

WOMEN, WORK AND PROTEST

A century of US women's labor history

Edited by
Ruth Milkman

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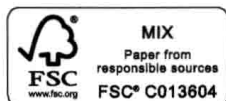
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For Nate

Editor's preface

Feminists have always been ambivalent about the relationship of women to trade unions. On the one hand, there is abundant evidence of women workers' ill-treatment on the part of organized labor. Many unions have a history of excluding women from membership altogether; virtually all have tended to exclude them from positions of power. And unions have often acted to reinforce rather than to challenge sexual inequality in the labor market. On the other hand, it is indisputable that unionized women are better off than their unorganized sisters. And unionism appears to have tremendous unrealized potential as an instrument for improving the situation of women workers.

The essays in this book seek to come to terms with this contradictory legacy as it has unfolded over the past century of women's labor history in the United States. They take up a wide range of specific subjects. Some are case studies of women's participation in individual unions, organizing efforts, or strikes; others examine broader themes in women's labor history, focusing on a specific period; and still others explore the situation of particular categories of women workers over a longer time-span. Although they are written from a variety of perspectives, all the essays share a preoccupation with the complex relationship between gender, consciousness, and working-class activism, in the context of the labor movement.

The history of women workers' relationship to trade unionism has only recently emerged as an object of serious scholarly inquiry, and the literature is still quite limited. In the past two decades, there has been an enormous outpouring of new research and interpretation in both labor history and women's history, yet the study of women and unions has remained marginal to both these fields. In labor history, despite the strong influence of social history and the movement away from narrow, institutional studies, the tacit presumption that the history of the working class is the history of male workers has been

preserved intact. In this respect, the 'new' labor history has failed to remedy the defects of the old. An adequate historiography of women's relationship to formal working-class institutions like unions and parties is still lacking; nor have the recent efforts to reconstruct the history of working-class culture and consciousness been particularly concerned with women. Within the rapidly proliferating literature in women's history, there has been more attention to women workers and their role in the labor movement, but here the study of women's past experience in relation to family, sexuality and feminism has been pursued far more extensively.

Perhaps it is because the topic has been so neglected that so much of the recent work which has appeared in women's labor history has been essentially descriptive in nature. Interpretative efforts have been largely devoted to questioning the traditional assumptions about women's relationship to the labor movement, rather than to reaching an independent definition of the terrain of debate. Certainly, it was necessary to challenge the total invisibility of women in conventional accounts of labor history, and the initial efforts to unearth the record of women's militancy as workers and labor activists were bound to produce descriptive histories. But this led, implicitly or explicitly, toward an overly simplistic and highly romanticized conception of women's labor history. The old myths of women's lack of interest or involvement in labor struggle were effectively supplanted by new myths, which were equally one-sided and, indeed, the mirror-image of the old. In the new feminist orthodoxy, each discovery of female militancy was taken as evidence of a virtually limitless potential for women's activism in the labor movement – a potential thwarted primarily by the disinterest or active hostility of male-dominated unions. While yielding some valuable insights and motivating a substantial body of important research, this approach could not do justice to the complexity of its subject.

The essays collected in this volume offer more nuanced perspectives on women's labor history, and begin to examine issues which were neglected in the early, essentially compensatory literature. For example, rather than insisting in a general way on the existence of a huge untapped potential for female activism, these studies seek to specify the historical conditions which have encouraged women's militancy and those which have impeded it. And, in reconstructing the history of women workers' protest activities, several of these

essays suggest that the mobilization of women has been especially effective when it has utilized organizational forms and techniques very different from those typically employed by men – forms that are rooted in women's own distinctive culture and life-experience. Also included here are efforts to begin to explain, rather than simply describe, the long history of male unionists' poor treatment of women workers. After all, insofar as men have an interest in promoting working-class unity, they might be expected to encourage women's full participation in unions, rather than to exclude them, and it is hardly self-evident why men's gender interest should prevail over their class interest in this regard. By examining the structural characteristics of unionism, on the one hand, and the impact of broader social ideology about gender on the labor movement, on the other, several of these essays shed new light on this critical problem.

