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Labor Issues, Academia, and the Workplace: An Interview with Kitty Krupat

KI: I'm curious about your personal interest in and involvement with labor issues. How did you get started?

KK: From my earliest memories, I recall that I had an interest in the working class. I don't know why, and I can't explain it. It was just part of a general developing consciousness. I was a child of the middle class, but I lived in a working class neighborhood. My father was the community doctor, so perhaps my interest stems from that. The patients he had were the working class people in our neighborhood and their children, many of whom were my friends. At that time, of course, I knew nothing about the labor movement in a formal way, although I knew that it existed. I knew there were unions, and I was intuitively on the side of workers.

In the 1970s, when I first went to work in the publishing industry, I began to understand the need for unions--through my own experiences. Workers like me--young women in fields like publishing and advertising, who had graduated college with few skills but many desires to do glamorous or intellectual work; who wanted to rub shoulders with famous, sexy people--were the low paid "sweatshop workers" of our industries. All the good jobs were held by men. Women did the scut work, and I started thinking that we needed unions as much as workers in so-called traditional laboring jobs. So just like factory workers needed unions, office workers, publishing workers, advertising workers, graphic artists, and writers also needed unions.

Curiously, this really hit home when I became a boss. At the time, my title was Managing Editor of the Pocket Books Division of Simon and Schuster. It was a fancy title for what was very routine, labor-intensive, technical work. I was a middle management person and as such had no real authority. I was told how much of an increase I could give to the workers I supervised. I realized how little money was allotted to me for raises. If I wanted to give one person a decent raise, I had to stiff someone else. I was juggling the amounts and learning the unwritten rules of favoritism and salary-secrecy. It was then--as a middle management person--that I started to develop a passion about justice for workers in industries like mine. And that's when I began to organize publishing workers. Coincidentally, I was very active in the anti-war movement. That work had put me in touch with a few progressive trade unions who had come out against the war and who were open to identity-based civil rights movements, including feminism. So, events in my life were coming together in a cohesive way.

KI: Was it difficult for the progressive unions that you mention to consider women's interests and rights in the workplace?

KK: Well, I can't speak for the whole labor movement because I wasn't that conscious of it at that time, but I can speak for District 65, which I joined in 1974. At the time, the union was independent. In 1980, it affiliated with the UAW. District 65 had a not very hidden left-wing history and was still a pretty progressive union when I joined the staff. The union had always been class-conscious and race conscious. They'd had had a Black Affairs Committee for many years. So, when a number of women came onto the staff around the same time, we tried to form a Women's Committee. Officers of the union understood the need for a Black Affairs Committee, but they didn't understand why we needed a women's committee. They would say old-lefty stuff like: "A worker is a worker. We don't make distinctions among workers based on gender." But we were persistent and finally we got a women's committee. We got it, because they had to give it. Having made a commitment to organize in industries like publishing and university work, the union was de facto representing women, who were in the vast majority in these industries and who were bringing their own needs and concerns to the attention of the whole union. To organize these women, the union smartly hired a bunch of women organizers, including me. We were a feisty bunch. District 65 prided itself on being a rank-and-file union, sensitive to its members' aspirations. So it couldn't just ignore our demands. Women were becoming a force in the union.

In the 1930s and 40s, there had been quite a number of women leaders in District 65, but that had changed, and by the time I and my colleagues arrived, we were the only women organizers in a sea of men trade unionists. There was considerable conflict--and sometimes open hostility--between men and women organizers. The men were pretty sexist--like most men out there in world. They were also, and understandably, afraid of us. They saw that the new industries we represented were growing industries, while the old blue collar shops they had struggled so hard to organize were on the decline. They had to know that the union was shifting resources from their industries to ours. These leaders--and their members--felt they were losing their power inside the union. It was actually tragic. Because the new (rival) industries were female-intensive, it's easy to see how ugly sexual politics could develop. But, the great thing about being in a union--especially a progressive union--is that you are constantly confronted with questions of equality, justice and fairness for all workers. On the simplest level, when we negotiate a union contract, we're bargaining for all the workers in a shop, not just the ones we happen to like or happen to feel comfortable with. If you really believe that "an injury to one is an injury to all," you can't easily turn your back on women workers or gay workers or professional workers. You can't just shut your eyes to their problems. You have to take on the bigots; you have to struggle to overcome intolerance and divisiveness. The members of our union and the leaders of our union were products of their society, so there was sexism. There was homophobia. There was racism. But the difference between the society of the union and the society at large was that we had to grapple with our own weaknesses; we had to fight with one other. And so we fought it out over the women's committee. When the President of the union tried to dismiss our proposal, we would say, "Why do you have a Black Affairs Committee?" When he said, "Well, that's different," we would insist: "No, it's not different." And so it went till we wore them all down. And in the end, if we didn't all "work and play well together," at least men and women in diverse workplaces came to understand that we had many interests in common.

