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# Women and the Labor Movement in America

BY
MOLLIE RAY CARROLL
*Professor of Economics, Goucher College*
*Vice-Chairman, Women in Industry Committee*

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Pamphlet

WOMEN IN INDUSTRY COMMITTEE
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## FOREWORD

Although the National League of Women Voters is not asking or supporting any legislation in relation to the women's trade union movement, there is among our membership a sympathetic interest in the general movement for organization among women workers. Without trade unions, progress toward the "standards" for women in industry approved by our Committee would make little progress. Without trade unions, the gains that are made could not be maintained. It is important that women voters should understand the progress of trade unionism among women.

To meet the requests for information about the labor movement among women, its history as well as its present status and significance, Professor Carroll, author of *Labor and Politics,* very generously consented to prepare this pamphlet.

(Signed) EDITH ABBOTT

*Chairman, Committee on Women in Industry*

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# WOMEN AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

AMERICAN working women have been vitally interested in, and a part of, the trade union movement for nearly a hundred years.

The close of the first quarter of the nineteenth century was a time of business prosperity following a period of depression. Better business conditions followed the notable improvement in transportation facilities of that period. Steamboats were busily plying upon rivers and lakes, and, in 1825, upon the new Erie Canal. Turnpikes connecting the East and the West were being completed.

Eastern manufacturers could market goods in the West and South instead of confining their wares to their own sections of the country. They began to grow away from the custom of selling to consumers directly. Instead, a whole group of middlemen, wholesalers and retailers, developed, whose profits arose from buying as cheaply and selling as dearly as possible.

Consumers tried to buy things as cheaply as possible from their retailers. Retailers paid no more than necessary to wholesalers. Wholesalers placed their orders where the prices were lowest. Manufacturers, consequently, tried to cut their labor costs. The burden of the advance in business methods and of prosperity fell upon labor.

The workers had suffered during the period of depression. They wished, in 1825, some share in the gains of prosperity. They wished to improve their economic status. Employers, on the other hand, not only were unwilling to grant any wage increases, they were even reluctant to maintain existing wage scales and sought opportunities to decrease wages. The struggle between these opposing interests resulted in "labor troubles." Men workers, who had promoted union organizations in some trades for years, engaged in strikes. Women, for the first time on record, united to secure better terms of employment.

The greatest concerted activity of women workers at this time was found among cotton-mill operatives. The first recorded strike in this industry occurred in Patterson, N. J., in July of 1828. Its immediate occasion was the change in dinner hour from twelve to one o'clock. Women and child workers promptly marched out at noon, remaining away for an unexpected half-holiday. Though the occasion seemed slight, it must be remembered that a small spark will start a conflagration once the fuel is laid.

Strikes during that and subsequent years in other New England cotton-mills showed the conditions against which all workers were protesting. Strikes were called to prevent reductions in wages and, in at least one instance recorded, in protest against the "ironclad oath" demanded as part of the terms of employment, that the worker abstain from membership in any trade union. These strikes were mostly lost.

Women in other industries resorted to the use of the strike to maintain or better their terms of employment. Tailoresses and seamstresses in New York began as early as 1825 to hold meetings for self-protection against the inevitable consequences of reduced and inadequate wages. In June of 1831 a strike involving 1600 women and lasting four or five weeks was called. Similar strikes occurred in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Women umbrella sewers, book binders, and shoe binders also struck. Their organizations were, however, all short lived. The strikes were usually of short duration. When they were over membership in the unions fell off. Nevertheless working women were learning to combine for their mutual advantage and were seeing the possibilities of united action.

## THE REFORM MOVEMENT OF 1840-1860

The next recorded women's labor organizations showed different types of activities. They occurred during the twenty years preceding the Civil War. The prosperity centering about 1825 was followed by long years of hard times. Immigration, convict labor and new machinery meant competition for the workers' jobs. The year 1837 brought a panic. This, following the long depression, produced a spirit of social unrest and attempts to cure social ills by various humanitarian reforms.

The years from 1840 to 1860 were characterized by unprecedented enthusiasms and the promulgation of a multitude of theories for the salvation of society. Transcendentalism, Fourierism and various cöoperative experiments indicated the trend of the times.

