Introduction

IN HIS 1999 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton proposed raising the federal minimum wage in the United States. Clinton's proposal resurrected an old and familiar set of debates, claims, and counterclaims, as progressives once again lined up in favor of a minimum-wage hike and conservatives positioned themselves generally against. In these debates, a key question has long been: Who are the nation's minimum-wage earners, teenagers or adults? A large portion of minimum-wage earners are "non-poor teenagers," argue conservative think tanks such as The Heritage Foundation (Wilson 1998). Not so, say progressive analysts, who insist that adults—not teenagers—constitute the bulk of minimum-wage earners in the United States. "An increase in the minimum wage," trumpets a mid-1990s report by the liberal Economic Policy Institute, "primarily benefit[s] not affluent teenagers but full-time, *adult* women workers in low-income and middle-class families" (Mishel, Bernstein, and Rasell 1995; emphasis added).

Not so hidden in these debates over who really benefits from increases in the minimum wage lies a deep-seated, widely shared, and almost completely unquestioned age-based prejudice against youth (teenage) workers in America. For despite their many differences, both the progressive and conservative adversaries in the minimum-wage debates imply or directly assert that the greater the number of teenagers in the pool of minimum-wage earners, the less argument there is for raising the minimum wage. Progressives and conservatives challenge one another not so much in their depictions of teenage workers or the rights or interests of these workers to demand a raise in the minimum wage as in their claims of whether teen workers make up the bulk of the minimum-wage workforce. Conservatives, arguing that the largest group of minimum-wage earners are teens, insist that the minimum wage should, therefore, not be raised; progressives, on the other side, in claiming that most minimum-wage earners are adults, argue that the minimum wage should be raised.

When it comes to the issues of wages, health-care benefits, and overall working conditions, youth workers are generally considered to be largely undeserving: they simply are not seen as meriting the same attention as adult workers. In a nation that frequently professes concern over the school-to-work transitions and the future social and economic well-being of its younger generations, there is a striking level of indifference to the plight of young workers and an amazingly open and unconcealed age-based prejudice against the young (Males 1996, 1999). Statements that would cause a national outcry if they were made about other disempowered groups in the workforce (e.g., women or minorities) raise not even a stir when they are made about youth workers. In the U.S. workplace, as Neil Howe and Bill Strauss (1993: 111) write, "bias against youth is so blatant that no one bothers mentioning it." It is telling, after all, that we live in a country in which it is illegal to discriminate against somebody in the workplace because he or she is old (older than forty), but it is perfectly legal to discriminate against somebody because he or she is young.[1]

Many concerns can be raised about the way teenagers are spoken of in the minimum-wage debates; here, I focus on one. In these debates, one of the principal arguments for why the presence of large numbers of teenagers among minimum-wage earners should be a sufficient reason for not raising the base level of pay in the United States focuses on the issue of teenage "need." Teenagers are typically presented in the debates as being largely "affluent"—as a group that can be contrasted with the adult (and deserving) poor. Teenage minimum-wage earners, so the argument goes, are most often the children of middle-class parents and work purely for discretionary income to spend on luxury purchases. In other words, teenagers don't really "need" the money they already earn, let alone the increased amount of money that a hike in the minimum wage would bring.

The ideological work that goes into constructing teens as wealthy and adults as poor in the minimum-wage debates is remarkable. First, as Katherine Newman (1999) points out in her study of young, minimum-wage fast-food workers in Harlem, the stereotype of the affluent, middle-class teenage worker obscures the fact that, in the United States, there is a sizable group of teenage workers from working-class and poor family backgrounds whose minimum wage earnings constitute critical financial supplements to the well-being of their parental families and

households. Some of these teenage workers, moreover, are even having to support families of their own on what are often only minimum-wage paychecks—as should be widely recognized from the national hue and cry in a separate set of debates over "teenage mothers."

