

International Women's Trade Unionism and Education¹

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Abstract

This keynote address, delivered in December 2015 at the International Federation of Workers' Education Association General Conference in Lima, Peru, refutes the standard trope of labor movement decline and provides evidence for the global rise and feminization of labor movements worldwide. Trade union women's commitment to emancipatory, democratic worker education helped spur these changes. The origins and effects of two historical examples are detailed: the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers held in the United States annually from 1921 to 1938 and the first International Women's Summer School of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) held in France in 1953. The latter experiment, attended by women labor leaders from 25 countries, energized the Women's Committee of the ICFTU. It led to the adoption of "The Charter of Rights of Working Women" by the ICFTU in 1965 and helped make possible the election of Sharan Burrow and other women to top office in the International Trade Union Confederation. The address concludes with a discussion of what the history of trade union women's education teaches about strengthening future labor movements.

Historians usually proceed chronologically, from past to present. But today I start with the present, with today's global labor movement, and offer some good news about how it is changing. These changes, I argue, can only be understood by looking at the history of international trade union women's educational efforts. In the second part of the talk, I turn to the past and explore those traditions of workers' education. I reflect on why labor women made education central to their politics and how they transformed themselves and the global trade union movement through education. I conclude with a few words about the future. The history and practice of trade union women's labor education, if remembered and appreciated more fully, can help chart the way forward to a strengthened, more meaningful, and more inclusive labor movement.

Today's Global Labor Movement

Let me start with the here and now, with the present-day labor movement. I want to emphasize two points: the labor movement is *growing*, and it is *feminizing*. Both of these transformations bode well for labor's future and both warrant more attention.

First, the labor movement is *growing*. This assertion, of course, goes against the widespread and deeply embedded view, repeated over and over, of union decline. But that view is a myth. It is a troubling myth because it keeps us

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from thinking clearly about worker education and global labor movements. It also perpetuates a sense of weakness and failure and makes us less hopeful about the future and the possibility of social change.

The decline of labor narrative flourishes because all too often we fail to think *globally*. It is true: unions in older industrial countries—in the United States or Western Europe, for example—are declining, but those trends are *not* universal.² If we look globally, a different picture emerges: one of growth, not decline.

Take the recent figures from the bible of global labor statistics: the *Historical Dictionary of Organized Labor*, third edition, edited by James Docherty and Sjaak van der Velden at the Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. In 1970, they estimate, there were 98 million union members worldwide, not including China; forty years later, in 2010, they count 175 million (again, not including China and the 200 million members in the All-China Federation of Trade Unions).³ In other words, despite the well-publicized declines of organized labor in Western economies, union ranks worldwide *rose* seventy-eight percent in the last forty years, gaining seventy-seven million members.

How can this be? The long and short of it, they find, is that gains in union membership in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe more than offset declines in the older, industrial economies. This story of the global growth of organized labor, in their opinion, “is one of the unsung success stories of modern world history.”⁴

But there’s another reason the myth of labor movement decline persists: we define the labor movement too narrowly and make the mistake of conflating the labor movement with collective bargaining and contract unionism. The labor movement, however, has always been about more than collective bargaining; that was true in the nineteenth century and it is increasingly true today.⁵ If we are to have a more accurate view of today’s labor movement, we need to broaden our definition of it and include noncontract forms of unionism, what some call alt-labor.⁶

Today, a broad and diverse alt-labor movement is flourishing. It is emerging in rich nations and poor, in the global south as well as the global north. We can see it in the resurgence of political unionism and the rise of new forms of worker mutualism. We can see it in the explosion of immigrant and community-based worker centers and other labor NGOs, or in the new community-labor alliances and transnational networks created by domestic workers, street vendors, waste pickers, and other disenfranchised workers. Many of these new associations may never sign a contract with an employer, but they are organizing collectively to improve the lives of working people, demanding higher wages and decent working conditions, legal inclusion, social recognition, citizenship, and human rights for all.⁷ The rise of alt-labor, like the upward trends of trade union membership globally, requires that we rethink and rewrite the dominant narratives of labor decline. We are growing and we should not underestimate ourselves.