This internal struggle for a women's committee was not taking place in a vacuum, by the way. Members were carrying out similar struggles in the shops. *The Village Voice*, which I organized in 1977, established one of the first union Gay and Lesbian Caucuses in New York City. At about this time, identity-based affinity groups were beginning to develop in other union settings, all around the country. Eventually, these caucuses became important power groups inside some unions.

KI: How do you view the politics of the current partnership practices between unions and the LGBTQ community?

KK: I don't think there is, yet, a genuine political or cultural practice that we can point to. In my opinion, the two groups aren't working together enough. My colleague, Patrick McCreery, and I took that simple

proposition as the central motif of the anthology, *Out at Work: Building a Gay-Labor Alliance*. We wanted to understand why there is so little interchange between the labor movement and the LGBTQ movement and why they remain, in most respects, quite separate, with different understandings and different ways of approaching problems. We wanted to explore the potential of an alliance between labor and LGBTQ movements. We came to the conclusion that these two institutions must be brought together if either one is to make genuine progress. In the end, I think we made a pretty clear statement: In our view, the best way for LGBTQ workers to be represented in the workplace--to be who they are; to secure broad rights and protections--is to organize into unions and take some leadership for bargaining contracts that address the particular needs of LGBT workers. Under union contracts with broad anti-discrimination clauses and sometimes domestic partner benefits, LGBTQ workers have already made progress. But for that progress to advance in a meaningful way, labor has to examine its own conscience--take up the fight to end homophobia in its ranks and examine the limitations of heteronormative standards--in other words, expand its notion of sexual orientation to embrace a diversity of practices. Labor also has to adopt an organizing strategy aimed at LGBTQ workers, who are out there unorganized in the millions; they work in every sector of the economy and in every kind of job. If labor looks hard enough, it will find new leaders for a movement that desperately needs to grow if it is to retain its power and vitality.

Where are most LGBTQ people? They are in the workplace. They are not in their own businesses or retired on some trust fund. They are working like the rest of us. In fact, they are everywhere. We felt that this very simple and obvious fact was overlooked by the LGBTQ movement and to a lesser extent by labor as well. The essays in our book take the reader through a fairly rigorous critique of both movements. It's probably fair to say that LGBTQ movements come under great scrutiny. Virtually all our contributors stressed a single point: The LGBTQ movement must re-assess its constituency. Few LGBTQ groups have come to terms with reality: The majority of LGBTQ folk are not well-heeled, white males but working-class women and men whose interests have been largely ignored by the movement. If labor needs to develop an agenda for organizing LGBTQ workers, LGBTQ advocacy groups must join the effort in order to make progress for the working-class LGBTQ population, an untapped resource for the LGBTQ movement as well as for the labor movement. In their own practices and policies, LGBTQ groups must become more class-conscious. As Cathy Cohen points out in our book, before they decide on corporate sponsors--like Nike or Coors, for example--they ought to examine the labor policies of these outfits and the working conditions in their establishments. And they ought to be willing to make sacrifices in defense of working-class interests. As Cohen asks in the book, are leaders of LGBTQ organizations ready to take a progressive and inclusive political stance? Are they willing to mobilize boycotts against exploitative employers? Are they ready to support single mothers on welfare and homeless people or undocumented immigrants?

KI: Currently, LGBTQ political activists in Arizona are fighting with The Arizona Human Rights Fund, the Arizona Stonewall Democrats, and other LGBTQ groups for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which would prohibit Arizona employers from using a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression as the basis for employment decisions such as hiring, firing, promotion, or compensation. How can LGBTQ groups struggle locally with the help of unions?