Second, calling teenage workers from middle-class backgrounds "affluent" obscures the fact that wealth in middle-class families belongs to adults, not to youths. "Youngsters," as Esther Reiter (1991: 17) notes, "generally have minimal say in how family income is divided, so even teenagers from well-off families [may] need to earn money." The level of access to financial (as well as emotional and personal) support that a youth has within a family is simply not visible to economists' measurements of overall household wealth. Abusive family situations may push some middle-class youths out of their homes, even as biased minimum-wage policies undermine their ability to achieve financial independence. Even in close-knit middle-class families, of course, teenage workers' ability to use their paychecks to cover at least personal expenses can be of invaluable assistance in easing pressures on what these days are frequently overburdened middle-class-family budgets.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the affluent and undeserving teen stereotype, though, is that claims of teenage workers' affluence are being made at a time when the gap between average teenage and adult earnings is wider than it has been in more than thirty years (Howe and Strauss 1993; Males 1999). As Anton Allahar and James Côté (1994) have argued, North America is in the midst of a decades-long redistribution of wealth that has seen teenage—and more generally, youth—workers grow poorer and adult workers grow wealthier relative to each other. Teenagers today, as a whole, earn less in both absolute and relative terms than teenagers did thirty years ago. Thus, adults who now make casual assertions about teenagers' affluence were themselves considerably better off than today's teen workers when they worked during their own youth. The propagation of the affluent-teen-worker stereotype plays a central role in obscuring the critical fact of a declining overall level of youth earnings in the United States and an increasing dependence of youth workers on the financial support of adults.

Nowhere is the incongruity and hypocrisy of claims that teenagers do not "need" increased wealth more striking than in the changing relationship in the United States between the federal minimum wage and the average cost of college tuition. In the past decade, college tuitions

have skyrocketed, and student borrowing has risen even faster (Flint 1998; Staples 1998; Zernicke 1998). More and more students are graduating from college buried under mountains of debt. Yet at the same time, the real value of the minimum wage in the United States has declined considerably since the late 1960s. In the mid-1960s, a college student would have had to work full time at the prevailing minimum wage for about six and a half weeks to pay for a full year's university tuition; by the mid-1990s, that period had almost tripled, to a little less than nineteen weeks (Males 1999: 315). Although the nation's leaders argue that it is more imperative than ever for youths to receive a college education, the country's minimum-wage policies are making it more difficult than ever for working youths to help pay for such an education. And as teenagers' ability to pay for college has declined, a multibillion-dollar-a-year, private-sector student-loan industry has exploded. This (adult-owned and -operated) industry takes full advantage of increased youth poverty to rake in handsome interest-based profits (Babcock 1997).

STOPGAP YOUTH WORKERS

This study focuses on the contemporary work conditions and experiences of youth workers (workers in their teens to mid-twenties) in North America—in Canada and the United States.[2] I begin with a discussion of the place teenagers hold in recent minimum-wage debates in the United States (debates that are not unlike those that take place in Canada), because having a sense of the extent and embeddedness of the prejudice against youth workers is critical to understanding, first, the current conditions of youth work in North America, and second, the reason North American youth workers' interests and experiences are so consistently overlooked and ignored. The minimum-wage debates illustrate how common and unmarked, how natural and easy, it is to dismiss youth (and especially teenage) workers as not being "real" workers and to pass over their interests as being unworthy of concern and of government and other forms of workplace intervention.

Youths in the United States and Canada today typically work in the lowest-paying, lowest-status jobs on the continent—in "dead-end jobs" or "McJobs" in the retail and food and entertainment service sectors. As a group, young workers have lower wages, fewer benefits, and less job

security than any other age group in the workforce. Employers of young workers, by contrast, frequently rank among the continent's largest and most powerful. Enormous national and multinational corporations—such as McDonald's, Pepsico/Tricon (owner of Taco Bell, KFC, and Pizza Hut), and Walmart—have grown profitable and wealthy in small or large part on the backs of low-wage youth labor. Indeed, for industries such as fast food, the "indispensable ingredient" for growth and success has been less the widely touted routinization of their labor process or the enthusiastic embracing of franchising expansion schemes that the "systematic exploitation" of large pools of cheap (minimum-wage) teenage and youth workers (Gabriel 1988: 127).

Not only do today's youth jobs provide little in the way of support for college tuitions; they also tend to be disconnected from the kinds of jobs that most youths will eventually move into in adulthood. For most young workers in the United States and Canada, low-end service and retail jobs constitute what Valerie Oppenheimer and Matthijs Kalmijn (1995) call "life cycle stopgap jobs" (see also Jacobs 1993; Myles, Picot, and Wannell 1993). These jobs generally do not lead anywhere in terms of career opportunities; nor do most young workers expect these jobs to become sites of career employment. They are temporary way stations, more or less discontinuous with individual career paths. Future doctors, real-estate brokers, truck drivers, and waitresses may all work for a spell during their youth in one of the continent's hundreds of thousands of low-wage service and retail jobs. Some young workers take on stopgap jobs during or between periods of schooling; some take these jobs between finishing schooling and entering career-type employment. But whatever their particular trajectory may be, young workers take stopgap jobs primarily because they are young. Better jobs are not readily available for the young in North America. Low-wage, low-status service and retail jobs are the jobs that youths can expect, and are expected, to find.

