

INTRODUCTION

Beth Skrondal never followed the course that was charted for her as a young white woman in the mid-1960s. When she graduated from high school, most of her peers quickly settled down, married, and had children. Refusing the cultural imperative to domesticate, Skrondal moved to San Francisco and lived in Haight-Ashbury during the summer of love. As the counterculture cooled at the end of the decade, she decided to pack up her things and leave for Miami, where she began a job as a flight attendant for National Airlines. Skrondal became an activist in her new workplace, and in 1973 she mounted a successful campaign for president of her Transport Workers Union local. For the next three decades, Skrondal was on the front lines of cultural and economic change in the airline industry and built a career that took her to Pan American World Airways in 1980 and then to United Airlines in 1985. Skrondal never married, and by the 1990s she had moved back to San Francisco, where she lived on her own in a Pacific Heights apartment just upstairs from her friend Stan Kiino, a gay man who had also spent twenty-five years flying for Pan Am and United and who also spent the majority of his adult life single. Skrondal and Kiino both divided their time among union activism, socializing with family and friends, and working the giant Boeing 747 on trips to Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Sydney.¹

Skrondal's activism often garnered widespread attention. In 1975, for example, she and her coworkers shut down National Airlines for 127 days when they went on strike to protest long hours and low pay.² Although headline-making advances have invigorated Skrondal, she insists that her day-to-day life

as a single woman has been the central motivation for her activism. “My little thing has always been single people,” Skrondal observed as she described why she continues to build the labor movement. “No ‘rights’ are ever discussed for single people.” Skrondal pointed out that staying single has come with a significant cost for many workers like her. As she began her career in the late 1960s, the employers of teachers, nurses, flight attendants, and other feminized professionals explicitly argued that women’s future husbands would meet their long-term economic needs. Most airlines thus paid flight attendants far less than workers in other trades and excluded them from the most lucrative retirement benefits. Despite having full-time jobs in a heavily unionized industry that was recognized for high wages, Skrondal and other flight attendants who chose to stay single would permanently lack the robust pay and job security that the airlines guaranteed to all of their male coworkers. To challenge that disparity, and because they refused to allow corporations to determine their relationship to bedrock cultural institutions such as marriage, monogamy, and domesticity, Skrondal and her flight attendant colleagues built a workplace activist movement to win political power and material resources for people who live beyond the boundary of the traditional family.

Skrondal’s lifelong experience as a single person, as a world traveler, and as an activist has certainly been eventful; she has participated in some of the most vibrant and most contentious moments in late-twentieth-century U.S. politics. But her life course is by no means exceptional. By the year 2000, most people’s personal lives resembled Skrondal’s, as they lived outside the nuclear family. People in all demographic groups were more likely to remain single, to marry later, to become solo parents, and to choose same-sex relationships. Between 1950 and 2000, for example, the percentage of the population living alone tripled.³ In 2010, a single woman breadwinner headed 40 percent of all families,⁴ and half of all children grew up without married parents.⁵ Therefore, although Skrondal’s journey transgressed the norms of middle-class femininity in the 1960s, a young woman’s decision to remain single, to forgo motherhood, and to move across the country to pursue personal and professional opportunities would be unremarkable by today’s standards.

While the nuclear family has receded as the dominant form of kinship, the economy has not kept pace with the social transformation. The labor market has changed drastically since Beth Skrondal began her career. In a highly competitive global economy, companies in most industries have phased out the free health insurance, the company-paid pensions, and the high pay that allowed Skrondal’s male colleagues to be breadwinners for their wives and children. But instead of replacing the family wage with a new system that meets the needs of today’s more flexible kinship networks, most

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employers have eliminated those material resources entirely. Therefore, as real wages have fallen for all but the most privileged workers since 1970,⁶ the vast majority of today's families are struggling to do more with less.

Despite these pressures, critical analysis of the pay, benefits, and time off that all families need is absent from most mainstream political debates. The changing nature of marriage and domesticity has certainly produced a searing controversy over the past four decades. Yet in both conservatives' push for a return to traditional "family values," for example, or liberals' bid for same-sex "marriage equality," labor and work are elusive concepts. These movements indeed make economic claims, as they both argue that marriage and domesticity fill emotional and financial voids in people's lives. Neither side, however, addresses how falling wages, rising insurance costs, and far longer workdays are changing the nature of marriage and the family. For three decades, flight attendants like Beth Skrondal have challenged that erasure and have insisted that for both people who have chosen heterosexual nuclear domesticity and those who have less conventional intimate networks, strong families depend on a living wage and reasonable work hours. Through their unions, and via the coalitions they have forged with feminist and LGBT organizers, flight attendants have built a social movement that has inserted the workplace back into the wider cultural debate about sexuality, family, and kinship in the twenty-first century. That movement—which has transformed the airline industry over the past four decades—is the subject of this book.

