Introduction

Achieving the Promise of Work

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In October 2017, the Institute for Work and the Economy hosted a conference, “The Many Futures of Work: Possibilities and Perils,” to re-frame the conversation about the future of jobs in the world economy. This conference focused on the factors driving changes in the structures of work, solutions that deal with the diverse consequences of such changes, and economic justice as a primary objective for policy making. To that end, the Institute invited stakeholders from all levels of government, foundations, civic organizations, all manner and sizes of business, trade associations, unions, community groups, education and training programs, grassroots organizations, and international institutions to share their experiences and knowledge. Our goal was to foster policies and practices that link successful and satisfying careers with strong business growth, lasting community economic achievement, and growing equity and equality.

Since the convening of the conference, the global population has suffered the human trauma and economic dislocations brought about by the 2020–2021 novel coronavirus pandemic. In the United States, the effects of the pandemic were felt most harshly by the least powerful among us who work in essential jobs or whose employment requires their physical presence. At the same time, the spate of murders of Blacks, Latinx, and other People of Color by the police and by others who seek to preserve their own privileged status made clear the intersection of the economically dispossessed and the victims of government-sanctioned violence. The resulting spotlight led to a convulsion of civil actions that echoed worldwide. We did not know in October 2017 that 2020–2021 would lay bare the issues that occupied the attention of the authors
and participants who came together for the conference. While the data presented in this book are a snapshot of the conditions that existed when the chapters were completed, the central themes and conclusions endure.

The conference and working papers were organized around five major themes: the innovative enterprise; restoring the middle; structural racism; barriers to rewarding employment such as age, gender, disability, and prior involvement with the criminal justice system; and economic justice. In focusing on these themes, and now presenting them in this book, our aim is to explore the constellation of factors driving the futures of work: the diminution of middle-income jobs; the structural differences and barriers that put different workers onto different career trajectories; and the economic immobility associated with the intersections of race, gender, age, ethnicity, perceived abilities, and prior justice system involvement. Ultimately, we seek to present a range of potential policies and practices that can shift our course away from low-wage, unstable jobs toward jobs that lead to greater prosperity and economic inclusion. We do not suggest that either the conference or this book examines all the relevant issues. Instead, our intent is to prompt conversations and research that collectively address the expanse of issues that are shaping the many futures of work.

The conversations at the conference were inspirational. Without any prompting, the people attending the conference advocated sincerely for truly equitable and equal opportunity. Many recognized that growing gaps in wealth and income are fueled by unsustainable policies and practices that make opportunities less equitable. Many believed also that there is a way forward, and that it is reasonable to call on those who benefit most from the status quo to shift the current economic trajectory towards greater inclusivity.

This book is organized into five parts. Part 1, “The Impact of Bias and Structural Inequality on Work,” addresses how bias and structural inequality are pervasive and create growing divisions in income and wealth along several economic fault lines. In Chapter 1, Jonathan Barr and Karen E. Maguire present a distillation of several recent analyses by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). They describe how work is changing across the OECD nations, but also they pinpoint some significant regional variations in these changes.

The remaining chapters in this part address structural barriers based on gender, disability, immigration status, and race. These and other structural barriers are nearly universally absent from typical projections of the “future” of work. The discussion in this part and throughout the book points to an often-fatal flaw in policymaking: the failure to recognize material inequities and inequalities that put different people onto different career trajectories. Our use of the plural “futures” is intended to place these differences at the front of the reader’s mind.
In Chapter 2, Professor Ruth Milkman examines recent trends in the status of women in the U.S. labor market, in female labor force participation and job segregation, and in earnings inequality. She also examines key barriers to women’s advancement, as well as the growing disparities between college-educated professional and managerial women and the rest of the female labor force. In Chapter 3, Professor Susanne Bruyère addresses the future of work for people with disabilities. Demographer Rob Paral, in Chapter 4, asks whether immigrants are underskilled or whether, more typically, they have been slotted into underskilled jobs. Finally, Professor Patrick Mason, in Chapter 5, offers an expansive discussion of the consequences of racial stratification as the bedrock of some of the most pervasive inequities in the labor market.