Working women, subjected to these influences, organized labor reform associations. Again, as in the previous period, the textile industries showed greatest activity. Miss Sarah Bagley, leader of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, a woman of unusual charm and ability, testified before the Massachusetts legislative committee on conditions in textile mills in 1845. This was the first official American investigation into the conditions of adult laborers and it was due almost solely to the efforts of working women. The indifference of the chairman stung the women to denounce his attitude and their efforts resulted in his defeat at the next election.



The women continued their agitation for reform and did much to push Massachusetts to the forefront in the field of labor legislation.

Similar organizations were formed in other cities. They included in some cases, tailoresses, seamstresses, crimpers, book folders and stitchers, and fringe and lace makers. Hand in hand with political agitation during this period went the strike for better wages and shorter hours. In the textile industry in Pittsburgh, efforts to force upon the attention of both legislators and employers the need of improved working conditions resulted in reduction of the working day from twelve to ten hours. In spite of a corresponding reduction in wages, the women workers believed that they had made a decided step in advance.

## THE CIVIL WAR

The reform movement of 1840 to 1860 finally came to an end with the Civil War. The war inevitably caused a serious disturbance of economic conditions. The first result was business depression and unemployment. Later, the issuance of greenbacks and the army's demand for goods brought on a period of unprecedented prosperity; but labor, although blessed with plenty of employment, suffered because increased wages lagged far behind the rising cost of living. Workers, therefore, resorted to organization for mutual aid in meeting their problems.

The textile workers, however, hitherto leaders among women's organizations, fell far behind their sisters in other occupations. In this industry there had been a considerable influx of Irish immigrants, even less able to bargain with their employers than were their predecessors who were largely native American girls.

Tailoresses and seamstresses found their ranks swelled by thousands of "war widows." A great oversupply of such labor ensued. These workers, however, largely with the aid of sympathetic outsiders succeeded in forming some new unions. But these were turned into cöoperative schemes and were in general short-lived.

Women cigar-makers were, after much opposition, admitted to membership in the men's unions, because it meant greater protection of conditions of labor for both sexes. Women had a like experience in the printing trades. The cigar-makers went a step further and urged protective legislation for all women under eighteen.

Women shoe-workers formed an organization called the "Daughters of St. Crispin," which continued until the depression of 1893. Women laundry workers in Troy, N. Y., compelled at that time "to stand over the washtub, over the ironing table, with furnaces on either side, the thermometer averaging 100°, for wages averaging

from $2.00 to $3.00 a week," formed a strong organization by means of which they were able to increase their wages to $8.00 and $14.00 a week by working on an average from 12 to 14 hours a day.

The period of expansion during and immediately after the Civil War terminated finally, however, in the panic of 1873. Its effect was quickly felt on the unions. Even some of the strongest organizations among men workers were seriously disrupted. Women's unions were badly disorganized.

## RAPID EXPANSION OF INDUSTRY

Following this depression came an enormous expansion of industry. Rapid extension of transportation throughout the entire country, marked interest in inventions and in the introduction of labor-saving machinery, combinations of industrial enterprises into great trusts, and an enormous increase in immigration characterized the end of the nineteenth century.

American labor groups sought to meet these tendencies in industry by organization along national lines and in all industries. The Knights of Labor, a universal labor union, established at that time, included within its ranks both sexes on equal terms. Employers as well as employees, were members and only a few groups of workers were excluded, notably bankers and lawyers. It aimed through economic and political methods to gain for labor an acceptable place in the new industrial order. It failed because it included workers whose interests in that day varied too widely to hold them together in any effort requiring concerted action. During its heyday, in 1885 and 1886, it numbered about 50,000 women members according to the best available estimates. By the early nineties it had suffered a marked decline and had lost practically the whole of its woman membership.

## MODERN LABOR MOVEMENTS

The labor organization that followed the Knights of Labor was also, necessarily, a national one to meet the tremendous, nation-wide problems that workers faced in making a living. Unlike the Knights, however, it was a federation of national unions formed along craft lines. Workers locally and nationally organized to meet the problems of their particular occupations formed an alliance in the American Federation of Labor to attack their common problems resulting from the enormous expansion of industry.

Women as well as men found in the labor movement an answer to their strivings for better wages, shorter hours, and improved conditions of work. Women went into many craft organizations affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.