*"Tell Me about Your Life!": The Political Economy
of the Stewardess Past*

Marriage, domesticity, and heterosexuality are keywords for flight attendant activists because managers have always used these concepts to assign value to the profession. Between 1930 and 1965, the category of the family helped make flight attendants the lowest-paid employees in the airline industry. The major carriers framed the flight attendant workforce with cultural assumptions that husbands should be breadwinners for their families and that wives should perform unpaid reproductive labor in the domestic sphere. Because top executives explicitly argued that a woman's long-term social role was to be a wife and not a worker, and thus that flight attendants did not deserve a family wage, flight attendants at some carriers made 20 percent less than men in comparably skilled trades.⁷ Nevertheless, as the industry boomed in the immediate postwar era, flight attendants worked in one of the most mobile, cosmopolitan, and alluring jobs in the entire economy. That tension—between a vast cultural opportunity and limited economic resources—set the

stage for the rise of a dynamic workplace activist movement among flight attendants.

The airlines' explicit use of gender and race as organizing concepts for labor was by no means new in the transport industry. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, for example, the railroads had hired African American men to provide onboard service as Pullman porters. Blackness served two purposes for management in that case. First, as black men performed servile labor for white travelers, those passengers would presumably reap the psychological rewards of white supremacy, which would enhance overall customer satisfaction among whites and thus stimulate demand for train tickets. Second, assumptions about black men's racial inferiority and innate servility helped mitigate the gender and sexual anxieties that would have followed white men doing what was imagined to be docile, unmanly work.⁸

Although airline executives operated in the same system of patriarchy and white supremacy as their railroad counterparts, they used a different calculus of gender and race to staff transportation aloft. From the airline's fledgling days in the 1930s, most airlines hired only young, single white women for regular cabin crew positions.⁹ Management's demographic decision stemmed from the most pressing economic problem during the industry's early days: chronic accidents. As the airlines scrambled for market share in a new and unregulated industry, they rapidly deployed untested technology, which caused scores of high-profile crashes. The industry's financial stability in the 1930s thus rested on its ability to prove that flying was safe. As historian Kathleen Barry argues in *Femininity in Flight*, airline managers leveraged the intersection of whiteness and womanhood to make their claim about safety. By making the pilot and flight attendant labor groups all white, the airlines used assumptions that white people are scientific, rational, and technically competent to calm passengers' nerves.¹⁰ Meanwhile, since the dominant culture assumed that middle-class white women were vulnerable and in need of protection, their labor would help turn the airline cabin into a space of safety and comfort.¹¹ If, managers asked the public, a delicate young white woman could work on an airplane every day, how could a commanding businessman be afraid to take a single airplane ride? Touting those social differences, the airlines chose highly gendered terms for the new profession: "stewardess," referencing a feminized version of elite steamship service work, or "hostess," channeling the white middle-class home. From their earliest days aloft, flight attendants' labor was defined in terms of the cultural categories of femininity and domesticity.

As the airline industry became safer and more successful in the 1940s and 1950s, a tension began to emerge in the story that airlines were telling about

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their stewardesses. Managers packaged stewardesses with conventional, mid-century ideas about white middle-class femininity. Projecting the stewardess as an attractive but modest “girl next door,”¹² the major carriers clad young women in the conservative attire common in other feminized trades: starched blouses, knee-length skirts, low heels, and conventional hairstyles. But unlike most pink-collar jobs that placed women under the physical oversight of male higher-ups, midcentury stewardesses were self-managed and highly mobile. Though the limited route systems of the 1930s kept stewardesses relatively close to home, subsequent technological advances gave the profession a global reach. In 1953, for example, American Airlines introduced nonstop, coast-to-coast service with the Douglas DC-7. Four years later, TWA took delivery of the sleek Lockheed Starliner, which could carry a stewardess from San Francisco to Paris during a single work shift. While their paychecks were still comparable to those of secretaries, nurses, and teachers, the fast, safe, luxurious airliners of the 1950s gave stewardesses a mobility unimaginable to most other middle-class white women.