Let me turn to my second point about today’s global labor movement: it is increasingly a movement *of* women, *led* by women. In support of this assertion, I offer global data on the feminization of unions from a 2012 report I wrote on

gender equity and global labor movements.⁸ In collecting data for this report, I discovered that no global survey on women's trade union membership existed. I decided to do my own, drawing on available data from the ILO, the EIRO, and multiple other sources. With the help of a talented Ph.D. sociology student at Rutgers, Anna Harewood, I compiled and analyzed national data from thirty-nine countries, a subset of nations that included every region of the world and represented some eighty percent of the world's unions.

In one-third of the nations, I found women were the *majority* of union members. But equally significant, when asked the parity question—that is, have women reached numbers in trade unions comparable to their numbers in the labor force, or about forty percent—the answer was yes for *two-thirds* of the nations! Or, put another way, in only one-third of the nations were women underrepresented in trade unions, with female membership falling below forty percent.⁹

Feminization of union membership, of course, is no guarantee of feminization of leadership. The gender gap in trade union leadership is still a reality, what the ETUC rightly described in 2003 as a “pyramid of exclusion,” meaning the higher you ascend in power and authority, the fewer women you find. But the pyramid is changing shape as well, with some sectors of the labor movement diversifying their leadership quickly while others move at much slower speeds, creating a “fast lane” and a “slow lane” of union change. Sociologist Ruth Milkman dubs this emerging bifurcated pattern the “two worlds of unionism.”¹⁰

Trade Union Women's Educational Initiatives: Two Moments

To understand how today's growing and feminizing global labor movement came to be, I want to step back into the past and look at the history of international women's trade unionism and worker education. There are many reasons for the rise and creativity of today's new labor movements, but the role of women and of education is often overlooked. In what follows, I trace how trade union women's educational initiatives helped revitalize, grow, and feminize the global labor movement. I argue that both the educational *ideas* and *activism* of trade union women mattered in making today's global labor movement possible. And both matter still in helping us figure out how we move forward.

I want to focus on two moments in the history of trade union women's education: first, the struggle to establish and sustain the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in the United States in the World War One era; and second, the international campaign to convince the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions to set up the first International Summer School for Women Workers in the aftermath of World War Two. Both struggles had profound consequences for the women who participated and for the labor movement they sought to transform and revitalize.

The Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers

The first great upsurge of worker education erupted in the decades before and after World War One. It rose in tandem with worldwide movements for political

and industrial democracy. Workers wanted full citizenship rights, including suffrage rights for women and all men; they also wanted self-government in industry, fair compensation for their labor, and social respect. These demands were not limited to the West. Calls for democracy and worker rights arose in Japan, China, and other countries in this era as well as in Europe and the United States.¹¹

The Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers was a product of this global upsurge for democracy. We talked earlier this morning about some of the coed worker education experiments that flourished in the early twentieth century. And certainly women were leaders in these coed endeavors. Yet some of the most important worker education experiments initiated by women were not coed. In the United States, the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers is perhaps the best known. And justly so. Held at Bryn Mawr College, an elite all-women's liberal arts college near Philadelphia from 1921 to 1938, it was among the first and most successful residential worker education programs. It was initiated and led by women to develop the individual capacities and political leadership of women workers.¹²

The Bryn Mawr Summer School is often touted as a famous example of cross-class sisterhood, of how women from all classes worked together to advance the needs of low-income and poor workers. But that was not true initially. In 1913, the American Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), the largest US organization of wage-earning women at the time, wrote to all the elite women's colleges. Your beautiful, leafy campuses are empty in the summer, they pointed out. Would you consider opening your college to industrial women for summer study? Not a single college replied in the affirmative. Elite women educators, although progressive politically in many ways, did not see the need for liberal arts education for working women.¹³

League women were not deterred, however: they simply moved to Plan B. Plan B was an extraordinary arrangement the WTUL initiated in 1914 with the University of Chicago. Soon after the League's founding in 1903, it established three priorities: organizing women into unions, passing labor standards legislation, and promoting the individual and social development of workers through education. In 1914, the national WTUL convention voted to raise money for tuition, fees, and living expenses for industrial women to study for a year at the university. In a move revealing the League's belief in the capacities of working women, it requested the scholarship recipients, usually seven or eight each year, be treated the same as regular University of Chicago students. Industrial women workers would sit side by side with other college students and enroll in courses taught by some of the university's most eminent faculty. But classroom study, in the League's view, needed to be informed by and connected to experiences outside the classroom. In addition to taking university classes, each student engaged in "field work" arranged by the League's Chicago branch. Such assignments put students in the midst of Chicago's dynamic reform community, which included, among other organizations, the politically powerful and progressive Chicago Federation of Labor and Jane Addams'

Hull House settlement, a magnet for reformers and progressive intellectuals worldwide.

