

# *Perspectives on Work*



## *Susan C. Eaton*

*"...At the end of the day it is our relationships that teach, motivate, and sustain us in our efforts to become the people we hope to be, engaged in making the world we hope to make."*

*"What I will always remain grateful for seeing—since my Harvard-Radcliffe education had given me no inkling of this—is how much most people both want to do a good job and make a difference through their labor. Surely we can do better than we do now at ensuring that most people enjoy and are enriched by their work?"*

*July 9, 1957 – December 30, 2003*

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In the Introduction to the Vol. 1, No. 2 issue of *Perspectives on Work*, the editors refer to the article written by Susan that is reprinted here by saying,

*“...Susan Eaton recounts in a personal way why she, like many of us, find our field challenging, rewarding and worth our energies. We hope many other young people find it so in the future. Our task is to make sure they do.”*

We hope this article will encourage those who follow in or are considering similar pursuits as Susan. It is also an opportunity to give those who will benefit from the funds established in her honor a glimpse of what inspired Susan.

Lotte Bailyn, Mary Jo Bane, Susan Cass, Jacalyn Curreri, and Thomas A. Kochan

## WORK AND EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS:

# a Doctoral Student's View



SUSAN C. EATON

I come to the world of industrial relations scholarship for both personal and professional reasons. My family history is intricately entwined with unions and workers; and my work history, before I became a doctoral student in IR/HRM three years ago, consisted of hands-on labor-management relations from the labor side, as well as research and consulting. In this essay I explain both influences, and why I think industrial relations practice can be a key factor in improving life at work — and what makes work meaningful — for everyone who works.

### Family First

I probably wouldn't be here today if my Irish-Canadian grandfather hadn't been a skilled member of the Plasterers' Union. His union card allowed him to cross the border legally and work in the U.S., including in Chicago, where he met and married my grandmother. She worked as a railroad bookkeeper and was part of the largely unorganized female workforce. Their son, my father, disappointed his craftsman father by refusing to follow him into the

Susan Eaton's grandfather's naturalization certificate. William Eaton was a skilled member of the Plasterers' Union.

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*My grandparents' wedding photo c. 1925,  
William Fitzsimmonds Eaton and Rosa Ellenbost.*

trade. But he did become a labor reporter who covered civil rights marches and labor disputes for many years and who co-wrote a book about Walter Reuther which I indexed when I was 14. My grandfather died of occupational lung cancer before I was born, but I vividly remember a photo of him taken at a Plasterers' Union picnic. So unions always seemed important in our home. Work has always been a part of my life, in a good way. As a little girl, I delighted in going to my father's office to play on his newspaper's teletype machine. (Yes, this was before computers and modems!) He found many good friends and colleagues in his work, and he loved it, even though it took him away from home for long periods. Even since his "retirement" at 64, he seems to be working virtually full time at a new series of jobs. My mother, who stayed home after my sister and I were born in the late 1950s, found the unpaid work of taking care of us both challenging and frustrating. When we were in high school, she returned to the workforce — first as a secretary, then as a paralegal, and later as lawyer and administrative judge. She hasn't retired yet!

I always assumed I would work for pay, and I looked forward to any opportunity, starting with newspaper delivery and baby-sitting and moving on to the local public library when I was 15. My first exposure to terrible conditions for workers came in northern Michigan in the 1970s, when I volunteered at a Catholic child care center for the kids of migrant farm workers during a summer "work camp" experience.

As we rode the school bus to pick up tiny children who lived in run-down shacks with one light bulb hanging from the ceiling, I found it hard to believe that such hard-working people could be so poor. The children we tended were all younger than six years old, because at that age they went to the fields to help their parents. I remember the shock of finding one of my favorite little girls gone when I came one day — her family had departed during the night, as many were forced to do. This experience led me to assist in the boycott of lettuce and grapes to support the United Farm Workers' efforts to win contracts

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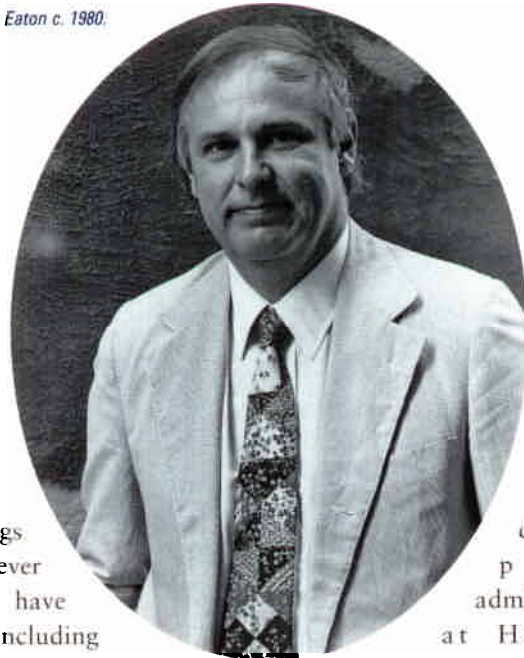
for California farm workers.