The opportunity to travel the world made the stewardess profession highly alluring to young women regardless of its low pay. Georgia Nielsen, who would work the skies for forty-two years, said that she originally chose the job “because it was exciting, and because it gave you mobility.” After growing up on a farm in Kansas, Nielsen traveled west, where she ended up working as a bank teller in Colorado Springs and then as a secretary at Denver University. “I was pushing twenty-two and not married, so my options were very limited,” Nielsen recalled with a laugh as she described looking for a means to continue her independent life. That opportunity soon surfaced in the airline industry. In May 1960, Nielsen reported for duty at Chicago’s Midway Airport as a stewardess for United Airlines. The rhythm of her new career made Nielsen an object of fascination for women friends who had followed a more traditional path through marriage and domesticity. “I transferred to the Los Angeles base so I could fly to Hawaii,” Nielsen reminisced. “Then I moved to New York and lived on the Upper East Side. [My friends] had their babies, and they would say to me, ‘Tell me about your life!’”¹³ By becoming a stewardess, Nielsen was able to remain within the domain of middle-class femininity that otherwise would have channeled her out of the workforce, while pursuing a highly mobile lifestyle that was ordinarily reserved for men.

Although the image of the “girl next door” packaged the stewardess profession in wholesomeness, work schedules that kept women away from home for days or weeks at a time nevertheless threatened the established gender order of the mid-twentieth century. Airline executives attempted to neutralize

that threat by offering stewardesses less pay and fewer benefits than they provided for men. Some companies, for example, continued to enforce depression-era restrictions on married women's wage labor, which forced stewardesses to choose between a job and a husband and which artificially shortened many stewardesses' careers.¹⁴ For those who opted to remain on the job, hourly wages at most carriers were lower than those for baggage handlers, ticket agents, and middle managers. Stewardesses lacked the protective work rules that guaranteed male airline workers shorter shifts and more days off and were categorically ineligible for the pension supplement programs that augmented pilots' and managers' retirement income.¹⁵ Because they were denied the longevity pay and the retirement security that allowed airline men to be breadwinners for their families, the most direct route to long-term economic security for many young stewardesses was to leave the airline industry and to get married. Therefore, while stewardesses' unprecedented physical mobility constituted a sexual transgression for young white women, low pay helped ensure that the transgression would quickly end in conventional middle-class domesticity.¹⁶

By the end of the 1950s, the ideology of the family had left managers and stewardesses in an increasingly untenable position. Pan Am had introduced the Boeing 707, a jet airplane that would double the speed of air travel and drastically reduce its cost. Rapid technological advances allowed the airlines to launch new routes that spanned the globe and to hire thousands of new stewardesses. Downtown layovers in Boston, Brussels, and Buenos Aires aroused new interests and new desires in stewardesses. Inequitable employment policies, however, left stewardesses without the material resources to fulfill many of those desires, pushing them to discard their careers and the new ideas that flying fostered. Many stewardesses accepted that jarring transition in the industry's early days. But as the 1960s approached, and as culture changed at the dawn of the jet age, management's mandate for temporary, low-wage stewardess labor quickly unraveled.

When a 30 Percent Raise Is Still Not Enough: The Social Transformation of the 1960s and 1970s

Space Age brands reveal that the airlines were undergoing a technological transformation in the 1960s. But as American introduced its "Astrojets," as TWA touted its "StarStream 707s," and as Braniff rolled out its "El Dorado Superjets," the industry was also involved in a social transformation. In the major cities where most stewardesses were based, activists in a new upsurge of political movements were exploring new ways of living and loving. They

demanded the right to stay single, to cohabitate with friends and lovers, to complement marriage with dual careers, and to forge new identities as feminists, bisexuals, lesbians, and gays. In many cases, stewardesses joined these movements and began to argue that new kinship networks would require new economic resources. By demanding the right to be breadwinners for their families, stewardess activists inverted the argument that airline managers had been making about family since the 1930s. Whereas the major carriers had leveraged marriage, domesticity, and heterosexuality to make stewardesses work for less, the new organizers used the domain of sexuality to secure political power and financial resources for front-line employees.

