

## CLASS AND CONSENT

Christopher Phelps

Perhaps the tremors began with the criminal charges filed against Dominique Strauss-Kahn in 2011 and Bill Cosby in 2015, or the lawsuit of Gretchen Carlson against Fox News CEO Roger Ailes in 2016. The real earthquake, though, was the election of President Donald Trump just weeks after footage leaked of him boasting that he liked to “grab ‘em by the pussy.” Global women’s protests on the day after his inauguration in January 2017 featured a pink sea of clever hand-knitted “pussyhats.” That set the context when, eight months later in October 2017, *New York Times* and *New Yorker* reporters broke allegations of sexual assault by the movie mogul Harvey Weinstein. Actress Alyssa Milano used a #MeToo hashtag on Twitter, echoing the “Me Too” phrase introduced eleven years before by Tarana Burke. The tremendous consequent outpouring exposed numerous men as alleged serial sexual harassers, dethroning them from positions of power. The very long list would include, among others, NBC *Today* host Matt Lauer, CBS CEO Leslie Moonves, Senator Al Franken, New York attorney general Eric Schneiderman, MSNBC contributor Mark Halperin, *New Republic* figures Leon Wieseltier and Hamilton Fish, Metropolitan Opera director James Levine, Amazon Studios president Roy Price, actor Kevin Spacey, and comedian Louis C.K.

Lost in the corporate media’s predictable concentration on famous names was, all too often, the everyday sexual harassment and violence at ordinary workplaces. To be sure, some journalists investigated the sexual abuse of hotel workers, fast-food workers, farmworkers, autoworkers, and other wage-earning women—as well as abuse within labor unions—but their exposés, however excellent, rarely broke

I would like to thank Leon Fink, this journal’s editor, and Patrick Dixon, its John Henry, for many hours of consultation and collaboration in the shaping of this special issue, as well as all my fellow contributors for their brilliant work. Mara Keire deserves a special shout-out for her spirited attempts to refine my thinking. Margot Canaday, Vanessa May, Robyn Muncy, David Sartorius, Katrin Schultheiss, and Leslie Rowland were chairs and commentators at the symposium that tested drafts of these essays. Thanks to the many students over the years who gave me an education in labor history and the history of sexuality. Dedicated to Rosa Hollier Phelps, smasher of the patriarchy.

through the endless salacious stories of celebrity misconduct.<sup>1</sup> This special issue of *Labor* seeks to contribute to a more rounded view from below, with a focus on sexual harassment in the history of labor and the working class from the nineteenth century to the present. It arises out of an online symposium sponsored by the journal, “Class and Consent: Labor, Work, Gender, and the Problems of Sexual Harassment and Violence,” which took place September 24–25, 2020, and involved every contributor here. What motivates the issue is the belief that the field of labor history can and must do more to speak to sexual harassment, even if this journal deserves credit for paying attention to the question from its very first issue in 2004.<sup>2</sup>

What constitutes sexual harassment has, of course, varied across time and place. The term itself was devised less than fifty years ago, in 1975.<sup>3</sup> A generative definition is provided by Mary Bularzik: “any unwanted pressure for sexual activity,” including “verbal innuendos and suggestive comments, leering, gestures, unwanted physical contact (touching, pinching, etc.), rape and attempted rape.”<sup>4</sup> Whether construed as sexual harassment or not, such behavior—and resistance to it—has pervaded the history of work and labor for centuries. A notice by maidservants in the *New York Weekly Journal* on January 28, 1734, stated that women driven to service in hard times “think it reasonable we should not be beat by our Mistresses Husband, they being too strong, and perhaps may do tender women Mischief.”<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Engels, in his 1844 investigation of the social conditions of the English working class, held that “the factory owner wields complete power over the persons and charms of the girls working for him,” and that “nine times out of ten, nay, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the threat of dismissal is sufficient to break down the inclination of girls who at the best of times, have no strong inclination to chastity.”<sup>6</sup> Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), told how upon entering her fifteenth year—“a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl,” as she put it—“my master began to whisper foul words in my ear. . . . He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled.”<sup>7</sup> As these examples show, workplace sexual harassment has occurred throughout American history across a variety of labor conditions, free and unfree, in field, home, factory, and office, from the colonial era to neoliberal global capitalism.

The following articles provide a narrative arc from the Civil War to the present. They identify a common theme of women’s resistance to sexual harassment in the

1. For exemplary work, see Mueller, “For Hotel Workers, Weinstein Allegations Put a Spotlight on Harassment”; Chira and Einhorn, “How Tough Is It to Change a Culture of Harassment? Ask Women at Ford”; Malone, “Will Women in Low-Wage Jobs Get Their #MeToo Moment?”; Yeung, “Unreckoned”; Sainato, “It Was Like Hell”; Smith, “Powerful Reporter Got Away with Sexual Misconduct”; and Covert, “McDonald’s Has a Real Sexual Harassment Problem.”