Working women also entered the National Women's Trade Union League, organized in 1903 during a meeting of the American Federation of Labor in Boston. The new League was affiliated with the Federation but it differed from existing unions because it included all women, whether gainfully employed or not, who accepted the principles of the labor movement. For the first time women who sympathized with the aims of labor even if they were not "workers" themselves were included in the labor group. Mrs. Raymond Robins of Chicago was soon chosen president of the new League and was its devoted leader for a period of nearly twenty years. The platform of the League demanded the organization of all working women into trade unions, equal pay for equal work, the eight hour day, the minimum wage, full citizenship for women, and all principles embodied in the economic program of the American Federation of Labor.

Organization of women workers proceeded steadily though slowly until the time of the World War. This event, first by enormously increasing the demand for American goods, and later, by drawing men workers from production, opened to women occupations hitherto closed to them. The result of the competition of more poorly paid, unorganized women workers forced men to see the necessity of more aggressive measures for their unionization. Some men's organizations, however, resisted the attempt to include women in unions already established and hitherto exclusively men's unions.

When women secured the suffrage their new position of dignity and power improved their status as wage-earners. The movement for organizing women workers has, as a result of enlarged industrial opportunities and of suffrage, steadily continued since the war.

## WHY WOMEN ORGANIZE INTO UNIONS

The growth and vitality of trade unions among women is due in no measure merely to a desire to imitate working men. Trade unionism has developed out of the profound needs of women workers.

Women workers organize into unions primarily because it is not usually possible for individual applicants for jobs to make satisfactory terms with their employers. When a worker asks for a job she usually does so because she wants the money. When an employer gives her a job he often has other people in mind whom he may hire for the same position. If he can secure her services on his terms, he may take her into his plant as a worker. In her case it is usually a choice of taking the job as he offers it to her or trying to find another.

At times, to be sure, notably during war, there are more jobs than there are people to fill them. Usually, however, there exists an actual or potential over-supply of labor. The worker, therefore, is tempted to take the position offered, however unsatisfactory the wages, hours, or other conditions. She is free to take the job or leave it, to be sure; but when that freedom means freedom to take it at the terms offered or to starve, there is little real choice.

Another element enters into the situation. If workers insist upon terms unsatisfactory to the employer, he frequently finds it possible to leave places vacant until such time as he finds suitable persons to fill them. This may be a matter of weeks. Workers generally cannot wait so long to secure jobs.

When the worker appears before the prospective employer she is aware of his advantage over her. She realizes that he knows the market and knows what other employers are paying for the same grade of work. He has had long training in dickering over wages and prices. She knows only her experience in similar situations, if she has had any. She senses his superior skill in these matters. Appreciation of the power of his knowledge makes her ill at ease. She wants to fortify herself by union with her fellow-workers, faced by similar problems. If they can pool their knowledge of employment conditions and their skill in dealing with the employer and can keep a sufficient number of jobs vacant seriously to inconvenience the plant, they may be able to drive a better bargain.

## THE WELL-INTENTIONED EMPLOYER

The employer is not an ogre. He is usually well-intentioned and he wants to do the right thing by his "help." Sometimes he does not have sufficient imagination to visualize what it means to a girl to live on six or eight dollars a week and to work ten hours a day at a task that takes every ounce of energy that she possesses. Sometimes he feels himself helpless in the face of market conditions. He meets pressure in the industrial world. That pressure has been steadily increasing since the early part of the nineteenth century when its menace aroused labor.

From consumer to retailer, from retailer to wholesaler, from wholesaler to manufacturer, from manufacturer to labor the demand is for the greatest amount of goods possible for the least amount of money. Retailer, wholesaler and manufacturer compete with each other for trade. The manufacturer feels the cumulative effect of it all. In order to market his goods he must usually sell them as cheaply as his competitors.



In some industries wages form a large item of the total cost of production. The employer who wants to do the right thing by his employees frequently finds himself in competition with the unscrupulous slave-driver who wrings the last ounce from his workers and undercuts others in the market. The man who makes his sales through tyranny to labor is an enemy to other employers as well as to the worker.

Protection to the good employer against the "sweater" may be afforded by legislation. The minimum wage, the eight-hour day, and regulation of the conditions under which employees may work forces those with less conscience to abide by minimum standards set by society. Trade unions may have the same effect. They raise labor standards in poor places. They frequently strive to cöoperate with and send labor to good industrial plants. They tend to take away the advantage of the employer without a conscience.