The new wave of mobilization began as the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s amplified the already significant tension between airline managers and stewardesses. With the explicit representation of sexuality becoming more acceptable in middle-class settings, the airlines made stewardesses’ bodies increasingly central to their brand identities. Fashion designers rolled out new stewardess uniforms, tightening blouses, lowering necklines, and raising skirts. Advertisers promoted the racy new uniforms with provocative media campaigns. Beth Skrondal’s employer, National Airlines, for example, gave each of its jets a woman’s name and then created television spots featuring a stewardess with the same name saying, “Come fly me!” Men in the audience would see the aircraft on the screen but recognize that they were being invited to “come fly” the stewardess.¹⁷ Though titillating new marketing images were in part a consequence of the loosening of conventional ideas about sex, the airlines put even tighter constraints on stewardesses during the sexual revolution. To further increase the likelihood that stewardesses were young, attractive, and sexually available to male passengers, some carriers augmented previous marriage bans with new rules that grounded stewardesses on their thirtieth birthday, a policy that forced workers to sacrifice their careers and forfeit their pensions.¹⁸ By the middle of the decade, as the airlines demanded greater sexual mobility in exchange for fewer resources, the stewardess profession openly transgressed the ideology of domesticity while making young women increasingly dependent on the traditional nuclear family to meet their long-term economic needs.

The emergence of vigorous social movements in the mid-1960s gave stewardesses a new set of conceptual tools to contest these inequities. The women’s liberation movement, for example, argued that in a patriarchal society, men exploit women’s bodies, restrict their desires, and strip them of economic necessities. Gay liberationists, meanwhile, insisted that traditional marriage and monogamy were outmoded ideals that limited self-expression and curtailed sexual freedom. A nascent transgender liberation movement was de-

naturalizing gender and providing new critical concepts to challenge the extreme, caricatured version of femininity that the airlines were selling on television. These pointed, comprehensive critiques of sexuality emboldened activists and provided a fresh intellectual framework that undermined management's long-standing rationalization for stewardesses' disparate treatment.

The new stewardess activists had two goals as they brought feminist and gay liberationist criticisms to their workplace. First, they mobilized to end the recruitment and retention programs that had limited employment to single, childless, conventionally attractive, young white women. Front-line activists filed union grievances, built coalitions with feminist and antiracist organizations, sued the airlines, and took their case all the way to the Fifth Circuit Federal Court of Appeals, which in the landmark 1971 ruling for the case *Diaz v. Pan Am* stripped managers of the right to enforce age limits, marriage bans, and other blatantly sexist practices.¹⁹ As they pushed to end overt sex discrimination, activists renamed their profession, discarding "stewardess" and the other gendered terms that management had chosen and replacing them with the neutral descriptor "flight attendant." But even after historic legal advances turned short-term jobs into lifetime careers, new flight attendants still earned considerably less than workers in other airline trades. Closing that pay gap thus became the movement's second goal. Organizers demanded large raises that would far outpace pay bumps for other groups and pushed to end the pension and work rule disparities that had compounded economic discrimination against flight attendants.

By the end of the 1970s, flight attendant activists had delivered on those demands. At Continental Airlines, for example, rank-and-file flight attendants walked off the job during the holiday rush just three weeks before Christmas 1980. Thwarting management's effort to replace union members with strikebreakers, flight attendants ended up winning a 39 percent raise in a new three-year contract that increased top pay to the equivalent of \$86,000 a year in 2015 dollars.²⁰ After similar brinksmanship, front-line workers at American, TWA, Pan Am, and other leading airlines also won double-digit annual pay hikes. By gaining access to generous compensation that had once been reserved for autoworkers, meatpackers, building tradesmen, and truck drivers, flight attendants upended a long-standing relationship between family and work in the U.S. economy. While large paychecks for unionized workingmen had built the modern U.S. middle class in the decades after the Great Depression, they had also reinforced conventional ideas about gender and sexuality because the notion of the family breadwinner helped justify men's dominance and women's dependence.²¹ In the airline industry, however, the string of union victories had the opposite cultural consequence.

After flight attendant activists at Continental delivered a 39 percent raise to an almost all-woman workforce, marriage and domesticity were no longer the sole routes to young women's economic security. Higher pay, more time off, and enhanced retirement income gave flight attendants vast new ability to control their relationship to domesticity, kinship, procreation, and sexual pleasure. Therefore, whereas breadwinner paychecks had previously reinforced the cultural ideology of the nuclear family, in the 1970s the workplace was becoming a driving force for social change.