KK: The state of Arizona is a hard place to start because it's a Right-to-Work state, so there aren't a lot of unions. But organizing does happen in Arizona. And anywhere there is a labor movement, there is also some level of political action. In fact, the labor movement is famous for its extensive and often quite successful lobbying efforts. Remember that the AFL-CIO has already taken a strong Pro-ENDA position in alliance with national LGBTQ organizations. So, I would say to LGBTQ groups in Arizona, as to any group in the United States, start by making contacts and establishing relationships with the local labor movement. They should start thinking of the labor movement as an organizing venue. I don't want to let the labor movement off the hook in this regard. The labor movement also has to recognize that by establishing community links with LGBTQ organizations, they will benefit from an important source of

people power. Both organizations need to become fully aware of the extent to which their constituencies overlap. Most LGBTQ people probably are not "signed-up" with a particular LGBTQ organization or union. They are the unorganized who can and should be organized into both movements, simultaneously. They're a source of political power for both movements. The labor movement has everything to gain in terms of increasing its membership, bringing a vital and potentially very talented group of organizers into the fold, reaching out, addressing new kinds of issues, opening up new areas for organizing. Sheer numbers are important, but the quality of our effort counts. We'll only get the numbers if we adopt innovative and creative strategies for organizing. For example, we could invite the LGBTQ community to help us tackle issues that straight workers have been reluctant to deal with. LGBTQ organizations have everything to gain from that sort of engagement with labor. It would propel them into struggles for rights that go beyond gay marriage and rights in the military. Those things cannot be the sum-total of achievement in the LGBTQ movement. There has to be a struggle over economics--about class. In my opinion, it has to be about getting people into an economic situation where they can have the same decent life opportunities that everyone else has. I come back to Cathy Cohen's point: When we patronize places where a lot of LGBTQ people work--sex shops, beauty salons, restaurants, offices--do we think about the wages and working conditions in those places? And if we do, are we prepared to do anything about it? Those are important considerations that run parallel to unionization efforts. It seems to me that a developing class-consciousness has to result in some pro-active political work. That work can be done independently by LGBTQ groups but more powerfully in coalition with labor.

KI: How would you describe the current relationship between unions and academia?

KK: Many universities have unions covering clerical, technical, maintenance and other support staff. NYU is probably typical in its approach to collective bargaining. While it accepts these unions, every contract negotiation is a struggle. Universities are employers just like any other employer. They don't like any union, but they are especially hostile to graduate student unions. They fight us tooth and nail. But I'm happy to say we're winning! In public universities, graduate students have been organizing since 1969. I think there are about twenty-seven unions and union contracts in the public sector. At NYU, which is my school, we were the first to legally establish employee status for graduate students. That happened two years ago. It took us all that time to win recognition of our union. The administration put up a huge fight. They tried every which way to delay, including threats to take the case to the Supreme Court. They did everything they could to avoid the inevitable. But we were very well organized, and we had quite visible support from a fair number of undergraduates and full-time faculty. When all this came to bear and there was enough pressure on them, they finally caved in and agreed to bargain with us. As we speak, contract talks are still going on. It has been slow-going and pretty painful. Unfortunately, we had to take a strike authorization vote in November. Unless there is considerable movement on economic issues very soon, I am afraid there will be a strike at NYU in the spring. While we've been struggling at NYU, graduate students at Brown University also won employee status in a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) decision, based on the NYU case. To give you a sense of just how terrible relationships are between private universities and graduate student unions, when the Brown students organized, the administration turned around and challenged the NYU decision, which was a progressive decision as Labor Board decisions go. But Brown, a so-called liberal institution, was not about to accept a pro-union decision on its graduate students. So, they mounted a case at the Labor Board and--predictably--lost it. Following NYU's example, they are appealing the case, but the Labor Board ordered an election for union representation, which was held December 5-6. The ballots have been impounded until the appeal is adjudicated. The same sort of scenario is unraveling at Columbia, where there is also a grad student union. In short, the universities are continuing to fight us even if they are waging a losing battle.

I think it must be a shock to parents when they realize that they are paying \$25,000 or \$30,000 a year in tuition and residence and their kids get to see a full-time professor maybe twice a week. The rest of the time students are taught by us. Of course, we're dedicated, good teachers, and students generally give us

high marks. That alleviates tension between us, but it doesn't stop students from saying, "Hey, I'm paying all this money. I want to study with Professor Big-Name-in-My-Field, but I can't get anywhere near him." Well, I don't blame parents and students for getting mad. The problem is that a graduate student who wants a career in the academy, wants to be the future Professor Big-Name. We want to get B-N's good salary and health plan so we can live full and productive lives as career academics. If we have a prayer of fulfilling this modest ambition, we have got to make some change in our industry (and I'm going to call it an industry). Right now, universities are following a "cost-effective" corporate model, with a very few well-paid full-timers at the top and an army of low-paid contingent workers at the bottom. We want to raise standards for part-timers so they won't be such a ready source of cheap labor. Currently at NYU, graduate students earn wages that are way below the standard of living in New York City. We have bare-bones medical coverage and can't afford to live in NYU housing. Many of us have to take second jobs to make ends meet, and, of course, we're exhausted from working long hours in the classroom and then on our own academic work. When parents find all this out, some of them are very sympathetic. They get it that the quality of education for their kids will improve if we are less harried, hassled and hostile.

