

# Bringing the State's Workers in: Time to Rectify an Imbalanced US Labor Historiography

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*This article considers the reasons why labor historians have continued to neglect the history of workers and unions in the US public sector. It argues that the most compelling explanation for historians' failure to examine the history of public sector unions is that conducting such an examination would challenge a number of deeply rooted preconceptions regarding the history of American labor since World War II. The article goes on to suggest what we might learn if US labor historians began to probe the experience of public sector workers more fully.*

In their studies of working-class history over the past two decades, labor historians went a long way toward 'bringing the state back in' to their historical narratives. But they did not do the same for the state's workers. In fact, US labor history scholars have shown shockingly little interest in workers who labored for local, state, or federal governments. The result has been an astonishing misallocation of scholarly interest and energy that perpetuates significant distortions in the historiography and US labor since World War II.

Consider these facts: in 2004, 36 percent of all government workers (including 41 percent of all local government workers) in the United States were union members, contrasted to only 7.9 percent of private sector workers. Public sector workers in the United States are roughly four times as likely to be union members today as their private sector brothers and sisters.<sup>1</sup> The 1.3 million members in the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) or the 2.5 million members of the National Education Association (NEA) now dwarf declining industrial unions like the United Automobile Workers (UAW) or the United Steel Workers of America (USWA), which have themselves now tried to

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expand by organizing public service workers. Yet labor historians who are fully versed in the history of the UAW or the USWA are poorly equipped to explain either the rise or the persistence of organizations like AFSCME or the NEA. How could they be? There is almost no literature on such unions in our field. Labor historians consistently ignore public sector workers. The last 29 issues of this journal carried a total of two articles that dealt mainly with public sector workers. Yet it is not the editors of this journal who are at fault, but rather the field itself: other journals of labor and working-class history have similarly thin records when it comes to the history of public sector workers.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Shaffer was surely right to take textbook writers to task recently for their failure to integrate public sector workers into US history textbooks.<sup>3</sup> But one cannot blame the authors of our textbooks for their failure to consider public workers when the historians to whom they look for guidance on labor history have themselves done so little research in this area. The fact is that while labor historians have managed to break out of the confines of studying industrial or craft workers to look at service, agricultural, and domestic labor, they have barely taken note of public sector labor.

Compare for a moment the historiographies of two unions that played a large role in post-1945 American politics, AFSCME and the UAW. Although AFSCME is today 50 percent larger than the UAW, boasts a wider geographic distribution of members, and currently mobilizes far more potent political resources than the old Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) mainstay, one would never guess it from the amount of attention it garners from historians. It is difficult to develop a comprehensive list of labor historians who have delved into the UAW's history—John Barnard, Kevin Boyle, Nancy Gabin, Martin Halpern, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Heather Thompson are just a few of the finest historians of that vaunted union.<sup>4</sup> But where are AFSCME's historians? It is shameful that we still have no single scholarly history of the union in print.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, while there are several fine biographies of the UAW's famous president, Walter Reuther, no academic has yet attempted a biography of AFSCME's fiery leader, Jerry Wurf, who arguably did as much for public sector unionism as Reuther did for industrial unionism.<sup>6</sup> No wonder that *Who Built America?*, which Robert Shaffer cites as the best of our textbooks when it comes to treating public sector unionism, slights AFSCME. While the book contains 28 references to the UAW (some running to a page or more), it makes only two specific references to the much larger public sector union.<sup>7</sup>

But it is not merely that historians have neglected AFSCME. Where are the histories of police officers, firefighters, postal workers? Why has no historian written about the largest union of federal workers, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)? Despite the enormous political importance of teachers' unions over the past four decades, labor historians have done shockingly little work on the subject.<sup>8</sup>

At times it seems that historians have gone out of their way to ignore or slight public sector workers and unions. The evidence of neglect is everywhere. Thus one finds an excellent volume of essays on the labor-liberal alliance in American politics

that does not even mention public unions. An otherwise splendid biography of Arthur Goldberg devotes but five sentences to Goldberg's crucial work shaping President John F. Kennedy's Executive Order 10988, an order that did more to organize millions of public employees in the 1960s than any other single event. Melvyn Dubofsky's authoritative volume, *The State and Labor in Modern America*, says little about the state's workers. Nelson Lichtenstein's recent survey of labor history since the New Deal reserves only a few pages for public sector unions. Nor has my own work been beyond criticism on this count. My book on labor in the World War I era made no mention of public employees even though the war spurred their first surge of organizing and saw the founding of key unions such as the American Federation of Teachers, the International Association of Fire Fighters, and the National Federation of Federal Employees. The failure of labor historians to come to grips with public sector workers and unions is as inexcusable as it is widespread.<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, there are notable exceptions to this tale of woeful neglect. The recent publication of two fine books, Joseph Slater's *Public Workers: Government Employee Unions, the Law, and the State, 1900–1962* (2004) and Margaret C. Rung's *Servants of the State: Managing Diversity & Democracy in the Federal Workforce, 1933–1953* (2002), has done a splendid job of filling in gaps in our knowledge of public sector labor history up to 1962.<sup>10</sup> But we have no book-length surveys of more recent public sector labor history to match Slater's or Rung's work. What little work has been published on public sector unionism is scattered and confined to a few settings like New York, Memphis, Philadelphia, and the San Francisco Bay area.<sup>11</sup>

What accounts for this systematic neglect? The most obvious possible explanation is that public sector unionism—which has mostly flowered since the 1960s—is too recent a phenomenon for historians to have taken its measure. But this possibility does not hold up to close scrutiny. Over the past decade, labor historians have been quite ingenious in uncovering the post-1960 history of other groups of workers. One need only look at recent studies of autoworkers, electronics workers, steelworkers, communications workers, and others to realize that labor historians have managed to bring the histories of their subjects up into the 1970s and 1980s with great success.<sup>12</sup>

Another possible explanation is that labor historians remain more interested in the heroic icon of the industrial worker and the imagery of the insurgent CIO, which hold more romantic appeal than the prosaic travails of cops and teachers and their unions. Yet this explanation also holds up poorly under close examination. Labor historians have done an admirable job in recent years of broadening their field to study many classes of workers that they previously neglected: slaves, domestic servants, and agricultural and home workers. In doing so, these pioneering historians have freed the field from its historic ties to the union struggles of the early twentieth century, broadening the boundaries of what constitutes labor history. As this work shows, it is not the case that labor historians have remained stubbornly wedded to the study of industrial workers so much as that their forays into the study of non-industrial workers simply have not led them onto the terrain of the public sector.

