KENDRA COULTER

Revolutionizing Retail

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Revolutionizing Retail

Workers, Political Action, and Social Change

Kendra Coulter

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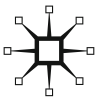

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Chapter 1

Retail Matters

In the world of retail, there is much talk of revolution. When a new product or marketing strategy is introduced, companies and media observers often claim that retail will be revolutionized. When new retail chains are created, corporate leaders assert that their company will revolutionize retail (Belisle 2011; Frank 2012; Spector 2005). The expansion of Walmart's reach, influence, and power has been called a revolution in retail, as well (Lichtenstein 2009). This book explores the idea and possibility of a different kind of retail revolution, one in which workers' well-being is improved and, ideally, transformed.

Why be interested in such a revolution? There are many ways to answer that question. First and foremost, there are significant numbers of people who work in retail, and the data may be surprising. In my home country of Canada, more people work in retail than in any other sector. Canada's paid workforce is made up of 18 million people, and just under 2 million of them work directly in retail, or one in ten workers (Statistics Canada 2011). Similarly, in the United States, about 10 percent of all workers are in retail, at least 15 million people (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). *Retail salesperson/clerk* is the most common occupation in both countries. Around the world there are large numbers of retail workers. In fact, an average of 10 percent of the labor force is working in retail across industrialized countries (Bozkurt and Grugulis 2011). Globally, with a direct workforce of over 2 million people, Walmart is the world's second-largest employer, surpassed only by the Chinese military (Berg and Roberts 2012).

Yet despite the great numbers of workers, in most countries retail jobs are not widely considered good jobs that offer fair wages, benefits, insurance, income security, or a strong sense of fulfillment. Workers often must contend with disrespect from employers and customers, and retail work is not widely recognized or valued in society at large. Most workers in retail earn only the minimum wage, which, in many jurisdictions, can also be called a *poverty wage*. This is because even with full-time hours, people's earnings are still below the poverty line/threshold or low-income cutoff (Coulter 2012a, 2012b; Institute for Research on Poverty 2013; Mackenzie and Stanford 2008; Statistics Canada 2009). Moreover, many workers in retail can only get part-time hours and thus are underemployed. It is not uncommon for people to take on two or three retail jobs simultaneously, trying to get enough hours across their workplaces to put together a modest living. But the fact remains that many of those with full-time hours are struggling financially, so workers only given part-time hours are forced into even greater instability.

This pattern is endemic to what is known as *precarious work*, and it is on the rise. Precarious jobs are insecure as well as low paid and thus insufficient for supporting a household or family (Cranford and Ladd 2003; Kalleberg 2011; Milkman 2011; Vosko 2000, 2006; Vosko, MacDonald, and Campbell, 2009). Precarious work negatively affects people's physical health, mental well-being, and interpersonal relationships, and limits their ability to access training and education (Law Commission of Ontario 2009; Lewchuk, Clarke, and de Wolff 2011; Zeytinoglu et al. 2004). A rise in precarious work means there are fewer middle-income earners, which exacerbates economic polarization and social inequality. Put another way, more people have less, proportionally. The number of studies that have identified the wide-ranging negative effects of social inequality on people's health and happiness, crime rates, and social cohesion are too many to list.

Not only do retail workers matter, what happens in retail matters, well beyond the sector itself. As Anita Chan (2011, 2) concisely explains, there has been a substantial economic shift in the "manufacturing system from being producer-driven to retailer-driven." Retailers' decisions have a significant effect on economic fortunes across sectors, especially those choices and demands made by large transnational retail corporations (Appelbaum and

Lichtenstein 2006; Fishman 2006; Lichtenstein 2006, 2009, 2011; Petrovic and Hamilton 2006). The most obvious example of the influence of large retailers can be seen in manufacturing. Where products are made affects manufacturing companies and the jobs (or their absence) therein. For example, if the largest stores sold more locally made products, small and large manufacturers nearby would benefit. Retail also affects transportation and warehousing, or *logistics*, and all the workers involved in the movement, storage, and distribution of goods (Bonacich and Wilson 2006). As Nelson Lichtenstein (2009, 1) explains, it is global retailers that control more than half of all world trade and thus "make the markets, set the prices, and determine the world distribution of labor to produce that gigantic stream of commodities that flows across checkout counters in every major industrial country."