Working in the low-wage, low-status service and retail sector has become almost a rite of passage for the youth of North America. Between entering high school and entering career employment, most youths now work in a series of stopgap service and retail jobs. McDona1d's alone claims to have employed, at one time or another, one of every fifteen adults currently working in the United States. The time a young worker spends in any single service or retail job is usually not

very long—a couple of months here, a few years there. But the time a youth spends in stopgap employment overall can add up to five or ten years, or even more. There are indications, moreover, that as economic conditions worsen for young adults in both the United States and Canada, young workers' transitions to higher-status, higher-wage, career-type employment are on average taking longer than they previously did (Bernhardt et al. 1998).

Most youths in the United States and Canada do eventually move up and out of stopgap service and retail jobs into higher-wage, more stable employment. Certain groups of youths who are disadvantaged by their race or class backgrounds are at greater risk of being unable to make this transition. But regardless of whether a transition to higher-wage, more stable employment is eventually made, individuals across North America are spending considerable amounts of time during their youth and early adulthood in marginalized and often exploitive conditions of employment. Even those who do make a successful transition out of stopgap youth work may spend as much as a fifth of their working lives in jobs that contribute minimally to their own futures; that involve mundane, repetitive, and often meaningless tasks; and that confer only meager salaries and low-level status—jobs whose most clearcut significance is the enormous amount of wealth they generate for those employers who have eagerly positioned themselves in the continent's low-wage youth-labor market.[3]

Despite their economic marginalization and their importance to North America's service economy, young workers are commonly overlooked or ignored by policymakers, researchers, workplace activists, and trade unions. Their erasure from North American public discourse as a coherent and distinct group within the labor force that has legitimate and pressing concerns about poor working conditions takes place in one of two ways. First, many commentators still fail to recognize the existence of stopgap youth work as a structural and substantive part of North American society and economy. To this day, one can find mainstream discussions of youth, work, and education that talk of normative "school-to-work transitions," as if youths in the United States and Canada moved directly from schooling to adult, career employment, and as if the intervening period of stopgap work did not even exist. When workplace observers find that large numbers of youths "flounder" in the low-end service sector between school and career, they often

react with surprise and attempt to explain the "anomaly" by pointing fingers at the failings of the North American school system or at deficits in the skills or work attitudes of contemporary North American youths. Yet why should anyone be surprised at the existence of stopgap youth labor when North America's society and economy are structurally and centrally organized around having access to and using large pools of low-paid and transient youth labor? Entire industries are based fundamentally on access to cheap youth workers, and as consumers, we all benefit from the low-price goods that low-wage (minimum-wage) youth labor helps make possible.

The difficulty that many North Americans have in recognizing the structural existence of stopgap youth work derives in part from the simple fact that we don't really know how to talk about youth as workers, nor do we know yet how to talk about work as a temporary, short-term and disjunctive lifecycle experience. Youths are thought of in our society not primarily as workers but as consumers—in particular, as consumers of music, fashion, television, and other media forms (Griffin 1993). Pick up any teenage or youth studies reader and chances are that it will say little, if anything, about the fact that youths work and a whole lot about various subcultural youth "styles" that are consumed and produced outside the workplace. Even though the overwhelming majority of North American youths work at some point during their teenage years—often for considerable amounts of time—youths on this continent are generally thought of within the contexts of the school, the neighborhood, and the street, but not the workplace.

Meanwhile, work in North America is generally thought of and studied within a long-term perspective and within frameworks of class formation and class reproduction, social stratification and mobility, individual careers, and so forth. All of these frameworks, however, are of limited use in capturing the social position of stopgap youth labor. Stopgap youth work is fundamentally anti-careerist in nature, and it is generally more or less discontinuous with prior and future individual work and educational paths. Stopgap youth work in the low-end service sector, moreover, involves youths who come from, and will later end up in, both the middle and working classes.

Because age—unlike the other dimensions of workforce stratification that are commonly given recognition (race, gender, class)—has only the temporary membership of individuals, stopgap youth workers in the

service sector can hardly be spoken of as a long-term "class" in their own right. Identification as a stopgap youth worker is ephemeral. We do, of course, know how to talk, and worry, about youths who get "stuck" in entry-level service-sector jobs well into adulthood, and about people who suffer long-term effects from difficulties they experience during their youth in the labor market. But once we start talking about such concerns, we have really stopped thinking about youth workers per se and moved on to the more familiar issues of class formation and reproduction and to the ways in which youth work experiences affect the later well-being of adult, rather than youth, workers.