Why then have path-breaking historians not tended to break new paths into the terra incognita of government employment?

To answer this question we must consider a third possible explanation for labor historians' neglect of the state's workers—the one I find most persuasive. I would argue that historians have tended to ignore public workers because a close examination of their story challenges, complicates, and revises so many of our preconceptions about recent US labor history. Public sector labor history does not correspond easily with the narrative of union decline that frames post-1945 US labor history. Indeed, to a great extent, public sector labor history runs counter to the general declension narrative. Moreover, the experiences of public sector workers and unions call into question many of the assumptions that shape that narrative. As Joseph Slater has argued, 'Incorporating public employees into labor history, shows that a good deal of the conventional wisdom and academic theory about unions in the United States is either misleadingly incomplete or completely wrong.'<sup>13</sup> Thus taking public sector labor history seriously forces us to re-evaluate much of the received wisdom we have about post-1945 US labor history.

The predominant narrative of postwar labor history is, in essence, a declension story. Ever since Solomon Barkin's 1961 book, *The Decline of the Labor Movement—and What Can Be Done about It*, labor scholars have tended to view the postwar period in terms of union decline. There is, of course, an important reason for this. Between the early 1950s and 2004 overall union density in the United States plunged from 35 percent to 12 percent. The declension narrative makes sense because it tells that story. But the decline of organized labor since 1955 has been so clear and continuous that our efforts to narrate it have taken on a teleological quality. By emphasizing the big story of labor's decline scholars, we have tended to overlook a back story that points in the other direction: the very same years that saw the private sector lose union density witnessed the massive upsurge of public sector unions. Most historians don't attempt to connect these two stories at all. Barkin can be excused for dismissing the activities of public sector workers as insignificant. (His lone mention of government workers took them to task for their distinct 'lack of response' to trade unionism.)<sup>14</sup> After all, Barkin wrote his book before public sector unions began their surge of growth. But scholars who have followed Barkin in tracing post-war labor's decline have no excuse for ignoring public sector workers. Yet this is often exactly what they have done. Michael Goldfield's *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States* (1987), for example, devoted a mere ten sentences to public sector unionism in a book that surveyed the very years when public sector union growth was booming. Those few students of labor's decline who have mentioned public sector unions at all have tended like Goldfield to treat it perfunctorily as a phenomenon primarily significant for concealing the extent of the private sector unions' decline.<sup>15</sup>

By leaving public sector unions out of the analysis, or invoking them only as a development that disguised private sector losses, I would argue, historians have constructed a distorted narrative. When the public sector is neglected, two interpretive problems arise. First, organized labor's decline since 1955 begins

to seem overdetermined. It appears to be more irresistible, inevitable, and uncontested than in fact was the case. Second, historians end up placing more weight on certain explanations for trade unionism's decline than is merited by a full review of the facts. Indeed, five factors often cited as explanations of the decline of organized labor in this period appear to be less significant when one views them through the eyes of public workers: the impact of the Cold War purge of left-wing unions; the failure of labor to get more support from the Democratic Party (or, lacking that, to construct an alternative party); the bureaucratization of unions; the inhibiting impact of labor law; the failure of unions to better link their cause to the civil rights and feminist struggles. Briefly considering these explanations in light of public workers' experiences turns many of our assumptions on their heads.

One development often cited as contributing to the decline of the labor movement in the years after World War II is the purge of allegedly Communist-led unions from the CIO. It has frequently been argued that this action cost the labor movement its best organizers and robbed it of its idealism and expansive political vision.<sup>16</sup> Public sector labor history is not completely at odds with this view. Indeed, the purge negatively impacted at least one wing of the public sector movement. Among the unions purged by the CIO was the United Public Workers of America (UPWA), a union that has received far less attention than most of the other allegedly Communist-led unions. Created from the 1946 merger of two smaller CIO unions of public sector workers, the United Federal Workers of America and the State, County, and Municipal Workers of America, the UPWA was distinguished for its opposition to segregation and racial discrimination in the government service.<sup>17</sup> Once it was driven from the CIO in 1950, the UPWA's membership plummeted. The union disbanded in 1953, a victim of Cold War politics. Yet, once one begins to look beyond the experience of the UPWA, the implications of the purge for public sector workers become more complicated and much less straightforward.

There is a strong argument to be made that the purge of left-led unions not only had limited negative consequences for most public sector unions, but may even have been a boon to them. The purge of Communist influence might actually have been a precondition for the near doubling of public sector union membership that occurred between 1956 and 1966.<sup>18</sup> Public policy was crucial to that growth. It is doubtful that policymakers would have tolerated the growth of government unions had organized labor not disposed of the charge that it harbored Communists in its leadership. Indeed, it was the widely touted 'loyalty' of public sector unions that allowed President Kennedy to encourage collective bargaining in the federal sector through Executive Order 10988. It is significant that the general counsel of the Department of Defense, Cyrus Vance, wrote the earliest draft of that executive order, which allowed federal workers to organize and bargain collectively.<sup>19</sup> If the nation's defense establishment had opposed collective bargaining in the federal service, it is unlikely that Kennedy would have ever issued his historic executive order. And had Kennedy not issued that order, the public sector union upsurge of the 1960s might have been far less widespread or significant. As it was, Executive Order 10988 helped trigger a massive wave of unionization among state and local government workers

who were not covered by the federal order. Indeed, one writer went so far as to argue that without ‘the laying on of hands by President Kennedy in his Executive Order 10988, unionization of public employees would have remained at a standstill.’<sup>20</sup> It could be argued that the purge, rather than hastening labor’s decline, was a necessary precondition for the emergence of the most significant union organizing to take place in the postwar era.

