

**On Our Own:  
Flight Attendant Activism and the Family Values Economy**

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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December, 2010

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## Acknowledgements

The foundational argument of this dissertation – that the economy has been reorganized around heteronormativity and hard work since 1970, and that this shift poses a serious threat to any effort to build a more just society – arises much less from my own brilliance than from the collective effort of doing this project. Indeed the creation of these pages depended on a multiplicity of intellectual, intimate, friendly, professional, and political relationships, bonds that are inevitably weakened by the growing reverie for privatization and personal responsibility. So rather than a testament to the prowess of the atomized individual intellectual, this dissertation is an archive of dialogue with friends in bars at all hours of the night, with my mentors in the Association of Flight Attendants’ offices in San Francisco, with displaced flight attendants in motel rooms in Dallas, Kansas City, Saint Louis, and a host of other places, and with my students and colleagues in the classrooms at the University of Minnesota. I want to briefly name just a few of the people whose solidarity most influenced the story I have chosen to tell.

First and foremost, I am absolutely humbled by generosity of the dozens of front line flight attendants who made this project what it is. The political economic changes at the center of this work have grounded tens of thousands of my former colleagues, and left so many others in a career with lower wages, longer workdays, little job security, and no union protection. Nevertheless, flight attendants invited me into their homes and cooked for me as they brought me up

to speed on the industry. They let me rummage through their basements to look through scrapbooks and file cabinets. And they rearranged their flight schedules – and days in the offices, hotels, hair salons, schools, and other places they now work – to participate in my formal interview process. I am particularly grateful to so many of the 4,300 grounded former TWA flight attendants who shared the passion, hope, and hopelessness of their four-decades-long struggle with me. No one donated more time to this project than Mary Ellen Miller, who spent dozens of hours connecting me to her vast network of colleagues and rich collection of documents. Dixie Daniels and Victoria (Frankovich) Gray constantly clarified nuts and bolts questions for me about government regulation, contract negotiations, strike tactics, and corporate merger policy. Paula Mariedaughter’s trove of visual materials will bring vibrancy to the book I hope to base on this dissertation. And interviews that were hilarious yet bitterly painful with Janet Lhuillier, Richard Wagner, Diane Watson, Kaye Chandler, and so many others kept me determined to finish this project even on days when I was ready to give up.

The mentorship that I got from my role models at the Association of Flight Attendants Council 11 in San Francisco lent me the tenacity and the *savoir-faire* to make this project happen. I learned what it means to be a union leader from Dawn Marie Bader, whose passionate commitment to my coworkers, deft political skills, and generous friendship – despite me joining the local as a 24-year-old green horn – are a model for my own workplace activism today. Stan Kiino

opened a million doors for me at AFA, and his constant work at the intersection of anti-racist, queer, and economic justice activism made me want to follow him through those doors. Kathy Lynch taught me that graciousness will carry me far, and that a touch of style is absolutely necessary for making political change. Terry Sousoures and Jeanne Heier-Donnellan taught me the value of technical knowledge; that the nuts and bolts of aviation safety, airline operations, and contract negotiations build strong and effective political activists. And thank you to everyone whose humor and solidarity made my time at AFA deeply inspirational to my academic work, especially to Roxanne Ng, Christine Black, Beth Skrondal, Joan Simms, and Dante Harris.

My most sincere thanks to the intellectuals who have influenced this project. For the better part of two decades, Peter Rachleff has been a mentor and close personal friend. What I find so hopeful about Peter is his constant commitment to reinventing his social and scholarly worlds. While workplace justice movements have faced daunting setbacks in the decades that Peter has been a professor, and while those difficulties have presented an academic and emotional challenge to all labor intellectuals, Peter has responded to the upheaval by demanding that all of his students think and read broadly: in political theory, in critical race studies, in political economy, and especially in the performing arts. That constant willingness to engage with sometimes unfamiliar intellectual and artistic traditions motivates my own approach to scholarship – and to life. Thanks to my academic advisor Jennifer Pierce for her unflagging commitment to my

work. Refusing the hierarchical mandates of the academy, Jennifer showed me solidarity and kinship in the workplace that I had come to know and value in my previous life at AFA. Whether in her comments on every graceful or ungainly incarnation of my dissertation, in the ten billion email volleys as co-editors of *Queer Twin Cities*, or on the endless social and professional events for the Department of American Studies and the GLBT Oral History Project, Jennifer always showed me leadership, but always made me feel like her comrade rather than her underling. Thanks to Lisa Disch, my dissertation committee chair, for demonstrating why being a good teacher matters. In the “postmodern” era, many lament that the medium has trumped the message. Lisa proves that we should ditch this binary. Her vigor and her stage presence in her graduate seminar in political representation – and the substance of her critiques of Derrida and Spivak and Mouffe – have been a role model for my own intellectual practice. Thanks to Kevin Murphy for always asking the hardest question on every exam. Kevin is immensely generous with his time, constantly helping me with the nuts and bolts of academic life: suggesting readings for a new syllabus, sending me citations to deepen arguments I make in my work, and quelling my anxieties about new work as I produce it. But he always pushes me on the broad significance of my work, which gives me direction as a thinker and a writer. I am honored to be taken so seriously. And thanks to Kale Fajardo for showing me the importance of the craft of academic writing. Kale’s interest in the ocean affirmed my own commitment

to aviation as an academic subject, which has driven my own commitment to interdisciplinary writing.

I am deeply indebted to all of my colleagues for their inspiration and their support on the long road to the Ph.D. Jason Stahl proves that friendship is the key to making a taxing workplace sane. Our alliance began at GradTRAC, the union organizing effort for “grad employees” in 2004, in which I was the minister of information and Jason was one of the ministers of paper distribution. Though the administration’s success at cynically stoking our peers’ anxieties about smartness, about individualism, about class, and about race beat us at the polls, the personal solidarity that grew between Jason and me in union work got us through the remainder of our time in graduate school, and carries us through life outside the University. Thanks to Alex Urquhart, who taught me the value of collaborative work. Alex and I were always together at our most vulnerable, designing syllabi when we had never taught, writing book proposals when we had never published, and slogging through dissertation chapters when we had no real idea what our projects were about. But in every one of those instances, sharing that vulnerability produced documents and ideas that flourished when my own would have withered. I look forward to days when we will practice that collaboration again. And thanks to Danny LaChance for lending me the humor to get through graduate school. On my way to Helga Leitner’s critical geography seminar on my first day at the University, Danny asked if I had bought a super expensive Rand McNally atlas to enhance my performance in the geography department. That set

the tone for the next six years. Thanks especially to Danny for all the late night therapy sessions at Barbette. I honestly think those are why we both finished our Ph.D.s.

Thanks to all my colleagues who have been so generous in reading my work over the last years. Our reading group with Alex Urquhart, Jason Stahl, Lisa Arrastia, and Adam Bahner allowed me to survive my prelims, even while I publicly blurted “this has just got to be done!” in Walter Library in frustration. Thanks to Ryan Lee Cartwright and Michael David Franklin for all of the sharp ideas that helped me make the final push to my defense. And thanks for everyone whose feedback on my writing has allowed me to meet the challenge of interdisciplinarity, especially to Marion Traub-Werner, Rajyashree Reddy, Dara Strolovitch, Helga Leitner, Eric Sheppard, Regina Kunzel, Tracey Deutsch, Martin Manalansan, Lisa Duggan, Roderick Ferguson, David Seitz, Trica Keaton, Connor Donegan, George Henderson, and so many others.

My most junior colleagues – my undergraduate students – made me a hopeful person on my darkest days. The conversations we had those afternoons in American Studies 4301 deeply influenced the final structure and argument of this project. Hana Worku’s interest in community organizing – and especially on the economic value of community – pushed me to deepen my own work on the valuation of family. And even more importantly, her on-the-ground skills as an organizer, and the housing collective she started, gave me a place to live when graduate school left me broke and lonely, which is one of the only reasons I am



still able to work as an academic. Thanks to Rija Caldis for her tireless effort to build a curriculum around an interdisciplinary and critical study of business, which helped me identify and articulate my own role as a teacher. And Connor Donegan's masterful eye as an academic reader is *the* reason that neoliberalism is a secondary – rather than primary – category of analysis in this text. That advice has made this work much more vibrant and readable. For that guidance, and for so much fun and friendship, I thank him.

The unconditional support of my family got me through this project. I owe my intellectual curiosity to my mother, Mary Lynn Murphy. As we drove around my home town of Saint Paul, Minnesota when I was a kid in the late-1970s and early-1980s, I made her into a practitioner of social and cultural analysis. I would ask her why black neighborhoods were so much poorer than white neighborhoods, why some people lived on the street, and how you could tell if people were gay. She would answer in the way any good teacher does, making her student confront her with new and more complex questions. My dad, Mike Murphy, was also my teacher, especially on topics that had anything to do with aviation. I am sure that after five days of business travel, fighting the operational chaos of mergers and strikes in the first years of airline deregulation in the 1980s, the last thing my dad ever wanted to do was go back to the airport on Saturday morning. But when I demanded we do so, he usually indulged me, walking me through every inch of the terminal, from the Northwest Orient widebody gates to the spots where Republic parked the Convairs on the end of the green concourse.

These pages are a reflection on the things about the airline business that I learned from him. And I thank my sister, Mary Murphy, for putting up with me as I barraged mom with questions and dragged dad to the airport. You have been a tremendous support and friend to me as my life has taken all its unexpected turns. Thank you also for being an invaluable research support for this project, using your job at Harvard and skills and an archivist to deepen and broaden the collection of documents that uphold this project.

I think that friendship is the institution most suppressed by the transition to the family values economy, but that reveals the most about the utter unsustainability – and unlovability – of a society based on compulsory marriage and compulsory work. Thus it has been a multitude of friendships, some fleeting and some enduring, which inspired me to come up with the concept of the family values economy. Thanks to my San Francisco social scene for an absolutely robust and indulgent life, and especially to Tom DeCaigny, Seth Goldstein, Nikki Sidney, Mikey Wallin, Elena White Negrete, Eric Wiesner, and so many others. Thanks to all the regulars from the Phone Booth for getting me through every Friday night for five years, and to the regulars at the gay beach in Dolores Park for getting me through all the hangovers on Saturday. And thanks to Jimmy Draper for keeping me warm on many a cold and foggy San Francisco night. In Minneapolis, I am most grateful to the Revolting Queers, and especially to Bethany, Elliot, Towanda, Dan, MDF, Lady Enchantress, Jeffy, Eric, Jack, Lauren, Andrew, and so many others. I think every successful social movement

has to be motivated by the dream for a new society. The RQ and Pegasus scene in Minneapolis not only keeps that dream alive, but also has the guts to live in that new society every day. And thanks to everyone else that keeps the fires burning on the cold tundra with me late into the night, and especially to Jenny Mojica, Jeanette Ziegenfuss, Jesse Leaneagh, Lucas de Lima, Anna Tsantir, and Soniya Munshi.

The cruel logic of the family values economy is that in your darkest moments, there is no safety net, there is no one there to catch you, and you can depend on no one to break your fall. My friendship with Dan Luedtke proves not only that such logic is grossly fallacious, but also that another future is possible. In an age when we revere independence, and when people attack dependency (when people are blamed for their poverty by being labeled “welfare dependent”), I only finished this project because I could depend on Dan. Whether through co-parenting my 20-year-old Volvo station wagon when I couldn’t afford it anymore, or through just talking to me when my writers’-block fueled angst seemed to have scared everyone else off, Dan kept me going all the way through graduate school. That commitment outside the boundaries of heteronormativity, monogamy, domesticity, and all the other ideals not only gave me the material resources to do this project, but also served as a model for resistance against the family values economy – which of course is the purpose of my intellectual work.

Probably more so than any other single foundation, the ideas in this dissertation are the product of a million conversations with James Andrew.

Whether on the futon of our smaller-than-a-shoebox apartment in San Francisco, or in the glamour of a café next to a bookstore on the banks of the Seine in Paris, I take no greater pleasure than just sitting around and chatting with James. I therefore am deeply saddened that the fatigue, the hopelessness, and the inward focus that come with writing a dissertation cost us the relationship we had for nine years. Nevertheless, your willingness to stand by me, and your willingness to build a totally different kind of commitment even while we struggled with the pain of our separation, gives me the faith in alternative forms of kinship that inspires the political and intellectual contributions of this volume. For that generosity, and for that perseverance, I dedicate my dissertation to you.

For James D. Andrew

## **Abstract**

This dissertation historically analyzes the working lives and activism of flight attendants in the U.S. airline industry since 1970. During that period, I trace the emergence of what I call the “family values economy.” Given three decades of neoliberal reforms, working people have been less able to count on living-wage jobs or on the state for material support. Traditional family relationships have had to make up for such austerity, with fathers, mothers, and children turning the household into a space to pool the resources of multiple low-paying service jobs. Since flight attendants’ work schedules keep them away from home for weeks at a time, and because of involvement in feminist and LGBT movements long critical of “family values” agendas, I argue that flight attendants are uniquely positioned to challenge the reorganization of the economy around traditional family. Flight attendants have thus demanded and won new resources for the alternative arrangements in which they live: as single people, as unmarried parents, as same-sex couples, and as cohabitating friends. The dissertation therefore contributes to labor, gender, and sexuality studies by showing how politicizing family has sustained flight attendants’ vigorous push to contest economic inequality.

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

### **The Family Values Economy and its Dissidents**

Kelly J. Kelly calls herself a reluctant activist. Born and raised in Northern California and describing her politics, friendship networks, and desires as out of step with the contemporary U.S. mainstream, Kelly took her first job in the airlines – ground handling Canadian Airlines at San Francisco International in the early 1990s – not to start a revolution, but to “get out of dodge.” But as three different airlines helped Kelly broaden her horizons, carrying her to flight assignments in Minneapolis, Paris, and Dakar, among many other places, political unrest followed Kelly to work. “Its like everything I have ever done in the workplace in the airlines has been a fight,” Kelly told me as we talked in a row of seats saved from a scrapped United jetliner that now sit in the living room of her apartment in San Francisco’s Noe Valley. After a series of grueling trips forced Kelly to fly from London to West Africa via Bordeaux and Rome and back in one day, and after American Trans Air (ATA) threatened to fire her entire crew and abandon them in Accra, Ghana when they insisted they were too tired to continue, Kelly became a leader of the movement to form a union for ATA flight attendants. That effort successfully brought the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) to Kelly’s workplace in 1994.<sup>1</sup>

Four years later, after she took a job at United Airlines in search of shorter hours and better pay, Kelly became the first United flight attendant to change her gender identity on the job. Local managers of her San Francisco crew base were

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<sup>1</sup> Introductory narrative from: Kelly J. Kelly, personal interview, 18 November 2004.



immediately hostile when Kelly began to present as a female flight attendant in 1998, attempting to force her onto a medical leave of absence and blocking United's uniform vendor from delivering the women's pieces that Kelly had ordered. Working with union leaders from AFA, and building her own arsenal of expertise as a transgender workplace advocate, Kelly carried her case to United world headquarters in Chicago, winning the right to continue working the skies as she transitioned from wearing the angular and militaristic men's double-breasted uniform to a softer – yet androgynous - pantsuit.

Reluctant activism once again found Kelly during the month we spent flying together out of San Francisco in the year 2000. Our Boeing 767 crew was fairly typical of the social milieu at United – then the world's largest airline – at the turn of the millennium. Kelly, by this time a trans-identified white woman and I, a gay white man then in my mid-20s, worked together in business class with our friend Ricardo, a young, athletic Mexican American gay man. Mary Ann, a white woman in her late 30s with a 10-year-old son, lead our crew as purser. Back in coach, a white gay man in his late 20s and his best friend and roommate, fashionable and Brigitte Nielsen-esque, worked with a twenty-something Chinese American woman who bid our trip to visit a romance in Washington. Except for me – who had been in a relationship since I started at United in the fall of 1998 – everyone on our crew was single, living in a variety of alternative domesticities: a single mother and her son, committed but platonic friends, or as housemates of other San Franciscans found on Craigslist. All of us

headed our households and lived entirely off our flight attendant wages – none could count on a traditional husband-breadwinner or wife-caregiver – and most of us were involved in union activism. Our racial, gender, and sexual heterogeneity – and our political chutzpah - often caught our passengers’ attention. After walking in on a galley conversation about the union, and after Kelly, Ricardo, and I served them lunch on a flight to Washington, two gay businessmen repeatedly commented on how “edgy” and “chic” we were, demanding to know our international layover party plans, and openly figuring our racial, gender, and political locations as sexually provocative, profitable, and global.<sup>2</sup>

Our crew’s multiplicities were also sites of conflict. Late one night on a flight home from Dulles airport, I walked into the first class galley to find Kelly red-faced with frustration. She whispered to me that while delivering the first round of cocktails, one of her passengers – a flight attendant supervisor travelling off-duty – began to comment on her appearance. Actively interrupting her sequence of appetizer and main course deliveries, the supervisor called Kelly into the doorway at the forward end of the aircraft. She sharply warned that Kelly’s uniform violated company regulations, and that the sweater draped across her shoulders looked unprofessional and unattractive.

While the supervisor’s transphobia, and Kelly’s anger and embarrassment disturbed all of us, Kelly and our crew had ample political resources to confront the situation. We recognized the supervisor as the spouse of another United

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<sup>2</sup> Only the names of individuals who agreed to participate in this project are in the text. The names and identifying information of all other airline employees that I worked with and that appear in this study have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

manager who had recently been served with a public reprimand letter from our union. Challenging the manager's patronizing and demeaning treatment of flight attendants, the president of our Local maximized the letter's impact by sending it not just to that manager's supervisor, but also to all 4,900 flight attendants in our base. Therefore, when we quickly rotated two other flight attendants in to work Kelly's section, and as I passed the supervisor's seat wearing the green AFA pin that identified me as an elected union officer, she likely realized that we had once again organized a response. In case she missed our displeasure, we consulted AFA's "Your Rights at Work" guidebook that most flight attendants carried, a quick reference checklist for any crewmember incurring discipline in the line of duty. The AFA pamphlet told us that since the supervisor had been drinking on the flight, she would be unable to take any action against Kelly or our crew. We then kept careful written track of all subsequent drink requests by the supervisor.

Just after 1am Pacific time, the captain pulled the 767's throttles back and we began our descent into San Francisco. Mouth open, the supervisor slept, passed out in her first class chair. As we prepared the cabin for landing, we debriefed the situation, following Kelly's leadership and recognizing that challenging the supervisor on the ground would only reproduce the unwelcome spectacle made out of Kelly's body, appearance, and subjectivity. But Kelly and our crew's strategic decision to let the incident drop was not a sign of intimidation or defeat. Instead, as we stood on the ramp after arrival, waiting for the crew bus and watching the ground crew pull the last cargo cans out of the jet we had just

brought in from Washington, I was struck by the atypical, invigorating, and hopeful nature of the flight attendant workplace. Though we ultimately were feminized service employees, and though our workplace reeled from three decades of setbacks – wage concessions, failed strikes, imposed two-tier wage systems, subcontracting, and outsourcing – we retained potent resources to stand up for each other on the job, continually remaking the work process to better suit our needs and desires.

The common sense of the millennial age, of course, was that flight attendants and other service employees had been robbed of any meaningful ability to defend ourselves at work. Indeed corporations had spent thirty years expanding their right to hire, promote, and fire at will, rolling back union organizing rights, workplace safety regulations, and equal employment opportunity enforcement. Pundits and academics also told us that unions had largely fallen out of the equation for workplace justice, immobilized by state repression and economic transformation, and hobbled by their own investments in retrograde masculinity, nationalism, and whiteness.<sup>3</sup> By the year 2000, we

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<sup>3</sup> There is an extensive literature on the “deindustrialization” of the U.S. economy and the rise of the “service” or “information” economy, and the corresponding decline of organized mass union mobilization in the workplace. This dissertation does not mean to minimize or dismiss this conversation, but rather to remind audiences that workplace mobilization is an enduring and legitimate political intervention even as the overall situation has undoubtedly become more difficult. For an intellectual genealogy about the decline of the labor movement, see: Daniel Bell, The Coming of Post-industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting. New York: Basic Books, 1973., Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry. New York: Basic Books, 1982., Kim Moody, An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism. London: Verso, 1988., Robert B. Reich, The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Capitalism. New York, Vintage Books, 1991., and Grace Kyungwon Hong, The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

assumed that an employee's only means to stand up to a company was to act as a consumer, quitting their job and making a personal choice to find a better boss. Flight attendants interrupt all of these narratives. For even though many of us were, in Kelly's words, "reluctant," – well aware that storming the barricades could bait bitter political and economic repression – ours was a workplace full of activists. Rather than voting with their feet, quitting our jobs, or joining the information economy, flight attendants have continued to combine their legal and political power as union members with our broad experience in anti-racist, feminist, and queer movements to transform the way the airline industry does business on a global basis.

This dissertation takes up discontent like that on our transcontinental flight one evening in the year 2000, putting activism – and reluctance – like Kelly's in context of the political economic transformation underway since 1970. It does so by examining and historicizing the day-to-day operations, work practices, and political interventions in one workplace: the passenger cabin of U.S. airliners. Flight attendant labor offers a situated, embedded means to access the dominant political economic concepts of our time: globalization, financialization, deindustrialization, deregulation, and privatization.<sup>4</sup> Grounding macroeconomic change in one industry and among one laboring population allows the project to *demytify* and *narrativize* material practices. This project aims to tell the story of the particular mechanisms that have underwritten political economic change -

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<sup>4</sup> My move to understand the economy as embedded in society is deeply influenced by Karl Polanyi's critique of the "abstraction" of the economy from society. See: Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

corporate governance and revenue generation, the bond and derivatives markets, and the reorganization of production, for example – to render them legible and contestable. Indeed the dissertation documents how the reforms of the last four decades have, on one hand, changed the way people live, think, hope, and love, but on the other hand are fundamentally unstable, unsustainable, and open to reorientation.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Argument*

Given the centrality of the transport industry to global interconnectedness, the airlines provide an obvious window to understand political economic change. But why, one might ask, do I focus on flight attendants? What unique information can flight attendants give us about our material world? The answer, I argue, lies in flight attendants' unique relationship to a category that has justified and facilitated efforts to rebuild the economy since 1970: family. As free market

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<sup>5</sup> To make new connections about the airlines, the project draws upon intellectual and activist critiques of “neoliberalism” – the term often used to describe the push to make the free market the sole organizing force of society after 1970. While appraisals of neoliberalism had become omnipresent in academic fields from anthropology to comparative literature by the year 2000, grappling with the production of unprecedented wealth, poverty, and inequality during the global boom of the 1990s, this dissertation returns to the category's activist roots two decades earlier. The term, after all, was a central concept for the transnational Latin American solidarity movement of the 1980s, that challenging the U.S.-sponsored rise of military dictatorships across the hemisphere from Argentina to Guatemala. “Neoliberalism” was particularly useful because it allowed activists to draw linkages across realms we might assume to be discrete, exposing the interplay between the free-market theories of U.S. universities' economics departments, corporate profit making strategies in the Global North and South, the international division of labor, imperialism, and racialization in shoring up the authoritarian Latin American state. These connections helped activists galvanize a movement that drew together disparate groups – indigenous people, students, trade unionists, and feminists – into a movement that challenged and ultimately ended right-wing dominance in the Americas after the year 2000. See: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005. For critiques of the totalizing nature of some materialist critiques of neoliberalism and their tendency to assume that neoliberalization inevitably co-opts and corrodes local cultures, see: Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999., and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

reforms have weakened state and corporate commitment to employees, the productive capacity of the domestic sphere has had to make up for such austerity. In other words, the value of family has had to replace public and private social safety nets as they have receded. I turn to flight attendants to explain this transformation precisely because of their fraught relationship to domesticity since the profession's outset. The global movement that is demanded of those who fly for a living enables personal, political, and intimate connections that resist containment in the home. Because of this mobility, flight attendants have built their lives around alternative dependencies – unmarried parents, cohabitating adults, and queer friendship networks, for example – and have demanded state and corporate resources to sustain such dependencies. I thus propose that flight attendants are a counterformation to the rise of this “family values” economy, providing an archive of its development and of efforts to contest it.

So how, one might ask, can “family values” – something we often assume to be the bedrock of “*social conservatism*” and the “*culture wars*” – be the organizing principle of the *economy* after 1970? Perhaps no other scholar has been as thorough or convincing in breaking down the perceived binary between economic value and cultural values than political theorist Janet Jakobsen. Cultural values, Jakobsen argues, are frequently assumed to be the product of traditionalism, phenomena rooted in human relationships that existed prior to the rise of capitalism and that are thus external to the free market mechanisms that assign material worth. Economic value, conversely, is supposed to lack cultural

commitments, as it is a product of the rational, mathematical calculus of the free market. Rejecting this opposition, Jakobsen proposes that cultural values undergird regimes of accumulation, justifying human relationships necessary for profit making. In particular, Jakobsen insists that “family values” discourse and activism have allowed the U.S. state to adjust to global demands for austerity after 1970.<sup>6</sup> Promoting marriage while curtailing welfare benefits, and encouraging private schooling, health insurance, and retirement savings while cutting Medicaid and public housing, “family values” agendas have shifted the ideological center of the nation away from the state and into the family, thus allowing the state to cut social spending and lower overhead.<sup>7</sup>

While Jakobsen’s reworking of the value/values binary is compelling, further political economic analysis is necessary to understand how and why family values began to stand in for the welfare state after 1970. The answer, I argue, begins with the economic term “legacy costs,” that which is usually used to describe the price of commitments made to citizens and employees during the interwar and immediate-postwar eras. As the cost of pension plans, public health programs, unemployment benefits, workers’ compensation, public assistance, and other legacies of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century welfarism continues to grow, institutions are running from their costs, whether those entities be the governments of France,

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<sup>6</sup> Janet R. Jakobsen, “Can Homosexuals End Western Civilization as we Know it? Family Values in a Global Economy” Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV New York: New York University Press, 2002, 54, 63.

<sup>7</sup> Jakobsen 56. See also: Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance. New York: New York University Press, 2003.



Portugal, Greece, Japan, or the United States, or management at Citibank, Daimler-Benz, or British Airways. Particularly in the U.S., where a smaller welfare state and a narrower labor movement made legacy benefits more tenuous to begin with, people have, since 1970, been less able to count on generous vacation time, a living wage, and defined pension benefits, or on government subsidized unemployment, housing, health, and education systems to supplement private incomes.

*Historicizing the Family Values Economy*

As state and corporate remuneration has gradually receded for lower- and middle-income people, the household – literally the physical space of domesticity – has had to make up for vanishing legacy benefits. As Bethany Moreton has persuasively argued in *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, the domestic sphere and domestic social roles have become new resources for production, one where family members can generate the economic value that the jobs and governments of the long-theorized “service” or “postindustrial” or “neoliberal” economy fail to provide.<sup>8</sup> For instance, fathers, mothers, and teenage children may each hold one or more jobs in retail, food, agricultural, health, or building services. Though such jobs could never support a person or family on an individual basis, pooling five or six of them in one household could. Parents and older children may in turn rotate schedules to cover housework and care for younger children, as well as for children of friends and neighbors whose jobs also require long hours away

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<sup>8</sup> Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. Chapter 7.

from home. The household may also host temporary and contingent work, in which babysitting, lawn mowing, clothes mending, and gift-making supplement paychecks from primary employment. Private production, then, increasingly has to cover people's economic needs when the spaces we often call public stop paying: when union contracts guaranteeing breadwinner wages are abrogated in bankruptcy court, when high wage manufacturing jobs are sped up or outsourced, and when state disability, unemployment, and health services programs vanish after austerity measures. After 1970, the economies of scale of the "Fordist" era – when big companies, big unions, and big government paid robust wages to those working in the public sphere – have gradually given way to the above elaborated economies of domesticity.

That domesticity has become a resource to produce economic value is a historic reversal of fortune for the category. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century U.S., the concept of domesticity did important ideological work to extract family relationships from the production of surplus value. Before the Civil War, the household had been the primary space for production, where people would grow and make the things they needed to survive, building furniture, sewing clothing, cultivating gardens, and raising livestock. Rapid urbanization and industrialization amid a booming Post-Civil War economy gradually pulled labor out of the house, drawing women and especially men into paid work. That toil, in informal workplaces or factories or sweatshops, was often grueling, dirty, and dangerous. As much as domesticity described a physical place away from work,

it increasingly functioned as an emotional and ideological space to take people away from that misery. While the rhythms of the machine and the demands of the foreman controlled life at work, individual will, and the tenderness of human connections, were imagined to control life in the domestic sphere.

As Anna Clark argues in *The Struggle for the Breeches*, multiple domesticities were manufactured to serve the political needs of various constituencies in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus while the category helped establish and reiterate middle-class values of asceticism and self-denial, and solidify bourgeois social roles of the hard working father, the devoted wife, and the obedient child, working class social movements also deployed their own version of the domestic ideal. Defining domesticity as a privilege that they deserved, activists conjured the domestic sphere as a shelter in which factory operatives could escape the ravages and temptations of work and market, proving their own commitment to sexual normativity and responsibility and therefore that they were deserving subjects of full political rights.<sup>9</sup>

Since domesticity was imagined, in Christopher Lasch's words, as a haven in a heartless world,<sup>10</sup> the home was increasingly figured as a space for the production of cultural values, but not for the production of economic value. As Jeanne Boydston, Dorothy Sue Cobble, and other women's labor historians have argued, the growing assumption that cash wages from paid labor were the foundation of family finances erased the worth of so much production that was

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<sup>9</sup> See chapter 12 of: Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Lasch, *A Haven in a Heartless World*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.

still done at home, an understanding that categorically devalued women's work.<sup>11</sup> And though this trend was established in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it dramatically intensified with the social programs of the New Deal era. Indeed the legalization and state encouragement of union organizing after 1935 yielded contracts that guaranteed a "family wage," allowing mostly-male industrial workers to become breadwinners whose pay and benefits enabled wives to stay at home and raise children.<sup>12</sup>

Things once again about-faced in the 1970s, when the economies of domesticity had to fill in for a receding state. With the rise of the family values economy, both the cultural cache and material worth of normative domesticity boomed. The discursive valorization of family surged with the growth of self-described "family values" activism. Evangelical groups like James Dobson's Focus on the Family or Ralph Reed's Christian Coalition scapegoated deviation from normative domesticity as the cause of the period's scorching social and political unrest, blaming homosexuality, abortion, feminism, promiscuity, and single parenthood for the apparent decline of the nation. These anxieties about sex – and attendant reverie for traditional family – helped justify neoliberal modes of governance based on, in Lisa Duggan's terms, privatization and personal responsibility.<sup>13</sup> Duggan shows how efforts to cut legacy costs were justified as a

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<sup>11</sup> Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic. New York City: Oxford University Press, 1990. See especially pages ix-xi and 30-45.

<sup>12</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. See especially pages 120-130.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Duggan, The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003 50.

move to promote marriage and hard work, practices that would put the nation back on track after its journey astray in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>14</sup> Here we see how “family values” was not merely a new normative framing for society, but an economic prescription. Indeed in the tie-up between hard work and marriage – between value and family – we saw a public-private partnership that made the service economy function, as the economies of domesticity promoted by family values agendas filled in for what austere employers and governments failed to provide.

Any deviation, then, from the family values economy was scorned not simply as immoral, but as inefficient. It is therefore no coincidence that the greatest political economic shift of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S., the drastic curtailment of the welfare state with the Clinton Administration’s 1996 reform, was called “The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.” By both cutting the social safety net and then ratcheting up the pressure on the bottom of the labor market by flooding it with low-wage job seekers, the Act intervened by naming and dispossessing the antitheses of the family values economy.<sup>15</sup> As it institutionalized personal responsibility, the Act pointed to the irresponsible, those generating inverse economies of domesticity: the racialized

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<sup>14</sup> Duggan xii.

<sup>15</sup> For analysis of the demonization of women of color as “dependent” on the state and the use of this dependence as an excuse to roll back the welfare state in the 1990s, see: Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State,” Signs 19.2 (Winter, 1994): 314-319., Laura Briggs, Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) ch. 6., and Lisa Lowe and Angela Davis’s conversation about the 1996 law in: Lisa Lowe, “Angela Davis: Reflections on Race, Class, and Gender in the U.S.A.” The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.

“welfare queen” living large off of state resources, sexually indulging rather than marrying, and having babies for profit; the addled state bureaucrat pushing paper for her fraud; the feather bedded union boss who cashed in on representing the bureaucrat. As racialized femininity and legacy benefits discursively emerged as the cause of economic crisis, normative domesticity and hard work were cast as its solutions. Thus marriage, monogamy, domesticity, and family replaced high wage jobs and the social safety net as the cornerstones of the post-1970 economy.

But as the family values economy turned the domestic sphere into a space to do more with less, it fundamentally destabilized two of the categories upon which traditional family rested: manhood and fatherhood. Since more and more workingmen were losing the high-wage manufacturing jobs that underwrote their breadwinner status, their power over the home and over the economy evaporated. I propose that corporate management intervened to assuage the anxieties resulting from workingmen’s loss of power. After 1970, top brass and their legal and legislative advocates stepped in to make managerial authority unilateral and uncontestable. The mechanisms that propelled the new push for executive power are familiar to historians. The anti-union consulting business and right-to-work movement made union densities plummet, with the U.S. labor movement shedding half its membership in the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, as the Reagan Administration significantly relaxed Federal enforcement of Equal Employment Opportunity laws, and as conservative activists won a series of victories against

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<sup>16</sup> For a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the losses of U.S. union membership in the 1980s, see the introduction of: Jeremy Brecher, Strike! Revised and Updated Edition London: South End Press, 1999.

affirmative action at work and in education, companies were free to manage race and gender relations with purely voluntary commitments to “diversity” and “equality.”<sup>17</sup> This constellation of reforms deeply constricted the public’s ability to intervene in the corporate decision making process. So while consumer advocates, civil rights leaders, the women’s movement, community organizers, and trade unionists wielded considerable power over the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century corporation, the reforms of the 1970s and 1980s served to devalue their stakes, making it more difficult to contest management’s agenda. In their newfound freedom from oversight, corporate officers became new patriarchs for the economy and new fathers for the nation. Indeed as global integration was raising new questions about the role of the father in the home and about the role of the U.S. in the world economy, top company brass moved to answer these questions by creating a new reverie for hierarchy, order, and corporate manhood. As it shored up heteropatriarchy in a society in flux, that push for unilateral managerial authority joined austerity as the core foundations of the family values economy.

*Flight Attendants as a Counterformation to the Family Values Economy*

While much of the labor movement present and past has accommodated and even embraced ideals of family and domesticity, flight attendants have staunchly opposed both the heteropatriarchy and austerity that uphold the family values economy. This is precisely why they have so much to tell us about the political economy of the last four decades. While Jakobsen and Moreton’s work

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<sup>17</sup> I discuss the relationship between the curtailment of EEO enforcement and the rise of “diversity” activism in detail in Chapter 3 of this volume.

is fundamentally important to understanding how the family values economy has been institutionalized, much less attention has been paid to ongoing efforts to contest it, a project to which flight attendants have been central. After all, as flight attendants have jetted across the globe, they have never been successfully domesticated. Flight attendants' trip rotations keep them away from their families and households for days and even weeks at a time, making them elude the watchful eyes of husbands, friends, children, and neighbors, and planting them in crew lounges, cafes, and hotel rooms with coworkers, with strangers, or alone. Indeed in an age when the enduringly important home has grown in significance to politics and economics – both as a space to reiterate patriarchal and reproductive ideals and to pool resources to survive the service economy – flight attendants are never home. And rather than a mere consequence of airline scheduling practices, generations of flight attendants have explicitly chosen the profession because of the mobility it allows. In the 1960s, when the airlines restricted hiring to young, white, middle-class women, many took the job because it enabled physical movement unimaginable in teaching, nursing, and other forms of wage labor available to their demographic group.<sup>18</sup> As this cohort mobilized and won material improvements from the airlines in the 1970s, subsequent generations worked the skies for class mobility, as flight attending began to offer longevity pay, life and health insurance, and pensions without necessarily

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<sup>18</sup> For a thorough analysis of the racialization and gendering of the flight attendant profession in the 1960s, and an analysis of the relationship between these politics and the growth of the flight attendant union movement in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, see: Kathleen Morgan Barry, Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.



requiring a college degree.<sup>19</sup> Many post-1980 hires also joined the profession because it extended physical and class mobility to queers, people of color, feminists, single people, and others who rejected – or were historically excluded from – normative domesticity.

While it has provided immense financial and emotional rewards for many flight attendants, the profession's dissidence from domesticity has also deeply constricted the historical value of labor aloft. The airlines, of course, were well aware that foregone domesticity would sell, especially as the sexual revolution transformed the erotic landscape. In the mid-1960s, many airlines implemented policies requiring new flight attendant recruits to be single and childless, and banning the existing population from getting pregnant. Hence in an age of compulsory domesticity for middle class white women, the airlines filled an erotic niche by breaking those rules and mandating sexual availability for flight attendants. But as betrayed domesticity has long titillated the public – think 1960s pulp novels like *Coffee, Tea, or Me* or contemporary retro pieces like *Mad Men* – the airlines nevertheless used normative domesticity to cheapen flight attendant labor. Enforcing mandatory retirement at 35 years old, and excluding 1960s flight attendants from pension plans, work rules, and longevity pay that pilots, machinists, salespeople, and managers expected as male breadwinners, the airlines explicitly framed flight attending as a short stint of hostessing prior to a woman's permanent career as a suburban wife and mother. Kathleen Morgan

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<sup>19</sup> For a thorough analysis of flight attendants' ability to produce and consume space via the mobility of their profession, see: Drew Whitelegg, *Working the Skies: The Fast-Paced, Disorienting World of the Flight Attendant* New York City: NYU Press, 2007.

Barry and other historians have shown that these gender-based inequities inspired a vigorous labor feminist movement across airlines, crew bases, regions, and union affiliations, and that eventually won flight attendants the material remuneration once reserved for their male peers.<sup>20</sup>

As the 1970s progressed into the 1980s, I argue that flight attendants sharpened their politics not just to demand access to men's wages and work rules, but to procure resources for the spectrum of alternative dependencies around which flight attendants organized their lives: as single parent heads of households, as cohabitating platonic friends, in intergenerational families, and in queer social networks.<sup>21</sup> Activists insisted that government and the airlines pay to underwrite their needs and desires not just as individuals, but as agents in networks that spanned age, generation, physical location, intimate connection, and marital status. From employers, this meant bottom line compensation: a living wage, vacation pay, shorter work days, and health and life insurance to provide for loved ones as they worked, once they retired, and after they died. From the state, this meant health and safety regulation to protect their bodies on the job, Family Medical Leave Act to mitigate illness, Labor Protective Provisions to shield flight attendants in mergers and downsizings, pension reform to stop speculators from gambling away retirement funds, and international labor infrastructure to safeguard working conditions as the industry consolidates globally. Flight

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<sup>20</sup> For a thorough analysis of the historical foundations of this paragraph, see: Barry 122-210.

<sup>21</sup> For a historical analysis of the political, emotional, and economic significance of friendship – a category that is central to my own discussion of “alternative dependencies” – see Tom Roach, Friendship is a Way of Life. Forthcoming, SUNY Press, 2011.

attendants, then, focused their intervention on “legacy benefits” for the alternative dependencies that sustained their lives, adding value to a multiplicity of family formations that transgress the boundaries of normative domesticity.

Given the particularities of their agenda, I propose that flight attendants were uniquely poised to be suspicious when the proponents of the family values economy whittled away state and corporate commitments to employees and offered domesticity as a quid pro quo. For while flight attendants’ lives were in many ways similar to those performing family values economy service labor – sharing earning responsibilities with spouses, leaning on older kids and neighbors for child care, taking on second jobs to augment wages when business aloft was slow – flight attendants spent three decades fighting the reforms that made the jobs of the family values economy so austere. Their activism, then, is an archive of the technologies that strove – though that didn’t always succeed – to implement an alternative and more equitable regime of accumulation than the family values economy.

New economic practices undoubtedly stretched flight attendant workdays and shrank their paychecks, but they have in no way blunted or obscured flight attendants’ critiques. Flight attendants continue to demand funding for alternative dependencies, both through union contracts that entitle the current cohort to at least some of what their peers expected in the past, and via the return of state regulation that blocks the airlines from the cheapenings and speedups at the center of the family values economy. Hence I propose that the flight attendant

movement is not a holdover from Fordism, not, as airline management has repeatedly proclaimed “a vestigial remnant of a bygone era”<sup>22</sup> or one that waxes nostalgic for a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century suburban home and male breadwinner. Instead, their workplace activism is an expression of the ongoing complexities of flight attendants’ – and for that matter most working people’s – physical, emotional, and political lives. Flight attendants, therefore, are a counterformation to the family values economy and its commitment to domesticity, providing an insightful vantage point to theorize a new and more sustainable political economy.

***Methodology: The Political Economy of History and the Curatorial Method***

Before proceeding to contribute to understandings of political economic change and workplace activism, I must stop to address the relationship between my argument and the methodology that sustains it. That relationship, at first glance, may appear contradictory. My intervention, after all, is historical in the traditional sense, turning to flight attendants to trace how the family values economy came to be, how it differs from what came before, and how social movements may challenge it. But the project’s method is at times unorthodox, a hybrid of historical and ethnographic techniques deployed to earn an interdisciplinary PhD in American Studies. My methodology is a consequence of its object of study – political economic change between 1970 and 2010 – that has deeply influenced the production of knowledge and information. In particular, the rise of technologies like deregulation, financialization, and subcontracting have, at

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<sup>22</sup> “Airline Mergers and Acquisitions: The Question of Labor Protection,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Aviation of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation of the United States Senate, Nov. 21<sup>st</sup>, 1985. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986. 28-29.

least temporarily, enhanced the power of corporations and weakened the bargaining position of trade unions and other workplace justice movements. This shift in the fulcrum of workplace conflict has placed unique pressures on the practice of history, with companies striving to cover up abuses of newfound power, and with justice movements seeking to make their members look authentic, resistant, and heroic. I propose that imbricating history and ethnography is the most effective way to respond to these pressures. Therefore, I cull from official archives of airlines and unions, I peruse flight attendants' basement scrapbooks and collections, I conduct formal interviews, and I perform analysis of my own labor aloft.

As I began the project, I was well aware that searching airlines' corporate archives was not a research strategy likely to bear fruit on its own. For while even deceased carriers airlines like TWA and Pan Am have museums trumpeting proud histories, showcasing flight attendant uniforms and aircraft color schemes, and even housing documents with financial and operational information, much of the evidence of the industry's post-1970 transformation has disappeared. Some of the reasons for this are well known. One only need to watch Michael Moore chase General Motors CEO Roger Smith through Detroit country clubs and cocktail parties to understand that the economic system has become less and less transparent as profit strategies have come to rest on dispossessing political economic reforms. Financialization, for example, allowed TWA to become the personal possession of a single individual in late 1988, when CEO Carl Icahn

engineered a stock swap to forcibly oust all remaining shareholders.<sup>23</sup> Like a Delorian, an estate in Greece, or a trophy wife, TWA and its 40,000 employees were at Icahn's complete and immediate disposal. Though he still owed the SEC basic financial information about the airline, there was no check to balance Icahn's control of information about TWA. Prior to the 1980s, airlines had diverse boards and large management teams, meaning that there were many pores for information outflow, even if that flow was clandestine. But after the 1988 stock swap, Icahn and only Icahn had the power to decide what went in the archive, meaning of course that little of value did.

One could assume that the labor movement would be a more revealing venue to research practices like the Icahn stock swap and its impact on front line employees. My experience indicates that this is only partially true. After all, movements for social change – queer, feminist, unionist, anti-racist, and other forms of organizing – also have a stake in disciplining, censoring, and sanitizing history. The impetus for activists to police their own archive has intensified because of the very difficulties facing justice struggles. Four difficult decades have in some ways made the archive a repository of disappointment, a holding cell for memories of failed organizing drives, concessionary contracts, and elusive legislation. Preserved information is always capable of reopening the bitter wounds of the past, revealing words, images, and data from which activists would rather avert their eyes.

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<sup>23</sup> For a thorough political economic and financial analysis of the 1988 Icahn privatization, see pages 46-48 of chapter 2.

This very bitterness flashed up among union leaders at TWA in the years after the Icahn stock swap. In 1997, while the airline limped toward its third bankruptcy, flight attendants voted to end representation by their small and financially strapped independent union in favor of the scale and financial resources of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM). Incoming IAM leaders were well aware that the smaller union had grown out of 1970s feminist critiques of the stagnant, sexist bloat of the industrial union bureaucracy. Institutional labor leaders condemned this agitation as subversion, rendering the TWA union's archives – formal records of this treachery – annals of sedition. At least partially stemming from these anxieties, the IAM stopped paying rent at the union's Downtown Saint Louis headquarters. As payment ceased, landlords hauled furniture and file cabinets to dumpsters. Photographs, transcripts, and negotiating notes from landmark cases surrounding the right to employment after strikes, appearance-based discrimination against lesbian and African American flight attendants, the ability to work and be openly HIV positive, and thousands of other records of tumultuous times wound up in a landfill.<sup>24</sup>

My critique of the relationship between our austere economy and activist histories is by no means isolated to institutions policing subversion. Organizers widely understand that archives manufacture politics, and that these politics of

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<sup>24</sup> The narrative of the fate of the IFFA archive was reconstructed from email and phone conversations with Victoria Frankovich, Kaye Chandler, and Mary Ellen Miller. Particularly important in framing the fate of the archive was an email volley I had with Frankovich in the fall of 2007. See: Victoria Frankovich, email correspondence, Nov. 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007.

representation are a necessary part of contesting the family values economy. A flight attendant interviewed for this project, for example, noted that she kept “everything” from the time she was a union activist, even materials from “the other side.” But when I announced my research visit, she admitted struggling over which documents to reveal, and which others to keep private. She went on to note that when unions actually make history and donate to archives, the process intensifies. “For official purposes, you have to tell the version of the story you want to last,” she said.<sup>25</sup> Part of the reason activists have been so careful about the “official story” is to protect themselves from the violence and sadness of the last four decades. Thus social movements have understandably worked to make their members – feminist flight attendants, women’s liberationists, queers, or welfare rights organizers – into paragons of justice, innocent of and physically separated from the harsh practices of the family values economy. Erasing contradictory, contentious, and even shameful moments helps maintain that innocence.<sup>26</sup>

The limitations of traditional historical methods – the tendency of companies, unions, and activists to scrub and sanitize the archive – points to the value of my time in the industry as a front line employee and as a union activist. Work and activism, more than anything, gave me an eye for information, allowing a deeper and more critical understanding of the official documents available. This

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<sup>25</sup> Off the record conversation with a flight attendant prior to an interview.

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to everyone in Rod Ferguson’s Fall 2007 “The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of American Studies” American Studies seminar at the University of Minnesota for helping develop the political liabilities and possibilities of the discourse of innocence. See also the introduction of: Hong.



context could not have been produced by traditional ethnographic fieldwork, in which I would have joined the airlines on a two-year stint as a scholar and participant observer during graduate school. In a heavily unionized, core infrastructural industry like the airlines, it simply takes much longer to gain a breadth of experience than most graduate programs would allow. Crew schedules, after all, are assigned by seniority. Flight attendants don't just show up and jet off to Paris on the first day of the job. Instead, the initial period is spent "on reserve," as an on-call backup for crewmembers who call in sick or miss connections. It can take years to regularize flight schedules enough to build up a social network on the job. This is even truer for labor activism. While some industrial unions use "salts" – pre-ordained activists that the union pigeon-holed in trades – all flight attendant leaders are elected from the rank and file. At three years of seniority, I barely had the name recognition to win my race for San Francisco base representative in June of 2001, squeaking over the line after my slate spent \$5000 on our campaign. Once in office I always struggled for credibility representing women twice my age that lived the sex wars of the 1970s and walked the picket lines of the 1980s. Shorter-term analysis could simply not have bridged these gaps.

This is, however, not a naïve pitch for "going native."<sup>27</sup> Quite the opposite, the authenticity assumed to exist in supposedly transparent rank and file

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<sup>27</sup> My interdisciplinary and reflexive approach to ethnography and history is deeply informed by feminist and anti-racist critiques of social science research methods. See especially: Marjorie Devault, Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999., Ruth Behar, Translated Woman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, and Mary Jo Maynes,

histories was largely elusive in my working life. As a graduate of an elite liberal arts college, I enjoyed privilege and mobility unimaginable to many of my colleagues. On several occasions, veteran, older women I worked with would stop and ask me why I “wasn’t using my education,” and warning that 35 years of working the skies leaves people with nothing but a sore back, insomnia, and varicose veins. But although I may have stood out, I wasn’t alone in my social location. By the late 1990s, United was using the flight attendant recruitment process to brand itself as fashionable, contemporary, and global, hiring a mostly well-educated, racially and sexually diverse cohort to remedy the media’s – and upper management’s – sexist dismissal of our senior peers as old, unattractive, and bitchy. And, perhaps ironically, because of the union wages these older women had won, privileged kids were fighting over flight attendant jobs prior to the Bush-era rollbacks of 2001. When I was hired in 1998, United interviewed 60,000 flight attendant candidates, hiring about 1,500 of them. I, for example, went through the recruitment process with a Latin honors graduate from Boston University who had been the senior editor of the campus-wide newspaper. A few months later, as I worked a Boeing 727 from Chicago to Boston, all three of the flight attendants were gay men under 25 who had graduated from private liberal arts colleges. Privilege like ours was common, but certainly not the rule.<sup>28</sup> In

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Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> My critique of authenticity, and appraisal of my own unique social location in the airline industry, is informed by James Clifford’s problematization of the assumed binary between traditional “rooted” culture and modern “routes” and movement. See: James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997. I also draw upon – and complicate the binaries in Laura Nader’s foundational work on

2002, for example, I flew a month of Chicago all-nighters with a young African American woman who, before coming to United, worked in a fast food restaurant with her mother and sister. No one in her family had been to college, and none had the employment benefits that she and I enjoyed prior to 2001. As all of us worked the skies together, we were never a “community of workers” whose story I can now translate to the public.<sup>29</sup> Instead we were a group indelibly crosscut by race, age, sexuality, politics, and privilege.

This dissertation builds linkages across those differences, putting my colleagues in conversation to unpack political economic change. Its method is thus curatorial. In other words, I create new information by putting narrative, emotion, and artifacts in dialogue with one another. I draw upon curation from its dominant practice in visual criticism, where the curator intervenes with an eye for arranging objects. But I fully recognize that “arranging objects” is dangerous business for a project that rests on peoples’ memories, vulnerabilities, and political commitments. So what I mean to say is not that I am here to affix items to a blank wall, but rather that people’s stories change when they are placed in relation to one another. Many flight attendants, for example, who organized in the mid-1970s have a particular way of talking about “justice,” one that is deeply informed by the women’s liberation movement. Those notions differ dramatically from ideas about justice espoused by young flight attendants of color organizing

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“studying up.” See: Laura Nader, “Up the Anthropologist – Perspectives Gained from Studying Up,” Dell H. Hymes, ed. Reinventing Anthropology. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972. 284-311.

<sup>29</sup> My approach to representing flight attendants, and my reticence to present a stable and developmental narrative of community, is most informed by: Miranda Joseph, Against the Romance of Community. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

in the 2000s. My goal as a researcher and writer is to put those people in contact on the page, analyzing how that interaction across space and time informs my core concepts.

### ***Situating the Project in the Literature***

Understanding the family values economy through the political agenda of its flight attendant discontents aims to take the labor studies and labor historical literature in a new direction. I do this by bringing conversations about labor and work into closer dialogue with the interdisciplines of political economy and of gender and sexuality studies. Research at this crossroads in U.S. history has been most innovative when it has engaged how the current austere regime of accumulation became hegemonic. In other words, recent scholarship is particularly compelling as it explains why low-wage labor, why non-union workplaces, and why an eroded social safety net have become, in Antonio Gramsci's terms, common sense. So for example, as her foundational monograph *Suburban Warriors* challenges top-down approaches that figure the conservative resurgence as an elite project of corporate executives and conservative operatives, Lisa McGirr traces how working- and middle-class grassroots activists have driven the shift toward anti-welfarism, regressive taxation, and the dismantling of state infrastructure for health, education, and housing. Somewhat similarly, Lisa Duggan's cogent critique in *The Twilight of Equality* demonstrates how social justice activists, especially those in mainstream LGBT movements, have made bids for inclusion by upholding rather than contesting neoliberal mandates for

privatization and personal responsibility. And, most relevant for this project, Bethany Moreton has shown not just how working people have come to rely on the economic value of traditional family with the rise of the service economy, but how the confluence of Christian ideology and service labor has provided white working women with a psychological wage that other political economic arrangements have failed to deliver. As it responds to these innovative works, my dissertation addresses the exact opposite question. Rather than probing how neoliberalism has become a dominant political economic paradigm, I trace the ways in which it has *failed* to become common sense. I ask, ultimately, how these austere theories and practices have inspired and crystallized a resistance movement among flight attendants that, in fits and starts, has troubled the waters for the family values economy.

The point of this project, then, is to sharpen our understanding of the political, economic, and intellectual foundations of flight attendants' dissident position. It therefore adds to the literature in history and sociology on the future of the labor movement. In history, scholars like David Roediger, Robin Kelley, Nancy MacLean, and Mae Ngai have been asking how migration, race, gender, and sexuality spawn contradictions that have inspired workplace activism, allowing us to consider how such tensions will continue to drive the push for social justice even as the institutional trade union movement falters. In a related dialogue, sociologists of work and labor like Kim Voss, Dan Clawson, Steven Lopez, and Ruth Milkman have rigorously analyzed how trade unionists'

intersection with the immigrant rights movement, community organizing, and anti-racist, feminist, and student activism have invigorated a new demands for workplace representation. My work contributes to this literature by compelling activists and scholars to more closely consider how they talk about family, community, and heteronormativity, and how they imagine these categories to be political. Indeed in an age when immigration controls, the home mortgage industry, long workdays – not to mention queer and feminist activists’ gains - make fewer people able or willing to access traditional family, this dissertation pushes labor intellectuals to find a more supple, a more expansive, and more deft way of engaging with working people’s desires, domesticities, and personal bonds.

As it contributes to research on the confluence of labor and family politics, my dissertation joins a vibrant conversation specifically focused on the working lives and history of flight attendants. Most importantly, my work picks up historical analysis where Kathleen Morgan Barry’s *Femininity in Flight* leaves off. From the profession’s outset in the early 1930s, Barry traces how antagonisms of gender built up in the airline workplace, finally erupting in a social and political upheaval among flight attendants that TWA flight attendant Paula Kane called “the stewardess rebellion.”<sup>30</sup> Barry is particularly effective at connecting flight attendant unionism to the broader women’s liberation

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<sup>30</sup> Stewardesses for Women’s Rights founding member Paula Kane coined the term “stewardess rebellion” in oral historical interviews about flight attendant activism in the late 1970s. See chapter 7 of: Kathleen Morgan Barry, *Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

movement, showing how the social movements of the 1960s transformed the theories, practices, and effectiveness of workplace activism. In another monograph of flight attendant labor, geographer Drew Whitelegg analyses how the political upsurge that Barry describes turned flying from “women’s work” into a robustly compensated profession, and how three subsequent decades of neoliberal reforms have once again cheapened and sped up the day-to-day practice of airline work. Rather than imagining the post-1970 period as one when the flight attendant movement declined, corroded and immobilized by the return to dominance of the free market, this project takes 1970 as a point of departure. I show instead that as months and years passed, flight attendants made an increasingly concise and poignant critique of the family values economy, even as their dissent was sometimes disorganized, disparate, and contradictory. Those criticisms – especially as they relate to traditional family as an organizing principle of society – should deeply inform the broader project of contesting the austerity of the neoliberal age.

As it approaches the airline industry as a political space, my work also draws upon Phil Tiemeyer’s newly released *Manhood Up in the Air*. Tiemeyer examines how the flight attendant workplace became a gay male lifeworld in the mid- and late-20<sup>th</sup> century, and how those social connections shaped the culture and politics of the airline industry. While gay and queer networks of friendship and intimacy deeply inspire my political economic analysis, this project is less interested in transport work as a space for community formation, whether for

LGBT people or feminists or any other population presumed to cohere around discrete political interests. Instead, I am interested in how sexuality broadly conceived – desires, identities, physical interactions, domestic arrangements, and familial bonds – shape an industry and a political economy, especially when they are *not* incitements to communal discourse. In particular, the flight attendants I interviewed often spoke of sexual arrangements that are deeply contested, from being celibate and alone to sleeping with married men. Thus flight attendants not only avoided organizing around some of these sexualities, but they were often reluctant to even talk about them. Nevertheless, the project considers how such whispered-about sexualities have deeply informed flight attendants' workplace agendas. A critical history of sexuality thus deeply informs my intervention into labor studies.

As it is unable to present a traditional developmental narrative of labor mobilization or community formation, my project also engages with the literature on new directions in research methods for the social sciences and humanities. Indeed as it is deeply committed to the empirical while striving to avoid positivism and reductionism, the text offers what Herman Gray and Macarena Gomez-Barris have theorized as a “sociology of the trace.” The search for “absent presences in the production of social worlds,” methods based on the trace strive to “make sense of the debris of structural projects like deregulation and



privatization.”<sup>31</sup> Searching through such wreckage, I take up both complete and incomplete pieces of evidence. This is why, on one hand the dissertation often exhaustively probes corporate stock swaps, bond offerings, and contract negotiations, while it also listens to uncomfortable silences around aloneness, around elusive monogamy, around failed relationships, and around absent traditional families. Thus, in Avery Gordon’s words, the project takes up the haunting of the airline industry by the rise of the family values economy, looking for phenomena that are “not easily perceivable but make their seething presence felt.”<sup>32</sup>

Scholars have been increasingly interested in taking up these traces and facing these hauntings, especially in interdisciplinary historical analysis. The project thus models itself on the work of Emily Rosenberg and Laura Briggs, both of whom address practices that are sometimes ephemeral and elusive and use them to conduct rigorous political economic analysis. Analyzing anxieties about Jews as landless, rootless, and failing to comply with the mandates of nuclear domesticity, Rosenberg’s *Financial Missionaries to the World* shows how late-19<sup>th</sup> century anti-corporate and anti-monopoly discourses relied on anti-semitic deployments of heteropatriarchy and private property rights. In a similar reading of political economy through the lens of sexuality, Laura Briggs’ *Reproducing Empire* turns to popular cultural texts and public policy documents to analyze

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<sup>31</sup> Herman Gray and Macarena Gomez-Barris, “Toward a Sociology of the Trace,” [Toward a Sociology of the Trace](#), ed. Herman Gray and Macarena Gomez-Barris. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Avery F. Gordon, [Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination](#). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Cited in Gray 7.

how racist contempt for the way Puerto Rican and African American women live, love, and reproduce shaped the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. welfare state. But while Briggs and Rosenberg brilliantly demonstrate how the traces of sexuality play a driving role in forming our material world, my work is most interested in how tensions over desire, dependency, and domesticity shape movements to contest dominant political economic paradigms.