The second way in which the interests and demands of stopgap youth workers are placed under erasure in public discourse recognizes the existence of stopgap youth work, but employs one or another variant of the undeserving youth worker stereotype (seen in the minimum-wage debates cited earlier) to deflect attention from the voices and concerns of young stopgap workers. Some workplace observers do acknowledge that most youths in North America work for a time in the low-wage, low-status service sector, but they argue that there is no need (or, alternatively, no way) to "fix" or change this system of stopgap work because there is allegedly a functional match between low-end service-sector jobs and the youth (teenage) workers who fill them.

Thus, on the one hand, we have the familiar image of the "happy teen worker," whom we met earlier in the minimum-wage debates. The prototype of the happy teen worker is the middle-class teenage worker who is still in high school. For this worker, low wages are not a problem because he or she is working only for extra spending money; part-time and irregular hours are not a problem, because he or she is not having to support himself or herself and needs only to be able to fit work around high-school classes; and low-status and monotonous work tasks aren't a problem, because he or she is able to learn from and appreciate the experience of simply having a job for the first time. The happy teen worker learns what it is to have real-world responsibilities, how to find ways to manage time and money effectively, and how to work cooperatively with co-workers, employers, and customers. What are bad jobs for adults, some workplace commentators claim, are perfectly good jobs for teenagers or youths.

The flip side of the happy teen worker variant of the undeserving youth worker stereotype is the equally widespread image of the "alien-

ated youth worker." The prototype is the high-school-graduate youth worker who comes from either the working class or the middle class (as in the figure of the "slacker"). Just out of school, the alienated youth worker drifts through an endless series of empty, meaningless, dead-end jpbs; drops in and out of the workforce almost at random; enjoys no real sense of connection with his or her work, workplace, customers, or employers; and finds the real focus of life after high school to lie outside the workplace in a fast-paced and occasionally high-risk social life that is shared with his or her same-age peers.

It may, at first glance, seem as if the image of the alienated youth worker lends credence to the concerns and complaints of young stopgap workers. But this is generally not how the image functions. The alienated-youth-worker image typically borrows on conventional "storm and stress" models of adolescence—models in which adolescence is considered a difficult and stressful period in the natural maturation process that sets youths apart from, and puts them in conflict with, the stable, responsible, and adult worlds of work and family (Griffin 1993). The alienated-youth-worker image often presents stopgap work as a natural epiphenomenon of adolescence—that is, if youths are alienated in the workplace, this is because alienation (from work, from life, from adults) is the natural state of adolescence. When youths are genuinely ready to settle down into a life of career work and adult responsibility, they will quite naturally move up and out of the youth labor market.

Some observers, in fact, see low-end service-sector work as providing a reasonably functional fit with storm-and-stress adolescents, because it allegedly matches their need to have little in the way of real commitment, responsibility, or investment. These jobs are designed on the assumption that the people holding them will not care much about the work they are doing and will not remain in their jobs for long periods of time. Because youth workers in the alienated-youth-worker image are seen as not really caring about work, there is little point seen in talking with them about ways to improve the youth workplace. Workplace reforms that involve the interests and voices of workers are worthwhile to consider only once youth workers have moved on into adult, career occupations in which they can and often do feel a real sense of commitment, connection, and investment. Adolescence is a difficult time inside the workplace and out, according to this argument, so

the best we can do as socially concerned observers is hope that youths will eventually grow up and learn to behave as adults.

To begin to understand and engage with the experiences and interests of youth workers in the low-end service sector in the United States and Canada—to undo the erasure of the voices of youth workers—it is necessary to move beyond these and other such familiar stereotypes of work, youth, and youth workers. Thus, we need to: 1) acknowledge the structural existence of stopgap youth work; and 2) recognize that the social and economic environments of our continent's workplaces and labor markets have produced a distinctive workforce identity (or social position)—that of the stopgap youth worker. As will be described in detail in this study, somewhere between the naturalized and silencing twin stereotypes of the happy teen worker and the alienated youth worker lie the actual voices, experiences, interests, and agencies of contemporary stopgap youth workers.

As stopgap workers, young workers themselves do often accept that low-end service work is a natural and even appropriate step to take on their pathways up into the adult world of career work. Many young workers consequently embrace, engage, and identify with their stopgap youth jobs in ways that simply are not acknowledged by the alienated-youth-worker image. At the same time, young workers, as stopgap workers, also critique and distance themselves from their low-end service jobs in ways that are not acknowledged by the happy-teen-worker image. Indeed, many young service-sector workers position themselves as stopgap workers in the first place precisely because working conditions in North America's low-end service sector are so fundamentally impoverished—that is, precisely because they consider low-end service-sector jobs, in one way or another, to be bad jobs.