This is not to suggest that the purge made for docile public sector unions that subordinated their interests to the foreign policy demands of the US government. That would be a simplistic rendering of events, especially considering that the public sector also provided one of the first stories of a union breaking with Cold War orthodoxy within the AFL-CIO. When Jerry Wurf, then leader of AFSCME’s District Council 37 in New York City, challenged his former ally, Arnold Zander, for the union’s presidency in 1964, Wurf made an issue of Zander’s ties to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). According to Wurf, Zander had allegedly allowed the CIA to use AFSCME as a conduit for US\$878,000 in payoffs to anti-Communist public sector unions in South America. Once elected, Wurf terminated that relationship with the CIA and later became one of the first union leaders to criticize the Vietnam War.<sup>21</sup>

Many have argued that the Cold War purge sapped idealism and a sense of vision from the labor movement, but when one turns to the public sector this analysis seems less convincing. In the 1960s, public sector workers showed as much spirit as did the industrial workers of the pre-purge CIO. In fact, writer Irwin Ross was struck by the parallel between AFSCME and the CIO during this period. ‘The union’s recent growth has created an exuberant atmosphere in its Washington headquarters reminiscent of the CIO organizing drives of the Thirties,’ he wrote in 1968. ‘There is an elan to the organization, an air of bustle and excitement, a sense of great plans underfoot, and an evangelical zeal that one rarely encounters these days in the stately mansions of Big Labor.’<sup>22</sup> Nor was AFSCME the only public sector union seized by such an expansive vision. Optimism filled the ranks of the public sector unions generally during the late 1960s and early 1970s. And no goals seemed unthinkable in these years when the National Prisoners’ Reform Association began organizing state prisoners in New England with an eye to winning ‘standardization of felony laws and prison conditions throughout the nation’ and ‘eventually the right to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement’<sup>23</sup> or when the president of the AFGE could announce that his union sought to organize members of the US military, joking he ‘might negotiate a shorter work week . . . so we’d have shorter wars.’<sup>24</sup> Without question, public sector unions came roaring out of the 1960s with grand expectations and undaunted optimism, untroubled by the memory of the purge that had taken down unions like the UPWA. To the extent that we focus on the experiences of public workers, then, the consequences of the purge seem more ambiguous than ominous.

A second widely held explanation for labor’s postwar decline is that the AFL-CIO was betrayed by its alliance with the Democratic Party, a relationship that Mike Davis memorably characterized as a ‘barren marriage.’<sup>25</sup> This view does not hold up

well when one moves the experience of public sector workers and unions to the foreground. On the local, state, and federal level, the success of public sector unions was almost always dependent upon an alliance between those unions and Democratic politicians. The first significant collective bargaining agreements between major cities and their unions were negotiated by Democratic mayors, Joseph Clark in Philadelphia and Robert Wagner, Jr in New York City. The first state collective bargaining law was passed in Wisconsin in 1959. As Joseph Slater has shown, the Wisconsin Council of County and Municipal Employees (an affiliate of AFSCME) had struggled since 1951 to enact legislation granting public employees collective bargaining rights. The union was consistently frustrated in its effort by Republican Governor Walter Kohler, Jr. The 'key change' that led to the union's success, Slater argues, was the election of Gaylord Nelson as Wisconsin's first Democratic governor in more than two decades.<sup>26</sup> Nelson endorsed the public employees' demands and signed the historic bill on 22 September 1959, the 40th anniversary of the great steel strike. On the federal level the story was much the same. Support for collective bargaining with federal workers got nowhere in the Eisenhower administration. Yet within months after John F. Kennedy took office his administration began to develop the collective bargaining policy that eventually went into Executive Order 10988.<sup>27</sup>

The record could not be clearer on this point: without the close collaboration that emerged between public sector trade unionists and Democratic leaders at all levels of government, the public sector movement would not have grown as quickly as it did. This is not to argue that relations between the public sector labor movement and Democratic political leaders were not subject to conflicts and strains. Indeed, conflict and strain were constant features of that relationship, especially after 1975.<sup>28</sup> Yet each side in that relationship knew well how much it needed the other. The more one takes cognizance of public sector union history the less persuasive become those accounts that dismiss labor's alliance with the Democratic Party as a barren marriage—public sector unions were in many ways the fruit of that marriage.

A third explanation for labor's decline in the post-1945 era alleges that unions gradually became less militant as they grew larger and more bureaucratic.<sup>29</sup> As early as 1948 a view that labor unions had lost their militancy had begun to take hold among writers. That year Samuel Lubell returned to a UAW local he had visited eight years earlier and was shocked by the changes he observed. 'In 1940 the flavor of the local was one of street barricades and sit-down strikes,' Lubell remembered, but 'eight years later it was almost like a lodge hall.' By the early 1950s, Lubell concluded that labor's dynamism was 'now gone.' Unions had come 'to resemble more closely the momentum of a bureaucracy than the trampling of a new social movement,' he wrote.<sup>30</sup> This view of union bureaucratization and diminishing working-class consciousness during the postwar era was widely repeated in subsequent labor histories of the period. Yet this picture does not hold up well when one considers the experience of public sector unionists.

Between 1945 and 1980, government workers became more militant, even as they flocked into ever larger and more bureaucratic unions. The strike statistics clearly

bear this out. In 1960 there were only 36 public employee strikes. By 1966 the number had risen to 142. Across the 1970s the number continued to rise, from 412 in 1970 to 478 in 1975 to 536 in 1980.<sup>31</sup> Public workers' militancy continuously increased during the two decades after 1960 and government workers often broke new ground with their job actions. It is not often noted that federal workers—the air traffic controllers who struck in 1981—staged the first transportation strike to spread to all 50 states as well as the US territories. State and local workers often led the way in creating new tactics as alternatives to the strike. In 1966 the police officers of Pontiac, Michigan, conceived of the mass sickout as protest against inadequate wages. They called their tactic 'the blue flu.' It was a bug that spread quickly to other public sector workers in the 1960s. Fire fighters called it 'red rash;' teachers referred to it as 'chalk-dust fever.' Such non-strike protests could often be quite inventive. County employees in San Diego inaugurated 'Human Error Day' in 1979, when they cut off incoming phone calls, misfiled and misrouted paperwork, and produced numerous typos and other mistakes in protest of a poor wage offer from their employer.<sup>32</sup>

Such militancy spoke to rising expectations for public employees all through this period. As one commentator observed, 'all types of government workers' were demonstrating a 'growing desire for participation in decision making involving the minutiae of life in the office or on the shop floor.'<sup>33</sup> The more one considers the experience of public workers, the less convincing becomes the argument that labor declined due to union bureaucracy or a general loss of militant spirit.