The research collected in this volume also breaks new ground in regard to the period that it covers. The bulk of recent scholarship on women's relationship to unionism in the United States concerns the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even for this earlier period, the literature is sparse; but for the years after World War I, it almost disappears altogether (with the exception of a small group of studies of women and the United Auto Workers in the period immediately after World War II). This book begins to fill in some of the gaps. While the first few essays deal with the period before 1920, all the rest analyze more recent developments.

This emphasis opens up a range of new substantive issues as well, for there were a number of interrelated shifts in women's position, both in the paid workforce and in the labor movement, which began in the interwar years and then culminated in the post-World War II period. First, in the aftermath of the suffrage victory, with the growth of female participation in the labor force, the legitimacy of trade union claims to special protection for women began to wane, paving the way for the development of a labor movement commitment to the pursuit of gender equality in the workplace. At the same time, both in the labor movement and in the larger society, there was a shift away from the 'family wage' ideal – according to which male wages should be sufficient for family support, so that married women have no need to work outside the home – and women were increasingly regarded as individuals with the same

rights to work as men. These changes, of course, coincided with the rise of industrial unionism, which greatly expanded the space available to women and women's concerns within the mainstream labor movement. The new constraints and possibilities shaping women's relationship to trade unions in the past half-century, then, were quite different from those operating in earlier years, and more directly relevant to the dilemmas facing women in the unions today.

The contributions in this volume extend the scope of the literature in women's labor history, both conceptually and in terms of historical periods covered. Nevertheless, there are many serious omissions as well. In particular, the one essay included here on African-American women and the labor movement does not compensate for the severe underrepresentation of women of color in this field. But if this book generates more research and rethinking about women's relationship to trade unionism, historically and in the present, its purpose will have been amply fulfilled.

New York City
January 1984

R.M.

Contents

Notes on contributors	ix
Editor's preface	xi
1 Bread before roses: American workingmen, labor unions and the family wage <i>Martha May</i>	1
2 Labor organizing and female institution-building: The Chicago Women's Trade Union League, 1904-24 <i>Colette A. Hyman</i>	22
3 Bread and roses revisited: Women's culture and working-class activism in the Lawrence strike of 1912 <i>Ardis Cameron</i>	42
4 The women of the Colorado Fuel and Iron strike, 1913-14 <i>Priscilla Long</i>	62
5 Another look at the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union: Women, industry structure and collective action <i>Roger Waldinger</i>	86
6 Problems of coalition-building: Women and trade unions in the 1920s <i>Alice Kessler-Harris</i>	110
7 Survival strategies among African-American women workers: A continuing process <i>Rosalyn Terborg-Penn</i>	139

viii *Contents*

8	'I know which side I'm on': Southern women in the labor movement in the twentieth century <i>Mary Frederickson</i>	156
9	'Where I was a person': The Ladies' Auxiliary in the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters' strikes <i>Marjorie Penn Lasky</i>	181
10	'We're no Kitty Foyles': Organizing office workers for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1937-50 <i>Sharon Hartman Strom</i>	206
11	Organizing the United Automobile Workers: Women workers at the Ternstedt General Motors parts plant <i>Ruth Meyerowitz</i>	235
12	Women and the United Automobile Workers' Union in the 1950s <i>Nancy Gabin</i>	259
13	Unionized women in state and local government <i>Deborah E. Bell</i>	280
14	Women workers, feminism and the labor movement since the 1960s <i>Ruth Milkman</i>	300
	Index	323

Tables

Table 1	Women members of labor organizations, selected industry groups, 1980	304
Table 2	Female membership and leadership in labor organizations with 250,000 or more women members, 1978	306