### *The Layout*

#### *Chapter 1*

The dissertation opens in 1970, when the roaring industrial economy of the mid-twentieth century was beginning to cool, and when the family values economy coalesced as a response to the slowdown. Mary Ellen Miller and I met to have a long talk about those political economic changes in my plainly appointed room at the Best Western just a few miles from her original TWA flight attendant base at the old Downtown Kansas City municipal airport. “I came to the industry because I got married rather than stay in college,” Miller began as she recounted joining TWA in 1969. “I had a scholastic and music scholarship, but I made a bad decision to drop out and get married. It did not work out and was a bad situation. I needed to safely get out and get away.” In clipped, vigorous yet austere sentences, Miller continued:

It was 1972 and I got pregnant. I decided I was going to have the baby. I decided I was going to keep flying – even though we had to inform them right away I waited so I could keep flying. I finally told them that I intended to keep flying. They grounded me without pay. I got pissed and started writing letters to the

Women's Equity Action League. I wrote letters all over the place. I had the baby in 1973 and started starving myself and doing all sorts of dangerous things so I could get back to work. I had no other income. I just made me madder. I got involved in Stewardesses for Women's Rights.

As Miller spoke, I was struck by the intersections and antagonisms that are often suppressed when we study political economy in the classroom. I think Miller and I both met to talk about regulation, junk bonds, and strikes. But after 10 minutes, lost love, violence, pregnancy, abortion, and desire floated back and forth between those other, more mathematical registers. The commonalities that Miller and I shared as flight attendants and trade unionists quickly melted into difference. As she talked about sexuality, I was keenly aware of my immense privilege as a professional researcher interviewing a displaced worker, as a man who never experienced intimidation as this small-bodied, middle-aged woman came alone to my hotel room on a Kansas City highway, or as a male flight attendant of the 1990s who never experienced overt corporate management of my sexual practices as Miller did. So I left her space, not asking about the adult daughter who is older than me and who Miller fought for the right to have at TWA, or about her personal life since. Nevertheless, we repeatedly returned to talking about sex, as navigating these tensions and power differentials is what inspired Miller and her friends to build the flight attendant movement in the 1970s, and convinced me to join it in the 1990s.<sup>33</sup>

Chapter 1 analyses the collision of ideas and interventions in the flight attendant workplace of the 1970s that Mary Ellen Miller and I began to discuss

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Ellen Miller, Personal Interview, 20 Mar. 2008.

that day in Kansas City. I demonstrate how and why the airline industry became a site to develop and implement the family values economy, and why flight attendants led a particularly visible and explicit charge against it. The chapter thus takes up two tasks. First, I document the theories, practices, and social conditions that allowed flight attendants to take control of their unions in the mid-1970s, ousting existing leaders and unveiling a new agenda built around the alternative domesticities and dependencies in which many flight attendants lived: as single people, as unmarried parents, in queer relationships, or as cohabitating friends – to name just a few examples. By the end of the decade, activists had won new material resources and political power for a spectrum of people who lived outside the boundaries of traditional family. But as flight attendants were staunchly committed to the pension benefits, shorter workdays, and larger paychecks they earned, conservative policymakers and academics worked to undo that legacy in an effort to buoy a U.S. economy hamstrung by inflation. My second contribution, then, is to closely analyze the intellectual foundations and political context for the 1978 deregulation of the U.S. airline industry, showing how the anti-regulatory movement cast low-wage service work and traditional family as solutions to the apparent economic decline of the United States. Chapter 1 thus traces two widely divergent futures for the flight attendant profession, the airline industry, and for the U.S. economy that were fiercely debated in the 1970s.

## *Chapter 2*

The debate over the future of the airline industry reached a boiling point in the mid-1980s. Janet Lhuillier, a 1973-hire at TWA's New York international crew base, walked me through three years on the picket line as we had dinner at the kitchen table of her suburban Kansas City ranch house. Plunking five bulging scrapbooks between plates of pasta and glasses of red wine, Lhuillier began to turn the yellowing pages to guide her memory. We stopped, both laughing aloud, at a series of photographs taken outside TWA's Kansas City heavy maintenance base on a hot spring day during the first months of the 1986 strike. A thirtysomething white woman in a halter-top and short shorts reclines in a lawn chair, smiling for the camera and holding up the latest issue of *New Woman* magazine. In the background, picket signs blaring "TWA flight attendants ON STRIKE" loom in front of the plant gates. The photo is undoubtedly playful, a humorous acknowledgement that flight attendants could be the independent and ambitious yet nonetheless traditionally attractive women sold on the cover of *New Woman*. But the photo is not a joke, as the strike stemmed from Carl Icahn's – TWA's then-new financier CEO – attempt to tear up the contract that, for the first time in the airlines, allowed a feminized service workforce access to financial mobility usually reserved for white men. Looking up from the scrapbook and out into the back yard of the home she bought with the material wages of this new womanhood, Lhuillier put the photograph in political economic context.

The 1983 contract victory was a fabulous psychological story. I remember sitting there on the Champs Elysees on a layover having

a cup of tea, and I am going, “I am richer than shit right now!” It was absolutely phenomenal because all of a sudden we were paid so much for doing our jobs. People were like, “I can buy my own home. I can buy my own car. I can take care of my son. I can put my kids through school.” All of a sudden, flight attendants’ self esteem rose. We were literally changed people. When Carl Icahn took over two years later, and told us we didn’t deserve our wages, he didn’t realize the transformation that these women went through. We weren’t going to go back. We had been through this two-year transformation of living a decent lifestyle, and having our self-esteem match our pay. We do a good job. We deserve it.

Lhuillier’s interpretation of the cause of the 1986 strike – that flight attendants, no matter what, were not going to go back to “the way things were” – has multiple historical referents. Flight attendant activists were unable and unwilling to go back to a past when middle class white women could live on a street like Lhuillier’s only as wives and mothers. And they were unwilling to “go back” into a family values economy where multiple low-wage jobs, a mountain of credit card debt, and a ballooning mortgage – rather than robust wages – were necessary to be Lhuillier’s neighbor.<sup>34</sup>

Given their refusal to “go back” to the future of the family values economy, Lhuillier and her peers walked off the job and onto what would become the longest, and arguably one of the bitterest strikes in the history of the airline industry. Chapter 2 is an interdisciplinary history of that unrest. After flight attendants had made hay out of politicizing family in the 1970s, airline managers were forced to cede at least some of their power to a group whose feminized labor had long been cheap, flexible, and temporary. Given growing social and political pressure in the early 1980s to rescue the country from the previous decade’s

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<sup>34</sup> Janet Lhuillier, personal interview, 19 Mar. 2008.

emotional and economic malaise, airline executives were newly committed to taking back that power. To underwrite their bid for unilateral managerial authority, corporate leaders turned to the recent deregulation of the banking industry and financial markets. Taking advantage of emerging high-yield, high-risk sectors of the bond market, a new generation of airline CEOs secured rapid access to large sums of capital, money that would make them momentarily less dependent on employees' labor and better able to thwart union resistance strategies. Flight attendants at the major airlines – especially at TWA but also at Continental, United, and Eastern, among others – refused to be deterred by the airlines' new financial arsenal. They instead walked out, and in the process explicitly named the motivations for their indignation. Activists demanded the continuation of their 1970s gains not just because all people deserve a living wage, but because flight attendants have a broad spectrum of people who count on them, from children to lovers to parents to friends. Chapter 2, then, is a struggle over the meaning and future of family; a conflict between a corporate family resting on executives' unchecked patriarchal authority, and flight attendants' diverse, porous notion of family that depends on a living wage, shorter workdays, better benefits, and regulatory protection from the state.

### *Chapter 3*

In the ashes of strikes, bond market debts, bankruptcy filings, and liquidation of companies like Eastern and Pan American that built the industry, flight attendants entered the 1990s reeling. It was therefore perplexing to have

one of the most hopeful, resilient, and humorous conversations in all of my research with activists who focused their recollections on that decade. On a foggy night in San Francisco's Bernal Heights neighborhood, I sat in front of the living room fireplace of Jeff Sheehy, a local AIDS activist and former president of the Harvey Milk Club, the LGBT caucus of the city's Democratic party. Sheehy was chatting with Stan Kiino, my mentor at AFA and a 30-year veteran flight attendant with United and Pan Am. Sheehy and Kiino helped spearhead a grassroots campaign that, in 1999, forced the airline industry to offer "domestic partner benefits" to gay and unmarried couples, extending health and retirement coverage, bereavement leave, and free travel awards to a variety of airline households not conforming to legal heterosexual marriage.

As we stoked the fire and talked, Sheehy and Kiino one-upped each other, building the intensity of the domestic partner benefits campaign, eventually standing up and running around the room to simulate courtroom drama and police arrests in acts of civil disobedience, and parroting United's spokespeople's' anachronistic and dismissive comments to the media. Kiino beat Sheehy to the story's climax, narrating how the airlines folded to activists demands on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999 in a monologue so polished it seemed rehearsed, like he savored it by acting it out in front of the bathroom mirror in the days and weeks leading up to the interview. Kiino stopped and then began:

I'll never forget that day – hazy without much wind. Jeff called and told me to sit down before he broke the news. I didn't believe it! All of a sudden this wave of a sense of entitlement came over me. It changed the way I looked at my job – that shoulder to



shoulder I had equal rights with my fellow employees. It was like the job meant more than anything to me at that point than in (the rest of my) 27 years of flying.<sup>35</sup>

This chapter explains how the *best* day in Stan Kiino's career – one that began at Pan American when that airline was the juggernaut of a government controlled industry and the U.S.'s premier global air travel provider – could occur two decades after deregulation and financialization destroyed that company and severely undermined the workplace movements based there. It therefore explores how workplace activists can advance their goals even in the face of the unflinching demands for austerity in the neoliberal age. Indeed as the airline industry was shifting from national to global models for labor sourcing and revenue generation, and as it turned unprecedented profits during the technology boom of the 1990s, the airlines used that global reorganization to demand further give-backs from the front line workforce. To meet this challenge, flight attendant activists hitched themselves to the LGBT movement to politicize family, a linkage that brought the airline union movement much needed momentum and won new economic resources for employees at all carriers. But chapter 3 is an analysis not of gay-labor alliances writ-large, but one specifically focused on flight attendant mobilization. Thus, for many involved in the campaign – including both of its rank and file leaders – the monogamous, domesticated, and normative relationships presumed to organize gay working people's lives and to motivate the push for gay marriage and for domestic partner benefits, were wholly absent. As they were unable to fall back on traditional family, flight attendants drew on three

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<sup>35</sup> Stan Kiino and Jeff Sheehy, personal interview, 20 November 2004.

decades of experience fighting both foundations of the family values economy: heteropatriarchy and austerity. As airline managers leaned on both those foundations, turning to traditional matrimony to deny gay and unmarried couples health insurance and pension benefits, flight attendants were ready to respond. Chapter 3, therefore, shows how flight attendants rendered themselves dignified and deserving recipients of family benefits without leveraging legal marriage, biological reproduction, or normative domesticity.

#### *Chapter 4*

At the twilight of the Bush years, the flight attendant movement against the family values economy endured, an endurance that in and of itself was a victory given the immensely difficult circumstances facing the labor movement. But scholars and activists nonetheless struggle with fact that the decade was also about displacement, a loss I knew all too well given my own layoff from United Airlines in 2003. On the way to Saint Louis in 2008 to interview some of the 4,300 former-TWA flight attendants who were pink-slipped after American Airlines acquired their employer in 2001, I flew United for the first time since I was grounded five years earlier. The boarding lounge where I waited at O'Hare international airport was once the living room of my home aloft, as the ends of the long concourses had long been gathering places for newly hired flight attendants. While our veteran colleagues clip-clopped down the halls to jumbo jets heading to Paris, Hong Kong, and Buenos Aires, those of us with little seniority awaited

Boeing 737s hopping up and down the Ohio River Valley and across the Great Plains.

But five years later only the destinations were the same: Columbus, Pittsburgh, Sioux Falls, Louisville, Albany. Though flight attendants hustling between flights all wore United uniforms and staffed airplanes in United colors, none of them worked for United, and none of them had the free health insurance, defined benefit pension plans, or living wages sustaining my labor at O'Hare. Only tiny titles below each airplane's cockpit windshield made United's new structure visible. My flight to Saint Louis would be operated by GoJet Airlines, a subsidiary of Trans States Airlines, a company born two decades earlier as a subcontractor for TWA. Next-door was a jet from Shuttle America Airlines, a subsidiary of the Republic Airways Corporation. Republic also owns Chautauqua Airlines, a company that not so coincidentally also subcontracts for United, as well as for Delta, Continental, American, and USAirways. Further down the tarmac was a United-clad aircraft of Mesa Airlines, whose subsidiary Go! – not to be confused with GoJet – was all over the papers after a pilot crew had fallen asleep and strayed off course during a long duty day in Hawaii. While no Go! airplanes operate for United, both Mesa, the parent company, and sub-brand Colgan Air, do.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The subcontracting system is in a continual state of flux, making it difficult to get a precise snapshot of the exact structure of an airline brand's operations on a given day. The parent company and regional affiliates' quarterly SEC form 10-Q filings, as well as supplemental 8-K filings, are the among the most transparent sources of information on the topic. See for example: United Airlines, "United States Securities and Exchange Commission, Form 10-Q," Chicago: United Airlines, Inc., March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008., or: Mesa Air Group, "United States Securities and Exchange Commission, Form 10-Q," Phoenix: Mesa Air Group, June 30, 2008.

By 2009, 52% of the major airlines' domestic flights each day were operated by these low-cost subcontractors, a reorganization of production that cost 5,000 of my United colleagues our jobs in the five years after 2001.<sup>37</sup> As they navigated the largest wholesale disappearance of flight attendant jobs in the history of the airline industry, two trajectories have emerged in activists' response. Chapter 4 traces history's weight on both of these paths. On one hand, flight attendants put the immense political and economic infrastructure they had built in three decades of challenging the family values economy to work to protect themselves. Most importantly, and in a case study that is the centerpiece of chapter 4, flight attendants at American Airlines used their grassroots, fiercely independent, democratic union to collectively craft a policy that would inoculate them against displacement during corporate mergers by denying seniority credit and job security protections to the flight attendants of any airline that management chose to buy. When American bought TWA, that policy saved all of their jobs – albeit via putting their longtime partners in anti-family values economy activism at TWA out on the street.

Meanwhile, as the American-TWA affair mobilized democracy at the expense of justice, another large cohort of flight attendants came up with a different solution to displacement, one emerging from longstanding practices of contesting heteropatriarchy and austerity. Activists recognized that the workplace

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<sup>37</sup> To understand the scale of the expansion and of the subcontracting system and its impacts, see: Aleksandra Mozdzanowska, "Growth and Operating Patterns of Regional Jets in the United States," Journal of Aircraft 42.4, July/August 2005, 858-864., See also: "Flying Cheap," PBS Frontline, dir. Rick Young, 25 May 2010.

– not domesticity, not the household, and not family – was, in many cases, where flight attendants found sanity and sustenance. Thus, they embarked on an effort to deny companies or unions the right to strip seniority and job security away from employees during consolidation, passing long sought after federal legislation to ban these practices. Chapter 4, then, argues that in 2010, flight attendants are still pushing on the labor movement, demanding that individual union contracts are not enough, and that a social safety net under everyone regardless of corporate or union affiliation is an absolute necessity in an age when people don't necessarily have a husband or a partner or children to fall back on.

### *Conclusion*

As it reflects upon the horizons of the confluence of political economy, of labor, and of sexuality in flight attendants' lives, the conclusion of my dissertation focuses on a recurring – if sometimes troubling – theme of the project: aloneness. Over and over, flight attendants found themselves alone in this story; alone on the picket line when their machinist and pilot colleagues crossed in 1986, alone on the unemployment line after the TWA seniority stripping in 2003, and, often, alone when they get home from work. I want us to consider how aloneness troubles the communal discourses that frequently sustain social justice struggles, and especially how it troubles the family-based version of community often invoked by the U.S. labor movement. As their femininity, their feminism, their queerness, and indeed their staunchness has built barriers between flight attendants and the

rest of the labor movement, and as differences of race, sexuality, and gender dig deep divides among flight attendants even as they inspire their politics, community has been an ever elusive ideal. But as the presumably horizontal and mutual spaces of community remain distant, flight attendants cannot fall back on the individualism at the center of the liberal-capitalist order, most importantly because that very individualism is constituted in the domestic sphere to which flight attendants have never had full access. So for flight attendants, being alone should not be read as an anxious emptiness or a site of rugged individualism, but as a space of openness. In other words, aloneness is the place where solidarity is made, as it implies a new set of needs around which people can make claims on companies and on the state. It is precisely through those needs, and through those vulnerabilities, that workplace activists are embarking on the desperately important task of undoing the family values economy.

## CHAPTER 1

### ON THE SIDE OF THE ANGELS: Mobilizing Around the Family Values Economy in the 1970s

“We will miss you,” began the text of a full page New York Times advertisement on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1976. A bold headline sliced through the explanatory paragraph, trumpeting that “TWA MAY NOT FLY BEGINNING JUNE 5<sup>th</sup>, 1976.” Members of Transport Workers Union Local 551, the flight attendants for Trans World Airlines (TWA), maintained the demure, cordial, and gracious airs assumed to surround their trade as they publicly plead their case for a strike:

We the flight attendants of TWA take pride in our tradition of offering the flying public the highest Standard of Safety and Service. It is with regret, therefore, that we must advise you of the possibility of a strike against TWA. To insure that you suffer no disappointment or inconvenience, we recommend that you make alternative travel plans until we can settle our differences.<sup>38</sup>

Without an accord at the bargaining table, Federal law allowed flight attendants to walk off the job at 12:01 am on the fifth of June, the very week that school got out and wealthy Manhattan families would head to JFK to escape the dog days of summer, and four weeks before Bicentennial Weekend, the biggest New York gala in 200 years.

The looming labor conflagration at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue-based TWA, the Big Apple’s prestigious hometown airline and the largest passenger carrier in the world<sup>39</sup>, would only add to New York’s misery in the broiling summer of 1976.

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<sup>38</sup> Transport Workers Union Local 551, Advertisement, New York Times 19 May 1976: 69.

<sup>39</sup> New York had several hometown airlines in 1976. In addition to TWA, American Airlines and Pan American were also based in Manhattan. At the time, Pan Am was solely an international

Months earlier, the city was forced into bankruptcy as rapidly intensifying inflation overran a tepid economy. When the Feds refused to print money and bail out the city, Mayor Abraham Beame implemented stinging austerity measures on the public institutions long sustaining life in New York, from the Public Library to City University of New York to the Metropolitan Transit Authority. In the vice grip of austerity, the ordinary functions of city living – going to school, taking out the trash, waiting in line at the post office, riding the subway – became cumbersome, ugly, and mean.<sup>40</sup>

Given these frustrations, the city’s political, cultural, and economic elite was not about to let a bunch of stewardesses scuttle New York’s encore on the world stage during the Bicentennial, much less their own summer getaways to the breezes of Nice and the shores of the Aegean. Rubber burned on checker cab tires as TWA lawyers descended upon the Federal Court for the Southern District of New York, aiming to slap flight attendants with an injunction to block the strike. Bill Jolley, Local 551 activists’ lawyer, remembers the bluster in the court room as the Judge bore down on flight attendants.

As we lost the injunction action, the judge said, “This is July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976. Do you know what weekend this is?! The tall ships are coming into New York! This is the most important weekend of our lives!” I said, “Judge, we need to recognize what we are celebrating here on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976.” But of course the injunction was granted...<sup>41</sup>

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carrier, while American was limited to domestic. This made TWA the only airline New Yorkers could patronize for travel to the West Coast, the Midwest, Europe, the Mediterranean, and Asia. In 1976, TWA and Eastern were vying for the title of largest carrier in the “free world.”

<sup>40</sup> For a thorough political economic critique of the New York bankruptcy of 1975, see Chapter 2 of: David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Bill Jolley, personal interview, 21 Mar. 2008.



While the injunction was a clear setback for activists ready to flex their muscles against TWA during the Bicentennial, it represented a mere fraction of the unrest in flight attendants' political lives that summer. Indeed a bitter conflict already seethed between those on the front lines and higher-ups of the Transport Workers' Union (TWU). Local 551's elected leaders had spent a year mobilizing and energizing TWAers around the "work rules" that other, mostly-male airline workers had long enjoyed and that the mostly-female "stewardess" group sorely lacked. While government regulations<sup>42</sup> and contractual language placed strict limits on how long a pilot could fly, and precisely prescribed how much rest that pilot needed after a long shift, flight attendants' workdays were scheduled at the company's whim. Linking trade union militancy to the feminist gains of a decade-long new social movement upsurge, flight attendants insisted that it was high time to right this gendered discrepancy in the summer of 1976.

These hopes were dashed when TWU staff negotiators reached a tentative deal with management that improved compensation but lacked substantive work rule enhancements in the final moments before the June 5<sup>th</sup> strike deadline. Flight attendant activists castigated the accord as yet another manifestation of the old boys' network long governing flight attendant labor relations. Though flight attendant leaders played an advisory role during negotiations, they were strictly

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<sup>42</sup> Extensive labor and safety regulations were extended to airline pilots and aircraft and powerplant mechanics with the Air Commerce Act of 1933. Flight attendants were exempted from this thorough safety certification process until 2003, when the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA finally succeeded in passing certification legislation for which it had lobbied for three decades.

prohibited from intervening in the final terms and conditions of new contracts.

TWA flight attendant Mary Ellen Miller, one of the elected leaders of Local 551 that summer, describes these politics of dismissal:

Of course they didn't think women could handle money effectively... So our function was really just to let the TWU people know about flight attendant stuff. But it wasn't to talk. It wasn't to negotiate. And it wasn't to make any of the real decisions. That was all done off in another room somewhere with these guys. (TWU staff) were guys in the mid 1970s, and they had the same expectations of women as the company. They thought we were going to be hired and not stick around.<sup>43</sup>

Interrupting sexist assumptions that flight attending amounted to nothing more than eighteen frivolous months of socializing and imbibing, a jetset precursor to an inevitable journey toward suburban domesticity, activists exercised their sole point of leverage over the situation. While flight attendants had little say about the contents of their contracts, the TWU constitution did guarantee the elected leaders of Local 551 the right to approve or reject any pact between the union and the airline.<sup>44</sup> Taking advantage of their veto power, flight attendants broke the truce between TWU representatives and management, setting New York up for a major flight attendant strike during the Bicentennial.

Male union staffers were apoplectic at flight attendants' insubordination.

Mary Ellen Miller describes the ensuing tableau:

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Ellen Miller, Personal Interview, 20 Mar. 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Local 551's leaders had to choose between signing the pact between the TWA and management immediately, or forgoing validation and sending the tentative agreement to the rank and file for ratification in a referendum. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1976, both TWA managers and union higher-ups wanted a finalized pact. Local 551 activists' choice to forgo immediate confirmation of the deal, and to send it to the members for ratification, denied union higher-ups their demand, setting up the final conflict which produced the decertification election.

They called us all into TWU headquarters...and got really belligerent. All these big name union guys. And they lined us up against this wall. Art Teolis, Buddy Ledger, Vicki Frankovich, myself, and Vera Trolf. They lined us up and brought out the TWU International Constitution. We were supposed to put our hand on it and swear – like a bible – that we would uphold the Constitution of the union and sign the contract.<sup>45</sup>

Like the House Un-American Activities Committee that strove to purge a generation of radicals from the CIO twenty-five years earlier, TWU bureaucrats forced Local 551 activists into a ritual performance of loyalty, cursing flight attendants as traitors for jeopardizing the work-rules-free contract negotiated by the union. The forced pledge of allegiance, of course, failed to move Miller and the others. The group pushed ahead in apostasy, swearing fidelity not to the union, but to their fellow front line flight attendants. Miller continued:

We swore on the Constitution that we would support the TWA flight attendants and do what they wanted. Then the shit hit the fan big time. (TWU leaders) told us they were going to throw us out.<sup>46</sup>

And throw them out the TWU did. The union put Local 551 in trusteeship, stripping Teolis, Frankovich, Miller, and the others from their leadership positions, installing a new junta to carry out the wishes of TWU higher-ups, denying flight attendants legal counsel to fight management's effort to block the strike, and ratifying the work-rules-free contract. But instead of suppressing activist mobilization, the TWU's forced settlement of flight attendants' conflict with their employer initiated a watershed transformation of flight attendant unionism. Eleven months later, in April of 1977, TWA flight

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<sup>45</sup> Mary Ellen Miller, personal interview, 21 Mar. 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Miller, 21 Mar. 2008.

attendants permanently ditched the TWU in a government-supervised decertification election, ushering in a feminist-led independent union that offered a vigorous new approach to labor aloft.<sup>47</sup>

Taking up unrest like that which roiled in New York over the Bicentennial, this chapter historicizes the U.S. airline industry of the 1970s. I frame the decade as a time of conflict between two interventions in political economy; one by flight attendants and the other originating among anti-union policymakers, intellectuals, and managers. Though my analysis focuses on the conditions of labor, on profit making strategies, and on political mobilization in the airlines, the discontent I explore was embedded in a much further reaching debate about the future of the economy. To link flight attendants to broader currents in political economic thought, I trace how both positions in the debate rested on transforming the relationship between domesticity and the economy. Indeed as cultural conflict over so-called “family values” surged in the 1970s, that struggle was tied up in a fundamental reorganization of the interplay between family and value.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The opening narration of the confrontation between the elected leaders of flight attendant Local 551 and the national leadership of the TWU was thoroughly covered in personal interviews with many TWA flight attendant activists in the spring and summer of 2008. The testimony of Mary Ellen Miller, Janet Lhuillier, Diane Watson, Richard Wagner, and Bill Jolley was particularly important to the account of the summer of 1976 on pages 1-5.

<sup>48</sup> My analysis of the reorganization of the economy around family values helps historically situate Janet Jakobsen’s cogent re-working of the relationship between cultural values and economic value. See especially: Janet R. Jakobsen, “Can Homosexuals End Western Civilization as we Know it? Family Values in a Global Economy” Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV New York: New York University Press, 2002, 54, 63.

Flight attendants were primed to join this conversation, as they entered the 1970s openly challenging the airline industry over the dominant valorization of family. Since the profession's outset in the early 1930s, flight attendants had been remunerated according to what historians and feminist theorists have termed the "family wage system," that which routed economic resources to wives and children through male breadwinners.<sup>49</sup> At first glance, the family wage system made airlines great places to work, as it allotted hourly wages, healthcare, and retirement benefits to cover not just individual pilots, machinists, and sales reps, but to cover those employees' entire families. Thus the family wage system upped the overall cash value of airline work. But as it did so, the family wage system fundamentally devalued flight attendant labor by requiring flight attendants to access a family wage by quitting, marrying, and domesticating rather than by flying for a living. Indeed as their work group was over 93% women in 1970, flight attendants were categorically denied the longevity pay and pension benefits their male peers expected, and were required to leave the profession at 30 years old.<sup>50</sup> Such stipulations limited average flight attendant tenure to just 15 months in 1965, a striking departure from the family wage paradigm that expected

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<sup>49</sup> Family wage distribution was by no means a 20<sup>th</sup> century innovation, as urbanization and industrialization had gradually deepened the presumed connection between economic value and wage labor in the public sphere since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. But what was unique about the family wage system of the immediate Postwar era was its robustness, as a booming global industrial economy, a strong labor movement, and social welfarist policymaking allowed breadwinning husbands to provide their families with unprecedented material wealth and unparalleled access to consumer culture. See: Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic. New York City: Oxford University Press, 1990. See especially pages ix-xi and 30-45.

<sup>50</sup> For detailed analysis of sexist recruitment and management policies, see: Kathleen Morgan Barry, Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. 122-143.

men to work for industrial employers for life.<sup>51</sup> The family wage system, then, blocked flight attendants from accessing the robust legacy of airline work in the mid-twentieth century.

By 1975, flight attendants had built a broad based social movement to upend the family wage system, linking their own unions to the “new social movements” flourishing beyond the airline industry. In doing so, flight attendants demanded and won new systems of political economy and political representation aloft. Indicting both airline management and male-dominated industrial unions in the family wage devaluation of their labor, flight attendants fired existing union leaders, formed their own, fiercely political independent unions, and staunchly pressed the airlines for new contracts that doubled flight attendant compensation in the decade after 1975. As I walk the reader through the labor history of this upsurge, I propose that flight attendants’ tenacity was important not just because it won employees a big raise during the austere 1970s, but also because flight attendants explicitly challenged the heteronormative foundations of the family wage system. Since 50% of all flight attendants were single, and since only 15% had children in the mid-1970s, flight attendants were able to politicize the alternative dependencies around which they structured their lives; around friendship networks, around unmarried parents, and around queer<sup>52</sup> or single

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<sup>51</sup> Age and longevity data from: “Collective Bargaining in the Airline Industry, Report 546,” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1979. 4.

<sup>52</sup> I use this contemporary term simply describe family structures that broke with or contested dominant heterosexual forms. It is not a term that was used by flight attendants to describe themselves or their families in the 1970s, and, in my experience, is rarely used even in 2010. The term is useful, though, for helping academic audiences understand the particularities of flight attendants lives and families.

parent households.<sup>53</sup> Flight attendants, then, provided an alternative to the family wage system that challenged compulsory marriage and domesticity, and that forced the airlines to provide funding for a spectrum of family formations.

As flight attendants refused dependency on breadwinning husbands, a new generation of managers and policymakers also moved to end the family wage system in the airlines, though as part of a vastly different agenda. In October of 1978, Congress comprehensively deregulated the airline industry, a move that sustained a broader initiative to lower the cost of production by eliminating companies' "legacy" benefits like pensions, health insurance, and longevity pay. Anti-regulatory activists argued that the family wage system had locked the economy in an inflationary wage-price spiral in the 1970s, and that rolling back breadwinner wages was necessary to break the spiral. Policymakers, then, revoked the major airlines' protected route franchises and allowed new, much lower wage, often non-union upstarts to compete with the established lines, placing intense pressure on managers to lower wages. As I trace deregulation's foundations in intellectual history, I argue that this austerity program was part of a broader effort to reorganize the value of family in the 1970s. Indeed while the family wage system had made the household into a space to distribute breadwinner wages, deregulation and other austerity measures turned that same household into a venue for husbands, wives, and children to pool the resources of multiple, low-wage, zero-benefits, short term service jobs. Thus, family was rebuilt as a vehicle to mitigate austerity in what I call the "family values

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<sup>53</sup> Data on marital status from "Collective Bargaining in the Airline Industry" 4.

economy.”<sup>54</sup> And as they won generous wage increases through activism in the workplace and beyond, flight attendants directly and successfully challenged the dispossessing practices that are the foundation of the family values economy.

As this chapter turns to flight attendants to tell a story about contesting the family values economy, it provides a different framework for thinking about political economy in the 1970s. Historical and social scientific scholarship has thoroughly chronicled the rise and institutionalization of neoliberal practices during that decade, and the rendering of these practices common sense. Barry Bluestone, Bennett Harrison, and later David Harvey, for example, have pointed to how deindustrialization and deunionization upwardly redistributed wealth and restored elite class power.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, Lisa McGirr has shown how grassroots homeowners mobilization re-framed neoliberal reforms as in the interest of the white middle class even though such reforms were the basis for the dispossession of that group.<sup>56</sup> And most recently, Bethany Moreton demonstrates that evangelical Christian revery for servitude and family have aligned Southern whites with service employers like Wal-Mart despite the poverty that such companies’ low wages require and enforce. This chapter instead points out that a

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<sup>54</sup> I use the term “family values economy” to synthesize a growing conversation about the return of the household to a productive space, and the connection of that productivity to a burgeoning low-wage service sector. See especially chapter 7 of: Bethany Moreton, To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry. New York: Basic Books, 1982. David Harvey makes his argument about the restoration of elite class power in multiple places, but most clearly in: David Harvey, “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,” The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 610 (2007): 21-44.

<sup>56</sup> Lisa McGirr, Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.



whole lot of feminized service employees never bought into the push for the family values economy regardless of elite or grassroots justification for it. Instead, flight attendants openly challenged the heteronormative ideals and economic austerity measures that are the dual lynchpins of the family values economy. I thus present the 1970s not as a time when people acquiesced to the dominance of so-called neoliberalism, but as an agonistic struggle between two staunchly defended about the future of political economy and its interplay with family.

***“Tell Me About Your Life!”  
Flight Attendants Contend with the Family Wage System***

At the outset of the 1970s, the airline industry became a venue for an increasingly unmanageable contradiction between the conditions of flight attendant labor and the family-based economy of the mid-twentieth century. On one hand, flight attendants were overwhelmingly single, young, and childless, women who more often than not lived outside the boundaries of normative domesticity. Meanwhile, the dominant regime of accumulation rested on normative domesticity via the family wage system. Lopsided gender and family demographics were the result of a significant shift in airline recruitment and retention policies between 1960 and 1965. While women had always constituted the majority of new flight attendant recruits, most major airlines had effectively stopped hiring male flight attendants by the end of the 1950s. The new bias was partially the product of Cold War anxieties about the masculinity of any man willing – or even worse wanting – to perform work cast as docile and servile.

Indeed the censure of suspect manhood was the explicit foundation of management's position in the 1959 Supreme Court case *Diaz v. Pan American World Airways*, in which airlines won the right to categorically deny flight attendant employment to men.<sup>57</sup>

As the High Court formally rubber-stamped the industry's push to make flight attending into women's work, the new erotic and economic horizons of the sexual revolution led the airlines to sell an increasingly narrow and libidinally loaded femininity. By 1965, as uniform skirts ascended and necklines plunged, most carriers implemented policies requiring flight attendants to be single, forcing them to retire by 30, banning them from getting pregnant, and meticulously monitoring their weight and physical appearance, thus explicitly leveraging flight attendants' bodies and sexual availability in a bid for a competitive edge in the marketplace.<sup>58</sup> And though women of color began suing for and winning the right to flight attendant work as early as 1957<sup>59</sup>, most carriers reinforced the interconnectedness of normative femininity and whiteness in the 1960s and 1970s, hiring women of color only through separate and much more rigorous recruitment processes that screened for physical appearance, attitude, and personal demeanor.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For a thorough analysis of the Diaz case and of the elimination of male flight attendant hiring in the late 1950s, see: Phillip Tiemeyer, *Manhood Up in the Air: Gender, Sexuality, and Corporate Culture in Twentieth Century America*, Diss, University of Texas, Austin, 2007. Austin, TX: UTA, 2007.

<sup>58</sup> Barry 122-143.

<sup>59</sup> The 1957 race discrimination cases are referenced and briefly analyzed in: Phil Tiemeyer, "Doctoral Dissertation Proposal," Austin, TX: University of Texas, Austin, 2004.

<sup>60</sup> The separate hiring process was thoroughly described to me by someone who went through it. See: Paula Mariedaughter, personal interview, 24 Jun. 2008.

Flight attendants' position as young, single, and working women with full time, usually unionized jobs strained their relationship to a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century economy based on the wages of male breadwinners. Contracts between large employers and craft or industrial unions were particularly important to the U.S. version of this family wage system. Men's wages were certainly central to all of the Keynesian, macroeconomic interventions that staved off political turmoil by buoying the global economy in the immediate Postwar era. But although liberal democracies in Europe charged the state with providing retirement and health benefits, maternity leave, disability and unemployment insurance, and vacation time, Dorothy Sue Cobble and other historians have shown that the U.S. pursued a "mixed welfare" model, where collective bargaining agreements supplemented – and often replaced – a social safety net controlled by the government. And while union women like those organizing as waitresses, in the needle trades, and as public employees certainly won some of these contractual benefits, breadwinner wages were disproportionately likely to be paid to the mostly-male members of the big unions in manufacturing.<sup>61</sup> In that giant and burgeoning sector of the Postwar economy, a single, family wage was understood to guarantee high demand and low unemployment by channeling cash through working men to women and children who were figured not as productive individuals but as men's dependants. Political theorists Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon have argued that the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century family wage system joins a 400-year genealogy of "dependency," where

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<sup>61</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. See especially pages 120-130.

workingmen's wages have been a marker of white male economic independence, and of the racialized, gendered, and classed dependence of his others: the slave, the pauper, and the wife.<sup>62</sup> Such inequalities remained evident in a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century context, where, for vastly different reasons and in different ways, the Filipino house boy in Los Angeles, the Mexican farmworker in Salinas, the African American domestic in Baltimore, and the white housewife in Cleveland were all denied the robust compensation and physical mobility of breadwinner wages. Thus, even though flight attendants worked outside the home, often belonged to unions, and even walked out on strike, the family wage system rendered them dependent on men: on fathers, and on current or future husbands.

Flight attendants' presumed dependency posed a stark dilemma for a profession that so many women chose for the independence it allowed. Every woman I interviewed for this project, and scores of others I reminisced with in galleys and on layovers during my years at United, insisted that they took the job precisely because it offered mobility that virtually no other type of "women's work" provided. 1960 United-hire Georgia Nielsen summarized her early career in terms of movement and independence:

I was pushing 22 and not married – your options were extremely limited. Nursing school or teaching. I chose aviation because it was exciting and a career that gave you mobility. We thought we were young lovelies who could tackle the world. I went to Los Angeles so I could fly Hawaii. I eventually bought a Mustang and transferred to San Francisco. Then I went to New York and lived

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<sup>62</sup> Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs* 19.2 (Winter, 1994): 314-319.

on the Upper East and West Side. People had their babies and everyone was like, “tell me about your life!”<sup>63</sup>

As they captured friends’ imaginations with stories of downtown living and island stopovers, Geographer Drew Whitelegg argues in Lefebvrian Marxist terms that flight attendants produced space as they worked the skies in the 1960s and 1970s. Those new spaces generated particular social and economic relationships that exceeded – and in fact became a basis to contest – the family wage system. 1969 TWA-hire Kaye Chandler described similar spaces as I interviewed her in a café in Sausalito, California:

In 1968 and 1969 I got really involved with skiing up at Tahoe with some people from the fraternities at San Jose State. When I got based in San Francisco for TWA, I rented a room up at Tahoe and I also rented a house down in Santa Cruise. I would go between the two places and fly in the middle. It was a party. I was always involved in my skiing and my sports and I always had a bit of a different drummer going. When my girlfriends and I would get bored we would take off and go to Sun Valley or got to Aspen for a week. It was really pretty wild. I didn’t think anything of jumping off cliffs with my skis...<sup>64</sup>

When I asked about her early career, Chandler spoke almost entirely about spaces outside the workplace, narrating herself as a tomboy who loved sports and cars and who sought out men as friends, teammates, and drinking buddies rather than as fathers or husbands. And though nostalgia for the economic boom years of the 1960s inevitably colors many flight attendants’ recollections, narratives like Nielsen’s and Chandler’s are important not because they prove that flight attendants really were the hard drinking, fast driving, high flying Barbie dolls that

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<sup>63</sup> Georgia Panter Nielsen, personal interview, 18 Aug. 2006.

<sup>64</sup> Kaye Chandler, personal interview, 23 Jun. 2008.

the paperbacks said they were, but because they point to familial, social, and emotional relationships and to a political economy that broke women's dependency on male breadwinners. These alternative dependencies – between flight attendants and their friends, roommates, lovers, and other connections beyond the boundaries of normative family – were a defining feature of flight attendant labor, both in the 1960s boom years that Chandler and Nielsen described, and after the social and economic transformation of the 1970s provided immense new financial challenges for flight attendants and vastly diversified the workplace.

The immediate problem for Kaye Chandler's late-1960s cohort, however, was that the independence and mobility of flying for a living were necessarily short lived as a result of the airlines sexist recruitment and personnel policies. This was only true, of course, until Chandler's cohort hitched themselves to the activist momentum of the age and organized. As Kathleen Morgan Barry chronicles in her social history of flight attendants *Femininity in Flight*, flight attendants across airlines were suing their employers in the late 1960s to stop the forcible insertion of flight attendants into the family wage system. Though unions like the Association of Flight Attendants and the Transport Workers Union provided valuable assistance toward flight attendants' legal challenge, many cases began with flight attendants taking advantage of the recently-ratified Civil Rights Act of 1964, walking into Equal Employment Opportunity Commission offices and demanding redress for their terminations. By 1973, flight attendants were

coordinating court cases, media work, and grassroots advocacy through the Stewardesses for Women's Rights (SFWR), a national organization that linked flight attendants across airline and union affiliations and drew upon both liberal and radical feminist traditions. Through the SFWR, through unions, and through tireless individual advocacy, the flight attendants of the early 1970s made a clear claim: we intend to upend the family wage system in the airlines, making ourselves – rather than our future husbands – the breadwinners for whoever we define as family. As they did so, flight attendants averred that they would need much, much more from their employers and from their unions in the 1970s. The airlines would have to cough up money, raising wages, extending benefits, and observing the work rules that male employees expected. And flight attendant unions would have to quickly become explicit advocates for the alternative dependencies around which flight attendants organized their lives.<sup>65</sup>

### *A Staunch New Unionism for the mid-1970s*

Impassioned and emboldened by growing alliances with women's liberation and other social justice movements, flight attendants brought the airline industry to a breaking point in the summer of 1976. Nowhere was the discontent more vivid than at industry-giant TWA. As the sun set across 7<sup>th</sup> avenue late in the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, TWA President Ed Meyer and CFO Charles Tillinghast finally rolled into the New York Sheraton in the final hours before flight attendants' 12:01am strike deadline.<sup>66</sup> The appearance of TWA's top brass

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<sup>65</sup> Barry 144-210.

<sup>66</sup> Mike McGraw, "Tentative Agreement Averts TWA Strike," Kansas City Star 05 Jun. 1976: 1A.

meant that the airline was in fact ready to make a deal after 18 months of glacial negotiations and after flight attendants had spent a year working for frozen wages under an expired contract. With the economic rebound from the recession of 1973 making headlines, and with robust bookings for the summer rush to California, Europe, and the Mediterranean, Meyer and Tillinghast faced a myriad of economic incentives to keep TWA airplanes flying.

Flight attendants were equally committed to seizing the moment. Mary Ellen Miller, who was seated on the union side of the bargaining table when Meyer and Tillinghast walked in, argued that the social movements of the 1970s magnified the political, social, and emotional significance of the TWA dispute.

(Other airline unions) weren't doing anything extraordinary. They were doing – I called it – they would file grievances on the colors of the lounge chairs. I actually had a case like this with the TWU. They were not doing the things we wanted to do. We wanted retirement and we wanted it now. We wanted to end all of these avenues of discrimination. We wanted to fly while we were pregnant. Discovering the women's movement was huge. Because of the Vietnam War, the women's movement, the Civil Rights Movement, there were all of these new people saying, hey, everyone else is flexing their muscles, and we are not dummies and do not have to be treated like this.<sup>67</sup>

As we talked about the confrontation three decades later in Kansas City, Miller framed the dominant mode of airline representation in the early 1970s as a banal, business-as-usual reproduction of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century trade unionism, that in which bureaucrats would fight with companies over the “color of the lounge chairs” to win male breadwinners incremental increases in access to the middle class. 1970s flight attendants, conversely, wanted to do something “extraordinary” with their

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<sup>67</sup> Miller, 20 Mar. 2008.



unions, proving that they were not “dummies” by greatly enhancing the value and recognition of feminized service labor. Thus, labor economics became a venue to adjudicate a broader struggle over the worth of people – and especially of single women – who lived beyond the boundaries of heteronormativity. Flight attendants aimed not just to explicitly ban the use of appearance, body shape, hairstyle, marital status and reproductive choices to cheapen and speed up their labor, but to win substantive increases in bottom line compensation to close the gap with men in other sectors of the economy.

Flight attendant activists at TWA deployed an aggressive strategy to support their new agenda, timing a walkout for maximum impact on the U.S. air transport system. Miller and her colleagues trained their peers on strike tactics, made contingency plans for a long-term work stoppage, and broadcast their preparations in major newspapers in the cities along TWA’s route network. June, July, and August are by far the busiest months in the industry, and airlines regularly cancel employee vacations and require crews to fly overtime just to maintain normal operations, making them particularly vulnerable to any summer labor interruption. Furthermore, TWA was slated to carry the majority of passengers to the bicentennial celebration in New York over 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, and to the Republican national convention in Kansas City in mid-August<sup>68</sup>, events whose scale and visibility would magnify the consequences of a flight attendant strike.

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<sup>68</sup> Repps B. Hudson, “Convention Flights Threatened,” Kansas City Star Date unknown, likely July 20th-23<sup>rd</sup>, 1976.

TWA was well aware of the stakes of the standoff, and Meyer and Tillinghast brought the company checkbook to the Sheraton to cool the situation. Management put a 30% wage increase on the table, an expansive offer even in an era of high inflation.<sup>69</sup> At American Airlines, for example, the industry's number 3 carrier behind TWA and United and who was wrapping up negotiations during the TWA conflict, notoriously hard-bargaining pilots won only a 24% increase for a contract of similar duration, and flight attendants' outstanding offer remained in the single digits.<sup>70</sup> But while flight attendants' relished the significant pay increase, they balked at the proposed contract's two glaring absences. The deal on the table guaranteed virtually no progress on work rules, the regulations that protect crews from extremely long duty days and guarantee time off between flights. And the raise would become effective only upon signing, with no retroactive compensation for the year spent without an updated contract.<sup>71</sup> Given the absence of work rule improvements and retro pay – items that union members in male-dominated trades took for granted – the contract seemed to once again devalue feminized service labor, reinforcing flight attendants' second class status in the airline workplace.

These historical inequities drove a wedge through the union side of the bargaining table as management moved to seal the deal. The union delegation, after all, consisted not of one but of two parties. At the end of the table were the

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<sup>69</sup> Alice Hartmann, "Union Not Sure TWA Contract Will Pass," Kansas City Star 08 Jun. 1976: 17A.

<sup>70</sup> Committee For an Equitable Contract, flyer, Dallas, TX: Committee for an Equitable Contract, 1975.

<sup>71</sup> Hartmann "Union Not Sure TWA Contract Will Pass."

six elected officers of TWU Local 551, all of whom were front line TWA flight attendants: Victoria Frankovich, Buddy Ledger, Mary Ellen Miller, Barney Spera, Arthur Teolis, and Richard Wagner. Across from management sat TWU International Vice President Fredric Simpson, and Air Transport Division Director Ernest Mitchell.<sup>72</sup> Both were full time employees of the TWU, and both had bargained for decades with airlines, railroads, public transit agencies, and other entities employing TWU members. Given the presumed value of this expertise, Simpson and Mitchell controlled the back-and-forth with the company, with Frankovich and the other flight attendants playing only an advisory role. Leaders of Local 551 had the constitutional power to approve or reject the deal after it was done, but they could not directly control its contents.

Herein lied the conflict. When TWA put a 30% raise down on the table, Simpson and Mitchell were elated, as it would instantly bring TWA flight attendants' pay to the top of the industry, provide a hefty raise despite TWA's loss of \$121 million the year before<sup>73</sup>, and outpace increases won by labor movement powerhouses like the UAW, the Steelworkers, and the Teamsters. But since Simpson and Mitchell had never been flight attendants, they underappreciated the physical and political value of work rules and retro pay, especially for a group that was specifically vying to redress historic, sexist economic inequities. As Simpson and Mitchell were in charge, they signed the agreement, adjourning the meeting and, at least temporarily, calling off the strike.

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<sup>72</sup> Negotiating committee data from: Transport Workers Union, "TWA Strike Deadline Near; U.S. Mediators Press Talks," TWU Express Jun. 1976: 1.

<sup>73</sup> McGraw "Tentative Agreement Averts TWA Strike."

When the conference room doors swung open to a lobby of anxious reporters, Local 551 activists' displeasure was immediately apparent. "The deal is very tentative," Mary Ellen Miller told the *Kansas City Star*.<sup>74</sup> After Simpson and Mitchell accepted management's offer, Miller and the other flight attendants refused to sign it, instead insisting that the contract be sent to all flight attendants for popular ratification. Crews would report to their aircraft at sunrise, and would have three weeks to read and consider the offer while continuing to fly. If a majority of voters refused to ratify the accord in a June 30<sup>th</sup> referendum, a strike would begin immediately.

Both union higher-ups and TWA brass were furious at flight attendants' indignant position. Meyer and Tillinghast looked totally inept, as they had plunked down a huge chunk of change on the table and *still* come away with a looming strike threat. The new deadline was even worse for the airline, as it would potentially shutter JFK airport during the bicentennial, making TWA another black eye on New York's already lurid public image in the 1970s. Meyer was apoplectic with reporters, expressing befuddlement at flight attendants' choice to delay acceptance of an offer that, with benefit costs figured in, gave employees a 50% raise.<sup>75</sup> TWU officials, meanwhile, walked out of the Sheraton making plans to send ballots and information packets directly to front line flight attendants, bypassing the elected leaders of Local 551 by refusing to let them weigh in on the merits of the deal.

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<sup>74</sup> McGraw "Tentative Agreement Averts TWA Strike."

<sup>75</sup> Alice Hartmann, "TWA Union to Set Deadline on Strike," *Kansas City Star* 27 Jul. 1976: 19.

They did, of course, weigh in, using informal channels in the workplace and media interviews to encourage their colleagues to reject the pact between the Transport Workers Union and TWA. Management immediately went to court to block their agenda, suing the union for unfair labor practices by alleging that front line activists like Miller, Teolis, and Frankovich were spreading false information to sabotage the June 30<sup>th</sup> referendum, and seeking an injunction to block the 4<sup>th</sup> of July strike.<sup>76</sup> The suit only deepened the rift between Local 551 and TWU higher-ups like Simpson and Mitchell, as a damages award in an unfair labor practices case would hold the entire union accountable for the actions of Local 551's members. Tensions continued to escalate as the new strike deadline approached – Local 551 activists began openly planning to petition the Federal Government for an election to ditch the TWU altogether – but June 30<sup>th</sup> proved an anti-climax. The contract referendum failed by 433 votes, with 58% percent of voting flight attendants opting to reject the compromise and strike.<sup>77</sup> But before flight attendants could walk out on strike, the U.S. District Court for New York's Southern District granted TWA an injunction against the work stoppage, blocking the bicentennial walkout and forcing the groups to continue bargaining for two weeks.<sup>78</sup>

Though the rejected accord was a victory for Local 551 activists, it was not a unique occurrence in the airline industry of 1976, with similar events

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<sup>76</sup> Alice Hartmann, "Airline, Utility Talks Continue," Kansas City Star 02 Jul. 1976: 9A.

<sup>77</sup> Alice Hartmann, "Flight Attendants Cancel Strike; Agree to Vote on TWA Offer," Kansas City Star Date unknown, likely 27 Jul. 1976.

<sup>78</sup> For additional background, see: Mike McGraw, "TWA Pact is Rejected," Kansas City Star Date unknown, likely 01 Jul. 1976.

transpiring at American and Western Airlines during the same period. At American, for example, front line flight attendants torpedoed three successive contract agreements between management and union negotiators from the TWU.<sup>79</sup> In April of 1975, union higher-ups entered “expedited” contract negotiations with American.<sup>80</sup> A year earlier, a mere 46.7% of flight attendants participated in an authorization vote for a new contract, an abysmally low figure for a bread-and-butter wage referendum.<sup>81</sup> Assuming low voter turnout signified an apathetic flight attendant population disinterested in trade unionism, the TWU proposed expedited bargaining as a cheap, fast way to placate a disengaged workforce. Flight attendants responded by shooting down the tentative pact won in the expedited talks, sending TWU business agents back to the bargaining table despite a 14% raise in the proposed accord.<sup>82</sup> Eleven months later, TWU negotiators returned to flight attendants with a new and improved deal that included an 8% retroactive raise to cover the bargaining delay. Yet again, flight attendants nixed the offer, refusing to rubber stamp a contract that, while making progress on retro pay, failed to guarantee the substantive work rule improvements that were so important to activists on the front lines of all carriers.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, “APFA Newsletter 1.1, Summer 1976,” Dallas, TX: APFA, 1976.

<sup>80</sup> Transport Workers Union “New TWU Contract Sets Standards for Best Wages, Pensions, Benefits, Work Conditions: Union’s Expedited Negotiations Proves Bonanza for Members.” Dallas, TX: TWU Local 552, 1975.

<sup>81</sup> Transport Worker Union, “TWU Local 552 Newsletter, January, 1975,” Dallas, TX: TWU Local 552, 1975.

<sup>82</sup> Transport Workers Union, “New TWU Contract Sets Standards...”

<sup>83</sup> Transport Workers Union, “Your New Contract Gains,” Dallas, TX: TWU Local 552, 1975.

Higher-ups from the Transport Workers Union were bent on preventing an insurgency like that at American from coming to TWA. After making minor progress in negotiations with the airline, union staff sent a new offer to front line flight attendants for a vote on July 27<sup>th</sup>. Local 551's leaders once again balked at endorsing the deal, instead making preparations to strike TWA on August 1<sup>st</sup>, potentially shutting down the airline during the Republican National Convention in Kansas City, an event to which TWA was slated to carry the majority of the delegates. As the latest deadline approached, union staff formally kyboshed flight attendants' insubordination, forcing activists to take a loyalty oath by pledging allegiance to the TWU constitution. The flight attendants refused. "And then the shit hit the fan big time," Mary Ellen Miller laughed as she retold the story while paging through newspaper clippings of the upheaval. The TWU placed Local 551 in trusteeship, forcibly removing all six elected officials from office.<sup>84</sup> The slap-down appeared – at first glance – to quell the insurrection, as the new contract offer passed by 428 votes on July 27<sup>th</sup>, guaranteeing official labor peace in the flight attendant workplace until the summer of 1978 and averting a new public relations fiasco for TWA during the Republican Convention in Kansas City.<sup>85</sup> But as the final deal lacked retro pay and formal progress on work rules, the pact

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<sup>84</sup> The trusteeship narrative is not documented in the press, as it was an internal union conflict that would likely have confused public audiences in the middle of the widely publicized standoff between flight attendants and TWA. It is also absent in TWU materials, most likely due to the political liability of the anti-democratic action. But the trusteeship likely occurred in mid-July, as Frankovich and the others were already out of office by the time the members voted in the July 27<sup>th</sup> referendum. Extensive debate about this in: Bill Jolley and Mary Ellen Miller, personal interview, 21 Mar. 2008.

<sup>85</sup> Alice Hartmann, "Attendants Approve Pact with TWA," Kansas City Star Date missing, most likely 28 Jul. 1976.

once again appeared to lock in flight attendants' second-class status aloft. Work rule improvements, for example, were solidified not by explicit contractual language as they were for pilots and machinists, but were left to a joint union-management committee that lacked any formal power to change the pace and compensation of flight attendant labor.<sup>86</sup>

Frustration with more long days on the job grew among front line flight attendants, especially as the leaders they voted into office were ejected from union property, and as non-flight attendant union staffers conducted education briefings on the new contract. New York-based flight attendant Janet Lhuillier beamed with excitement as she told me about her participation in the 1976 stand off, recalling that the push for work rules to protect her from grueling hours and short layovers on the intercontinental trips she was flying to France, Italy, and Greece that summer galvanized her commitment to workplace activism. But when she and her peers converged at JFK airport for a mass briefing on the anxiously anticipated details of the July 27<sup>th</sup> accord, Lhuillier insists that union higher-ups' inept, dismissive conduct sapped activists of their energy.

Prior to the contract vote, we met with the TWU at our JFK hangar. The little man they sent looked like a beat up bird. He had a patch over his eye and his arm in a sling. And he showed up with two HUGE bodyguards. And we were thinking, why does he need two bodyguards for flight attendants! So we kept asking him questions about our contract, and he didn't know anything. He didn't know anything about our work rules. He didn't know anything about what we were trying to negotiate. We are going, how can this guy fight for us?<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hartmann "Attendants Approve Pact with TWA."

<sup>87</sup> Janet Lhuillier, personal interview, 19 Mar. 2008.



Lhuillier's tone while telling the story was comedic yet indignant. Her first problem with the union's presence that day was, of course, visual. By sending the "beat up bird" and his body guards – clichéd embodiments of macho, mid-twentieth century unionism - to meet with a workforce meticulously inspected for weight, breast size, hairstyle, and makeup application, the TWU seemed to rub the privilege of men's aesthetic latitude at work in women's faces. And by seeming to reference the visual composition of *On the Waterfront*, where union men valiantly and often violently fought for the breadwinner wages of their brothers, the TWU jammed the flight attendant standoff of 1976 back into the box of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century family wage system, the very contours of which dispossessed flight attendants and other feminized or racialized service workers. Moreover, as the "beat up bird" seemed to know nothing about minimum layover requirements, maximum duty times, legal rest restrictions, reassignment regulations, or any of the other work rules that Lhuillier and their peers went to work on their day off to hear about, union higher-ups' reinforced flight attendants' growing concerns that sexist political representation upheld a sexist political economy in the airline industry.

In the wake of the JFK hangar meeting and others like it, flight attendants at many of the largest airlines stepped up their efforts to build new systems of representation and economics in their workplace. At American Airlines, for example, flight attendants formed the "Committee for an Equitable Contract" in the fall of 1975. Committee flyers that began appearing in crew briefing rooms

and aircraft galleys noted that while flight attendants received a 9% pay increase in their 1974 contract, pilots reaped 24%, managers won 14%, and even non-union employees doubled flight attendants' raise at 19% over the same period.<sup>88</sup> As they illuminated disparities in compensation, activists chastised the Transport Workers Union hierarchy for trivializing flight attendants' growing discontent. Committee members insisted that TWU staff had publicly dismissed grassroots leaders as "easily confused" and "a disgruntled few," and had argued that most flight attendants were "apathetic."<sup>89</sup> To make matters worse, TWU leaders blocked dissident flight attendants from seeking or holding union office at American just as they had at TWA, preventing select activists in the Boston, Dallas, and Los Angeles bases from representing their peers in the Spring of 1976.<sup>90</sup>

As the weeks and months of 1976 passed, grassroots committees grew into full-blown organizing movements for a new generation of flight attendant unions. Activists at Pan Am, Continental, and American joined Miller, Teolis, Frankovich, and the other TWA dissidents in seeking government supervised change-in-representation elections to end male-dominated industrial unions' relationship with flight attendants. Just two years earlier, local leaders of the Association of Flight Attendants ended that unions' longstanding subordinate relationship to the Air Line Pilots Association, seceding from their parent union

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<sup>88</sup> Committee For an Equitable Contract, flyer, Dallas, TX: Committee for an Equitable Contract, 1975.

<sup>89</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, "APFA Newsletter 1.1."

<sup>90</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, "APFA Newsletter 1.1."

and becoming a freestanding labor organization that represented flight attendants at United, Western, Braniff, and other large trunk lines. In the new organizations, participants penned constitutions in which flight attendants would elect leaders to carry out union policy, flight attendants would set collective bargaining agendas via regular membership meetings and contract surveys, and flight attendants would design and author all internal and external communication materials.<sup>91</sup> The new unions' structures and messages deeply resonated with front line flight attendants. After beginning organizing during the standoff of 1976, TWA's independent union movement – the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants (IFFA) – won its decertification election by a comfortable margin in April of 1977. American Airlines flight attendants' new group – the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) – prevailed with a two-thirds majority thirty days later on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1977.<sup>92</sup> Only a year after union staff helped scuttle the much anticipated TWA bicentennial strike, flight attendants had ejected the TWU from the workplace at three of the U.S.'s largest and most prestigious carriers: Pan Am, American, and TWA.