A fourth explanation for labor's decline concerns the role that law and the state played in undermining workers' efforts to organize in the post-Taft–Hartley era. Over the past two decades, a large body of historical scholarship has emphasized the ways in which labor law since the 1940s has forced workers to 'lie down like good dogs,' as Christopher Tomlins's influential book put it.<sup>34</sup> In some ways public sector labor history confirms Tomlins's view of the inhibiting power of the law. Throughout the postwar era, public sector workers were even more constrained by laws than their private sector counterparts. The vast majority of public sector workers lack the right to strike; many are also denied by law the right to collectively bargain over wages and benefits or negotiate union security provisions.<sup>35</sup>

Once we examine it more closely, however, the history of the public sector movement complicates our view of the law's impact on workers and unions in the post-1945 period. First, in contrast to private sector workers, public workers witnessed the distinct liberalization of the labor laws that affected them between 1947 and the mid-1970s. The Taft–Hartley Act of 1947 recognized no rights for public sector workers, mentioning federal workers only to levy penalties against their collective actions. Section 305 of the Taft–Hartley Act required the immediate dismissal of any federal employee striking against the government. This draconian approach to federal workers' job actions continued into the 1950s. Passed in 1955, Public Law 330 added to the dismissal penalty a US\$1,000 fine and imprisonment for up to one year.<sup>36</sup> However, between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, there was a slow but steady liberalization of laws affecting public sector workers and unions at all levels. The right to strike was never granted to federal workers, but they did see their



collective bargaining rights widened between Kennedy's 1962 executive order and the passage of the Civil Service Reform Act in 1978. State and local workers also saw their legal rights expand. Between 1959 and 1980, 37 states legalized collective bargaining for government workers, four states recognized the right to strike for some public employees, a number of states dropped laws that called for the dismissal of striking government workers, and some cities and states negotiated agency shop provisions to provide for union security.<sup>37</sup> Even as private sector labor law was operating less favorably over time for unions, the public sector law ran in the opposite direction at least until the mid-1970s.

Yet it was not simply that trends in public sector labor law contradicted those in the private sector during this period. The experience of public sector workers also reminds us that the content of the law was often less influential in determining workers' fortunes than the social and political context within which the law operated. Remember, almost all of the significant strikes staged by public sector workers in the 1960s and 1970s were illegal, even in most states that had legalized public sector collective bargaining. Throughout this period, public sector union leaders understood that a willingness to defy the law was essential to building the public sector union movement. As Lane Kirkland reminded an audience of government unionists, 'The truth is that the only "illegal" strike is an unsuccessful one by a very weak union.'<sup>38</sup>

During the period of rising militancy, public sector workers showed that public goodwill and their own solidarity could often surmount the illegality of their strikes. Just as legal prohibitions of the strike had less influence over union successes than public opinion during the years of rising labor militancy, so too the decline in public labor militancy after 1981 had less to do with changes in the law—no significant new anti-strike legislation was enacted in this period—than with changes in public opinion produced by Ronald Reagan's successful busting of the 1981 Professional Air Traffic Controller Organization (PATCO) strike. By the end of 1981, the number of public sector strikes had plummeted by 46 percent compared with 1980 levels. Teachers' strikes, the most common form of public sector militancy in the 1970s, fell by 56 percent between 1979 and 1982.<sup>39</sup>

The more one brings the story of public sector workers to the forefront, the more it seems clear that changes in the law were less influential in shaping labor's fortunes than we may previously have assumed. Rather than reinforcing the determinative power of the law, public sector labor history leads us toward a more complex view that takes into consideration the importance of shifts in the national political culture, such as the one represented by the Reagan presidency. Ultimately, these shifts determined the way the law functioned on the ground.

A fifth explanation for the decline of labor in the post-1945 era argues that labor 'lost an opportunity' to link up with movements for civil and women's rights and as a result accelerated its own decline by failing to transcend racial and gender divisions among workers.<sup>40</sup> While there is some truth in this view, it holds up less well for public sector workers and unions than for their private sector counterparts.

The connection between public sector unions and the civil rights and women's movements was in many ways much closer than the connection between those social movements and private sector unions. Two factors accounted for this. First, African Americans and women often saw government employment as preferable to private sector employment. As Thomas Sugrue found in his study of postwar Detroit, government work provided the 'most promising area of opportunity for blacks,' since racial barriers were often more porous in government employment.<sup>41</sup> Women too found government work an attractive alternative.<sup>42</sup> The presence of an abundance of minority and women workers in government jobs ensured that when unionism rose in this sector, African Americans and women would play an important role in that upsurge. The second factor that tied public sector unionism to the social movements of the 1960s was timing. As Robert H. Zieger has noted, 'the surge of public employment and of union activism coincided with the racial and sexual revolutions of the 1960s, putting public employee unions near the center of important social crises in the turbulent decade.'<sup>43</sup>

The connection between civil rights, feminism, and public sector organizing had an impact on the orientation of some public sector unions. As Kim Moody points out, 'the large inflow of Black and women workers helped to transform conservative AFL unions' like AFSCME 'into more modern liberal business unions that allied themselves with the civil rights movement in the 1960s.'<sup>44</sup> As government workers' unions became more diverse in their membership, they made racial and gender justice issues more central to their agendas. Thus AFSCME's famous 1968 Memphis sanitation strike was conducted as a civil rights struggle. Nor is it surprising that in 1981 AFSCME Local 101 in San Jose, California, became the first union to organize a strike around the issue of comparable worth for women workers.<sup>45</sup>