The second part of this book, “Rising Economic Inequality: The Elephant in the Room,” focuses on the factors driving increasing economic disparities. In Chapter 6, Dr. Eileen Appelbaum examines variations in compensation for similarly skilled employees working in different types of firms, concluding that outsourced and supply chain production innovations have contributed substantially to increasing compensation inequities. Professor William Lazonick, in Chapter 7, addresses how shareholder primacy and corporate financialization strategies are anathema to achieving sustainable prosperity and the ascendance of what he terms the “innovative enterprise.” In the next chapter, human rights and immigrant rights activist Oscar Chacón joins with Amy Shannon to round out this discussion, drawing on Chacón’s advocacy experiences to articulate a hemispheric perspective on economic justice and the futures of work.

In Part III, “The Platform Economy and Gig Workers: Expectations, Challenges, and Opportunities,” contributors take on the platform economy and gig work. While these popular modes of providing service present new opportunities for some workers, they also create many new challenges that exacerbate already prevalent inequities. Although gig workers who rely on electronic platforms as their primary means for earning a living remain a very small cohort within the overall workforce, proportionally speaking, task-based work mediated through electronic platforms is a growing segment of how workers and families generate income. Businesses increasingly cite these platforms as ways to engage some portion of their workforce. In Chapter 9, James Bau Graves, retired executive director of the Old Town School of Folk Music, Chicago’s leading venue for folk music education and performance, shares the lessons of professional music performance as the original “gig” economy. Professor Chris Warhurst and his colleagues at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom (Chapter 10) offer a range of scenarios for interpreting the prospective direction of the digital economy—from the utopian to the dystopian—as a framework for thinking about policies that can channel emergent institutions and practices in a socially beneficial manner.
Lastly, in Chapter 11, Professors Martin Kenney and John Zysman remind us that huge pools of venture capital enable the “disruptive” innovations of the platform economy. As a consequence, there is a social imperative to induce the firms benefiting from these infusions of capital to develop labor-friendly, work-enhancing internal practices.

Part IV, “The Role of Labor Activism in the Twenty-first Century,” challenges traditional union models and presents ideas for new forms of worker collective action and engagement. In Chapter 12, activists Saru Jayaraman and Devan Shea describe their work with restaurant workers as they press for fair wages and for safe and abuse-free working conditions. In Chapter 13, Dr. Stephen Herzenberg contemplates new and modified models of unionization that track with the changing structure of work. A small community of organizers and researchers already understands the basic structure of broad-based unions that could mesh well with the modern economy. The primary challenge to creating these unions on a large scale is not a technical one; it’s a matter of building will and power. Dr. Herzenberg suggests how. Activists/scholars Michelle Miller and Eric Harris Bernstein, in Chapter 14, outline the underlying factors that have led to the apparent decline of worker power. They examine three developing areas of worker abuse that must be addressed, and then they suggest the policy solutions and worker initiatives that might serve to counter them.

The final part of this book, “Paths to the Future,” offers some policy prescriptions. In Chapter 15, Professor Phyllis Moen describes how the traditional ideal of a planned compensated career does not describe today’s reality. She argues that we must broaden the concept of productive work to include unpaid family care work and civic engagement. We must also establish policies and practices that recognize and support flexible careers and flexible life courses rather than static age-graded regimes. In Chapter 16, Tom Croft, head of the Steel Valley Authority in Pennsylvania, and investment expert Annie Malhotra argue that shareholders and stakeholders alike have an imperative to make corporate management more accountable and to move toward what they call a “commonwealth company” framework. Under this framework, workers take stronger action in their roles as shareholders (who own a large chunk of the capital markets) and as stakeholders to invest responsibly and reclaim their power to participate in the governance of companies. Employee ownership expert Christopher Mackin, in Chapter 17, documents the origin and framework for employee stock ownership and the value of this business model for growing prosperity and wealth equitably. In Chapter 18, Professors William A. Darity Jr. and Darrick Hamilton close this part with their vision of an authentic “right to work” through a national program of guaranteed employment for all who want to work.

Policies that affect the many futures of work need to be informed by the wants, needs, desires, ideas, and opinions shared around kitchen tables and
family events, in barber shops and beauty salons, at community gatherings, on shop floors, in places of worship, and in offices. These policies need to be discussed in public forums where diverse opinions are invited and respected. The insights provided by the contributors to this book can and should be used as a foundation for the development of strategies, policies, and practices to guide the futures of work away from low-wage, unstable jobs toward greater equity, prosperity, and inclusion.

Our path forward is to further support, empower, collect, and report these conversations, to foster cutting-edge research and policy-thinking, and to engage leaders in business, labor, government, education, and civic society in forward-leaning collaborations that are aimed at “Achieving the Promise of Work” for workers, their families, and their communities. In my Conclusion, I set out the principles and guiding framework through which that promise can be accomplished.