As front line activists took control of the physical and political infrastructure of their unions in the Spring of 1977, they ushered in an almost immediate transformation in the relationship between flight attendants, the labor movement, and the airlines. Though flight attendants clearly had a new attitude on the airplane and at the bargaining table, it was not necessarily driven by a

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<sup>91</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, "APFA Newsletter 1.1."

<sup>92</sup> American Air Flight Attendants Switch, For Their Own Union," Wall Street Journal, 4 May 1977.

stable or coherent ideology. The new unions undeniably borrowed theories and methods from social movements outside the airline industry: civil rights and urban anti-racist movements, gay liberation, and liberal, radical, and lesbian feminisms. This meant that participatory democracy, public debate, and bottom-up organizing were guiding principles for all of the new unions' endeavors. But the leaders – and even the most committed activists – were not necessarily steeped in the broader activist culture of the age. So, for example, while Stewardesses for Women's Rights cofounder and outspoken lesbian feminist Patt Gibbs was elected the first President of the independent union at American in 1977, the leadership team at TWA remained mostly men. As male privilege had long entitled men to speak up in the flight attendant workplace even as a small minority, and as airlines had often explicitly hired men to fill leadership positions on jumbo jet aircraft and on international flights, male dominance was reproduced in even the most defiant part of the flight attendant movement. Arthur Teolis, one of the few married, straight-identified flight attendants at TWA with virtually no connections in queer or feminist circles, was elected the first President of the union that women's liberationists like Victoria Frankovich and Mary Ellen Miller had worked so hard to build.<sup>93</sup>

What, I argue, set the new unions apart from their predecessors and from much of the rest of the labor movement in the growing austerity of the 1970s was

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<sup>93</sup> Teolis's disconnection from explicitly the explicitly feminist mobilization of the mid-1970s came up in several interviews, and was covered in detail in my conversation with Paula Mariedaughter. I also interviewed Richard Wagner, one of the men on both the 1976 and 1978 negotiating committees, and he explicitly distanced himself from the women's movement and from the cohort of women who had come together around the Stewardesses For Women's Rights.

their absolutely staunch, unflagging commitment to the bottom line, to putting a broad anti-oppression agenda to work by enhancing the economic value of flight attendant labor. Bill Jolley, TWA flight attendants' lawyer throughout the 1976 standoff and change-in-representation process, emphatically and emotionally described IFFA's unique approach as he sat with Mary Ellen Miller, former New York-based TWA flight attendant Diane Watson, and I discussing the early days of the movement:

I was a liberal and a trade union lawyer and activist. The pattern of rampant discrimination, from age to sex to marriage to weight to children...it just seemed so out of whack. I was just pissed at what the airlines were doing. The TWA flight attendants were the most activist of all the unions I represented. They went to the mat on absolutely everything. I know the number of grievances they argued was a record. If they thought a flight attendant was right, they went for it.<sup>94</sup>

Nostalgia and sadness inevitably informed the conversation, with people in their late 50s who had lost their careers and in many ways lost their movement reflecting on living, loving, and mobilizing in their mid-20s. But everyone at the table was adamant about navigating those emotions to point out the uniqueness of the late 1970s, a period where economics and social differences inspired a vigorous unionism in which activists would “go to the mat on absolutely everything.”

Staunch new commitments took airline management by storm as soon as the new unions got on the property. In July of 1977, for example, APFA activists sent American Airlines official notice of their intent to pursue unprecedented mid-

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<sup>94</sup> Jolley

contract negotiations. Instead of following the Railway Labor Act and waiting for the amendable date on their collective bargaining agreement to renegotiate wages and working conditions, the new union sought an immediate redesign of the work process and of compensation policies. The overture included proposals for a four-tier reserve system that would rotate responsibilities for last-minute, on-call flying to mitigate burnout, low- and high-time flying options that would allow individuals to maximize time off or earning potential, and increased staffing on American's large fleet of Boeing 727s to avoid overwork.<sup>95</sup> American, of course, slammed the door in APFA's face, blasting President Patt Gibbs for "undermining the labor-management relationship," for "attempting to coerce the company into adopting APFA's plan," and for preparing a document that was "completely unacceptable for serious consideration."<sup>96</sup> But despite the tactical setback, APFA boldly demonstrated that flight attendants were newly and passionately committed to garnering improvements in wages, work rules, and quality of life. These commitments would yield substantive gains in the next decade. Flight attendant activists eventually locked many of APFA's 1977 demands into union contracts, making multi-tier reserve rotation, low- and high-time scheduling options, and increased cabin staffing standard practices at many carriers by the mid-1980s.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Negotiations under the Railway Labor Act normally happen only after union contracts expire. APFA moved to speed up the bargaining process to get cash in flight attendants' hands as quickly as possible. See: Association of Professional Flight Attendants, Letter to American Airlines flight attendants, 27 Jul. 1977.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Crandall, Letter to American Airlines flight attendants, 11 Jul. 1977.

<sup>97</sup> Work rules varied by carrier but reflected APFA's bargaining goals by the mid-1980s. Only Pan Am, for example, had a truly "four-tier" reserve system, but American and United implemented seniority-based multi-tier rotating systems. American eventually implemented a low-time "on availability" system for flight attendants who wanted to fly less. USAirways

While APFA made great strides – at least in ideological terms – with its newly interventionist approach with management, TWA flight attendants leapfrogged their peers in their bid for a new contract in the summer of 1978. Mindful of the infighting and unruliness of the standoff of 1976, TWA flight attendants went into the new round of talks aiming to innovate not just on *what* would be in a new contract, but on *how* they would win an accord at the bargaining table. Newly-formed IFFA won significant concessions from the airline’s brass on both fronts.

Preparing to approach TWA to open negotiations, IFFA activists began with the premise that the very process of collective bargaining in the airline industry was the root cause of frequently disappointing outcomes for flight attendants. Most troubling about airline negotiations was their unfailingly glacial pace. Such slowness was the very purpose of the Railway Labor Act (RLA) of 1926, the comprehensive Federal statute that governs the labor-management relationship on the rails and on wings. The RLA was ratified at the apex of management power over unions following the “open shop drive” that rolled back craft union power in the early 1920s.<sup>98</sup> Though management activism had significantly demobilized the labor movement by mid-decade, pockets of committed employees – especially railroad engineers, firemen, brakemen, and machinists – could still hobble productive capacity in disputes with companies.

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allowed reserves to “pass” on the reserve list to tailor their schedules to individual tastes for hours worked and layover destinations.

<sup>98</sup> See especially Chapter 5 of: David Montgomery, The Fall of the House of Labor Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Taking advantage of the anti-union consensus in Congress, elected officials crafted a new law aimed at permanently snuffing out labor unrest in the nation's transportation system. Congress accomplished this by making railroad and airline union contracts endless. Rather than expiring as they do in all other industries, collective bargaining agreements instead become "amendable" under the RLA, denying unions a firm date for a strike. Employees can still resort to self-help, but only after a Federal panel appointed by the President of the United States authorizes such a strike. That petition process often takes months or even years – hence the 1976 TWA affair stemmed from a contract that became amendable in July of 1975 – a financial boon to management as union members have to continue to work under the wage rates in outdated contracts.

Strikes, nevertheless, did happen under the RLA, with airline workers spending over 2,200 days on strike in the 1970s.<sup>99</sup> Airline management thus used a second strategy to improve their hand against unions during walkouts. As the Federal regulation of the airlines in 1933 explicitly banned new entrants from joining the marketplace, blocking banks and wealthy individuals from starting airlines to cherry-pick TWA and its peers, the big carriers were immune to losing market share to upstarts during protracted strikes. All airlines needed to accomplish to weather labor unrest was find the money to keep paying bills when walkouts blocked them from selling tickets. To do this, airline management invented the "mutual aid pact" in 1958. The administrations of all the regulated

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<sup>99</sup> "Strike Report: U.S. Airlines Under the Railway Labor Act," Washington, DC: Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007. 1-2.



airlines agreed to pony up cash to a general fund based on the size of their operation. If employees walked out, the struck airline would automatically be entitled to cash payments to cover lost revenue. Compensation was based on the solvency of the fund, and by the mid-1970s airlines could expect to recover 35-50% of their normal operating income in a no-strings-attached grant, making it much easier for management to sit back and wait for striking employees to run out of money.<sup>100</sup>

To counteract both the RLA process and the mutual aid pact, airline unions – especially the Air Line Employee Association for ground employees at National and the Association of Flight Attendants units at Alaska and Braniff – designed the expedited negotiations process in the mid-1970s. The new, faster bargaining was based on a horse-trade, where airlines would promise employees total wage increases of at least 5% on an annual basis, and unions would waive their right to strike if they failed to prevail on other items. A healthy raise, in effect, was the quid pro quo for union commitment to labor peace, a tradeoff that re-solidified the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century “Fordist bargain” in the airlines.<sup>101</sup>

TWA flight attendants immediately moved to use expedited negotiations as a scaffolding for upcoming talks after IFFA was certified in April of 1977. But activists like Frankovich, Miller, and Teolis aimed to implement a system that was more ambitious, and more reliant on their own activism than expedited

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<sup>100</sup> Data from: “How Airlines Make Money by Not Flying: Facts About Inter-Airline Strike Subsidies,” Washington, DC: Air Line Pilots Association, Date unknown, approx. 1974.

<sup>101</sup> Background data on expedited negotiations from: “Collective Bargaining in the Airline Industry” 4.

models from other airlines. Since TWA was making money and growing – the airline recorded a record net profit of \$64 million in 1977<sup>102</sup> – and since IFFA leadership proved their mettle by quickly and decisively winning the change-in-representation campaign, IFFA was reluctant to settle for a standard set by other, less mobilized shops at weaker companies. So IFFA proposed a different horse trade. In March of 1978, activists approached TWA with a tight timeline for negotiations. The union and the company would simultaneously submit a bargaining petition limited to 25 items. TWA and IFFA would have six weeks to talk over those proposals. If no deal resulted, a Federal mediator would be appointed for a month of supervised talks. At the end of that month, parties could either proffer arbitration, a back-and-forth system requiring parties to meet in the middle of their differences, or, presumably, petition the National Mediation Board for a strike release. There would be no IFFA waiver of the right to strike, and TWA would have no responsibility to provide a raise.<sup>103</sup>

Well aware of flight attendants' high expectations, and glad to limit the number of items on the table, TWA President Meyer accepted the deal, and IFFA and TWA submitted their openers on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1978. The details of the union's proposal are absolutely telling of flight attendants' hopes – and their undeniable confidence – in the late-1970s. TWA's opener was detailed and modest, using each of their 25 allotments to demand, for example, reduction in meal budgets for Tel Aviv layovers, elimination of the \$2.50 per day en route laundry

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<sup>102</sup> "Record for 1977," The 630 News Mar./Apr. 1978: 3.

<sup>103</sup> "Text of Accelerated Negotiation Agreement," The 630 News Mar./Apr. 1978: 3.

compensation, reduction by one day of time off for domicile transfers, and elimination of the pay differential between the Boeing 707 and 747.<sup>104</sup> IFFA's pitch, conversely, was open-ended and expansive. Line items like "revise and increase all elements of pay," "reduce on-duty time limitations," "improve sick leave protection," and "eliminate all discriminatory practices," dotted the IFFA dossier. While bold proposals like IFFA's would dominate corporations' bargaining positions after the boom in the anti-union law and consulting basis in the 1980s, they were unusual from employers or from labor groups when IFFA went to the table in 1978.<sup>105</sup>

After only 20 months off, the IFFA bargaining team – this time Victoria Frankovich, Mary Ellen Miller, Bill Numrich, Arthur Teolis, and Roberto Veitia<sup>106</sup> – was back in marathon talks with TWA. Though private bargaining broke down on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, forcing the dispute into government-supervised mediation, overall progress in negotiations was remarkably rapid. And after only 95 days at the table – a sixth the length of the 1976 standoff – IFFA and TWA reached a tentative agreement on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1978. The new pact greatly increased flight attendants' take home compensation by augmenting work rules and pay procedures: guaranteeing a new \$1.25 an hour per diem for entire trips, full credit for "deadheading" into position, "trip rigs" ensuring an hour of flight pay for every 3 ½ hours away from home, and minimum monthly pay for all flight attendants. The accord also included major symbolic improvements, like crew

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<sup>104</sup> "Company's Opening Proposals," The 630 News Mar./Apr. 1978: 4.

<sup>105</sup> "IFFA's Opening Proposals," The 630 News Mar./Apr. 1978: 5.

<sup>106</sup> "IFFA Negotiating Committee Members," The 630 News Mar./Apr. 1978: 8.

meal parity with pilots, which mandated that flight attendants would eat the same meals with the same frequency as the men they worked along side, a simple equality unheard of in the industry prior to the 1978 deal. Even at United, for example, crew meal parity with pilots remains elusive 30 years later, and Delta flight attendants continue to be denied crew meals altogether. And perhaps most importantly, the 1978 deal offered an unprecedented “reopener clause,” giving flight attendants a permanent right to weigh in on the structure and operation of the company in a changing industry by automatically compelling TWA to bargain with IFFA in the event of a corporate merger, route transfer, or change of ownership. Though IFFA fell far short of prevailing in many areas – TWA could still monitor flight attendants’ appearance and body size and ground them for missing weight loss targets – the deal was an undeniable victory for IFFA on the grueling terrain of the RLA, the first pact *ever* reached prior to the amendable date in the history of airline unionism. IFFA leaders immediately endorsed the contract and sent it to the general membership, who ratified the 3-year accord on July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1978.<sup>107</sup>

The expedited negotiations process ultimately – at least for the time being – benefitted IFFA and TWA. President Meyer could go to the public promising the labor peace that his competitors failed to achieve. Northwest Airlines, for example, was on strike for the entire summer of 1978, shutting down the largest U.S. air bridge to Asia, and giant United would be grounded for April and May of

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<sup>107</sup> Mike McGraw, “Tentative Package Reached; Flight Attendants, TWA Settle on Early Agreement,” Kansas City Star 14 Jul. 1978: 3.

1979.<sup>108</sup> Tranquility in the workplace meant that Meyer could focus on sharpening TWA's already stellar, global reputation for style, sophistication, and reliability. IFFA, meanwhile, was on top of the world, avoiding the divisive, stagnant negotiations all but expected in the industry, and helping flight attendants recognize that being staunch could have immense political, economic, and psychological rewards. Indeed, as they took their new paychecks to the bank, flight attendants detached a living wage, ample time off, and a secure retirement from the material and ideological foundations of the family wage system. In an age of intensifying global stagnation, and even as their brothers in manufacturing faced growing demands for givebacks, flight attendants made the airlines – and the state labor apparatus that governed them – step up to the plate and provide ample resources to meet their needs.

### ***Airline Deregulation and the Production of the Family Values Economy***

TWA flight attendants' success at winning substantive improvements in compensation and quality of life in 1978 contract talks is particularly striking giving the broader economic context of the era. After all, macroeconomic performance in the United States and across the globe was the weakest it had been in over 40 years. Though the economy was growing again by the end of the decade, the U.S. was still struggling with the consequences of the 1973-1975 recession, the longest and deepest downturn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century save for the Great Depression. The airlines reeled from slackened demand, with just 55% of airline seats full in 1977, a downturn that faced

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<sup>108</sup> "Strike Report"

many carriers with their first major financial crisis since they had spread their wings across continents and oceans in the 1930s.<sup>109</sup>

The airlines, and the broader U.S. industrial system, entered the 1973 upheaval with a family-based macroeconomy. Large employers, especially in the manufacturing sector, paid family wages to the mostly male cohort on the front line, wages that would fuel family demand for consumer products that would keep the economy growing. The particular material and financial dynamics of the 1973 recession knocked this family-based system out of alignment. Indeed a new generation of policymakers, intellectuals, and activists insisted that the high wages and growing consumer prices of the male-breadwinner-based family wage system were in fact the *cause* of the crisis of the 1970s. In response, they proposed comprehensive austerity measures aimed at rolling back wages and prices so inflation would cool and the economy would grow. In place of the old family wage system, then, came a new family-based economy, one centered on the household as a space for fathers, mothers, and children to pool the lower wages of multiple, non-union service jobs in the booming service sector. The airline industry became a test case for the implementation of this new economy based on the economic value of family. Just three months after IFFA activists heralded their accord with TWA in expedited negotiations, the airline industry was comprehensively deregulated in October of 1978. Deregulation would place immense new pressures of flight attendants' decade long bid to win material resources for their multiplicity of domestic commitments.

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<sup>109</sup> Thomas K. McCraw, Prophets of Regulation: Francis Adams, Louis D. Brandeis, James M. Landis, and Alfred E. Kahn Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1984. 263.

Three political economic trends – stagnation, inflation, and deficit spending – expose the magnitude of the 1973 recession, revealing the impetus for drastic policy responses like deregulation. First, the euphoria of a seemingly endless mid-twentieth century boom promptly vanished as the economy derailed at the dawn of the 1970s. While annual economic growth averaged an impressive 4% between 1945 and 1968, it slowed to 2.6% in 1969, and lurched into negative territory at -0.3% in 1970.<sup>110</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, inflation accompanied intensifying stagnation. While the inflation rate averaged an enviably low 2.5% on an annual basis in the 1950s and 1960s, it swelled to 6.7% in the 1970s even as the economy faltered.<sup>111</sup> As the decade progressed the trend worsened, with inflation bulging to an alarming 16% by the spring of 1980.<sup>112</sup> Finally, government spending continued to rise even as the state's buying power shrank, as an expansive Cold War military, an intractable war in Southeast Asia, and a host of new social programs vied for Federal dollars. Government spending outpaced economic growth even in the golden era of the 1960s, growing by 5.5% a year for the decade, and maintaining that rate amidst stagnation and inflation in the first half of the 1970s.<sup>113</sup>

Inflation, stagnation, and intensifying deficit spending drove a growing coterie of public officials, corporate executives, and conservative intellectuals to

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<sup>110</sup> McCraw 237.

<sup>111</sup> McCraw 237.

<sup>112</sup> Alfred E. Kahn, A Conversation with Alfred E. Kahn: Held on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1980 at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1980. 23.

<sup>113</sup> Kahn, A Conversation with Alfred E. Kahn, 20.

offer a new indictment of Keynesianism, the dominant mode of economic management for three decades. Keynesian economists long insisted that deficit spending by central governments would underwrite economic growth enabling everyone to prosper, from manufacturing magnates to entry level workers. The new critics of Keynesianism challenged these assumptions, arguing that state spending – and the progressive tax code it depended upon – fueled the inflation that was dragging down the economy. To mitigate Keynesianism’s dampening affect, the new coalition proscribed a comprehensive program of austerity for the public sector: cut public transit services and raise fares; cut public school budgets, raise class sizes, and increase tuition at public universities; reduce funding for public indigent care clinics; de-couple public assistance and social security from cost of living indexes and lower monthly payments; reduce public employee salaries and benefits, and drive a harder bargain against their unions to prevent lucrative settlements. Accompanying these austerity measures was an invigorated effort to transfer transportation, education, healthcare, retirement, and infrastructural services from the public sector to private corporations. By the mid-1970s, a new generation of activists, politicians, and intellectuals were selling privatization as an elixir for the economic pestilence of the time.

The airline industry became a hallmark test case for privatized remedies to political economic maladies. The push for privatization was boldly evident in the industry’s comprehensive deregulation, a process which ultimately ended public



oversight of airline routes, fares, and labor standards<sup>114</sup>, and left the free market and individual carriers solely responsible for determining the conditions of labor aloft. Signed into law in October of 1978, the Airline Deregulation Act was the brainchild of one of the most gifted and charismatic intellectuals to emerge from the vacuum of a collapsing Keynesianism in the 1970s. Dr. Alfred Kahn was a Professor of Economics at Columbia University, and would soon be appointed President Carter’s “inflation czar,” charged with hatching a plan to put a lid on skyrocketing consumer prices and a floor under the stagnant economy. Kahn used his experience as a government regulator in the 1970s – first of utilities at the New York Public Service Commission and later of the airlines at the Civil Aeronautics Board – to develop a committed critique of state intervention in the economy that lit the torch for the campaign for deregulation across industries. Kahn’s fundamental premise was that the cost structure of the United States was out of control, and that comprehensive, structural reform of the economy, rather than short term remedies like wage and price controls, would be necessary to stimulate sustainable growth.<sup>115</sup>

While Kahn’s agenda to rebuild the economy openly challenged the necessity and validity of Keynesian management, the theoretical foundations of his work disrupt assumptions we might have about a vast, homogenous, right-wing movement that gave birth to neoliberalism in the 1970s. Kahn’s adviser at Yale University was Joseph Schumpeter, among Economics’ most methodical and

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<sup>114</sup> See Chapter 4 of this volume for a complete discussion of the impact of deregulation on the system of Labor Protective Provisions that structured airline labor between 1938 and 1985.

<sup>115</sup> Kahn, A Conversation with Alfred E. Kahn, 8.

influential critics of the welfare state. Schumpeter's tutelage inevitably encouraged Kahn to distance himself from Keynesian interventionism at its apex in the 1950s and 1960s. But as a graduate student of the 1930s, Kahn was also deeply influenced by then-dominant institutional economics. Institutionalists like John R. Commons, the most noted intellectual forefather of labor history, argued that cultural and political structures - government agencies, labor unions, and social movements - deeply influenced peoples' economic behavior, and that such apparatuses had a legitimate and necessary role in regulating the economy. Kahn spent his career researching and writing at the nexus of Schumpeter's neoclassicism and Commons' institutionalism. But while fellow adherents to classicism – especially Milton Friedman and others at the University of Chicago - turned to free market dogma to fix the economy and uphold the greater good, Kahn took up institutionalists' concern for the social by embracing science. Offering a disciplined empiricism, Kahn insisted that microeconomics – meticulous analysis of unit costs and prices in individual industries and firms – rather than the theoretical expansiveness of macroeconomics and corresponding Keynesian commitments to public health, housing, and education systems, would best solve our social problems.<sup>116</sup>

The intersection of classicism and institutionalism – concern for unit prices and social relationships – shaped Kahn's agenda for the airlines once President Carter handed him the reigns of the Civil Aeronautics Board in 1977.

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<sup>116</sup> Thomas K. McCraw provides a thorough intellectual history and political genealogy of Alfred Kahn in Prophets of Regulation; See especially pages (need numbers).

In particular, Kahn turned to the didactic power of pricing to stem the airlines' growing losses. He insisted that ticket prices could teach the airlines – and especially airline workers – a lesson about how to behave in a lean economy. Borrowing from his landmark 1970 tome *The Economics of Regulation*, Kahn called for regulatory reform based on the theory of marginal pricing.<sup>117</sup> The price of a good should reflect its marginal cost in Kahn's appraisal, the amount required to produce one more unit of that item. So if there were 109 people booked on a TWA 707 from New York to San Francisco when a prospective passenger called reservations, the quoted rate should match the amount of money required to carry that 110<sup>th</sup> person across the continent. Government regulation, of course, made this a highly unlikely scenario, as predetermined CAB rates, rather than the moment-to-moment cost of airplanes, fuel, and flight attendants, determined the price of the ticket. Kahn argued that removing the protective cushion of regulation would force the airlines to tighten their belts and tackle their ever-inflating marginal costs. Managers would have to get serious about reining in their unions – nixing those downtown Boston layovers and free appetizers in Athens for pilots and flight attendants – if airlines could no longer pass labor cost increases on to passengers by requesting government-guaranteed rate increases. These austerity measures - lower pay and fewer perks for unionized workers in the airlines and beyond – would help Kahn fight the inflationary spiral of rising wages and rising prices that was crippling the economy in the mid-1970s.

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<sup>117</sup> McCraw 226. To understand the relationship between government regulation and Kahn's theory of marginal pricing, see: Alfred E. Kahn, *The Economics of Regulation: Principles and Institutions* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988.

Kahn engineered three fundamental roll-backs of government regulation to implement marginal cost pricing in the airlines, thereby reorganizing the industry around private instead of public modes of governance. First, the CAB-orchestrated route authority system was abandoned in favor of unrestricted access to all markets for all airlines. So while the government allowed United, American, and TWA to split lucrative New York-Los Angeles flying three ways prior to deregulation, any airline – Braniff, Delta, Continental – could jump in on the action with their own non-stop service after 1978. Eliminating government oversight of individual carriers’ route networks ratcheted up competition between the existing players, as every airline scrambled for a toehold in the most prestigious markets. Second, CAB-dictated price floors and ceilings vanished in favor of individual carriers’ complete discretion over fares. Airlines certainly offered discounts prior to deregulation – as is evident with introduction of economy or “tourist” class service in the 1950s – but they could do so only after winning government approval. After 1978, airlines moved to offer a smorgasbord of highly discounted fares in vigorous attempts pilfer market share from competitors.

Third and most importantly, deregulation removed the ironclad barriers to entry that had protected established airlines from upstart competition since the industry was originally regulated in 1938. During the mid-twentieth century boom, individual airlines constantly worked to blunt the impact of adversaries’ advances: the introduction of larger, faster, more comfortable airplanes, more

lavish cuisine, or sexier, more stylishly dressed flight attendants. Though they struggled to respond to these pressures, government regulation meant that airlines could count on such innovations coming from players with similar organizational histories, labor-management paradigms, and cost structures. This all changed after 1978. Once the industry was deregulated, new entrant airlines - like PeopleExpress and Air Florida in the 1980s, ValuJet and Vanguard in the 1990s, and jetBlue and Virgin America in the 2000s - hired young, inexperienced workers off the street, paid them lower wages than the established lines, offered less extensive health benefits, slimmer pensions, and – taking advantage of the anti-unionism of the 1970s – stymied collective bargaining efforts. Rock-bottom cost structures underwritten by these austere labor regimes allowed the new carriers to dramatically undercut the established lines, sapping revenue streams and constricting market share.<sup>118</sup>

Deregulation’s effect on the major airlines was undeniably significant, and particularly challenging for TWA. In the half-decade that followed 1980, the company recorded a net loss in every fiscal year, and shed a full 30% of its operational capacity in a painful effort to stem the tide of capital outflow.<sup>119</sup> Though TWA’s fundamentals remained strong – an impressive presence in the profitable U.S. transcontinental business and robust market share at critically

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<sup>118</sup> For a thorough accounting for all of the policy interventions of the airline deregulation act, and for perhaps the most cogent historical appraisal of deregulation 25 years after the act’s passing, see: Alfred E. Kahn, Lessons from Deregulation: Telecommunications and Airlines After the Crunch Washington, DC: AEI-Brookings Joint Center for Regulatory Studies, 2004.

<sup>119</sup> “To Regulate Attempts to Acquire Control of Airlines,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Aviation of the Committee on Public Works and Transportation of the House of Representatives, 6 Jun. 1985. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986. 66.

important London Heathrow and Paris Charles de Gaulle – it became much more difficult for the airline to pay the wages and benefits that those on the front lines had won through unions and other social movements in previous decades. Thus, TWA President Ed Meyer and managers across the industry made a new push to roll back wages, both for the male breadwinners of the family wage system and for flight attendants long working on that system’s periphery. Flight attendants, I therefore argue, were uniquely positioned to recognize and reject Kahn and others’ calls for austerity, as they had spent a decade identifying and challenging their exclusion from the family wage system, and righting this wrong by demanding new material resources for the single women, the working mothers, and the lesbians and gays who worked the skies. In this resistance – which intensified in the early 1980s – was an explicit rejection of the nascent family values economy and its dependence on low-wage, zero-benefits, non-union work.

***Against the Family Values Economy: The 1983 Cliffhanger at TWA***

Amid the drumbeat for the implementation of the family values economy in the airline industry, TWA flight attendants were back at the bargaining table in the spring of 1981, haggling with management over the future of the 1978 accord that would become amendable on June 30<sup>th</sup>. The momentum that carried IFFA through the expedited negotiations of 1978 had wholly vanished with the turn of the decade and the dawn of deregulation. In November of 1980, TWA steadfastly rejected IFFA’s proffer for a new round of expedited

negotiations, refusing to entertain any framework for sped-up talks.<sup>120</sup> TWA's intransigence reflects immense new pressures on Ed Meyer, both in economic terms as lowering wages could help stop the hemorrhaging on the airline's balance sheet, and even more importantly in political terms, as Reagan and Kahn's new agenda identified indignant union leaders like Miller and Frankovich as the cause of the economic crisis while framing Meyer's austerity plan as its solution. Flight attendants were undaunted, as their commitment to the "bigger picture," and in particular to staving off the nascent family values economy, ran as deep or deeper than Meyer's agenda. The ensuing conflict, and the 1983 cliffhanger that brought flight attendants a lucrative new contract, thus points to two distinct economies that emerged in the 1980s, revealing the political foundations of and material progress toward both.

Absent an agreement on expedited negotiations, TWA and IFFA submitted opening proposals for a new contract on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1981. The company dossier was expansive and deeply concessionary, a list of 46 individual roll-backs of pay, benefit, and work rule programs. Meyer accompanied TWA's opener with a stern warning, insisting that all employees would be expected to accept an 18-month pay freeze, and that flight attendants would be required to forfeit the work rules won in the 1978 accord. To underscore his commitment, Meyer

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<sup>120</sup> Contract negotiator and soon to be IFFA President Vicki Frankovich expressed vigorous commitment in our conversations to communicating all union information to front line flight attendants. Her agenda is well documented in the historical record, as Frankovich published an exhaustive, moment to moment analysis of contract talks in IFFA's newspaper, the *630 News*. Many of the dates and times for this section of the dissertation come from that essay. See: Vicki Frankovich, "Never Have So Few; Spent So Much; Only to Lose the Good Will of So Many!" *The 630 News* Apr. 1983: 3.

stripped TWA's negotiating team of its authority to change the flight attendant contract and mandated that company brass vet all economic modifications, a hierarchical move highly unusual in airline negotiations. As the summer of 1981 heated up, IFFA leaders would have a much more difficult time fulfilling their members' high expectations and hopes that grew out of the 1978 deal.<sup>121</sup>

Over the coming months, IFFA moved to accommodate management demands for a pay freeze by attempting to swap the lost wages for deeply-coveted work rule improvements, an intervention that would swap pay for rest and time off. TWA rejected both of flight attendants' wage freeze tradeoffs in July and November of 1981, reaffirming corporate officers' bid to make all changes to the flight attendant contract permanent and concessionary. Talks, then, continued in circles in the first, and then into the second year past the amendable date on the existing flight attendant agreement. Management appeared unmovable in its commitment to the deal languishing on the table: a 14% raise over five years, work rule give-backs, and no retro pay to cover the delay. To break the logjam, flight attendants took a strike authorization vote on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1982, some fifteen months after the old contract ended, authorizing a work stoppage if TWA failed to move off its concessionary position.<sup>122</sup>

Though staunchly committed to the work rule improvements that allowed crews protection from jet lag and to maintain a space for life outside of work, flight attendants knew a strike would be a daunting endeavor on the harsh terrain

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<sup>121</sup> Frankovich 3.

<sup>122</sup> Frankovich 3-4.



of the Reagan years. Given these anxieties, IFFA proffered arbitration on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1983 despite members' widespread support for a strike. Though job actions would still be possible after arbitration, they would be much less likely, as agreeing to supervised back-and-forths constituted a tacit acknowledgement by activists that the company would meet many of its concessionary goals. Refusing flight attendants' willingness to compromise, TWA rejected the arbitration petition as soon as it hit the table. With the Federal Mediator then determining that talks between TWA and its flight attendants were deadlocked, the National Mediation Board started a 30-day strike countdown on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1983, releasing both parties from requirements to continue talking, and pushing IFFA to open strike centers and prepare their peers for a work stoppage.<sup>123</sup>

TWA's next move was eye-catching, taking all affected parties by surprise. Immediately after the strike release, management sent a new and much more lucrative contractual offer directly to the homes of TWA's 5,500 flight attendants. Entirely bypassing the IFFA negotiating team, management's new deal provided over twice the raise as offer sitting on the bargaining table, promising most flight attendants 30% in pay hikes over five years despite the sagging economy in the winter of 1983. Miller and other negotiators now speculate that TWA's "package offer" was developed to drive a wedge between IFFA officers and front line flight attendants. The work rule language, after all, in the package offer was extremely vague. Union leaders immediately recognized many of the rules as unenforceable, because leeway in syntax would allow

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<sup>123</sup> Frankovich 4-5.

management an escape hatch to legally avoid complying with their stipulations. But the book rate pay increases were undeniably generous, and would be deeply coveted by flight attendants continuing to struggle with the high cost of living. If Miller and the others shot down the big raise to avoid the squishy work rules, those on the front lines would likely revolt, as the deal's dollar figures seemed to outweigh its linguistic shortcomings, especially to the lay person. IFFA hedged, refusing to accept or reject the offer, and going back to the table to try to re-write the vague sentences in the work rules section. Over the next six days, progress towards sharpening and clarifying contractual language was virtually nil, with management committed to the specifics of the offer sitting on flight attendants' desks.<sup>124</sup>

Flight attendant activists took control of the situation just before midnight on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1983. Thwarting presumed efforts to paint IFFA negotiators as out-of-touch ideologues, the group forewent further clarification on work rules and offered an unconditional acceptance of the pact. Mary Ellen Miller, who was seated at the bargaining table that night, recalled the utter drama that ensued:

TWA's team came in right before midnight. We said, "YEP, WE'LL TAKE IT!" Then, they grabbed the offer and yanked it off the table. The Federal Mediator said, "NO! – YOU OFFERED IT, IT IS A DONE DEAL." (Management negotiators) yelled at us down the hallway promising that we would regret it. It was so personal – we made them look bad.<sup>125</sup>

As talks were supervised by a Federal Mediator, parties were strictly forbidden from rescinding any formally extended contractual offer - which the "package

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<sup>124</sup> Frankovich 5.

<sup>125</sup> Miller, 21 Mar. 2008.

offer” of course was – until the other party responded to it. Any deal that touched the table would remain available until the other party officially rejected it, which IFFA never did. Instead, Miller and Frankovich called TWA’s bluff, taking the giant pot of cash and handing it to front line flight attendants. Immediately recognizing that their strategic move to bypass IFFA and go directly to flight attendants had backfired horribly, company negotiators were, in Victoria Frankovich’s recollection, “crestfallen” and “visibly shaken.” Meanwhile, flight attendants left the room to herald achievement of “one of the most lucrative economic offers recently negotiated by any group in the airline industry.”<sup>126</sup>

Front line flight attendants wholeheartedly endorsed the accord in a referendum, validating the contract on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1983. All TWA flight attendants interviewed for this project described the 1983 deal as among the most important moments of their career. Everyone, of course, savored the victory as being about money. “I am richer than shit right now!” Janet Lhuillier remembered thinking on a Paris layover as soon as the deal became law. But even more importantly, the political economy initiated by the 1983 contract ushered in a new way of being for flight attendants. “We were changed people,” Lhuillier insisted in the same conversation.<sup>127</sup> With the rapid increase in the value of their labor, flight attendants could live their lives differently. They could afford to quit working overtime. They could afford to retire earlier. They could afford to send their kids to college. And they could afford to pave their own path,

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<sup>126</sup> Frankovich 5.

<sup>127</sup> Lhuillier

meeting material needs without the family wages of a male breadwinner. New paychecks, in other words, allowed flight attendants to support whoever they called family. In this way of being, in this political economic subjectivity, flight attendants emerged as a counterformation to the family values economy. And even as the push for austerity intensified on the broader labor landscape, the 1983 victory left flight attendants dead set against going back to the old system, regardless of what the regulatory framework or operating margins of the airline industry demanded.

***Conclusion: Toward a Struggle over Family Values in the 1980s***

On the evening of April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1983, as TWA 747s thundered down Kennedy airport's "Bay runway" – the nation's longest airstrip and the place most peoples' trips to Europe officially got underway in the 1980s – the tranquility of Spring in New York failed to cover up immense tensions in the airline industry. Flight attendants staffing the evening rush that night were earning the enviable wages of the new contract for the first time. But as flight attendants took off for Los Angeles, London, and Lisbon, TWA managers prepared to file a petition with the National Mediation Board for an early opener to contract talks with IFFA, expressing new commitment to roll back the wage gain.<sup>128</sup> Indeed as flight attendants first experienced the cash flow that male breadwinners had long expected, both business leaders and flight attendants were passionately committed to reworking the broader relationship between family and economics. That debate

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<sup>128</sup> "TWA/Ozark Proposed Merger and its Effect," Off the Line Summer 1986: 13.

over the value of family would drive a new conflict that would come to a head in the mid-1980s.

As tensions rose in the industry, flight attendant leaders like Victoria Frankovich and anti-regulatory activists like Alfred Kahn did agree on one point: the family wage system had to go. By 1980, Kahn was passionately committed to his position that breadwinner paychecks were the place that policymakers should intervene to break the inflationary wage-price spiral. Inflation had become the dominant category in right-wing political economic thought in the late 1970s, and absolutely remains so in 2010. The family wage system became the place for Kahn to put that focus on inflation to work. Political historians might, of course, wince at using the term “right-wing” to describe Alfred Kahn, a Carter Administration appointee and life-long Democrat. But I argue that his increasing commitment to enforcing austerity measures on *all* breadwinners – including feminized and racialized service employees who had never reaped most of the benefits of the family wage system – drove Kahn to deepen his connection to conservative individuals and institutions.

Kahn’s theoretical approach shifted to the right as his sphere of political influence grew and the economic crisis of the 1970s deepened. While the Alfred Kahn of 1960 understood himself as a dedicated empiricist, scientifically managing prices to influence producer and consumer behavior, Kahn politicized his approach by 1980. Joining the research advisory committee of the American Enterprise Institute’s Center for the Study of Government Regulation, and

regularly circulating position papers via Heritage Foundation networks, Kahn was increasingly affiliated with conservative think tanks taking the most extreme and least nuanced line against government regulation, social programs, and progressive taxes. “Any time any of you thinks of ways to push me or help me, I would like you to know that I do have a pulpit, sometimes to be used publicly and sometimes to be used privately,” Kahn evangelized at an American Enterprise Institute at a breakfast in the spring of 1980.<sup>129</sup>

Alfred Kahn’s tie-up with the hardest-line opponents of the welfare state stemmed from his intensifying qualms with a principle element of the family wage system: contracts between industrial unions and corporations in core industry. Kahn had come to believe that the mid-twentieth century pact between big government, big companies, and big unions had given organizations like the Teamsters, the UAW, and the Steelworkers inordinate access to money and political power. These resources allowed big labor to force contracts on employers that irrationally and artificially inflated the marginal cost of producing goods – from telephone service to trucking ton-miles to taconite. For Kahn, robust union contracts, and the breadwinner wages they guaranteed, had trapped the global economy in a swirling sargasso of stagnation. For Kahn, marshalling state and private resources – injunctions against strikes and boycotts, right-to-work laws, anti-union law firms, and most importantly deregulation – to open and gut these contracts was a necessary emergency response to free the economy from the gyre. “I have no intellectual reservations about trying to influence wage

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<sup>129</sup> Kahn, “A Conversation with Alfred E. Kahn” 11.

settlements,” Kahn told an American Enterprise Institute coterie, explaining that extracting concessions from 700,000 Teamster truck drivers in negotiations for the 1980 National Master Freight Agreement was the most important front in the battle against the inflation.<sup>130</sup> As he preached deregulation, and used his pulpit to transform the governance of industries to undermine labor contracts, Kahn became a political and intellectual prophet for the rapidly intensifying anti-statist, anti-welfarist, and anti-union movements of the late 1970s.<sup>131</sup> “We think government regulation is getting worse,” American Enterprise Institute activist Murray Wiedenbaum blustered to Kahn at a 1980 meeting, “But we think you are on the side of the angels.”<sup>132</sup>

The fact that evangelical images of pulpits, prophets, and angels pop up in Kahn’s and Wiedenbaum’s writings would probably not surprise many historians of the late 1970s. We know, after all, that this nexus – of religion and political economy – was an ascendant site of political mobilization during the period. By framing youth culture, women and families of color, and welfare recipients as self-indulgent, wasteful counterformations to hard-working, presumably white families, self-described “family values” activists rendered upwardly redistributive reforms common sense to the middle class. What this chapter has shown, however, is that the austere consensus of the family values economy emerging in

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<sup>130</sup> Kahn, “A Conversation with Alfred E. Kahn” 20.

<sup>131</sup> For a political economic critique of the conservative resurgence in the 1970s and prior, see” Jason Michael Stahl, Selling Conservatism: Think Tanks, Conservative Ideology, and the Undermining of Liberalism, 1945-Present, Diss, University of Minnesota, 2008. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008. AAT3318033

<sup>132</sup> Murray Wiedenbaum, cited in: Kahn, “A Conversation with Alfred Kahn” 16.

the 1970s was hardly common sense to everyone. In fact, family values economics was explicitly and wholeheartedly rejected by a variety of groups, from Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition to the labor left to women of color feminist organizers. Flight attendants, I argue, were one of the most outspoken of these dissident groups. So while the business establishment and conservative policymakers tapped striking new vigor to implement the anti-union and anti-welfare reforms of neoliberalism, flight attendants were equally committed to defining and implementing their own political economy. So as airline managers moved up their agenda to replace the family wage system with the family values economy, flight attendants were diametrically opposed to their initiatives. "We were literally changed people after the 1983 contract," Janet Lhuillier emphatically reiterated to me as she reflected on the advances on the late 1970s and the early 1980s. "We were not going to go back."<sup>133</sup> The resulting struggle between Lhuillier's cohort and airline management is the topic of chapter two of the dissertation, which frames the political economic crisis in the industry of the 1980s as one of many fronts of a conflict over the economic value of family. I turn, then, to conceptualizing the 1980s not as a time when neoliberalism ran over a paralyzed labor movement, but as an age when companies and front-line activists fought over who could be a breadwinner, and which people could depend on the material rewards of airline work.

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<sup>133</sup> Lhuillier



## CHAPTER 2

### THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES: The Struggle Over Managerial Authority in the 1980s

“My parent is a breadwinner,” read the sandwich board serving as a costume for the picketing toddler. Dragging a loaf of Wonder Bread nearly her own size, the toddler trotted forward, reaching out for a parent’s hand in the photograph’s upper right corner. While the shot was one of thousands snapped on strike lines during 72 days of round the clock picketing in the Mediterranean, Europe, and the United States, its form and content made it perhaps the most reproduced of any representation of the TWA flight attendant strike of 1986. The poster-clad child would soon be the poster child for the “Boycott of Conscience,” the social movement activists built when TWA locked 4,000 flight attendants out of their jobs in mid-May.<sup>134</sup> After unionized crews walked out to protest the imposition of a 44% cut<sup>135</sup> in pay and benefits, management re-staffed flights with skeleton crews of permanent replacement workers. The airline then filed a lawsuit aimed at reinterpreting labor law to exempt TWA from hiring the strikers

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<sup>134</sup> For a thorough summary of the goals and motivations for the “Boycott of Conscience,” see Victoria Frankovich’s letter to the membership in: Victoria Frankovich, “IFFAGram,” 26 Jun. 1986, 1-2.

<sup>135</sup> 44% is the figure that IFFA used as a total for management’s proposed concessions in late 1985. That number is the union’s estimate for TWA’s reduction in “total flight attendant cost” (TFAC), the sum total of reduction in all forms of compensation, plus cost savings from the elimination of work rules and duty rigs. Totally pay reductions for individual flight attendants could vary dramatically based on what type of flying a flight attendant did before and after the imposition of concessions. If, for example, a flight attendant was bumped from international lineholding to reserve status, compensation reductions could be in excess of 44%, whereas someone able to continue a high-grossing trip like LAX-LHR or JFK-CAI would take less of a hit. The numbers, of course, were always in debate, with management usually quoting about a 20% reduction, which normally included only basic hourly pay and benefit reductions. See: Independent Federation of Flight attendants (IFFA), “Peace and Goodwill, Bread and Freedom,” 01 Jun. 1986.

back. Insisting that flight attendants were breadwinners whose families depended on the economic value of their work, activists challenged the lockout with a consumer boycott, legislative advocacy, a series of lawsuits, and round-the-clock pickets on TWA property.<sup>136</sup>

As I looked back over strike photographs nearly 24 years to the day after they were taken, I struggle with history's heavy weight on the images. The story of a management-baited strike and of what turned into a 3 ½ year lockout seems to confirm everything we know about the workplace in the 1980s: that it was a decade of deindustrialization and anti-unionism, that most organizing initiatives by front-line employees were painfully unsuccessful, and that the robust pay and generous vacation and retirement programs of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century family wage system were abruptly rolled back. The outcome of the TWA affair could of course further entrench the doubts surrounding the labor movement during and after the 1980s. Though flight attendants took their course all the way to the Supreme Court and won the right to re-employment for every striker, they would come back to much longer days with much lower pay and far fewer benefits than before the strike.

Challenging my own inclination to declare that history has exhausted the meaning of workplace unrest in the 1980s, Chapter 2 instead suggests that flight attendant activism should transform our approach to the decade. That sandwich

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<sup>136</sup> The image of the child in the “my parent is a breadwinner” sandwich board appeared in a number of IFFA strike and Boycott of Conscience publications, including several additions of Off the Line, IFFA’s strike newspaper. See, for example: IFFA “Peace and Goodwill, Bread and Freedom.”

board, that widely broadcast image of the picketing child, and that slogan declaring “my parent is a breadwinner,” force us to recognize flight attendants’ unique and tense relationship to the category at the center of the decade’s political economic debate: family. Indeed the as the Reagan administration, conservative activists, airline managers, and the labor movement sparred over the value of family and the role of breadwinners in the coming economic order, few flight attendants were traditional heads of households. As they walked out demanding a family wage, 85% of flight attendants were women, over half of who were single.<sup>137</sup> The vast majority of households thus lacked the foundations of normative domesticity: patriarchal authority, marriage, and biological reproduction. Instead, friendship, unmarried gay and straight partnership, and single parenthood were dominant institutions in strikers’ lives. Meanwhile, flight attendants’ pilot and machinist peers who were much more likely to be traditional breadwinners accepted TWA’s demands for concessions, crossed flight attendants’ picket lines, and went to work. Rather than avoiding these antagonisms of gender and sexuality, flight attendants staunchly and tirelessly pointed them out. That Boycott of Conscience poster, after all, excised the “s” from the category of “parents” at the center of debate about traditional family, highlighting that child’s disproportionate likeliness to have only one parent. That parent’s hand, which fades out of the top of the image, is disembodied, lacking a gender, a race, or an age, yet clearly singular. The poster thus detaches

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<sup>137</sup> IFFA “Peace and Goodwill, Bread and Freedom.”

breadwinning from its traditional investment in heteropatriarchy and nuclear domesticity.

Pointing to that child's single flight attendant mom was a bold move in 1986. Conservative policymakers, the business lobby, and the so-called "religious right" had teamed up to re-make the economy around traditional family values: around the productivity and authority of the father, around the obedience and the productive and reproductive capacity of the mother, and around well-parented children supported by private-sector wages. This coalition blamed downward redistribution – whether from union contracts or from the welfare state – for giving people the agency to subvert those relationships, and for allowing people the economic opportunity to organize their lives around something other than traditional family. While the critique of the sexual disorderliness of a living wage was often generalized, it was also particularized in the 1980s, blaming black and Latina women for failing to defer to men's authority, for eschewing monogamy, and for pursuing sexual engagements that were self-indulgent and unproductive.<sup>138</sup> The white, middle-class male breadwinner was thus a 1980s antidote to all of these deviant families, a remedy to stabilize a social world and an economy that seemed so out of whack in the 1970s.

Of course the anti-union and anti-welfare austerity measures propelling the rise of this family values economy stripped middle class white men – and

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<sup>138</sup> To understand how the sexual practices of Puerto Rican and African American women were pulled into the debate over the demise of the Welfare State, see Chapter 6 of: Briggs, Laura. Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

most other people – of their very ability to be breadwinners, undermining the patriarchal authority that once came with economic security. Managers of the companies enforcing these very austerity measures intervened to rescue a destabilized manhood with their own managerial authority. Chapter 2 traces how the airline industry became a test case and a flash point of management’s intervention. Framing union wages and family benefits as vestiges, as legacies of a bygone and inefficient era, a new cohort of executives turned to a newly deregulated financial services industry to help them confiscate such legacy benefits from their employees. With this unilateral enforcement of lean production, managers promised to jump-start the flagging early-1980s economy, in turn rewarding all families and re-empower breadwinning men.

Recent scholarship, especially the powerful writings of Janet Jakobsen and Bethany Moreton, has documented how big companies and their allies made the above paragraph – which seems utterly bonkers – make sense, tracing how they managed the striking contradictions between traditional morality and free market fundamentalism.<sup>139</sup> But we know a lot less about the alternative futures that emerge when such contradictions become unmanageable. This, then, is the task of Chapter 2. TWA flight attendants, after all, openly challenged both the

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<sup>139</sup> For further analysis of the challenge of the often-posed binary between family values and economic value, see the discussion on pages 6-12 to the introduction of this dissertation. Jakobsen theorizes “family values” as a regime of accumulation in: Janet R. Jakobsen, “Can Homosexuals End Western Civilization as we Know it? Family Values in a Global Economy” Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV New York: New York University Press, 2002. 45-67. Moreton discusses the return to the domestic sphere as a site of production with the rise of the service industry in the 1970s, and unpacks the relationship of this productive unit to Christian notions of servitude in chapter 7 of: Bethany Moreton, To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

heteropatriarchal and dispossessing foundations of the family values economy, a challenge we see in the poster adorning that child. On one hand, flight attendants refused the hostile imposition of traditional family on their lives, insisting that they, too, were breadwinners for their kids, for their friends, for their lovers, and perhaps most importantly, for themselves. At the same time, flight attendants demanded that companies fund, and that the state guarantee resources for, the above-named alternative dependencies. For flight attendants, family linkages – whatever those may look like – are only successful with a living wage, with time off, with a safe workplace, and with health and retirement insurance. During the strikes of the 1980s, such resources came into view not as “legacy costs,” as holdovers from a lost past, but as the bedrocks of the economic future that flight attendants were pointing toward.

While fractious and exhausting strikes shook the workplace at TWA, Continental, Eastern, and so many other carriers, these pages argue that managers ultimately failed to lock in the family values economy in the 1980s. Chapter 2 is therefore a story not of the institutionalization of the family values economy or of efforts to make it ideologically coherent. It is instead a narrative of rupture. The next pages thus turn to showing how sexuality, intimacy, and family underwrote flight attendants’ and managers’ deeply contested claims on the political economy of the 1980s.

***Understanding the Problem:  
Airline Operations and the Dilemma of Sociospatial Change in the 1970s***

1984 was a vigorous yet anxious year for flight attendants, and especially those at the global flag carrier TWA. As Chapter 1 demonstrated, the group walked tall after beating management at the bargaining table in March 1983, proudly cashing the hefty new paychecks that would underwrite the alternative dependencies that flight attendants called families. But before they even began to earn those hourly wages, TWA President Ed Meyer's management team intervened to ratchet them down. When TWA signed the new covenant with the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants (IFFA) in April, it also filed a motion with the Federal Government for an "early opener" of talks for a *new* contract. The airline's labor relations department sought the new negotiations to buoy TWA's rapidly deteriorating finances. TWA lost money four out of the first five years of deregulation, shedding 12,000 employees and eliminating 30% of its operation.<sup>140</sup> Flight attendants recognized that the downturn was real and that it was significant, and IFFA thus voluntarily agreed to bargain for \$28.3 million in annual cost savings as they wrapped up the 1983 talks.<sup>141</sup>

Though TWA's mounting losses posed an undeniable problem for flight attendants who had based their political economic agenda on the wages TWA paid, the company's financial problems must not be understood as an inevitable consequence of deregulation or of the broader neoliberal reforms of the late

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<sup>140</sup> "To Regulate Attempts to Acquire Control of Airlines," Hearing before the Subcommittee on Aviation of the Committee on Public Works and Transportation of the House of Representatives, 6 Jun. 1985. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986. 66.

<sup>141</sup> "TWA/Ozark Proposed Merger" 13.

1970s. Rather, major airlines' uneven and divergent financial performance is rooted in the airline industry's fraught relationship to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century industrial supremacy of the United States. Let me briefly pause my broader analysis of flight attendant activism and the family values economy to walk through the operational structure and profit making strategies in the mid- and late-1970s to expose why the period was so difficult for many carriers, and how this set up a conflict between flight attendants and their employers around the category of family over the coming decade.

While Civil Aeronautics Board regulation ultimately decided where each airline would fly prior to 1978, and left the airlines with differing yet complimentary route systems, the vast majority of companies made money by cherrypicking revenue off the Postwar boom in manufacturing. On a given Spring business day in 1974, for example, two giant United Boeing 747s would leave Chicago for Pittsburgh before 10am each morning, with a 300-seat TWA L1011 following close behind. The parade of jumbo jets linked the capitol of the world's steel industry with the financial center of the U.S. Midwest with an air bridge with more capacity than Chicago-London and Chicago-Paris combined. But as chapter 1 demonstrated, the industrial economy that made cities like Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Detroit such important ports of call on airline's systems was grinding to a halt in 1973, when a deep recession and intensifying international competition overran big manufacturers' profit margins. Going forward, it would be much more difficult for the airlines to make money



carrying coal, steel, and auto executives between industrial cities.<sup>142</sup> Instead, the airlines would have to build networks connecting what Saskia Sassen calls “global cities,” those with command and control mechanisms over the finance, insurance, real estate, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors. This meant that, regardless of the regulatory paradigm, each major carrier would have to tweak its schedule to gain a top position in the East Coast megalopolis, connect traffic through a hub in a large Midwestern city with a diverse economy, and then link that traffic to the burgeoning California corridor. Since international aviation treaties began to be liberalized in the early 1980s, and since half of all airline flights in the world serve the U.S. domestic markets, airlines would have to achieve a dominant market presence and revenue generating capabilities within the U.S. to underwrite new bids for international expansion.<sup>143</sup>

United, American, and TWA were all poised to build such a network in the mid-1970s. I propose that O’Hare international airport in Chicago was the

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<sup>142</sup> All statistics from airline industry schedules are from The Official Airline Guide, the authoritative reference for airline schedules, as accessed through the widely referenced website [www.departedflights.com](http://www.departedflights.com). Aircraft and schedule information appears as presented by the airlines. Thus there may be some minor irregularities in the statistics I present due to the airlines’ own imprecision. So for example, in 1974, the aircraft code “707” for a TWA flight could refer to a 707-100 or turbojet 707-300 aircraft. The code “B3F” is used for turbofan 707-300B and C aircraft. But by 1979, “707” referred to any 707 aircraft, which for TWA could be a single class or two class aircraft, and a -100 or -300 series. Thus seating capacities varied anywhere between 120 and 170. I estimated seat counts based on my own knowledge of city pairings and time periods and did the same for the American Airlines statistics. See: Official Airline Guide North American Pocket Guide Flight Schedules, 01 Apr. 1974, and Official Airline Guide North American Desktop Edition, 15 Nov. 1979. Referenced on: [www.departedflights.com](http://www.departedflights.com), viewed 10-15 Jun. 2010. <<http://www.departedflights.com/oagintro.html>>

<sup>143</sup> My analysis of the strategic and economic decline of TWA rests layering TWA’s flight schedules from the 1970s over analysis of urbanization, financialization, and globalization in Neil Smith, Saskia Sassen, and David Harvey’s work on the 1970s. See especially: Saskia Sassen, “Economic Restructuring in the American City,” Annual Reviews of Sociology 16 (1990): 465-490., and David Harvey, Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography, Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2001.

flashpoint of carriers' struggle to reshape their operations around global cities as deregulation approached. By gradually shifting capacity toward Chicago, airlines could take advantage of the city's giant economy and population, leverage its strategic location in the geographic center of the continent, and reduce their exposure to the withering, undiversified economies of smaller cities in what was quickly becoming the "rust belt." Nearly twice the size of its next largest competitor at O'Hare in the mid-1970s, United was first out of the gate toward the Chicago centered strategy, a move that would make it the dominant airline in the United States – and in the world – until the crisis of the Bush era 25 years later. As United flourished, American and TWA were equally positioned to take second place. In April of 1974, for example, American and TWA's Chicago operations were almost the exact same size. On peak business days, American offered approximately 15,700 seats on 103 flights to 25 destinations from Chicago, while TWA provided 15,500 seats on 101 flights to 22 destinations. Their operations were even structured similarly. While American captured a bit more North-South traffic, and while TWA enjoyed the marketing advantage of prestigious London and Paris nonstops, both flew robust schedules to the banking centers of the East Coast and to booming California. Both anchored schedules on the venerable Boeing 707, the airliner that brought reliable jet transport to the world beginning in 1958, backed up their 707s with newer and more fuel efficient 727s, and upbranded busier and more prestigious routes with 300-seat jumbo jets.

As deregulation neared, building up those schedules, and enabling the economies of scale and density that large hubs provided, would be imperative for both airlines. American clearly understood this. While it upped the pressure on TWA in Chicago, it threw Braniff under the bus in Dallas, ruthlessly undercutting the smaller and more vulnerable line until it collapsed in 1982, and building a fortress hub in an emerging global city on the Midwest's southern boundary. TWA tried to meet American's challenge, but the carrier was hamstrung by its own inability to raise capital. During the previous decade, TWA had followed managerial trends in many industries that encouraged diversification of product portfolios. Indeed after TWA bought a string of travel-related companies, most notably Hilton Hotels International, half of TWA's profits came from non-airline endeavors in 1977.<sup>144</sup> But while those assets paid off amid the airline business' notorious cyclicity, TWA borrowed heavily to buy them, and such leverage constrained the company's ability to take out new loans. Inability to borrow quickly and borrow widely presents a serious problem in a capital-intensive industry like the airlines. So when fuel prices spiked during two oil crises in the 1970s, transforming fuel from penny cheap to the largest item in airlines' budgets, TWA was simply unable to come up with enough money to buy newer, lighter, and more economical airplanes like the Boeing 727, a jet that American was not so coincidentally scooping up from competitors. Thus when TWA wanted to add new routes out of Chicago, it had to rely on its aging 707 fleet, many of which were original turbojet versions built in the late 1950s. Though the deafening

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<sup>144</sup> "Record for 1977," The 630 News Mar./Apr. 1978:3.

metallic whistle and thick blanket of black smoke pouring out of turbojet 707s on takeoff dazzles mid-century airliner buffs, the 707's fuel bills broke the bank for the airlines. American, therefore, trimmed 707 operations to just 15% of its O'Hare schedule by the fall of 1979, when TWA was still flying a full third of its schedule with the old jets.