Evidence suggests that African American and women have been more successful in rising to positions of power within public sector unions. A public sector union produced the first woman president of a CIO union when Eleanor Nelson took the reins of the United Federal Workers of America in 1944.<sup>46</sup> The AFSCME produced Linda Chavez-Thompson, who was elected Vice President of the AFL-CIO in 1995, the highest-ranking post ever held by a woman in the labor federation. Government unions also produced the most influential African American trade unionist since A. Philip Randolph: William Lucy, Secretary-Treasurer of AFSCME. Public sector union leaders like Lucy, William H. Simons of the American Federation of Teachers, and Lillian Roberts and Leonard Ball of AFSCME also played a prominent role in founding the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. While the history of public sector trade unionism is by no means free from racial or gender tension and conflict, as a whole public sector workers and unions did a better job of organizing women and racial minorities in the 1960s and 1970s than did their private sector counterparts.<sup>47</sup> Again, to the extent that we foreground the story of public sector unionism, the impact of labor's failures regarding blacks and women seem less decisive.<sup>48</sup>

As these examples suggest, integrating public sector workers and unions into the postwar labor narrative calls into question several of the leading explanations for the decline of US organized labor since World War II. The public workers' history

cautions us against placing too much weight on the Cold War purge, union bureaucratization, labor's alliance with the Democratic Party, the function of labor law, or the failure of labor to more aggressively organize among women and minorities as explanations for labor's decline. Indeed, the public workers' history tends to move us away from all monocausal explanations for labor's decline and toward a broader more synthetic explanation for trade unionism's troubles. Each of the factors discussed above deserves a place in that larger explanation, but individually none of them seems as convincing once we consider the matter through the eyes of the state's workers.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, one reason why labor scholars have neglected to 'bring the state's workers in' to their histories may be that a serious examination of the public sector would force them to revise or qualify many of the assumptions around which we have built our postwar labor history narrative. Certainly, integrating public sector workers into our master narrative will not be easy, for it will complicate the dominant story line on many levels. Nonetheless there are many good reasons why labor historians should apply themselves to the task. Let me now turn to five immediate benefits that we might gain by probing public labor history more fully.

First, bringing the state's workers into our narratives will help us make class and workplace struggles more visible in mainstream narratives of recent US history. Too many US history textbooks predictably leave unions and class out of the story of post-1960 American history. After treating the embourgeoisment of workers moving to suburbia in the 1950s, most textbook authors let unions and the workplace slip from view. If social class appears in the narratives of post-1960 America, it is usually discussed only in terms of the plight of the poor. If unions are mentioned in this period, they tend to be portrayed as the victims of economic transformation and political backlash rather than as agents of social change.

Even the historians who are most aware of social class dynamics in US history have yet to find ways to make those dynamics as visible in post-1945 American history as they are in earlier periods. This failure, I would argue, is directly connected to their inability to recognize the significance of the public workers' post-1960 union upsurge. Consider Eric Foner's recent text *Give Me Liberty! An American History*. Except for a few obligatory sentences on the United Farm Workers, Foner's treatment of the 1960s entirely ignores workers' struggles. Foner devotes roughly seven pages to the 'new movements' of the 1960s. Feminist, reproductive rights, gay liberation, Latino, American Indian, and environmentalist movements receive extended treatment from Foner. But he does not devote a single sentence to the rise of the public sector union movement. The omission is stunning when one considers that public sector unions more than doubled their membership in the 1960s, enrolling 2.3 million workers by 1970—a number that would rival the combined memberships of the other social movements of the 1960s. The result of his failure to acknowledge the most overlooked 1960s movement is that Foner unintentionally perpetuates a classless narrative of the postwar years in which workers are only acknowledged when they also happen to be Latino/a or African American.<sup>49</sup> When even our best

historians leave workers' struggles out of recent US history, how can we successfully challenge the nation's myth of classlessness? Incorporating the history of public workers into their narratives will help historians make class more visible in recent American history.

A second reason why we should investigate public sector workers and unions more thoroughly is that their story can help us better understand the powerful forces of anti-statism that gained ground in the United States after the 1960s. Public sector labor unions made their breakthrough in the years when liberalism was still ascendant. Indeed, public sector unionization coincided with the peak years of 1960s liberalism. But as the public sector union movement gained strength, liberalism entered a period of crisis. These two developments are not unrelated. As public sector unions flexed their muscles in the early 1970s, they exacerbated problems that were already emerging within the remnants of the New Deal order. As early as 1970, David T. Stanley of the Brookings Institution worried that public employee empowerment could not have 'come at a worse time.' Just as the unions gained strength, Stanley noted, local governments were beginning to struggle with 'inflation, urban decay, the flight to the suburbs, outmoded tax systems, and insufficient aid from state legislators.'<sup>50</sup>

In the volatile atmosphere that emerged during the economic crisis of the mid-1970s, public sector union demands helped engender a backlash against government among many voters. Each public sector union victory in wages, benefits, and staffing policies indirectly aided conservatives who argued that 'government waste is the nation's biggest growth industry,' as the anti-public-sector-union crusader Ralph De Toledano put it.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, anti-public-sector-unionism helped energize what was perhaps the most important political movement of the 1970s: the tax revolt. California's Proposition 13 advocate, Howard Jarvis, liked to frame his anti-tax anti-government initiative as a way for voters to send the message that 'we're not going to permit public employee unions to run this country.' Government workers' unions were 'trying hard to run the country,' Jarvis warned. But 'the public employee unions are not going to run this country,' he grouched. This was a message that resonated even among concession-bargaining private sector union members in the 1970s who could no longer win back at the bargaining table what they might lose in the tax increases that they feared would be prompted by public sector wage settlements. Jarvis liked to boast that 'we got 60 percent of organized labor's vote in California' in the landslide that enacted Proposition 13 in June 1978.<sup>52</sup> If militant public sector unions experienced a backlash even among the ranks of some inflation-squeezed private sector unionists, labor's political allies could scarcely ignore the problem. As this backlash took shape, it pushed the Democratic Party and one-time liberal Democratic politicians—including Ed Koch in New York, Maynard Jackson in Atlanta, and Dianne Feinstein in San Francisco—into a series of confrontations with government workers' unions. Increasingly liberals felt that they had to resist public sector union demands as a way of establishing their credentials as tough-minded, growth-oriented politicians.<sup>53</sup>