Meanwhile, the WTUL continued to pursue Plan A: Summer Schools for Working Women. And in 1919, they began to make progress with the help and inspiration of trade union women from abroad gathered in Washington, DC, for the first international congress of working women. Excluded as voting delegates from the ILO's founding Washington conference, labor women in France, Britain, and the United States decided to hold their own international conference with the goal of formulating global labor standards and achieving, as they put it, "a higher standard of life for all." Over two hundred labor women attended from nineteen nations, including Britain, France, Sweden, India, Japan, Poland, Italy, Argentina, Cuba, and the United States. They met for ten days and formed the first international trade union women's federation, the International Federation of Working Women, which included among its goals "the right to education for all."¹⁴ After the conference ended, many of the international delegates stayed on in the United States to travel, study, and lecture. Some, like France's leading trade unionist Jeanne Bouvier, helped the WTUL lobby US women's colleges for summer schools for industrial women.

Eventually, the international pressure on the US schools paid off. In 1921, Margaret Dreier Robins, the national president of the WTUL, wrote Bouvier with the news:

Dear Jeanne, you will rejoice with me in knowing that the visit we made to Bryn Mawr College during those wonderful ten days of our First Congress in 1919 has had a most far-reaching effect. This leading college for women recently announced that it is prepared to open a "Summer School for Working Women in Industry." Do you not agree that this is most significant? For years some of us have been dreaming of [this] happy day. But before this could happen our educational leaders also had to see the vision and it was during that momentous visit of our international workers [in 1919] that the vision came to the faculty of Bryn Mawr College. Now Dr. Thomas, president of Bryn Mawr, will open the school this summer ... a happy augury of the day when the industrial worker may look to the colleges for cooperation in solving the problems of industry and equally important when the great heritage of learning, of poetry, of science, may be the common heritage of all.¹⁵

As Dreier hoped, the Bryn Mawr Summer School was a special place, an experiment that changed the lives of everyone who participated. It was a place of creativity, of inspiration, of intellectual and emotional nourishment. It aimed, as Hilda Smith, its first director said, "not to teach *what* to think but *to* think."¹⁶ It welcomed trade union and non-trade-union women; women of all races, ethnicities, and cultures; native-born and foreign-born; women from Russia, India, Germany, Sweden, and a multitude of other countries. Students encountered the wide world of knowledge: drama, arts, writing, political economy, law, social

science, history. They contemplated the stars and the relation between human beings and nature; they looked inward to find their own special wisdoms. It was democratically governed, participatory, and egalitarian.¹⁷

And, significantly, the Summer School “educated” the elite women who attended as well as the nonelite. Wealthy girls from the elite schools volunteered as tutors at the school and were transformed by their encounters with immigrant and working-class women. Their assumptions about the intellectual incapacities and moral failings of workers were tested and rejected. A “new world opened,” as one student put it.

The experience of teaching women workers changed the faculty as well. One faculty member, Esther Peterson, a young graduate of Columbia Teachers’ College, took a job as a labor organizer and, later, as assistant director of education for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers after teaching drama, singing, and physical education at the Bryn Mawr Summer School in the 1930s. By the 1960s, President Kennedy would appoint her assistant secretary of labor, making her the highest-ranking woman in his administration.¹⁸ But before that, she would help create the first international women’s summer school in the 1950s.

The First International Women’s Summer School

The 1953 International Summer School for Women Workers was part of a second upsurge of global worker education after World War Two. In many ways, the first international women’s summer school was inspired by the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers and carried on its traditions. There are parallels between the two postwar eras in which the schools arose too: both were moments of global consciousness and of heightened expectations for women and workers. And as was true for the Bryn Mawr Summer School, it took pressure from an international network of trade union women for change to occur.