Partially as a result of TWA's capital problems, and partially as a consequence of failing to identify a clear reinvention strategy after deregulation, TWA withered at Chicago while American grew. In the fall of 1979, a year after deregulation, American was offering 134 daily flights from Chicago to 36 destinations, while TWA flew just 75 flights to 23 destinations. The smaller number of departures meant that many cities got only a single TWA flight from Chicago, making it much more difficult for TWA to recruit high-fare business travelers who value frequent flight schedules. During the same period, TWA virtually gave up on its Chicago-California business, flying only a single daily flight on Los Angeles-Chicago – an ill-timed all-nighter on a 707 – against the six jumbo jets American offered each day.<sup>145</sup> The downward spiral continued to worsen as TWA flew into the 1980s. By 1983, TWA had stopped flying from Chicago to the West Coast altogether, paring its daily offering to only 11 eastern and rust belt cities. And by 1985, when American connected Chicago to the world with non-stops to 57 cities, TWA served just eight airports from O'Hare,

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<sup>145</sup> TWA's shrinking schedules are clear evidence of declining marketshare. Analysis of yields and revenue loss would likely make the case even more dramatic – though such work is outside the scope of this project. Some West Coast flights were being operated on 707 aircraft that did not even offer first class, while DC-10s on American and United had large first class cabins that attracted the highest yield customers.

three of which were in its hometown of New York City. Meanwhile, TWA built up operations at Pittsburgh and especially at Saint Louis, escaping American's full court press in Chicago, but placing it front and center in the crisis of deindustrialization in the Midwest.

As TWA gave up on Chicago and retreated down the Mississippi and down the Ohio river valley, it became apparent that it was not merely deregulation that determined the downfall of some established airlines, but that economic duress was just as much a consequence of particular carriers' failure to read the tea leaves of sociospatial change. TWA was absolutely not alone in this strategic abdication, as fellow trunk line Eastern and mid-sized carriers like Continental and Braniff followed a similar path. By the early 1980s, companies' bloody balance sheets proved that their operations had gotten away from them, and growing losses made it even harder to rebuild operations in the global cities that could buoy them. In the deepening uncertainties of economic change in the 1980s, managers searched for a new solution to right the course of their firms. Here, I argue, is where the family values economy emerged in the airlines, as retooling internal politics around austerity and managerial authority seemed to be the only route to survival when external dynamics were so unpredictable.

### ***The Family Values Economy and the Return of Managerial Authority***

At the outset of 1985, TWA's managers and front line employees had a legitimate reason to fear that the airline was in a downward spiral. Given the intensifying pushback against the union movement and against the family wage

system in the early 1980s (see Chapter 1), management recognized that one way to break the spiral would be to drastically lower operating costs so TWA could turn a profit on the remaining revenue it was able to generate. To do so, the airline would have to eliminate many of its legacy costs, those stemming from the pensions, health insurance, longevity pay, and work rules that most TWA employees had enjoyed for generations, and that flight attendants had just won in the victories of 1978 and 1983. Managers, in other words, would have to bring the family values economy to the lives of front line TWA employees.

As a push to enforce deep austerity measures on the front line workforce, the family values economy has, in somewhat ironic terms, a tense relationship to traditional family values. If, after all, you slash a TWA ticket agent or pilot or machinist's compensation far enough, you undermine his patriarchal authority in the home. By curtailing his role as a breadwinner, and by necessitating that the home become a space to pool the resources of husbands', wives', and children's' work, you strip that TWA employee of the power he gained from the family wage system. Though it certainly changed familial roles in the airline industry and beyond, the advent of the family values economy was by no means a threat to heteronormativity or patriarchy. Instead, I argue that the family values economy shored up traditional gender roles by restoring the managerial authority of the corporate executive. As upper management found new power over front line employees by rolling back the gains of unions and other social movements, corporate leaders solidified their role as fathers for their workforces and fathers

for the nation, patriarchs who would lead struggling companies and a flagging national economy out of the duress of the 1970s. By eliminating legacy benefits to deepen the labor-management hierarchy, and by cracking down on front line insubordinates – especially a staunch group of feminized service employees like flight attendants – corporate leaders leveraged ideals of traditional manhood and normative fatherhood as they implemented the family values economy.

The struggle for managerial authority played out in particularly vivid terms in the airline industry in the mid-1980s. Debate over emerging practices and ideologies of corporate leadership was explicit and well documented, as the airlines had become a center of public scrutiny of the decade’s “leveraged buyout” (LBO) or “hostile takeover” boom. Driven by the deregulation of the banking industry and a booming financial services sector, financiers would execute LBOs by running up stock prices, buying off board of directors, firing managers, and then implementing deep austerity measures presumably aimed at enhancing profit margins. A hallmark of the financial brinksmanship of the “go-go 80s,” the LBO push to make companies lean and mean had befallen Continental, Eastern, TWA, Northwest, Hawaiian, and several smaller lines by the end of the decade.<sup>146</sup>

Perhaps no individual was more vocal, more passionate, or more concise about the fundamental necessity of management shakeups than Carl Icahn, who

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<sup>146</sup> For a cogent analysis of how LBOs were sold to make companies “lean and mean” and thus to restore American financial prowess, see Karen Z. Ho’s work on the “shareholder value revolution” in: Karen Z. Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. 122-169.

staged a hostile takeover of TWA on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1986, and whose biography and bravado inspired Michael Douglas's famous performance as "Gordon Gecko" in Oliver Stone's 1987 film *Wall Street*. In a flurry of Congressional testimony, in a tireless media campaign that carried him from the studios of ABC *World News Tonight* to the cover of *Cosmopolitan*, and directly to the employees of U.S. Steel, TWA, and other giants he bought up, Icahn presented the corporate takeover boom as a referendum on and rejection of a failing managerial paradigm. In a keynote address to a March, 1986 management conference at New York University's Stern School of Business, for example, Icahn attacked existing corporate leaders for being addled and outmoded:

Industry in the United States is operating within a feudalistic system where top management is protected by layers of incompetent bureaucracy. There is a law of survival of the unfittest whereby the least competent become top management.<sup>147</sup>

Launching similar barbs in front of the House Aviation Subcommittee, Icahn belittled the fears of incumbent managers at the major airlines. "I think it is just entrenchment," Icahn insisted. "I think its just self-preservation, fear of the unknown, and fear that I am going to oust them."<sup>148</sup>

Recurring indictments of his peers in top management, and especially of older colleagues who took their posts in the immediate Postwar era, demonstrate Icahn's targeted rejection of corporate governing practices that emerged during the Fordist and Keynesian eras. Icahn frames mid-20<sup>th</sup> century corporate brass as sheltered by state regulation and protectionism, and hamstrung by militant labor

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<sup>147</sup> "What Flight Attendants are Doing on their Own," *Off the Line*, March 1986, 15.

<sup>148</sup> "To Regulate Attempts to Acquire Control of Airlines" 117.



and social movements. Significant external constraints meant, for Icahn, that managers lacked ultimate control over their firms, and thus that executives were just another interest group competing for power in the complex institution of the mid-century corporation. Attacking the failed manhood of fathers stripped of dominance, Icahn extrapolates that existing managers were terrified at the thought of having to take charge, terrified that they might have to assert themselves, and terrified at the thought of losing a protected, easy life.

This critique – that existing executives had failed to maintain manly authority over the businesses they ran – guided Icahn’s public presentation of his takeover bid for TWA. Icahn repeatedly served TWA President Ed Meyer with a two-pronged personal attack. First, Icahn dismissed Meyer’s leadership as inept. As TWA failed to stake a competitive claim on Chicago and Los Angeles, as it continued to rely on an aging fleet of jets from the 1960s, and as it watched labor costs balloon after a series of bungled moves by management negotiators, Icahn claimed that Meyer had failed to take charge and dedicate himself to the task at hand. After Meyer and TWA employees lobbied for Congressional hearings to probe the threatened LBO, Icahn used the investigation as a stage to play up his criticism of Meyer’s ineptitude. During the first round of deliberations on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985, Meyer was the first witness to testify against Icahn. “If you don’t mind, I’ll read my presentation,” Meyer began, coming off as a quiet, doddering old man intimidated by the intensity of the venue.<sup>149</sup> Icahn took the stand immediately after Meyer, booming as he opened his unscripted address. “Mr.

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<sup>149</sup> “To Regulate Attempts to Acquire Control of Airlines” 55.

Meyer is flat wrong,” Icahn immediately argued, wasting no time in setting up a binary debate with the man he hoped to replace at TWA.

The second foundation of Icahn’s attack on Meyer’s manhood and on Meyer’s authority involved accusing the TWA president of being hen-pecked. For Icahn, the flight attendant activist victories of 1978 and 1983 best exemplified Meyer’s leadership team’s striking lack of fortitude. In a centerfold article on Icahn’s “feisty” leadership style in *Cosmopolitan*, Icahn argued that his decision to confront flight attendant activists in a decisive, aggressive manner best exemplifies the business skills necessary to right TWA’s course.

I have been able to build a successful airline because I was willing to confront the task, to stand up to unpalatable situations. When I looked at the unfavorable contract we had with flight attendants, I said, “I am not going to live with this.” The top management told me they’d handle it, that they always negotiated a deal. I asked, “What happens if the flight attendants won’t negotiate?” They said, “Well, we have to work with them.” But I said, “We have a training school. Why don’t we start training new people so we have some leverage just in case?” You don’t have to be a genius to figure that out. We live in a world based on supply and demand. The flight attendant chose to be one, and she’s in a business where there are a lot of flight attendants willing to work for a lot less.<sup>150</sup>

Icahn chastised the Meyer administration for even dignifying flight attendants with negotiations. For Icahn, the staunchness of flight attendants like Frankovich and Miller should never have been able to distract Meyer from the mathematics of a changing economy. Meyer should have recognized that the age family values economy had dawned. Given the roll back of state regulation and labor protection, and during an intensifying management counterattack against the labor

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<sup>150</sup> “Cosmo Glorifies Icahn” 14.

movement, Icahn reminded audiences that flight attendant labor was being devalued. If IFFA wanted to mouth off and deny basic economic facts, then Meyer should have opened up TWA's Kansas City training center and implemented the family values economy by firing and replacing all flight attendants. Meyer ultimately failed to muster the courage to make the "unpalatable decision" that stewards of the family values economy would have to be able to make.

Icahn, of course, was promising to be this very steward. Demanding the chance to replace Meyer and to reinvigorate TWA and the broader economy, Icahn offered a pact with workingmen and with the nation based on renewed managerial authority. Icahn reflected to Congress:

I am not talking about the real employees, the real guys doing the work, I am talking about what I consider the top layers in these companies that have built up bureaucracy on bureaucracy, and these bureaucracies really throttle up the productive engine in this country. Japan is much more productive, much better management than we have. In Japan, you don't see the big lush offices.<sup>151</sup>

Insulting managers who wedded their prowess to mahogany-lined boardrooms at tony addresses, Icahn blamed their bloat for betraying the workingman and betraying the nation. For Icahn, failed managerial authority devalued both workingmen's labor and economic production writ-large, allowing both to be lapped by Asian vigor and ingenuity. Implementing the family values economy, making companies lean and mean and blocking them from foolishly caving to insubordinate groups like TWA did in 1978 and 1983, would return the working

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<sup>151</sup> "To Regulate Attempts to Acquire Control of Airlines" 127.

man and the United States to their rightfully dominant positions. While Icahn's clunky romanticization of "the real guys doing the real work" seems unbearably disingenuous as he prepared to slash workingmen's wages at TWA, I argue that Icahn was not making a simple equivalence between working class masculinity and his own. Instead, he aimed to lift workingmen and the U.S. economy with a particular brand of elite manhood. That leadership style would derive its manliness from its practitioners' willingness to take unprecedented financial risks. Mobilization of risk, then, allowed Icahn the material and ideological resources to beat Meyer in the debate and to make his family values agenda dominant in the airline industry by mid-decade.

***The Business of Risk as a Foundation of the Family Values Economy***

In the summer of 1985, Carl Icahn came to TWA promising to use financial risk taking to break the airlines' downward spiral. Icahn, after all, was not proposing an ordinary merger or acquisition to solve TWA's problems, but a leveraged buyout. By initiating a hostile takeover, Icahn was making an overt political and economic assertion about TWA. Insisting that shareholders were being underserved by Meyer's lackluster, mid-20<sup>th</sup> century leadership style, Icahn claimed that TWA was undervalued.<sup>152</sup> In other words, TWA had unique and highly desirable economic fundamentals: a dominant position in the lucrative U.S. transcontinental market, treaty-protected access to London and Paris, and a strong presence in Southern Europe, the Mediterranean, and India. But, in financiers'

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<sup>152</sup> To understand how critiques of mid-twentieth century leadership framed firms like TWA as "fat" and "slow," and how these critiques propelled the takeover movement of the 1980s, see: Ho 129-137.

appraisal, since Meyer's disengagement and flight attendants' brassiness had left the company flailing, shares of stock were priced far below what they could reap at a better-managed TWA. Icahn, therefore, offered to pay up front for the opportunity to reorganize TWA around a new commitment to managerial authority, proposing to pay shareholders what the company *should* be worth rather than its depressed market value. The above market offer would, of course, require quick access to a vast amount of cash. It would also require the participation of private investors willing to risk taking Icahn at his word, and thus willing to brave the possibility that TWA's financial woes would worsen and force Icahn to default on the loans.

Energized by the riskiness of the TWA buyout, Icahn aimed to finance the deal with a newly popular technology that derived all of its value from risk: the junk bond. A junk bond is a mere promise, a zero-collateral slip of paper claiming to offer a rate of return much higher than ordinary, asset-backed, investment-grade bonds. The junk bond business was booming in the mid-1980s amid the gradual deregulation of the banking industry. Deregulation juiced up the bond market by reducing government oversight of securities trading, allowing banks and wealth individuals to exchange a much broader range of financial products. The Garn-St. Germain Depository Institutions Act of 1982, for example, relinquished much of the state's control of the savings and loan business. After Garn-St. Germain, savings and loans could bundle consumer debts into securities and trade them, or conversely invest deposits in a wider range

of less orthodox and lower-collateral bonds. Icahn built on the new investment pattern that deregulation helped initiate, securitizing TWA's debts by promising to reward those who shared the risk of continued airline operations with immense interest payments.<sup>153</sup>

But deregulation alone fails to fully explain the growing clamor to invest in risky deals like Carl Icahn's takeover of TWA. Junk bonds, after all, seemed like a financial accident waiting to happen, as they burdened sellers with immense interest obligations while providing no guaranteed revenue stream. That accident did happen, as a string of defaults in an overheated bond market helped touch off the "savings and loan" scandal of 1990 that ended up costing taxpayers \$150 billion and seriously damaged the presidency of George H.W. Bush. But in 1985, hedge fund managers and private speculators rushed to patronize investment banks like Drexel-Burnham-Lambert who specialized in junk bonds specifically because they offered a chance to work with people like Carl Icahn. Indeed the riskiest part of the bond market linked buyers to aggressive young financiers who were promising – and some would say delivering on the promise – to reignite the stagnant 1970s economy with their own managerial fortitude. This bet, that Icahn would be able to implement the family values economy in the airlines and thus restore profits in a flagging industry, provided Icahn the cash to transform workplace politics at TWA and beyond.

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<sup>153</sup> For a summary of the relationship between banking deregulation and the rapid expansion in scope and scale of the financial services industry, see: Randy Martin, The Financialization of Daily Life. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002. 1-55.

As front line employees, Ed Meyer, and Carl Icahn sparred about TWA's future in front of Congress and on newspaper opinion pages, the drama of high-risk finance was no means confined to that particular airline. Indeed by the mid-1980s, the entire airline industry had become a flash point in the debate over new management practices, and especially over hostile takeovers. On a Los Angeles afternoon in the summer of 1983, Continental Airlines CEO Alan Feldman committed suicide in his office with a 6-shot revolver after Houston-based financier Frank Lorenzo captured control of Continental's board and wrestled the airline away from Feldman in an LBO. After Continental's unionized workforce balked at demands for an immediate 50% paycut, Lorenzo shut the company down, fired everyone, and rebuilt operations with non-union replacements hired off the street.<sup>154</sup> Lorenzo openly claimed that the Continental deal was part of a broader plan to stage hostile takeovers of existing airlines, enforce deep austerity measures, and then rebuild the broken-down companies into a low-cost, non-union airline empire. By 1987, Lorenzo had taken control of legacy airlines Eastern and Frontier, as well as discount carriers New York Air and PeopleExpress. Ensuing cost cutting measures would touch off perhaps the bitterest strike in the history of the industry, that at Eastern Airlines in March of 1989 and that would lead to the downfall of Lorenzo's entire business.

Given the growing upheaval about hostile takeovers in the airline industry in the mid-1980s, news cameras swooped around TWA's Fifth Avenue

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<sup>154</sup> A particularly colorful narrative of the Feldman suicide and subsequent lockout may be found in: Jack E. Robinson, Freefall: The Needless Destruction of Eastern Airlines and the Valiant Struggle to Save it, New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

headquarters when Carl Icahn – perhaps the only LBO artist more famous than Frank Lorenzo – quickly collected 34% of the airline’s stock during the first weeks of June 1985. Journalists believed that Icahn was pulling together financing for a raid on TWA by borrowing against the resources of ACF Technologies, a previous Icahn takeover target, and that he planned to use TWA’s cache of unencumbered assets to launch a follow-up raid on U.S. Steel progeny USX. But as Icahn jockeyed for position, Frank Lorenzo also appeared on the scene, making TWA the target of *his* next foray into aviation. Lorenzo counter-offered and outbid Icahn, announcing a deal to buy TWA for \$793 million on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985.<sup>155</sup>

As he detailed his plan to slide TWA out from under Icahn, Lorenzo announced he would raise \$580 million from a junk bond deal orchestrated by Drexel-Burnham-Lambert. Lorenzo’s bid for TWA ultimately offered outstanding stockholders \$19 per share in junk-bond-generated cash, plus \$4 of preferred stock in the new TWA, allowing Lorenzo to purchase the airline without spending any of his own money. Once he controlled the airline, Lorenzo would use cash from TWA operations to make the massive interest payments on the loan from Drexel.<sup>156</sup> As Frank Lorenzo moved to close the TWA sale, Carl Icahn insisted he was not about to have his deal scuttled. On August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1985, Icahn upped Lorenzo’s ante, offering an additional dollar per share: \$19.50 in cash, and

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<sup>155</sup> Bryan Burrough, William Carley, John D. Williams, Mark Zieman, “Texas Air Agrees to Purchase Trans World Airlines For \$23 a Share in Cash, Debt, or \$793.5 Million Total,” Wall Street Journal 14 Jun. 1985, Eastern ed.: 1+.

<sup>156</sup> Burrough et. al., 1.



\$4.50 of preferred stock in post-buyout TWA.<sup>157</sup> When Lorenzo countered at the same price, Icahn called the Houston financier into a secret meeting ten days later, on August 16<sup>th</sup>. Icahn offered Lorenzo \$50 million to end his takeover attempt, cash that would, of course, have come from TWA's treasury once the sale was complete. After Lorenzo balked at the deal, and demanded \$70 million up front to disappear, Icahn stormed out of the meeting in anger, forcing the standoff to continue.<sup>158</sup> Though it appeared that TWA's board would accept Icahn's bid by the end of August, the raid faced another hurdle as the \$850 million in junk bonds that Drexel would have to sell to help Icahn finance the deal were moving much more slowly than anticipated. This meant that Icahn would lack the funds to close the transaction until mid-December. By that time, the TWA buyout had descended into pure theatrics. Not only was Lorenzo still at the trough trying to steal the deal from Icahn, but Northwest and American Airlines had put together merger proposals for TWA, and aviation buff and notoriously corrupt Atlantic City gaming tycoon and eccentric James M. Crosby aimed to one-up all of the bidders.<sup>159</sup>

By the end of the holiday season of 1985, it looked as if Carl Icahn would become the eventual star of the TWA hostile takeover passion play. While Drexel was pushing junk bonds as fast as it could in the fall of 1985, Icahn continued to

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<sup>157</sup> Teri Agins and Mark Ziemann, "TWA Holder Icahn Tops Texas Air Bid With \$24-a-Share Cash-Preferred Offer," The Wall Street Journal 06 Aug. 1985, Eastern ed.: 1+.

<sup>158</sup> William M. Carley, "Takeover Battle Nearly Ended in Secret Meeting, Aid to Icahn Says," The Wall Street Journal 16 Aug. 1985, Eastern ed.: 1.

<sup>159</sup> William M. Carley, "TWA's Auction is Set Back as 2 Unions Vehemently Object to Sale to Texas Air," The Wall Street Journal 19 Dec. 1985, Eastern ed.: 1+.

buy up individual shares of TWA stock, which gave him 52% control of the airline by January. Majority status effectively allowed Icahn to force a sale of TWA to himself. The board of directors finally approved the takeover on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1986, by which time the offer stood at \$24 per share, but included *no* cash. All remaining owners would be given \$24 per outstanding share in a “stock swap” buyout, a move that would turn all minority stakeholders into Icahn’s business partners in the new TWA. But as Icahn became the victor in the struggle, it was quickly apparent that *he* had gotten a raw deal. For not only had the airline industry fallen into another slump in the winter of 1985, and not only was TWA particularly hard hit as the dramatic hijacking of TWA flight 847 from Athens to Rome on June 14<sup>th</sup> quickly weakened patronage of one of its last profitable international divisions, but Icahn paid an average of \$19.50 per share for TWA, a company that was trading at \$15 as the sale closed. TWA’s finances were so weak that Icahn had to borrow \$750 million from Drexel to fund daily operations as soon as he took over. And though the far-above market purchase price was an embarrassing faux pas for one of Wall Street’s most visible and brash financiers, TWA’s dire finances, and the high-interest loans Icahn used to subsidize them, were a gift to Icahn as they allowed him new leverage to accomplish his long stated goal: to demonstrate new managerial authority at TWA by enforcing austerity on all aspects of its day-to-day operations.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Data for Final Icahn transaction narrative from: Daniel Hertzberg, “TWA Names Carl Icahn as Chairman But His Victory is Seen as Bittersweet,” The Wall Street Journal 06 Jan. 1986, Eastern ed.: 1+.

### *The Standoff Over Family and Value in the Fall of 1985*

By the third week of June 1985, labor activists from all trades at TWA had returned to New York from the week of Icahn hearings in Washington, preparing to mount a defense against both the Lorenzo and Icahn takeover bids. Though the airline industry's overall performance continued to improve as the economy recovered from the 1982 recession, the threatened LBO faced TWA employees with a bitter choice: either open up contracts to provide at least some of the cost savings that Lorenzo and Icahn were demanding in their new managerial imperatives, or risk a lockout and permanent replacement in a management-baited strike as had occurred at Lorenzo's Continental in 1983. Though the stakes of the situation disturbed everyone on the front lines, far different historical forces weighed on flight attendants' response to the hostile takeover than on their peers in other trades. In particular, mostly-male workgroups like ramp service, cleaners, machinists, pilots, and station operations were reeling from the national collapse of the family wage system. Activists from all of these groups feared they would have to join other, mostly-male unions in automotive, steel, meatpacking, and trucking who were making concessionary bargaining a way of life.<sup>161</sup> These once unstoppable organizations had spent a decade systematically forfeiting the

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<sup>161</sup> For an intellectual genealogy about the decline of the labor movement, see: Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York: Basic Books, 1973., Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry*. New York: Basic Books, 1982., Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism*. London: Verso, 1988., Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Capitalism*. New York, Vintage Books, 1991., and Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

legacy benefits that underwrote breadwinner status, sacrificing pay, gutting pension benefits, and foregoing work rules and vacation time. With Lorenzo and Icahn circling like vultures, and with the dismal outcome of the Continental strike, the men of TWA feared they were next in line for a haircut.

As pilots, machinists, and ground crews prepared to cede ground, flight attendants dug in. Activists, after all, had spent a decade openly challenging both the heteronormative and dispossessing foundations of the nascent family values economy, the social forces at the center of Lorenzo and Icahn's agendas. On one hand, flight attendants had built a social movement around challenging men's authority at work, both from men who ran the airlines and who led industrial organizations like the Transport Workers Union. Thus, when a new man like Icahn arrived to make a new bid for manly authority, flight attendants were primed to be suspicious. Secondly, flight attendants had used this feminist critique of patriarchy to fight the dispossessing tendencies of both the family wage system and the family values economy. As they beat big carriers like American and TWA at the bargaining table in the late 1970s, activists blocked the airlines from continuing to devalue feminized service labor, and won lucrative new material resources to support the multiplicity of dependencies in flight attendants' lives. So while Carl Icahn had a lot to say about how airline workers should arrange their families and pay their bills, so did flight attendants. Only in their mid-30s as the standoff with Icahn heated up, flight attendants like Mary Ellen Miller and Victoria Frankovich were young women who, in a decade of

activism, were battling 1000 against the airlines. They had already painted a clear portrait of what the political economy of the airlines and other industries should look like in the 1980s, which of course was the polar opposite of the austere family values economy on Icahn's docket.

Given this divergence in historical trajectories, flight attendants' initial skirmishes with Icahn differed dramatically from those of their male peers. Flight attendants responded to the industry's initial demands for austerity by upping their militancy rather than tempering it. In the spring of 1985, front line flight attendants elected Victoria Frankovich to become IFFA's second president. Frankovich beat incumbent and fellow IFFA co-founder Arthur Teolis in her race, largely by advocating a firmer stance against TWA President Ed Meyer's push for concessionary bargaining. The new leader's first months in office were blurringly fast paced, as IFFA turned the heat up on Meyer by petitioning the National Mediation Board for authority to strike TWA as the company threatened to impose wage concessions in the Summer of 1985. The Federal Government denied IFFA's request, refusing to grant authority for a third airline strike during a summer when Pan Am and United were already shuttered by walkouts.<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, flight attendants remained indignant as they worked the skies, carving out a more visible, vocal, and explicitly political critique of the economic transformation of the 1980s than their male colleagues.

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<sup>162</sup> "IFFA Negotiations and the Sale of TWA," The 630 News. Date unknown, likely late fall 1985 and definitely prior to the strike of March, 1986.

The divergence between flight attendants and other work groups intensified as union activists opened concessionary negotiations with Icahn in late June of 1985. Though six months would pass before Lorenzo formally withdrew his offer and before Icahn could secure enough financing to close the sale, activists intervened to begin hammering out the labor economics of a takeover they assumed was inevitable. Tensions escalated on July 5<sup>th</sup>, when TWA pilots went public about a deal with Carl Icahn. Pilots agreed that if Icahn beat Lorenzo and won control of the airline, they would immediately cut their pay by 22%, and take additional work rule and benefit concessions lowering total compensation by nearly 40%. In exchange for the cash, Icahn promised to leave pilots alone, refraining from baiting a strike or locking them out. To further sweeten the deal for Icahn, pilots offered two particularly painful caveats. To avoid appearing to be the only group to cry uncle and give up, pilot leaders signed a “me too” clause requiring Icahn extract concessions of similar severity from all other workers. The pilot’s union also ratified a no strike clause, requiring rank and file pilots to cross the picket lines of any other labor group who struck TWA during the Icahn transition. As pilots announced their deal, word began to circulate that mechanics were also close to a pact with Icahn that included a less extreme 15% pay cut, but nevertheless mandated sizable benefit and work rule givebacks.<sup>163</sup>

Given Icahn’s rapidly growing stake in TWA, and conscious of media din that Icahn was about to offer a sweetened takeover proposal that the board of

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<sup>163</sup> William M. Carley, “TWA Pilots Agree to Accept Pay Cuts of Up to 20% if Icahn Acquires Airline,” The Wall Street Journal 03 Jul. 1985, Eastern ed.: 1.

directors was likely to accept, Frankovich agreed to a private meeting with Icahn on Friday, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1985. Frankovich was prepared to match the concessionary deal that Icahn had on the table with the machinists. Though it would sacrifice many of the gains of the 1978 and 1983 advances, the pact would protect most of flight attendants' coveted work rules, and would have been less severe on a percentile basis than the givebacks of much higher paid pilots. But when the conversation began, Icahn quickly rejected Frankovich's offer. "I am going to need more from the girls," Icahn began, opening his rebuttal with the term "girls" which he frequently interchanged with "stewardesses" to refer to flight attendants. Icahn proceeded to lay out his particular version of the family values economy. First and foremost, Icahn would be in charge at the new company. Management benchmarks for concessions would not be negotiable. Flight attendants could move the poker chips around to decide what they wanted to give up, but concessionary cash values would be fixed. Second, though every rank and file employee would be required to make substantive and permanent givebacks, flight attendants would have to accept deeper cuts than other unionized groups. Icahn used two lines of argumentation to justify the disparity. On one hand, unlike the men who flew, fueled, cleaned, polished, loaded, and unloaded TWA airplanes, flight attendants were unskilled. "I can get nineteen year old girls off the street to do these jobs," Icahn told Frankovich. Echoing management's line for a half century, Icahn implied that the flight attending was a hobby, not labor; a chance to provide the caretaking, homemaking, and

entertaining that women – that girls – were naturally good at. Meanwhile, flight attendants deserved to take additional concessions because they were not breadwinners. “Flight attendants can afford to give more because they are providing only second incomes,” Icahn told Frankovich. “Stewardesses are not breadwinners. They don’t have dependents like the men do.” Returning to his worn, sentimental allegiance with workingmen, Icahn assumed that “the girls” would have to rely on hard working husbands, rather than on TWA, for material resources.<sup>164</sup>

As Icahn swiftly dismissed Frankovich, he made it clear that, like flight attendants, his political economic intervention was about value and family. At first appraisal, Icahn’s intervention was purely mathematical. He needed to extract money from employee paychecks to service the interest payments on the junk bonds he used to fund TWA’s operation. But as he insisted on austerity from all, Icahn used family values to structure these dispossessing practices. Not only would flight attendants have to respect Icahn’s fatherly authority at work and accept a disproportionate share of the givebacks, but they would also have to depend on wifery and domesticity for material sustenance, as the airline industry would distribute the bulk of its dwindling resources to trades long populated by male breadwinners. Thus Icahn aimed to rescue TWA’s market value by shoring up traditional family values at home and at work.

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<sup>164</sup> Icahn’s comments were relayed in sworn testimony in front of the House Aviation Subcommittee during the June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1985 proceedings for the hearing, “Airline Mergers and Acquisitions: The Question of Labor Protection.” Testimony reproduced in: “TWA/Ozark Proposed Merger” 13.



Flight attendants were jarringly distracted from the TWA affair that Friday evening, for just as Frankovich and Icahn's private meeting adjourned in New York, Delta Airlines flight 191 crashed as it flew through a severe thunderstorm on final approach to Dallas-Fort Worth International airport. Networks interrupted regular programming with video feed of twisted rows of turquoise and amber passenger seats protruding from the L-1011's burning hull, gripping everyone who worked in aviation, and illustrating the vast chasm between the business of "risk" that Icahn was trumpeting and the inevitable risks of flight attendants' lives on the job.<sup>165</sup> Flight attendants had little time to process the loss of colleagues and the vivid demonstration of the risks of their work, as the TWA standoff was back on the front page Monday morning. On the afternoon of the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, Icahn signed the very agreement with the machinists union that he had denied flight attendants 48 hours earlier, trading basic job security for a 15% across the board reduction in hourly pay.<sup>166</sup> The accord left IFFA the lone labor group at TWA lacking a contractual bargain for the Icahn takeover, an event which appeared even more likely when Icahn's sweetened offer of \$25 per share hit the covers of national papers the next morning.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> A crew training video that layers the cockpit voice recorder audio transcripts over a computer simulation of Delta 191's flight path for the final two minutes of the flight is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKwyU1RwPto>. The cause of the crash was determined to be a combination of a microburst and severe windshear from a category 4 thunderstorm over the air field, inadequate weather forecasting staff to warn the captain of the danger in his flight path, and the failure of the crew to initiate a go-around as soon as they recognized the L-1011 to be experiencing windshear.

<sup>166</sup> "IFFA Negotiations and the Sale of TWA...A Chronology," *The 630 News* Spring 1992: 5.

<sup>167</sup> Agins and Zieman 1.

Hopes for a peaceful settlement faded into darkness as summer tuned to autumn. In September and October, Icahn made no overture to mend the discord of the August 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting. Instead, he embarked on an unmistakable journey toward a management-baited strike. On the first of November 1985, TWA reopened its travel school in downtown Kansas City for flight attendant recruitment. The school had been idle for most of the decade after TWA ceased hiring and began downsizing in the early 1980s. Though a new hiring boom was clearly at hand, it was no sign that prosperity had returned. After all, while advertisements running in national periodicals trumpeted the opportunity to see the world on TWA's global route system, their fine print revealed a starting wage of \$1000 per month, which was less than half of the starting wage guaranteed in the IFFA contract. Paltry paychecks - and the odd timing of a recruitment binge at an airline making headlines for ongoing contraction - made the purpose of the newcomers' employment unmistakable: to permanently replace IFFA members walking off their jobs in a strike against Carl Icahn. As the holiday season approached, flight attendants checked in for their trips knowing that TWA was working around the clock to train the replacements who could end their careers. Meanwhile, their peers in mostly-male trades – pilots, baggage handlers, and mechanics – faced no such indignities.<sup>168</sup>

Early in December, as the streets of downtown Kansas City bustled with hundreds of permanent replacement workers threading their way through constant

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<sup>168</sup> Data and narrative of permanent replacement worker hiring from: "TWA/Ozark Proposed Merger" 13-14.

IFFA demonstrations into the TWA travel school, Icahn sent his only formal proposal of the fall to flight attendants. The extensive list of demands on its pages was highly disturbing to IFFA leaders. Not only did it set a higher percentile benchmark for flight attendants than for other workers by targeting a 44% reduction in total compensation, but it also made fundamental alterations to the labor management relationship that no one else at TWA was expected to swallow. In particular, the Icahn prospectus comprehensively denied flight attendants the compensation “snap backs” that pilots and machinists were allowed, meaning that concessions would be permanent, rather than temporary means to help the airline through a hard time. Second, it ended IFFA’s “dues check-off” agreement, making flight attendants unable to pay their union dues using regularly scheduled direct deposit from their paychecks, starving the union of cash when it needed it most.<sup>169</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Frankovich and the flight attendants refused to entertain Icahn’s December overture, arguing that it amounted to nothing other than a controlled demolition of IFFA. Instead, the union sent Icahn several alternative proposals, moving money around in attempts to find common ground, but maintaining the position that flight attendants should not be obligated to sacrifice the intellectual, emotional, and material foundations of their 1978 and 1983 advances by offering deeper concessions than their male peers.<sup>170</sup> On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, Icahn formally rejected all of IFFA’s offers, insisting that 22% was a non-

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<sup>169</sup> “TWA/Ozark Proposed Merger” 13.

<sup>170</sup> “IFFA Comprehensive Proposal,” The 630 News February, 1986. 2-3.

negotiable benchmark for hourly pay reductions.<sup>171</sup> Recognizing that the drama at the bargaining table had reached the point of utter futility, Frankovich and the IFFA negotiating team submitted Icahn's final offer directly to flight attendants in a referendum vote on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1986. 98% of those who went to the polls shot it down.<sup>172</sup>

Well aware that Frankovich wasn't about to approve the January proposal, Icahn filed a petition with the Federal government for release from contract negotiations. If the National Mediation Board granted Icahn's request, a 30-day "cooling off period" would begin, after which flight attendants would be free to engage in a legal strike, and Icahn could begin replacing IFFA members with the replacements training in Kansas City.<sup>173</sup> Though the Reagan-appointed majority on the Board had denied Frankovich's petition for a strike release nine months earlier in the twilight of the Meyer era, citing the disruption of the United and Pan Am strikes, they immediately obliged Icahn, granting TWA an immediate release from bargaining on February 5<sup>th</sup>, and beginning the push toward the witching hour: midnight, Friday, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1986.<sup>174</sup>

***"My Parent is a Breadwinner": On Strike Against the Family Values Economy***

Absent any movement in negotiations in the days and hours leading up to the National Mediation Board's deadline, flight attendants packed picket signs for

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<sup>171</sup> "IFFA Negotiations and the Sale of TWA"

<sup>172</sup> IFFA, "Flight Attendant Union Asks Our Help in Fighting Back," flyer, July 1986.

<sup>173</sup> "IFFA Negotiations and the Sale of TWA"; See also "Collective Bargaining in the Airline Industry" 1, 4-5.

<sup>174</sup> "IFFA Negotiations and the Sale of TWA," See also: National Mediation Board, "Strike Report: U.S. Airlines Under the Railway Labor Act," Washington, DC: National Mediation Board, 2007.

trips beginning the first week of March. When midnight Friday night passed without a deal, the overwhelming majority of flight attendants walked off the job, nearly grounding TWA from Honolulu all the way across the system to Bombay. Once the strike was called, all flight attendants were expected to stop working as soon as their aircraft landed regardless of their location. Flight attendants in the middle of trips would have to crash with friends or hitch rides home on other union airlines. Meanwhile, IFFA chartered a series of jumbo jets to perform “sweeper flights,” hopping across Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East to pick up stranded crews.<sup>175</sup> As they grounded their aircraft, flight attendants reported en masse to IFFA picket lines, where they projected a concise theme for round-the-clock demonstrations: “we are breadwinners.” Appropriating and redirecting Icahn’s hyperbole from his confrontation with Frankovich the previous fall, flight attendants plastered the slogan on every piece of union paraphernalia. Loaves of bread – whether sliced, bagged, and ready to eat or larger than life representations of their edible referents – were central to strike theatrics. Handbills distributed to airport workers, passengers, and journalists, for example, featured a ghoulish Carl Icahn wielding a butcher knife, bearing down upon a caricatured loaf of bread, hacking off slices labeled “wages,” “pensions,” and “job security.”<sup>176</sup> Shortly thereafter, IFFA organized the first of several “bread deliveries” to Icahn, where uniformed flight attendants carrying “We are

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<sup>175</sup> Mary Ellen Miller thoroughly discussed the coordination of the “sweeper flight” missions in her personal interview. See: Mary Ellen Miller, Personal Interview, 20 Mar. 2008.

<sup>176</sup> The category of “breadwinner” dominates every IFFA strike publication. See, for example: “Los Angeles Strike Photographs,” Off the Line March, 1986. 13.

Breadwinners” placards and “On Strike” picket signs would catch the TWA chief executive at public engagements in front of media cameras and present him with polka-dotted loaves of white Wonder bread.<sup>177</sup> In other events aimed to raise the spirits of strikers walking the line twenty-four hours a day, rallying picketers would carry outsized slices of styrofoam bread with giant, fanged-toothed bites missing, while fellow activists waved banners trumpeting Icahn’s infamous assertion that “these girls are not breadwinners,” and others carried IFFA’s signature “We are Breadwinners” picket signs.

Since flight attendants had spent a decade vocally criticizing the family wage system, I argue that their claim on breadwinner status must not be read as a “me too” demand for simple equality with male colleagues, or a nostalgic bid for the return of family wage economics. Instead, flight attendants invoked breadwinning as a simultaneous critique of the heteronormativity and dispossession that were the driving forces of the transition to the family values economy. In other words, flight attendants refused to go to work and submit to Icahn’s unilateral authority, and then turn around and go home to scrape together the dwindling resources of parents’ and kids’ family values economy jobs, or to depend on the breadwinner wages of husbands’ work – which of course few flight attendants were ever able to do. “We are breadwinners” was, conversely, a staunch demand that airline management should cough up the cash for flight attendants to take care of their kids, their friends, their lovers, or whomever they chose to be with.

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<sup>177</sup> “Strike Solidarity Events,” Off the Line May, 1986. 2.

As flight attendants marched on airport terminals with kids announcing, “my parent is a breadwinner,” they offered an alternate genealogy to the “working families” discourse that emerged to describe union members – and often the U.S. working class more broadly – in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>178</sup> “Working families” became a category that labor activists, community organizers, not-for-profit administrators, and progressive Democrats used to describe the deserving recipients of the living wages and social programs that neoliberal reforms were eliminating. Flight attendant activists expose how working families ideology has an affinity with, and is an alibi for, the broader family values agenda. I propose that working families advocacy often cedes the framework for the relationship between family and value to people like Icahn, parroting his sentimental portrayal of the working class as traditional and heteronormative. That sentimentality and presumed heteronormativity pervaded post-1980 representations of unionized and/or white working class social locations from a variety of constituencies: from a business lobby that exalted white working class “Reagan Democrats” for sticking to moral traditionalism and voting against the agenda of progressive social movements; to the labor left who sought to portray the working class as innocent, honest, and deserving; to urban liberals who chided the white working

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<sup>178</sup> By the late 1990s, “working families” was the category the AFL-CIO was using to describe its constituency whenever it engaged in public policy conversations. Working families, for the AFL-CIO, were the recipients of downwardly redistributive social programs, from unemployment coverage to socialized medicine to the relaxation of bigoted immigration laws. The AFL-CIO’s activist list-serve, for example, was called “The Working Families E-Activist Network.” “Working families” discourse was also prevalent in the labor left. New York’s “Working Families Party” was an early 21<sup>st</sup> century bid for a labor party, and supported by various factions of the trade union and sectarian left. Their rhetoric on family, however, mirrored that of John Sweeny – and to a lesser extent Lane Kirkland’s – AFL-CIO.

class for being reactionary, racist, homophobic, and trashy. IFFA, in turn, dumped this entire conversation, re-presenting workplace and union activism without the sentimental, heteronormative framing of traditional family. By taking control of the conversation about breadwinning, flight attendants pointed out how traditional family participates in their dispossession, and insisted that contesting compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory marriage, and compulsory domesticity must be the centerpieces of flight attendants' – and all downwardly redistributive - economic agendas.

During the strike's initial days and weeks, flight attendants kept up picket line energy by playing up their obviously tense relationship to traditional femininity and domesticity. IFFA activists, for example, constantly played with the image of the ball-busting feminist rabble-rouser, poking fun both at widely held assumptions that flight attendants are sweet-smiling caregivers who willingly comply with rigid gender norms, and that assertive women are always irrational, angry, bitter man-haters. "I am Woman, Hear me Roar," the 1972 Helen Reddy pop hit turned lurid cliché, seemed to inspire every picketing flight attendant to thrust her fist skyward and roar – if only to burst out laughing afterward – whenever the camera came near.<sup>179</sup> Similarly, IFFA strikers couldn't pass up the opportunity to comment on the infamous "freedom trashcan" of the 1968 Miss America pageant protests. On a warm spring Kansas City day during the first weeks of the strike, three flight attendants held the line in front of TWA's

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<sup>179</sup> See, for example: "Marsha Smyser Agrees We Can Do It!" photograph, *Off the Line* Spring 1989. 1.



overhaul base, where 10,000 workers – nearly all of whom were men – maintained the airlines’ jetliners. As they smiled for the camera, one picketer pitched her bra skyward, launching it on a flight toward an imaginary freedom trashcan, humorously – yet indignantly – bucking off the reins of patriarchal anti-unionism.<sup>180</sup> In another photograph from the Kansas City overhaul base, a halter-top clad flight attendant posed in a lawn chair on the picket line, laughing towards the camera while clearly pretending to be engrossed in the latest issue of “New Woman” magazine, reminding the viewer that for TWA flight attendants, robust union wages were a necessary foundation for the sexual self-determination and economic independence assumed to lie at the core of every “new woman.”<sup>181</sup> Best of all were photos from a series of “We Hate Carl Wienie Roasts,” events popular not only because they brought broke strikers together for free food, but because promotional materials’ liberal use of the word wienie alongside images of hotdogs, bratwursts, and polish sausages allowed flight attendants to play with – and perpetuate – paranoia that castration fantasies motivate staunchly politicized women.<sup>182</sup>

As flight attendants grabbed public attention with picket line theatrics and flight cancellations, Carl Icahn began to deliver on his promise to transform TWA with aggressive managerial authority. By mid-March, Icahn was instrumentalizing two strategies to make flight attendants believe that, though they may have felt energy and camaraderie on the picket line, the stark realities of

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<sup>180</sup> Janet Lhuillier, untitled photograph, March 1986.

<sup>181</sup> Janet Lhuillier, untitled photograph, March 1986.

<sup>182</sup> IFFA, untitled photograph, Off the Line exact date unknown, 1988.

the dawning family values economy left their campaign isolated, outgunned, and outmoded. First, Icahn yoked the courts to guarantee that flight attendants were the only group of workers with the legal right to strike TWA. During the first week of the strike, nearly 75% of the rank and file members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) walked off the job in solidarity with flight attendants, despite IAM International President William Winpisinger's refusal to grant a strike authorization to the Machinists' local. Given the succession of headline-making failed strikes amid the collapse of the family wage system, Winpisinger thought a strike against Icahn was futile, and used his constitutional power to block front line employees from putting themselves in harm's way and walking out. Though the precedent setting case *U.S. v. Buffalo Forge* seemed to provide front line machinists with a route to a legal strike despite Winpisinger's reservations, Icahn convinced an increasingly anti-union Federal judiciary to re-interpret the *Buffalo Forge* decision, thus blocking the machinists' strike on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March.<sup>183</sup>

The second element of TWA's countermobilization involved re-staffing TWA flights with permanent replacement workers. On the eve of the March 7<sup>th</sup> walkout, TWA had hired, trained, and positioned 1,000 newly hired permanent replacement workers. IFFA strikers scornfully titled the group "the 18-day wonders," ripping the FAA decision to grant TWA a waiver of minimum safety requirements that allowed the airline to reduce its training program from six weeks to 18 days. While the new-hire replacements' moral, political, and

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<sup>183</sup> IFFA Negotiating Committee, "IFFAGram," 8 Apr. 1986, 2-3.

economic motivations for joining TWA continue to be a source of bitter debate, especially as United Airlines was simultaneously hiring full-time, unionized flight attendants at twice the wage of IFFA strikebreakers, Icahn offered replacements a bargain that some couldn't refuse. Though the pay was low, strikebreakers could jump the airline industry's infamously long seniority line. So while United new-hires would have to wait on call for puddle jumpers across the Great Plains, TWA strikebreakers could scoop up senior flight attendants' premium trips to Paris, Milan, or Cairo. Once they got to the airport and waded through the throngs of IFFA picketers, they would work flights with new-hire replacement peers, as well as IFFA members who crossed the picket line. Dubbed "crawl-overs" by IFFA strikers rebuking coworkers' and friends' actions as desperate and dishonorable, picket crossovers were exceedingly rare in the strike's first weeks, but, given management's intensifying threats, had grown to nearly 1000, or one-sixth of the pre-strike workforce, by the first of May.<sup>184</sup>

While flight attendants strove to remain energized as the permanent replacement workforce grew, widespread doubts about the effectiveness of strikes in the 1980s worked against activist efforts to stay mobilized. By mid-decade, it seemed that pundits, activists, and intellectuals were framing the dispossessing practices of the family values economy as inevitable and uncontested. Whether from pro-labor intellectuals like Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison who traced the corrosive effect of deindustrialization on working class communities, from the president of TWA's pilot's union who called Victoria Frankovich "out to lunch"

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<sup>184</sup> IFFA Negotiating Committee, Letter to IFFA Membership, 10 May 1986.

for staging the walkout,<sup>185</sup> or from Eastern Airlines President Frank Borman who called TWA flight attendants “incredibly stupid” for striking, history itself seemed to govern TWA flight attendants as they walked the line.<sup>186</sup> But a brief look at the period’s legal and labor history paints a much more complex picture, illuminating that although flight attendants faced immense challenges, there was still room to move for activists like Frankovich. So, for example, while a Federal Government study from the late 1980s, for example, found that a significant majority of both union leaders and management negotiators believed that permanent replacement workers were used “frequently” after 1980 and “rarely” before, legal precedents prove this assumption wrong.<sup>187</sup> Permanent strikebreaking was, in fact, legalized in a test of the Wagner Act just three years after its passing at the peak of New Deal détente with unions. In the 1938 case *NLRB v. Mackay Radio*, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that it is *not* an unfair labor practice to replace striking employees with others in order to carry on business. Furthermore, the Board insisted that employers are *not* bound to discharge replacements in order for strikers to resume their previous employment once the dispute is resolved. The Supreme Court extended the *Mackay* decision to airline and railway workers shortly after the Board released its

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<sup>185</sup> Carolyn Friday and David Pauly, “A Fatal Flight Takes its Toll,” *Newsweek* 06 Sep. 1986: 38-40.

<sup>186</sup> Quote from an interview with Eastern Airlines President Frank Borman in: “The Battle for Eastern Airlines,” Dir. Alex Gibney, *PBS Frontline* 31 Jan. 1989.

<sup>187</sup> “Prohibiting Permanent Replacement of Striking Workers,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Aviation of the Committee on Public Works and Transportation of the House of Representatives, 10 Apr. 1991. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991. VII.

findings.<sup>188</sup> Replacements' and strikers' rights were further clarified in the 1968 *Laidlaw* NLRB precedent, which determined that legal strikers always have first right of return to vacant positions after a settlement, but that employers do not have to terminate permanent replacement workers in order to make room for those returning from the picket lines.<sup>189</sup>

Though permanent replacement workers absolutely helped management win many of the most visible and bitter strikes of the decade – the PATCO air traffic controllers strike of 1980, the Phelps Dodge miners' strike in Arizona in 1983, and the Hormel Meatpackers' strike in Minnesota in 1985 – they were used in only 17% of strikes in the 1980s. In fact, of the 251 strikes where permanent replacement workers were used between 1938 and 1990, only 22 of those strikes occurred after 1980. Furthermore, unionized workers – especially those in the airline industry – reaffirmed their legal right to use fundamentally important pressure tactics against employers in the 1980s. In 1987 and 1990 decisions, for example, the Supreme Court solidified airline workers' rights to engage in secondary boycotts and work slowdowns, allowing activists to stage overt and covert job actions across the entire air transportation system to resolve disputes at a single carrier.<sup>190</sup> Legal advances and ongoing organizing allowed the labor movement to expand – rather than retreat – in the 1980s. While 60% of airline workers were union members in 1979, union density was nearly 80% in 1990.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> “Prohibiting Permanent Replacement” VI, 80-82.

<sup>189</sup> “Prohibiting Permanent Replacement” 92.

<sup>190</sup> “Prohibiting Permanent Replacement” VII, 80.

<sup>191</sup> “Prohibiting Permanent Replacement” 130-135.

By the first of May 1986, TWA flight attendants were starkly facing the bitter disappointments and enduring opportunities of a 1980s strike against the family values economy. Withheld labor left TWA's operation in undeniable shambles, by its own accounting losing \$3 million per day, racking up an all-time record loss of \$169 million in the first quarter of 1986, and continuing to reap abysmal marks for on-time performance and customer satisfaction. But, nevertheless, the airplanes were moving. They admittedly did so with skeleton crews, staffed by approximately 1,850 new-hire strikebreakers and, by mid-month, just over 1,200 IFFA flight attendants who crossed the line.<sup>192</sup>

As these uncertainties intensified, Frankovich called Icahn back into negotiations, offering concessions of yet unseen depth and permanence. On April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1986, IFFA submitted a proposal in which contractual give-backs would lower TWA's total flight attendant costs by 28% on a per-unit basis, an unprecedented offer for a group politically and ideologically committed to preserving at least some of the gains of the 1978 and 1983 victories. Icahn promptly refused the overture, reaffirming his commitment to unilateral managerial authority by spontaneously conjuring 30% as the new benchmark for flight attendant concessions.<sup>193</sup> Icahn's dismissal confirmed a now familiar pattern: Icahn would summarily dismiss any economic offer that IFFA put on the table, inventing new numbers to form a financial asymptote that Frankovich could approach but never touch. The concessionary asymptote made it increasingly

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<sup>192</sup> Data about strike effectiveness in the first week of May 1986, from: IFFA Negotiating Committee, "IFFAGram," 2 May 1986, 1.

<sup>193</sup> IFFA Negotiating Committee, "IFFAGram," 29 Apr. 1986, 1.

clear that Icahn aimed not merely to lower the cost of production in the TWA cabin, but to swap the IFFA workforce for a cheaper, younger, and more docile population.

Painfully acknowledging that Icahn's actions were driving the strike to the precipice of a lockout, IFFA leaders came together on May 17<sup>th</sup> to make one of the most difficult decisions of their careers. Frankovich's stoically crisp, yet clearly morose prose communicated the intensity of the situation to all TWA flight attendants.

Last night at 10pm IFFA made an unconditional offer to return all striking flight attendants to work immediately. This does not mean our fight is over – that decision is up to you. What this does mean is we are no longer withholding our services. Therefore when the company calls you to return to work, you must return. This is a strategic move on our part which is designed to prevent TWA from further attempting to replace us with scabs and new hires.<sup>194</sup>

By issuing the back to work order, IFFA mandated that without caveat or precondition, all airport pickets would come down, and all remaining strikers would make themselves available for immediate return to work, ultimately offering the airline flight attendant labor at a price only Icahn would name.

Nine days would pass before the terms of that labor would emerge. On May 26<sup>th</sup>, strikers headed to the polls to vote in a referendum on the back-to-work plan that, if ratified, would serve as flight attendants' new "contract" with TWA. The document proposed working conditions wholly unseen at a major airlines, that would immediately roll back virtually all of the gains of 1978 and 1983, and that undermined many of the basic principles of trade unionism: pay reductions of

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<sup>194</sup> IFFA Mailgram, 18 May 1986.

at least 20%, abolition of most work rules and all the “duty rigs” that allowed flight attendants to be paid for layovers and time away from home, across-the-board staffing reductions, deep cuts in vacation and retirement pay, and the termination of the union security clause that guaranteed flight attendants the right to representation and seniority-based distribution of resources.<sup>195</sup> 80% of strikers cast their ballots, with 97% of participants pulling the lever to torpedo the accord, a move that temporarily thwarted flight attendants’ dispossession, but left strikers without a concrete plan to return to the skies.<sup>196</sup>

### ***The Struggle for Authority in the Flight Attendant Workplace***

With Frankovich’s back to work order came neither an end to the conflict between IFFA and TWA or an institutionalization of Icahn’s push for unilateral managerial authority. Instead, as 1986 bled into 1987, debate intensified over the future of flight attending’s structure, governance, and remuneration. Icahn, of course, moved to use the apparent defeat of flight attendants on the picket line to make family values economics a permanent fixture of the industry. Before IFFA had made any indication that they were considering abandoning their pickets, Icahn filed a motion in the Federal District Court for the Western District of Missouri on April 19<sup>th</sup> to abrogate IFFA’s “union security clause.” Such clauses are the foundation of modern collective bargaining agreements, as they legally compel companies to recognize the existence of unions, to settle political and economic differences with employees in formal talks at the negotiating table, and

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<sup>195</sup> IFFA, “Summary of TWA’s New Demands,” 26 May 1986, 1-15.

<sup>196</sup> IFFA Negotiating Committee, “IFFAGram,” 26 May 1986, 1.



to make everyone in a given job classification eligible for the benefits of contractual accords. Absent IFFA's security clause, Icahn would presumably be exempt from requirements to re-employ flight attendants who worked for TWA prior to March 7<sup>th</sup>, allowing Icahn to swap out a politicized, mobilized population for a non-union mix of "18-day wonders," picket crossovers, and post-strike new hires. The broader anti-union movement of the 1980s jumped at the chance to use Icahn's move against IFFA to take on labor in a heavily unionized industry where the closed shop had been standard for five decades. Thus the National Right to Work Committee, a conservative think tank focused on eradicating compulsory union membership, covered many of Icahn's legal costs for the Missouri case.<sup>197</sup>

Never conflict averse, IFFA counter-sued, arguing that Icahn had shirked his legal responsibility to bargain in good faith by baiting a strike designed to confiscate the careers of Frankovich and her peers. Reaffirming their commitment to self-determination in the workplace, and to company funding for the spectrum of dependencies in which they lived, flight attendants sought immediate, court-ordered relief from the lockout. To defend and the political economic paradigm that they had worked to build for decades, flight attendants insisted on the immediate recall of every striking IFFA member to active status, and the termination of all "18-day wonders" that Icahn leveraged to break the strike.

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<sup>197</sup> For a summary of Icahn's legal campaign and IFFA's defense against it, see: "IFFA's Strike-Related Legal Action," Off the Line, October 1986, 1-3.

While the three-year legal battle between IFFA and Icahn points to the immense challenges facing 1980s dissidents like the TWA flight attendants, its resolution reveals that the family values economy was neither inevitable nor interminable. Of course it seemed like austerity and dispossession were the only innovations of the age, with deunionization, low-wage service work, and racially motivated welfare cutbacks emerging as policymakers' primary response to the 1973 and 1982 recessions. Nevertheless, critics of the family values economy in the airline industry still got traction. Flight attendants carried their case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which eventually upheld an Appellate Court decision that, though Icahn may have believed he was leading the industry into a brave new world, the status quo ultimately prevails in airline labor relations. The court argued:

While we take judicial notice that labor relations in the airline industry have entered a different era, one of strife and turmoil resulting from deregulation and takeovers by "corporate raiders," the underlying statute and the contract language that was written in a manner consistent with the RLA still requires a construction which emphasizes continuity in existing relationships between management and labor, except where either side has requested a change.<sup>198</sup>

For the appellate judges, times had changed, but the past still weighed on the future. Citing a landmark 1966 case that resulted from a labor dispute on the Florida East Coast Railway, the court sided with flight attendants to argue that Icahn could only modify the sections of the IFFA contract that TWA originally sought to change at the opening of bargaining in 1984. So while Icahn could

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<sup>198</sup> *Trans World Airlines v. the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants*, 86-1998, United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit 7.

decrease flight attendants' pay, he would have to continue to negotiate with IFFA and honor the contract's basic framework. And though Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's sharply worded Supreme Court decision defied IFFA's insistence that all full-term strikers deserved the immediate right of return to TWA, the decision denied Icahn any opportunity to stage a permanent lockout, guaranteeing strikers first dibs on new flight attendant jobs created at the airline, and seniority credit once they occupied those jobs.<sup>199</sup> This meant that every original TWA flight attendant would be senior to every strikebreaker, giving veteran flight attendants first dibs on higher paying international flying, and allowing strikers to preference flying with friends rather than with picket crossovers and "18-day wonders" who had tried to take their jobs. So, though the pay, benefits, and work rules of the skeletal flight attendant contract forfeited most of the gains that flight attendants had made in 1978 and 1983, the political foundations of TWA flight attendant workplace activism remained sturdy.

Management's failure to unilaterally implement the family values economy explicitly animated much of the debate surrounding the final strikers' return to work at TWA in the late summer and fall of 1989. "We're BA-A-A-A-ACK" roared a brontosaurus on the cover of IFFA's August newsletter.<sup>200</sup> Hand-drawn and goofily resembling the star of PBS's subsequent *Barney* series, the cartoon spoofed management's dismissal of returning strikers as both monstrously

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<sup>199</sup> *Trans World Airlines, Inc. v. The Independent Federation of Flight Attendants*, 87-548, The Supreme Court of the United States, 489 U.S. 426; 109 S. Ct. 1225; 103 L. Ed. 2d 456; 1989 U.S. LEXIS 1197; 57 U.S.L.W. 4283; 110 Lab. Cas. (CCH) P10,946; 130 L.R.R.M. 2657, Argued 07 Nov. 1988, Decided 28 Feb. 1989, 3-4.