The literature we currently have on the anti-statist conservative backlash focuses largely on the agency of suburban homeowners who rebelled against taxes

and integration. The focus on the suburbs has caused us to neglect the extent to which workplace conflict and labor issues were a central part of the story. The post-1960 decline of liberalism and rise of anti-statism, I would argue, will not be fully understood until we have a better grasp of the tensions that developed within the Democratic Party and between its leaders and their public sector union allies over wages, benefits, and workplace issues as they emerged by the mid-1970s.<sup>54</sup>

A third reason to explore the history of public workers is that doing so may help us better understand one of the great surprises of the past thirty years of labor history: the rapid disappearance of the strike. It is not immediately apparent why the strike disappeared as quickly as it did. Strikes did not decline in proportion to labor movement membership declines, as one might expect. Rather, between 1960 and 1980, the average US strike rate held fairly steady at 286 major work stoppages per year, even as union membership rates were steadily eroded. Indeed, as a whole the decade of the 1970s was slightly more strike-prone than the 1960s, despite union losses stemming from deindustrialization and other factors. But after 1980 the strike suddenly began to disappear as a major weapon in the arsenal of US workers. The annual average of major work stoppages plummeted to 34 in the 1990s, and has hovered at 24 in the 2000s. The rapidity of the dropoff is astonishing.<sup>55</sup>

Historians have consistently pointed to the ill-fated 1981 strike of PATCO as a crucial event in labor's late-twentieth-century decline. The walkout of these federal government workers, which was broken when President Ronald Reagan fired and permanently replaced them, helped to legitimize the tactic of permanent striker replacement in the 1980s. Private sector employers such as Hormel, Greyhound, International Paper, and Phelps-Dodge each used the permanent replacement tactic later after the PATCO debacle. As the use of permanent replacements spread, workers' willingness or ability to strike was severely eroded.<sup>56</sup>

Yet, while the PATCO strike has been widely cited as a factor contributing to labor's decline, we still have no systematic study of its influence on the use of the permanent replacement tactic. Nor have we fully investigated the many prologues to PATCO that occurred in public sector strikes in the 1970s. In fact, Reagan was not the first public official to fire government strikers. Several big-city Democratic mayors either replaced or threatened to replace municipal strikers during the 1970s. It is likely that the activities of local government employers eased the way for Reagan's tough handling of the air traffic controllers, which in turn sent ripples throughout the US industrial relations system. Indeed, preliminary evidence suggests that public sector employers helped normalize a tactic that private sector employers alone might not have been able to legitimize.<sup>57</sup>

In many ways the public sector provided the ideal arena within which to legitimize permanent replacement. While private sector employers could be accused of busting unions in order to fatten profits at workers' expense, public sector employers could rationalize permanent replacement as a necessary response to unions that broke the law by staging illegal walkouts, holding the public treasury hostage to unreasonable demands. Government union busting could thus be portrayed as an act undertaken in the interest of the commonweal. We need to learn much more before we can

definitively trace the decline of the strike in the late twentieth century. But what is already clear is that the story cannot be told properly by looking only to the private sector: what happened to public workers and their unions mattered.

A fourth reason why we should fill out our understanding of US public sector labor history is that doing so will allow us to make better-informed comparisons between the experience of American workers and unions and those of other nations. To date, historians' discussions of the alleged 'exceptionalism' of US labor history tend to focus on the distinctiveness of US workers' political behavior (why did the US produce no durable mass-based labor party?), differences in the levels of overall union organization and militancy between the United States and other nations, and differences in social welfare regimes or private sector industrial relations practices. But whether historians have argued for or against American exceptionalism, or whether they have championed Aristide Zolberg's notion of 'many exceptionalisms,' they have tended to do so without reference to the experience of public sector workers and unions. Examining public sector labor history thus provides us with new evidence from which to draw comparisons.<sup>58</sup>

By bringing public sector labor history to bear in comparative studies, we can shed some new light on the old question of American exceptionalism. But, rather than neatly confirming or disputing the exceptionalist argument, public sector labor history is likely to offer a range of contradictory evidence.

On the one hand, public sector union history across the industrialized world has been more uniform than that of the private sector. Thus the experiences of American government workers have diverged in less significant ways from those of other developed nations than has been the case for their private sector counterparts. The timing of public sector union organization, for example, was fairly synchronized across the industrialized world: the most significant public sector union organization occurred during the first three decades of the post-1945 era; the growth of public sector unionism slowed in the next two decades; and in the last decade public sector unions experienced declines in union density. The rights of public sector workers also show less variance across the industrialized world than those of private sector workers: the right of government workers to organize has been broadly accepted, while the right to strike has been generally limited. On the other hand, a focus on public sector labor history tends to underline some exceptional features of the American working-class experience. In this sense, however, American exceptionalism contains some surprises. For one thing, if we were to judge solely on the basis of public sector union struggles we would have to conclude that American workers were more militant than their counterparts in most other industrialized nations. While the United States has never seen the sort of political strikes of public service workers that France witnessed in May 1968 or December 1995, American public sector workers struck with greater frequency than those of most other industrialized nations during the 1970s when public sector labor militancy peaked worldwide.<sup>59</sup> As these observations suggest, to the extent that we bring public sector workers' experiences to the fore, we may avoid repeating some of the same old points in the now

well-worn exceptionalist debate and instead arrive at new insights regarding American workers' experiences in comparison with those of other nations.

