

THE FORGOTTEN AMERICAN FEMINISTS

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The history of American feminism has a class problem. The ideas, organizations, and social movements of elite women occupy center stage. The efforts of working-class women to achieve gender justice, as *they* define it, are relegated to the historical margins, if they appear at all. In part because of this class bias, American feminism ends up being narrowly construed as a movement almost exclusively devoted to political and legal enfranchisement and to individual opportunity in a “free” market economy.¹

Recovering the history of labor feminism challenges this popular but mistaken view of American feminism. It forces us to re-think the key ideas, campaigns, and institutions of American feminism. The struggle for economic justice and social rights becomes as important as the struggle for political and legal rights. Mixed-sex institutions such as the labor movement and the civil rights movement become crucial sites for feminist reform. Feminism becomes a movement to transform jobs and the market rather than one limited to employment access.

Far from being a marginal movement, labor feminism was at times the *dominant* wing of American feminism. Labor feminists articulated a vital variant of American feminism that put the needs of working-class women at its core, and they championed worker associations and unions as the principle vehicle through which the lives of the majority of women could be bettered. Labor feminists pursued collective as well as individual rights, gave attention to economic and social as well as legal reform, and

¹ For more on how class has shaped the history of American feminism, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), introduction. Although women's labor history blossomed as a field in the 1970s, little of this pioneering scholarship has been integrated into either the history of women's reform or the history of the labor movement in the U.S. For an introduction to the scholarship in women's labor history, see Ava Baron, ed. *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

judged the class and race problems of women to be as important as the discrimination they faced due to their sex. They argued that gender difference must be accommodated and that equality is not always achieved through identity in treatment. Theirs was a vision of equality that claimed justice for women on the basis of their humanity, not on the basis of their sameness with men. Where the male standard, or what labor feminists called the “masculine pattern,” didn’t fit their needs, they rejected it.

The history of American labor feminism over the last century can be divided into three broad generational cohorts. In this short essay, I will discuss each cohort briefly, but I will concentrate on the World War II generation, the labor feminists who are the prime actors in my most recent book, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (2004). The essay will close with some reflections on the lessons this history offers for the next generation of working women’s organizations.

PROGRESSIVE ERA LABOR FEMINISM, 1900s-1930s.

The ideas of Progressive Era² feminists like Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, or Rose Schneiderman were forged in the growing immigrant communities of early twentieth-century US, in the rise of socialist and democratic party politics, in the mass strikes among garment workers and others from 1909 to 1914, in tragedies such as the

² The Progressive Era in U.S. history, which spans the turn-of-the-century to World War I, derives its name from the rise of a progressive reform movement centered in the urban middle-classes.

Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in 1911, and in the massive parades, civil disobedience, and soapbox oratory on behalf of woman suffrage.³

Progressive Era labor feminists created new ethnically inclusive worker associations, particularly in the garment trades where the majority of all unionized women resided. They also formed all-female cross-class organizations like the Women's Trade Union League and the National Consumer's League. These groups combined working-class immigrant women, largely from Southern and Eastern Europe, with elite native-born women reformers, mainly of Northern European background. The wealthy women, called "allies," joined labor women on the picket lines and encouraged union formation. Elite "allies," however, often preferred consumer boycotts and fair labor standards laws rather than strikes and picketing as the best strategies for advancing the status of wage-earning women.

The accomplishments of Progressive Era labor feminists were impressive. By the 1920s, they had succeeded in passing numerous state laws regulating hours, wages, and working conditions for women; in securing union contracts and grievance procedures in many factories and workshops; and in helping to win woman suffrage. Their influence reached its peak in the 1930s with the emergence of a new Democratic Party sympathetic to the economically disenfranchised and the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the U.S. Presidency. They helped craft the key labor and social welfare legislation of the New Deal, including the Fair Labor Standards Act (the first federal legislation setting minimum wages and maximum hours for both men and women); the Wagner Act (committing the federal government to protecting worker's right to organize, strike, and

³ For an introduction to this generation of labor feminists, Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and A Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of

bargain collectively with employers); and social welfare legislation providing income supports for the unemployed, the elderly, and the sick.

WORLD WAR II LABOR FEMINISM, 1930s-1960s

The World War II generation of labor feminists – women such as Esther Peterson, Addie Wyatt, Caroline Dawson Davis, or Myra Wolfgang – were the intellectual daughters and granddaughters of the Progressive Era reformers.⁴ They too believed that women’s disadvantages stemmed from multiple sources and that a range of social reforms was necessary to remedy women’s secondary status. By the 1940s they assumed leadership of the labor feminist movement and refashioned it for a new era.