At the same time, what retail workers are paid affects others businesses. Retail workers' incomes affect their ability to spend money in their communities. If workers are paid more, they will be more likely to spend that money on goods and activities for themselves and their families thus contributing to local businesses and economies (Ruetschlin 2012, 2013; Yalnizyan 2013). If workers are paid less, their income is directed more to essentials and less to sports, entertainment, leisure activities, community groups, and so forth. They may feel obligated to take on debt, or *more* debt, as well, as they try to make due with poverty wages.

Retail workers' earnings also directly affect how much tax they pay and, thus, how much revenue governments collect to spend on public services such as health care, education, training, child care, environmental protections, public safety, infrastructure, and emergency services. If more people are earning less, they pay lower taxes, thus our collective resource pool shrinks. This is particularly noteworthy since most governments have been lowering the tax rates paid by corporations and high-income earners, thereby restricting the revenue collected from the top end of the economic scale.

The working conditions in retail affect retail employers as well. There is a growing body of evidence that better working conditions positively benefit retailers. Workers who feel more respected and who are earning sustainable incomes are happier and healthier, as well as more loyal and engaged, so turnover decreases and productivity increases (Andersson et al. 2011a, 2011b; Cascio 2006a,

2006b; McKinsey & Co. 2010; Ruetschlin 2012, 2013; Ton 2012). At the same time, customers benefit from higher-quality service. Better-paid workers also spend more both in their workplaces and in other retail stores. Of course, increasing workers' happiness and improving their health is a worthwhile goal regardless of its impact on corporate bottom lines. But the data reveal that retailers would also benefit from improving retail work.

Put concisely, in addition to affecting the well-being of the millions of people working in retail, retail matters because it affects us all. Improving retail work is in everyone's interest. Whether motivated by empathy and solidarity, by a desire for greater equity, fairness, and social justice or by an interest in economic activity, better service, and prosperity, the reasons for revolutionizing retail are strong and many. As Martin Luther King Jr. put it, "Our lives begin to end when we become silent about things that matter" (Hurtado 2007, 194).

Researching Retail, Envisioning Change

Inspired by the idea and possibility of transformation, I have been studying retail for four years. The on-the-ground realities of the sector are familiar to me as I worked in retail for six years during high school and university. As a result, I have experienced the frustrations of retail firsthand. Yet during those six years, I also met many people who cared about others, including their coworkers and the people who came into their stores. I have now met many more such retail workers through this research project. This dynamic—great frustration combined with workers' commitment to creating supportive relationships despite the tensions of their work—fertilizes the retail soil. Fertilized soil allows for seeds of change not only to be planted, but to have a greater chance of growth.

The world of work is important, always. Work shapes people's lives in a range of significant ways, including by affecting their income, health, schedules, identities, and understandings. How people make a living also affects their relationships, including those with other living beings and the environment. Yet, unfortunately, many workplaces are characterized by rigid hierarchy and dissatisfaction. We purport to live in democracies, yet the place where most people spend so much of their time—their workplace—is largely devoid of democracy. Most workers have little control over

their daily work lives and even less over the decisions governing their workplaces and the economy at large. Often their experiences and knowledge are discounted or even dismissed. For too many people, their working lives are dominated by an unpleasant mix of volatility and frustration.

Nevertheless, workplaces can become sites for learning, questioning, and contesting the status quo. Work is important terrain for promoting greater fairness and compassion and, potentially, for creating transformative change. It is this possibility that has brought my attention back to retail now that I am a labor studies professor. In this book, I ask, what is needed to revolutionize retail? The question is about the process, as well as the destination—that is, both the means and the ends are important. What changes need to be made, and how can they be achieved? Over the course of this book, I explore and analyze both dimensions.

Rather than simply seeking to understand current experiences in retail and the way things are, I have researched the present with an eye to the future and the way things could be. Some people are committed to changing both the perceptions and realities of retail work, and I have focused on their efforts to make change in the sector. Employing an inductive approach, I have sought to understand what is being done to change retail and how, and who is doing that work and why. In other words, rather than testing a predetermined hypothesis, the collection and understanding of data have been my priorities. I then enlist pertinent social theory to help explain and understand the data.

In this way, the findings and analytical insights I present are drawn from the evidence, rather than the other way around. I have not sought to fit the data into a rigid box or to prove a specific theoretical point. The research process was truly an intellectual journey—of course, one fuelled by my interest in improving retail work. I do not pretend to be an "objective," dispassionate researcher. If I were, I would likely have chosen an altogether different project or prioritized different research questions. I am interested in improving retail work and began this project committed to research that could contribute to the improvement of retail workers' lives. But I did not begin this project certain of how exactly this can be done or fully aware of the effectiveness of current strategies. My interest in improving retail work drives my research agenda; it does not replace the process of inquiry.