2. Meyer, “Workplace Predators.”

3. The best history of its origins may be found in Baker, *Women’s Movement against Sexual Harassment*.

4. Bularzik, “Sexual Harassment at the Workplace,” 25.

5. Quoted in Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, 26.

6. Engels, *Condition of the Working Class*, 167–68.

7. [Jacobs], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 44.

workplace, featuring a diversity of tactics, evolving frames of reference, differing categories of workers, and myriad proposals for its regulation and overcoming. Crystal N. Feimster mines a rich documentary vein to unearth the extraordinary story of how African American laundresses for the US Army in Louisiana during the Civil War used tribunals to contest their harassment. Black women's resistance to sexual abuse in the Civil War and Reconstruction era is traced more broadly by Kaisha Esty, who carries out an intellectual history of what she creatively calls their assertions of "sexual sovereignty." Mara Keire examines internal investigations by Macy's department store in the Progressive Era and finds management so preoccupied with women's morality as to excuse verbal and sexual harassment by male supervisors. Annelise Orleck profiles two strikes a century apart, by corset workers in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1912, and McDonald's workers in 2018–19, to examine the efficacy of the strike tactic against sexual harassment. Emily E. LB. Twarog recounts how 9to5, an organization of office workers, initiated a sexual harassment hotline in the 1980s, using telecommunications to support and counsel women. A global horizon is established by Eileen Boris, who reconstructs in detail how, in a complex process stretching across decades, the International Labour Organization passed its Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) in 2019. Anne Balay draws on her oral histories of queer blue-collar workers and her own work as a union organizer to provide a personal essay on the class dimensions of consent and its implications for labor organizing. In a concluding essay, Christopher Phelps provides a synthetic overview of the value of class as an analytic category for understanding sexual harassment, drawing together evidence of labor movement activity against it from the Gilded Age to the present. Finally, in a documentary bonus, a short story by Margaret Sanger from 1912 published here for the first time provides a fictional dramatization of a nurse's repudiation of a doctor's attempted sexual assault.

Read holistically, this special issue traces how working-class women, in resisting work-related sexual abuse between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, helped reframe behavior once viewed as "virtue" forsaken as, instead, sexual harassment. A powerful rotation in perspective, this shifted blame from the harassed to the harassers. Nevertheless, these essays merely scratch the surface of what labor history might contribute to our understanding of sex, class, and consent. Future research could expand our comprehension in many areas. The women's resistance that is at the core of the contributions here, for example, should be complemented by more investigations of working-class male behavior and supervisory predation. The relationship between sex work and sexual harassment, often existing on a continuum, deserves fuller treatment. The way lesbian, gay, transgendered, and queer workers experienced harassment historically has barely begun to be told. Transnational and comparative approaches to this topic remain surprisingly rare.<sup>8</sup> Structural analyses of workplaces as institutional contexts for sexual regulation could augment a history of capitalism too often delimited as political economy. Finally, work as a locus of consensual sex—the

8. One exception is Zippel, *Politics of Sexual Harassment*.

joys of workplace sex and sexual banter—deserves a greater secondary literature, one brought into dialogue with the history of sexual harassment and violence, because the workplace has always been a site of mutual desire, lust, and pleasure as well as danger and violation.<sup>9</sup> If these essays arrive at the end of a very long historical process, then, they represent but a beginning. ■

## References

- Baker, Carrie N. *The Women's Movement against Sexual Harassment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Berebitsky, Julie. *Sex and the Office: A History of Gender, Power, and Desire*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012.
- Bularzik, Mary. "Sexual Harassment at the Workplace: Historical Notes." *Radical America* 12, no. 4 (1978): 25–43.
- Chira, Susan, and Catrin Einhorn. "How Tough Is It to Change a Culture of Harassment? Ask Women at Ford." *New York Times*, December 19, 2017. [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/19/us/ford-chicago-sexual-harassment.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/19/us/ford-chicago-sexual-harassment.html).
- Covert, Bryce. "McDonald's Has a Real Sexual Harassment Problem." *The Nation*, July 28, 2020. [www.thenation.com/article/society/mcdonalds-sexual-harassment-feature](http://www.thenation.com/article/society/mcdonalds-sexual-harassment-feature).
- Engels, [Friedrich]. *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. New York: Macmillan, 1958.
- Foner, Philip S. *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, vol. 1: *From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor*. New York: International Publishers, 1947.
- [Jacobs, Harriet]. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Boston: L. Maria Child, 1861.
- Malone, Clare. "Will Women in Low-Wage Jobs Get Their #MeToo Moment?" *FiveThirtyEight*, December 14, 2017. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-metoo-moment-hasnt-reached-women-in-low-wage-jobs-will-it>.
- Meyer, Steve. "Workplace Predators: Sexuality and Harassment on the U.S. Automotive Shop Floor, 1930–1960." *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 1, no. 1 (2004): 77–93.
- Mueller, Benjamin. "For Hotel Workers, Weinstein Allegations Put a Spotlight on Harassment." *New York Times*, December 17, 2017. [www.nytimes.com/2017/12/17/us/harvey-weinstein-hotel-sexual-harassment.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/17/us/harvey-weinstein-hotel-sexual-harassment.html).
- Saintano, Michael. "'It Was Like Hell': California Hotel Workers Break Their Silence on Abuse." *The Guardian*, October 16, 2018. [www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/16/hotel-workers-sexual-assault-harassment-terranca-resort](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/16/hotel-workers-sexual-assault-harassment-terranca-resort).
- Smith, Ben. "A Powerful Reporter Got Away with Sexual Misconduct for Decades. His Paper, and His Union, Looked the Other Way." *New York Times*, December 6, 2020. [www.nytimes.com/2020/12/06/business/media/pittsburgh-post-gazette-news-guild.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/06/business/media/pittsburgh-post-gazette-news-guild.html).
- Williams, Christine L., Patti A. Giuffre, and Kirsten Dellinger. "Sexuality in the Workplace: Organizational Control, Sexual Harassment, and the Pursuit of Pleasure." *American Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 73–93.

9. For examples of such a fused approach, see Berebitsky, *Sex and the Office*; and Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger, "Sexuality in the Workplace."

Yeung, Bernice. "The Unreckoned: Seventeen Women Tell Why #MeToo Still Hasn't Come for Them." *The Cut*, September 5, 2018. [www.thecut.com/2018/09/unreckoned-left-behind-by-metoo.html](http://www.thecut.com/2018/09/unreckoned-left-behind-by-metoo.html).

Zipfel, Kathrin S. *The Politics of Sexual Harassment: A Comparative Study of the United States, the European Union, and Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.