YOUTH AND UNIONIZATION

In this study, I am concerned not only with describing the contemporary work conditions and experiences of stopgap youth workers in North America, but also with moving beyond the passivity and fatalism that characterize the majority of discussions of youth work in the United States and Canada. The process that leads to the erasure of the stopgap youth worker as a distinctive and recognizable subject position in North American public discourse also frequently leads to the stance

that interventions to improve working conditions in the contemporary yough workplace are unnecessary, unfeasible, or undesirable. To this end, I examine, from the point of view of stopgap youth workers, the significance that unionization can have in improving work conditions in the youth workplace. I explore such questions as: How do unions work with young workers in stopgap service jobs? How do unions in the low-end service sector reduce and transform—or, alternatively, reinforce—youghs' workplace marginalization? What difference can unionization make in the work lives of young stopgap service-sector workers?

One of the most striking features of stopgap youth labor in the low-end service sector—particularly when considering the disempowerment of youth workers in North America—is, in fact, its extremely low level of unionization. In both the United States and Canada, young workers are less likely to belong to trade unions than any other age group in the workforce. This virtual absence of unionization among young workers means that one of the most vulnerable groups of workers on the continent—workers with little work experience, limited employment alternatives, low employment status, temporary work orientations, and no protection from anti-discrimination legislation—must typically confront some of North America's largest, most powerful corporations on an individual basis, without the benefit or support of collective action and representation. Under such conditions, quitting a job understandably becomes a young worker's signature final solution when when faced with employer intransigence in response to his or her workplace demands.

The low level of unionization in the youth labor market is not incidental to the existence of this market. As government minimum-wage policies and the absence of antidiscrimination protection for young workers in the workplace have helped to foster a low-wage, low-status, stopgap pool of youth labor, so, too, has the labor movement's widespread abandonment of youth workers in North America over the past half-century. Unions historically have frequently tended to act in the interests of their adult members and to work against youths in the labor market, whom they see as a threat to adults' jobs and wages. Seniority rules and restrictions on apprenticeship openings are but two common strategies unions have used to exclude youths from stable, well-paid jobs and to relegate young workers to a secondary labor market.

Since the end of the 1970s, union abandonment of youth interests in the workplace has quickened. Between 1983 and 1991, the number of workers in the United States age thirty-five and older who were union members actually rose by 1 percent, while the number of workers younger than twenty-five who were union members fell by 23 percent (Howe and Strauss 1993: 112). Youth workers who remained trade-union members in this period were not necessarily all that better off than their non-union counterparts. "Nothing exemplifies [the] age-graded inequality" in the labor movement during the 1980s, write Howe and Strauss (ibid.), "more than the two-tier wage ladder" that many unions began to negotiate widely during this decade. Tiered wage ladders have protected the wages and benefits of older workers while establishing secondary, lower-paying wage scales for newer, younger workers who are just coming into the workforce.

Despite the North American labor movement's occasionally dismal history in dealing with youth workers, unionization remains important to consider for the possibilities that it might have to offer for improving stopgap youth work for two reasons. First, unionization is still one of the most valuable and critical means workers have for transforming and improving their working conditions without having to rely purely on employer voluntarism and goodwill. Although many workplace observers today place their hopes for improved working conditions in North America in employer-driven changes in managerial strategy (especially in the highly touted "high-performance" model), there is little reason to believe that such changes will dramatically affect the low wages, low status, and high stress levels of stopgap youth work in the low-end service sector: Those employers who have positioned themselves in the youth labor market have done so precisely to take advantage of cheap and transient youth workers. Although unionization among stopgap youth workers in North America is rare, a number of unions are operating in the North American youth labor market, and the work these unions are doing with young stopgap workers has so far been almost completely ignored by researchers and policymakers.

Second, over the past few years there has been a shift (some would say a renaissance) in the North American labor movement—particularly in the United States. Faced with an aging and shrinking membership, and increasingly concerned about threats to the social and economic well-being of younger generations on the continent, the North

American labor movement has recently shown renewed interest in organizing among the young. For the first time in decades, union recruiters are becoming a familiar presence on college campuses across Canada and the United States, and over the course of the 1990s, student involvement in labor organizing mushroomed. Like many recent shifts in the North American labor movement, however, this renewed union interest in youth, though exciting, tends to be long on high-profile rhetoric and short on real commitment to confronting genuine past and present problems in the interactions of youth and labor. There is thus a vital need to consider carefully the experiences of youth stopgap workers who already belong to trade unions—to focus not only on the highlights and triumphs of unionization in the youth labor market but also on the failures, shortcomings, and misfires.