<sup>200</sup> Untitled cover photomontage, *Off the Line* Fall 1989: 1.

uppity and as ancient, anachronistic dinosaurs who had won an undeserved second lease on life from the Supreme Court. With their return came an economy and politics that, in Icahn's cohort's appraisal, was supposed to have vanished with the rise of the family values paradigm. Perhaps no public commentary more concisely summarized management's sour grapes attitude at the fizzling of the TWA lockout than a column by Gary Neuharth, the outgoing CEO of Gannett Communications, in his widest-circulating newspaper *The USA Today* in July of 1989. Neuharth editorialized:

When I retired as chairman of Gannett in April 1, I took my first domestic commercial airline flight in 19 years...Most of the young, attractive, enthusiastic flight attendants have been replaced by aging women who are tired of doing their jobs or by flighty young men who have trouble balancing a cup of coffee or tea. Its discrimination to deny pretty young females a chance of glamorous entry-level jobs in the air and to deny passengers the peppy playfulness of their company to ease cabin pressure.<sup>201</sup>

Neuharth's initial premise is even more perplexing than his broader analysis, as the audience is left wondering if the CEO had *ever* travelled in two decades, or whether he commuted exclusively by private jet. And the timing of the rip on flight attendants was utterly bizarre, as only nine days earlier, a United flight attendant crew had been hailed heroes for saving the lives of 150 passengers on a DC-10 that dove into an Iowa cornfield, bounced three times on its nose, and cartwheeled into a fireball, a crash that cost one flight attendant her life. But despite its tastelessness, Neuharth's analysis reflects a common thread in public attacks on flight attendants during the airline industry's upheaval in the late

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<sup>201</sup> Excerpt of Neuharth's comments from: "USA Yesterday: Columnist Disputes Remarks by Publisher from the Dark Ages," Off the Line fall 1989, 6.

1980s. For flight attendants' critics, the vulgar complex of bitchiness and fagginess of their enduringly unionized and politicized workplace was the cause of the industry's problems in the 1980s. Indeed it was sagging breasts and limp wrists, rather than failure of old-line players to build a critical mass in a newly liberalized industry that really made the business model of legacy airlines like TWA unsustainable. Joining peers like Icahn, Neuharth offers austerity and heteronormativity as interwoven solutions to the airlines' problems, solutions represented in a flight attendant of the future who is young, demure, and low-paid. Staunch women and effeminate, servile, yet equally staunch men making good wages, entitled to good work rules, and awaiting good retirement benefits were, for management's most outspoken innovators, the root of the airline industry's enduring instability in the late 1980s.

***The Brightest Bulb in the Portfolio: New Risks as the Salvation of TWA***

Sympathetic to laments like Neuharth's, Icahn offered a clearly articulated plan to solve the problem he named in *The USA Today*. Management promised to stabilize the industry by taking new and even greater risks with the financial tools becoming available in a deregulated marketplace, tools that would deepen executives' control over their firms. First and foremost, Icahn had announced his intent to fully privatize TWA on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1987. With a stroke of a pen, TWA would become Icahn's personal possession, a precious trophy over which the financier would have complete control. To fund the privatization, TWA would spend \$1.2 billion to purchase all outstanding company stock, including Icahn's

73% stake, at \$40 per share. The deal would yield Icahn \$440 million in cash – which he justified as payback for the bath he took on the bidding war with Lorenzo in 1985 – and 90% of the new TWA’s stock. Like a home mortgage refinancing, TWA was *both* the buyer and the seller in the deal, but Icahn was the primary beneficiary as the airline’s value was unlocked. Investors who were forced to become Icahn’s business partners in the original LBO stock swap also made a healthy profit, selling shares printed at \$24.50 for \$40 just eighteen months later. The parties cashing in on TWA’s privatization claimed the deal was fair and square, simple compensation for aiding Icahn in his campaign to “save” TWA from “out of control” labor costs in 1986, though even the Wall Street Journal was putting such “salvation” in quotation marks by the summer of 1987.<sup>202</sup>

While the transaction looked stunning for Icahn and the 1986 investors, one may have wondered how on earth TWA – which was losing money and had a negative net worth – could afford to drop \$1.2 billion on Icahn’s refinancing plan. The answer, of course, is that TWA could not afford it. But it hatched a plan to do so by securitizing its own debt. Much like the subsequent “sub-prime mortgage crisis” began with speculators profiting from trading bundles of individual homeowners’ debts, Icahn would package \$800 million of TWA debt and sell it to investors looking to make quick cash by playing the odds that the

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<sup>202</sup> Data for Icahn’s 1987 privatization from: William M. Carley and Teri Agins, ‘TWA Proposes \$1.2 Billion Plan to Go Private,’ The Wall Street Journal 23 Jul. 1987, Eastern ed.: 1+.

airline would survive to pay hefty interest rates on that debt.<sup>203</sup> Unfortunately for Icahn, the securitization plan proved so risky that it flopped, as even the most adventurous private investors worried that TWA was too far underwater to cover new interest obligations. After a year of haggling with investment bankers in a search for new funding sources, and after Icahn resorted to forcing TWA to sell a billion more dollars worth of junk bonds that saddled the airline with an even greater debt load, Icahn finally closed the privatization “sale” on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1988.<sup>204</sup>

TWA’s economics were increasingly surreal once the company began to operate as Carl Icahn’s personal airline. On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1989, for example, Icahn raised \$300 million for the airline by selling a portfolio of “light bulb bonds.” Just a hair above junk bond status, the securities were in fact backed up by junk, relying on consumables like light bulbs, toilet paper, and cleaning solvents lying around TWA’s hangars for collateral. Though the light bulb bond plan seemed like a joke to the layman – like asking a friend to invest in the food in your refrigerator – the certificates came with a 16% annual interest obligation, a healthy payoff for investors looking to get into high-risk, high-reward funds. Furthermore, edgy deals like the light bulb bond affair were increasingly mainstream as the 1980s progressed. Indeed while notoriously lowbrow Drexel-Burnham-Lambert orchestrated Icahn and Lorenzo’s 1986 LBOs of TWA and

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<sup>203</sup> Randall Smith, “Icahn’s Plan to take TWA Private Upsets Bond Holders Worried About Mounting Debt,” The Wall Street Journal 26 Aug. 1987, Eastern ed.: 1+.

<sup>204</sup> Paul B. Carroll, “TWA Shareholders Approve Buy-Out Proposed by Icahn,” The Wall Street Journal 08 Sep. 1988, Eastern ed.: 1.

Eastern, the 1989 deal was the brainchild of the smart kids from the Ivies at Merrill-Lynch, the bluest of the blue chips and an utterly reputable institution. These high-risk transactions – those enabled by the ongoing deregulation of the financial services industry – were not Icahn-driven aberrations, but the bedrock of the Reagan, Clinton, and both Bush Administration’s political economic policy agendas.<sup>205</sup>

In the privatization of TWA, the debt securitization, and the light bulb bond affair, we get a detailed picture of the economic operation of the family values economy, and recognize how the image of the dominant political economy of the 1990s and 2000s differed so dramatically from its substance. The family values economy, after all, is often sold with traditional categories for thinking about the economics of the home: frugality, sobriety, and personal responsibility. By the mid-1980s, policymakers and the press were demonizing welfarism and Keynesianism as domesticity’s self-indulgent and wasteful antitheses, undeserved transfers of cash to entitled union members who scorned hard work, and to irresponsible welfare recipients who chose immediate gratification over asceticism. Family values economics, then, was cast as that very asceticism, forcing people to buckle down, work hard, and re-start the economy with what they were saving.

But Carl Icahn’s TWA would have nothing to do with saving or with investing in the future. TWA absolutely saved money as it broke flight

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<sup>205</sup> Data on light bulb bond affair from: Linda Sandler, “TWA \$300 Million Notes Secured in Part by Light Bulbs,” The Wall Street Journal 02 Jun. 1989, Eastern Ed.: 1.



attendants' strike, spending about \$110 million less per year in 1989 than it would have if the 1983 contract had remained in place.<sup>206</sup> But while its three largest and most successful competitors – Delta, American, and United – each spent over \$1 billion on capital investment in 1989, Icahn spent 1/15<sup>th</sup> of that at TWA, dedicating only \$76 million to new operational technology.<sup>207</sup> Like a timewarp back to the very Meyer administration that Icahn so vehemently critiqued, TWA of 1989 was limping along on an international fleet of 747-100s and L1011s that it had ordered in the mid-1960s. Worsening the retreat it had started in Chicago in 1975, TWA shuttered its Los Angeles and Boston focus cities, and closed its India operations. Infuriating front line employees' enduringly proud of TWA's heritage, Icahn sold the carriers' crown jewel London Heathrow hub to American Airlines in 1991 to help pay down debt obligations, cutting the operational and revenue generating center out of its European network, and giving a devastating leg-up to a huge competitor.

So although TWA was succeeding in the bond brokerage business, the company was failing as an airline by 1990. The airline indeed channeled a river of money out of its union contracts and into the financial services industry. While it saved that \$110 million on flight attendant costs in 1989, it made \$476 million in interest payments on its loans and junk bonds.<sup>208</sup> Thus the family values

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<sup>206</sup> "Summary of TWA's New Demands," 1.

<sup>207</sup> "Oversight of the Department of Transportation's Commercial Air Carrier Financial Fitness Policy, Focusing on the Proposed Privatization of Trans World Airlines," Hearing before the Committee on Public Works and Transportation of the House of Representatives, 29 Sep. 1988. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989. 45.

<sup>208</sup> "Oversight of the DoT's Commercial Air Carrier Fitness Policy" 12.

economy emerges not as a system of frugality, sobriety, and personal responsibility, but as accumulation by dispossession, a mere conduit to route funds out of flight attendants' paychecks and toward Merrill, Drexel, and Carl Icahn himself.

***Conclusion: The Active Defiance of Privatization and Personal Responsibility***

Taking stock of the introduction of TWA flight attendants into the dispossessing circuit of the family values economy, it is easy to insert their journey into a familiar narrative about the 1980s. As a union accustomed to substantive gains at the bargaining table suffered a tactical defeat on the picket line, and as junior strikes spent over three years locked out of their jobs, the TWA flight attendant strike of 1986 seemed to represent another watershed setback for organized labor, and for the feminist and anti-racist movements invested in trade unionism. My hope is that this closer examination of the motivations, goals, and outcomes of 1980s flight attendant activism has shown that the triumph of neoliberalism and deunionization was neither complete nor a foregone conclusion. Quite the opposite, flight attendants – and in many cases their peers in other airline trades – were standing up to the unilateral managerial authority and austerity that were the dual lynchpins of the family values economy. After CEO Richard Ferris, for example, tried to impose a deeply inequitable two-tier wage system that blocked younger union members from enjoying their older peers' earlier gains, pilots, machinists, and flight attendants went on a coalition strike

against United Airlines in May and June of 1985.<sup>209</sup> Ferris attempted to keep United flying with a mix of picket crossovers and new-hire replacements, but tight solidarity within and across the machine shop, the cabin, and the cockpit hobbled the airline. About facing and pursuing détente, management called union leaders back to the table, eventually backing off the harshest elements of the two-tier system and negotiating a back to work agreement for immediate return of all strikers.<sup>210</sup>

Ground and flight crews at Eastern Airlines also staged a coalition strike against concessions, walking off the job in March of 1989 after Frank Lorenzo staged an LBO that aimed to make Eastern the anchor of a low-cost, non-union airline empire. Lorenzo eventually rebuilt the airline with permanent replacements, but chronic operational irregularities resulting from an overstressed, undertrained work force, as well as an enormous load of junk bond debt, precipitated the collapse of Eastern in January of 1991. Though everyone at the once-proud airline lost their jobs, Lorenzo also lost his discount empire, banished from the airline industry by an act of Congress after flimflaming employees, creditors, and destination communities in Eastern and Continental's bankruptcies. Thus, although it faced the challenge of a lifetime, the flight attendant activist paradigm – the counterformation to the family values economy aloft – persevered

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<sup>209</sup> “Strike Report: U.S. Airlines Under the Railway Labor Act,” Washington, DC: Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007. 1-2.

<sup>210</sup> Flight attendant participation in the United Airlines strike of 1985 was a center of the personal narratives for many people interviewed for this project, particularly for Terry Sousoures who was a new hire probationary that honored the picket line, and for Kathy Lynch, Jeanne Heier-Donellan, Ed Sanford, and Beth Skrondal, all of who had leadership roles during the strike.

in the 1980s, ultimately proving as steadfast as management's push for a brave new workplace. Indeed I, a graduate of an elite liberal arts college in the roaring economy of the late 1990s, became a flight attendant for United Airlines specifically because of my foremothers and fathers at Eastern, United, TWA, and at many other carriers kept the family values economy at bay and forced the airlines to keep offering the "legacy" benefits that those companies so desperately wanted to ditch.

Though all of these instances of labor unrest transformed the airline industry in the 1980s, I opted to focus on the TWA flight attendant affair because it vividly demonstrated how family was a central political and economic category in all of these debates. Unrest at TWA exposes deindustrialization, deunionization, and neoliberalization not as discrete events, but as practices embedded in the rearrangement of domesticity, heteronormativity, and patriarchy in the 1980s. The academic literature has, so far, absolutely taken up this family affair. But after pathbreaking texts like Janet Jakobsen's, Lisa Duggan's, and Bethany Moreton's, we are most critically aware of how this new way of structuring the economy around family became hegemonic, of how it became common sense. What Chapter 2 has instead shown is what happens when a group of people recognizes the family values economy as nonsense.

So, for example, TWA flight attendants provide an alternate approach to Lisa Duggan's persuasive work on the entrenchment of neoliberal cultural politics in the 1990s. Duggan traces how mainstream LGBT institutions and activists

redirected their bid for equality to uphold and reinforce – rather than contest – broader neoliberal investments in privatization and personal responsibility.<sup>211</sup> Taking the opposite route of the movements Duggan examines, flight attendants indicted privatization and personal responsibility as inadequate and in fact bankrupt ways to organize life at home and at work. Flight attendants instead demanded a state and corporate-funded social safety net under everyone in the workplace. In June of 1986, for example, as they waited for an Appellate Court to intervene in the lockout at TWA, IFFA activists rolled out the “Boycott of Conscience” to scale their struggle up beyond the bargaining table and the airline industry. Demanding the opposite of privatization and personal responsibility, boycott leaders introduced new Labor Protective Provision (LPP) legislation to block unilateral managerial authority by stripping companies of opportunities to use mergers and acquisitions to deny employees seniority and job security.<sup>212</sup> They organized Congressional hearings to step up financial oversight of the industry, creating a paper trail of sworn testimony for events like the Icahn privatization and light bulb bond affair.<sup>213</sup> And they helped individual flight attendants file state level race and sex discrimination lawsuits against Icahn to expose and contest management’s use of historic axes of discrimination to propel the lockout.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. 50.

<sup>212</sup> “LPPs Pass House but Fail in Senate,” *Off the Line* fall 1986, 14.

<sup>213</sup> For a full summary of IFFA’s legislative agenda at the outset of the lockout in the summer of 1986, see: IFFA, “IFFA Congressional Action Plan Summary,” July, 1986, 1-8.

<sup>214</sup> Karen Lantz, Letter to IFFA Members, exact date unknown, June 1986. See also: IFFA Executive Board, “IFFAGram,” 09 Jun. 1986, 1-2.

Though some of IFFA's initiatives during the boycott of conscience never came to fruition – though some including the LPP legislation absolutely did – more important than the nuts and bolts of their agenda was their broader critique of the dispossession of the family values economy. With the boycott of conscience, TWA flight attendants were making a simple yet ambitious claim: that dignity is not negotiable, and that a humane workplace is not a “legacy” of a bygone era, but a right. Frankovich and her peers insisted that flight attendants should never have to bargain for basic racial and gender equity at work, for seniority credit for their years of service, for the right to return to work after strikes, for compensation for forced transfers or layoffs after corporate takeovers, or for a safe work environment. After thirty years of dedicating her body, her skills, and her politics to an airline job, a flight attendant should be guaranteed a dignified workplace, job security, and a stable retirement, material resources that activists insisted were not – and should never be – debatable.

As the boycott of conscience gave way to the final return of all TWA flight attendants to the skies in 1989, the family values economy failed to achieve hegemony even if many of its economic foundations were institutionalized. But the apparent stalemate between flight attendants and the airlines by no means cooled the industry's discontent. My analysis, then, turns to the transformation of tensions over the family values economy in the 1990s. During that decade's unprecedented economic boom, a new cohort of flight attendants would join the industry who were more diverse in terms of race, linguistic background, age, and

sexual and gender identity than ever before. Though these new positionalities would change the way flight attendants thought about the intersection between family and value, it certainly meant that the discourses and practices of traditional family were less likely than ever to get traction among flight attendants even as they peaked in cultural, political, and economic significance. Chapter 3, then, turns to flight attendants new politicization of family in a bid to re-charge the movement after the difficult days of the go-go 80s.

## CHAPTER 3

### **UNITED AIRLINES IS FOR LOVERS?: Flight Attendants and the Political Economy of Domesticity in the 1990s**

Beth Skrondal left Haight-Ashbury with the passing of the summer of love. Boarding a DC-8 routed from the Golden Gate to the Everglades, Skrondal went to work as a Miami-based stewardess for National Airlines in the twilight of the 1960s. Social expectations – and airline employment policies – proscribed a short stint aloft for Skrondal; a couple of years of jet-setting and socializing before settling down with a businessman or a pilot she met on the job. But Skrondal joined a growing number of women bucking these trends. Rather than marrying or retiring as her 30s approached, Skrondal ran a successful campaign for president of her Transport Workers Union local in 1973. Though a young woman union president was a rarity in the notoriously conservative craft unionism of the transport industry, and equally unusual in the region with the lowest union density in the United States, Skrondal joined a long tradition of working women who organized their lives around trade unionism: the Jewish and Mexican women of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union in the 1910s and 20s, the labor feminists of the waitresses' union like Myra Wolfgang, and the cross-racial women's solidarities of public employee and clerical workers' unions during and after the New Social Movements. Nevertheless, Skrondal stopped to explain her social location as I interviewed her about her 35 year career as a flight attendant



and activist – as if it wouldn't be legible. “My little thing has always been single people. No ‘rights’ are ever discussed for single people.”<sup>215</sup>

Though Skrondal's identification as single could be expected – 51% percent of her peers used the category to describe their marital status in a 2003 Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) survey<sup>216</sup> – her inclination to explain and account for her non-partnered life is understandable not only because “single” has been less likely to be politicized as an identity category than “gay,” “lesbian,” or “woman” have, but also because Skrondal had made national headlines a decade earlier leading a campaign for the rights of *coupled* airline employees. As the San Francisco communications chairperson for AFA during the union's 1997 contract standoff with United, Skrondal was instrumental in building a coalition with LGBT activists also locked in a protracted battle with the airline. That February, United sued the City of San Francisco in an effort to overturn a local gay rights ordinance requiring companies to provide equal benefits to all employees regardless of sexual orientation. The 1996 law forced organizations like United to provide the same economic resources to gay couples – and unmarried straight partners – as they did for people who were legally married.

The ensuing domestic partner benefits brouhaha stirred up by LGBT activists and United employees garnered public sympathy and attention dwarfing the earlier, stand-alone phase of the flight attendant contract dispute. And the

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<sup>215</sup> Narrative derived from: Elizabeth Skrondal, personal interview, 18 March 2005.

<sup>216</sup> Association of Flight Attendants Employee Assistance Program, Selected Results from a Survey of Flight Attendants' Post 9/11 Views About Their Jobs and Careers. Washington DC, Association of Flight Attendants, 2003.

eventual resolution brought robust material benefits for all participants in the alliance: a new, industry leading contract for AFA members, and full bereavement, medical, and travel benefits for lesbian and gay couples at United. Partner benefits activists hailed United's August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999 capitulation to their demands as a victory for gay rights, locking in full economic citizenship for the airline industry's expansive LGBT population. But as they savored a rare labor victory in an age where accumulation by dispossession seemed all but uncontestable, Beth Skronidal and many of her peers remained decidedly out of step with the political moment. As they faced down the company on domestic partnership, most flight attendants had never centered their lives on domesticity or partnership. Thus flight attendants like Skronidal were ineligible to receive the benefits that their own campaign had won. Just as it seemed justice had prevailed – delivering new resources to a broader cross section of “working families” – flight attendants raised a new set of uncertainties about how and why family, commitment, and dependency should be politicized in the workplace and beyond.

Chapter 3 takes up the social location of Beth Skronidal and so many of her single flight attendant colleagues to re-think debates over the value of family in the 1990s. Focusing on the LGBT-labor alliance for domestic partner benefits in San Francisco, I grapple with how a campaign for economic justice for who we often call “alternative families” both contested and abetted the entrenchment of the family values economy. While political commentators and organizers widely differentiated so-called “social conservatives” from “fiscal conservatives” in the

1990s and 2000s,<sup>217</sup> I have argued that the U.S. economy was reorganized around traditional family values after 1970. A new generation of patriarchs for the post-union era, corporate executives claimed unilateral managerial authority over their workforces to implement a host of austerity measures, creating new jobs with lower pay, longer hours, and few benefits. Domestic relationships became mechanisms for employees to mitigate this austerity, with mothers, fathers, and children working multiple low-wage service jobs and pooling their resources in the household. Flight attendant activists like Beth Skrondal came of age fighting both the heteropatriarchal and dispossessing foundations of the family values economy, demanding material resources from companies to support their often non-traditional personal lives.

When United Airlines sued the City of San Francisco, it seemed like a gratuitous extension of family values dogma, requiring that families be heterosexual, nuclear, and legally married if they wanted any support from companies. The airline's position thus raised the immediate ire of the mainstream LGBT rights movement. Turning away from 1970s feminist and civil rights agendas that used state regulation to challenge companies' discriminatory

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<sup>217</sup> Social conservatism as a category abstracted from economics was often invoked to make anti-working class arguments about the ignorance of people voting "against their economic self interest" because of their positions on guns, abortion, and homosexuality. Though I argue in this dissertation that the family values economy absolutely works against lower-income peoples' economic self interest, I concur with scholars like Bethany Moreton who, in documenting the growing economic work that "family did" in the 1990s, why so many white working class people would see a vote for family values as a vote FOR their economic self interest. This text, then, works against the veiled false consciousness argument in Thomas Frank's later work even as concurs with his critique of upward redistribution. See: Thomas Frank, What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives won the Heart of America. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004.

practices, gay activists used voluntarist approaches to gain new rights at work in the 1990s, framing the gay community as a profitable niche market and a talented pool of prospective employees that could help companies up their profit margins. When United openly flouted this voluntarist diversity agenda, gay activists teamed up with flight attendants engaged in their own union struggle against United. By making a company wedded to selling the sophistication and cosmopolitanism of the 1990s global economic boom seem homophobic, retrograde, and mean, flight attendants and their allies not only won new resources for unmarried couples, but scored a rare activist advance for a front line workforce reeling from two decades of family values economy cutbacks.

As they celebrated the success of their campaign against United in August 1999, I propose that flight attendants taught their mainstream LGBT activist peers something new about political economy. While national LGBT institutions had challenged companies' inequitable politicization of traditional family for decades, they failed to adequately grasp that the family values economy was simultaneously a project of heteropatriarchy *and* austerity. When United sued to block the San Francisco ordinance, after all, it argued not that gays were good or bad, but that gay activists were interfering with its right to lower its operating costs, a right that all companies were claiming in the family values era. Flight attendants argued that while "alternative families" are a great thing, they are only meaningful or possible when supported by living wages and robust benefits, material resources that are compromised when companies win the right to

unchallenged cost discipline. Thus, any LGBT workplace movement must broadly challenge the managerial authority and austerity that upheld the family values economy.

As the San Francisco campaign stood up to carriers' push to cheapen airline labor, flight attendants illustrate that advocacy for alternative families has much broader horizons than private benefits for monogamous couples. Indeed as they fought for domestic partner benefits, most flight attendants had never been domesticated. Both Skrondal and her partner benefits campaign co-chair Stan Kiino, after all, had lived their adult lives single and childless, spending their time with friends, relatives, fellow activists, and with coworkers on intercontinental trips that carried them away from home for days or weeks at a time. But far from ironic, these single peoples' leadership of a movement for lovers should have been expected, as both dedicated their careers to challenging compulsory heteropatriarchy and compulsory austerity in the airline industry. Chapter 3, then, follows their lead, illuminating how confronting a company on social issues is inevitably embedded in a struggle for a fairer economy.

### ***Who's in Charge at the Airlines in the 1990s?***

With the economic boom of the 1990s, the pressure that had plagued the U.S. airline industry since the run-up to deregulation in the 1970s seemed to have ebbed. Though traffic fell off a cliff during the first Gulf War, it quickly rebounded as the economy stabilized in 1992. And while 1980s financiers like Carl Icahn and Frank Lorenzo had tried to reorganize the industry around the low-

cost, non-union paradigm of the family values economy, the odds ultimately beat these executives at their risk-intensive strategy. By 1991, their anchor carriers – TWA, Continental, and Eastern – were either out of business, or inconsequential players hobbled by labor unrest, miserable customer service, and weak networks. Meanwhile, giants United, American, and Delta, none of which had been forced through and LBO and attendant cost slashing, were solidly established as the industry’s trend-setters.

Though their success was undeniable, the new powerhouses operated on uneven terrain in the 1990s. On one hand they amassed unprecedented economic power, turning the new mobility required by the global technology boom into profit. United, for example, had grown into the world’s largest airline by 1991, linking dot-com epicenters like the San Francisco Bay Area and Northern Virginia to financial markets in Tokyo, New York, and London, and to emerging “global cities” like Shanghai, Delhi, and Sao Paulo. By mid-decade, United’s balance sheet showed that the internet revolution had stimulated, rather than eroded, demand for face to face communication via transoceanic air travel. The carrier outperformed a roaring market, with shares appreciating 270% between 1994 and 1997 and logging a \$1.3 billion profit in 1997 alone, an impressive showing an industry known for razor-thin margins.<sup>218</sup> On the other hand, intensifying global competition ratcheted up economic pressure on even the most successful firms. Growing trade with the Global South amidst international

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<sup>218</sup> James Ott, “United Remakes Itself for Global Competition,” Aviation Week and Space Technology 147.1 (07 Jul. 1997) 54.

liberalization – loosening once-staunch protectionism of fortresses like Tokyo-Narita and London-Heathrow – allowed Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific, Air India, and Emirates to morph from regional players into ironclad competitors. Meanwhile, two decades of deregulation in North America left low-cost or non-union upstarts like PeoplExpress, Southwest, and jetBlue able to peg prevailing prices on their much lower cost structures.

So even while United was Wall Street’s darling in the short term, Joseph Schumpeter’s reflections on “creative destruction” haunted its managers, as the future of the airline industry seemed staked on crushing the old, Fordist/Keynesian way of doing business that enabled United’s rise to power.<sup>219</sup> Thus, United and its peers aggressively sought austerity measures from unionized employees at the negotiating table, struggling to unload labor overhead in a bid for survival in an uncertain future. Regardless of whether or not airlines and other companies were making money – and even if they showed robust profits, improving cash position, and growing market share – employers adamantly demanded concessions from labor. Irrespective of the numbers on an airline’s balance sheet, managers insisted that austerity was the only route to the future, making accumulation by dispossession the order of the day in the busts – and unprecedented booms – of the deregulated information age.

This particularity of 1990s political economy set up a searing new conflict between flight attendants and their employers. Building upon the commitments

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<sup>219</sup> See: Joseph A. Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1976. 81-86.

that galvanized the movement in the 1970s, flight attendants refused to acquiesce to the heteropatriarchal or dispossessing foundations of the family values economy. Activists – especially those at juggernauts United and American – insisted that while their employers and the global economy had taken off, flight attendant remuneration was marooned in 1983. And despite economists’ millenarian trumpeting that a “new” economy could experience robust growth with little inflation, flight attendants were struggling to cope with a rapidly ascending cost of living in the global cities in which crews were based: New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, and Tokyo.<sup>220</sup> So even at carriers like United and American where management had failed to get away with gutting contracts in the 1980s, flight attendants’ lives were becoming more like those working in the service trades at the center of the family values economy, as people picked up overtime trips and took second jobs to cover rising rents. Flight attendants, then, insisted that this creeping conversion to the family values economy was unacceptable. They argued that every flight attendant should be able to comfortably support her or himself and whoever he or she called family on one job without taking on stressful and dangerous overtime flying.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> See chapter 2 for analysis of the transformation of U.S. cities into “global cities” in the 1970s, especially my references to: Saskia Sassen, “Economic Restructuring in the American City,” *Annual Reviews of Sociology* 16 (1990): 465-490.

<sup>221</sup> With the rise of low-cost carriers like jetBlue, overtime flying became a required practice for flight attendant crews. While the AFA contract at United, for example, strictly limited flight attendants to 85 hours of flight time per month, jetBlue crews could fly as much as they wanted, as long as they complied with FAA rest requirements. Some crews flew 120 or more hours per month. The issue of fatigue resulting from overtime became a national issue in the fall of 1998 when an American Airlines MD-80 jet crashed in a thunderstorm in Little Rock, Arkansas. The pilot crew executed the storm avoidance missed approach procedure incorrectly. Since they had been on duty for 13 hours and 40 minutes at the time of the crash – 50 minutes short of their



Management was equally committed to its own critique of flight attendant labor in the 1990s. Executives insisted that after the union advances of the 1970s, flight attendant labor was deeply overvalued, and that flight attendants had come away with a significant misunderstanding of who was in charge in the airline workplace. Companies, management insisted, were not a society, and absolutely not a democratic one at that. While of subset of management literature and the new economy media were celebrating the hip, free-spirited, anti-hierarchical tech workplace,<sup>222</sup> big, labor intensive companies from United Airlines to Safeway grocery stores to Wal-Mart reaffirmed their commitment to managerial authority. As union density plummeted across industries, the CEO was once again an unchallenged patriarch, not the prime minister of a corporate republic. Flight attendants, it seemed to management, had failed to get this message. Thus, corporate leaders intervened in flight attendant labor relations to straighten out the misunderstanding, reaffirming their commitment to unilateral authority and austerity.

Nowhere was management's commitment more vividly demonstrated than in the American Airlines flight attendant strike of Thanksgiving, 1993. American's fortunes seemed boundless as the economy recovered that fall. The carrier cashed in on the junk-bond induced debt crises facing several of its formerly vigorous competitors. To secure additional cash to finance the lockout

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absolute contractual maximum – experts argued that fatigue precipitated their failure to take more decisive action when the weather deteriorated.

<sup>222</sup> For analysis of the changing power relationships inside 1990s tech firms, see Thomas Frank's cogent critiques of the new management literature, and especially of *Wired* magazine, in the mid-1990s editions of *The Baffler* magazine.

of all unionized employees at Eastern Airlines, for example, Frank Lorenzo sold that carrier's lucrative Latin American division to American in 1990. The new purchase buttressed American's already strong Caribbean network, gave it a dominant position along the West coast of South America, and secured precious access to the Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires megalopolises. During the same tumultuous months, Carl Icahn made a series of deals to transfer TWA's treaty-protected and highly profitable London Heathrow hub to American, allowing the company to enhance its Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Boston, and Miami operations with access to the most important overseas financial market.

While the new possessions would immediately widen American's profit margins, top executives remained adamant that improving performance provided no occasion to temper commitments to austerity programs. Instead, the carrier vigorously asserted its intention to further lower flight attendant overhead. Activists from the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA), the independent union that American flight attendants founded alongside similar organizations at Pan Am and TWA in 1977, would not let the contradiction stand. Yet rather than shaping their efforts around the mass mobilization model of the 1980s – most evident in Victoria Frankovich's campaign at TWA in 1986 or Charlie Bryan's at Eastern in 1989 – American flight attendants unveiled a narrow, precise strategy they hoped would account for the stinging challenges of the family values economy. First, flight attendants timed the planned strike for

maximum operational and financial impact, choosing Thanksgiving weekend, the busiest of the year in the airlines.<sup>223</sup> Second, APFA leaders announced in advance that they would limit the strike to 10 days, the time they discovered it would take American to train the strikebreakers who had proven highly damaging to peers' efforts at Continental, TWA, and Eastern in the 1980s.<sup>224</sup> Finally – and most importantly – in an unprecedented inversion of traditional labor solidarity, flight attendants asked unionized pilots to cross their picket lines and go to work during the strike. Flight attendants knew that if their highly paid, mostly male colleagues reported for duty during the strike that American would be legally obligated to pay them – even if the walkout left aircraft idle. The pilot-crossover strategy effectively doubled the potential economic impact of the strike, as American would have to refund passengers' tickets as flights were cancelled while continuing to meet its costly pilot payroll. Thus, flight attendants demonstrated the political and operational value of feminized labor by leveraging the economic value of men's work. Union leaders explicitly narrated this connection in the media campaign preceding the strike. At a Dallas news conference on the strike's second day, APFA President Denise Hedges announced:

APFA asks APA pilots NOT to cast ballots to declare a sympathy strike with flight attendants. This is our strike. In the past two days, we've proven that we're up to the task and we'd like history to record that flight attendants have the solidarity and the courage to stand up for themselves and win....with just a little help from our friends.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, Letter to the Membership, 09 Nov. 1993.

<sup>224</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, "APFA Hotline," 19 Nov. 1993.

<sup>225</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, "Picket Points," 20 Nov. 1993.

For Hedges and her coworkers, solidarity meant not mass mobilization of all unionized workers, but allowing flight attendants a moment in the sun to openly challenge the forced flexibilization of their labor that came with the conversion to the family values economy.

As they walked off the job and reported to the picket line at 6am central standard time on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1993, flight attendants' strategy immediately paid off. Less than twelve hours after strike began, President Clinton personally telephoned Hedges asking her to negotiate a strike settlement deal via White House Senior Advisor Bruce Lindsey. Since the Railway Labor Act gave the President of the United States the right to block a strike and force a settlement (see Chapter 1), flight attendants scrambled to channel the President's power to their advantage by requiring American to agree to binding arbitration for the issues that remained log-jammed at the bargaining table.<sup>226</sup> Binding arbitration would protect American flight attendants from being subjected to a lockout as TWA flight attendants were in 1986, yet would allow them the opportunity to force management to move on at least some of the issues it had previously refused to discuss. Hedges called Lindsey and promised that flight attendants would call off the strike if management would allow a neutral referee to settle all contractual items remaining in dispute. Lindsey told APFA leaders to turn on the TV. If President Clinton announced a strike settlement during his November 22<sup>nd</sup> press

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<sup>226</sup> See: Norman Mineta and James Oberstar, Letter to the National Mediation Board, 21 Nov. 1993.

conference with the President of the Philippines, flight attendants should immediately return to work and prepare for an arbitrated settlement.<sup>227</sup>

Clinton did just as Lindsey promised, and flight attendants reported to their aircraft after five days on the picket line. But no sooner had the President announced the accord than American Airlines CEO Robert Crandall made an acrid public statement claiming that the deal would destroy the airline's global competitiveness. "Those who have created this arbitrated solution have no commitment to the long-term profitability of the company," Crandall told reporters. "The inevitable inclination of arbitrators is to split the difference, which could result in a contract that is simply untenable in the long term."<sup>228</sup> Furious that government-supervised arbitration would explicitly interrupt management's push for unilateralism, American managers intervened to scuttle the arbitration process. Throwing egg in both Clinton and flight attendants' faces, management opened the arbitration with a deeply concessionary proposal on 56 contractual items – a number far exceeding the smaller list of disputed items that were supposed to be the subject of the meetings.<sup>229</sup> Ultimately returning negotiations to square one after the Clinton compromise had stripped flight attendants of the right to strike, American made it appear that Clinton and Lindsey had sold flight attendants out. Moreover, while flight attendants worked under management imposed wage and benefit give-backs, the arbitration dragged on for two years, guaranteeing that flight attendants would continue to work under

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<sup>227</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, Letter to the Membership, 08 Jul. 1994.

<sup>228</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, 08 Jul. 1994.

<sup>229</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, "Skyword," 01 Apr. 1994.

highly outdated work and compensation programs until at least 1995, locking in the docility and flexibility that APFA planned the strike to contest.<sup>230</sup>

The tepid and long overdue resolution of the American Airlines thanksgiving strike exposes why the workplace was so frustrating for flight attendants in the 1990s. The airlines were unfailingly committed to forcing flight attendant labor into the box of the family values economy, making it as much like working at Wal-Mart or Pizza Hut or the Gap as possible. Management, of course, never seemed to be able to make their vision a reality. Though they clearly embarrassed Clinton and APFA with their bait and switch response to the Lindsey overture, it was *still* much more desirable to be a flight attendant for American Airlines in 1995 than it was to work the checkout lanes in a big box. Nevertheless, companies like American had made collective bargaining a task more arduous and disappointing than it had ever been.

Those disappointments help contextualize United flight attendants' extreme displeasure with their own contract negotiations. Those talks, which began in the fall of 1995 in advance of a contractual amendable date of February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1996, put negotiators in a difficult position. Crews worked a factory-fresh fleet of 44 Boeing 747-400s, the largest, highest flying, and fastest commercial airliner in the world, the globe's largest fleet of these jumbo jets save for British Airways and Singapore Airlines. New route announcements – Seattle-Tokyo, Chicago-Buenos Aires, Los Angeles-Paris – seemed all but mundane as United scrambled to accommodate tech boom demand. But as AFA leaders went to the

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<sup>230</sup> For arbitration timeline see: Association of Professional Flight Attendants, 08 Jul. 1994.

bargaining table, talks yielded wages a decade out of date in a moment when skyrocketing dot-com boom salaries made headlines on the 24-hour cable programs streaming in the concourses and crew lounges where flight attendants worked.

After six months of slow going bargaining, AFA negotiators finally announced a deal with United on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1996. The accord exchanged modest wage increases for enhanced staffing flexibility that would have allowed United to crew international flights with flight attendants domiciled overseas. Well aware that scheduling and seniority concessions in a moment of vigorous airline profitability would be a bitter pill for those on the front lines, the AFA bargaining committee headed up by President Kevin Lum bluntly told flight attendants that the 1990s would have to be an age of reduced expectations. As he encouraged them to ratify the tentative agreement, Lum told the membership, “While in all honesty, it is not all we had hoped to achieve, this tentative agreement does address your core concerns.” Lum continued, asking the membership, “Am I willing to fight for more, given all of the costs and risks?”<sup>231</sup> Lum, a 20-year veteran flight attendant, a Chinese American gay man, and a sharp negotiator versed in the economics of the airline industry, was well aware that the entrenchment and normalization of accumulation by dispossession in the 1990s presented him with daunting odds at the bargaining table.

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<sup>231</sup> Association of Flight Attendants Master Executive Council and Negotiating Committee, Letter to the membership, 08 Feb. 1996.

Though Lum's words were straightforward and sober, many on the front lines dismissed his analysis as arrogant, patronizing, and ignorant of flight attendants' longstanding success in overcoming the cheapening and speedup of their labor. Rank and file activists in a number of crew bases began to openly organize against Lum's leadership team, circulating a series of underground newspapers satirizing AFA's ineptitude for failing to make any substantive advances in a age of record airline profitability, and distributing pamphlets urging Lum's ouster in a decertification election much like those at American, Pan Am, and TWA during the upheaval of the 1970s.<sup>232</sup> Dissent was sufficiently widespread to sabotage Lum's deal with management, with a majority of front line flight attendants voting against the accord in a ratification referendum and sending the negotiating committee back to the bargaining table with United.<sup>233</sup> But rather than a new imperative for a more generous new contract for flight attendants, the failed vote left negotiations dead in the water for an entire year, with little substantive progress toward a new settlement toward a settlement despite a slew of gangbusters earnings announcements from United.

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<sup>232</sup> As negotiations dragged on through 1996 and into 1997, activists began to circulate a series of dissident pamphlets, flyers, and newspapers urging a more aggressive AFA stance in negotiations. In January of 1997, an underground newspaper, *The IBS*, began to appear in crew lounges, briefing rooms, and in the galleys of United's jets. The paper took its title from the "inflight briefing sheet" or "IBS," the summary of technical data – from passenger loads to crew compliment to meal service specifications – that United prepared for the flight attendants on every departure. Passing off hyperbolized political satire as data, and packaging it as the actual IBS for a trip, *The IBS* humorously undermined the "official story" of the labor dispute emanating from United and AFA communications mechanisms while enabling the clandestine distribution of an alternative narrative. Given the newspaper's title, pursers could literally announce "additional copies of the IBS await you aboard the aircraft" without arousing the ire of managers or union officers. See, for example: "Cure Company Co-Dependency: Use the Nico-Dumb Patch," *The IBS* 3.2 (Mar/Apr 1997) 4.

<sup>233</sup> Association of Flight Attendants United Master Executive Council Negotiating Committee, Letter to the membership, 09 Apr. 1996.



### *Family Values Activism and the Dilemma of “Corporate Equality”*

As activists looked for a new set of ideas and strategies to reinvigorate the contract campaign at United, management ended up giving flight attendants the resources to get AFA out of the quagmire that hobbled it. As it stalled at the bargaining table, the airline headed to the Federal District Court for the Northern District of California aiming to protect its right to continue to tying dependent benefits – like free plane tickets, medical insurance, and pension beneficiary status – to a particularly restrictive definition of family that required heterosexuality, nuclear domesticity, and legal marriage. United’s move reproduced a core principle of the privatizing and welfare constricting reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, which re-framed family benefits not as state entitlements available to all people regardless of marital or employment status, but as privileges for corporations’ productive employees and their families.<sup>234</sup> By offering as narrow – and thus cheap – a definition of family as possible, United would help entrench the era’s growing political investment in traditional family values and in economic austerity measures.

The new dispute over the value of family – which flight attendants would certainly have a lot to say about – literally walked up to union activists in May of 1997. On a spring afternoon, Beth Skronidal and fellow San Francisco-based flight attendant and AFA communications committee co-chair Stan Kiino were

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<sup>234</sup> Janet Jakobsen traces the relationship between domestic partner benefits and broader privatization of benefits in the post-welfare era in: Janet Jakobsen, “Can Homosexuals End Western Civilization as we Know it? Family Values in a Global Economy” Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV. New York: New York University Press, 2002.

painting picket signs in the alley behind Skrondal's Pacific Heights apartment, fretting over disappointing turnouts at recent AFA rallies and strategizing for a stronger presence at the next demonstration. In the sea of tag board, paint cans, and stencils, the two barely noticed that Jeff Sheehy, the president of the Harvey Milk Democratic Club, the local LGBT caucus of the Democratic Party, had approached their make shift art studio.<sup>235</sup> He proceeded to ask for their help. Six months earlier, on election day 1996, Sheehy and other local activists scored a notable victory for LGBT workplace rights. After Congress dealt national LGBT institutions a watershed blow by passing the "Defense of Marriage Act" while torpedoing a comprehensive workplace non-discrimination bill for gays and lesbians, Sheehy and his peers convinced the San Francisco City Council to ratify an ordinance requiring all employers doing business with the city to offer "domestic partner benefits" to gay and straight employees regardless of marital status. But in early February, Sheehy's victory was thrown into jeopardy by United's lawsuit, as a victory by the airline would open a legal loophole that any company could use to bypass the ordinance. Sheehy asked Kiino and Skrondal to join him in building a linkage between United flight attendants and gay activists, as both groups were visible targets of United's political, economic, and legal apparatus. Kiino beamed with excitement during our 2005 interview as I asked him about their first back-alley conversation. "Jeff started talking about civil

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<sup>235</sup> Stan Kiino, personal interview, 20 Nov. 2004.

disobedience, saying ‘now remember, the police and mayor are your friends.’ I just stared at him in disbelief as we had never done anything like that before!’<sup>236</sup>

Kiino, Skronal, and AFA took Jeff Sheehy up on his invitation. And though their new relationship brought desperately needed humor, drama, and success to an airline labor movement caving under the weight of its own malaise and inaction, the ensuing campaign was built on strange bedfellows. At first glance, a political alliance between flight attendant unionists and LGBT leaders is utterly unsurprising. The airlines had of been a focal point for the production of queer space for decades, from the male homosocial and homosexual networks of international travel in the 1950s,<sup>237</sup> to lesbian organizing within flight attendant unions in the 1970s, and to flight attendants’ crucial role securing the right to work with HIV/AIDS and to transition on the job in the 1980s and 1990s. And perhaps more importantly, the workplace was the venue where the LGBT rights movements enjoyed its greatest successes in the 1990s. Though the push for marriage rights, military service, and for local non-discrimination protections had faltered against resistance from grassroots and elite right-wing organizing, scores of Fortune 500s had included lesbians and gays in equal employment opportunity (EEO) statements by mid-decade, and were quickly extending “domestic partner benefits” to same-sex couples.

Despite the historical currents pulling activists like Beth Skronal and Jeff Sheehy together, a new set of ideas was organizing the intersection of LGBT and

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<sup>236</sup> Kiino, 20 Nov. 2004.

<sup>237</sup> Phillip Tiemeyer, Manhood Up in the Air: Gender, Sexuality, and Corporate Culture in Twentieth Century America, Diss, University of Texas, Austin, 2007. Austin, TX: UTA, 2007.

workplace mobilization in the 1990s that challenge any assumption that such an alliance would be natural or inevitable. Sociologists Frank Dobbin and John Sutton have argued that much of LGBT activists' success in the corporate arena stemmed from their ability to re-frame LGBT rights and benefits with the logic of profit, rather than of corporate compliance.<sup>238</sup> Instead of demanding that companies adhere to federal or local anti-discrimination law, 1990s LGBT leaders began to argue that "diversity" programs allowed companies to tap new resources in a broader and richer "talent pool." In a shift from regulatory compliance to corporate voluntarism, activists' made the corporation and the free market – rather than the regulatory state – the primary sites of moral agency and authority. In this privatizing move, LGBT institutions framed their constituents not just as dutiful, productive employees, but as loyal consumers who would reward corporate patronage with allegiance to given firms' product lines.

The LGBT movement's intervention at the crossroads of production and consumption was particularly evident in the "Corporate Equality Index," a workplace-focused initiative of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the largest LGBT political action committee and lobbying organization that began in 1995.<sup>239</sup> The index evaluated companies on a host of issues deemed important to LGBT employees: sensitivity training for managers, inclusion of sexuality and gender

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<sup>238</sup> Frank Dobbin and John R. Sutton, "The Strength of a Weak State: The rights revolution and the rise of human resources management divisions," *American Journal of Sociology* 104.2 (1998): 442-445. See also: Lauren B. Edelman, Christopher Uggen, and Howard S. Erlinger, "The Endogeneity of Legal Regulation: Grievance Procedures as Rational Myth," *American Journal of Sociology* 105.2 (1999) 406-454.

<sup>239</sup> Elizabeth Birch, "HRC Corporate Equality Index Coverage: HRC in the News." (Washington, DC: Human Rights Campaign, 1997) <http://www.hrc.org/pressroom/cei%5Fnews.asp>. 04 Dec. 2004.

expression in EEO statements, and domestic partner benefits for same sex couples. Companies with high scores on the index would in turn be included in the HRC's "Fight for Fairness While You Shop" consumer guides, directing LGBT buyers where to procure food, clothing, fuel, and other essentials.<sup>240</sup> With the shopping guides, the HRC made a clear horse-trade. If LGBT people received dignity at work – freedom from harassment, acknowledgement of their partners – companies would enjoy a robust new niche market. Taking the HRC up on the deal, so many companies had upped their equality scores by 1997 that HRC President Elizabeth Birch announced, "The truth is its corporate America that has been the unlikely hero in the movement for equality for gay and lesbian Americans."<sup>241</sup>

Birch's rhetoric on corporate heroism was, of course, fingernails on a chalkboard for flight attendants. Not only were flight attendants exhausted by management's intransigence at the industry's most profitable firms, but Birch's words seemed to contradict everything flight attendants had been saying about political economy for two decades. The working world had certainly changed for flight attendants since 1970, but not in a way that reflected corporate leaders' benevolence or enlightenment. Instead, the Fortune 500 was rebuilding the economy around heteronormativity and austerity. Flight attendants had built a social movement that explicitly contested this process, winning new resources for

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<sup>240</sup> See, for example: "This Holiday, Shop for Equality," [HRC.com](http://www.hrc.com), 2006, Human Rights Campaign, 11 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.hrc.com>>, or: [Buying for Equality 2007](#) (Washington, D.C.: Human Rights Campaign 2006). Statistics used in this pamphlet and methodological information from: [Corporate Equality Index 2006](#) (Washington, D.C.: Human Rights Campaign, 2006) 11-13.

<sup>241</sup> Birch

alternative family dependencies – one of which Birch seemed to be talking about. Such advances helped flight attendants remain a better job than a whole lot of others in the service sector. But, like everyone else in the bottom 95% of the income spectrum, instead of benefiting from corporate heroism, flight attendants were getting used to doing more with less.

While Birch’s observations undoubtedly frustrated flight attendant leaders long subjected to the airlines’ anti-feminism, anti-lesbianism, and anti-unionism, the HRC’s shift from state regulation to corporate voluntarism is nevertheless understandable. I urge us to consider that Birch turned to corporate heroism not simply because she liked to shop – though she certainly may have – but because companies’ authoritarianism provided the very insulation from democracy that LGBT activists desperately needed. Direct democracy – and especially the popular ballot initiative process – had long stung LGBT people with bitter defeats, from Anita Bryant’s referendums to repeal municipal gay rights ordinances in the 1970s to the proliferation of sweeping and widely popular “gay marriage bans” after the mid-1990s. Thus, LGBT leaders learned to avoid the ballot box at all costs, a history that Jeff Sheehy’s cohort acknowledged as they pigeonholed their partner benefits law through the city council rather than take it to the public in a referendum. Since corporations are profoundly anti-democratic, and since they had become even less democratic with the rise of the family values economy and its corresponding commitment to unilateral managerial authority, activists could use corporate infrastructure to lock in health care and termination

protections for LGBT employees while dodging a public hissyfit. And, by winning corporate benefits that rendered LGBT people productive employees, domesticated partners, and loyal consumers, Birch could sell a public image of lesbians and gays that would allow middle class audiences and policymakers to drop the stereotypes they picked up during 1980s sex panics that figured gays as self-indulgent, as oversexed, as AIDS risks, and as pedophiles.<sup>242</sup> Indeed after the landmark 1986 Supreme Court case *Bowers v. Hardwick* reaffirmed the criminalization of consensual intimacy between same-sex couples in private space, Birch fished for a new route to prove that gay is good, even if that meant ditching the ballot box and building alliances with British Petroleum, Chase Manhattan, and United Airlines.

That the corporation had, in some cases, been a safe harbor from popular democracy for LGBT people made it no easier to reconcile the contradiction that Birch's agenda posed for flight attendants. This tension was particularly stark when United launched its first explicitly LGBT-aimed niche marketing campaign in April of 1997. Two months *after* it began its legal campaign against the partner benefits ordinance in San Francisco, the airline ran a series of full-page advertisements in *The Advocate*, the most widely circulated monthly LGBT political and cultural magazine in the U.S. at the time. Framed in the cool grays and blues of Fallon Worldwide's elegant yet decidedly understated "United is Rising" advertising campaign, the image focuses on a glowing orange

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<sup>242</sup> Ryan Patrick Murphy and Alex T. Urquhart, "Sexuality in the Headlines: Intimate Upheavals as Histories of the Twin Cities," *Queer Twin Cities* 36-56.

“stewardess call” button above rows of passenger seats. An androgynous stick figure marks the button, the symbol that replaced the miniskirt-clad, tray-toting stick-ette on Boeing airplanes built prior to 1990. “When there is a need in the community, We’ll be there,” read bold text that set off a list of LGBT charities and service organizations United had funded the previous year.<sup>243</sup> Running alongside articles covering LGBT political mobilization, United’s ad reproduced the HRC’s familiar horse trade: rights in exchange for revenue. Increasingly prominent LGBT marketing firms, especially the widely cited Witeck and Combs group, offered empirical evidence that LGBT consumers – and especially lesbian and gay couples – enjoyed *both* high incomes *and* discriminating tastes, making them a desirable if underappreciated demographic niche. Though the LGBT market was small - \$670 million per year in 2000 when United’s annual ticket sales approached \$22 billion<sup>244</sup> – LGBT patrons could endow United’s product with style and sophistication via what Miranda Joseph has termed “productive consumption,”<sup>245</sup> helping United move high-margin first and business class inventory. But as the advertisements figured LGBT people as rights-bearing citizens and faithful consumers, they recycled worn clichés of gender, sexuality, and labor in the airline industry. Imagining “the community” as a road-warrior businessman who derives political and economic power from his dominant

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<sup>243</sup> For descriptions of the advertisements and reproductions of the images, see: Ted Gideonse, “Flying the Gay-Friendly Skies,” *The Advocate* 794 (14 Sep. 1999).

<sup>244</sup> For the latest estimates on the value of the “gay market” from its most devoted prophets, visit: [www.witeckcombs.com](http://www.witeckcombs.com). See: Bob Witeck and Wesley Combs, *Business Inside Out: Capturing Millions of Brand Loyal Gay Consumers* New York: Kaplan Publishing, 2006.

<sup>245</sup> Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. 40-45.



relationship to feminized flight attendant labor, the ad not only erases flight attendants' enduring contribution to LGBT workplace struggles (see Chapters 1 and 2), but stakes claims for gay rights on timeless assumptions that flight attendants are necessarily the stick-ette stewardesses of yesterday's call buttons: flexible, servile, and voiceless.

United's striking moves in the spring of 1997 – using the HRC's “rights in exchange for revenue” paradigm for its advertising campaigns while suing to withhold rights – demands a closer examination of what, exactly, big companies like United were saying about family in the 1990s. They seemed, after all, to be pushing a definition of family that was both rigid and flexible. We must not forget that the business lobby and the family lobby had allied themselves to get conservative candidates elected, at once demanding a non-union workforce, a deregulated economy, and traditional families that were not queer, not feminist, and not alternative. But as companies aggressively moved to end the family wage system, they seemed to admit that “traditional family” would look a bit different than it did in 1965, requiring not only a breadwinning dad, but a breadwinning mom and breadwinning kids, and requiring that all of those people do a whole lot of domestic and contingent work on the side. And as companies demanded these new domestic lifestyles, they were increasingly likely to sell alternative lifestyles. The real estate, fashion, entertainment, and transport industries were embracing the emerging “lifestyle” market, making artsy downtown singles, fashionistas, childless couples, and a variety of queer positionalities an explicit part of revenue

generating strategies. United merely joined that crowd with its series in *The Advocate*. But companies remained disciplined about controlling costs while they searched for new marketshare. So when any kind of family – especially alternative ones riffing on the feminist, queer, and labor movements – made new claims on the bottom line, they reacted with overwhelming negativity.

### ***Deregulation as the Anti-Gay Agenda of the 1990s***

In case LGBT institutions like the HRC missed flight attendants' constant reiterations, United Airlines' lawsuit against the City of San Francisco reminded everyone that the family values economy rested on austerity – even if companies were willing to wiggle a bit on the meaning of “traditional family.” As United went to court against the City of San Francisco, United used the many of the same anti-regulatory and anti-union arguments it had long used to shore up family values economy to strip gay couples of their bid for health insurance and other workplace resources. United's complaint rested on three primary legal claims, each of which proposed that labor must be low-cost and flexible. First, the airlines argued that the San Francisco domestic partner ordinance violated the dormant Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution. Since the Commerce Clause gives states the right to regulate business only within their boundaries, courts have long recognized a corresponding and inverse – though unwritten – *dormant* logic that prevents states or municipalities from governing companies operating outside of their physical jurisdiction. The airlines argued that San Francisco not only regulated business extraterritorially with the partner benefits ordinance – telling

United how to operate in Boston and Brussels and Beijing – but that, by requiring costly benefits for local employees, placed an undue burden on United from which competitors would be exempt.<sup>246</sup>

In addition to their Constitutional objection to local mobilization that infringed on the rights of global corporations, United made a second argument demanding that federal labor law, not grassroots organizers’ homespun partner benefits ordinance, should govern the working conditions of airline employees. Hence if any flight attendant – gay or straight – wanted better benefits, they would have to convince their union to seek such remuneration at the bargaining table. United proposed that the San Francisco ordinance violated the “minimum labor standards” principle of the Railway Labor Act (RLA), as it would tip the balance of power in the labor-management relationship toward the union. The RLA mandated that all such power realignments must occur in government-regulated negotiations: in formal collective bargaining, in mediation, in arbitration, or in a legal strike. Street level gay activism, United insisted, was none of the above. Furthermore, the airlines argued that activists like Jeff Sheehy were imposing obligations on United that were inconsistent with the domain of collective bargaining offered by the RLA. So even if union leaders would have lumped partner benefits into their protracted contract dispute at the bargaining

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<sup>246</sup> “Air Transport Association of America, Airline Industrial Relations Conference, and Federal Express Corporation v. City and County of San Francisco, San Francisco Human Rights Commission, and San Francisco Airport Commission,” United States District Court for the Northern District of California, Case no. 97-1763 CW, 992 F. Supp. 1149; 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 4837; 158 LRRM 2138; 76 Fair Employment Practice case (BNA) 1108; Employee Benefits case (BNA) 1116. 10-13.

table, United laid the legal groundwork for rejecting those claims as “gay rights” and not “trade union” concerns, and thus outside the boundaries of legitimate RLA negotiations. As it did so, an age-old dismissal by flight attendants’ coworkers and employers – that their queer and feminist aspirations were inappropriate and unrealistic in the airlines – resurfaced in the partner benefits dispute.<sup>247</sup>

The airlines rounded out their objections to the domestic partner ordinance by claiming that the law in fact violated the Airline Deregulation Act (!). United told the court that airline deregulation was primarily intended to promote free market competition, where the immutable laws of supply and demand – rather than government labor protections or union duty rigs and work rules – would solely determine prices. Mandating domestic partner benefits, and for that matter any political economic intervention by a trade union or other activist group, would constrain United’s pricing freedom by requiring higher airfares to offset rising labor costs. The airlines fought this battle on many fronts in the 1990s. Delta Airlines, for example, told a different Federal Circuit Court in 1997 that all state civil rights laws violate the Airline Deregulation Act as they generate undue price constraints. Carriers further insisted that the San Francisco case was particularly burdensome as no Federal statute governed LGBT workplace rights. Since, in United’s appraisal, deregulation was conceived to shield airlines from inconsistent governance by the local state, any LGBT workplace activist gains would violate deregulation’s guiding principles as, after the failure of federal

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<sup>247</sup> “Air Transport Association of American v. City and County of San Francisco,” 35-36.

discrimination protections in 1996, all LGBT advances were inevitably locally focused. As the airlines offered deregulation as a weapon to block domestic partner benefits, they demanded protection from the uneven outcomes of decades of activism by invalidating civil rights victories protecting working individuals and collectivities. Thus, by the summer of 1997, United clearly argued that even while gay domesticity and consumption could be an effective generator of revenue, labor austerity was an inviolable principle of the family values economy. This revelation that cast overwhelming doubts on the HRC's "corporate equality" discourse, and opened a space for a gay-labor alliance that explicitly demanded retirement benefits and healthcare for all employees.<sup>248</sup>

***United Against United: Sexuality and Labor in the Streets of San Francisco***

This very alliance began to make national headlines in the summer of 1997 when activists fused the still unresolved United flight attendant contract standoff with the dust-up over domestic partner benefits. On June 20<sup>th</sup>, members of AFA Local 11 assembled and marched in the San Francisco LGBT Pride Festival, an annual happening that brought a million visitors to the Bay Area from across the globe, making it a centerpiece of queer cultural and political life and of United's summer profit-making strategy. Activists donned screaming chartreuse t-shirts with black letters slammed together into the word CHAOS. The shirts signaled AFA's trademark "Create Havoc Around Our System" strike strategy, which featured quick, unpredictable hit and run work stoppages that guaranteed operational disruption while minimizing corporate retribution against individual

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<sup>248</sup> "Air Transport Association of America v. City and County of San Francisco," 28-34.

flight attendants. Threatening to disrupt passengers’ – and pridegoers’ – flight schedules, unionists passed out 10,000 leaflets that asked, “Is United really gay friendly?” and directed the audience to call the airline demanding domestic partner benefits for all employees and a fair contract for flight attendants.<sup>249</sup>

As they put the squeeze on a major corporation with a parade float, flight attendants challenged the political economic transformation Pride festivals in the 1990s. As the millennium approached, Pride Festivals once serving as hubs for local-scale socializing and political organizing had become bully pulpits for companies to build brand loyalty across broad hinterlands. Icelandair managers, for example, raffled off free trips at festivals in, among other places, Seattle, Minneapolis, and New York, collecting contact information for the presumably lucrative gay travel market on the West Coast, in the Midwest, and for the East Coast megalopolis.<sup>250</sup> CHAOS t-shirts interrupted this seemingly natural and inevitable convergence between the airlines, their gay employees, and niche marketing. But they did so by offering an ugliness that contradicted the cuteness prescribed for both flight attendants and the gay community, using costuming

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<sup>249</sup> Skrondal; Kiino; Jeff Sheehy, personal interview, 20 Nov. 2004.

