sues involved in abortion work. Unless we begin to find ways to explore abortion work from the perspective of workplace safety, the important issues that are facing these workers will continue to be ignored. Abortion work is principally a regular health care service carried out, for the most part, by unsupported health care providers in an extraordinarily hostile environment. At a time of enormous transition within the health care system, and in our current heightened sense of insecurity, it is important that the uneasiness of these workers be recognized as credible concerns for workers in general.

Hard Bargaining

Kate Bronfenbrenner

FOR THE LAST DECADE, the United States has experienced the longest and most dramatic peace-time economic expansion in its history. Since 1991, an estimated 22 million jobs have been added to the economy, while the Gross Domestic Product has increased, on average, 4 per cent each year. Corporate profits have soared, unemployment has dropped, and labour productivity has increased at nearly double the rate it did in the nation's last economic expansion, almost 30 years ago. But this economic boom carries with it some disturbing contradictions. Despite low unemployment and tight labour markets, American workers are more, not less, anxious about job security. This persistent insecurity is in large part a function of rapid increases in the extent and frequency of capital mobility, and the threat of capital mobility, since the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The spectre of capital mobility, and the employment upheaval that follows in its wake, haunts the union organizing process for unorganized workers and collective bargaining for workers already in unions — keeping wages low, unions weak, and workers anxious.[1]

In the late 1980s, prior to the passage of NAFTA, employers made plant closing threats a primary focus of their anti-union campaigns in 29 per cent of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) certification elections. By the mid-1990s, when NAFTA

[1]This essay is drawn from a much longer report entitled "Uneasy Terrain: The Impact of Capital Mobility on Workers, Wages, and Union Organizing." The report was submitted to the US Trade Deficit Review Commission in 2000. A complete version of this report can be found on line at <www.ustdrc.gov/research/research.html>.

first went into effect, plant closing threats during organizing campaigns had increased to 50 per cent of all elections and 62 per cent in more mobile industries such as manufacturing where the threat to move all or part of a facility either within or outside the US was much more credible.[2] Not surprisingly, unions are shifting their focus from organizing targets in industries with high threat rates, such as garment and textiles, electronics, communications, and auto parts, toward less mobile industries such as health care, passenger transportation, social services, and education. The Union of Needle Trades, Industrial, and Technical Employees (UNITE), for example, which in past years has concentrated most of its efforts in organizing in textile and apparel manufacturing, where the threat rate is 100 per cent and the percentage of plant closing and jobs moved overseas from already organized units increases each year, has shifted its focus to laundries and distribution warehouses where the threat rate is 50 per cent and 43 per cent respectively, and the ability of employers to move work out of the country is much more restricted. Similarly, the percentage of campaigns in the health care industry has doubled since 1993.

Given that direct and unambiguous threats to close a plant in response to union organizing are often in violation of the law, most employers make their threats indirectly and verbally, which makes them difficult, though not impossible, to document. A recent study conducted by the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University of 400 NLRB election certification campaigns that took place between 1998 and 1999 illustrates this broader point well: 79 per cent of the election campaigns where threats were made involved veiled verbal threats, while 51 per cent of campaigns with threats involved specific and unambiguous threats. Threats of plant closure usually took place in the context of other aggressive anti-union behaviour by employers. Employers who made threats of plant closings were more likely to hire outside consultants, discharge union activists, hold captive-audience meetings and supervisor one-on-ones, establish employee involvement committees during the organizing campaign, make unilateral changes in benefits and/or working conditions, use bribes and special favours, use electronic surveillance, threaten to report workers to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and show anti-union videos. Significantly, threats of plant closing were found to be unrelated to the financial condition of the company, with threats no less likely to occur in companies in a stable financial condition than in those on the edge of bankruptcy.

As expected, the Cornell study found that union election win rates were significantly lower in units where plant closing threats occurred (38 per cent) than in units without plant closing threats (51 per cent). Win rates were also significantly lower in mobile industries where the threat of closure was more credible (32 per cent). In

[2]The overall threat rate, however, underestimates the extent that employers use plant closing threats during organizing drives because it includes industries and sectors of the economy where threats to shut down or move facilities are much less prevalent and carry less weight because the industry or product is less mobile.