A final incentive for delving into public sector labor history is that it may help us explain the historical origins of the split that emerged in the AFL-CIO in 2005. It was no coincidence that no public sector union joined the Teamsters, United Food and Commercial Workers, Carpenters, and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in forming the Change to Win Coalition or bolting from the AFL-CIO in the summer of 2005. Of the unions that left the AFL-CIO to join the Change to Win, only SEIU had a public service employees division that made up more than 10 percent of its total membership. Led by AFSCME, unions predominantly composed of government workers remained within the AFL-CIO and consolidated their influence over the direction of the federation in the wake of the split. The public sector unions did not share the acute sense of crisis that gripped many private sector labor unions. Nor did public sector unions advocate the sort of fundamental changes in the structure of the AFL-CIO or its commitment to organizing that the unions like SEIU sought. AFSCME's president, Gerald McEntee, had helped engineer the election of John Sweeney as AFL-CIO president in 1995, and he remained Sweeney's key backer and the leading opponent to the Change to Win Coalition in 2005. When the Change to Win leaders accused the AFL-CIO of 'throwing money at politicians' instead of organizing, it seemed that their rhetoric was targeted specifically at public workers' unions, which have been perhaps the most politically active organizations in the AFL-CIO. Although such rhetoric at times was misleading—Change to Win unions scarcely eschew political action—it spoke to deep tensions that had emerged between organizations such as AFSCME and SEIU. These unions had increasingly seen each other as rivals by the late 1990s as they fought over jurisdictional rights to organize home care workers licensed and employed by state and country governments. Their conflict over the organization of such workers contributed directly to power struggle that resulted in the July 2005 labor split. All of this suggests that if we are to understand the tensions and divisions that emerged in the US labor movement in the late twentieth century, we must have a greater understanding of the fights waged between unions over the organization of public health workers and the ways in which the strategy and concerns of predominantly public sector unions diverged from those of their predominantly private sector counterparts during the period of organized labor's intensifying crisis.<sup>60</sup>

Here I have enumerated only some of the benefits that might be realized from a vigorous exploration of US public sector labor history. But a final observation is in order. In the end, it behooves all who seek a reunited and rejuvenated American labor movement in the years ahead to learn the history of the public workers and their unions, for only when we have restored their story to its rightful place in our historiography will we truly be able to see the whole of recent US labor history. Seeing that whole is essential to the creation of a movement whose strategies and structure serve the needs of all workers. We have responsibility to give today's students and activists a more complete and accurate picture of labor's recent past than we have constructed to date. Only when they have that picture will they be able to clearly see

some of the little-understood processes and unappreciated developments that have helped bring organized labor to its current crisis. The recent books by Margaret Rung and Joseph Slater and several recent dissertations by intrepid labor historians raise hopes that our field may be moving finally to redress its long neglect of government workers and their unions.<sup>61</sup> Yet there remains an enormous amount of work to be done. We have a rich and largely uncharted world to explore and nothing to lose but our preconceptions.

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### Notes

- [1] ‘Union Members in 2004,’ Bureau of Labor Statistics New Release, USDL 05-112, 27 January 2005.
- [2] Estes, “‘I AM A MAN!’”; Shaffer, ‘Where Are the Organized Public Employees?’, 315. It should be noted that labor economists have done a much better job than labor historians in studying public sector labor. See, for example, Lewin et al., *Public Sector Labor Relations*; Troy, *New Unionism*; Freeman, ‘Unionism Comes to the Public Sector.’
- [3] Shaffer pointed out that *Labor History* published only two articles on public employee unions and reviewed only six books on that subject in the years between 1990 and 2000. Shaffer, ‘Where Are the Organized Public Employees?’, 315, 331.
- [4] Barnard, *American Vanguard*; Boyle, *The UAW*; Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement*; Halpern, *UAW*; Lichtenstein, *Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*; Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*
- [5] The best survey of AFSCME’s early years can be found in Kramer, *Labor’s Paradox*. Some scholars have probed aspects of AFSCME history yet no full-length study of the union has yet been produced. See Ryan, ‘Everyone Royalty’; McAndrew, ‘Politics of the Public Workers Union’; Kupferberg, ‘AFSCME.’
- [6] On Reuther, see Lichtenstein, *Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*; Barnard, *Walter Reuther*; Carew, *Walter Reuther*. Reuther was also the subject of less scholarly treatments. See Gould and Hickok, *Walter Reuther*; Dayton, *Walter Reuther*; Howe and Widick, *The UAW*. The only biography of Jerry Wurf remains Goulden’s *Jerry Wurf*.
- [7] See Lichtenstein et al., *Who Built America?*, index.
- [8] Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*; Golin, *Newark Teachers Strikes*; Eaton, *American Federation of Teachers*.
- [9] Boyle, *Organized Labor*; Stebenne, *Arthur J. Goldberg*, 313; Dubofsky, *The State and Labor*; Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*; McCartin, *Labor’s Great War*.
- [10] Slater, *Public Workers*; Rung, *Servants of the State*.
- [11] Freeman, *Working-Class New York*; Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*; Bellush and Bellush, *Union Power*; Johnston, *Success While Others Fail*; Maier, *City Unions*; Spear, ‘Lessons to Be Learned.’
- [12] Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*; Cowie, *Capital Moves*; Stein, *Running Steel*; Green, *Race on the Line*.
- [13] Slater, *Public Workers*, 1.