<sup>250</sup> At the Minneapolis Pride in 2008-2010, for example, Icelandair was conducting the trip raffle at its festival table, while Delta was giving away trinkets and signing up frequent flyers at its “force for global good” table. The “force for global good” campaign touted various international charity donations. Meanwhile, the Association of Flight Attendants has publicly estimated that Delta spent at least \$250 million on thwarting Delta flight attendants’ 1995-2001 organizing campaign, and Delta is now suing the Federal Government to overturn the Obama Administration’s liberalization of the right to organize under the Railway Labor Act. For a discussion on the political economy of corporate marketing at Pride, see: Susan Craddock and Alex T. Urquhart, “Target(ing) HIV Prevention,” *Queer Twin Cities*, The Twin Cities LGBT Oral History Project, ed. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

rather than traditional union chants and pickets that may have been illegible in Pride Festival spaces increasingly sold as frivolous and fun.

While flight attendants used color rather than pickets to get their message out at Pride, the domestic partner benefits campaign also embraced tactics often associated with orthodox trade unionism. Three weeks after Pride, on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1997, the coalition staged the first in a series of civil disobedience-centered mass protests in downtown San Francisco. Shortly after United sued the City in February, LGBT leaders announced – and widely publicized – a consumer boycott of the airline. As a new-hire flight attendant in 1998, I hid my crew badge on several occasions as I walked into gay bars on layovers, passing under banners of crossed-out United 747s that the boycott movement had designed and circulated. As they assembled with flight attendants in front of the airline’s Geary Street city ticket office, activists extended their efforts beyond gay bars and institutions, physically enforcing the boycott on United property. Demonstrators were particularly strategic in choosing the Geary Street facility as a target of economic intervention. Before the internet became airlines’ primary customer service interface, city ticket offices offered boutique services to high-yield customers on a face-to-face basis. Frequent flyers from United’s most profitable accounts – Wells Fargo, Cisco Systems, or AOL – could walk from their financial district offices to make reservations, change seats, and confirm upgrades at the ticket office, avoiding long airport lines while building relationships with local sales agents, making personalized business connections that the discount carriers

could never provide. A throng of chanting, CHAOS t-shirt-wearing, picket-sign waving flight attendants, and scores of LGBT allies with bright rainbow flags, quickly interrupted United's sophisticated customer service experience. "The whole thing was like theater," Jeff Sheehy recalled.

First we assemble, march, and chant. Then we send in the United frequent flyers, who cut up their frequent flyer cards in the office in front of the press. Then, at a given moment, those who volunteer to do civil disobedience block the doors and shut the office down. They arrest us and we go to jail.<sup>251</sup>

Sheehy told me that the events were choreographed as a media spectacle for still photography and video feed, with plastic shards of frequent flyer cards tossed on the ground as police pushed through AFA pickets to handcuff and carry off demonstrators blocking United's doors.

As their demonstrations in San Francisco made headlines, the domestic partner benefits coalition wrestled the category of diversity away from its market-oriented, liberal pluralist, "corporate equality" framing, reorienting "diversity" toward downward economic redistribution. As they walked the line with rainbow flags and AFA picket signs, diversity discourse became a shield for union members, allowing them to ratchet up the pressure on United Airlines while dodging corporate reprisal. The Railway Labor Act, after all, strictly prohibits economic sanctions – strikes, boycotts, and sickouts – until the National Mediation Board officially grants a union the right to strike. Though AFA had languished for 16 months without reaching a pact with United, Federal mediators

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<sup>251</sup> Beth Skrondal, Stan Kiino, and Jeff Sheehy extensively discussed the civil disobedience rallies in their interviews. See also: Crispin Hollings, personal interview, 19 November, 2004; and Ed Sanford and Loyd Scobee, personal interview, 18 March 2005.



continued to balk at granting flight attendants a strike release, forcing them to work under increasingly outdated wages and working conditions. But while the RLA mandated that flight attendants continue to fly without an agreement, labor law said nothing about the boycott rights of LGBT institutions. Thus, local activists announced the boycott by accusing United of being a retrograde, homophobic opponent of diversity and equality – even though the carrier’s lawsuit rested on interstate commerce, regulatory, and labor law. LGBT activists conveniently showed up at flight attendants’ July 10<sup>th</sup> demonstration, urging customers to boycott United and shutting down the ticket office while flight attendants innocently chanted for a fair contract. “Diversity” ultimately denied United a legal route to sue AFA for unfair labor practices and win injunctions against picketing, eliminating an economic barrier that would plague pilots at American Airlines a year later. In April of 1998, pilots staged a similar challenge to orthodox RLA bargaining – but absent the rainbow flags - organizing a sickout prior to their official strike release. Management won an eye-popping \$50 million dollar damages lawsuit against the pilots’ union, hobbling their impassioned campaign against labor subcontracting in the airlines (see Chapter 4).<sup>252</sup> As they hoisted the rainbow flag, LGBT activists opened a new space for flight attendants to intervene in airline economics – a space the Railway Labor Act had previously foreclosed. And most importantly, new alliance partners made protest spaces much more fun and energizing than they had been during the stand-alone phase of

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<sup>252</sup> To understand management’s Railway Labor Act case against American Airlines pilots, see: *American Airlines v. Allied Pilots Association, Order of Contempt*, The United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas, Wichita Falls Division, Case no. 7:99-CV-025-X.

the contract dispute. While activists struggled to get 50 people to spend their day off at airport pickets, 400 flight attendants showed up to march in the July 10<sup>th</sup> demonstration.<sup>253</sup>

Direct action protests continued after the initial flight attendant contract CHAOS rally in July. Subsequent events repeated the basic civil disobedience mass demonstration formula, but added newly theatrical themes. Activists discovered, for example, that the American Center for Law and Justice, a conservative think tank funded by televangelist Pat Robertson, had indirectly collaborated in the airline industry's lawsuit against San Francisco. Robertson had recently and bizarrely attacked Tinky Winky, the purple, alien-like cartoon star of the British children's show *The Teletubbies*, for being "gay" – presumably due to his pink triangle-like antenna and because of a purse-like bag the "male" cartoon character sometimes carried as an accessory. Activists lampooned United's alleged legal tryst with reactionary Robertson, recruiting local AIDS quilt designer and founder Gilbert Baker to create life-size Tinky Winky costumes that demonstrators wore while blocking the doors of the city ticket office, getting arrested in front of an amused press. Another direct action featured protesters piling suitcases in front of the same property, each adorned with the details of a discrimination lawsuit United had lost. "Get Rid of Your Tired Old Baggage," rainbow flag-clad picket signs shouted. The event mobilized a double entendre,

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<sup>253</sup> Both Stan Kiino and Beth Skronal described their elation at arriving at the Geary Street ticket office to see swarms of flight attendants lining up, and having to convince police to shut down additional lanes of traffic to accommodate the size of the protest. Both claimed police estimated 400 attendees, while both said that previous rallies had garnered about 50 participants.

figuring United's anti-feminism, homophobia, and racism as outmoded and retrograde, while poking fun at public frustration at United's propensity to lose passengers' luggage.<sup>254</sup>

While the domestic partner benefits campaign grabbed headlines and hearts in the summer of 1997, like most social movements the coalition was riddled with internal contradictions. The Human Rights Campaign surprised some of its frequent critics by being among the campaign's most active supporters. While other LGBT advocacy groups of the 1990s – notably the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force under the leadership of Urvashi Vaid – pushed for new mobilization at sexuality's intersection with gender identity, race, immigrant status, and economics, the HRC and its string of white cisgendered leaders continued to limit their agenda to partnership recognition and military service, perhaps the movement's most limited aspirations. But when United moved against the HRC where it was most mobilized – in the Fortune 500 – the group responded not only by pushing the consumer boycott of United, but by helping expand the scope and scale of the boycott through its media and Democratic party networks.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Sheehy and Kiino

<sup>255</sup> Sheehy was President of San Francisco's Harvey Milk Democratic Club during the United affair. The Milk Club was one of two LGBT caucuses of the Democratic Party, the other being the Alice B. Toklas Club. Though the clubs originally started around separate, gender-based roots, the Milk Club for gays and the Toklas Club for lesbians, by the mid-1990s the Milk Club was more clearly aligned with the city's left-wing, neighborhood based grassroots movement, while the Toklas Club remained closer to downtown institutionalists. The Milk Club, thus, took the strongest stance against the Clinton Administration when DOMA passed and ENDA failed. Nevertheless, since both the Milk Club and the HRC were ultimately Democrat fundraising apparatuses, and since the San Francisco grassroots activists remained at least somewhat committed to Democratic Party politics, both the Milk Club and the HRC ended up being big

Labor, meanwhile, who had scored a number of successes with such community-union coalitions in the 1990s, was surprisingly divided. AFA of course dedicated cash and leadership time to the San Francisco effort, deepening a commitment to the domestic partner benefits it had repeatedly – an unsuccessfully – sought at the bargaining table since 1990. But the San Francisco Airport Labor Coalition, an umbrella group for unionized employees at the airport, was increasingly vocal in its opposition to the boycott in the summer of 1997. Longtime Bay Area gay and labor activist Howard Wallace recalled being aggressively recruited by fellow labor leaders to help quell union support for the LGBT boycott. Wallace told me:

I got a call from Shelly (Kessler from the San Mateo Labor Council), and she told me that the whole Airport Labor Coalition was lined up to oppose the domestic partner issue. They thought it was going to drive United out of town! They needed help (organizing to block advancement of domestic partnership benefits). She wanted me to work on public officials like Tom Ammiano – to get them to back off on the issue. She was pulling at straws – poking around for support. But I told her I couldn't help her. At the next meeting...it was almost comical. One guy from the machinists union was snarling at me like he was ready to leap at me. I was really THE enemy. And I wasn't quite ready for that.<sup>256</sup>

Labor leaders worried that United would become the “runaway factory” of the service industry, following manufacturing giants in abandoning production in unionized areas in search of lower wages, in this case in locales absent requirements for domestic partner benefits. Their fears, of course, seem utterly

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players in the boycott – especially as AFA was legally blocked from supporting the boycott, and since internal employee groups could not advocate a boycott of their employer for fear of termination.

<sup>256</sup> Howard Wallace, personal interview, 19 November 2004.

preposterous to anyone with knowledge of airline economics, as moving West Coast operations to Las Vegas or Phoenix or Portland would have cut United off from the profitable epicenter of the global technology boom. Furthermore, because many of its Asian route authorities were non-transferable from San Francisco, United would have had to shutter its most profitable division to effectively grandstand against gay couples. But after the labor movement had been routed in the mass upheavals of the 1980s, and because the political economic predicament of high-paid, white, male, “breadwinners” in the declining manufacturing sector continued to dominate the thinking of the U.S. labor movement, a seemingly irrational fear was bitterly real for many union leaders. Flight attendants ignored their warning and stepped up their activism, but did so without the material support of their peers in the machinist, airport services, and building trades.

As the labor movement balked at the boycott, United’s internal LGBT employee network “United With Pride” also openly dissented from the direct action campaign in San Francisco. Two days before the first mass demonstration in the financial district, United With Pride chairperson David Tomb did an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, urging LGBT United employees to steer clear of the boycott. Tomb argued, “The effects of the boycott would do considerable damage to the relations we’ve established with our colleagues and management. The boycott has a negative impact on those they are trying to

help.”<sup>257</sup> United With Pride and its predecessor organizations had been key players in the successful campaign to modify United’s equal employment opportunity statement to include lesbians and gays in the early 1990s, and were doing high-level advocacy within the airline for domestic partner benefits when the boycott was announced.<sup>258</sup> But in the summer of 1997, flight attendants had made the internal contradictions of mainstream LGBT workplace discourse unmanageable. In her work *Changing Corporate America from the Inside Out*, sociologist Nicole Raeburn exposes these antagonisms. Raeburn argues that domestic partnerships and other LGBT benefits are morale boosters in corporate workplaces, making employees less likely to unionize; less interested in pursuing a political strategy presumably dependent on alienated, aggrieved populations. Substituting corporate benevolence for unionism as a basis for labor identification and representation, Raeburn explicitly frames “corporate equality” as a resource in employers’ “union avoidance” toolkits.<sup>259</sup> Furthermore, given the success of “corporate equality” campaigns for EEO inclusion and domestic partner benefits, and after painful airline union setbacks like that at TWA in 1986, Tomb’s words likely seemed sensible to the public, trading the “old workplace activism” – the anachronistic hornet’s nest of the picket line – for the “new workplace activism” – diversity and equality rhetoric that so many supported by 1997.

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<sup>257</sup> John King, “S.F.’s Push to Boycott Airline has Surprise Foe: Head of United’s Diversity Group Says it’s Wrongheaded,” San Francisco Chronicle 8 Jul. 1997, final ed.: A1+.

<sup>258</sup> Hollings

<sup>259</sup> Nicole Raeburn, Changing Corporate America from the Inside Out: Lesbian and Gay Workplace Rights (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 149.

### *The Politics of a Gay Rights Victory*

While gay activists, union leaders, and United employees debated which ideas and goals should drive LGBT workplace mobilization, the standoff between AFA and United jumped back into the headlines with a rare development in collective bargaining in the airlines in the 1990s: a settlement. Only four days after the mass demonstration in front of the Geary Street ticket office, AFA reached a tentative contract accord with United management.<sup>260</sup> While there is no documentary proof that the rally spawned the settlement – though local activists swear that United’s labor relations department called AFA Local 11 President Liz Loeffler asking what it would take to “call her dogs off” immediately following the protest – it is clear that the San Francisco campaign turned the heat up on United by putting the flight attendant dispute in the public spotlight.<sup>261</sup> The ensuing settlement was, however, bitter sweet for AFA members. The contract’s benefits were undeniable, and drove me to fly for United while declining a simultaneous offer from American Airlines. All layovers, for example, exceeding 13 hours were required to take place in 4-star hotels in the destination city’s downtown, allowing flight attendants physical and mental outlets in museums,

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<sup>260</sup> Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, “Directory of Media Releases,” 14 Jul. 1997, <http://www.afacwa.org/default.asp?id=639>, 08 Mar 2010.

<sup>261</sup> Kiino and Lynch. Kevin Lum, the President of the AFA United master executive council during the time of the partner benefits affair, told me that United approached AFA being ready to move on the partner benefits issue well before it filed the lawsuit. Then, for unknown reasons, it cut off all contact with the union on the partner benefits issue until after its capitulation three years later. Workplace lore often says that this resulted from John Edwardson – President of United under CEO Gerald Greenwald in the 1990s – being a conservative Roman Catholic, though I have never seen any evidence that Edwardson scuttled the partner benefits deal or tried to influence Greenwald to stop it. This Chapter argues instead that management’s broader commitment to cost discipline and unilateral authority convinced it not to yield to LGBT activists who had started the benefits movement in the airlines. Lum discussed United’s partner benefits overture, and then its silence, in detail with me in: Kevin Lum, personal interview, 21 Nov. 2004.

theaters, and riverwalks, and preventing them from being caged in boring, isolated, expensive airport motels. Additionally, AFA thwarted company efforts to use language ability to violate seniority by preempting senior, monolingual flight attendants from flying international trips.

Notable improvements accompanied an extremely unusual contract duration and pay system, drawing extensive anger from front line flight attendants. The contract would last an unprecedented 10 years, the longest ever under the Railway Labor Act. Wage increases were partially paid in lump sum bonuses that upped employees' tax liability, and additional wage increases granted after the first five years would come only via a binding arbitration system that denied flight attendants the right to strike. AFA members approved the deal in a referendum, but by an extremely narrow 51-49% margin. So even as galleys and crew lounges were filled with excited debate about flight attendants' headline-making interventions in San Francisco, the contract standoff seemed to be ending on the same note as the American Airlines affair two years earlier, a stalemate that advanced management's commitment to front line austerity in the age of the family values economy, and that wholly failed to include flight attendants in the robustness of the Clinton-era boom.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Details on contract from: Agreement Between the Flight Attendants in Service of United Airlines as Represented by the Association of Flight Attendants, AFL-CIO, and United Airlines, Inc. Chicago: United Airlines, 1997. The AFA accord was also notable as it lacked the domestic partner benefit provisions that so many of its members were demanding. Keeping the new benefits off the bargaining table was, at least in theory, a shrewd strategic move. After all, if United would have caved on AFA's demands for expensive new partner benefits, the airline would have pushed the union to offset at least some of the costs with give-backs in other areas. Since flight attendants – not pilots, customer service agents, or mechanics – were the ones in contract talks during the partner benefits brouhaha, their group would ultimately have had to “pay” for the



While the unanticipated and largely unpopular AFA contract deal undoubtedly tripped up the San Francisco campaign, denying it the blaring color and imminent strike threat of CHAOS, major political and legal developments kept United's partner benefits intransigence on the front page. On December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998, days before San Franciscans would descend en masse on the United terminal at SFO to head home for the holidays, the City's Board of Supervisors officially endorsed the boycott.<sup>263</sup> With the dramatic beaux arts façade of City Hall towering in the background, city leaders urged the public to support diversity and equality by avoiding United, pledging that no city employee would be allowed to fly the airline on business. Officials insisted that, regardless of what the dormant Commerce Clause implied, and regardless of the presumed entitlements of airline managers in a post-regulatory world, that companies would not be allowed to classify and compensate employees based on race, gender, and sexuality in San Francisco. And though the HRC's familiar equals-sign logo adorned the podium from which City Supervisors delivered their comments, the public endorsement of the boycott drew on a vastly different – though familiar – genealogy of workplace activism than the movement for corporate equality. Indeed LGBT leaders followed hotel, restaurant, municipal, and building trades unions in leveraging elected officials and public commerce to enforce labor

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benefits if they had one them in negotiations. No such payment would be necessary if the victory came from the streets and covered all employees. Nevertheless, since the new contract closed the book on further economic improvements for flight attendants until 2006, it sapped the coalition of the urgency that compelled hundreds of AFA members to demonstrate in the streets of San Francisco, ultimately reducing participation to a smaller group of committed flight attendant unionists.

<sup>263</sup> Jason B. Johnson, "S.F., Gay Rights Groups Support Boycott Against United: Domestic Partner Rules Contested by Airline," San Francisco Chronicle 15 Dec. 1998, final ed.: A25.

standards. Since the early days of AFL craft unionism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, union locals had used their economic and political organizing power to sever relations between city governments and hotels that locked out striking employees, builders who worked non-union, or contractors that violated public agreements.<sup>264</sup> Suddenly, LGBT organizations long insisting on the merits of a wholly voluntarist approach to workplace rights were borrowing from unions' ongoing push for compulsory, standardized regulation of pay, benefits, and working conditions.

Activists' move to force United to offer domestic partner benefits won a significant boost from 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Judge Claudia Wilkins on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1999, when her Court lifted the restraining order that had exempted United from the San Francisco ordinance. Wilkins tossed out United's professed right to discriminate, insisting that neither inter-state commerce law, nor labor or regulatory policy, allowed the airline to continue withholding the benefits. The decision gave activists within and outside the airline industry the right to continue politicizing sexuality at work, even if that politicization would change the terms and conditions of private employment contracts. The dismissal of United's labor and regulatory case was, however, accompanied by an expansive caveat. Wilkins exempted United from changing its pension or medical benefit programs, insisting that the Federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) superseded

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<sup>264</sup> Urban space and urban institutions have been hugely important to the institutionalization of the U.S. craft union movement since the 1880s. The HRC ironically drew on this union institutionalist framework in the San Francisco affair, even though it had largely eschewed such compulsory strategies against companies. To understand how urban institutions helped shore up collective bargaining as a basis for U.S. unionism during the progressive era, see: Bruno Ramirez, When Workers Fight: The Politics of Industrial Relations in the Progressive Era, 1896-1916. New York: Greenwood Press, 1978.

the San Francisco ordinance. Passed during the twilight of state regulation in 1974, ERISA was ultimately a progressive law, blocking withering industrial firms from raiding pension and medical benefit funds to subsidize other business transactions. Given this history, the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit claimed that ERISA prevented any local entity – whether a company or an activist group – from unilaterally amending benefits eligibility. Wilkins’ decision by no means stopped activists from pursuing ERISA claims for the benefits, which the San Francisco campaign would have been well equipped to do after recruiting dozens of flight attendants and other employees to testify in the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit case. The ruling simply established an additional legal hurdle prior to compulsory extension of health and pension benefits.<sup>265</sup>

United didn’t wait for the next legal plot twist or protest march. Instead, on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1999, the airline shocked the industry – and floored activists – by fully capitulating to the San Francisco campaign’s demands. The carrier announced that, effective immediately, it would offer full domestic partner benefits, including those covered by ERISA. The same-sex partners of all United employees worldwide, and the domesticated lovers of any San Francisco-based employee, regardless of gender, would be eligible for the new program, thus respecting the scope of the local ordinance while limiting its full inclusiveness to the Bay Area. Two days later, American Airlines, freed from fear of right-wing

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<sup>265</sup> John Schmeltzer, “Some Partner Benefits Ordered in Airline Case,” Chicago Tribune 28 May 1999, Chicagoland final ed.: 3.; see also: Edward Epstein, “Airline Keeps Leases for Now: United Wins Ruling in Battle with S.F. over Partners’ Law,” San Francisco Chronicle 29 Aug. 1998, final ed.: A15.

reprisal that had followed benefits-offering companies like Disney, followed United's lead on domestic partner benefits. USAirways joined the group a month later, and all carriers, even notoriously sexually conservative and anti-union Delta and cash-strapped TWA, joined the pattern by April of 2001.<sup>266</sup>

“We have changed the world,” San Francisco City Supervisor Mark Leno trumpeted at a victory rally the day after United's announcement. “This is about equality,” United flight attendant Kent Bloom told *The San Francisco Chronicle* as Leno spoke.<sup>267</sup> Just when it seemed like caveats always overdetermined good news – flight attendants won a new contract, but it drags on for 10 years, flight attendants finally get a raise, but it comes in bizarre lump sums every other year – the domestic partner benefits story seemed to lack caveats. Even though activists lost the ERISA decision, for example, United would offer full medical and pension benefits to all eligible parties. In an age when the conversion to the family values economy sometimes seemed interminable, flight attendants and their friends visibly and creatively advocated for their cause, changing the economics of the airline industry in the process.

### ***Alternative Dependencies as a Challenge to Corporate Equality***

Every activist I interviewed about the San Francisco domestic partner benefits campaign took visible pleasure in relaying the news that United Airlines had caved to their demands. Flight attendant Stan Kiino's eyes lit up as he

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<sup>266</sup> Edward Epstein, “United Airlines Capitulates on Partners Issue: Full Benefits Worldwide for Gay, Lesbian Couples,” *San Francisco Chronicle* 31 Jul. 1999, final ed.: A1.; see also: Harriet Chiang, “American Adds Benefits for Domestic Partners: Airline Joins United in Offering Full Coverage,” *San Francisco Chronicle* 6 Aug. 1999, final ed.: A19.

<sup>267</sup> Epstein, “United Capitulates on Partners Issue.”

reached the climactic point in his narrative. “Jeff Sheehy called and asked if I had heard – and asked if I was sitting down,” Kiino began.

I’ll never forget that day – hazy without much wind. I didn’t believe it. All of a sudden this wave of a sense of entitlement came over me. It changed the way I looked at my job – that shoulder to shoulder I had equal rights with my fellow employees. It was like the job meant more than anything to me at that point than in (the rest of my) 27 years of flying.<sup>268</sup>

That day in July, 1999 that Kiino narrates as the most important in his career was clearly a beginning, rather than the apex, of his own political trajectory. A second generation Japanese American who started his career in Pan Am’s New York base in 1973, Kiino took up a number of activist leadership roles in the months and years after the San Francisco victory, revealing the multiple intersections of difference at which he lived. By the early 2000s, Kiino had become an anti-racist organizer for the California Federation of Labor’s people of color caucus. In 2009, he was elected national chairperson of Pride at Work, the queer advocacy umbrella for the AFL-CIO. Before assuming a national labor leadership position, Kiino had become an elected officer of his union local. In April, 2001, Kiino, myself, and four other flight attendant activists ran on a progressive slate for the reins of AFA Local 11, explicitly using the broad-based, direct action, participatory model of the partner benefits campaign to energize our colleagues amidst the widespread demobilization and hopelessness that followed the 1997 contract affair. After we won our election and took control of the union, memories of the fun and humor of the partner benefits campaign continued to

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<sup>268</sup> Kiino

drive my peers' sense of possibility and hope for a labor movement that was often embattled and defeated. When AFA Local 11 won organization of the year from the LGBT lobbying group California Alliance for Pride and Equality, President Dawn Marie Bader and partner benefits leader Jeff Sheehy accepted the honor together, insisting that the benefits campaign was a moment of rebirth and renewal for queer and labor politics.<sup>269</sup>

But for all the inspiration that Kiino's memories of the San Francisco campaign have provided, his words are nonetheless perplexing. Like his co-chair of the Local 11 benefits campaign Beth Skrondal, Kiino received no new resources during the July 1999 victory – because he was single. The gap between Kiino's passionate commitment to equality, and the material conditions of his life during the victory, demand that we pause to consider the meaning – and referent – of “equality.” Indeed we must examine whether equality, in this case, stood in for something more powerful and more adaptable than the liberal pluralist, corporate equality politics of the HRC's tastefully tame equals-sign placards. Kiino, after all, has not organized his life around the partnered domesticity that sustains the HRC's apparent premise – that “LGBT people” are equal to straights, and should be equally able to share in the material and psychological privileges of heteronormativity. Rather than with a partner or husband, Kiino lives by himself in a Pacific Heights apartment complex, just upstairs from Beth Skrondal. He arranges his flight schedule around five or six-day trips to the South Pacific,

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<sup>269</sup> The author was present at the event during Bader and Sheehy's address.

maximizing days off to commute to care for and live with his aging mother in the Central Valley town of Hanford, California.

As he discussed caring for his mother, Kiino highlights the alternative forms of dependency he has cultivated during his airline career, dependencies that have enabled material and emotional sustenance outside domesticated, partnered realms. Kiino was particularly pointed when narrating the mutual support networks that grew out of the AIDS crisis. In his early 30s, Kiino had spent a decade flying for Pan Am when AIDS upended the lives of gay flight attendants, their coworkers, and their friends. The skills and rhythms of flight attendants' working lives, Kiino argued, made them critically important caregivers for friends, lovers, and acquaintances when the agents of heteronormative dependency – the state, parents, and spouses – were unable or refused to provide care.

AIDS was devastating. There are only a few men from my 50 person training class at Pan Am still left alive. And that is true for a lot of airlines' flight attendant groups... A lot of us weren't involved in any organization, but we spent all our time trying to help friends. As a flight attendant, I am used to sleeping in different situations because of layovers and jetlag. So I was the one who was flexible enough to stay over at peoples' houses because they needed help with their illness during the night. There was this era – where you just had to get used to it. People described it like being in a war. You don't know who was next to die. People were dying before their time.<sup>270</sup>

Kiino argues that friends with AIDS could count on flight attendants because they were used to sleeping away from home, because they expected to wake up and help people during normal sleeping hours, and because they regularly and calmly

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<sup>270</sup> Stan Kiino, personal interview, 15 March 2005.

handled blood, vomit, and feces – the physical products of many AIDS-related illnesses – as part of the first responder qualifications of their professional lives. Thus in Kiino’s relationships to lost coworkers and friends, to his current peers aloft, to the union movement, and to his mother, partnership has been practiced much more broadly than the domesticated, monogamous version at the center of the HRC’s bid for corporate equality. These alternative dependencies motivated Kiino during the San Francisco domestic partners campaign, inspiring him to push United to open up benefits eligibility to more of his colleagues - even absent the prospect of personal economic gain.

***The Family Values Economy and the Crisis of Domesticity***

Though the San Francisco domestic partnership campaign invigorated Stan Kiino’s anti-racist, queer, and labor activism, we must nevertheless remain mindful that the family values economy that flight attendants have worked so hard to resist relies on many of the same ideas about domesticity that the partner benefits campaign utilized. Janet Jakobsen and other scholars have argued that domestic partner benefits campaigns have functioned as alibis for the broader erosion of social programs since 1970. Rather than a bid for the health and welfare of the whole population, domestic partner benefits make medical insurance and pension payouts contingent on monogamy and productive employment, extending coverage only to hard-working, deserving employees and their cohabitating spouses.<sup>271</sup> Domestic partner benefits, then, directly reproduce the dominant logic of 1990s anti-welfarism: withholding resources to the

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<sup>271</sup> Jakobsen 60.



undeserving and sexually aberrant, and paring economic remuneration to marital fidelity and hard work. For political theorists Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, privatized distributions systems like domestic partner benefits produce two sets of dependencies: people on their lovers and employees on corporations.<sup>272</sup> As housing, health, and retirement benefits have become elusive privileges rather than rights, people have to find a job or find a lover to access such resources. Domestic partner benefits reinforce this privatization of the politics of difference, wedding queer futures to compulsory labor and compulsory domesticity, the dual lynchpins of the family values economy.

The glaring problem for flight attendants is that the transition to the family values economy – especially that occurring after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – broke both dependencies, preventing them from counting on jobs or lovers to satisfy their material needs. On the job front, the wave of airline bankruptcies following the 9/11 attacks cannibalized the very benefits that activists like Beth Skrondal and Stan Kiino fought so hard to win. Invoking section 1113 of the U.S. bankruptcy code, which allowed insolvent firms to seek permanent “relief” from employees’ wages and benefits, United, Northwest, USAirways, and other major carriers abrogated flight attendants’ collective bargaining agreements. Scrambling to avoid hasty and ham-fisted court-ordered concessions, union activists initiated round-the-clock negotiations to voluntarily reduce flight attendant compensation. Management negotiators came to the table with the 1997

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<sup>272</sup> Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State,” *Signs* 19.2 (Winter, 1994): 314-319.

contract and red pens, literally crossing out the pages and paragraphs that had guaranteed the pay, work rules, and health coverage that flight attendants had won in the watershed advances of the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>273</sup> As flight attendants scrambled to accommodate grueling new 15-hour turnarounds from the West Coast to Hawaii, the return to cheap airport motels, and cash paycuts in excess of 10%, those with domestic partners had to break the news that medical insurance once covered by a nominal charge could now cost hundreds of dollars per month and provide fewer services.<sup>274</sup>

Worse was the fate of the defined benefit pension plans to which the San Francisco campaign had won access for surviving partners. Beginning in 2003, the major airlines began to file ERISA motions for “standard termination” of their pension programs. Thankfully, ERISA protected at least some of what flight attendants had been promised by their employers, requiring the Federal Government to make up for deficits in the pension plans of collapsing companies. But the termination – which was finalized in 2005 for United flight attendants – immediately froze benefit accrual, and capped monthly payments at levels often well below those “guaranteed” by the AFA contract. Two thirds of active United flight attendants would lose 50% or more of the payments United had long pledged once the ink on the termination dried. Socializing pension risk to return

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<sup>273</sup> The red pen reference is a direct quote from AFA International President Patricia A. Friend from a personal conversation with the author at the AFA annual Board of Directors Meeting in 2002.

<sup>274</sup> Economic information on concessions from the December, 2001 informational “roadshows” on concessions at the San Francisco Airport Marriott. The author was present at all road shows and operated trips under the new and old work rules.

United to private profitability, the termination transferred \$9 billion of United's pension debt to the Federal Government, further burdening an agency already shouldering \$23 billion of U.S. corporations' unfunded pension liabilities. And in a farcical performance of accumulation by dispossession in the millennial era, the U.S. bankruptcy court handling United's case insisted that CEO Glen F. Tilton's personal pension be walled off and insulated, guaranteed for its full value of \$4.5 million dollars.<sup>275</sup> As flight attendants were stripped of their pensions, corporate equality discourse broke down, both ideologically – in the blatant contradiction of “corporate heroism” in Tilton's pension grab – and materially, as the survivor pension benefits presumably extending full economic citizenship to lesbian and gay couples quickly vanished.

As benefits disappeared, corresponding domestic partnerships often embarked on the same course. Indeed the economic and emotional fallout from the airlines' post-9/11 upheaval put new and unprecedented strain on flight attendants' personal and intimate connections. After United's bankruptcy, it seemed every day at work was a bitter and disappointing first: the first Japan trip with the shorter, more tiring 1-day layover, the first New York stopover in a fleabag motel at the end of the runway, the first paycheck with the new, lower hourly rate on the corner of the stub. The situation was even more challenging for flight attendant activists, who strove to keep their peers mobilized while there was

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<sup>275</sup> Pension termination data from: Patricia A. Friend, “Protecting Pensions,” Testimony, Senate Finance Committee, June 7, 2005, Congressional Quarterly Congressional Testimony Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 2005, 2. See also: Bradley D. Belt, “Protecting Pensions in the Airline Industry,” Testimony, Senate Finance Committee, June 7, 2005, Congressional Quarterly Congressional Testimony Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 2005, 2.

little or no good news to relay. Given these difficulties, three of our six elected officials at AFA Local 11 lost our partnered relationships on a temporary or permanent basis after the bankruptcy. Two of my peers were married to other United employees who were also active in managing the workplace crisis. Both of their partners had visible affairs with other people we worked with, bringing betrayal, loss, and shame to my colleagues even if every flight attendant understood why things would fall apart. As a more junior employee, I ended up losing my career at United. My relationship that had flourished in the vibrancy of the industry – albeit with a non-airline lover – withered and ended as we attempted to adjust to living and working together on the ground. By the mid-2000s, private bonds – with lovers or with United Airlines – would no longer sustain many of us on the front lines, rupturing the promise that corporate equality discourse had made.

***Conclusion: The Enduring Potential of Staunch Flight Attendants***

As my fellow flight attendants and I coped with losing love and losing money at the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our setbacks point to a historical dilemma that weighs heavily on the labor movement in the age of the family values economy. The problem for people trying to create social change at work is that the very practices that have made the labor movement its most effective for 100 years are now its greatest sites of vulnerability. In 1928, the foundational and interdisciplinary labor historian Selig Perlman argued that U.S. unionists have, paradoxically, come closest to accomplishing Marx's fundamental prescription –

that workers must take control of the means of production – when their strategies are narrowest and most economistic.<sup>276</sup> Rather than making hay out of expansive claims on the state, or through strategic moves to challenge the state, unions have succeeded by framing jobs, pay, and benefits as private property. Thus, someone is most likely to walk out on strike not after identifying as an oppressed member of the working class, but because, “this job is mine, this pay is mine, and these benefits are mine. I earned them, and I will not let a far away company take them away from me.” Flight attendants ultimately built on this tradition, letting the theoretical dilemma of normative domesticity stand even though it troubled them, and hitting United hard to win lucrative new benefits for one type of alternative family. But in the family values age, companies have dedicated immense resources to rolling back even the most rudimentary gains by those on the front lines, as the airlines’ bankruptcy and pension termination process clearly show. Thus the “job and wage conscious unionism” that brought so many people – and so many flight attendants – to workplace activism seem to be evaporating.

I would like to suggest that rather than pondering whether companies’ confiscatory practices have made unionism passé, flight attendants show us that continuing to stand up for yourself at work is an end in and of itself in the family values age, and an especially hopeful practice when it yields victories like it did at United in 1999. This struck me as I saw Kathy Lynch coming down the concourse at San Francisco International Airport for our interview in 2006, rollerboard in

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<sup>276</sup> Selig Perlman, A Theory of the Labor Movement. New York: MacMillan, 1928. 155-165, 197-200.

tow and decked out in silver wings and her navy blue uniform dress. Hey stylish, cropped haircut was straight out of *Vogue*, but I knew that chemotherapy drove Lynch's new look as much as fashion magazines. Lynch had just come back to the front lines after a confrontation with United over her medical leave of absence for cancer that, at least temporarily, had endangered her 35-year career at United. When we sat down to talk, Lynch beamed with energy, laughing aloud as she considered the ongoing ordeal in the airline workplace, and making fun of how much power management has – or wishes it has – over flight attendants. “The airlines have treated flight attendants like high schoolers. First we were junior high girls in the 1960s, and then in the 1980s we were allowed to become high schoolers,” Lynch began to reflect.

The result of being treated like high schoolers is that you have 60-year-old women flight attendants going into the office feeling like they are a 16 year-old looking for a hall pass. Supervisors would make comments about how “stupid” that one is – or can you believe this crew was “stupid” enough to do this. It is like spousal abuse. They hired these women to be the “girl next door,” and then tell them they aren't good enough or smart enough for their entire career.<sup>277</sup>

Humor failed to hide Lynch's indignance, her disgust that a sexist labor relations paradigm infantilizes, trivializes, and devalues the labor of all of her peers. But Lynch was nevertheless talking to me at work and in her uniform well after United attempted to force her off the job, proving that flight attendants had learned to stand up to the airlines and win when they did so. Beating the company on domestic partner benefits in 1999, proving that management's

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<sup>277</sup> Kathy Lynch, personal interview, 16 Aug. 2006.

authority was neither unilateral nor infallible, was a priceless resource for a flight attendant like Lynch in her own conflict with the company in the years that followed. Flight attendants and their friends, after all, had proven that they could catch the largest airline in the world off guard and knock it off center, compelling ludicrous legal arguments that collapsed in court, and clouding expensive marketing campaigns selling sophistication and inclusiveness with the ruckus of a state sponsored consumer boycott in San Francisco. In a family values economy when “at-will” employment was the law of the land – when companies fired whoever they wanted whenever they wanted to – flight attendants made the airlines stop before they fired Kathy Lynch and others like her.

Lynch’s commentary and energy point to the immensely hopeful and immensely troubling nature of “gay rights” victories like the one at United Airlines in the 1990s. Her enduring presence at the airline points to the San Francisco campaign’s greatest contribution: through standing up to the company, activists made United a better place to work for everyone. Period. But the victory simultaneously reinforced assumptions the health and retirement care are privileges for productive employees, their monogamous partners, and their traditional families. These tensions between a democratic workplace and the family values economy would boil over after George W. Bush was seated President in the year 2001. Chapter 4, then, turns to that rupture. I take stock of how queer, feminist, and democratic unionist genealogies both inspired flight attendants and pitted them against one another as companies moved to shed their

legacy costs after 9/11. But as they worked through this painful discord, flight attendants took up a new round of mobilization to define and implement a dignified workplace in age when the family values economy was severely compromising this dignity.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE EXPENSE OF JUSTICE: The Tensions of Democratic Unionism in the Bush Years

Harold Newton's friends refused to stay quiet after he committed suicide. His death seemed so avoidable, after all, the result of a series of events in his last months among us that could have gone so differently. A year and a half before Newton made the decision not to go on, he was laid off from his job as a New York Kennedy-based flight attendant for TWA in July of 2003. With 30 years of seniority, Newton was a member of a unique cohort of men in the airlines, those who got their jobs because the EEOC blocked the airlines from limiting hiring to women, most of whom identified as gay, and many of whom lost their lives when AIDS shook the airline industry in the mid-1980s.<sup>278</sup>

Notice of layoff put Newton in a particularly difficult position. As was typical of his male and female flight attendant peers, Newton was unable to fall back on traditional family in a moment of economic crisis, lacking the wages of a wife, a partner, or children to make up for his own after paychecks stopped. Absent economies of domesticity had never troubled Newton, as his fellow flight attendants had built a social movement to force the airlines to provide a safety net under their work group soon after he joined TWA in the early-1970s, winning a family wage for crewmembers gay and straight, married and single, parents and childless.

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<sup>278</sup> Harold Newton's story is recounted in detail by fellow flight attendant Willie Aviles on the website [Justice4TWA.com](http://Justice4TWA.com). The site is coordinated by former San Francisco-based TWA flight attendant Kaye Chandler, who helped extensively with the research for this project. See: Kaye Chandler, [Justice4TWA.com](http://Justice4TWA.com), 17 Aug. 2010.

That stability won through decades of activism vanished when Newton and all of his TWA colleagues were grounded in 2002 and 2003. In the weeks after his layoff, Newton was forced to begin cutting fundamentals out of his budget, opting to discontinue his health insurance to save the \$500-plus dollars per month COBRA contribution. Refusing to be discouraged, Newton went back to school to broaden his skill set, though he knew that as a 60-year-old, age discrimination would deeply impact his journey through the job market. The stress took a toll on Newton's physical health, which triggered an economic vortex. Facing a string of medical bills while uninsured, Newton ran out of cash and got behind on his mortgage. An apartment fire in Newton's building that ruined many of his belongings drove the situation from difficult to unmanageable, pushing Newton into a depression from which he never recovered.

What made Newton's death so disturbing was that its context was utterly avoidable. 30-year veteran TWA flight attendants lost their jobs after American Airlines bought their employer in January 2001. During airline mergers, the unions representing each incoming group of flight attendants control the order of names on the seniority list at the new company, determining who would be first off the plank in a downsizing. Since post-merger American Airlines would be composed of 19,000 flight attendants originally hired by American and only 4,300 from TWA, the American group would solely determine the outcome of the seniority integration given the supermajority of votes. On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001, the elected leaders of the American flight attendants union unanimously voted to

deny all seniority credit and job security protections to incoming TWA flight attendants, sacrificing colleagues' careers to protect their own employment in an age of economic uncertainty. When American downsized after 9/11, all TWA people were let go, 91% of who would have kept their jobs if seniority credit had been extended – including Harold Newton.

The historic dispossession and its consequences for Newton motivated his friends to act. Rather than keeping the details of Newton's last days private, they now serve as the main page for the activist website Justice4TWA.com. That organization and several other TWA affinity groups continue to do media advocacy, Congressional lobbying, and direct action to plead their case for a return to the skies. And in 2007, they joined a coalition of airline activists to help pass watershed legislation that prevents unions or employers from stripping seniority away from any group in corporate mergers, an advance that has guaranteed full seniority credit for everyone in the giant Delta-Northwest and United-Continental mergers of the decade's end. Flight attendants now hope that the suffering of people like Newton is propelling reforms that will ease at least some of the anxiety gripping flight attendants in the Bush years.

Chapter 4 grapples with the pain in the lives of flight attendants like Harold Newton, trying to account for why things got so bad, and pointing to places where relief may lie. I pull apart the intersection between flight attendants' principled commitment to social justice and their economic self-interest, explaining why this crossroads had become so tense in the millennial age. By the

year 2000, the economy had been reorganized around two principles that troubled Newton and his peers: traditional, heteropatriarchal family and economic austerity. Nowhere are the challenges that this family values economy provided for flight attendants clearer than in the American-TWA merger affair. Thus, I walk you through that transaction in detail, tracing the antagonisms between the standoff's actors: front line flight attendants, longtime union leaders, company-side labor negotiators, management consultants, the judiciary, feminist social movements, and history itself.

My first task is to describe what was so difficult about the period. The answer begins with the rise of the subcontracting system in the airline industry in the mid-1990s. By 2010, just over half of all domestic flights in the United States were operated by low-cost and often non-union surrogates that carried major airlines' brand names but honored none of their commitments to employees.<sup>279</sup> Rather than directly confronting well-organized flight attendants and trying to tear up cherished contracts like Carl Icahn did at TWA, management began a quiet but massive siphoning of flight attendant work away from unionized groups at United, American, Continental, and other major airlines, and toward discount subcontractors. With a third of their North American work already gone on the eve of the millennium, flight attendants worried that management could begin to acquire larger carriers with lower costs, and then subcontract lucrative intercontinental and long haul flying to those new possessions. Hence American

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<sup>279</sup> For analysis of the economics of the subcontracting system, see: Aleksandra Mozdzanowska, "Growth and Operating Patterns of Regional Jets in the United States," *Journal of Aircraft* 42.4, July/August 2005, 858-864.

Airlines flight attendants' immense discomfort with management's announced purchase of TWA, a struggling international airline where employees made far less than those at American.

The chapter's second aim is to analyze the institution that was so tempting to American flight attendants as they organized a response to that merger threat: democratic unionism. Prior to the rise of the family values economy, flight attendants' principled commitments to social justice and their economic self interest were usually one and the same. Democratic unionism was a vehicle for action at this confluence of idealism and the bottom line, as a mostly-woman work force used recently-established independent unions to fight for an end to the sexist family wage system and to win material support for the people they were: single adults, unmarried parents, gay families, and a host of other non-traditional dependent relationships.

After deregulation, and with so much work disappearing to the subcontracting system, it was much more difficult for social justice struggles to make economic advances, driving a wedge between principled commitments and the bottom line. Meanwhile, the government oversight that protected employees from mistreatment at the hands of managers or other employee groups was no longer enforced. With this vulnerability came a new opportunity to re-direct democracy, protecting economic self-interest by confiscating resources from unprotected peers. Thus American flight attendants came together through their elected body, took a democratic vote, and stripped TWA flight attendants of all

seniority and job security, a move they could never have made when labor and transportation law strictly prohibited such practices. The American Airlines group thus won new material benefits like it had in the 1970s, but through enacting democracy at the expense of justice.

While the rupture between two groups of flight attendants who had long been allies is disturbing, the third task of this chapter is to analyze the fundamental purpose of flight attendant activism, one that became even more obvious with the American-TWA conflict. When the American union's vote pulled away the job security, pulled away the living wage, pulled away the health insurance, and pulled away the work rules, it was all the clearer why these resources were so important to flight attendants. Harold Newton, after all, did not have a traditional home to fall back on. The workplace – not the household, not domesticity, not normative family – is where Newton and so many others found and won sanity and sustenance. Once that grounding washed away in the American-TWA affair, it was newly clear that those resources should not be up for debate - whether through rational dialogue in the union hall or through ideological interventions like Icahn's. Flight attendants, thus, rebuilt their movement around a new set of goals to make basic workplace dignity non-negotiable. Expressing what they deserve and what they need – what Harold Newton needed – guided flight attendants as they pulled their activism together in the 1970s, and it endured as a beacon for flight attendants as they steered the movement through the crisis of the Bush years.

***Family Affair:  
Selling the American-TWA Merger with Family***

As he signed the purchase agreement for TWA on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001, American Airlines CEO Don Carty was well aware that he had delivered a herculean task to his public relations department. Why, shareholders, passengers, and especially employees would ask, would a carrier like American that had defied gravity in the deregulated age, buy the most financially troubled and bitterly conflict ridden company in the airline industry? To soothe their constituents' fears, American's spokespeople turned to the category that I have argued has been most important to the reorganization of the economy since 1970: family. Drawing on a dominant logic of the family values economy – that domestic relationships are a boat to weather the storm of the lean production era – American retold the history of TWA as a family affair. “Family Ties, Shared Success,” trumpeted the bold masthead of a special TWA merger edition of American's employee newspaper *The Flagship News*. A glossy photograph captured a father and daughter embracing in front of the tail of a TWA DC-9. Both were wearing navy blue uniforms, though the elder's sported the interlocking gold globes of TWA while the young woman's bore American's iconic eagle. The text offered the pair's family history as an interpretive device for the merger, telling a story of frugality, hard work, delayed gratification, interdependence, and perseverance.

When I was newly married to Scott, my husband of 15 years, I needed a good, full-time job. My dad prompted me to check out American Airlines.” Now McAllister, her father, who went

through a buyout in 1986 as an employee of Ozark Airlines that was bought by TWA, will be joining his daughter at American...  
“You have to be doing things right to be where American is right now.”<sup>280</sup>

Rather than ducking TWA’s difficulties, the article used a family’s story to take them head on. “We worked hard to make things go here at TWA and we’re sorry they didn’t work out, but now we just need to work together for American,” reflected another TWA employee quoted later in the text.

As it inserted the disappointments of TWA into the family values framework, the article was able to reference that airline’s antagonisms – the flight attendant lockout of 1986, the junk bond debt crisis, the string of bankruptcies in the 1990s – while abstracting them from their historical, political, and economic context. The collapse of TWA, after all, was anything but an example of the thrift, asceticism, self-restraint, and mutuality touted as core principles of the family values era. Rather than building family bonds, TWA’s pilots and machinists crossed flight attendants’ picket lines in 1986, collaborating with management to save their own careers and turning an ordinary contract dispute into a 3-year lockout. And to solidify a new commitment to managerial authority, Carl Icahn used junk bonds and other extremely high-risk private debt placement strategies to take over the airline, forcing TWA to wastefully jettison assets it had cherished for generations to finance short-term interest payments on the bonds (see Chapter 2). Regardless of employees’ frugality or sobriety, management’s financial indulgence left TWA on the brink of collapse by 1990.

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<sup>280</sup> “Family Ties, Shared Success,” *Flagship News* 57.3, Mar/Apr 2001, 1+.



Well aware of these ongoing political and economic tensions at TWA, American managers leaned on another familiar foundation of the family values economy as they touted the tie-up to employees: opportunity. While welfare reform had ended any state commitment to equality of condition for families or populations, advocates of the family values paradigm offered opportunity as a buoy to lift all fortunes in the 1990s. So even though TWA employees would join American at an immense disadvantage to their new counterparts, the opportunities provided by the merger would better everyone's lot regardless of past injustices. American's Vice President of Flight Service Jane Allen used the word opportunity no fewer than five times in a one-page memorandum announcing the deal. Allen's prose lauded "great new flying opportunities" and "huge benefits for American and our people," noting that the merger would allow American to "flourish in an ever increasingly competitive environment," and that the airline would hire "thousands of new flight attendants over the next few years."<sup>281</sup>

While management celebrated employees' dedication, an altruistic commitment to opportunity by no means drove American's decision to buy TWA. Instead, Carty signed the purchase agreement because he got a good deal. TWA was desperate for a merger partner, up for grabs at a basement price. The airline had been through two bankruptcy proceedings in 1992 and 1995, and was on its way to another, losing almost \$350 million in 1999. Well aware of TWA's dire state, American made an offer of just \$500 million in cash and \$3.5 billion in assumed debt for virtually all of TWA's assets, a fourth the price United's

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<sup>281</sup> Jane Allen, Memorandum to American Airlines Flight Attendants, 10 Jan. 2001.

simultaneous bid to acquire USAirways.<sup>282</sup> American found treasures at the TWA bargain store: valuable landing rights at traffic-restricted East Coast airports, the international licensure from TWA's once-expansive global route network, and most importantly, a new domestic hub to relieve choked Chicago O'Hare. Every time thunderheads mushroomed in June humidity, or snow squalls blasted off lake Michigan in the gales of November, traffic at O'Hare ground to a halt, trapping American airplanes, crews, and passengers, and wasting millions of dollars in fleet, fuel, and labor costs. The core of TWA's domestic system lied at Lambert Field in Saint Louis, a mere 300 miles southwest of O'Hare and in the dead center of the United States. Less traffic demand meant that Saint Louis rarely ran delays. Once American scooped up TWA, it could route East-West through passengers – a college kid heading from Providence to Sacramento, or a grandmother bound for Baltimore from Seattle – via speedy Saint Louis, taking much of the pressure off gridlocked O'Hare and refocusing that airport on passengers headed only as far as Chicago.<sup>283</sup>

While Saint Louis would help American relieve its gridlocked O'Hare hub, the American-TWA affair was nonetheless a linkage of two deeply dysfunctional families. Unrest at both carriers stemmed from the dispossessing practices associated with the conversion to the family values economy in the years since 1970. These tensions were most stark at TWA. Reeling from the economic

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<sup>282</sup> For the basic financial terms, conditions, and background of the merger, see: Susan Carey, Nikhil Deogun, and Scott McCartney, "TWA Approves Chapter 11 Filing, Buyout," Wall Street Journal 10 Jan. 2001, Eastern ed.:A3.

<sup>283</sup> For a complete summary of the assets American gained in the TWA deal, see: "TWA/American Airline Workforce Integration," 18-55.

downturn following the first war with Iraq, TWA flew into bankruptcy court on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1992. While signaling the carrier's precarious financial position, the Chapter 11 filing was in fact a stay of execution for TWA as it forced the final break-up of the airline's long-stormy relationship with Carl Icahn. Icahn had already taken windfall profits after he privatized TWA in 1988, and by the turn of the decade the financier clearly wanted out of mounting losses and seemingly endless labor strife. The bankruptcy petition forgave nearly \$1 billion in debt for which Icahn could have been accountable, and in exchange transferred ownership of TWA to a board of employees and creditors.<sup>284</sup> While the plan seemed a "third path" satisfying labor, managers, and Icahn, TWA would have to come up with hundreds of millions of dollars in "exit financing" before it could leave the protection of bankruptcy court. Finding this cash on private capital markets was an extremely difficult prospect, as investors had spent a decade watching TWA bleed cash and sell assets while United, American, Delta, and other competitors prospered.

To break the financial impasse, Carl Icahn made perhaps his most devastating contribution of the entire saga at TWA. Icahn offered the airline a \$200 million exit loan from his own financial war chest. While the Icahn's financing appeared to provide new breathing room for TWA employees – room they desperately needed after swallowing another 15% reduction in wages during

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<sup>284</sup> "Icahn Officially Ends Stint as the Chairman of TWA," Wall Street Journal 11 Jan. 1993, Eastern ed.:A4.

the bankruptcy exit<sup>285</sup> - events quickly deteriorated in familiar ways. On the verge of a second bankruptcy after reduced market share hamstrung the airline's competitive position, TWA defaulted on the Icahn loan in January of 1995. As a penalty for non-payment, Icahn forced a deal on TWA making himself a long-term ticket broker for the airline. Icahn agreed to buy \$610 million worth of TWA tickets at 55% of market value over eight years. He would then resell the tickets at discounted prices, keeping the delta.<sup>286</sup> So if the average value of a TWA ticket from New York to Paris was \$1000, TWA was forced to sell Icahn the ticket for \$550. Icahn would turn around and undercut TWA, selling the ticket for \$900 and keeping the \$350 difference. The system allowed Karabu ticketing – the new Icahn brokerage – to torpedo TWA's last profitable transcontinental and international routes. Analysts estimate that Karabu sapped \$100 million a year from TWA's earnings, diluting annual revenue by 3%. Though these figures may seem small, the airline industry's razor thin margins make them massive. TWA lost \$29 million in 1997 and \$65 million in 1998, years that would have been profitable without Karabu's slow bleed.<sup>287</sup> To remedy the losses, TWA was forced to sell more assets and drop more routes, shuttering its once-prestigious New York JFK hub in a vortex of losses that spiked to \$348 million in 1999. Despite TWA's complete repayment of the original Icahn loan in January of 1997, courts repeatedly sided with Icahn when the airline tried to sue its way out

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<sup>285</sup> Brett Pulley, "TWA's Icahn is Preparing to Step Down," Wall Street Journal 03 Aug. 1992, Eastern ed.: A3.

<sup>286</sup> Michael J. McCarthy, "TWA Says it's in Talks with Icahn to Trade Airline Tickets for Debt," Wall Street Journal 12 Jan. 1995, Eastern ed.: A5.

<sup>287</sup> "TWA/American Airlines Workforce Integration," 34.

from under Karabu, ruling that a deal was a deal in 1995 and safeguarding the crippling ticket sales venture well into the new millennium.<sup>288</sup>

***The IAM Knows what Flight Attendants Need:  
The TWA Financial Crisis and the Ghosts of the Family Wage System***

As two bankruptcies and Icahn's Karabu ticketing deal cast a pall over their futures, TWA flight attendants took a series of steps that they hoped would transform their union to better meet the austere conditions of the family values economy. Reflecting on what some argued were continual setbacks since the 1986 strike, flight attendants voted in the spring of 1997 to end nearly two decades of representation by IFFA – the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants. In place of Victoria Frankovich, the outspoken advocate of the rank and file democracy movement of the 1980s labor left and who had led flight attendants through the strike against Icahn, TWA flight attendants elected Sheri Cooper, a proponent of affiliation with a larger, multi-trade industrial organization. Cooper pointed out that a national union – namely the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) who represented TWA's mechanics and customer service agents – would offer flight attendants stability and financial security absent at tiny, independent IFFA, increasingly precious resources for workers at faltering TWA. Less than a year into her tenure, Cooper laid the framework for a government-supervised referendum in which

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<sup>288</sup> TWA and affiliated parties filed dozens of lawsuits against Icahn over the Karabu venture. For legal background see: "Trans World Airlines, Inc. v. Karabu Corp.," United States Bankruptcy Court for the District of Delaware, Case no. 92-115, Adversary no 96-40, 196 B.R. 711; 1996 Bankr. LEXIS 619; 29 Bankr. Ct. Dec. 236, 31 May 1996.

flight attendants would chose between joining coworkers in the IAM or remaining independent IFFA members.