THE STUDY

This book explores the significance of stopgap work and unionization for young service and retail workers by describing the work and union experiences of two small groups of young unionized service-sector workers in the United States and Canada. The study that forms the basis of this book consisted of eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted in the late 1990s with two groups of young unionized workers: grocery workers in a large U.S. city that I call "Box Hill" and fast-food workers in a similar-size Canadian city that I call "Glenwood." (To protect the privacy of individuals and organizations, I have altered all proper names involved in this research.)

The young grocery workers I studied worked for the three large, multiregional supermarket chains that dominate the Box Hill grocery market. Although some significant differences exist among these chains, I consider them together for the purposes of this study, only occasionally and casually referring to them individually by name as "Good Grocers," "Food City," and "Grand Foods." The union local representing Box Hill's young grocery workers—"Local 7"—had about 12,000 members at the time of my research (about one-third of whom were younger than twenty-five). These members worked in a little more than two hundred grocery stores in the greater metropolitan Box Hill region.

The fast-food workers I studied all worked in the outlets of a single multinational fast-food company in Glenwood that I call "Fry House."

Although many Fry Houses in North America are franchised, almost all of the unionized Fry House restaurants in Glenwood are owned directly by the Fry House corporation. The union local representing Glenwood's young Fry House workers—"Local C"—was a small but diversified service-sector local with members working in the hotel, building maintenance, building security, and restaurant industries in and around the city. At the time of my research, Local C represented about 750 Fry House workers (about two-thirds of whom were younger than twenty-five). These workers worked in approximately fifty different Fry House outlets in the Glenwood region.

I chose the Box Hill and Glenwood sites partly because supermarkets and fast-food restaurants are prototypical places of stopgap youth employment. The grocery and fast-food industries are two of the largest youth employers in North America: In the United States, fully one-third of working teenagers are employed in restaurants or grocery stores, making these two industries the number-one and number-two employers of American teenagers, respectively. For youths between the ages of 16 and 24 who are in the U.S. workforce, one-fifth work either in eating or drinking establishments or in grocery stores (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1996). Canadian government statistics suggest that the proportion of youth workers in Canada working in the grocery and fast-food industries is highly comparable to that in the United States. In 1986, 15 percent of youth workers age 16 to 24 worked in either restaurants or grocery stores in Canada (Statistics Canada 1989). Because youth employment in the Canadian service sector as a whole has steadily increased over the past decade (Rehnby and McBride 1997), it is likely that this figure is now considerably higher.

I also selected the two research sites in Box Hill and Glenwood because they offered the possibility of studying two different kinds of union experience among young stopgap service-sector workers. In many ways, Box Hill can be said to represent a typical stopgap youth experience of unionism. Although overall unionization rates among young service and retail workers in North America are very low, the grocery industry—the second-largest employer of teenage labor on the continent—is actually a relatively highly unionized industry. About a third of grocery workers continentwide are represented by trade unions; in Box Hill, as in a few other regions of the continent, more than 90 percent of the local grocery market is unionized. If high-school-age workers

belong to any union at all in North America, chances are they belong to a grocery union.

Grocery Local 7 in Box Hill can be said to represent a fairly typical youth union experience for two other reasons. Like many North American unions, the local practices what is sometimes referred to as "business unionism" (Moody 1988; Parker and Gruelle 1999). Local 7 staff focus primarily on bargaining for wages and benefits and on policing the union's collective-bargaining agreement on behalf of its grocery membership; they are much less concerned with working to involve, mobilize, or educate members in union affairs. Local 7—again, like many North American unions—also has not had an extensive history of targeting the needs and interests of its younger members. To the extent that young grocery workers are spoken of at all by Local 7 union staff, they tend to be depicted as presenting problems: in the collection of union dues, for example, or in the enforcement of the collective-bargaining agreement.

Fast-food Local C, on the other hand, can be said to represent a fairly atypical example of stopgap youth unionism. The fast-food industry in North America is almost completely non-union. Indeed, my decision to conduct part of my fieldwork research in Canada was motivated by the fact that there are no fast-food union locals (at least, none that have lasted over the years) anywhere in the United States. In Canada, by contrast, a handful of unionized fast-food chains and outlets are scattered across the country. Originally organized in the 1960s and now about fifty restaurants strong, the Glenwood Fry House bargaining unit constitutes one of the largest and longest-lived of these union fast-food units.