Bread before roses: American workingmen, labor unions and the family wage

Martha May

For most of the twentieth century, American trade unions have both endorsed and actively pursued the ideal of a 'family wage' – a wage rate sufficient to support a male worker and his family. Contemporary feminists have often criticized the family-wage ideal and have pointed to the many difficulties it has presented historically for women workers in their struggle for equality. But whether the family-wage ideal historically constituted a class aspiration, which both women and men of the working class supported, or, alternatively, an effort to consolidate male supremacy within the working-class family, is a point of intense controversy among feminist commentators. In this chapter, Martha May offers an important new historical perspective on this debate. Tracing the early history of the family-wage ideal and its relationship to the American labor movement, May suggests that initially, in the nineteenth century, the family wage emerged as a working-class cause, supported by both sexes – and strenuously opposed by capital. Subsequently, however, as the pragmatic unionism of the American Federation of Labor became the dominant force within the labor movement, gender privilege superseded the claims of class, and the family wage became a cross-class ideal, supported by Progressive reformers as well as workingmen. In the long run, May contends, the impact of the family-wage ideal on the labor movement was extremely divisive; yet its origins were in a politics of class unity.

'The idea that the worker should be paid a living wage rather than the market rate of wages as determined by the laws of the universe,' railed one magazine writer in 1872, 'is pure and simple communism.'¹ In the late nineteenth century, employers and laissez-faire economists argued strenuously against the living wage capable of supporting a worker and his family. Forcing employers to provide for non-workers through the pay packet, they warned, would mean the demise of American industry. The very spirit of free enterprise was at stake.

In the Progressive era, however, the idea of a living wage won widespread acceptance. By 1918, the authors of a social survey of Philadelphia could state confidently:

Nowadays very few persons object to the principle of a living wage. It is generally agreed that the humblest worker is entitled to a return for his services that will enable him to support himself and his family in decency and comfort.²

Once championed only by workingmen and labor unions, now the living-wage ideal was endorsed by Progressive social scientists, and even by some employers – notably Henry Ford, Elbert Gary and John D. Rockefeller – for whom it offered the promise of worker stability and productivity, and a bulwark against radical unionism.³

The living wage of labor, Progressives and paternalistic employers was in practice a family wage: the earnings of a male worker which were sufficient to support a dependent family.⁴ As an ideal – and, indeed, it was more often a demand than an achievement – the family wage legitimated the division of labor by gender.⁵ It encouraged the notion that female participation in the labor force merely supplemented family income, and served to justify unequal wage rates and sex segregation in the labor market.

Contemporary feminists agree on the consequences of the family-wage ideology for women; its historical *purpose*, however, remains ambiguous. Was the family wage a vehicle for male supremacy? Or was it, as Jane Humphries has argued, primarily an attempt by the working classes to retain autonomy?⁶ Or, did the family-wage demand constitute an effort by workers to win better conditions by mobilizing values accepted throughout society in support of their complaints? Exploring these issues may help illuminate the processes

through which sex segregation in the labor market is created and maintained, and how it might be overcome. Specifically, analyzing the historical origins of the labor movement's commitment to the family-wage ideal may help to explain the enduring tension between women workers and American labor unions.

This chapter examines the family-wage ideology of organized labor in two periods: the decades of its formation in the nineteenth century, and its operation in the early twentieth century. I will argue that, in the earlier period, the family-wage demand emerged as a working-class cause, which capital opposed but which both working-class men and women supported. Its meaning was transformed in the early twentieth century, however, as the class perspective of labor changed into a more pragmatic unionism. In the Progressive era, the family wage became a cross-class ideology, and now, within that ideology, issues of gender superseded the claims of class autonomy.

The family wage as a working-class demand

The family-wage ideology emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century as a response by workingmen to specific industrial and social conditions: the inadequacies of wage rates; the difficulties of securing subsistence; the relative fluidity of the labor market, with its high turnover rates, decreasing skill requirements, and technological innovations; and the presence of a powerful ideology defining gender roles. Fearful of the erosion of customary traditions of craftsmanship, a decline in status and decreasing wages, skilled workmen expressed serious concern about the effects of industrial development on family life. 'The name of freedom is but a shadow . . . if we are to be torn from our fireside for endeavoring to obtain a fair and just support for our families,' journeymen cordwainers in Philadelphia argued in 1806.⁷ Similarly, at a Utica, NY convention in the 1830s, workers agreed that 'the mechanic with his family . . . has the honest right not only to a livelihood for himself and them, but to save from his earnings the means of education for his children, and comfort for himself in his old age.'⁸