KI: When did you decide that you wanted to pursue your activism as a scholar?

KK: It's interesting that you should ask that. In November, I attended the Social Science History Association conference and was on a panel entitled, "The Scholar-Activist, Activist-Scholar." I guess I was asked to participate because I'm an example. But I'm an odd-ball example. I'm sixty-three years old. I graduated from college in 1961 with a BA. Two weeks later, I got hired as a proof-reader for Esquire Magazine. I stayed in the publishing industry for thirteen years. As I said earlier, my organizing career began as a rank-and-filer at Simon & Schuster, which was my last place of employment in the publishing industry. From there, I joined the union movement as a professional organizer and remained a trade union staffer for 22 years. In 1989, after 15 years at District 65/UAW, I moved on to the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (now part of UNITE, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Technical Employees), where I was the Director of Education. In retrospect, I actually think I made a mistake by taking that job--not because of the job or the union. Not at all. But because of me! I was at a turning point in my own life. I felt that I was an intellectual by nature and that I had put my intellectual life on hold--or that I had let my intellectual life atrophy. Looking back on my state of mind, I think I was pretty confused. Like so many of my union colleagues, I thought activists and intellectuals were different animals. I didn't see then what I see now: that activism is a highly intellectual project. After all, no movement can succeed without a theory and without a carefully thought-out strategy. But I was still thinking in either/or terms. This will sound like a transexual's confession: I felt like I was in the wrong skin. The need for what I thought of as an intellectual life--pure and simple--became urgent. So, in 1995 I left the ILGWU and entered the New York University Program in American Studies. I wanted to find a route to activism through intellectual life and intellectual work. I was 57 years old at the time; I had been out of school for 37 years; I had no idea that the language of scholarship had changed radically in my absence. It was tough, but I got saved by a wonderful project. At the end of my first year, the Program Director, Andrew Ross, asked me to work with him on an anthology, *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade and the Rights of Garment Workers*. I had lots of union contacts and could help Andrew persuade them to join the *No Sweat* project. Working on that book was a revelation. It was a concrete example of how academics, cultural critics, workers, journalists and labor leaders could engage in productive conversation that was highly political in intent. That experience provided the model for *Out at Work*, which I've already talked about extensively. Since coming back to school, the most fabulous thing that's happened to me is that I've discovered I can make a political intervention through writing, teaching and public speaking--and that I can continue to do grass-roots organizing right in the university. As an activist in several academic labor campaigns, I'm beginning to think that we have made good progress in recognizing that intellectuals are workers. But we have a harder time seeing that workers can be and often are intellectuals. We don't give workers credit for the complex intellectual negotiations that go on every day in the workplace and union hall. Nor do we take the time to think about the rich cultural lives many workers enjoy outside the workplace. It's this side of the activist/intellectual equation I want to study more deeply.

KI: What sort of research projects are on the table for you now and in the background, waiting their turn?

KK: It has been wonderful working on *No Sweat* and *Out at Work*. Patrick (My co-editor) and I have been very gratified by the response to *Out at Work*. We consider it a small victory every time we are asked to speak about the book at a union meeting or conference. But now I need to get to work in a serious way on my dissertation, which will be a biography of Elizabeth Hawes. She was a fashion designer in the 30s and 40s, who moved in a leftist circle of artists and intellectuals. Working in Paris, she soon came to the conclusion that French designers of haute couture didn't understand the way women's bodies work. Nor did their designs take into account the daily needs of women--especially the growing numbers of working women. Hawes began writing columns and books about how fashion dictates victimized both women and men. From there, she ventured into pre-feminist discussions of women's rights, including sexual liberation. She wrote "Design for Living," a weekly column for the left-wing newspaper, *PM*, that gave advice to working women on issues ranging from fashion to managing the double burden of cooking and shopping for a family. She opened her own design house in New York, creating ready-to-wear clothes that were both attractive and affordable. Then suddenly, as World War II is approaching, she closes up shop and goes to Detroit, where she becomes an organizer in the Women's Department of the UAW. It's a fascinating story. Hawes' life was lived in the interstices between culture, art, work, intellect and activism. In that sense, it is a wonderful subject for an exploration of the intellectual history of her times and of the labor-left alliance that flourished in the 1930s and 40s. Our post-modern, globalized economy and culture are quite different. But there appears to be a continuity between the impulse toward intellectual activism that animated the life of Elizabeth Hawes and the stirrings of scholar-activism that we are observing on some university campuses today.