Chapter 3

Sales Floor Solidarity: Understanding Union Organizing in Retail

Retail workers actively engage in a range of strategies to reassert their self-worth and try to improve their daily lives. They do so on their own and/or in groups. Smaller, daily tactics are employed, such as taking an extra five minutes on break or pretending not to see a particularly rude customer. Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) argues that restaurant servers have so little control of their daily labor that the allocation of extra condiments, one domain over which workers have control, is used to express some humanity and autonomy. In retail, workers reward respectful and kind customers by distributing extra samples, coupons, or free gifts, offering the discount that officially ended hours earlier, providing an item for free if it will not scan, and so forth. These strategies can serve as expression of workers’ own humanity, as a small act of defiance against their employer, and/or as an act of solidarity with customers.

These sorts of strategies are often used by marginalized people and have been called everyday acts of resistance, as well as weapons of the weak (Scott 1987). Such acts disrupt patterns of disrespect or exploitation and offer a momentary respite, but they do not generally contribute to better conditions, at least not on their own. Like venting on social media, these routes are more about providing temporary catharsis.

Retail workers enlist more decidedly political forms of coordinated collective action, like unionization, to try to address the actual causes
of their discontent. Without question, central to both historical and contemporary strategies are class-based forms of resistance—particularly unions. Although there are limitations, by enlisting collective forms of political action, retail workers find that they are not quite so “weak.” Union organizing strategies are the focus of this chapter.

Unions are democratic workers’ organizations which were “created to challenge inadequate wages and economic inequality and to fight for dignity and a better standard of living for working-class people” (Coulter 2012a, 160). As capitalism was expanded, people experienced poverty, extreme exploitation, and workplace-induced injuries, diseases, and deaths, while seeing their fruits of their labor enriching owners and managers. As a result, many workers decided they deserved better and that united, collective action was the only effective strategy to counter the coordinated, resourced capitalists for whom they labored. Workers of all kinds, from car assemblers to waitresses to nurses to professors, have organized unions. They have done so in order to self-advocate and influence their conditions of work; obtain better wages, benefits, and other tangible improvements; secure rights and protections; and unite in movements to promote progressive political and cultural change.

In terms of workplace organizing, since the 1930s, many of the major unions focused on the large and male-dominated industrial and manufacturing sectors in both Canada and the United States (Frank 2012; Sangster 2010; Sugiman 1994). Decades of organizing and bargaining led to major improvements in wages, conditions, and benefits in these sectors and transformed what were precarious, low-wage, and dangerous jobs into more secure and stable positions that could sustain households and provide workers and their families with a decent standard of living.

During the same period, retail stores were expanded and seen as central to the growth of “modern” capitalist economies and consumer cultures (Belisle 2011; L. Cohen 1997, 2003; Pitrone 2003; Worthy 1984). Retail workforces grew in size, and the industry moved away from a family-based male shopkeeper model to a more centralized and largely feminized workforce, with women dominating the sales floors, catalogue services, and offices of retail stores, and men being primarily concentrated in warehouses and management. Working in retail meant long hours and very low wages. In this context, certain unions sought to organize retail workers and improve work in the sector. The results were mixed. As historian