This experience, along with the values of my upbringing, led me to explore community and labor organizing. In college at Harvard-Radcliffe, I wrote

a collaborative senior thesis with four other women, comparing five different kinds of organizing for social justice. My own experiences and interviews (with members of a community organization called the Vermont Alliance) suggested that union members were the most highly skilled local organizers. I decided to seek out a job in the labor movement. I applied to several different unions for jobs, and I was hired by George Hardy's executive assistant, Bob Welsh, to work with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), AFL-CIO. Soon after I arrived there in 1980, John Sweeney became president of the SEIU.

### **From Research to Action: Working for the Union**

When I started work, SEIU was a medium-sized union of 350,000 members,



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but even then (as now), its officers and staff were open to hiring young people and people from outside the membership who would commit themselves to the union. I completed a wonderful one-year apprenticeship in research and negotiation skills, while also learning about organizing, picket lines, and publishing, and how to work a 60-hour week day in and day out.

I worked for SEIU for 11 more years, as an international representative, organizer, negotiator, researcher, and eventually a senior manager. During that time the union grew and organized constantly. My work was incredibly rewarding and never-ending. For me, the meaning in my hands-on union work came from feeling I could make a real difference in people’s lives. This occurred in various ways — through bargaining a first pension plan for factory workers, opening up a new promotion path, or negotiating a “patient care committee” for nursing home workers and residents.

My skills were useful at the bargaining table, in speaking the language of both the company’s lawyers and the front-line workers, and in helping level the playing field so their voices could be heard — as they so often were not without the union. And I learned constantly,

often things I could never otherwise have known, including what employees’ lives were like, both their family and religious lives (for we often worked at their homes), and their lives at work. I began to see how much everyone wanted to “make a difference” in their jobs and how the union helped them to do that.

When I became a manager in the national union in 1985, I found myself suddenly in the role of those I had so often criticized from the bargaining table. With help I was fortunate to have (mainly from Hal Stack, director of Labor Studies at Wayne State University), I gradually learned the difficult skills of supporting the growth of others and negotiating the employment relationship from the “managerial” side. Eventually I came to feel that here, too, I could make a difference.

In 1990, I left Washington DC to get married and take a leave; as I entered my thirties, I found that work alone, no matter how challenging and satisfying, was not enough. I wanted more — including a family life! During the next three years, I completed a report for the International Labor Organization on women and unions in North America, and a master’s

degree in public administration at Harvard’s

Kennedy School of Government. I was introduced to the intersection of work and family issues through participating in an “action research” project focusing on work and family, described by Lotte Bailyn in the first issue of *Perspectives on Work*. I learned that research could be effective in illuminating issues of work, meaning, and social relationships.

With support from MIT and those faculty willing to see potential in a non-traditional graduate student, I entered MIT’s Sloan School for the Industrial Relations doctoral program. Now I am completing my third year of study and beginning a dissertation on the changing nature of work in the service sector, on work-family issues, and on women’s work!

**From Action to Research — and Why**

My years of activism as a union staff member and my years of first-hand experience with labor-management issues across the table, profoundly influenced my reasons for wanting to study industrial relations, or “work and employment relations,” as we are beginning to call it at MIT to reflect the changes in the makeup of our economy. In the remainder of this essay, I explain where I see the field going and what I think it can contribute to our understanding of work and human lives. While

I was a union staffer, I spent thousands of hours with workers on their jobs, in nursing homes, in hospitals, in offices and in smelly bathrooms where some performed janitorial work. I talked to members in factory lunchrooms and in their trailer parks, miles outside of town. I leafletted hospitals at 5 a.m. to catch the dietary shift coming in and watched nurse's aides tenderly bathe their elderly patients, and I met the 11-7 shift coming off work, as well. As much as I hated the smell of cigarettes, I spent hours in a tobacco factory to see how its janitorial work was organized.