Kannopolis, North Carolina, for example, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textiles Workers Union faced an employer, Fieldcrest Cannon, that hired a public relations firm to circulate advertisements that, according to the NLRB, "feature[d] a picture of a nuclear explosion with the caption 'There's more than one way to destroy a community. VOTE NO.'" When the United Auto Workers (UAW) squared off against Mitsubishi Heavy Industries in Franklin, Tennessee, company consultants talked openly about a plant Mitsubishi was building in Mexico and the possibility of some work being transferred to that facility; a poster on a plant bulletin board showed an Indiana facility closed with a lock on the gate and the caption: "This is what happened to hundreds of strikers in Indiana." In the last two weeks of the organizing drive, supervisors escalated the threats in individual conversations with workers, asking one employee: "Is your family ready to move to Mexico?"

Yet even in campaigns in mobile industries without threats, the win rate averaged only 37 per cent, suggesting that the threat of capital mobility need be neither spoken nor written to have an impact. Workers in industries such as textiles, electronics, telecommunications, food processing, or computer technical support do not need any reminder from their employers that they work in an insecure industry where companies shut down and move in search of lower labour costs, higher profits, and a non-union workforce. Indeed, for large multinational companies such as Pepsico, Royal Dutch Shell, and Pratt and Whitney, an increase in shipments to other facilities or a visit from company officials from other countries can serve as a very credible threat of plant closure during an organizational campaign.

Thirty years ago, textile workers were the kind of people who benefited most from tight labour markets and helped drive the economic expansion and build the middle class. But today, workers in this industry, as in food processing, metal fabrication, and auto parts manufacturing, operate in the shadow of the economic boom, sharing in little, if any, of its benefits. They work ever longer hours in workplaces beset by serious job injury and health problems, with declining pay, few benefits, and little security. Many are recent immigrants from Latin America and Asia, or women, or both, and few have the skills or education needed to transfer to better jobs in the "new economy." They are workers who would benefit most from the collective power and voice that a union provides. Yet, in a climate where capital mobility and the threat of capital mobility are driving unions to seek targets in less mobile industries, these are the workers who are most likely to be left behind.

Just ask the employees who backed UNITE's widely celebrated 1994 election victory for 2,500 workers at Tultex Corporation, a fleece-wear manufacturing plant in Martinsville, Virginia. The union had won the victory after five very difficult organizing attempts which included repeated threats of plant closing in captive-audience meetings and videos. The success in Martinsville was followed quickly by a series of organizing victories at Tultex facilities in South Boston, Virginia, and Mayodan, North Carolina, and solid union contracts were bargained at all three facilities. But by early 2000, Tultex had shut down all three facilities and moved pro-

duction to Mexico and Jamaica, leaving more than 2,600 union workers out of a job.

The cost of plant closings and threats of plant closings in response to unionization goes well beyond broken unions, failed organizing campaigns, and first contract campaigns. Lacking intensive efforts to organize the nation's most mobile industries, union density will plummet further, causing working conditions to worsen, as workers lose their only hedge against the worst effects of the global economy. And, without hope of collective power to demand real improvements in wages and benefits, more reasonable hours and pace of work, and long-term job protections, workers' insecurity about their position in the current economy and their prospects for the future will continue to rise. The resultant insecurity will continue to constrain wage and benefit demands and hold down inflation, but it will not be good for American workers, their families, and their communities. Without the collective voice and power that unions bring, the global economy becomes little more than a worldwide race to the bottom in wages, working conditions, and living standards that no nation can win.

Brothers and Sisters: Gender and the Labour Movement, a Feminist Labour Studies Conference at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, Hamilton, May 2002

Franca Iacovetta

OVER THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, it has become something of a political tradition within the Canadian Committee on Labour History (CCLH) to organize, where possible, a CCLH labour day conference with an activist program during the time of the annual Canadian Historical Association (CHA) meetings. Thanks to the volunteer labours of many people, we were able to do so in May 2002, when the CHA met in Toronto. At the CCLH general meeting the year before, there had been unanimous support for Craig Heron's suggestion of holding our labour day event at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (WAHC) in neighbouring Hamilton. Along with