The IAM election spawned a deeply divisive debate. Many TWA veterans – especially people who had been active during the victories of 1978 and 1983 (see Chapter 1) and who had supported Frankovich’s leadership during the strike against Icahn – argued that joining the bureaucratic, hierarchical, male-led IAM would be worse than a giant step backward, as it would combine the blatant sexism of the family wage-era union movement with the austere pressures of the family values economy. A recruitment video produced by the IAM in concert with Cooper’s cohort and circulated to all TWA flight attendants stoked these activists’ worst fears. A time warp back to 1955, the film begins with a monologue by IAM President George Kourpias, an older, overweight white man in a brown suit sitting in front of the union’s industrial cog logo. Seeming unfamiliar with flight attendant parlance and colloquialisms, Kourpias appears to read off a teleprompter. He calls IFFA “The I.F.F.A.,” slowly revealing each letter as if flight attendants wouldn’t recognize the name of the union that organized their three year strike, and failing to pronounce the acronym “iffa” as TWA flight attendants do. After touting the power of solidarity – as if flight attendants would forget that IAM President William Winpisinger filed a lawsuit to block front line mechanics from honoring IFFA’s picket lines during the 1986 flight attendant strike – Kourpias introduces Bill Sherry, who “has 35 years of experience,” and who “knows what TWA flight attendants need.” Sherry is

another older, very overweight white man in a beige suit who, while speaking in front of rows of model fighter jets and cruise missiles, elaborates on what “The I.F.F.A.” is failing to provide. The video’s aesthetics are laden with irony, both in the way they reinforce stereotypes about an anachronistic and outmoded labor movement in a supposed recruitment tool, and in the way they highlight men’s exemption from appearance and beauty standards to a group of women workers long fired for being overweight, unfashionable, or unattractive. Furthermore, the film explicitly refigures flight attendant unionism as a patron-client relationship in which male union staff tell flight attendants what they need and want, a striking reproduction of the gendered conditions that spawned flight attendants’ mass abandonment of the industrial union movement in the 1970s.<sup>289</sup>

Though disturbed by a unionism that in many ways treads on her activist cohort’s legacy, TWA flight attendant and IFFA founder Mary Ellen Miller is circumspect about the politics of the period. Explicitly rejecting narratives of treason and betrayal – those assuming that flight attendants turned their back on a feminist legacy with their votes for a paternalistic IAM – Miller told me that flight attendants’ decision to leave their once-proud independent union reflects a rapidly changing context for flight attendant politics. Miller argues:

Flight attendants wanted to believe that there might be someone else who had an answer that was different. In their hearts they just wanted to hope. TWA was going under – the writing was on the wall. There wasn’t hope in what IFFA was communicating anymore. We were the same people who broke away from the

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<sup>289</sup> The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, Recruitment Video. Upper Marlboro, MD: The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, 1997, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), 07 February 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heybk0BovrM>>

TWU and formed IFFA and won more for flight attendants and fought the discrimination. And now all of a sudden we were apologizing for the company – and saying “it is really true when they are saying this is much is how much we are losing.” The IAM said “we are the fighting IAM, we’ll get you what you deserve.” It sounded like there might be a rabbit to pull out of a hat there.<sup>290</sup>

Miller’s cohort’s string of victories in the late 1970s brought a host of improvements for flight attendants and for the spectrum of dependencies they called family – “winning more for flight attendants” and “fighting the discrimination” as Miller argues, from a relatively stable employer with deep pockets. But by 1997, rank and file flight attendants and union leaders alike recognized that TWA was on the verge of collapse. IFFA’s once defiant, indignant, and inspiring message became mired in the financial crisis, beginning to sound, in Miller’s words, like “apologizing for the company.” Furthermore, while the IAM may have sorely lacked IFFA’s energy, it offered a large strike fund, unemployment counselors, and an armada of lawyers, precious tools for flight attendants in danger of losing decades-long careers. Rather than evidence of vanished courage or an abandonment of feminist principles, many TWA flight attendants’ support for the IAM was a pragmatic response to the austerity of the family values economy.

***The Subcontracting Flu:  
Activism and Antagonisms in the Age of Dispossession***

Though American Airlines flight attendants were spared the immediate financial crisis facing people at TWA – American maintained robust growth and

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<sup>290</sup> Mary Ellen Miller, Personal Interview, 20 Mar 2008.



healthy profits throughout the 1990s as it bought up the assets of struggling competitors (see Chapter 3) – their workplace was home to an equally bitter feud as companies found new technologies to implement the family values economy. Perhaps no new operational technique spawned more discord than the subcontracting system. Subcontracting was by no means a new phenomenon for flight attendants at carriers like American and TWA. In a rush to modernize and standardize fleets around jet aircraft during the boom years of the 1960s, major airlines retired the aircraft most efficient for serving small towns: propeller planes with less than 50 seats. Since they were unable to profitably serve Minot or Fresno or Scranton with big, fast, expensive jets like the Boeing 707 and Douglas DC-8, the majors began to depend on regional airlines to fly puddle jumpers between outlying communities and the majors' hubs. The process became increasingly widespread as the industry expanded after deregulation, with each major carrier recruiting multiple regionals to provide small town service. United, for example, has used Atlantic Coast Airlines to connect its Washington, DC operations to the Shenandoah Valley, Air Wisconsin to feed Chicago with passengers from small-town Ohio and Wisconsin, and Skywest to link Los Angeles and San Francisco to California's Central Valley. Early forms of subcontracting certainly siphoned some flight attendant jobs away from established lines. But since most regional aircraft were staffed by a single flight attendant, and since jumbo jets connecting the largest cities dispatched with a

crews as large as 18, the majority of job creation remained at the major – and usually unionized – airlines.

This all changed after 1995. Canadian and Brazilian aircraft manufactures jumped into the lucrative, dot-com boom U.S. domestic market by introducing a new generation of airplanes bringing the comfort and speed of jet propulsion to regional carriers. Hailed to deliver jet-set sophistication small town air travelers long coping with tiny, bouncy, buzzing propeller planes, the airlines instead grabbed the new “regional jet” technology reorganize their fleets and route systems.<sup>291</sup> Instead of replacing medium sized jets coming up for retirement with new aircraft, major airlines transferred this flying to regional jets operated by the carriers originally flying propeller planes. By the turn of the millennium, regional jets – and their much lower paid, often non-union crews – were flying core major airline routes, like Chicago to Atlanta, Washington, D.C. to Dallas, or Los Angeles to Seattle. Labor cost savings at regional operators like the Mesa Air Group, Republic Airways, and American Eagle convinced United, American, and other majors to shut down medium size stations like Eugene, Oregon, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Portland, Maine and to outsource all labor at these venues to regional carriers. The growing gap between the image of substance of airlines – where airlines became “brands” offering sales, marketing, paint schemes, and interior design while shirking commitments to the actual people who sold tickets, who cleaned, catered, fueled, and flew airplanes, and who provided in-flight

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<sup>291</sup> For a thorough, quantitative analysis of the growth and operational patterns of regional jet service in the U.S., see: Aleksandra Mozdzanowska, “Growth and Operating Patterns of Regional Jets in the United States,” *Journal of Aircraft* 42.4, July/August 2005, 858-864.

safety - put airline employees on the defensive as the millennium approached.

Flight attendants were forced to ponder: If management can transfer so much of our flying to regional subcontractors, what would stop them from dumping all of the flying?

Widespread fear that subcontracting would ultimately allow management to turn major airlines into the next Wal-Mart, the next Gap, or the next Burger King, eliminating all legacy benefits with a rigid implementation of the family values economy, American Airlines employees responded in a way that made international headlines. In the summer of 1998, an American pilot doing research on the airline's SEC filings discovered that his employer had become the majority stockholder of Reno Air, a West Coast upstart with a growing presence in Northern California and Nevada.<sup>292</sup> While the impetus for investing in Reno Air seemed innocent to some – allowing American new access to the geographical epicenter of the “dot-com boom” and building new competitive muscle against its giant adversary United - American's quiet stockpiling of Reno Air shares spawned workplace rumors that the airline planned to acquire Reno and operate it as a subcontractor carrying the American brand but jilting unionized American employees. Though some Reno Air staff were unionized – flight attendants voted in the Teamsters while the pilots joined ALPA – the small carrier was a low-cost progeny of deregulation, lacking most legacy benefits and with wages and

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<sup>292</sup> This information came from a synopsis of the Reno Air affair by Holly Hageman, a former aid to American Airlines CEO Robert Crandall, and posted on the official Allied Pilots Association list serve. See: Holly Hageman, “Dysfunctional Airline/Union Relations 101,” Allied Pilots Association List-Serve, 8 Feb 1999.

working conditions far inferior to American's. Buying Reno Air and operating it as a separate entity would allow American to fly big MD-80 jets on core routes with cheap, outsourced crews.<sup>293</sup>

Aiming to interrupt this potentially damaging expansion of the subcontracting system, American's workers – most notably its unionized pilots - took drastic action. In a striking tactical departure from the buttoned-down business unionism long dominating pilot politics, thousands of crewmembers stayed in bed in a grassroots-organized “sick out” on the weekend of February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999. Vanished pilots forced American to cancel 900 flights and spend nearly \$50 million re-accommodating stranded passengers.<sup>294</sup> The immediate consequences of aviators' mystery illness followed familiar anti-union plot lines. Management lawyers rushed from American's Dallas headquarters to the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas in Wichita Falls to seek an injunction forcing pilots back to work. With an almost caricatured bravado, Judge Joe Kendall's decision bore down on “radical elements” among the pilots who caused a “ridiculous” and “outrageous” job action:

When you realize this dispute is about the pilots wanting more money retroactively for flying the same airplanes to the same places merely because American bought a small airline many have never heard of, and you have been sleeping on the floor with your kids for a couple of days in some airport 1500 miles from home, is hard to see the pilots as being mistreated...But what a Federal Judge can do, and what I will do, is make people pay for what they break. So if the activity and consequent damages continue, all the

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<sup>293</sup> Pilots' objections to Reno Air subcontracting are thoroughly summarized in: Allied Pilots Association, “Special Report to the Membership,” 15 Mar 1999.

<sup>294</sup> Jane Allen, Letter to American Airlines Flight Attendants, 10 Feb 1999.

assets of the Union, including their strike war chest, will be capable of safely being stores in the overhead bin of a piper cub.<sup>295</sup>

Pitting the injured, consuming nuclear family – an entity that would presumably evoke universal sympathy in the family values age - against greedy union bureaucrats, Judge Kendall slapped pilots with a temporary restraining order against the sickout, held individual union leaders in contempt of court for organizing the stoppage, and awarded American Airlines \$10 million in damages to cover the cost of the unrest. Though Appellate Courts tempered this Texas Judge's stinging language, they upheld his punitive actions, eventually enforcing the largest damages award ever leveled against an airline union.<sup>296</sup>

While a court-orchestrated slap-down of union activism in the late 1990s is unsurprising, the American-Reno Air controversy stands out for the inspiring and troubling new information it provides about the relationship between labor solidarity and the family values economy. On one hand, the possibility of new austerity inspired vigorous labor activism. American publicly admitted that most of the pilots who came down with the subcontracting flu were not grizzled, senior jumbo-jet captains skipping posh layovers in Rio and Rome, but were young, newly-hired domestic pilots.<sup>297</sup> These junior crewmembers often lived in crowded airport "crash-pads" with other new pilots and flight attendants sitting on call for pre-dawn check-ins and grueling all-nighters. When I flew for United in

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<sup>295</sup> American Airlines v. Allied Pilots Association, Order of Contempt, The United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas, Wichita Falls Division, Case no. 7:99-CV-025-X, 3.

<sup>296</sup> K. Fairbank, "Pilots Union Fined 45.5 Million for Sick-Out." Philadelphia Enquirer 16 Apr. 1999, C1.

<sup>297</sup> Hageman

the late 1990s, I spent a brief period living in a crash-pad next to Boston's Logan International Airport, splitting a 2-bedroom apartment with 10 other people who included three gay flight attendants in their twenties, a middle-aged Russian flight attendant who split her time between the U.S. and Europe, and a 50-plus pilot who commuted to his family life on the West Coast. Bunk bed filled pads like ours were reported to be strongholds of the American subcontracting flu that occurred just before we all moved in together. Challenging the inevitability of a new round of work speedups, and confronting provisions in labor law that make it much easier to fire a junior employee than a senior one, young employees risked a decade of training and apprenticeship to participate in the action.

On the other hand, as new bonds solidified between junior American Airlines pilots, new tensions emerged between employees across brands. Rather than fellow dispossessed workers, union activists at American figured Reno Air workers as agents of dispossession, strangers at the gate threatening to cheapen pilot and flight attendant futures. This widening rift between unionized groups was most evident in American unionists' refusal to negotiate a seniority integration process for incoming Reno Air employees at American. By the Spring of 1999, it was clear that American management had backed off any intent to subcontract to Reno Air, instead taking concrete steps to subsume all inherited flying under existing union contracts. Nevertheless, labor leaders insisted that opening American's contracts to rearrange seniority lists to accommodate newcomers from Reno Air aided and abetted management's insidious

commitment to subcontracting. In the process, longstanding procedures guaranteeing workers “fair and equitable” seniority credit during corporate mergers were tossed out. Instead of granting Reno Air employees recognition for their years of labor aloft, pilot and flight attendant leaders argued that Reno Air employees should be stapled to the bottom of the American roster, as any other formula would be a “voluntary reduction” - and therefore violation - of original American employees’ seniority.<sup>298</sup> American’s activists implied that management could have whatever hookups with discount airlines it wanted, but that front line employees should not have to take on the waylaid groups of workers born out of such connections.

***Hierarchical Dilemmas:  
The Seniority System and the Trend Toward Confiscation***

While APFA extended an olive branch to Reno Air flight attendants by going to the bargaining table and negotiating a small cash bonus for the lost seniority – workers got between \$500 and \$6,000 depending on how long they had been with Reno<sup>299</sup> – the unilateral action forcing newcomers to the bottom of the seniority list points to a new dilemma for flight attendant activists in the family values age. As American Airlines subcontractors like Chatauqua and American Eagle were regularly taking delivery of Embraer ERJ-145 regional jets, more and more flying was being pulled away from unionized flight attendants at the parent company. So even without Carl Icahn tearing up flight attendants’

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<sup>298</sup> Drew Engelke, “Reno Air: Overview of the Current Situation,” Memorandum from the Communications Committee of the Allied Pilots Association to all members, 08 Feb. 1999.

<sup>299</sup> International Brotherhood of Teamsters, “Reno Air Teamsters Merger Committee Newsletter,” 12 Apr. 1999.

contract, and even without Victoria Frankovich facing a lockout after storming the barricades, there were going to be far fewer resources to go around for American crews. While activists undoubtedly borrowed from the toolkits that had proved so useful in the late-1970s – using grassroots and legislative activism to try to slow the subcontracting process down – flight attendants also deployed a new mode of economic agency resting on self-defense and confiscation. American Airlines flight attendants, in other words, moved to protect their share of the industry’s shrinking pie of material resources even if that required making use of the dispossessing technologies of the family values economy that had so troubled them. So for example, when the Reno Air sale closed, American’s West Coast route network mushroomed. APFA members got first pick of all this new flying, gaining access to the most desirable, highest paying schedules with the most days off. By denying Reno Air flight attendants credit for their years of labor aloft, APFA turned corporate mergers – processes that had been regularly used to enforce the austerity of the family values economy – into opportunities to secure new material gains for the group of flight attendants it represented. The Reno Air purchase thus ended up affording American Airlines flight attendants new career opportunities even as their labor was being cheapened and sped up by the subcontracting system.

It is no surprise that seniority became an arena where the confiscatory tendencies of the family values economy came together. While generations of progressive unions had vigorously defended the seniority system as the best



means to block management favoritism along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, language ability, age and political affiliation, we must recognize that seniority is also a deeply hierarchical system of distribution. Union shops organized around seniority allot resources based on one's position *above* or *below* other employees, not merely *how long* a worker has served. Seniority certainly provides some fixed value, notably via annual wage increases hinging only on the number of months or years spent in a given workplace. But for scheduling, benefits, vacations, and layoffs, seniority determines an employee's share of workplace resources only as it relates to other employees' shares, rewarding those on the top of the list and depriving those on the bottom. This means that in a seniority-based shop, an employee may maximize compensation in two ways: by convincing the company to distribute more, giving everyone across the board raises; or by finding a way to put more employees below her on the seniority list, as American flight attendants did during the Reno Air deal. In an age where unions faced massive barriers to winning large-scale advances for all workers, the second route became an increasingly tempting means to secure raises and job security for some.<sup>300</sup>

The hierarchical properties of the seniority system thrust it to the center of the struggle playing out in the American-TWA merger, a deal dwarfing the Reno affair in cost and complexity. Though American management pounded pilot

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<sup>300</sup> While seniority remains a crucial element of workplace justice struggles, preventing managers from awarding lucrative or desirable labor based on nepotism, racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination, the hierarchical nature of seniority reinforces many of the exclusions the system aims to contest. African American labor activists, for example, have long noted that since overt racism made black workers the last hired by the automobile industry during its early and mid-twentieth century boom, that seniority made them the first fired during the economic crisis of the 1970s. In this case, seniority was the handmaiden for new forms of racism emerging with deindustrialization.

activists after the Reno Air subcontracting flu, executives openly acknowledged that labor had scored an advance during the Reno fight. Managers admitted that they were on notice that workers would mobilize not only in the face of subcontracting threats, but also against all mergers if such deals involved modifications of seniority lists. American's Vice President of Employee Relations Jeff Brundage told a Senate panel:

As you well know, there was a very difficult occurrence in another acquisition by American (the Reno Air deal), and we had learned our lessons. We had learned our lessons that we would have to go out of our way to inform our employees that we understood what their contracts said... There was no circumstance under which we would make the TWA asset acquisition if (legal protections for TWAers seniority) were named because of the very tension they would have created with our own employees.<sup>301</sup>

Brundage's summary of the lessons learned in the American-Reno Air employee conflict is disturbingly revealing. He admits that management made a huge mistake in failing to adequately anticipate, acknowledge, and respect union contracts and union activism during airline consolidation. But to make up for the disregard, and to provide American unionists a new voice and new agency in the upcoming TWA deal, Brundage argues that American's legal department must strip job security protections from incoming employees' contracts, tipping the balance of power toward his own workforce in any dispute between unions.

These lessons – that paradoxically transformed management from an agent of family values era austerity into a guarantor of unionized employees' contractual rights – convinced American Airlines executives to insist on a unique

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<sup>301</sup> “TWA/American Airline Workforce Integration,” 65, 67.

set of stipulations prior to closing the TWA purchase in 2001. Most striking was a requirement in the purchase agreement forcing TWA to file for bankruptcy before the sale closed. Rather than a simple reaction to TWA's debt load – American had already agreed to cover nearly \$4 billion in TWA debt – managers at American hatched the TWA bankruptcy plan to instrumentalize Section 1113 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code. Functioning as a line item veto for managers, Section 1113 allows bankrupt companies to reject all or part of debt-generating contracts. American's leadership team identified two cases where Section 1113 would be necessary for a successful merger. First and most predictably, they insisted on torpedoing the Karabu Ticketing contract, protecting American from Carl Icahn's continued attempts to siphon cash from TWA's most valuable assets. Secondly and more troublingly, American's executives mandated an 1113 motion against the "Standard Labor Protective Provisions" (LPPs) in all collective bargaining agreements between TWA and its unionized workers.<sup>302</sup>

LPPs began to appear in airline union contracts with the push for deregulation in the 1970s. The provisions provided a safety net for employees when airlines reorganized the labor process during mergers, guaranteeing severance pay for those laid off, reimbursement for moving expenses during forced transfers, mandating a "fair and equitable" integration of union seniority lists, and referring any remaining disputes over seniority or working conditions to a neutral arbitrator. LPPs were originally guaranteed by the government, born in railroad labor relations in 1939, and first appearing in the airline industry with the

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<sup>302</sup> "TWA/American Airline Workforce Integration," 10, 83-85.

proposed merger of United and Western Airlines in 1950. Government regulators sharpened and clarified LPPs in coming decades, standardizing them after a particularly messy labor dispute in the 1972 merger of East Coast regionals Allegheny and Mohawk Airlines, and applying these “Allegheny-Mohawk” or “Standard” LPPs in all subsequent mergers.<sup>303</sup>

Though the 1978 Airline Deregulation Act ended the government mandate to enforce LPPs, Congress, union leaders, and even airline managers reaffirmed their commitment to the Allegheny-Mohawk precedent in the 1980s, ostensibly because it prevented lengthy, expensive inter-union disputes and resulting strikes or work slowdowns.<sup>304</sup> Companies and unions continued to follow LPPs on a voluntary basis after the Federal Government began withholding such protections when conservative ideologue Elizabeth Dole took the helm of the Department of Transportation. After 1985, Dole repeatedly denied LPPs under the aegis that, in a deregulated environment, “government would limit its intervention in airline affairs, including labor matters.”<sup>305</sup> To challenge Dole’s intervention, airline unions bargained with management to write LPPs directly into labor contracts. Though the new language provided an important layer of insulation for workers in some cases, privatizing labor protective provisions left them newly vulnerable to the bankruptcy process, as a single Section 1113 petition by management could

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<sup>303</sup> “Airline Mergers and Acquisitions: The Question of Labor Protection,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on Aviation of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation of the United States Senate, 21 Nov. 1985, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986. 22,37, 63-65.

<sup>304</sup> “Airline Mergers and Acquisitions,” 63.

<sup>305</sup> “Airline Mergers and Acquisitions,” 47.

abrogate and invalidate the Allegheny-Mohawk section of a collective bargaining agreement.

***“What are the Chances we could Get Away with it?”  
Democratic Unionism and Confiscation in the Family Values Age***

This very machination – management’s threatened Section 1113 filing against privatized, contractual labor protective provisions – opened a new space for APFA to act, as they would no longer be bound by any state or legal responsibility for TWA flight attendants’ wellbeing during the merger. The union’s subsequent actions on this privatized, deregulated landscape raise fundamental questions about the role of democracy in trade union representation. Notions of “democracy” – whether an amorphous ideal or a body of precise, juridical prescriptions<sup>306</sup> – sustained powerful activist and intellectual critiques of bureaucratic, mid-Twentieth Century unionism, challenges that in many ways reinvented labor activism in the 1970s by making use of feminist and civil rights activist commitments to grassroots, participatory democracy. Activists rejected dominant models of collective bargaining, where company labor relations experts and union business agents bartered behind closed doors, penning wages, work rules, health coverage, and retirement benefits into contracts with little input from those on the front lines. Generations of dissident movements - from African

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<sup>306</sup> Calls for democratic unionism have meant a number of things to union reform movements. In some cases, democracy has sustained calls for proportional representation of women or people of color in elected union leadership positions or on union executive boards. In other cases, activists have used notions of democracy to demand procedural reform within unions in which members directly elect leaders, vote on contracts, and set policy via referendums. See intellectual genealogy below.

American revolutionary unionists in the UAW in the 1960s<sup>307</sup>, to feminist agitators in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>308</sup>, to the “rank and file democracy movement” against concessionary bargaining in the manufacturing sector in the 1980s<sup>309</sup> – invoked “democracy” to demand a unionism resting on direct representation of the ideas, politics, and concerns of the rank and file. Democratic notions – inclusion, participation, and enfranchisement – were the rhetorical and practical foundations of the dissident flight attendant movement that spawned IFFA at TWA and APFA at American in 1977.<sup>310</sup>

Once a seeming panacea for flight attendant activists, democratic unionism was newly troubled as austerity-driven angers and fears peaked among those on the front lines at American. The rank and file deluged APFA headquarters with anxiety-ridden emails and phone calls about the TWA deal, with many demanding that the union protect their jobs by denying seniority to the TWA group. Copies of the TWA flight attendant seniority list – some circulated online by grassroots activists and others distributed by APFA itself - blew through the American flight attendant ranks like a prairie fire. American flight attendants recoiled at how senior the TWA bunch was – 25% of TWAers began flying

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<sup>307</sup> Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, Detroit I Do Mind Dying. Boston: South End Press, 1998.

<sup>308</sup> See: Frieda S. Rozen, “Turbulence in the Air: The Autonomy Movement in the Flight Attendant Unions,” Ph.D. diss, Pennsylvania State University, 1988., and: Toni Gilpin, On Strike for Respect: The Clerical and Technical Workers’ Strike at Yale University, 1984-1985 Urbana-Champaign, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1995.

<sup>309</sup> See, for example: Peter Rachleff, Hard Pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement Boston: South End Press, 1993.

<sup>310</sup> Democratic notions were particularly compelling to flight attendants, who, because of their gender, were long denied basic access to the trade union processes. Elected leaders of Transport Workers Union flight attendant locals, for example, were not even allowed at the bargaining table during contract negotiations with airlines, as male union bureaucrats wholly controlled flight attendants’ economic affairs until the “stewardess rebellion” of 1976.

before 1970, and 1,600 people had been flying for more than 25 years – knowing that the new group could use their seniority to displace some of the American people from lucrative international flying, or even from their jobs.<sup>311</sup>

Management stoked American flight attendants' fears in a classic divide and rule strategy. A February 2001 flight attendant meeting at JFK airport, for example, was “all but out of control” after the base manager held up a copy of the TWA flight attendant seniority list, dramatizing the supposedly untouchable seniority of the new group.<sup>312</sup> Susan French, chairwoman of the APFA Merger and Acquisition Committee, described a rapidly intensifying and deteriorating situation in a letter to the President of the union:

As you well know, our committee has been inundated with calls and letters from our membership. We have received well over 1000 telephone calls and emails. It has become quite clear to the M&A committee that the issue of the TWA seniority integration is a political bombshell with land mines everywhere one treads. At the same time, our research and investigation is leading us ever closer to the conclusion that stapling 4,000 TWA flight attendants to the bottom of our seniority list may be the most inappropriate move we can make, although it is exactly what our members want and expect.<sup>313</sup>

Given American flight attendants' growing defensiveness against equitably integrating senior TWA flight attendants as broader anxieties about the subcontracting system intensified, union activists faced a grave question: what does it mean to honor the democratic and feminist ideals that gave birth to APFA

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<sup>311</sup> This seniority data was taken from a series of charts produced by APFA for union leaders. Many flight attendants interviewed for the project noted that the charts were widely circulated among front line flight attendants either via union list-serves or in management briefings. Data taken from: Association of Professional Flight Attendants, TWA Merger information packet for union leaders, approximately 15 Mar. 2001.

<sup>312</sup> Tommie Hutto-Blake, Letter to the APFA Board of Directors, 21 Mar. 2001.

<sup>313</sup> Susan French, Letter to John Ward, 23 Feb. 2001.

in the age of the family values economy? APFA could draw upon its longstanding commitment to democratic unionism, sidestepping expert political and legal opinions and embracing, in Susan French's words, "what the members want and expect." But by doing so and stripping TWA flight attendants of their seniority, flight attendant activists at American would inevitably corroborate management's effort to ditch a group of senior, organized, politicized, workers. Conversely, APFA could have honored longstanding labor feminist commitments to justice and equality, recognizing TWAers years aloft with full credit for their years of labor. But extending this olive branch could make APFA's own members – especially junior American Airlines flight attendants – newly vulnerable to layoffs as subcontracting ramped up.

The dilemma over fidelity or betrayal of labor feminist pasts fueled a painful debate among APFA leaders as the TWA closing approached. Backed into a corner by the "lightning speed" at which the TWA case progressed through the Bankruptcy Court, and frustrated by the absence of reliable information during the proceedings, Susan French delivered a barrage of questions to APFA General Counsel Steve Moldof:

We'd like to know..the value, if any, of APFA becoming more involved in the (TWA) bankruptcy process. For example, can we endeavor to undo American's promise to offer the TWA flight attendants jobs?...It is abundantly clear that 99.9% of our members want TWA flight attendants to go to the bottom of the seniority list, and that is exactly what they expect our union to do. Aside from the fundamental fairness issues raised by this position, what are the chances we could get away with it?<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Susan French, Letter to Steve Moldof, 19 Feb. 2001.



While the law is French's premise – drilling a union-side labor attorney about the consequences of APFA's support for the stapling – ethical and moral questions haunt her inquiry. Noting the “fundamental fairness issues raised by this position,” French seems exasperated to have to ask, “Can we help American break its promise to TWA flight attendants?” and “What are the chances we could get away with it?”

While the specter of “fairness” colors French's letter in generalities, other APFA activists made the case against the seniority stapling in specific historical and political terms. Lesbian feminist activist and APFA co-founder Patt Gibbs, for example, insisted that democratic unionism is never simply about directly representing “what the members want and expect,” but must be guided by adherence to principles that transform the agenda of the rank and file. Gibbs reminded APFA President John Ward in a letter:

Sometimes (my politics) caused me to lose an election for Union office, but my principles were more important than any election. I am sure you remember hearing flight attendants say that the company didn't like me because I was gay, or militant, or different looking, or mean, but so what...<sup>315</sup>

Gibbs ultimately argued that her union interventions were constitutive; rather than merely translating what a typical 1970s flight attendant wanted, Gibbs proposes that her decision to identify as a lesbian, her decision to eschew traditional white women's beauty standards, and her decision to take an unwavering and confrontational role with management manufactured a new set of desires for

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<sup>315</sup> Patt Gibbs, Letter to John Ward, 03 Mar. 2001.

American Airlines flight attendants in the 1970s.<sup>316</sup> These principled commitments – and their constitutive capacities – guided Tommie Hutto-Blake, another APFA co-founder, as she submitted a brief to the union’s Board of Directors on the eve of the seniority stapling vote. In particular, Hutto-Blake argued that ideals about workplace anti-sexism had built long and fruitful links between American and TWA flight attendants. As part of her submission, Hutto-Blake included a 1976 *American Civil Liberties Review* publication by TWA flight attendant, Stewardesses for Women’s Rights cofounder (see Chapter 1), and attorney Kathleen Heenen, a document notable not only for its rigorous feminist legal scholarship, but for its provocative collection of sexually charged airline marketing images centering American and TWA flight attendants. Hutto-Blake implored her colleagues, “Reflecting on our common history (with TWA flight attendants) will assist us in our current decisions. I urge the Governing Body to read and reflect on this article before making one of the toughest decisions of your career as a union advocate.”<sup>317</sup>

Reflecting on Hutto-Blake’s plea – grappling with how American flight attendants should acknowledge and honor their “common history” of activism with TWAers – APFA leaders began to argue that by the year 2000, history had

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<sup>316</sup> My analysis of Patt Gibbs’ politics is informed by Chantal Mouffe’s concept of the “constitutive role of the political” in *The Democratic Paradox*. While my analysis follows later Marxist feminist writers like Miranda Joseph’s critique of the radical democrats use of “equivalence” as a problematic concept – because it flattens out the differences between concepts like “sexuality” and “gender” and “race,” – radical democrats assumption that political mobilization itself creates new identities informs both my own analysis and flight attendants’ goals in the 1970s. See: Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* London: Verso, 2000. 26.

<sup>317</sup> Tommie Hutto-Blake, Letter to the APFA BOD, 18 Mar. 2001.

fundamentally altered what it means to be a labor feminist.<sup>318</sup> Flight attendants would undoubtedly continue to make use of the democratic institutions they built at American and TWA in the late 1970s. APFA activists would come together as a body of leaders elected directly from the rank and file, representing the interests of the people who are American Airlines flight attendants just as they had begun to do three decades earlier. But they would do this activist work in a completely different political and economic world from that of 1976, one where it was increasingly difficult to maintain and advance the material gains they had won from the airlines in previous decades, and in which the family values economy had fundamentally jeopardized the cross-airline feminist solidarity that flight attendants had built in the 1970s.

During that earlier period, APFA activists joined flight attendants from all airlines to lobby Congress to defend government-guaranteed LPPs against Elizabeth Dole and the Reagan administration's effort to privatize them.<sup>319</sup> But at the turn of the millennium, AFPA leaders insisted that Elizabeth Dole had won the debate in 1985; that government had been out of the business of protecting workers for two decades, and that any effort to protect the TWA flight attendants' seniority would be an anachronistic boondoggle harming APFA's own members. As the TWA merger dispute unfolded, APFA activists walked the halls of

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<sup>318</sup> For a genealogy of the category of labor feminism, and how it offers a different periodization – and one that is much less invested in the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s – than “liberal feminism” or “lesbian feminism” or “radical feminism,” see: Dorothy Sue Cobble, The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. See especially pages 120-130.

<sup>319</sup> “Airline Mergers and Acquisitions,” 37.

Congress with talking points “urging congress to maintain its longstanding policy to leave the resolution of seniority issues to the parties involved.”<sup>320</sup> A pilots’ union flyer from the same joint lobbying campaign with APFA was even more explicit in endorsing the privatized system of labor protection, arguing that government meddling would complicate the TWA deal by giving “special rights” to a few:

After the Airline Deregulation Act was passed more than 20 years ago, The federal government has moved away from the notion that it should have any role in determining employee issues raised by a merger, acquisition, or other transaction. (Seniority protection legislation) would mark a fundamental change in the longstanding “hands off” policy by giving special benefits to only one carrier’s employees – benefits not available to any other group of employees.<sup>321</sup>

American unionists’ public prescriptions offered a new vision for labor activism in the family values age: elected flight attendant leaders would sit down with managers and rationally arrive at seniority and job security solutions without the patronizing aegis of the regulatory state and its anachronistic labor protective provisions. In the process, APFA leaders re-framed the union not as network of employees or flight attendants or queers or feminists, but an organization representing the 19,000 flight attendants currently working under the contract between APFA and American Airlines. The goal of this organization would be to secure material resources for American Airlines flight attendants even if that

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<sup>320</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, “APFA Factsheet on the Airline Worker Seniority Amendment to the Defense Appropriations Bill of December 2001,” press release, approximately 01 Dec. 2001.

<sup>321</sup> Allied Pilots Association, “Facts about the Bond Amendment,” talking points, Washington, DC: Allied Pilots Association, 2002. 1.

meant stripping TWA flight attendants of their seniority, and even if that act of dispossession compromised flight attendants' broader principled commitment to winning cash for every flight at every airline and for whoever they called family. This new labor activist equation meant that the dispossession of TWA flight attendants was not an aberration or betrayal of feminist solidarity, but a necessary – even if unfortunate – part of twenty-first century democratic unionism. Thus flight attendant activists acquiesced to a foundational assumption of the family values economy: that jobs are fleeting; that no one can count on a living wage to support themselves or their family, and that any job that is here today may, with no notice, be gone tomorrow.

***A Gross Injustice?:  
Implementing the March 22<sup>nd</sup> Protocol***

Elected leaders from all American flight attendant bases put the austere democratic unionism of the family values economy to work at the APFA Board of Directors meeting on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001. The Board unanimously approved a set of principles directing the Merger and Acquisition Committee to meet with American managers and finalize a legally binding TWA seniority deal. Though there had been extensive internal debate surrounding a possible seniority denial to incoming TWA flight attendants, no elected APFA officials dissented from this March 22<sup>nd</sup> protocol in the final vote.<sup>322</sup> The unanimously endorsed road map promised new security and mobility for the original American group, calling for “protections against furlough” and “preservation of the bidding seniority of the

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<sup>322</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, “Resolution 4,” Minutes from the March 18<sup>th</sup>-March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001 Board of Directors Meeting, 22 Mar. 2001, 1.

American Airlines flight attendants.” To purchase these privileges, the document demands “non-credit for bidding seniority for TWA years of service in the event TWA flight attendants transfer from the fenced St. Louis and JFK bases.”<sup>323</sup> The TWA group would receive credit for their years of labor aloft only if they stayed in their original bases in Saint Louis and New York, and only during the months it took to finalize the operational merger. Once the deal was complete, the original-American group would “preserve their seniority” by confiscating the seniority of all TWA flight attendants in all bases. Thus TWA people would be the last to chose their daily flight schedules, the last eligible to fly higher-paying international trips, the last to chose vacation times, the last to qualify for transfer to a new base, the first in line for exhausting “reserve” on-call flight schedules, and the first furloughed if the airline downsized.<sup>324</sup>

News of the March 22<sup>nd</sup> protocol sent shockwaves through flight attendant social and political networks when it appeared on the APFA website and on the union’s HotLine phone network. Though airline seniority list mergers had always been ugly – with accusations of internal wrongdoing, calls for union leaders to resign, rank and file lawsuits against labor leadership, and grassroots movements to relinquish union membership plaguing consolidation for decades<sup>325</sup> – no flight

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<sup>323</sup> “Resolution 4,” 2.

<sup>324</sup> The March 22ns Protocol did demand full company seniority for TWA flight attendants, recognizing their years of TWA service for pay and vacation purposes. APFA’s decision to deny TWA flight attendants’ classification seniority is ultimately what set TWAers up to be laid off.

<sup>325</sup> For a particularly poignant example of the internal debates within unions during seniority mergers, see the arbitration decision from the 1982 merger of Republic Airlines and Hughes Air West: Arthur Stark, “Opinion and Award of Arthur Stark, Arbitrator, in the Seniority Integration Dispute between The Flight Attendants of Republic Airlines and the Flight Attendants of Republic West,” 27 Apr. 1982.

attendant union had ever dumped *all* of newcomers' seniority on a wholesale basis. Flight attendants had always gotten *something* for their years of service, even if that something was an itty-bitty cash payment as in the Reno Air deal.<sup>326</sup>

Given the unprecedented nature of the March 22<sup>nd</sup> protocol, reactions by the affected parties varied widely. TWA flight attendants were obviously flabbergasted and irate. Though front line flight attendants widely criticized their IAM leadership for a tepid and bungled response to the American deal - especially after the union voluntarily waived their contractual LPPs to grease the skids for a merger they insisted was the only means to save TWA union jobs<sup>327</sup> - Robert Roach, the General Vice President of the IAM immediately and vigorously responded to the March 22<sup>nd</sup> protocol. In a letter to APFA, Roach blustered:

Without even giving (TWA flight attendants) the benefit of a phone call, you announced on your "hotline" that in effect the APFA Board of Directors had voted unanimously to unfairly represent and prejudice TWA flight attendants represented by this organization. Be advised that if APFA goes forward with its announced plan to discriminate against TWA flight attendants...and place them at the bottom of the American Airlines' seniority list, we will take all legal measures available...to prevent this gross injustice.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> The Reno Air flight attendant seniority merger was itself an anomaly. In all previous mergers, flight attendants were awarded classification seniority at their new employer based either on their original date-of-hire, or on a mathematical formula determined by a neutral arbitrator. In all of these cases, flight attendants got at least some actual bidding power from their years of service. In the Reno Air case, flight attendants got no seniority credit, but were compensated in cash for their seniority. Though many flight attendants from Reno Air were angry about the deal, their severity of their case was mitigated by the overall junior status of all Reno Air flight attendants. Given that Reno Air was a new airline, its most senior flight attendant had flown for only 6 years. The TWA case was vastly different, as the most senior flight attendant started in 1955, and 25% of TWA flight attendants had flown for over 30 years on the date of the American-TWA merger.

<sup>327</sup> All TWA flight attendants interviewed for this project expressed anger and resentment at the IAM's choice to voluntarily waive TWA flight attendants' scope clause and Allegheny-Mohawk LPPs. For a particularly thorough and ongoing commentary on the situation, see the "Ladybug" newsletters of flight attendant Kaye Chandler and the transcript of her interview for this project.

<sup>328</sup> Robert Roach, Letter to John Ward, 23 Mar. 2001.

While management was well aware of – and likely ecstatic about – the inter-union conflagration that Roach’s rebuke signaled, American’s labor relations department responded to the March 22<sup>nd</sup> protocol largely as if nothing had happened. After all, every other airline merger had resulted in some sort of seniority negotiation process, and management knew it would likely have to share the cost of hiring a neutral arbitrator to oversee such meetings. Robin Dotson, American’s Managing Director of Employee Relations, sent a brief and straightforward note to APFA nearly a month after the March 22<sup>nd</sup> protocol advertising the company’s readiness to begin a negotiation process, despite the protocol’s apparent refusal of refereed meetings. Dotson told APFA:

In accordance with our commitment to the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (“IAM”), we are currently in the process of choosing a neutral facilitator to meet with APFA and the IAM to discuss the seniority integration of TWA flight attendants. Please let me know as soon as possible when the APFA Merger & Acquisition Committee will be available in the next month for this meeting.<sup>329</sup>

Two days later, on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Dotson confirmed to both the IAM and APFA that American intended to hire Richard Kasher, a negotiations specialist from Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, to mediate seniority talks between the American and TWA flight attendants.<sup>330</sup> Over the coming days, Dotson, Roach, and Kasher coordinated their schedules and tentatively scheduled a summit meeting for late May in Philadelphia.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Robin Dotson, Letter to John Ward, 18 Apr. 2001.

<sup>330</sup> Robin Dotson, Letter to Richard Kasher, 20 Apr. 2001.

<sup>331</sup> Robert Roach, Letter to Robin Dotson, 23 Apr. 2001.



Logistical preparations for seniority negotiations ground to a halt on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2001, when APFA President John Ward sent a terse yet crucially important missive to Dotson. Ward reflected:

I have received your letters of April 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>.

As you know, APFA is not a party to any agreement reached between American Airlines and the IAM to retain a facilitator for the purpose of discussing the seniority integration of the TWA flight attendants.

As previously communicated, APFA intends to negotiate an Integration Agreement with the Company which is consistent with the guidelines set forth by the APFA Board of Directors on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001.<sup>332</sup>

Ward's letter to Dotson briefed company higher-ups of APFA's intent to scuttle the Philadelphia meetings by refusing to participate, insisting that American flight attendants would not be a party to seniority talks between TWA flight attendants and American management, and that the final post-merger seniority list should be determined only in a private, unrefereed meeting between Ward and American's labor relations department.

APFA never directly communicated with TWA flight attendants even as the union announced its intention to boycott the Philadelphia summit. The only time Ward addressed the TWA group was in a half-page response to Roach's public censure of the March 22<sup>nd</sup> protocol. Ward told TWA flight attendants and the IAM:

The resolution adopted by the APFA Board of Directors represented its considered judgment as to how best to proceed with regard to the TWA transaction, consistent with its legal

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<sup>332</sup> John Ward, Letter to Robin Dotson, 23 Apr. 2001.

responsibilities. Rest assured that our Board gave careful attention to your presentations and the difficult issues presented. Contrary to the comments in your March 23<sup>rd</sup> letter, APFA has not taken steps to displace anyone, including TWA flight attendants who may become American flight attendants in the future, or to otherwise harm any flight attendants, and has not engaged in any “anti-labor activities.”

APFA has a long and proud history of providing outstanding representation to the American flight attendants and of joining with and supporting flight attendants and others who are employed by air carriers and other entities... We look forward to continuing that course in the days ahead and to lending support and deriving support from our fellow labor unionists in the difficult times that lay ahead for us all.<sup>333</sup>

Though Ward broadly and philosophically engages Roach’s charge that APFA was preparing to violate labor’s timeless adage that “an injury to one is an injury to all,” he never makes any reference – in this letter or in any other public venue - to the logistics of the seniority merge process or to the IAM and American’s plans for a neutral facilitation. Instead, he leaves the merger at arms length, referring to TWAers as “flight attendants who may become American flight attendants in the future” – even though the American Airlines Board of Directors had already approved the TWA purchase agreement, and even though the closing was just 15 days away.

Ward’s radio silence toward TWA flight attendants’ pleas for a pre-merger seniority summit reveals the legal foundations of APFA’s confiscatory strategy. American flight attendant leaders offered a new and strictly literalist interpretation of airline labor law for the family values era, one that would exempt them from even discussing, much less arbitrating, the seniority issue with the TWA group or

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<sup>333</sup> John Ward, Letter to Robert Roach, 26 Mar. 2001.

their IAM union leadership. APFA avoided seniority negotiations by placing TWA flight attendants in a troublesome legal “time bind” created by silences in the Railway Labor Act (RLA), the 1926 law governing labor relations on the railroads and airlines (see Chapters 1 and 3). APFA recognized that in the letter of the RLA, there was no legal requirement for a union seniority summit during airline consolidation, even though one had taken place in every airline merger prior to the American-TWA affair.<sup>334</sup> The summit process was never written into the RLA, as it was instead part of the government-guaranteed system of labor protective provisions. But with the advent of a family values economy dedicated to furthering unilateral managerial authority by reducing state intervention in the economy, LPPs stopped being enforced.

Absent legal or regulatory framework for seniority mergers, APFA simply made one up. Union leaders wagered that they could bypass the pre-merger summit process, proceeding directly to American management and submitting a combined seniority list designed entirely by APFA, and with no input from TWA flight attendants. American would keep the document, set it aside while they prepared to merge the two companies, and then begin to honor it once the operational merger occurred. APFA activists, thus, moved to introduce big box retail’s labor relations paradigm in the airlines, where all personnel policy

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<sup>334</sup> Since seniority summits were required by Federal LPPs, they took place in every merger until 1985, when the DoT stopped enforcing LPPs. The airline industry then entered an intense period of consolidation in 1986 and 1987, most notably with the Delta-Western, Northwest-Republic, Ozark-TWA, USAir-PSA, and American-AirCal deals. Seniority summits took place on a voluntary basis in all of those deals as management continued to use the LPP system as a basic standard. Mergers at the major airline level then tapered off until the late 1990s, when American’s unions avoided the summit system in both the TWA and Reno Air deals.

changes are made behind closed doors without substantive oversight by employee advocacy groups.

Though writing TWA flight attendants out of the seniority merge process might seem like a glaring lack of due process, especially as they would soon become APFA members and pay APFA dues, labor policymakers had given the nod to similar practices in other industries. In a 1988 merger of Riser Foods and Rini-Rigo Warehouse, two grocery outfits from suburban Cleveland, the National Labor Relations Board<sup>335</sup> argued that *time* decides whether or not unions could make deals with management that would negatively impact the seniority and working conditions of future members. The Board found that *prior* to the operational merger, *prior* to the moment the incumbent union begins representing the new members, that the incumbent union can make any agreement it wants with management, even if that agreement would treat incoming members harshly. The company could then enforce this agreement *after* the operational merger. If it turns out that the agreement discriminates against incoming members, the Board ruled that newcomers have no right to sue their new union because the agreement was made *before* they were members of that union.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> The National Labor Relations Board interprets and enforces the Wagner Act of 1935 and subsequent amendments. The Board has no jurisdiction over airline workers, as they are governed by the National Mediation Board, the interpreter and enforcer of the Railway Labor Act of 1926. The Riser case therefore has no official bearing on APFA's treatment of American flight attendants. It was, however, regularly cited APFA's defense against the series of Duty of Fair Representation Lawsuits that Reno Air and TWA flight attendants filed against APFA, and likely helped APFA win all DFR cases that have been decided to date. For more information see: Eleanor McNamara-Blad, et. al. v. The Association of Professional Flight Attendants, Case no. 00-15846, United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, filed 11 Jan. 2002.

<sup>336</sup> The text of the following NLRB decision thoroughly describes the legal precedents for the "time bind": Riser Foods, Inc. and Douglas F. Schreiber, and the International Brotherhood of

Herein lies the “time bind.” Since airline consolidation creates immense logistical challenges, combining vastly different schedules, facilities, training procedures, and aircraft fleets, most mergers involve an “interim period” where two airlines are financially linked but operationally separate. For the American-TWA deal, between April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the date the sale closed, and July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003, when the government officially certified that the two companies had become a single airline operation, TWAers would continue to work TWA airplanes, follow TWA procedures, and remain members of the IAM, the union for TWA flight attendants. At the same time, American flight attendants would fly American airplanes, follow American procedures, and stay in their pre-merger APFA bargaining unit. APFA would only begin representing *both* groups after the government officially ruled that the operational merger had occurred. The problem for TWA flight attendants was that in the Riser-Rini-Rego case, the Board found that workers are legally entitled to equitable treatment only from their *current* union. APFA would be exempt from the duty to provide TWAers a fair and equitable seniority agreement because it didn’t represent the group at the moment they submitted the seniority list to American. Since TWA flight attendants were not members of APFA when it sent the merged seniority list to American management, they lacked a legal procedural basis to interrupt – or even weigh in on – the agreement. Nonetheless, TWA flight attendants would be

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Teamsters, AFL-CIO, Case 8-CA-21686, Case 8-CB-6465, National Labor Relations Board, 30 Nov. 1992.

subject to its dictates once they began to fly for the new, merged company in July of 2003.

***The December 17<sup>th</sup> Accords: Dispossession and Inclusion in the 9/11 Era***

While the March 22<sup>nd</sup> protocol and the Riser-Rini-Rego precedent presented TWAers with perhaps the most ominous conditions ever facing flight attendants during airline consolidation, the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 catapulted the merger onto a plane of unprecedented difficulty and intensity. Though the political and economic impacts of 9/11 on the airline industry have garnered widespread media attention, a brief review of American flight attendants' unique proximity to the crisis is necessary to better understand the merger's painful material and emotional outcomes. Flight attendants for American Airlines were the first attacked that morning in September. Hijackers killed nine working flight attendants as they crashed American flight 11, a Boeing 767 operating the breakfast flight from Boston to Los Angeles, into the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46am. Four more flight attendants lost their lives when flight 77, the first daily American Boeing 757 from Washington Dulles to Los Angeles, careened into the Pentagon 51 minutes later.

As the airline industry scrambled to respond to the unparalleled scale and violence of September 11<sup>th</sup> – with airports quickly redesigning lobbies to accommodate new security scrutiny, airlines armoring jetliner cockpits to prevent unauthorized access, and crewmembers struggling to cope with the sense of violation that their workplace had been used as a weapon and thrust into the

center of a global political and economic conflict – American Airlines faced another disaster. On November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2001, another bright and cool autumn morning in New York, American flight 587, a fully-loaded Airbus A300 bound for Santo Domingo with 260 people on board, slammed into a brownstone lined boulevard in Belle Harbor, Queens minutes after takeoff from JFK airport. Seven more flight attendants perished. Though investigators later ruled out sabotage as a cause of the crash - instead concluding that pilots lost control after the vertical stabilizer separated from the aircraft during an encounter with the wake turbulence of a passing Japan Airlines 747 – the twisted remains of another American Airlines jet on a smoldering urban landscape left air travelers on the razor’s edge. The situation further deteriorated when, just a month after the flight 587 disaster and ninety days after 9/11, Al Qaeda operative Richard Reed packed his shoes with deadly C-4 explosive charges and boarded American flight 63 from Paris to Miami on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001. Though flight attendants’ deft and forceful physical response prevented Reed from detonating the bombs and crashing the Boeing 767 into the Atlantic, the harrowing near-aversion of sixth jumbo jet crash in three months left the airlines in financial ruins and gravely jeopardized flight attendants’ careers.

As the wave of accidents and attacks stoked a rapidly intensifying crisis of confidence in aviation safety, the cultures and politics of the immediate post-9/11 era further threatened the already reeling industry. Newly virulent and intensely racialized suspicions were cast upon Indian, Pakistani, Egyptian, Saudi Arabian,

Jordanian, and other passengers traveling to and from Southwest Asia and North Africa. While pilots, flight attendants, and other workers at U.S. airlines undoubtedly perpetuated this racism in many cases,<sup>337</sup> it undermined their own job security, as these populations were a necessary and profitable foundation of the airlines' international business. New legal restrictions on tourist and work visas for these passengers, and rampant racial and religious hostilities toward those able to clear bureaucratic hurdles and enter the United States, deeply constricted travel to and from the region. The situation only worsened once it seemed the Bush Administration would carry out its war with Iraq. International air travel to and from the United States fell off 32% between November of 2002 – the beginning of Bush's final push for invasion – and the declaration of "victory" the following May.<sup>338</sup>

While airlines' revenues evaporated amid rising global tensions, a series of deeply regressive public policy reforms strove to remake political economy in a way that would create immense new challenges for those living beyond the boundaries of traditional family. Drawing upon the Reagan Administration's "supply side" adaptation of neoclassical economics,<sup>339</sup> Congress attempted to

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<sup>337</sup> Given that the airlines' persistent lobbying against mandatory, comprehensive security training for pilots and flight attendants left flight crews without the technical skills to enforce new security measures, crews were often forced to make up security implementation policies on an ad-hoc bases. Racial profiling became a part of these ad-hoc security procedures in some cases. In my own flying for United – which in my case resumed with a San-Francisco to Washington DC flight on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – crew briefings varied by the day. On some trips, captains and pursers explicitly advocated racial profiling of "Middle Eastern" passengers, and in an equal number of other cases, flight attendants and pilots openly discussed how we refused to make our workplace an alibi for or participant in the racialized scapegoating sweeping the United States.

<sup>338</sup> Get footnote for the IATA website.

<sup>339</sup> Cite Jason's project here



stimulate the faltering millennial economy by reducing taxes, aiming the majority of savings at the wealthiest segment of the population. Resulting revenue shortfalls helped justify a new round of material and ideological attacks on the programs helping people who did not benefit from the economies of heteronormativity, most notably in the proposed privatization of social security that threatened the only guaranteed income for many older single, widowed, and childless people. Meanwhile, two dozen states passed referendums banning “gay marriage,” the most restrictive of which not only prevented the legal recognition of lesbian and gay relationships, but blocked states from extending benefits to any family that was not legally married, heterosexual, and nuclear.<sup>340</sup> The Federal Government brought these dispossessing practices to the airlines when it passed the Air Transport Security and Stabilization Act in late 2001. Though the system of loan guarantees the Act initiated allowed some carriers to remain solvent, airlines were required to freeze wages for six years to be eligible for the credit enhancement, concessions the state enforced on America West, ATA, and several other airline beneficiaries.<sup>341</sup> By early 2003, family values economy lynchpins of heteropatriarchy and austerity were the centerpieces of state efforts to revive the airlines and the broader economy from the 9/11 era downturn.

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<sup>340</sup> Both the labor movement and LGBT groups fiercely criticized the sweeping gay marriage bans of the 2000, 2002, and 2004 electoral cycles for forcing public employers to strip a variety of benefits for non-normative families from union contracts, and to deny the benefits to non-union employees. See AFL-CIO and HRC press releases from 2004: “Negotiated Contract Update 12/2/2004,” [Official Website of UAW Local 6000 – Michigan’s Best](#), 2004 United Auto Workers Local 6000, 2 December 2004., and: “HRC Denounces Michigan Health Care Denial,” [Human Rights Campaign](#), 2004 Human Rights Campaign, 2 December 2004. <<http://www.hrc.org>>.

<sup>341</sup> For a thorough and ongoing summary of the labor dispute over the signing of the ATSSA, see the Association of Flight Attendants’ bi-weekly email news updates from the Fall of 2001: The Association of Flight Attendants, “E-Lines,” October, 2001 – January, 2002.

Though flight attendants at all airlines struggled to digest and respond to the new impetus to enforce the family values economy, the situation at newly-merged American and TWA was particularly unmanageable. American flight attendants had spent a year bogged down in a protracted contract dispute with management, unable to reach an agreement on what would only have been the second new contract for flight attendants since the group shut American down with a strike over thanksgiving weekend, 1993. Six months before the 9/11 attacks, and while American was still turning solid profits, then-President Tommie Hutto-Blake warned all APFA members of a two-fold crisis threatening the very survival of APFA. First, Hutto-Blake raised the possibility that management was preparing to force a flight attendant strike in an effort to break the union. “Management is not serious about concluding negotiations with a contract that the APFA membership could endorse,” Hutto-Blake’s “All-Call” recorded message told the rank and file. Second, management’s new relationship with TWA could be a powerful new weapon in this union busting strategy. American could bait an APFA strike and then force employees from TWA – which American would own by April of 2001 - to permanently replace flight attendants on APFA picket lines. Conversely, American could subcontract lucrative international and long-haul flying to TWA, eliminating the jobs of APFA members without the hassle of a strike and lockout.<sup>342</sup>

The uncertainties of the family values age, and the threatening tenor of negotiations even before the 9/11 attacks, provided deep incentives for APFA to

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<sup>342</sup> Tommie Hutto-Blake, “All Call,” 04 Mar. 2001.

pursue a strike-averting deal with American Airlines. The problem, of course, was that APFA had few cards to play at the bargaining table. The union had virtually no ability to credibly threaten a strike, as rank and file members were desperate to protect their jobs amidst downsizing rumors, skyrocketing unemployment, and anxieties about strikebreaking and subcontracting to TWA. Meanwhile, save for a successful public employees strike in Minnesota in October of 2001, the intense nationalism and anti-radicalism of the immediate post-9/11 era meant that strikes – if only temporarily – vanished as a form of legitimate dissent.

American flight attendants did, of course, have one point of leverage to bring order to the situation. APFA would make the final determination on the order of the new, combined American-TWA flight attendant seniority list. The quicker APFA resolved the seniority dilemma and provided the company with a new roster, the faster American could complete the costly “interim period” of the merger, proving to skittish investors that the two companies had become a single, efficient entity. Furthermore, the position of TWA flight attendants on the seniority list – whether dovetailed by date of hire or stapled to the bottom – would deeply impact labor costs at the new airline. Since the TWAers were an older, senior bunch, their pay and vacation outlays would be much higher than those for new hires off the street.<sup>343</sup> If APFA stapled them to the bottom of the seniority list – making TWAers the first in line for post 9/11 layoffs – American would

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<sup>343</sup> Since standard industry practice – and the APFA March 22<sup>nd</sup> Protocol – would grant company seniority to incoming TWA flight attendants, and since they were a largely senior group, they would be comparatively expensive to employ. Denying classification seniority to TWAers would allow the company to furlough employees at the top of the pay scale, a cost savings that other carriers’ were prevented from exercising due to seniority language in their union contracts.

score new cost competitiveness by being able to axe expensive, senior flight attendants at a moment when contracts at United, Northwest, Continental, and other unionized carriers limited furloughs to cheap newbies.

This austere political and economic context – unprecedented financial turmoil in the airline industry, APFA’s pressing desire to provide economic security for members by locking in a new contract, and the potential labor cost savings of stapling TWA flight attendants to the bottom of the American seniority list – shaped a pact between APFA and American that, at least for the time being, sealed TWA flight attendants’ fate. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2001, APFA President John Ward convened a meeting with the Employee Relations department of American Airlines, generating and signing two documents that would transform the tripartite relationship between American flight attendants, TWA flight attendants, and American Airlines. The first of these covenants was a concession by the company. In a letter entitled “Agreement Prohibiting the Leveraging of TWA-LLC against the APFA,” American made a legally binding promise to refrain from using former TWA flight attendants as subcontractors or replacement workers in the broader contract dispute between APFA and the company. The agreement stipulated that once the Federal Government officially gave APFA the right to represent incoming TWA flight attendants, American would recognize TWAers as under the jurisdiction of the APFA contract and refrain from subcontracting to TWA. Furthermore, if APFA struck American Airlines as a result of failed contract negotiations, the airline would immediately shut the TWA

operation down, making it impossible to retain TWA flight attendants as permanent replacement workers.<sup>344</sup>

The second agreement between Ward and American managers was a quid pro quo for the first. In “Agreement on Seniority Integration and Related Matters Between American Airlines, Inc, and Association of Professional Flight Attendants Representing The Flight Attendants of American Airlines, Inc.,” the company and the union agreed that all incoming TWA flight attendants would receive a classification seniority date of April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the date American’s purchase of TWA closed. Though the company complied with standard industry practices and agreed to honor TWAers’ seniority for pay and vacation purposes, the accord meant that every TWA flight attendant – even those who wore pill-box hats working Lockheed Constellations on their first TWA trips in 1957 – would have just six months of seniority to protect their jobs in a rapidly downsizing industry, less seniority than all 19,000 flight attendants originally hired by American.<sup>345</sup>

In a moment when the heteropatriarchal and dispossessing foundations of the family values economy seemed their very harshest, throwing daunting hurdles in front of so many flight attendants and their spectrum of dependents, American flight attendants won security and inclusion with the December 17<sup>th</sup> accords.

When Ward signed the paperwork, APFA members were newly protected from

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<sup>344</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, “Agreement Prohibiting the Leveraging of TWA-LLC Against APFA,” 17 Dec. 2001.

<sup>345</sup> Association of Professional Flight Attendants, “Agreement on Seniority Integration and Related Matters Between American Airlines, Inc, and Association of Professional Flight Attendants Representing The Flight Attendants of American Airlines, Inc.,” 17 Dec. 2001.

the subcontracting system, sheltered from permanent replacement on the picket line, and cushioned from the mass furloughs impacting all other airline employees. The same pen strokes abandoned TWA flight attendants, exempting them from any remaining spoils of working for a once powerful company like American. In the December 17th documents' bitter interdependence, we see a particularly painful phenomenon of the family values economy, where some working people gain mobility by upholding the upward redistribution of wealth, power, and resources that defined the political economy of the age.