The family wage represented a dual claim to subsistence and industrial justice to its early advocates: workingmen, organized in

trades' societies and unions, demanded both sufficient wages and the rights due the industrious producer in a republic. Without fair wages, the workingman faced poverty and a diminution in status, as dependency upon industrial wages placed new constraints upon family resources. Under existing wage rates, frequently inadequate for the needs of one person, the working-class family would be unable to maintain a tolerable standard of living or retain its customs or traditions.⁹

Workingmen repeatedly condemned 'purse-proud aristocrats' and 'tyranny,' as labor's demands in the early industrial era centered around regaining status, recouping losses and reaffirming the laborer's basic rights, including the right to maintain a family. In demands for better educational standards, and in attempts to secure consumers' cooperatives, mechanics' lien laws and equitable methods of payment, workingmen recognized the connection between control over working conditions and over home life. The family wage became a first step toward ameliorating the precarious position of the workingman and his family under the new conditions of industrialization, a means to restore their dignity and equality. Male workers claimed that 'which the God of nature intended as their right, but which avarice denies them – a comfortable subsistence.' The family wage also promised a means to diminish capitalists' control over family life, by allowing workingmen to provide independently for their families. Cordwainers from Lynn, Massachusetts, complained in 1844 about an industrial system which robbed 'our families of support, our children of the benefits of the higher branches of education, and ourselves of the many comforts of life,' while enriching employers and creating 'anti-republican' distinctions.¹⁰

Through such rhetoric, workingmen expressed the belief that only 'producers' and their families faced the dislocations of family life resulting from industrialization. Only their wives and children experienced the pressures to join the labor force; only their children confronted the possibility of a lifetime of poverty and need. Divorced from other sources of income, workers claimed that only a fair wage rate stood between their families and the specter of poverty and starvation. As early as the 1830s, workers argued that if wives and children were forced to enter the labor market to supplement family income, the status of the workingman would be degraded. As labor

organizer Seth Luther reasoned, 'we know . . . that the *wives* and *daughters* of the rich manufacturers would no more associate with a *factory girl* than they would with a *negro slave*. So much for equality in a republican country.'¹¹ The National Trades' Union asked, 'is not avarice satisfied with a nation of Fathers and Sons, but our Wives and Daughters, the Loved Ones of our hearts and affections, shall be thrown into the spoilers' arms?'¹² One purpose of the family-wage demand was to spare the workingman's wife and children the degradation of factory labor. And, equally important, it was to insure that the workingman would retain his status within the family, and his right to a family structure resembling that of the more advantaged classes.

Workingmen left little doubt as to the form of family life they sought. William English, a leader in the National Trades' Union, wondered in 1835 if the time would arrive when 'our wives, no longer doomed to servile labor, will be the companions of our fireside and the instructors of our children.'¹³ Without adequate wages, the workingman could not fulfill the normative prescriptions for a 'proper' family life. The family-wage demand asserted the social right of the working class to the ideal of family and gender roles embodied in the 'cult of true womanhood.' Indeed, the family-wage ideology was heavily dependent on arguments about female domesticity and male responsibility. 'The physical organization, the natural responsibilities, and the moral sensibilities of woman, prove conclusively that her labor should only be of a domestic nature,' declared the National Trades' Union.¹⁴ In a speech delivered in 1867, William Sylvis of the National Labor Union inveighed in similar terms:

It will be fatal to the cause of labor, when we place the sexes in competition, and jeopardize those social relations which render woman queen of the household. Keep her in the sphere which God designed her to fill, by manly assistance.¹⁵

The family-wage ideology operated by connecting class issues of subsistence and justice with gender, thus defining the relationship between men, women and work. The domestic ideal placed women in the home, while waged work received an increasingly masculine definition. Indeed, the 'cult of breadwinning' was featured prominently in the class ideology which developed among industrial