Recently employers, too, have found ways of fighting the competition of the "sweater." Scientific management at its best has eliminated many of the costs of industrial waste. The "sweater," who usually has a small shop, is generally efficient only in driving hard bargains with his workers. The industrial manager who increases his profits by using his brains usually can afford to pay better wages. Indeed, he generally believes that he cannot afford to do otherwise, for he realizes that labor's goodwill plays an important part in efficient production. It is not strange, then, to find many highly efficient employers desiring to deal with unions.

Sometimes wages, hours and conditions in a non-union factory are very good and still the workers want a union. We must remember, however, that the factory may last beyond the lifetime of the considerate manager. Most people do not wish their incomes to be dependent upon the benevolent disposition of anyone. The working woman has exactly the same feeling.

## UNION METHODS

Most unions consider their business agents vital to their existence. Many employers say that they would be willing to deal with their employees in a body but resent the interference of outsiders, that is, of so-called "business agents" or international secretaries. Let us examine the workers' reasons for having business agents. In the first place, dickering over wages and prices is a special job. It requires knowledge of processes in the industry, of market conditions and of prices. All these are highly technical points. Manufacturers have their special men to handle these matters for them. It requires

also ability to stand up to the employer's representative as an equal, and not as employee to employer. But even if a worker in a shop had all of these qualities and this information, there is still another element.

The business agent must at times make demands or complaints. A worker in the shop who does so is soon counted a "chronic kicker." She may incur the antagonism of some foreman even if the "big boss" is open-minded toward suggestions. Some day she is a few moments late or breaks a minor rule. None of us is perfect. It is a good occasion for a discharge, and the workers in the shop are without their spokesman.

We may agree to all this and still resent some union tactics so thoroughly that we believe unionism as today functioning to be wrong. Some union leaders gravely injure their cause by their corrupt practices. So do some employers, some politicians, some professional men. Unfortunate experience with such cases often colors our attitude toward many high-minded individuals in the same group. The answer to this difficulty lies in sympathetic interest in the choice of leaders rather than in condemnation of the movement.

Again, it is aggravating, no matter how sympathetic we may be toward labor, to meet the desire to do as little and receive as much compensation as possible on the job. When the union seems to foster such a spirit we believe the tendency to be anti-social. When we look at it from the point of view of the woman worker, however, we see that such a policy results partly from fear.

If she works faster, her pay envelope may be larger for several weeks. Then, too often, some one conceives the idea that her wages are too high. Her piece rate is cut and she gets the same amount weekly as before she made the greater effort. Perhaps she cannot keep up the new pace she has set. Then she gets less than before she made the spurt. Her fellow-workers are in the same boat and resent her efforts that have resulted in less pay for more work.

Or she works harder. Orders are filled in less time than expected. The plant shuts down. She is out of a job. That is too often all the reward she gets for extra effort. As long as the worker faces prospective unemployment we cannot expect her to evidence much enthusiasm in working herself out of a job.

There is another reason back of labor's attempt to do as little and be paid as much as possible. It lies in our whole social code. We think of business success in terms of financial remuneration to the one who conducts the enterprise. We do not expect the manufacturer to produce goods until all who want them are satisfied, but only so long as he can make a profit from them.



Business today is not run for service to humanity or for love of the job but for its monetary returns. Can we be surprised when workers take the same attitude toward the one commodity they have to offer? It is aggravating, to be sure. So also is it aggravating when foodstuffs are destroyed to "keep up the market price" or when factories are shut down for the same purpose and buyers have to pay high prices or be satisfied with less than they desire.

In other words, labor is trying to follow accepted methods of business. We, on the other hand, tend to expect of workers a different set of standards. This is partly because such tactics are usually more readily recognized when conducted on a small scale or when utilized by labor.

Recently into the hearts of some employers and some workers has come belief in production for service. Is it not incumbent upon all of us to strive for the day when in production, in political life, in the professions and in all effort that will be the ideal?

## SPECIAL ORGANIZATION PROBLEMS OF WORKING WOMEN

The labor movement has gradually attracted a large body of woman workers because of the obvious benefits it offers them. Organization of women into trade unions has, however, proceeded slowly, largely because of some of the special problems surrounding working women.

The idea that woman's place is in the home has had a marked effect upon the industrial progress and organization of women workers. Since her sphere has been deemed the home, she has been considered a casual amateur, temporarily occupied. It has not seemed worth while to remedy her wages or conditions of pay. Too often she herself has assumed the same attitude. Considering her job a stop gap between her father's home and marriage, she has taken little interest in agitations for her own advancement.