- [14] Barkin, *Decline of the Labor Movement*, 6–7.
- [15] Goldfield, *Decline of Organized Labor*, 15–17, 188.
- [16] A representative work in this literature would be Filippelli and McColloch, *Cold War in the Working Class*.
- [17] African Americans played a leading role in both the UPWA and its predecessor organizations. For example Secretary-Treasurer Ewart Guinier and organizer Marie Richardson Harris built a solid organization in the Bureau of Engraving. See Hanson, ‘United Public Workers.’
- [18] Private sectors unions grew by 12 percent (not as fast as the growth in the private sector workforce), while public sector union grew by 88 percent. Ross, ‘Those Newly Militant Government Workers,’ 104–5.
- [19] See Cyrus Vance to David E. Bell, 22 March 1961, Government Service file, Box 11, Myer Feldman Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Vance’s role in the process of drafting Executive Order 10988 has not received attention from historians. To date, most have credited Labor Secretary Arthur Goldberg with shaping the order. But the evidence clearly indicates that it was the Defense Department which got the ball rolling within the administration, in large part because it feared that a more pro-union order might get the President’s signature if it did not take proactive steps to pre-empt that possibility. For a view that emphasizes that the order was ‘Goldberg’s initiative,’ and which does not mention the role of Vance or the Department of Defense, see Stebenne, *Arthur J. Goldberg*, 313.
- [20] Toledano, *Let Our Cities Burn*, 25.
- [21] Billings and Greenya, *Power to the Public Worker*, Chapter 7; Goulden, *Jerry Wurf*, 103.
- [22] Ross, ‘Those Newly Militant Government Workers,’ 107.
- [23] *Government Employee Relations Report*, 15 January 1973, B9–B11.
- [24] *Government Employee Relations Report*, 25 August 1975, A8–A9.
- [25] The phrase comes from Davis *Prisoners of the American Dream*. The ham-handedness of Davis’s treatment of the political history of organized labor in the postwar era has not been widely adopted by other historians. Nonetheless, the essential view that organized labor got little to nothing from its political allies exists to varying a extent in much of the better literature on labor and politics in the postwar era. On Davis’s views, see also Davis, ‘The Lesser Evil?’
- [26] Slater, *Public Worker*, 179.
- [27] Hart, *Collective Bargaining*, 7–8.
- [28] For an account of how these tensions played out in New York, see Bellush and Bellush, *Union Power*.
- [29] See for example Moody, *An Injury to All*.
- [30] Lubell, *Future of American Politics*, 174–76.
- [31] Public Service Research Council, *Public Sector Bargaining*, 6.
- [32] Burpo, *Police Labor Movement*, 31; Kearney, *Labor Relations*, 207.
- [33] Ross, ‘Those Newly Militant Government Workers,’ 7.
- [34] See Tomlins, *The State and the Unions*, Part 3. For a similarly pessimistic interpretation of labor law, see Atleson, *Values and Assumptions*.
- [35] For a survey of public sector labor law in the early postwar period, see Slater, *Public Workers*, Chapter 3.
- [36] Murphy and Sackman, *Crisis in Public Employee Relations*, 71.
- [37] For a discussion of trends in this period, see Lewin et al., *Public Sector Labor Relations*.
- [38] Kirkland quoted in *Government Employee Relations Report*, 3 November 1975, A8.
- [39] Teachers’ strike figures from *Government Union Critique*, 30 July 1982, 1.
- [40] An influential statement of the argument regarding labor and race can be found in Korstad and Lichtenstein, ‘Opportunities Found and Lost.’ A persuasive argument concerning labor’s failure to ally itself with feminism can be found in Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement*.
- [41] Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 110.

- [42] On women in government employment, see Bell, 'Unionized Women,' 281.
- [43] Zieger, *American Workers*, 164.
- [44] Moody, *An Injury to All*, 82.
- [45] Johnston, *Success While Others Fail*, 55–86.
- [46] 'The History and Structure of the United Federal Workers of America, CIO' (typescript, [1946], in the collection of the Library of Congress), 5.
- [47] A clear example of a public sector union struggle that produced racial tension was the 1968 Ocean Hill—Brownville teachers strike. For the best account of this conflict, see Podair, *Strike that Changed New York*.
- [48] In this respect, the degree of success that public sector unions had in organizing minorities helps explain why African Americans were more likely than whites to be union members at the end of the twentieth century. By 2004 union density among black workers was 15.1 percent, while among whites it was only 12.2 percent. See Bureau of Labor Statistics, 'Union Members in 2004,' news release, 27 January 2005 <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>> (accessed 27 June 2005).
- [49] Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, 1009–15.
- [50] Stanley, 'Effect of Unions,' 48.
- [51] Toledano, 'America's Biggest Growth Industry,' 150.
- [52] *Government Employee Relations Report*, 30 October 1978, 9.
- [53] On San Francisco, see Boehm and Heldman, *Public Employees*; on Atlanta, see Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, Chapter 4; on New York, see Freeman, *Working-Class New York*; Maier, *City Unions*; and Spear, 'Crisis in Urban Liberalism.'
- [54] On the suburban origins of the backlash, see McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven*. Neither book considers whether labor conflict may have been entwined in the backlash phenomenon as it took shape. For a representative right-wing critique of public sector unionism which stresses its role as a force promoting statism and high levels of taxation, see Troy, *New Unionism*. Troy argues that the goal of public sector unionism 'is to redistribute income from the private to the public sector of the economy, with government redistributing—socializing—income' (104).
- [55] See Bureau of Labor Statistics figures: <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.t01.htm>> (accessed 1 July 2005). The dropoff in strike activity has not been confined to the United States. Since 1981 there has been a dramatic decline in strike action in the world's 14 most industrialized nations, excluding the United States. In 1981 a combined total of 70 million total workdays were lost to strikes in those countries. By 1996 the figure had dropped to less than 5 million. See Piazza, 'Globalizing Quiescence.'
- [56] Timothy Minchin, who has documented the use of replacement workers most carefully, has cited the influence of the PATCO strike in each of his case studies. See Minchin, 'Broken Spirits,' 'Permanent Replacements,' 'Torn Apart,' "'Labor's Empty Gun'.'
- [57] See my full argument on this in McCartin, "'Fire the Hell out of Them'.'
- [58] Major contributions to the literature on American exceptionalism make no effort to compare the experience of government workers and unions in the US with those of other nations. See, for example, Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*; Halpern and Morris, *American Exceptionalism?* Lipset's book largely reaffirms American exceptionalism, whereas the Halpern and Morris book contains essays that cast doubt on the notion that American working-class experience was exceptional. Neither volume looks at public sector workers or unions. Zolberg's argument is laid out in his essay 'How Many Exceptionalisms?'
- [59] For comparative data on union formation, strike militancy, and rights enjoyed by public sector workers, see Treu et al., *Public Service Labor Relations*. For a rare historical study that has made public sector workers the basis of a comparative analysis, see McGuire, 'Disciplining the State.'
- [60] James P. Hoffa quoted in *Washington Post*, 26 July 2005. On conflicts between AFSCME and SEIU over the organization of home care workers, see Barnes, 'Labor's Raider's.' Among the

dissident unions, only SEIU had a membership that included more than 10 percent of public sector workers. The 1.8-million-member Teamster union claimed a public service membership of roughly 170,000. See <<http://www.teamster.org/about/structure/divisions.htm>>.

- [61] Among the best recent unpublished works on public sector union history are: Spear, 'Crisis in Urban Liberalism;' Ryan, 'Everyone Royalty;' Green, 'Battling the Plantation Mentality;' Brenner, 'Rank-and-File Rebellion.'

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