The Family Values Economy

The string of feminist union victories at the major airlines invigorated activists, but it was a deeply threatening prospect for corporate managers in all industries. Flight attendants' large new paychecks proved that the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s could deliver substantive economic gains to much of the U.S. workforce, especially to the women, people of color, and other oppressed groups that had been locked out of the family wage system since its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century. Rapid economic advances for marginal workers were particularly worrying to business leaders because they came at a time when corporations were already facing vast new macro-economic pressures. In November 1973, the U.S. economy entered its longest and deepest recession since the Great Depression. As the economy contracted, and as firms faced new, low-cost competition from emerging economies in Southeast Asia and Latin America, corporate profits fell sharply. Despite the downturn, inflation intensified and interest rates rose as the government continued to borrow to fund a large military and a robust social safety net. By the middle of the 1970s, the postwar boom had gone bust and executives struggled to mitigate soaring operating costs and plummeting revenues.

Recognizing that they faced a cultural and economic challenge in the 1970s, business leaders responded by making a new political argument about both. That argument rested on what managers maintained had been a devaluation of hard work. They acknowledged that the high taxes, generous welfare benefits, and protective government regulation that defined the mid-twentieth-century economy had benefited civil rights activists, feminists, students, and environmentalists. But while those policies helped aggrieved groups surge forward, business leaders contended that they stifled the economy and took opportunities away from hardworking American families. To restore work opportunities for ordinary people, managers and their allies pushed for reforms that would roll back taxes, welfare, and regulation, reforms that they insisted would bolster the bedrock cultural values that had

previously made America strong: independence, thrift, deferred gratification, self-denial, and personal responsibility.

Timeless ideals about family and work helped big business produce new momentum for its cause. U.S. corporations had mobilized against taxes, welfare, and regulation for over a century. But as historian Kim Phillips-Fein argues, they enjoyed unprecedented success in the 1970s, when they began to emulate the mass mobilization strategy of the left.²² By the middle of the decade, corporate executives had built a new, pro-business activist movement that they hoped would appeal not just to elite professionals but also to a wide swath of the U.S. middle class. To make that coalition as broad as possible, pro-business activists framed their agenda not in terms of the benefits it would provide to corporations or high-income individuals but rather as a means to address the pocketbook issues of ordinary families that were struggling in the 1970s. Taxes, they insisted, took money out of breadwinners' much-deserved paychecks and transferred it to aggrieved groups who eschewed the work ethic. Government regulation put fetters on companies and prevented them from creating jobs for responsible people who wanted to work. By making the traditional American breadwinner the rhetorical centerpiece of their movement, pro-business activists were able to frame upwardly redistributive, neoliberal policies—from regressive taxation to deregulation, privatization, and anti-unionism²³—as pro-family, pro-work reforms.

Big business's appeal to hardworking families resonated in part because of a wider political argument that the family was in jeopardy in the 1970s. That argument originated in a resurgence of conservative religious activism. In Southern California's pristine new megachurches, through innovative media corporations such as Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network and political organizations including James Dobson's Focus on the Family, a new cohort of evangelical Protestant leaders insisted that the social transformations of the 1960s and 1970s had undermined the nuclear family. Religious activists took an overt and often vitriolic antifeminist, antigay, and antiabortion stance, asserting that radical feminist critiques of marriage, gay liberationist dissent from domesticity, and increasingly permissive cultural attitudes about premarital sex, cohabitation, and single parenthood compromised the cultural values that had provided strength and stability for U.S. society.²⁴ Contending that social change represented an attack on the family, the new religious movement aimed to build coalitions with allies that would defend the family. By promising to create new opportunities for ordinary people who valued family and work, the pro-business activist movement framed itself as one of those allies.

From radical feminists to religious conservatives, political activists of all affinities argued that the family faced vast pressures in the 1970s. What the emerging alliance between the pro-business and pro-family movements added to the debate, however, was that morality—and not economics—was the root cause of those pressures. Rather than focus on wage stagnation, for example, the new movement talked about personal responsibility and deferred gratification, maintaining that poverty and welfare use were a consequence of families with the wrong values. Rather than discuss work rules, health insurance, or retirement benefits, they talked about independence, self-reliance, and thrift, arguing that families with the right values took care of themselves and had no need for the social programs that high taxes paid for. Whereas the family wage had created the mid-twentieth-century middle class, the new pro-business, pro-family activists claimed that family values would build the middle class of the twenty-first century. For the new coalition, domesticity and hard work would be the organizing principles of a new society. Thus, as historian Bethany Moreton incisively argues, “Family values are an indispensable element of the global service economy, and not a distraction from it.”²⁵