In the early 1950s, an informal transnational network of women trade unionists began to meet. Some had known each other for years: before the war they had participated in the Women’s Committee of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), set up by the International Federation of Working Women in 1924 to carry on its work inside the male-led international trade union movement. But the economic crisis of the 1930s and the rise of Fascism and war devastated the IFTU and its Women’s Committee.¹⁹ By the early 1950s, two labor federations had replaced the IFTU: the communist-led World Federation of Trade Unions, founded in 1945, and its non-communist rival, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Launched in 1949, the ICFTU had some 48 million members with affiliates in 53 countries.

In 1952, Peterson moved to Brussels, where the ICFTU had its headquarters. There, she joined the network of labor women intent on reforming the ICFTU and making it more responsive to the needs of women workers. In

the early 1950s, the network began to expand and diversify. The women also reached consensus on a strategy for advancing their agenda within the male-dominated global labor movement. The next step, they agreed, was convincing the ICFTU to sponsor a summer school for women workers. To the surprise of many, the ICFTU agreed. In cooperation with the United Nation's Economic and Social Council, the ICFTU announced it would hold a two-week residential summer school for women workers in June 1953. The school would take place in the Château de la Brévière, in the heart of Compiègne forest outside of Paris, a site established by UNESCO as the International Center for Workers Education. The women's network applauded these decisions, especially the ICFTU plan to involve the United Nations. Other plans concerning the school, however, would prove more divisive.

The School was controversial from the beginning, and it remained so, long after it concluded. First, there was the controversy over *whether* it should even happen. Then there was the controversy over *how* the school should be organized.

Esther Peterson co-chaired the school with ICFTU Assistant General Secretary Hans Gottfurcht, a German trade union leader. Their relationship did not go smoothly. Their educational philosophies conflicted and each had strong and quite different opinions about how to structure the school. Gottfurcht insisted on lectures by experts and formal country-by-country reports from individual students. In contrast, Peterson fought for a participatory democratic style of worker education, drawing on student experiences and modeled on what she had learned at Bryn Mawr. She wanted students to spend most of their time talking to each other in groups organized by language, where they would identify the most pressing problems they faced, work steadily over the two weeks to find collective solutions to those problems, and then present their group proposals to the school for further refinement.

In the end, Peterson and Gottfurcht divided the baby in half: the first week would be organized along the lines favored by Peterson; the second week would conform to Gottfurcht's vision. Needless to say, the school ended up a disjointed mess pedagogically. Nevertheless, it proved a rousing success socially and politically. It strengthened transnational ties among labor women reformers and was key in advancing the feminist agenda within the labor movement. A fire had been ignited that refused to go out.²⁰

Fifty-two women labor leaders attended from twenty-five countries, including Turkey, Mexico, Tunisia, and India. Women attended also from West Africa, Europe, and North America. The demands voiced by these women, all faithfully recorded by Peterson and the school staff, were bold and pointed. The students proclaimed their opposition to hierarchical relations between men and women and called for "democracy in the home" as well as on the job and in the union. The ICFTU, they declared, needed to change in fundamental ways. "The traditional trade union approach" of just emphasizing "wage and hour improvement" was not enough. They wanted a movement that recognized the work of the home and that paid attention to the full range of human needs and problems.

As they stressed, the labor movement must acknowledge women's "role as homemaker" as well as "wage-earner" and "establish personal contact with women," recognizing them as individuals and as "human beings with human problems." Education and individual development must be part of any movement for societal transformation.²¹

The effect was electrifying. The group of international trade union women—their bonds renewed by two weeks together in the forest chateau and inspired by the student's bold recommendations—pressed for further change. They now had a unified agenda, based on large part on what the students at the school had specified. The network wanted the ICFTU to promise more resources for organizing women. They wanted ICFTU resolutions favoring equal pay, family leave, childcare, and additional female ICFTU officers; they wanted a permanent and well-resourced ICFTU Women's Committee.