My relationships with hundreds of workers convinced me that work itself, no matter how low paid or "unskilled," is fundamental to most people's lives — not just in the sense of earning their livings, but in their own sense of who they are and what they are accomplishing in this world. Whatever our jobs are, we can make them meaningful, or we can experience them as meaningless — though some are more obviously satisfying than others. Most people have a sense of "making a difference" in the world through what they do, whether it is cleaning toilets, changing bandages, teaching others, or running a sewing machine. If they do not have

such a sense, they yearn for it. And if they are part of a good labor organization, the union or association can help them gain that sense — by helping them gain the dignity and respect that rightly comes with honest labor, of whatever kind.

What I will always remain grateful for seeing — since my Harvard-Radcliffe education had given me no inkling of this — was how much most people both want to do a good job and to make a difference through their labor. They hate not having the proper tools or training to complete their tasks. They hate not being asked how they might do their jobs better. And those who are not asked — which in my experience was especially true for those at the bottom of the workplace ladder — especially have a lot to contribute. I saw people everywhere being undervalued and their skills and ability to contribute underestimated.

For instance, nurse's aides, who are often paid barely more than minimum wage, deliver 90 percent of hands-on care to elderly and disabled individuals in long-term care facilities and home health care. While many are not highly educated, nearly all of them do the

work because they like to help make people more comfortable and to care for those who cannot care for themselves. Yet they are rarely asked for their observations on the mental or physical state of their residents. Most are not trusted with basic information about the person's health or family situation. Some risk their jobs to read forbidden charts, so they can understand more about the condition of "their" patients.

This does not have to be the case. In my old union, SEIU, and in other health care unions, negotiators have bargained for "patient care committees" which would ensure the input of nurse aides into "care plans" and nursing or medical decisions. Some of these committees have improved food, schedules, and care routines, as well as attending to particular residents. These committees also help to improve the job of nurse's aides, though most are still underpaid and under-benefited. But their work is more meaningful. Unions, in their best manifestation, can help enable workers to make a contribution — in part, by getting managers or "management" to sit up and take notice! They can introduce a new power relationship at work — and a new relationship with the employer in which there is more mutual respect and dignity. Only occasionally do you find workers on the job who are contemptuous of their employers — in some sense, employees have to show respect, otherwise they won't be around for the next paycheck. Usually I found it was supervisors who were inclined to

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take for granted, patronize, or simply undervalue their employees, to their own loss and that of their “product” or service. Even in today’s “total quality” workplaces, most new ideas are imposed from the “top.” Just ask an employee.

### **Why “Work and Employment Relations” Makes a Difference**

The field we have known as “industrial relations” gives us a chance to study work and what makes it meaningful, effective, and productive to both employees and managers. As the kinds of work we value as a society change and diversify, so do relationships at work. Of course, as work changes, we have new things to study! I am involved in trying to understand what aspects of our manufacturing-based models apply to the service sector and how the service sector is changing — both human services and other kinds.

I believe that students of the future in “work and employment relations” will have to attend more to the boundaries between work and “life” or family matters. Since women are now virtually all working for pay at some time in their lives, these boundaries have shifted for both men and women of all classes. I also predict we will pay more attention to both intellectual labor (or knowledge work) and to “emotional labor,” or work which requires us to adopt or to

mimic a particular emotional state, such as cheerfulness, or caring. We know very little about the costs and benefits to employees of such work, or about how it is organized from the management side. Too often, as in the case of the nurse’s aides, managers assume that “caring” is a skill female workers (at least) learn at home which can be transplanted to the workplace and paid very little — but this is mistaken. My study of quality care shows that the “philosophy” of care matters just as much as the economics do in determining whether elder care providers deliver high, low, or mediocre quality.

Work organization is integrally linked to performance and outcomes, both for employees and firms, as many skilled researchers have shown. Usually how work is organized is decided at the “top” of the organization, not at the bottom or even in the middle. I am interested in IR because, in some cases, it focuses a light on those in the middle and the bottom of the ladder. These are the people who have so much to give, but are often not asked. Whether we “work to live” or “live to work,” we still spend the majority of our lives working. Surely we can do better than we do now at ensuring that most people enjoy and are enriched by their work. Most people have tremendous untapped potential, in my view. Industrial relations can help us identify

ways to improve how work can help individuals and companies realize their full potential in creativity, relationships, and growth.



**Susan C. Eaton**

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