Although the pro-business activist movement’s focus on family values was only one of many interventions in the relationship between family and work in the 1970s, it would have significant political consequences. Perhaps most importantly, framing the workplace in terms of morality and not in terms of economics undermined what had previously been widespread support for the labor movement and for the welfare state among the middle class, particularly among white men in the middle class. According to historian Robert Self, in the decades after 1930, many white men recognized that union contracts, government regulation, and the social safety net delivered the resources they needed to be breadwinners for their families. White racial nationalism, heteropatriarchy, and pro-union, pro-welfare politics all aligned in a mid-twentieth-century paradigm that Self calls “breadwinner liberalism.”²⁶ But after 1970, and in a new formation that Self describes as “breadwinner conservatism,” white men began to see state intervention as a threat to their role as providers. Being a successful breadwinner would require eliminating the government regulation that prevented employers from creating work opportunities, as well as cutting the taxes that transferred workingmen’s money to poor people with the wrong values. As they began to interpret values-driven policies as aligned with their own interests, a growing number of working-class and middle-class white men joined a political coalition with big business to promote these policies, and they continued to support that coalition even when it attacked the labor movement.

Those attacks were particularly aggressive in the airline industry. In October 1978, after a vigorous lobbying effort from the pro-business activist movement, Congress passed the Airline Deregulation Act, which opened the industry to new competition from upstart airlines that hired low-wage, non-union workers. To bring their operating costs in line with the new carriers, executives at the established companies pushed flight attendants and other employees to forfeit the gains they had made in the 1960s and 1970s. Workers at Eastern, United, Continental, and other airlines struck in protest, and long, bitter labor disputes ensued. At TWA, for example, managers locked flight attendants out of the workplace for almost three years in the late 1980s after union leaders refused to accept a concessionary contract that would have reduced overall compensation by almost 45 percent.²⁷ The U.S. Supreme Court finally forced TWA to rehire the flight attendants in 1989, but only after they agreed to accept the majority of the cutbacks that management originally proposed.

TWA's unilateral action against flight attendants provided a decisive economic victory for management, lowering the airline's operating costs and weakening its unions. But while it saved TWA money, the campaign against flight attendants also revealed the immense tenuousness of big business's political position in the 1980s and 1990s. The alliance between pro-business and pro-family activists had elevated the concept of domesticity by arguing that thrift, independence, personal responsibility, and other family values would sustain people in a changing economy. Domesticity would, in the words of Christopher Lasch, be a "haven in a heartless world," providing both emotional and economic security.²⁸ But after the TWA affair, and in the wake of similar events in the mining, meatpacking, and automotive industries, the domestic sphere had become a space of scarcity and pain, as parents and children were forced to adjust to longer workdays and far smaller paychecks. Although big business had justified deregulation, tax cuts, and welfare roll-backs by claiming that they would restore the family ethic and the work ethic, it seemed to most workers that neoliberal reforms had rapidly devalued both family and work. Flight attendants' political task as the 1990s approached, then, was to highlight the striking inconsistencies in corporations' argument about work and family and to offer a different political agenda that would mobilize their coworkers against an inequitable economy.

Flight Attendant Unions and the Decline of the Traditional Family

The disconnect between the story that big business was telling about family and the new pressures on most people's kinship networks provided an op-

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portunity for workplace activists. Corporations made significant economic gains in the 1970s and 1980s in part because they delivered a compelling cultural argument about the past and about the future. Even though economic data clearly contradicted their analysis, business leaders were able to build a coalition because they referenced the moral values that many people held dear. For unions to counteract big business's momentum, they would have to tell a different story about those values, presenting an alternative narrative about the family ethic and the work ethic that would more clearly resonate with the dynamics in people's personal and professional lives. Since the early 1970s, flight attendant unionists had been making just such a case. They insisted that workers need better pay and more time off, not *despite* the fact that the family has changed but *because* the family has changed. Workers deserve new financial resources because they are choosing a wide variety of domestic arrangements; some are pursuing traditional heterosexual marriage like many of their parents and grandparents, and many others are staying single, cohabitating with friends in mixed households, and becoming sole breadwinners for their children. Regardless of which route workers take, flight attendants activists have argued, better pay and benefits help transform the family from a site of scarcity into a site of strength and satisfaction. Whereas the pro-business activist movement has used old ideas about sexuality to justify upward redistribution, the flight attendant activists of the 1990s and 2000s have made new claims about sexuality to advocate for a more equitable economy.