Organization of women workers has been rendered difficult, also, by their low wages. They have found it difficult to afford even small union dues when their pay envelopes have failed to provide the bare necessities of living. Then, too, they have been scattered about, one or a handful in an establishment. This does not train people to a feeling of solidarity with others in the same position. It makes communication and the development of a feeling of solidarity, of esprit de corps difficult, and so handicaps organization.

Among higher grades of women's work class distinctions form barriers to unionism, which has often been considered the recourse of the hand worker alone. Among men, "white collar" workers are

slowest to organize. Women in clerical occupations have experienced the same hesitation. Women, too, are inclined to apathy and they accept too readily overwork and underpay as their lot. They are often resigned to poor conditions as part of the normal state of affairs. Sometimes when they have organized to protest against their conditions of labor, they have exhausted their slender union resources in premature or ill-considered strikes. On the other hand, such strikes have sometimes cemented them together into permanent organizations.

Men workers have ony too readily accepted women's own estimate of their position. They have considered women cheap, casual, temporary laborers competing for their jobs. Consequently they have resisted the admission of women workers into the already successful men's unions. This has been done sometimes by the direct exclusion of women or by apprenticeship requirements or dues that have amounted to virtual debarment. Sometimes the best way to keep women or other minorities out of an organization is to pretend to admit them on equal terms.

At other times women are freely admitted to unions with men. In such cases they may or may not be encouraged to take an active part in union meetings and discussions. If they simply swell the membership list of the unions they are likely to become lax in payment of dues and to drop out. At other times they are cordially welcomed and play an important part in the activities of the union. Much depends upon the woman workers themselves.

## WOMEN IN PRESENT DAY TRADE UNIONS

The American Federation of Labor, comprising nearly four million workers, employs some women organizers. Though some of the national organizations included within its membership refuse to admit women, the Federation has gone on record as favoring their unionization either in the existing local and national organizations of their trade or into special women's locals directly under the care of the Federation. The glove-makers organization, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, accepts women on equal terms with men. Indeed, its national president for years has been a woman, Miss Agnes Nestor, prominent in the Women's Trade Union League.

The International Ladies Garment Workers Union offers another example of an organization within the American Federation of Labor that includes women workers. It is one of the most forward-looking labor groups in America today. It is characterized by intelligent, broad-minded relations with the employers in the industry. It is doing perhaps the most solid piece of workers' education of any union in America today.



School teachers are also organized in many places. In 1902 the Chicago Teachers' Federation became affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and, although in 1916 the Chicago Board of Education compelled the teachers to withdraw from the Federation, they were active participants in the labor movement for a period of approximately fifteen years. The Cleveland school teachers organized in 1914. Since that time many other cities have established such organizations.

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, an organization comprising about 200,000 workers on men's garments, and unaffiliated with the American Federation of Labor, also admits women. A few women are included among its officials and organizers. This union embraces a trade that a decade ago was notorious for its low wages, long hours, intermittent employment, and bad working conditions. Now it stands for some of the best principles of unionism, including hearty cöoperation with employers.

## THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S TRADE UNION LEAGUE

To the National Women's Trade Union League, finally, must be given great credit for its share in organizing women workers. Since its organization in 1903 it has grown to include 600,000 women. Its membership includes both workers and "outsiders" who approve the principles of the labor movement. It has also a large membership of men who are vitally interested in the problems of working women. Its headquarters are 311 South Ashland Boulevard, Chicago.

## REFERENCES FOR FURTHER READING

Those who wish to read further on this topic may find material of interest in the following books:

1. Henry, Alice. **Women and the Labor Movement.** (New York: Doran, 1923.)

2. Hoxie, Robert F. **Trade Unionism in the United States.** (New York: Appleton, 1923.)

3. Carroll, Mollie Ray. **Labor and Politics.** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1923.)

4. **Encyclopaedia Britannica,** New Volumes, Articles on "International Labour Organization;" "Trade Unions—United States;" "Women's Employment—United States."

5. All the publications of the U. S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, but especially **Bulletin No. 12,** "The New Position of Women in American Industry." These publications may be obtained without charge by writing to the chief of the Women's Bureau, Washington, D. C.

6. Publications of the National Women's Trade Union League, 311 South Ashland Boulevard, Chicago.

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*Progress of Labor Legislation for Women,* by Mrs. Florence Kelley. (Ready December 1.)

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