Fast-food Local C in Glenwood is further unusual in that it belongs to one of the few unions in North America that embrace what is sometimes called a "social movement" model of unionism (Moody 1988, 1997). Beyond the negotiation of wages and benefits, Local C seeks to mobilize its members, to involve them in union affairs, and to educate them not just about unionism, but also about broad social-justice issues that affect workers throughout contemporary society. During the 1990s, Local C also distinguished itself as being highly oriented to working closely with its youth members. Indeed, the local has gained a widespread reputation in Canadian labor and media circles as being one of the most successful union locals in the country in organizing and working with young stopgap service-sector workers.[4]

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

My fieldwork in BoxHill and Glenwood comprised union and workplace observations; interviews with young workers, shop stewards, and union staff; and the collection of union and company newsletters, training materials, and other such artifacts. Before my study began, I made the decision to conduct my research without official employer involvement.[5] My study was thus based not in the grocery and fast-food workplace, but in the two union locals in Box Hill and Glenwood; it was approved and facilitated not by company management, but by union local staff. Much of my time in Box Hill and Glenwood was spent simply hanging out at the Local 7 and Local C union halls. For the better part of a year, I went to every union meeting, social event, educational program, and conference that I could get to. I traveled with union representatives as they visited their stores and talked with them about how they did their jobs. I attempted to learn as best I could how these two union locals worked with their young members by observing all of the various points of contact between union and worker.

I also talked to young grocery and fast-food workers in Box Hill and Glenwood. Many of these workers I found simply by visiting the stores represented by the two locals. Some workers' names were given to me by union staff and stewards. A few workers I actually met in the union halls. Young workers themselves also frequently put me in touch with co-workers whom they thought would be willing to talk to me.

My interviews, which typically ran a little under an hour and were held in locations chosen by my interviewees (usually a local diner or coffee shop), were unstructured and open-ended. My goals in interviewing young workers were primarily to hear them speak about what mattered most to them in their workplaces and to learn what they thought about their unions. Some interviews ended up being highly focused on one or two issues that were of particular importance to the individual worker, while others were more wide-ranging. In total, I conducted a little more than ninety interviews with young workers (about sixty in Box Hill and thirty in Glenwood) and twenty-odd more with older coworkers, union staff, and shop stewards. Almost all of my interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed.

Because I conducted my research without the official involvement of the employers for whom Local 7 and Local C members worked, I was

unable to conduct extensive or intrusive observations in grocery and fast-food workplaces in Box Hill and Glenwood. I did, however, spend much of my time during my eleven months of fieldwork as a casual workplace observer and customer, wandering almost daily through the public spaces of BoxHill supermarkets and Glenwood Fry House outlets. One of the advantages of doing research on low-end customer service work, after all, is that much of this work takes place in an open and semipublic environment. I found that I was often able to chat casually with young grocery and fast-food workers I met while they were on the job and to observe interactions young workers had in the workplace with their co-workers, customers, and managers. When I visited in the company of local union representatives, I was also able to enter stores' private, back-room spaces and talk casually with store-level managers. The experiences and opinions of grocery and fast-food managers, however—like those of grocery and fast-food customers—are not a central part of this study. My focus is on the experiences and opinions of young stopgap grocery and fast-food workers first, and on the relations between these young workers and union staff at Local 7 and Local C second.

THE YOUNG WORKERS OF BOX HILL AND GLENWOOD

Most studies of youth workers in the United States and Canada define this group according to educational achievement and status. There are, for example, studies of high-school-student workers, high-school-graduate workers, high-school-dropout workers, and college-student workers. These groups are often thought to be highly distinct and, therefore, to demand separate study. In Box Hill and Glenwood, however (as elsewhere in the low-end service sector), workforces are composed of youths of all kinds of educational status and achievement. High-school students, dropouts, and graduates, along with community-college and university students, dropouts, and graduates (a handful, at least, of the latter), can all be found at these work sites—and quite often, they are quite literally working side by side. Further, young grocery and fast-food workers in Box Hill and Glenwood have had a wide range of experiences of schooling. Some are, or have been, straight-A students who cram their grocery and fast-food jobs into days filled with school-based extracurricular activities (sports, music, journalism, debating). But there

are also those who are, or have been, deeply alienated by their experiences at school and frustrated by being forced to participate in classroom activities at which they are constantly being told they are not very good.

Studies of youth workers commonly use the word "youth" as a proxy for two other, generally unmarked identities—that is, "youth" all too often is taken to mean "male youth" and "working-class youth." (Researchers who study the work experiences of middle-class youths generally say that they are studying "student workers.") In this study, "youth" does not have any such covert gender or class identification. In both Box Hill and Glenwood, large numbers of young men and women are working. A slight majority of youths in the Box Hill supermarkets are male (about 55 percent), whereas a larger proportion of youths in the Glenwood Fry Houses are female (about 70 percent).