Flight attendants' counterargument about family and work has often delivered concrete economic gains. In the spring of 1997, for example, activists in United Airlines' San Francisco flight attendant base joined forces with local LGBT and HIV/AIDS organizers to demand medical and retirement benefits for workers with same- or opposite-sex unmarried partners. Fifty-one percent of United flight attendants were single at the time, and for decades the company had saved money by using marriage as a means to deny family employment benefits to the majority of the workforce.²⁹ Unwilling to give up those cost savings, United managers dismissed the flight attendants' overture. For the next twenty-seven months, the grassroots coalition mounted a campaign of street theater and civil disobedience that eventually compelled United to reverse course and offer the medical and retirement coverage. By the year 2000, every U.S. airline had followed suit, which for the first time brought family benefits to tens of thousands of employees who were unable or unwilling to marry their lovers.³⁰

The San Francisco coalition overcame immense odds as it pushed a corporation to provide benefits that met the needs of a majority of workers' families.

Workplace activists face undeniable difficulties at the outset of the twenty-first century: the labor movement lost half its members in the 1980s after the rapid implementation of neoliberal policies, and just 7 percent of private-sector workers belong to unions—the lowest rate since management’s open-shop drive of the early 1920s.³¹ But despite that painful context for activists, the San Francisco campaign was able to overtly politicize the category of the family to deliver material goods that would have been unattainable even at labor’s high-water mark in the 1960s. Family benefits were undoubtedly lucrative in the mid-twentieth century, but they were allotted in the narrowest possible terms and available only through legal heterosexual marriage. Therefore, even if companies had kept the same benefit programs from the 1950s, far fewer people would have been able to access them after 1970 because households made up of single, divorced, and cohabitating people had always been categorically ineligible. After the San Francisco case, however, access to benefits rested on signing a sworn affidavit that documented a committed relationship. There was no requirement for a legal marriage, for cohabitation, or for financial interdependence. For the first time ever, the airlines’ family benefits programs fit the needs of a highly mobile transport workforce that had always crossed national, cultural, intimate, and sexual boundaries. A sustained, explicit critique of the ideology of the nuclear family helped yield a victory at a historical moment when many other union initiatives had failed.

Flight Plan: Labor Histories, Queer Futures

As it situates the flight attendant union movement in the history of debates about family and work, this book offers both an economic and a cultural analysis. On the first level, the book provides a labor history, theorizing collective bargaining, direct action protest, and the elements of political economy: macroeconomic change, government regulation, and financial organization. The second level addresses how cultural discourse shapes economic policy. Most of the flight attendants who appear in the narrative were active participants in the cultural movements of the late twentieth century, joining such groups as the Kansas City Women’s Liberation Union in the early 1970s, living in San Francisco’s Castro district during gay liberation, majoring in women’s studies while in college in the 1980s, or leading LGBT activist groups such as the Harvey Milk Democratic Club in the 1990s and 2000s. For all of these activists, however, the workplace has been the primary venue to enact feminist and gay politics. This history of flight attendants thus situates post-1970 trade unionism in the history of the women’s movement, of lesbian and gay liberation, and of LGBT and queer mobilization.

Chapters 1 and 2 trace flight attendant activists' fight to win a family wage. Placing the flight attendant profession in the context of the cultural ideology of domesticity, Chapter 1 analyzes the causes of the flight attendant upsurge of the mid-1970s. The chapter provides an ethnographic analysis of the early careers of straight, lesbian, and gay flight attendants who worked during the mid-twentieth century, and a labor history of the confrontation between those flight attendants and the airlines that began in 1975. Both the ethnography and the labor history show how ideas about domesticity left flight attendants with lower wages than men and how alliances with the decade's feminist and gay liberation movements pushed flight attendants to confront those disparities. Chapter 2 documents the political economic consequences of flight attendants' activism, chronicling the successful struggle that won both the time off and the money necessary for flight attendants to be breadwinners for their families. The chapter focuses on a grassroots campaign among flight attendants at TWA, United, American, and other carriers in the late 1970s, a movement that ousted the male-led industrial unions, formed independent rank-and-file flight attendant unions, and mounted an aggressive new economic strategy against the airlines. Through their efforts, activists made unprecedented progress in closing the pay and benefit gap between flight attendants and other airline workers.