Despite the bitter watershed that the December 17<sup>th</sup> accords delivered to TWA flight attendants, APFA members by no means absconded with the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow as the ink dried on the pages. Though the pact removed the immediate threat of a lockout or wholesale subcontracting, the subsequent truce between APFA and management that the December 17<sup>th</sup> accords helped enable became the most painful contract settlement in American flight attendants' history. That deal, solidified as caustic negotiations drew to a close in late April, 2002, rolled back most of the gains that American and TWA flight attendants won in the late 1970s. APFA activists certainly took some consolation in preserving flight attendants' defined benefit pension plan, retirement benefits that were stripped from peers at Delta, Northwest, United, and other major carriers, but they nonetheless reeled as total flight attendant compensation was slashed by over 30%. The most notable of the concessionary contracts' many consequences was the dramatic speedup of flight attendant work. Longer shifts,

shorter layovers, fewer days off, less vacation and sick time, and smaller crews meant that American could fly the same schedule with a significantly smaller flight attendant population.<sup>346</sup>

Work speedups also meant that over 20% of American flight attendants would forcibly lose their jobs, a burden born almost entirely by older women who began their careers at TWA. Mass layoffs began on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002, when 420 flight attendants – all former-TWA – were ordered to turn in their badges and flight manuals and leave American Airlines. The furlough process gradually but steadily worked its way through the entire TWA flight attendant population, with younger 1990s hires gone by New Years Day 2003, and some 1960s veterans kept on through the middle of the summer. Each new announcement meant that an older, more experienced group was faced with unemployment. When 259 TWAers got their pink slips on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003, for example, they averaged 49.6 years old, with every furloughed flight attendant over 40 and 42% of the group over 50. By the time the furlough process drew to a close at the end of the year, 3,394 TWA flight attendants were on long-term layoff from American Airlines, 1500 of which would never get their jobs back. The furloughed group averaged 51 years old, with 58% of those on layoff over 50. If TWA flight attendants had gotten full seniority credit during the merger, 3,085 of these flight attendants

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<sup>346</sup> For a thorough description of the legal battle that took place over the concessionary settlement of April, 2002, see the court records for: Sherry Cooper, et al. v. TWA Airlines, LLC, American Airlines, Inc., and the Association of Professional Flight Attendants, 02-CV-3477 (NG) (KAM), United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, 2005 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 41007, decided 18 Jul. 2005. See also: Ann M. Marcoux, et al. v. American Airlines, Inc., AMR Corp., and the Association of Professional Flight Attendants, 04-CV-1376 (NG) (KAM), filed 13 Nov. 2006.

would have kept their jobs. The furloughed group would have averaged 36.8 years old, with just 12.3% of those in unemployment lines over 50, if date-of-hire seniority would have been extended to TWAers as it had in most other airline mergers.<sup>347</sup> These realities were most stark at Saint Louis, the airport where the majority of TWAers were based. As the Saint Louis operation was depopulated in rounds of TWA layoffs, the airline brought in 900 original-American hires as replacements, literally swapping out TWA bodies for American bodies, and even forcibly transferring new American recruits from their Los Angeles and Miami stations to cover vanished TWAers work. The process was complete on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003, when the last TWA flight attendant turned in her wings, grounded in what perhaps had become the bitterest inter-union conflict in the history of the U.S. airline industry.

***Dignity is not Negotiable:  
Stripping Management of the Merger Weapon in 2007***

The wholesale grounding of TWA flight attendants in 2003 seems to confirm what we already know about labor in the 2000s. The race and gender-based inequities of the family wage system were intensifying rather than abating, and they were cast into a family values economy that provided none of the robustness of the 1960s boom. Indeed as a part of their 2003 duty of fair representation lawsuit against APFA, TWA flight attendants submitted evidence

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<sup>347</sup> All of the data on TWA flight attendants' age and seniority was collected, analyzed, and submitted to the Court by Thomas DiPrete, a Columbia University Professor contracted to assist TWAers in their class action age discrimination lawsuit against American and APFA. The age discrimination charge was later withdrawn and their claim was rolled into the broader "Sherry Cooper, et al" DFR lawsuit. That case was dismissed. TWAers only remaining claims against APFA remain in the "Marcoux at al." DFR case. See the conclusion of this dissertation for further explanation of why TWAers were denied legal relief. See DiPrete 1-5.



from the union's online discussion board that some American flight attendants had begun to refer to the TWA group as "furlough cushions."<sup>348</sup> Presumably referring to the very real role of TWA flight attendants in shielding their American peers from the blow of 9/11, the category grossly referenced the overt sexualization that management had used to cheapen flight attendant labor before groups like IFFA and APFA intervened to stop it. In both form and content, "furlough cushion" echoed "sky whore," "trolley dolley," "air mattress," and other 1960s pejoratives resting on the compulsory flexibility and violability of flight attendant labor. But as TWA flight attendants stood in unemployment lines, such "furlough cushions" were not even able to enjoy the psychological wages of glamour that their "air mattress" foremothers expected.

While this ugly history weighed on TWA flight attendants situation, genealogies of flight attendant activism informed TWA flight attendants' response. Making use of a dissident toolkit developed over three decades of activism, the TWA group ended up pointing to the ways in which the family values economy was partial and contestable rather than interminable. TWA flight attendants began to embark on a new round of mobilization to mitigate the despair peeking in their ranks. 22-year veteran Saint Louis-based flight attendant Roger Graham argued that his friends' pain drove his own decision to help lead the new initiative:

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<sup>348</sup> The use of the term "furlough cushion" was one of many premises of the TWA flight attendants' lawsuit against both American and APFA. See: "Sherry Cooper, et. al. vs. TWA Airlines LLC, American Airlines, APFA, and Don Carty," United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, 2003 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 14211, 30 Jun. 2003.

I was at home one night. I was with another flight attendant who was going through a difficult personal time because of the layoff and this really pissed me off. And I went into the bedroom and I told my partner how much this angered me. We had no money – but we decided to go down to Dallas and picket our own union for doing nothing to get us back.<sup>349</sup>

Graham and a dozen other displaced flight attendants decided to coordinate a push to the Dallas headquarters of APFA to set up a picket line in front of their new union at American Airlines, demanding that the organization invalidate the December 17<sup>th</sup> accord and renegotiate a fairer seniority integration agreement. Only 40 people showed up, but as they all spent precious time and fleeting economic resources on the trip, they built a new network bent on furthering their cause.

That opportunity appeared in the legislative arena, and in particular in the dead-heat 2006 Senate race in TWA's home state of Missouri. Incumbent Republican Senator Jim Talent faced a vigorous challenge from upstart Democrat Claire McCaskill in a year that was swinging toward the Democrats nationally. Graham and his peers honed in on a public debate between Talent and McCaskill at a Missouri Public Television affiliate in the Saint Louis suburb of Clayton. The Dallas activists claimed to have the support of 12,000 displaced TWA employees who would vote in Missouri, and promised to deliver that constituency to any candidate who promised to support a concrete legislative remedy for the TWA flight attendant seniority stapling. After wrangling 10 seats in the small television studio and submitting a questions that the moderator promised to ask during the

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<sup>349</sup> Roger Graham, personal interview, 31 Mar. 2008.

debate, 90 additional TWA flight attendants rallied with bullhorns and signs outside the venue, drawing attention to their cause despite a driving rain and 40 knot winds.<sup>350</sup>

Though both candidates paid lip service to the injustice of the TWA affair on camera, only McCaskill was prepared enough for the question to promise a legal means not only to overturn the layoffs but to prevent the situation from reoccurring at another airline. A week later, Graham met with McCaskill to review and finalize her commitment to flight attendants.<sup>351</sup> Her intervention proved acceptable to Graham, who promised to deliver the votes and who posed for a media photoshoot with McCaskill holding a model of a TWA Boeing 767.<sup>352</sup> McCaskill upset Talent in the November general election, beating the incumbent by 40,000 votes and deeply energizing the displaced TWA workforce who turned out en masse in her support.

McCaskill quickly delivered on her promise to the Dallas activists in two ways. The first was much more controversial than the second. McCaskill called APFA leaders and American Airlines upper managers into a meeting, convincing the union and management to draw up an extension of “recall rights” for furloughed TWA flight attendants. Under the then-current APFA contract, laid off flight attendants would be first in line for new openings for five years after their last trip. Since many TWA flight attendants began their forced furloughs in

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<sup>350</sup> Timeline and summary of the McCaskill interactions come from my personal interview with Roger Graham, who coordinated the Missouri effort.

<sup>351</sup> For details of that commitment see: Claire McCaskill, Letter to former TWA flight attendants, 30 Oct. 2006.

<sup>352</sup> Roger Graham, photograph, 30 Oct. 2006

mid-2002, those recall rights began expiring in 2007, allowing American to begin to permanently fire the group. The McCaskill deal moved those recall rights back to seven years, allowing the industry 24 additional months to recover from the 9/11 slump. The extension, however, would only cover the 1,200 TWA flight attendants still on the recall list in December of 2007, allowing American to permanently dump the 1,500 who had already passed the five year mark. Many TWA flight attendants – especially IFFA-supporters who fiercely fought to the recall of all their peers during the Icahn lockout in 1986 – scoffed at the deal, insisting that it violated the basic principle of the labor movement that an injury to one is an injury to all.<sup>353</sup>

McCaskill’s other initiative drew much broader support among the TWA group. The Dallas activists teamed up with both Missouri senators to introduce the McCaskill-Bond Act, which would restore portions of the Allegheny-Mohawk Labor Protective Provisions to Federal law books. Since by 2007 TWA flight attendants lacked both a union and an employer, the group teamed up with AFA who had long hoped to re-codify LPPs in law to protect their flight attendant members at 26 airlines. Sliding McCaskill-Bond into the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008 to avoid a near-certain Bush veto of stand-alone legislation, activists re-established sections 3 and 13 of the Allegheny-Mohawk LPPs as the governing for labor relations during mergers and acquisitions in the airline and rail industries. The new language would force unions to deliver “fair

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<sup>353</sup> “McCaskill Brokers Deal to Save 1,200 Jobs at American Airlines,” U.S. Senator Claire McCaskill, 2007 U.S. Senator Claire McCaskill, 22 Dec. 2007. <[http://mccaskill.senate.gov/?p=press\\_releases](http://mccaskill.senate.gov/?p=press_releases)>

and equitable” credit to all effected unionized groups in mergers, and to submit any dispute over the meaning of “fair and equitable” to a neutral arbitrator with the power to enforce a solution.<sup>354</sup> Thus, Allegheny-Mohawk effectively closed the loophole that APFA used to boycott the Philadelphia seniority summit in April of 2001. So just when it seemed that a family values economy commitment to austerity made a government-orchestrated safety net a vestige of the past, the LPPs of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century were once again the law of the land.

The return of the Allegheny-Mohawk framework had a massive impact on flight attendants experience in the new consolidation wave in the U.S. airlines at the end of the decade. In 2008, Delta’s successful acquisition bid for Northwest Airlines touched off the largest merger in the industry’s history. The new Delta’s immense scale forced 3<sup>rd</sup> place United to move on 4<sup>th</sup> place Continental to leapfrog Delta back into United’s once-proud status as the world’s largest airline. No party from the union movement or from management in either of those mega-mergers has even suggested a seniority stapling for any employee group. Instead, if AFA’s position prevails at the new United – which it is all but guaranteed to do – both seniority integrations will have been accomplished simply and quickly around the date-of-hire principles that TWA flight attendants have always demanded, robbing management of the razor sharp weapon it used to divide and

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<sup>354</sup> “The McCaskill-Bond Amendment,” The Association of Flight Attendants Official Website, 2008 Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO 18 Aug. 2010. <http://afaonevoice.org/images/McCaskill%20Amendment%20explanation%20FINAL%20for%20WEB.pdf>

rule employees since Elizabeth Dole stopped enforcing the LPPs in 1985.<sup>355</sup>

Though airline mergers are always contentious, the United and Delta affairs prove that the wholesale dispossession of TWA flight attendants was – rather than a new gold standard – fleeting and unsustainable.

***Conclusion:  
Negotiating Dignity in the Family Values Age***

That seniority stripping seems to have faded into the past of 1990s free market dogma does not make life any easier for displaced TWA flight attendants. Following the global economic freefall of October 2008, TWA flight attendants who had won recall to work were once again furloughed from American Airlines, re-triggering the five-year countdown to their permanent banishment from the industry.<sup>356</sup> Regardless of how much their 1978, 1983, and 1986 struggles did for all flight attendants, no one who flew for TWA continues to work in the airline industry.

Their re-grounding raises deeply troubling questions about the communal discourses at the center of the labor and feminist movements that once held American and TWA flight attendants together. In the family values age, solidarity is questionable and sisterhood is questionable. Indeed the decision to pursue the March 22<sup>nd</sup> protocol was by no means faceless and bureaucratic. American flight attendants like Tommie Hutto-Blake who ended up endorsing the seniority stapling once sat face to face with the women they dispossessed,

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<sup>355</sup> Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, “Keep Your Seniority: It’s not a Rumor,” United/Continental Merger E-News, 05 Aug. 2010.

<sup>356</sup> Dixie Daniels, email correspondence, 15 Mar. 2009.

meeting with Mary Ellen Miller, Victoria Frankovich, and so many others from TWA to talk through the theories and practices of contesting the family values economy. Nevertheless, in this painful betrayal, the overall purpose of flight attendant unionism in the family values economy becomes even more apparent – and more attainable. TWA flight attendants, after all, have made the simple point that dignity is not – and should not be – negotiable. Just like United, Northwest, and USAirways management should not have been allowed to use a bankruptcy court to force AFA to negotiate away flight attendants’ pensions, seniority should not have been a haggling point in the American-TWA affair. No union or company should have had the option to engage in a settlement so odious that Harold Newman opted to take his own life rather than face its consequences. No union should have had the choice to shield its members from the subcontracting system by confiscating other flight attendants’ jobs. Instead, credit for decades of seniority, a safe workplace, and reasonable, healthy work schedules should be every employees’ right. And while the family values economy has compromised these very standards, flight attendants’ continued activism leaves them well within reach in the millennial era.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **ON OUR OWN:**

#### **Flight Attendants, Individualism, and Community in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

I was embarrassed by my ungraceful arrival in the lobby of the Embassy Row Hilton in Washington DC. Like always, I fumbled my crew bag through the revolving doors, bonking it against the glass partitions and tripping over it as I shot out the other end. I laughed, then, as my mentor also made a stumbling debut. Clearly, 31 years of experience at two of the world's leading airlines do not make turnstiles any easier to operate with airline luggage in tow. But as we put our bags aside – which were still stuffed with uniform pieces and aircraft manuals from trips we had just operated – I could tell Stan Kiino was upset. The two of us had come in from San Francisco to join all of our union's elected officials for an emergency meeting after United Airlines filed for bankruptcy the previous week in December 2002. We knew that United would soon go to court to make a Section 1113 petition (see Chapter 4) against portions of our contract, slicing out the pay rigs that sustained us, the retirement benefits that allowed us to grow old in comfort, and the work rules that protected our sleep and our sanity.

The night before we got to Washington, while I was flying puddle jumpers up and down the West Coast, Kiino had worked a Boeing 747 on the southern transpacific crossing from Sydney to San Francisco. After they finished the dinner service in business class and the passengers dozed off to sleep, one of Kiino's colleagues, a 60-year old woman who was also Japanese American and who also had flown for Pan American prior to that airline's collapse, broke down



to Kiino in the 747's mid-galley. The rumors flying across United's system – that our pensions would be taken away, that we might be sold to another airline, that we would close the doors for good – left her overwhelmed. Their talk shook my mentor. “Stan, I'm alone,” the flight attendant began haltingly. “I'm alone. I don't have a husband. I never did that. Neither of us did that, Stan. But if United goes under, where are we going to go?”<sup>357</sup>

While solidarity brought Kiino and I together at the union meeting that night in Washington, his words and his fears demonstrated how differences would always crosscut that solidarity. The transition out of United, after all, would be so much easier for me than it would be for Kiino and his coworker, for I could fall back on my privilege as a young person, my privilege as a white man, and on the privilege of having a lover who could provide emotional and financial support. But while some of us could depend on the safety net of whiteness or manhood or domesticity, so many of my colleagues could not. Indeed most flight attendants were on their own as United Airlines approached the brink of collapse, an aloneness that tells us something about the practice of contesting the family values economy. In particular, I propose that single peoples' lives and politics indict the individualist and the communal discourses that drive both the family values economy and movements to contest it. I want us to consider that coming

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<sup>357</sup> I have chosen not to include this flight attendant's name as she was not interviewed for this study. I thus omitted any personal details that might give away her identity – other than her age, race, and gender, which locates her as part of a fairly large demographic group at the San Francisco crew base. The key points in the galley conversation, however, remain as Stan Kiino recounted them to me.

to terms with being on your own needs to be a foundation of the push to end the family values economy and the sadness it creates.

### ***The Age of Domestic Individualism***

At first glance, the single woman who broke down in the galley over the South Pacific that night is a role model for American individualism. Completely self-reliant and self-made and from immigrant roots, that flight attendant has prospered from her dedication to United and Pan American Airways, dependent on no one. But as a single, childless woman of color, she is nonetheless the wrong kind of individual for the American Dream. Individualism, after all, is not a discrete category, but one that is all tangled up with another social ideal: domesticity.<sup>358</sup> As literary scholar Gillian Brown has argued, the emerging practice of domesticity was fundamental to the solidification of individualism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. For Brown, “American individualism takes on its particularly “individualistic” properties as domesticity inflects it with values of interiority, privacy, and psychology.”<sup>359</sup> In the newly-defined domestic sphere, individual will was law, with love, commitment, tenderness, and cultural and religious values guiding relationships. A refuge from the external coercion that

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<sup>358</sup> My analysis on the relationship between domesticity and individualism is deeply indebted to Grace Hong’s work in Chapter 1 of *The Ruptures of American Capital*. Though I pay closest attention to Hong’s analysis of Gillian Brown here, her broader work premise that social death happens in the private rather than the public sphere, and that such a private social death was critical to the maintenance of racial hierarchies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, deeply contributed to my overall thinking about flight attendants, the private sphere, and dispossession in this dissertation. See: Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. See especially pages 15-27.

<sup>359</sup> Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 1., cited in Hong 17.

could threaten individual agency, domesticity was cast, in Christopher Lasch's words, as a "haven in a heartless world."<sup>360</sup>

By making individualism contingent on domesticity and all that domesticity had begun to imply in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century – land and home ownership, the gendered division of labor, bourgeois Christian sexual values – individualism rested on white privilege and heteropatriarchy. Hence the problem for Stan Kiino and his friend in the galley, whose self-reliance was utterly devalued because of their lack of access to white or heteropatriarchal privilege. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which were the crucible for Stan Kiino's activist career, intervened to detach economic security from such privileges. Drawing on anti-racist, feminist, third world nationalist, queer, and socialist principles, activists strove to make individualism and its attendant commitment to domesticity less important, insisting that a broad spectrum of social locations were dignified, beautiful, and valuable. Social movements thus built new forms of economic agency that transgressed and surpassed the boundaries of domestic individualism: better wages through union mobilization at work, government support for housing and education, direct state material compensation for traditional and non-traditional poor families, and an end to legal segregation that restricted property ownership to the white elite. Flight attendants like Stan Kiino and his friend capitalized on this social movement upsurge,

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<sup>360</sup> Christopher Lasch, A Haven in a Heartless World. New York: Basic Books, 1977., cited in Hong 25.

winning at least some of the privileges of domestic individualism while failing or refusing to be domesticated.

This momentary détente that benefitted my older colleagues in the 1970s was once again called into question with the rise of the family values economy. I argue that that political economic transformation re-established and secured domestic individualism by turning family into property.<sup>361</sup> After 1970, family literally became something that you own, something that is necessary for economic mobility and necessary for survival. With a host of new austerity measures, domesticity was forced to do what companies and the state once did, becoming a vessel to deliver legal rights and material resources. Family's cache was on one hand institutional, with legislators preserving tax breaks for married couples, with activists honoring monogamy and domesticity through marriage promotion initiatives, and with companies allotting benefits to married straight and later partnered gay couples while lobbying to end the social programs that once provided benefits for all.<sup>362</sup> Meanwhile, family gained new importance as a productive resource, with domestic relationships sustaining life in a lean

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<sup>361</sup> To understand how traditional family could function as property, one must consider legal scholar Cheryl Harris's foundational 1993 essay "Whiteness as Property." From the fugitive slave laws to Jim Crow to racial covenants in housing, whiteness has been a prerequisite to enforceable property rights. Only through being white could private property – and thus possessive individualism – be secured. Thus, actual cases "protected even the expectation" of white people's rights "as legal property." The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s chipped away at whiteness as property, mobilizing feminist, anti-racist, third world nationalist, queer, and socialist principles to challenge inequitable systems of distribution. By turning family into property – indeed by reinforcing the normative domesticity that maintains the white privilege that Cheryl Harris critiques – opponents of the social movement upsurge moved to shore up the Jim Crow system of distribution, reinforcing inequality along lines of gender, sexuality, and race. See: Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," Harvard Law Review 106.8 (June 1993) 1710-1791., cited in Hong 43.

<sup>362</sup> See chapter 3 of this project for a thorough elaboration of this point.

economy. Husbands could get second jobs mowing lawns or working construction. Wives could take the second shift at Lowe's or Menard's. Kids could babysit and later work with Mom at Wal-Mart. In the process, family became the most precious commodity of our time, something that seemingly everyone had to have to express economic agency. This possessive investment in domesticity is exactly what troubled Stan Kiino and his friend as they crossed the Pacific, as it was unclear what their existence would be worth without the airline jobs that stood in for the value of family in their own lives.

The proponents of the family values economy were explicit in advocating domestic individualism as an organizing force of our social world after 1970. Margaret Thatcher's insistence that "society does not exist" is now ubiquitous, but those comments in an October 1987 interview for *Woman's Own* magazine are worth reviewing given their precision and clarity.

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand, "I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!" or "I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!" "I am homeless, the Government must house me!" and so they are casting their problems on society. And who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.<sup>363</sup>

Family does hugely important work for Thatcher here, as it channels love, tenderness, commitment, and mutuality into a narrative that is otherwise threateningly austere. But family sentiment cannot cover up the utter absence of

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<sup>363</sup> Douglas Keay, "Interview with Margaret Thatcher," *Woman's Own* (31 Oct. 1987) 8., cited from [Margaret Thatcher Foundation](http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/106689) 16 Aug. 2010.  
<<http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/106689>>

compassion in Thatcher's words. For Thatcher, in the age of the family values economy, nothing will catch you if you fall. And nothing should catch you. No other social solidarity than domestic individualism should exist to sustain people. Thus family is the necessary and only means to mitigate economic change.

### ***The Lost Innocence of Community***

Like so many of their compatriots in the labor movement, flight attendants have often turned to communal discourses and practices to challenge the individualism that Margaret Thatcher's cohort enforced. Most of the flight attendant leaders I have interviewed for this project have built their careers on speaking for the collective. There are some staunch, loud voices among my respondents, but only the collectivity could have produced the amplification necessary for Kelly Kelly or Victoria Frankovich or Roger Graham to make change. Those communal ideas and resources are particularly import to flight attendants, as their group lacks many of the other support networks – especially those deriving from traditional family – that people have fallen back on in times of uncertainty.

But as they widely embrace collective ideals, queer and feminist Marxist intellectuals – and as I will show flight attendants themselves – have also cast doubts on community, and especially on community in the age of the family values economy. Perhaps no other thinker has more thoroughly questioned communal ideals than Miranda Joseph. The first pages of her 2002 text *Against the Romance of Community* plainly display Joseph's premise. "Enlightenment

rationality, the nation state, and liberalism in both its political and economic forms,” Joseph argues, “are fundamentally constituted in oppressive communal discourses.”<sup>364</sup> While we often assume that community is a space outside of capitalism, a domain of horizontal solidarities to shelter people from the harsh operations of the market, of corporations, and of the capitalist state, Joseph instead argues that community is essential to the reproduction of the relations of production. Through what Joseph calls “productive consumption,” communities are created, and communities endow commodities with meaning and value.<sup>365</sup> So, for example, when middle class gay men bought lofts in downtowns of U.S. cities that the real estate industry niche marketed to them in the early 2000s, their purchases both created a new type of gay community – one linked to property ownership, whiteness, and manhood – and added value to those lofts, making them the objects of gay desires that were more chic, more edgy, and more cosmopolitan than the desires of straight middle class couples who may have otherwise bought them.<sup>366</sup> Middle class gay men won a newly visible community through the transactions, and developers reaped higher sales prices. Joseph summarizes the linkages between community and niche marketing in the family values age:

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<sup>364</sup> Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. xxi.

<sup>365</sup> Joseph 41.

<sup>366</sup> For a thorough analysis of the relationship between LGBT community and capital in the family values era, see my essay in the volume *Queer Twin Cities*. See: Ryan Patrick Murphy, “The Gay Land Rush: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Life of Post-Welfare Minneapolis,” *Queer Twin Cities*, ed. The Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

The very differentiations that communities may seek to enact with their productive consumption may not be external to or oppositional to capitalist production but may very well be the elaboration of its own necessarily dense articulations of differences, niches, and of communities of producers and consumers.<sup>367</sup>

As it juices up the free market with new capital, community perpetuates the economic practices of the family values era that have been so difficult for flight attendants.

Scholars have widely taken Joseph to task for her critique of community, often alleging that it smacks of orthodox Marxism. Feminist geographers J-K Gibson-Graham, for example, have thrown their hands up at arguments like Joseph's because they seem to imply that capitalism has no outside, and that all social relations are just fodder to bolster the market.<sup>368</sup> I, however, do not read such determinism in Joseph. Instead, I think Joseph is making a simpler and very necessary point: that community is not an innocent practice. Virtually every flight attendant interviewed for this project seems, to me, to concur with the basic foundations of Joseph's argument, and particularly that collectivities should be the objects of both desire and skepticism. Paula Mariedaughter, for example, a 1969-hire for TWA, passionately struggled with collective ideals as we talked about her career in a public library in Fayetteville, Arkansas in 2008.

Mariedaughter insisted that group identity engendered by the women's liberation movement of the 1970s completely transformed her understanding of herself. But

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<sup>367</sup> Joseph 45.

<sup>368</sup> Gibson-Graham do not specifically indict Miranda Joseph, but they elaborate on their problems with scholars that imply that capitalism has "no outside." See the introduction of: JK Gibson-Graham, The End of Capitalism as we Knew it: A Feminist Critique of Political Economy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.



it also bitterly betrayed her, becoming a site of sadness as much as a site of affinity.

Mariedaughter's life as a TWA flight attendant inspired a movement. As we back-and-forthed about the 1970s in a Kansas City hotel room, Independent Federation of Flight Attendants co-founder Mary Ellen Miller told me that Mariedaughter's story compels her to remain committed to the flight attendant union movement – even during its most difficult and discouraging days. Paula Mariedaughter, after all, was a standout from her first day at TWA. At 5'11", she exceeded the airline's height restriction, meaning that her hire would need special approval from recruitment higher-ups in Kansas City. Mariedaughter not only got the job, but because of her height and striking appearance, landed employment as a TWA fashion model. Rolling out the airline's new flight attendant uniforms in 1971, Mariedaughter posed for photo-shoots in angular but svelte purple suits and dresses with black leather lace-up go-go boots. The series sustained internal publications for pilots, mechanics, and managers, and went on to run as full-page advertisements in the *New York Times* and other major papers.<sup>369</sup>

But as she sold TWA in high femme and high heels, Mariedaughter began an aesthetic and political metamorphosis. Mariedaughter, after all, was not Paula's birth name. She adopted the title in the mid-1970s, drawing upon her mother's identity and discarding her patrilineal surname as she studied the theories and practices of women's liberation. Soon after her modeling debut,

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<sup>369</sup> Copies of both the company photoshoots and the *New York Times* layouts were donated to my own collection from by Paula Mariedaughter herself.

Mariedaughter stopped wearing makeup and up-dos, and began coming out as a lesbian to fellow flight attendants. Though Mariedaughter was far from the only lesbian working aloft in the 1970s, becoming one of TWA's most visible, most desirable, and most sexually unavailable flight attendants raised the ire of her male peers. The situation boiled over in the forward galley of a DC-9 1978:

I was on a layover in DC and then we had a puddle-jumper back. Somewhere – I think we were in Indianapolis – we were on the ground and I had closed the curtain and was in the galley eating. And the pilot came in and wanted to know why I wasn't wearing lipstick. And I said, "Well, its sex discrimination, as the male flight attendants are not required to wear lipstick." So he forced me to go back and get my training manual out of my suitcase. And of course it said we had to wear lipstick. I told him I wasn't going to do it. He said if you don't put on lipstick by the time we land in Saint Louis, I am going to have you removed from the airplane. So my knees were shaking and I couldn't eat. But I thought, "I am not doing it." So I was removed from the flight and sent home. The pilot and his union tried to say that it was about safety, and that I was interfering with the chain of command on the airplane. What I think was really going on...is that I was a symbol. That life was changing.<sup>370</sup>

The Captain and his union argued that Mariedaughter violated the authority enshrined in him by TWA and the Federal Government when she refused to don lipstick. Mariedaughter's suspect femininity – the missing makeup, the flat, straight, parted hair, the rumors of lesbianism – so upset the balance of the crew that the captain claimed he was liable to lose control of his ship and endanger the lives of the passengers.

Mariedaughter was well aware that IFFA had grown out of independent women's groups like the Kansas City Women's Liberation Union and the

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<sup>370</sup> Paula Mariedaughter, personal interview, 24 Jun. 2008.

Stewardesses for Women's Rights, and would be politically committed to the fight to save her career. She was right, and fellow activists pursued her case so vigorously that upper management eventually dropped all charges and returned Mariedaughter to work without further incident. As she reflected back on the process, Mariedaughter highlighted the power of IFFA's collective identity:

In my view, our union came into existence because it coincided with a group of women who had not had their spirits broken. Part of the way patriarchy works is that they want to break your spirit as a child. Our union had individuals who were ready – who had not had their spirits broken – and we had an incredible social movement that helped us blossom. Feminist women like Vicki Frankovich and Mary Ellen Miller were the guiding forces of this union, and that could not have happened without the whole social movement of women's liberation.<sup>371</sup>

But the very hope of collective identity – the possibility that it might stop people from having “their spirits broken” by oppressive forces at work and beyond – is what also made the flight attendant community so troubling for Mariedaughter. Indeed after a series of labor feminist advances in the late 1970s, flight attendants struggled to maintain that momentum given the growing challenge of the family values economy. When Mariedaughter and her peers walked out on strike to challenge management's new demand for unilateral authority in 1986, many of her friends and peers reinforced the picket line and deepened their commitment to the cause. But many did not. And as the women's liberation movement seemed to pass, descending into the unrest of the 1980s, Mariedaughter felt bitterly betrayed by the collective. Mariedaughter was choked with tears as she narrated the foregone possibilities and unfulfilled promises of the 1970s:

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<sup>371</sup> Mariedaughter

When women's liberation was a new thing, my coworkers were interested in it. But when it was no longer the new thing, I think it...that I...(pause)...I felt betrayed...It broke my heart...that they didn't get it... enough to make real changes in their lives.<sup>372</sup>

For Mariedaughter, community was – and absolutely still is – a beacon for flight attendants. But it is always elusive, as likely to make a flight attendant feel alone as it is to feel protected.

Fissures in solidarity like those that brought Paula Mariedaughter to tears troubled so many of my peers, including younger flight attendants who tended to be much less invested in the orthodox 1970s understandings of community and mutuality and sisterhood that Mariedaughter espoused. In 2006, I sat down to talk about solidarity with Dante Harris, an African American flight attendant in his late 20s who began his career at United Airlines in 1999. We spoke over the makeshift computer table of the tiny Association of Flight Attendants office at San Francisco International Airport, an office that was once mine and was now Harris's since he took over my responsibilities when I left AFA in 2004. Harris began our conversation wanting to talk about collective power. During one of several temporary layoffs that he and I shared after 9/11, Harris got a job flying for United subcontractor Atlantic Coast Airlines out of Washington DC. Working conditions were often infuriating, with managers releasing Harris from duty at Dulles International Airport in suburban Virginia, then ordering him back to work after the long transit ride to his downtown crash pad while refusing to cover the fare or count the time as on the clock. For Harris, the communal resources of the

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<sup>372</sup> Mariedaughter

new AFA local at Atlantic Coast would be crucial to challenging the frustration and the intimidation of the everyday.

But as Harris talked about the airline industry, and as he talked about collective ideals, he rarely used words like exploitation or labor or worker. Instead, he kept talking about discrimination. And the more he spoke, the more he elaborated on his past, the more I recognized that he was talking about workplace inequities that I, as a white flight attendant, would never fully understand. Assumptions about black men's aesthetics, about black men's politics, and about black men's sexualities jeopardized Harris's job from his first days at United. Thus as he considered the possibilities and pitfalls of solidarity, he confronted and unpacked those assumptions. During his first weeks in training, for example, Harris was pulled off the floor and called to the dreaded 9<sup>th</sup> floor of United World Headquarters. A call to the 9<sup>th</sup> floor was usually the last experience trainees had at United, as the offices of human resources, labor relations, and corporate security – the groups who would collaborate on interrogations and terminations – were immediately outside the elevator. As the doors opened and Harris stepped out, one of United's only African American training supervisors stood outside. Harris was confused, as she looked not stern or angry, but humiliated. He told me of their brief interaction, which of all things revolved around Harris's stylish and well-trimmed goatee:

The black woman supervisor looks disgusted - like she has been put up to it by white managers. She says to me, "we just got to the point where we can have corn rows. Can you just wait until you get out to the line to wear the goatee?" There are only three times

I have cried in my career as an adult and this was one of them. I was like why do I have to shave when the white guys don't. A white guy in the uniform manual has a goatee and it is in my face.<sup>373</sup>

Harris cried because he had to watch one of the few African American women who had made it into airline management give up her authority and give up her power in front of a subordinate, an inversion of the corporate hierarchy to which a white manager would never have been subjected. Higher-ups forced her to invent a racist dress code that clearly violated her own integrity, and forced her to transgress United's employee appearance manual that allowed men of all racial backgrounds to have facial hair. As Harris cried while riding the elevator back downstairs, he wanted to quit. But his new job was the pride and joy of his family, and he recognized that being a black flight attendant would have to be about learning to stand up to management quietly while remaining employed to fight another day.

But standing up to United would not be nearly as easy as it seemed in traditional union stories of solidarity and struggle. Instead, for Harris, going to work would have to mean learning to keep management in check while also developing the courage to challenge fellow flight attendants. Harris, after all, was particularly upset that day because he had already been to the 9<sup>th</sup> floor, and was already in the middle of another stressful situation with his peers. During United's flight attendant training program, recruits live with colleagues in hotel-like suites at a corporate conference center for 9 weeks. Shortly after classes

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<sup>373</sup> Dante Harris, personal interview, 17 Aug. 2006.

began, rumors circulated that Harris's suite-mates, both of whom were 19-year-old gay white men, were having an affair, and having sex in the bedroom that the airline had provided them. United's corporate sexual harassment program strictly forbid sexual relations on company property. Flight attendants could have sex in their layover hotel rooms while off duty, but not while sharing space with other recruits at the conference center. If United could prove that a trainee violated the no-sex policy, that person would be fired immediately as AFA lacked representation rights for trainees.

Harris purposely avoided feeding the rumor mill about his suite-mates to protect his own career, and was thus deeply disturbed to be pulled out of emergency procedures training – the also-stressful process of being tested on response drills for in-flight fires, bomb threats, and post-crash evacuations – and summoned to the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. Harris described how the ensuing investigation pitted him against management and the flight attendant community.

They said “Mr. Harris, come upstairs now.” They put me in a room with the other three trainees accused of sexual harassment and left us there. They didn't question us. They just let me sit there with the accused. They made it look like I was the accuser. They put me by myself then, and threatened to fire me if I didn't talk. The two guys were my roommates. It made it look like I got everyone fired. They were all fired, and no one talked to me for the last 3 weeks of training, calling me homophobic and a gay hater. They told us all we couldn't talk – so I couldn't talk about the questioning and that I didn't say anything. No one would talk to me – I had my own room. They shamed my parents when they came for my flight attendant graduation, saying I was homophobic. They left me in my own room. All of the others involved were white.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Harris

In the days after the interrogation and firings, Harris's non-African American colleagues hardly seemed to consider that he had been harassed and threatened and was afraid for his job. And they certainly didn't pause to consider Harris's own sexual identifications and politics. Instead, as a young, tall, fit, African American man with braids, they figured him to be hyper-masculine and homophobic, the cause of discomfort with gay white men's sexuality rather than as a young man who – given the goatee drama – was also navigating the airlines' racialized sex panic. And as his peers shunned his family, they figured Harris not as a member of the flight attendant community but as a homophobic traitor and a scab, which is deeply ironic as Harris went on to represent all of them as an officer of the gayest local of a very, very gay union.

As Harris headed west to go to work as a young, black, San Francisco-based flight attendant for United, historical forces meant that he would never have full access to domestic individualism or to community. For Harris, acting politically in the family values age would have to begin with being alone. I was so proud to stand next to Dante Harris as a fellow AFA leader and as a friend, but I would never have to go through what he did. Thus as a union leader, Harris would have to learn to stand on his own to demand the respect and economic resources that communal and familial discourses are usually invoked to justify. In the family values economy, communal institutions have in many cases replaced the individual as economic conduits, with churches, not-for-profits, and neighborhood organizations replacing the welfare check with the single tax ID



number. As interventions like Harris's force us to recognize that community is not an innocent category in the family values age, we must consider how people might access dignity at work without community or family to fall back on.

### ***Legacy Benefits and the Flight Attendant Body***

Flight attendants have proved that people can act politically in the family values age without reverting to romantic discourses of community or individuality – even if community and family remain important to most people who work aloft. In 2005, for example, a group of senior flight attendants who lived in the Los Angeles area came together to form an activist collective and art project called “the stewardesses stripped.” Transcending airline and union affiliation, the stewardesses stripped was an independent entity dedicated to politicizing and challenging the airlines’ confiscation of flight attendant retirement benefits. Beginning in 2004, United, Delta, USAirways, and several other carriers began proceedings to dump over twenty billion dollars in pension liabilities on taxpayers, freezing old-age protections that front line employees had been promised for decades.<sup>375</sup>

For the scale of their campaign against pension termination, the stewardesses stripped chose not the community, the union, or the household, not the spaces that ordinarily ground movements for better wages and working conditions. Instead they chose the body. They did so by making a series of stewardess-themed pin-up girl calendars to visually display the physical location

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<sup>375</sup> Bradley D. Belt, “Protecting Pensions in the Airline Industry,” Testimony, Senate Finance Committee, June 7, 2005, Congressional Quarterly Congressional Testimony Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 2005, 2.

where the pension confiscation would take place. Ditching romanticism and sentimentality, the stewardesses stripped bluntly expressed their anger through a stigmatized social and sexual location: the stripper. Indeed in an age when notions of community and family were often deployed to make working people seem honest and deserving (see chapter 3), the collective chose to put forth a laboring body frequently attacked as neither honest nor deserving in the family values era.

While they undoubtedly maintained the fantasy and playfulness that animates some forms of adult entertainment, the stewardesses stripped crosscut their performance with a sober realism. Each month's model was a woman whose body the airlines meticulously inspected during hiring, probing thighs for firmness, examining teeth for shine and straightness, evaluating complexion and hairstyle, and carefully measuring height, weight, and physical proportions. Yet this policing had taken place thirty years earlier. In the mean time, the stewardesses stripped worked the skies through the austere decades since 1970. Exposing their fifty-plus-year-old bodies, the group revealed both a glamorous eroticism and the scars, graying, and sagging inevitably produced by jetlagged sleeplessness, heavy lifting, and emotional labor. Calendar layouts for each month were arranged around a central pun that animated props and costuming. "Our retirement benefits are going up in smoke. Its time to sound the alarm!" July 2007 reads, featuring a burlesque-clad aging flight-attendant-turned-firewoman straddling a vintage hook and ladder truck. "Coffee, tea, or...me without a

pension,” another month announces, framing a nearly nude flight attendant cocktail waitress in fishnets and a tiara, and referencing the sexualized youth fetish of 1960s flight attendant pulp novels. A different month asks, “Are you getting hustled? Don’t get caught behind the ‘8’ ball,” with a flight attendant in stilettos and panties splayed across a pool table while suggestively caressing a cue.<sup>376</sup>

Pensions were not an arbitrary choice for the subject matter of a flight attendant visual art project about the body. Retirement insurance, after all, allows the body to grow old. It allows you to be alone after your spouse or lover dies, or if you never had a partner or children. Through the stewardesses stripped, and also in their more orthodox legal and legislative pension defense campaign, flight attendants made it abundantly clear that being dispossessed of your pension comes with a unique sense of doom. 1985-hire United flight attendant Terry Sousoures began to talk to me about pension reform in technical terms as we sat in the AFA office in San Francisco, walking me through an explanation of how a union-proposed change in legal actuarial standards might allow companies like United Airlines to continue to pay benefits during the post 9/11 slump. Sousoures is a friend of mine, and I always thought of her as a hard nose. She came up through the union ranks in the in-flight safety program, one built on nuts-and-bolts knowledge of airline operations rather than on the political and emotional foundations of unionism. But half way through her explanation, Sousoures became visibly distraught, with a vulnerability flowing from her sentences that I

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<sup>376</sup> “The Stewardesses Stripped 2007 Calendar,” Los Angeles: The Stewardesses Stripped, 2006.

had never seen in all of our years of working together. “Losing my pension is the worst feeling. I can’t make up for what I lost. I feel like I can’t grow old.”

Sousoures paused, falling silent. “I want to kick and scream and cry about it...”<sup>377</sup>

Indeed as I talked to more of my former colleagues after Sousoures, I recognized that the pension confiscation made everyone come out of character. A few days later, I sat down in a conference room in the San Francisco International Airport’s new history museum with Georgia Panter Nielsen, the author of the flight attendant monograph *From Sky Girl to Flight Attendant* and who flew for United for 42 years before retiring to become AFA’s official historian in 2002. Nielsen’s tone was always poised, that of a professional documentarian of history. She usually spoke in first and third person plural: what “we” did as a community and what “they” decided in management. When I brought up the stewardesses stripped, she began reflecting as a professional, acknowledging the controversy that emerged among some older flight attendants long accustomed to presenting themselves as appropriate and lady-like when they saw an art project that was graphic and risqué. But the more she spoke, the more somber – and even angry – Nielsen seemed and the more solidarity she expressed with the stewardesses stripped. She switched from 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural to 1<sup>st</sup> person singular, speaking for the women in personal terms.

These women are angry. They know exploitation of their bodies and they have just turned it around! They are saying, “I am 60 and I have been violated. You have taken my clothes. You have taken

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<sup>377</sup> Terry Sousoures, personal interview, 18 Aug 2006.

what I need. You are putting me out here with promises made and not kept, and I am going to show you what this looks like.”<sup>378</sup>

Nielsen narrated the pension confiscation as about one entity violating one flight attendant body. “You have taken what I need. I am going to show you what this looks like.” As Nielsen spoke, it was clear that that moment of aloneness – that invocation of the single body – had become a much more powerful political and emotional tool than any sort of collectivity.

As I reflect on Nielsen’s words, I want us to consider that so-called “legacy benefits” are about that single flight attendant body. Living wages, good, affordable, usable health insurance, and defined benefit pension plans allow that single body to exist. They make it so flight attendants are okay even if they don’t have a family. They make it so flight attendants, unlike Wal-Mart employees, don’t have to work until they die. Many of us – and most flight attendants – will grow old alone. Legacy benefits allow people to face that. The benefits for that single body, then, are not a “legacy” of a bygone era. Instead, working and aging on your own is a reality not just of the transport agency, but one of an increasingly mobile society, one entangled with an economy built on voluntary and involuntary movement. But being on your own is not something we should be afraid or ashamed of, but one that we have the resources to support. Here, then, in the struggle for legacy benefits to support the single flight attendant body, is the site of the struggle over the future of the airline industry.

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<sup>378</sup> Georgia Panter Nielsen, personal interview, 18 Aug 2006.

### *Legacy and the Future of the Airline Industry*

While political economic categories like neoliberalization, deregulation, and financialization sometimes make successful workplace activism seem like an anachronism, I propose that the very unsustainability of the airline industry opens a space for flight attendants to intervene in their future. This dissertation has shown that flight attendants' ideas and activism – those that have come from people like Stan Kiino and his friend on the southern transpacific line who considered their aloneness – are a counterformation to the family values economy. And though locking those desires into union contracts, state regulation, and material remuneration has been an immense challenge since the 1970s, flight attendants' goals and strategies have been clear nonetheless.

Which is of course more than we can say for the airlines. Even the strongest carriers have offered few new ideas for the industry's political economic future beyond increasingly tired reiterations of 1970s anti-statism. The airline industry is thus a prime example of what Anthropologist Karen Ho has called the corporate “strategy of no strategy.”

To actualize their central identity as being immediately responsive to their own changing relationships with the market (including employees, products, and so on), their strategy is, in a sense, to have *no strategy*. Ironically, having no long-term is contradictory and potentially self-defeating in that investment banks often find themselves making drastic changes only to realize months or weeks later that those changes were unnecessary, premature, and extremely costly.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Karen Zouwen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. 275.

In the deregulated and financialized age, the airline industry is about cash flow rather than about strategic position.<sup>380</sup> The goal is to get money in the door as quickly as possible – whether through selling airplane tickets or floating billion dollar notes on the bond market – while trying to slow cash bleed to creditors, employees, and tax collectors. Managers, then, have built their agenda around that day-to-day cash strategy, lobbying against many of the reforms that could build a more robust future but that might result in additional short-term expenditures.

So in 1993, for example, just as American Airlines was emerging as one of the world's dominant players after the TWA and Eastern route acquisitions (see chapter 4), and just as it accessed strategic power and a market position that could have allowed it to totally change the way the industry made money, American went on the defensive. The airline's lobbyists pounded Capitol Hill trying to pass legislation that would have blocked the use of airport taxes for off airport uses.<sup>381</sup> If American would have succeeded, they would have prevented cities like New York and San Francisco from extending local rail lines to the airport – simply because they didn't want to help pay for it. The U.S. airlines have, for the most

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<sup>380</sup> I am not arguing here that there airlines have made *no* strategic moves. Some companies have innovated to bolster their long term position. Delta's rigorous dedication to building an African route network is an excellent example of this. The creation of alliances like SkyTeam and OneWorld, and their attendant international joint ventures, are also good examples of strategic leaps forward. My overall point, however, is that the airlines have focused on operational austerity to maintain quarterly cash flow advantages rather than investing in long-term retooling of operations to mitigate logistical and environmental crisis.

<sup>381</sup> The unions for American's employees have archived copies of management's powerpoint presentations from their lobbying trips. The presentations blatantly expose the airlines' opposition to expanded taxation and intermodal transportation. See: American Airlines, "The U.S. Airline Industry," powerpoint presentation, 01 May 1993.

part, opposed intermodal transportation both for tax reasons and because they are afraid of competition from high-speed trains. Intermodal transport has, of course, become the wave of the future in the years since American's rear-guard move, with airports like Shanghai Pudong, Paris De Gaulle, and Amsterdam Schipol becoming hubs of air and surface transit that have increased, rather than diluted, airline revenue generating potential. Air France, for example, is so supportive of intermodal that it is moving to replace Paris-Amsterdam and Paris-Brussels service with 300-mile per hour AGV trains operating under its own brand.<sup>382</sup>

Meanwhile, no one wants to take the train to the airport in the U.S. because the airport itself is such a nightmare of delays, gridlock that is also a result of the airlines' backward looking agenda. The 2000s was the decade of delays for the U.S. airline industry, with late arrivals shooting up 30% between 2000 and 2006 even while demand dropped off with the post-9/11 downturn.<sup>383</sup> Traffic-choked airports regularly run behind schedule even in perfect weather, with long delays being the rule, not the exception, at New York Kennedy, Newark, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and other major transport hubs. Some flights are virtually always late. Comair flight 652, for example, a subcontracted trip that is supposed to leave Kansas City for New York LaGuardia each day at 6:30pm, was late 91% of the times it operated in the second quarter of 2009, and that is

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<sup>382</sup> Details are still being worked out for the anticipated operation of the operation of the Air France AGV by the Veolia Corporation. See for example: "Air France Eyes Move to Railways," July 4<sup>th</sup> 2008, BBC News Online, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7489483.stm>>.

<sup>383</sup> "Congestion and Delays: The Impact on Travelers and Possible Solutions," Hearing before the Aviation Operations, Safety, and Security Subcommittee of the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee of the United States Senate, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Washington, DCL Federal News Service, 2007. 3.



counting only the nights it actually departed and didn't get cancelled. It usually ran 59 minutes late, which is a whole lot better than jetBlue flight 544. That flight, from Palm Beach to Newark, is late 77% of the time, but averages 2 hours and 5 minutes behind schedule.<sup>384</sup> So if a two-hour delay is normal, one can imagine how long people have to sit on the hot Florida tarmac on a bad night.

The reasons for the delays are obvious. The airlines have of course resisted taxes for new technology to modernize the air traffic control system, even while they have demand that the state implement such improvements. Kennedy Airport was designed to handle 100 flights an hour on its four runways, for example, but outdated technology means it can only welcome 68 flights an hour most nights.<sup>385</sup> Meanwhile, the subcontracting system has meant that more and more flights are trying to land at the big airports, as mid-sized jets like the Boeing 737 and Airbus A320 are replaced by 50- and 70-seat subcontracted flights. The number of landings in the New York area jumped 36% in the first half of the 2000s even as passenger volumes remained flat, as larger jets were parked and their unionized crews were grounded. And, as the Fortune 500 flourished during the "Bush Boom," top executives left airline travel behind, switching to private

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<sup>384</sup> Statistics on chronically delayed flights are compiled on a quarterly basis by the Federal Government. See: Research and Innovative Technology Administration of the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, "Flights with 70 Percent or More Delayed Arrivals (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 2009 – Apr.-Jun. 2009)," Washington, DC: The Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2009. <[http://www.bts.gov/programs/airline\\_information/frequently\\_delayed\\_flights/html/2009\\_q2.html](http://www.bts.gov/programs/airline_information/frequently_delayed_flights/html/2009_q2.html)>

<sup>385</sup> Statistics for JFK operations were presented in the sworn testimony of Captain Joe Kolshak, Executive Vice President of Flight Operations for Delta Airlines. See: "Congestion and Delays" 7.

jets. Corporate jet travel jumped 43% between 2000 and 2006, clogging the skies with airplanes carrying as little as one person.<sup>386</sup>

The airlines have adamantly opposed any state intervention to get the airplanes moving, claiming that the free market should resolve the process. Regulators and consumer advocates have proposed two strategies to remedy public outcry over the delays. First, they envision a slot capping system that places a ceiling over the number of airplanes that can be scheduled to land each hour. Busy airports like Kennedy and O’Hare already have such systems, but many argue that the maximum number of flights should be further reduced to ease the pressure on the system. Additionally, experts have proposed implementing congestion pricing for airport use, which would make the airlines pay more for the right to land during the evening East Coast rush. Even though delays have cost the airlines a fortune – Delta alone spent \$700 million on crew, fuel, and reaccommodation costs for delays in 2007, more than twice what it saved on employee givebacks in bankruptcy<sup>387</sup> – the airlines militantly oppose slot capping and congestion pricing. They fear that any state intervention will compromise the expansion of the subcontracting system, which requires more flights on smaller jets. Flight restrictions, in management’s appraisal, would force the airlines back into the arms of the unionized groups who work bigger airplanes.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> “Congestion and Delays” 7.

<sup>387</sup> “Congestion and Delays” 7.

<sup>388</sup> The airlines’ vigorous objection to both slot restrictions and congestion pricing is abundantly clear in the sworn Congressional testimony of Zane Rowe, Senior Vice President for Network Strategy for Continental Airlines in 2007. See: “Congestion and Delays” 8-10.

As the airlines deployed the strategy of no strategy, doing little about mounting operational problems in a costly effort to preserve the sanctity of the free market and their own right to subcontract, they have inadvertently opened up a space for flight attendants to act on the future of the airline industry. Indeed growing public outcry over the hassle, unpredictability, and environmental consequences of air travel may enable workplace activists to change the way the airlines do business, and change the way the state participates in that business. It might be easy to be pessimistic, assuming that flight attendants ability to affect change depends on stronger government oversight, supervision that has of course been washed away with the rise of the family values economy after 1970. But I think that such assumptions are wrong. Instead, I argue that the global airline industry of the future will be made up of three tiers, all of which will depend on national and transnational regulation, and at least two of which are very open to flight attendants' push to win legacy benefits for everyone.

The first tier of the airline industry of the future is comprised of the low cost carriers (LCCs). Their names are becoming increasingly familiar to travelers worldwide: EasyJet, Ryan Air, Air Asia X, Virgin America, jetBlue, and many others. LCCs make money by denying legacy benefits to employees, and then using the cost savings to offer lower fares that cherry pick marketshare away from established competitors. Of course LCCs keep their costs low in other ways: operating a single aircraft type to reduce training and maintenance costs, cutting out perks like first class to lower overhead, and avoiding complex operational

tasks like transoceanic flying. But their ability to pay employees less than the established lines sets them apart from the competition, a process which is of course wholly dependent on the state. It is not a coincidence that the laboratory for the LCC model has been the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, whose slew of relatively new anti-union labor laws has made it much harder for crews to challenge their employers than for crews in Brazil or South Korea or Continental Europe. But this dependence on a repressive state is itself fleeting – and porous. At the U.S. LCC Southwest Airlines, for example, employees have unionized and won many legacy benefits, compelling that airline to focus on operational efficiencies rather than on employee dispossession to maintain an advantage over competitors.<sup>389</sup>

The second tier of the airline industry of the future includes the legacy carriers themselves. Born from state franchises in the interwar and immediate postwar era, the legacies names are most familiar to generations of passengers worldwide: Air France, British Airways, United, American, Aerolineas Argentinas, Air India, Japan Airlines, Qantas, and so many others. Though the

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<sup>389</sup> The 3-tier schema I propose here is meant to describe the emerging structure of the airline industry as it is relevant to flight attendant activism on a transnational basis. It is not meant to be a rigid normative framework or a rigorous economic analysis of individual airlines. Some carriers could be placed in more than one of these 3 categories. Because of the international division of labor, carriers from the Global South often have lower cost than the Northern legacy airlines. Thus they could be understood as “low cost carriers.” But as they inherited their franchises from governments, they are still technically “legacy airlines.” Aer Lingus of Ireland is a great example. The carrier is the descendant of Aerlinte Eirann, the Irish national airline founded in 1936. But since Ireland never developed the expansive welfare state of England or the Continent, Aer Lingus’s costs are markedly lower than legacy competitors in the U.S. or in Europe. United Airlines is taking advantage of those low costs by subcontracting its new Washington-Madrid service to an Aer Lingus-run joint venture. So in this case, a “legacy” is functioning as both an “LCC” and as a subcontractor. The 3 categories are useful, though, in that they help point to where opportunities and obstacles exist for organizers.

ownership of the legacy airlines remains corralled at the national scale, they operate increasingly transnationally, grouped together around three global alliances that will pool revenue and operational resources. Star Alliance, for example, anchors itself on Japan's ANA, United, and Lufthansa, and operates its largest hubs at Tokyo, Chicago, and Frankfurt. Such alliances make money by using their dominant position in these "global cities"<sup>390</sup> – marketshare that was originally guaranteed by the state – and linking such cities together in global networks. Though subcontracting and other lean production paradigms – like the family values economy in the United States – face those on the front lines at the legacy carriers with immense challenges, most remain heavily unionized, and employees already possess political infrastructure that can be adapted to the increasingly transnational organization of the legacy airlines.

The third tier of the airline industry of the future includes the carriers of the Persian Gulf. Like its super-hub of Dubai, the airline Emirates has grown exponentially, seemingly cut from whole cloth and making almost unbelievable claims about its future political and economic centrality. Emirates, for example has 100 Airbus A380 super jumbo jets on order. That means it will operate twice as many of the 600-seaters as *all* the European airlines combined by 2020. The Gulf carriers – Emirates and its Doha-based mega-competitor Qatar Airways and smaller Abu Dhabi-based Etihad Airlines – prosper by undercutting the European and Asian legacies on traffic between Europe, South and West Asia, and the

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<sup>390</sup> See my reference to Saskia Sassen and Neil Smith's work in my discussion of TWA's route network in the 1970s in Chapter 2.

South Pacific.<sup>391</sup> This new group of airlines is so powerful, for example, that all European airlines except British Airways have dropped the “kangaroo route” to Australia, an operation that used to be the pride of Lufthansa, Air France, and Alitalia. The Gulf carriers rely on an authoritarian state to maintain their cost advantage over all others. The majority of employees are temporary and contingent, living on the Arabian peninsula and sending remittances home from labor that is much higher paying than most work in the Philippines, India, or Nigeria, for example, but that lacks any legacy benefits. Strict prohibitions against union organizing – especially at companies where most people are guest workers – make it difficult for flight attendants and other front line employees to win long term work and retirement benefits that would make working at the Gulf carriers more sane and sustainable.

Scholars and activists have clearly demonstrated how workers leveraged the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century regulatory state to win legacy benefits at established companies, and why such resources have been so much harder to grasp at both the LCCs and the Gulf carriers.<sup>392</sup> But what we must remember, following the particularly insightful work of critical geographers like Gillian Hart and David Harvey, is that accumulation by dispossession is an ongoing practice that has to

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<sup>391</sup> As per my discussion in footnote 33 above, this description of the Gulf Carriers is meant to present a basic schema for flight attendant organizers and not a rigorous analysis of Emirates’ labor relations strategies or cost structure. The rapid growth of the Gulf Carriers receives virtually daily press in all of the aviation media and my intention is not to present any sort of literature review of that data here as it is beyond the scope of the project.

<sup>392</sup> To understand how the labor movement leveraged the mid-century regulatory state to win legacy benefits for employees, and how those benefits have been harder to win after the end of the regulatory state, see, for example: Kim Moody, Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy. London: Verso, 1997.

be reiterated by state and corporate actions every day.<sup>393</sup> jetBlue and Emirates have to leverage the state and constantly engage with their employees in a particular manner to keep their labor so cheap. And that exploitation may not always be reproducible. I hope I have shown that what flight attendants do for us is provide a new *imperative* for why we should interrupt that dispossession. A whole lot of social movements have been insisting that people have enough money to pay their bills, that people can go home after 8 hours at work, that people can be safe on the job, and that people can go to the doctor. Flight attendants are merely picking up that baton. But what they do provide is a new reason for why people should keep acting politically. Never quite able to be fully inside the boundaries of community or family as they fly across the globe, flight attendants are nonetheless embedded in a whole lot of dependencies: with friends, with their kids, with their parents, with their lovers, and more than anything on themselves. Legacy benefits are the bonds that hold those dependencies together. Flight attendant politics, then, are a struggle for the tenderness and the care in those bonds, a struggle that, like flying itself, should extend our sense of emotional and political possibility.

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<sup>393</sup> For a particularly cogent analysis of the daily practice of accumulation by dispossession, see: Gillian Patricia Hart, *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. 39.

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