I see organizations that are comprised of retail workers and that advocate for workers, like unions, as playing a positive role, overall. The data are clear that workers do better with collective representation. Moreover, I have ample personal experience with both nonunion and union work (including my current position). My goal with this research was to understand what is being done to improve retail work and to analyze whether these efforts are causing or contributing to a revolution in retail. Thorough understanding, rigorous analysis, and honest critique all play a role in these interconnected tasks. Intellectual analysis means grappling with accomplishments, as well as failures or inadequacies where they exist. Put concisely, my political commitment to workers' well-being and social justice does not hinder my intellectual commitment to accurate data, understanding, analysis, and critique.

My intellectual and methodological approach extends from Linda Briskin's (1999a) conceptualization of *mapping* as a way to study workers' organizing. Mapping is both spatial and conceptual. It involves documenting and analyzing how workers' organizing takes shape in different places, often simultaneously. Connections, similarities, and differences are to be identified, and both the material and discursive dimensions of organizing are considered. Put another way, I am interested in both what is being done and what is being said in person, online, and in other textual sources that are used as part of organizing.

Drawing from my anthropological training, I assembled a cross section of data-collection strategies in order to capture and, in turn, present a holistic picture of retail action. Put simply, I tried to capture every bit of data I could find. Conventional ethnographies, the primary methodological approach used by sociocultural anthropologists, generally mean long-term immersion in a specific site, allowing for the detailed observation of people and their cultural practices over time. My research was not spatially bound, nor did I live among those being studied or work in retail during the study. Thus, this is not a conventional ethnography, but I did bring an ethnographic ethic to the project. I was committed to a longitudinal approach, including direct in-person observation of the most significant activities whenever possible and the maintenance of regular contact with the key social actors most central to the cases highlighted.

The bulk of my field research centered on Canada and the United States, and these countries are the focus of this book. I also conducted preliminary field research in Sweden, and the Swedish data are incorporated into chapter 5 in particular. I used a number of research methods to ensure thorough understanding. I engaged in participant-observation research in/at retail workers' meetings, strategy sessions, workplaces, political rallies, workshops, media events, gatherings, and conferences. Through these methods, I directly spoke with and/or observed at least 300 retail workers. The participant-observation data are bolstered by formal interviews with key informants in the world of retail. I conducted interviews with 34 retail workers, organizers, and local and national leaders of retail workers' organizations and unions, which provided deeper understanding of the retail terrain. In terms of frontline retail worker interviews, salespeople and cashiers were my primary focus. I was in regular contact with some of the most active key informants, thus continuously collected and recorded their perspectives. The words and actions of retail managers and corporate representatives as expressed in person, in meetings (recorded by workers), emails, and media commentary have been documented, as well. I also collected and examined documentary sources including retail reports, statistics, leaflets, websites, social-media vehicles, and traditional media source coverage, further expanding the data pool.

Overall, by using such a range of methodological strategies, I collected data both in public and behind the scenes, as events unfolded and after their completion. I spoke with workers in real time and after weeks and months had passed, which allowed interviewees time to reflect further on key events and actions. This book stems from all of these data collection strategies and incorporates pertinent scholarly literature to provide and promote both depth and breadth of understanding.

Workers are at the heart of this project. Retail does not exist without workers. No stock is put out, no products are sold, and no transactions occur without workers to complete these and all other necessary tasks. Retail is dependent on the continuous labor of people, every day. Moreover, retail workers' voices are essential to understanding the realities of retail work, including its challenges and possibilities, and the potential for transforming the sector. Frontline workers' perspectives are enlisted throughout this

text and provide insightful, valuable data. Similarly, the organizers, researchers, and others who work alongside frontline retail workers and advocate for change in the sector are themselves workers. Many of these allies are deeply dedicated to social change, yet they consistently shun the spotlight, concentrating instead on building the power of others. I recognize the importance of the breadth of the political work done to advocate for progressive change in retail, whether paid or unpaid, in public or behind the scenes.

While many of the workers whose insights are included in this book are noteworthy leaders, the reality is that they work in a sector within which some interests are hostile to workers' advancement. As a result, although I would like to give them due credit as agents of history, when using direct quotes, workers' identities and workplaces are obfuscated, and all names used are pseudonyms. The exception is when explicit consent to use a worker's real name has been obtained, often after she or he has left the sector or if she or he was speaking to me in an official capacity. Moreover, it is customary to take seriously the local and regional specificities when pursuing ethnographically-informed research. Because of my need to conceal the workplaces and identities of many key informants, that is not entirely possible here. The cases considered in chapters 3 and 4, which are not explicitly identified, are from different regions of Canada and/or the United States, and any specifics I can provide without revealing the locations in question are included. I also outline overarching and essential contextual dimensions below.

