



Book Reviews

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Nadasen, Premilla. *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015. 240 pp. \$27.95 (paper).

Reviewed by: Katherine Eva Maich, *University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA*

By most accounts, women like Dorothy Bolden, Georgia Gilmore, Josephine Hulett, Mary McClendon, Carolyn Reed, Geraldine Roberts, and Edith Sloan tend to be left out of the dominant historical narrative. Yet Premilla Nadasen's important book reveals the rich and complex history of these African American labor activists who organized tirelessly to build a national movement of household workers. By focusing primarily on this selection of leaders, Nadasen provides a forum through which worker activists articulate their own stories of working in other people's homes and bringing their struggles to the streets. *Household Workers Unite* offers a glimpse into the tenacity and innovation of a long overlooked yet vital part of the U.S. labor movement, both then and now.

Nadasen draws from extensive archival research to weave together the story of widespread organizing from the 1950s to the 1970s, including interview transcripts, household workers' written reflections, newspaper articles, and legislative accounts that reveal the often-racist assumptions embedded in social policy. She thoughtfully synthesizes individual organizer's roles, including their sometimes-divergent ideas regarding how best to move the movement forward. For example, noting how black household workers especially remained trapped in the occupation with slim chances of upward mobility, Cleveland-based Geraldine Roberts commented, "There isn't any advancement . . . for thirty years, she's still the same lady" (p. 97). To address this issue, organizations in other cities launched household worker training programs intended to professionalize and elevate the status of the work, while Roberts instead established a community college partnership, urging women to educate themselves "out" of household work.

Household Workers Unite thus illustrates the profoundly intersectional and interconnected racial, gender, and class inequalities that workers faced in mainstream white U.S. society as well as within the labor movement itself. Traditional unions remained interested in organizing manufacturing (mostly men) and service sector (mostly women) workers, relegating domestic workers to the margins. Already categorically excluded from labor rights recognizing them as "real workers," African American women activists created their own organizations at the community level and beyond, including the National Domestic Workers Union of America, the Household Workers

Organization, the Household Technicians of America, and the Professional Household Workers Union. They organized on public transit, linked up with broader social movement struggles for civil rights and women's rights, and forged a complicated and sometimes paternalistic relationship with the middle-class reformers of the National Committee on Household Employment.

Yet the movement's achievements were not without nuance, as Nadasen demonstrates. The establishment of Maids' Honor Day in 1970, for instance, signified recognition of undervalued workers and yet also revealed the entrenched power dynamics inherent to the domestic employment relationship. Workers dressed up, enjoyed a fancy banquet, and listened to their very own bosses praise their qualities as household workers. However, at the same time, values of deference, loyalty, and self-sacrifice loomed large within the generic employer discourse around the indispensability of their workers. In this way, Maids' Honor Day championed and reinforced employers' expectations of their workers, favoring those women who exemplified a particular moral code and dutiful manner, rather than challenging or critiquing employer's demands as part of a broader struggle for worker rights (p. 87).

Both Nadasen's scholarly rigor and political commitment shine as she presents a narrative of strife and triumph throughout the book. At times her narrative meanders between various decades and the chronological developments of the movement become a bit tangled, but this technique also mirrors the imbricated nature of historical progress. *Household Workers Unite* thus offers a creative vision for organizing from a structurally vulnerable position in the informal economy, and its many parallels to the contemporary domestic worker movement remind us that there is still much work to be done. The text is thoughtfully rendered, accessible, and entertaining, making it a smart addition to courses in Labor Studies, Women's Studies, African American Studies, History, and Sociology, as well as those interested in racial and gender justice, labor informality, and social change.

Nadasen closes *Household Worlds Unite* by commenting, "The world, at times, seems full of despair" (p. 185), a statement which could hardly feel more apt considering our current political climate. And yet through these women's voices and histories, she finds hope, inspiration for social change, and timely lessons from those who fought this fight not-so-long ago; so, too, should we.

Huws, Ursula. *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2014. 208 pp. \$16.00 (paper).

Reviewed by: Eric Schuster, *Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA*

While popular accounts of the gig economy proliferate, and the multibillions minted from contingent laborers like Uber drivers and Amazon packagers are celebrated, defining social class in the global digital economy remains challenging. Ursula Huws, Professor of Labour and Globalization at Hertfordshire Business School, demystifies the processes and character of work, linking them to the newly stable points and processes