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# JUSTICE AT WORK

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GLOBALIZATION  
and the  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
of WORKERS

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ROBERT A. SENSER

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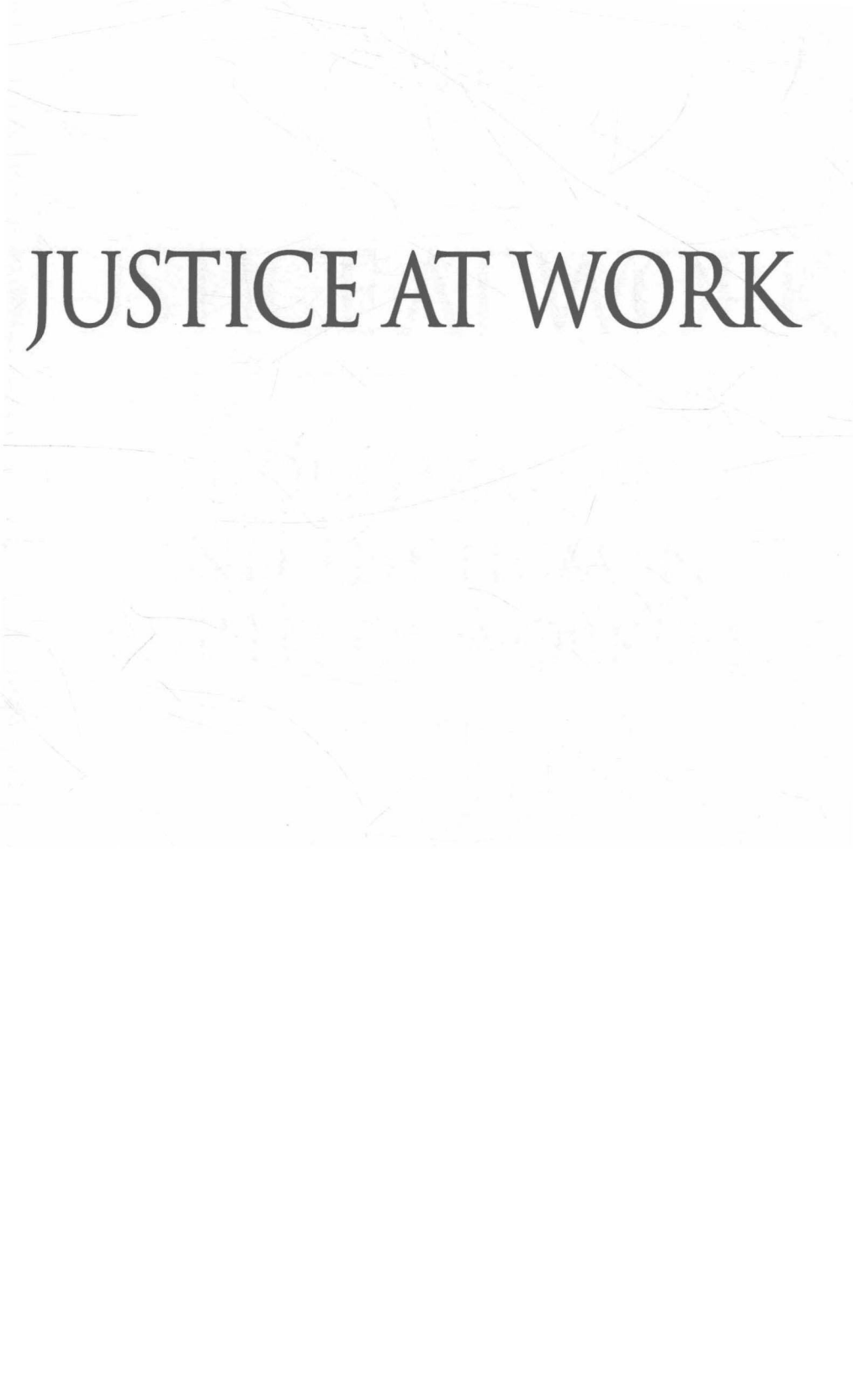
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for my wife

Dzung Senser





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WANTING TO GO HOME  
*Garment Worker in Bangladesh*  
(see "On Their Knees," page 18)



## CHAPTER 1

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# Where I'm Coming From

FROM ONE ANGLE, my professional career looks like a string of jobs with nothing in common except paychecks. In a lifetime of working in the public and private sectors on four continents, I've been a butcher shop helper, a clerk typist, a soldier, a reporter, an editor, a staff member of a Catholic organization, a Foreign Service officer, and a program director for a foreign assistance organization.

If all those jobs—excepting the short-termers and forty-two months in the army—had to fit under one heading, it would be this: writer. Starting in high school, I found that I liked to write and that others liked what I wrote. It is a skill that served me mighty well, especially in my tours as a U.S. labor attaché in Algiers, Bonn, Brussels, and Saigon during my twenty-one years in the Foreign Service.

My father had hopes that I would follow in his footsteps by making an honest living as a shoe repairman, like his father before him. As a head start, he got me a Saturday job wrapping repaired shoes in a Chicago department store where he knew the manager. It was fast-paced work. Shoes of all sorts kept piling up, and you had to wrap them quickly to keep the pile down and the customers happy. Twice, or maybe three times, I wrapped together two shoes that looked alike but were not a pair. Customers do not like it when

they get home and find they have two shoes, only one of which is theirs. The manager didn't like it either. He let me go home early, saying I didn't have to return the next Saturday.