Young grocery and fast-food workers in Box Hill and Glenwood come from a mix of class backgrounds. Some, for example, have parents who work as professors, lawyers, and business owners; others' parents work as hospital orderlies, hotel maids, building-maintenance workers, and bus drivers. It is important to note that the mix of middle- and working-class youth workers in Box Hill and Glenwood is typical of youth employment throughout the United States and Canada. Youth work on this continent is marked by the facts that both middle- and working-class youths can be found in the waged labor market and that they tend to work in the same kinds of "youth" jobs, which are more or less discontinuous with the occupations of their parents and with the occupations that most of them will enter as adults. To an extent, workers of different class backgrounds in Box Hill and Glenwood work in different stores in different neighborhoods from one another. But in many stores, youths of different class background work together.

What can be said of class differences among young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood can also be said of differences in race and ethnicity. The workforces at both sites are racially and ethnically diverse. Union staff in Glenwood estimate that 40 percent of the Fry House workforce is visible minority, with significant numbers of workers of East Indian, Filipino, Fijian, and Chinese descent. The grocery workforce in Box Hill likewise has a considerable minority membership of African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and recent immigrants from Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. Individual stores in Box Hill and Glenwood vary considerably in their local racial and ethnic makeup, but many

stores have mixed staffs in which workers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds work side by side. In terms of the educational, gender, class, and racial identities of their workforces, therefore, the Box Hill supermarket and Glenwood Fry House are—as Newman (1999) has said of fast-food restaurants in Harlem—often "living laboratories of diversity."[6]

I assume that most readers will already be somewhat familiar with the basic organization of work in the contemporary supermarket and fast-food restaurant. For not only are most of us regular supermarket—and possibly fast-food—customers, but many of us worked in these kinds of workplaces when we were young. I will only note here that the Glenwood Fry Houses tend to be a little smaller than the average fast-food restaurant in North America, with about ten to thirty-five employees in each outlet. These restaurants are further notable for having a very simple division of labor—again, much simpler than that found in many other U.S. and Canadian fast-food restaurants (Reiter 1991; Leidner 1993). Glenwood Fry Houses have only three job classifications: cook, cashier, and supervisor. In addition to their customer-service role, cashiers in these restaurants share cooking tasks with cooks, as they are responsible for preparing side orders such as fries, salads, gravy, and so on. Supervisors help out with cooking and serving customers and are responsible for a number of managerial tasks (shop-floor supervision, ordering, inventory, scheduling, and so on). A number of cooks and cashiers in Glenwood are trained as "in-charges," meaning that they can act as temporary supervisors when the need arises.

Supermarkets in Box Hill fall toward one of two ideal store types—that is, the "neighborhood store" or the "superstore." Neighborhood stores are characterized by being located in predominantly residential areas and tend to be older and smaller, employing about forty to fifty workers. The superstores are huge, cavernous warehouses that are usually located along major shopping routes or within larger shopping centers; they each employ about eighty to one hundred workers. At least ten different job classifications are used in the Box Hill supermarkets: baggers, stockers, checkers, grocery (dry goods) clerks, produce clerks, deli clerks, bakery clerks, nonfoods clerks, meat cutters, and bakers. Workers in the first eight classifications are represented by Local 7; the meat cutters and bakers are represented by other union locals and are

not considered in this study. These Box Hill job classifications are similar to those found in other supermarkets elsewhere in North America (Walsh 1993; Hughes 1999).

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into three sections. In Part I, "Youth and Work," I provide background on the study of youth workers and the conditions of youth service-sector work. In Part II, "Youth in the Workplace," I examine the active and collective presence of young workers within the grocery and fast-food workforces of Box Hill and Glenwood. And in Part III, "Youth in the Union," I describe the experiences young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood have of unionization. My presentation in the first and second parts is fairly straightforward; my strategy of analysis in Part III, however, merits advance explanation.

The day-to-day experiences young workers in Box Hill and Glenwood have of their unions are far more similar than one might expect, given the two locals' embrace, at higher levels of action, of what are sometimes radically different approaches to the practice of unionism. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in young workers' experiences of the two locals, which derive in part from the differences between the business and social-movement models of unionism and in part from differences between what I call (borrowing from Ryan [1987]) an "adult-centered" model of unionism practiced by Local 7 in Box Hill and an "all-ages" model of unionism practiced by Local C in Glenwood. My discussion in Part III deliberately highlights the differences between these two union locals and downplays their similarities for the purpose of describing, succinctly, first, some of the limitations of unionization in the youth labor market; and second, some of the potential that unionization has to offer for improving youths' workplace conditions.