The ICFTU balked at these demands. But the trade union women upped their pressure on the federation: they petitioned, they lobbied, and they made their voices heard. In 1956, after two years of foot-dragging, the ICFTU agreed to set up a permanent women's committee, and in May 1957 the committee held its first meeting. And true to its traditions, it strove mightily to include the full range of women's voices. The ICFTU had at first rebuffed committee requests to add representation from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, but gradually the committee gained more travel funds and globalized. By 1963, at its Vienna Conference, it was a truly global group of some sixty-two members with Swedish trade union leader, Sigrid Ekendahl, as its chair.²²

Ekendahl was an experienced and persuasive political in-fighter. She had headed the Women's Council of the LO and served in the Swedish Parliament. Under her leadership, the Women's Committee pushed the ICFTU to issue a "Charter of Rights of Working Women" in 1965, a major global victory for women's rights. The Charter committed the ICFTU to recognizing "the equality of men and women workers," "women's right to work," "equal remuneration for work of equal value," and to "enabling women with family responsibilities to become integrated in the labor force on a footing of equality." The Charter was translated into 20 different languages and 400,000 copies were printed and distributed worldwide.²³

Many advances followed from the 1965 breakthrough, but let me fast forward to the present. In 2006, when the ICFTU joined with other trade union bodies to become the 168-million member International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the Women's Committee persisted, now part of a new labor international. Australian trade union leader Sharan Burrow became the ITUC's first President in 2006 and in 2010, its first female General Secretary, the organization's highest office. She was re-elected General Secretary in January 2014. Like many top female leaders in the ITUC, Burrow had been active, nurtured, and supported first by the ICFTU Women's Committee and then, with the merger, the ITUC Women's Committee. Yet the roots of her triumph ran deeper. As I have narrated, the ICFTU Women's Committee grew out of the 1953 International Women's Summer School, which in turn

rested on a long history of trade union women's international solidarity and emancipatory educational endeavors around the world.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by looking to the future. What can we learn from the history of trade union women's education about creating the next labor movement? In a worker education tradition rich with wisdom, what traditions stand out as worth reclaiming and honoring? Of the many possibilities, let me offer three.

First, start with the individual. Recognize and value each individual, what they know, what they do, what they have to contribute. Second, democracy matters in education and in social movements, just as it matters in society at large. We need to draw on the wisdoms, experiences, and capacities of everyone if the movement is to live up to its professed ideals of human dignity and individual wellbeing. Third, the personal is political. That is, how we treat each other on a daily basis—today, here, now—is the revolution.

Luckily, those traditions are very much alive today. They are being carried on and expanded by trade unionists worldwide, including our sisters in this room from India's Self-Employed Workers' Association. As Namrata Bali, SEWA's Education Director, makes clear, SEWA's collective power rests on helping each member develop a shared sense of individual self-worth and membership in a community of "work sisters." SEWA's educational program begins with each member learning to speak their own name in public and claim what they do all day as work, as valuable. The next step is for each member to recognize the rights and dignity of *all* "work sisters." Creating bonds of commonality among all "work sisters," regardless of caste, class, religion, or region does not come easily. Yet against great odds, SEWA is doing just that. Its growth over the last half century is sustained by its concern for individual self-development, democratic practice, and a community built on interpersonal norms of civility and respect for difference.²⁴

These traditions are also being carried on and reworked by domestic, care, and service worker unions around the world. The new "emotional proletariat" is organizing and the organizations they are creating are remaking our economy and our culture. They are pioneering a new, relational unionism, to adopt the name invented by Kris Rondeau, the lead organizer of the Harvard Union of Clerical Workers. Wages and economic security remain key issues—no surprise given the abysmal pay for most service work—but relational unions also seek to improve the quality of human relationships. For the emotional proletariat, comprised of workers whose expertise lies in interpersonal exchange, the *person* and the *inter-personal* are priorities. It's whole person unionism.²⁵

These movements know the personal is political; they know the group is not diminished by self-development: it is strengthened. They also know the next labor movement will not just be about economic transformation: it will be about the transformation of *social relations*, about what happens between people. They are drawing on the best of worker education traditions from the past and recasting them to build a better future for us all.

NOTES

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11. Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Who Speaks for Workers? Japan and the 1919 ILO Debates Over Rights and Global Labor Standards," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 87 (2015): 213–34.
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13. This paragraph and the next are drawn from Dorothy Sue Cobble, *America's Social Democracy and the Global Women Who Made It* (Princeton, NJ, 2018).
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