The next two chapters historicize the rise of the family values economy in the late 1970s and 1980s and show how these new cultural dynamics compromised flight attendants' economic gains. Chapter 3 presents the intellectual foundations of the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978, arguing that its backers justified the act as a pro-work, pro-family intervention in public policy and tracing how their justification rationalized harsh corporate countermobilization against flight attendants. Chapter 4, meanwhile, traces Wall Street's role in the elevation of domesticity as a cultural concept. As the banking industry drastically increased its influence over the U.S. economy in the 1980s, Wall Street financiers took over Eastern, Continental, TWA, and other major airlines, contending that a new injection of capital would leave airlines better able to create work opportunities for ordinary Americans. Once in control of the airlines, the new banker managers cut wages for all workers, reserving the deepest cuts for flight attendants. Chapter 4 analyzes how the ideas about the traditional male breadwinner and women's economic dependency structured the struggle between Wall Street and flight attendants. Both chapters argue that reforms packaged as a means to incentivize domesticity and hard work eliminated the family wage for all but the most privileged workers.

Whereas the middle chapters of the book reveal the dynamics that facilitated the rise of the family values economy, Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the

process of contesting those dynamics. Chapter 5 unpacks the new opportunities that have opened up for activists in the twenty-first century. The chapter documents the grassroots campaign among United Airlines flight attendants and LGBT activists in San Francisco that pushed for better pay and better benefits for the flexible kinship networks in which most flight attendants live. Chapter 6 traces the new challenges that activists have faced amid neoliberal reforms, centering on a bitter dispute between flight attendants for American Airlines and TWA when their employers merged in 2001. The struggle between American and TWA activists exposes the enduring importance of feminist commitments to justice to flight attendant activism in the twenty-first century.

Notwithstanding the many examples of rank-and-file workers' political advances in this text, the post-1970 period has by all accounts been an extremely difficult one for trade unions. Organized labor's crisis does not, however, mean that all social movements have receded. For example, the gay and lesbian liberation struggle that had helped deliver watershed advances to flight attendants in the 1970s has given way to the modern LGBT rights movement, which has flourished since 1990. LGBT activists have won lucrative new protections for U.S. workers in an era when many unions have lost the ability to deliver those protections. By the turn of the millennium, almost all Fortune 500 corporations included sexual orientation in their equal employment opportunity statements, and a growing number were providing explicit antidiscrimination language for transgender and gender nonconforming people.³²

Without a broad-based movement for economic justice, however, cultural struggles like those waged by mainstream LGBT leaders have often failed to address the needs of working people like flight attendants. The rapid string of same-sex marriage victories in the 2010s, for example, delivered both economic security and social acceptance for some LGBT people, bringing legal recognition for relationships and corresponding tax and employment benefits. But by defining the enfranchised LGBT person as married and gainfully employed, these particular gay rights advances reinforced the core logic of the family values economy: that domesticity and hard work should be the organizing principles of society. As Lisa Duggan argues in her widely quoted analysis of "homonormativity," the mainstream LGBT rights framework often "upholds rather than contests the broader neoliberal imperatives of privatization and personal responsibility."³³ Similarly, according to the more recent work of legal scholar Dean Spade, the bid for LGBT protection through hate crimes legislation has often lent political credibility and material support to the system of mass incarceration that has otherwise inflicted

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widespread racial and sexual violence against queer and especially transgender people.³⁴ Because of this blinkered agenda, and despite four decades of feminist activism in the airline industry, flight attendants' pressing economic needs have often been invisible in the core agenda of national LGBT rights organizations like the Human Rights Campaign.

Lisa Duggan, Dean Spade, and many others have made these critiques brilliantly, transforming social movements while doing so. There has, however, been far less concrete historical analysis of feminist and queer political mobilization that has moved beyond the marriage rights and equality claims of middle-class families. Over four decades of union activism, flight attendants provide one such example. Whether on the picket line against sexist age restrictions or for a big raise, flight attendants compel feminist and queer activists to take up issues of economic justice. Flight attendant unions have demonstrated that to expand the boundaries of sexual expression and of kinship, activists must push for a fairer overall economy: for a living wage, for safe and dignified working conditions, and for time outside work. In an age when family values have been offered as a substitute for a fair economy, and as flight attendants have challenged that substitution, their activism helps us recognize that domesticity and hard work are the foundational ideologies of an economy that dispossesses not just queer people but all working people. In the context of the flight attendant union movement, labor history contributes to the struggle for justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people. Indeed, when Beth Skrondal reflected on her life and moved single people from the margin to the center of debates about family and work, she imagined a queer future, a time when traditional family values are not the sole organizing principle of society. This book is a history of that future.