Dad kept trying. I lasted longer at another Saturday job he lined up, this time in a department store butcher shop as all-around handyman doing chores in and out of a below-freezing meat locker. It was an environment that I did not warm up to. That summer, when school was out, I helped build a cistern, repair a badly leaking roof, waterproof our basement, and dig a drainage ditch—labor useful as an apprenticeship for a career in residential construction. But that too was not to be. What led me astray was a high school typing class.

Yes, an ordinary touch-typing class started me down a long road that, decades later, led me to write and edit this book. The nun who taught my typing class at Cardinal Stritch High School in Chicago was doing research on Dante for her master's degree, and she asked me to take the streetcar trip to pick up books for her at the central library. Not often, but each time was an adventure. On one afternoon trip downtown, I stopped by a large bookstore (large for the time) and became fascinated by the colorful array of magazines from all over the world. Among the many temptations, I settled on the magazine *Writer's Digest*. Its cover was a purple so lurid I hid the magazine under a living room carpet when I got home. I read it studiously. It listed dozens and dozens of publications actually open to publishing what I wrote.

One evening, in bed with the flu, I was scanning the *Chicago Daily News* when I noticed a fascinating story about a blind Boy Scout troop with a blind scoutmaster. Bingo! I quickly called him for an interview—my first ever. When the scoutmaster came to the phone, he listened and asked, "How old are you?" I couldn't disguise that I was sixteen. Still, I got my interview, wrote my article, put it in proper form (as per *Writer's Digest* guidance), and mailed it off, with a proper cover letter (again as per), to *This Week* magazine, then a national Sunday supplementary section for the *Daily News*. Soon I found a thin envelope addressed to me in the mailbox on our front porch. It was an offer to buy not the article, but the article

idea for \$35. That was a little disappointing at first. As it turned out, however, *This Week* published my work in its October 1, 1938, issue under a joint byline, mine and that of a *Daily News* reporter who had beefed it up (but kept my title, "Scouts Courageous," and my opening paragraphs about the Scouts saluting a flag they could not see). It looked impressive pinned on the high school bulletin board.

A schoolmate, looking up at the article with my sister, asked, "Your brother wrote this?"

"He can write anything," my sister said. I thought so too in those days. And soon I was off on a new writing venture.

One warm afternoon, when my father was supposed to be on the job working in a downtown shoe repair shop, he swung open the screen door on the back porch, rushed past me, saying only, "I got fired."

Unemployment was not a new experience for him, or us. Years earlier, our lives were disrupted when Dad lost his job at a shoe repair shop in South Chicago's Pullman Car Works, which shut down because of the Depression. But this was different. It was a union official who got him fired.

As my father gradually told me the whole story, I got angrier and angrier. I let off steam on my new Corona portable, which my parents had purchased so that I wouldn't borrow one from a girl in my high school class. I tapped out an article about my father's fate and his reactions to it, all in the first person (Dad writing anonymously). Weeks later, it appeared in the February 2, 1940, issue of *Commonweal* under the title "Appeal of a Catholic Workman" and the subtitle "A Human Document That Vividly Describes the Effect of Labor Racketeering on the Rank and File."

It was indeed vivid but didn't quite deliver all that the subtitle promised. Rather, my account focused on the abuses committed in one local union and the injustice inflicted on one worker, my father, and his family. The article led off with a series of dramatic comments by five unnamed workers indicting unions in general. One quote was "Unions are all a racket." Another: "If this isn't the shortest way to communism, I don't know what is." After the



quotes came a colorful generalization by my father (really me): “As ominously as the rumble of thunder, remarks like these can be heard wherever working men gather.” A few paragraphs later, the article contradicted the hyperbole by asserting, “The men do not grumble at the idea of a union as such . . . [but] against the perceived laxity of national union headquarters in their supervision of locals.” (The adjective *perceived* was added by the editors, I’m sure; it wasn’t yet a part of my vocabulary.)

My father’s story had an unexpected ending. After a year or so doing odd jobs, he again got full-time work in a unionized downtown repair shop, and he gladly rejoined the local union, even with the same official at the head. His perspective remained as expressed in our article: “I know, from the [popes’] social encyclicals, that the idea of unionism is sound. As a result, I don’t condemn unions: I condemn the way they’re administered.”

That experience was an early expression of sensitivity to the plight of the vulnerable. It flowed from the gut instinct of a human rights advocate—a term also not yet a part of my vocabulary.

Thank God, most of my paid employment over the years was congenial to that instinct. Indeed, it was an unwritten job requirement for editing *Work*, published by the Catholic Council on Working Life in Chicago, where I worked for seventeen years before joining the Foreign Service. For example, I ghosted a series of first-person articles based on interviews with ordinary people—a black couple whose suburban home had been burned down by racists, a steelworker who defended the grievances of his fellow workers, a stockyard worker who made her living packing pigs’ feet. Occasionally, I traveled to research special stories as a freelance writer. The *New Republic*, in its December 5, 1955, issue published my article, “Hunting Elephants with Popguns,” describing the frustrations of organizing workers in the rice mills of southern Louisiana.

While a program director for an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the Asian-American Free Labor Institute, in Washington, D.C., I again freelanced in late 1996 by sending *Foreign Affairs* a