In order to reflect on the potential for revolutionizing retail, we first need to understand who retail workers are and what retail work is like. Thus, in chapter 2, I paint a picture of retail work and workers, emphasizing the "who, what, when, where, and why" of retail as a whole. Retail is often misunderstood and mischaracterized, thus I provide clarity and corrections. In other words, the second chapter profiles the sector and the people therein. I demystify and elucidate retail work and workers, situating them both within the broader social and economic terrain.

Next, I put the spotlight on recent examples of workers' organizing. Unionization is one of the primary strategies retail workers have employed to make change. As a result, in chapter 3, I present a brief historical portrait of the development of political action in retail, with a focus on Canada and the United States,

to contextualize the current state of retail work and efforts to make change. Then I concentrate on a number of workers' union organizing victories and explore what factors contributed to their success. Accordingly, in the chapter, I outline the practical matters of organizing but also humanize the processes by putting workers' understandings of this form of political action at the center of the discussion.

Workers' unsuccessful attempts to make change are instructive, too. In chapter 4, I hone in on failed organizing projects and identify what defeats reveal about the challenges of retail organizing and the barriers to change. Central to such a discussion is the role of union avoidance strategies. Accordingly, in the chapter I trace the multileveled and multifaceted work some employers do to prevent unionization, as well as to suppress workers' interest in unionizing when organizing commences. The roles unions play in facilitating or inhibiting organizing are also considered.

Both of these chapters are about the building blocks of making change, but they also highlight the very personal experiences of real workers as they self-advocated and organized. As such, the discussions not only illuminate the understudied processes of retail organizing, but they also offer personal and often emotional perspectives on what causes workers to move from inaction to collective action. The data help us better understand how real people navigate the complex obstacles standing between them and better jobs.

Retail workers and their allies have been engaged in a number of creative and dynamic forms of political action in recent years. Thus, chapter 4 paints a picture of the broader retail terrain, highlighting a number of the diverse strategies being used to promote change. Different organizational vehicles, campaigns, and routes, including the avenue of public policy, all play a role in contemporary efforts. In other words, in retail, *organizing* is not merely a synonym for *unionizing*, and various kinds of political action are being envisioned and implemented. I introduce and spotlight a broad range of forms of political action being pursued today, thereby emphasizing the diversity of possibilities that exist and that could be enlisted, within and across cultures.

In the final chapter, I present the concluding analysis, which stems from the data as a whole. I explore to what degree current efforts are revolutionizing retail and what lessons they offer. The

insights are conceptual and challenge us to think more deeply and thoughtfully about retail workers and work. The findings are also practical, and I propose ideas for strengthening and expanding efforts to make change, given the complexities of the contemporary socioeconomic, political, and cultural terrain, and both the accomplishments and failures of contemporary organizing. I offer answers to this book's guiding question: what is needed to revolutionize retail?

CONTEXT MATTERS

Because this is a book about the present and future of work, the enduring and shifting realities of class are entangled with the discussion. Some theorists, particularly in a historical context, have posited that class is determined by your relationship to the productive process, or the means of production. You own productive infrastructure, or you sell your labor to someone who does and work for them in exchange for wages. The former are the capitalists, or the bourgeoisie, and the latter are the working class, or proletariat—two classes and one very tidy framework. More recently, however, many scholars have argued that class is about more than social actors' objective positioning in relation to the production process, although this dimension is not to be abandoned, nor is it irrelevant. This problematization of a dualistic and deterministic notion of class stems from the diverse material realities of work and how people earn a living (from lawyers to retail managers to the self-employed), as well as from empirical data on how people understand and experience their labor and lives. Many people who work for wages simply do not identify as working class, nor do they necessarily even use the language of class (Bettie 2003; Metzgar 2003). Moreover, both the experience and language of class has become more crowded and complex, with ideas of *middle class*, *lower middle class*, *upper middle class*, *intellectual class*, *creative class*, *liberal class*, *underclass*, *dangerous class*, and *precariat* now widely in use, the latter seeking to capture the sort of volatile working arrangements confronted by many people in retail (Ehrenreich 1989; Florida 2002; Hedges 2010; Standing 2011). At the same time, the Occupy movement and other social movements have enriched the popular discussion by more widely advancing the idea of a 99 percent and a 1 percent, thereby deemphasizing