As young women, they engaged in the dramatic sit-downs and massive strikes of the 1930s and helped build unions among factory workers in auto, electrical, packinghouse and other mass production industries. In the 1940s and 1950s, they solidified their gains and expanded unionism into new sectors of the economy. In 1947, for example, in the largest walkout of women in U.S. history, some 230,000 telephone operators led a nationwide strike against AT&T. Carrying signs that proclaimed, “The Voice With a Smile Will Be Gone for Awhile,” around-the-clock pickets paraded throughout the South, the Midwest, and in rural towns across America. The Washington, D.C. telephone operator’s local, emboldened by some two hundred successful work stoppages in the previous year and a half, effectively cut off telephone access to the White House.

North Carolina Press, 1995).

⁴ This discussion of WW II labor feminists is based on Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement*, chs. 2-6.

Moving into positions of leadership in the unions and in government in the postwar decades, this generation of labor feminists aimed to transform the agenda of labor unions to better meet the needs of women. They banded together nationally under the auspices of the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor to push for a broad-ranging and concrete social reform agenda that would guide them into the late 1960s. It included an end to unfair sex discrimination, equal pay for comparable work, a family or provider wage for women as well as men, the revaluing of the skills in "women's jobs," legislatively-mandated shorter daily and weekly hours for men as well as women; and social supports for child-bearing and child-rearing.

Labor feminists recognized that discrimination against women *did exist* – an assumption not widely shared in postwar America. But their goal was not to end *all* distinctions on the basis of sex, which they feared would be the result of the passage of the ERA. They sought only to end those distinctions that *harmed* women, that is, the "unfair" or invidious distinctions that amounted to discrimination. Some distinctions, they felt, such as the woman-only state laws setting wage floors and hour ceilings, benefited the majority of women. They wanted to extend these protections to men. Until that happened, however, they believed that the laws should be retained.

Yet sex discrimination was not the *only* problem women faced. Class, race, and other kinds of inequalities needed to be addressed as well. But how? Labor feminists parted ways with the more individualist, equal rights feminist tradition often celebrated in current histories. Individual opportunity, access to the market, and equal treatment with men were important and necessary. But they were also *insufficient*, particularly for poor women. Working class women, like working class men, needed *more* than access to the

market or the opportunity to move into the few positions at the top. They needed to transform the market and the nature of working-class jobs. To effect this transformation, labor women looked to the state and to working-class organizations.

Making “no bones about the fact that there are certain things women need that men don’t,” labor feminists sought accommodation for women’s reproductive labor from employers and the state. They pushed unions to negotiate improved pregnancy and maternity leaves with job and income guarantees, health coverage for women during childbirth, and contract language that would give workers more control over their work schedules and more time off for family emergencies. They sought to expand disability and unemployment coverage to pregnant women and mothers, fought for tax reforms that would benefit families with dependents, and lobbied repeatedly for federally-funded universal child care programs. Caring labor was as deserving of social wages and state benefits as any other work, they reasoned, and the right to a life apart from wage work was an important aspect of what they called “first-class economic citizenship” for women. “Women must not be penalized for carrying out their normal functions of motherhood,” AFL-CIO lobbyist Esther Peterson told a convention of international government officials in 1958. In the words of Nancy Fraser, they were seeking policies and practices that would render “women’s difference costless.”⁵

These efforts are clearly forerunners to the work-family reforms that have increasingly become central to the current U.S. women’s movement. Yet the core of the

⁵ Nancy Fraser, “After the Family Wage: What Do Women Want in Social Welfare?” *Social Justice* 21 (Spring 1994): 80-86. For the historical quotes, see transcript, “Conference of Trade Union Women, April 1945,” 103-6, box 898, file “WB Conf. 1945,” Women’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, record group 86, National Archives and Record Center, Washington, D.C. and Esther Peterson, “The Changing Position of Women in the Labor Force,” in U.S. Department of Labor, *Labor Laws and Their Administration: Proceedings, August 24-28, 1958*, Bulletin 199 (Washington: US GPO, 1958), 22-23.

labor feminist work-family agenda still has not been incorporated into today's discussions. For theirs was a reform movement aimed at solving the problems of nonelite women. That meant, for them, finding *collective*, not *individual*, solutions to two crucial concerns: low wages and long hours.

The solution to raising women's wages that came to predominate by the end of the 1960s was moving women into higher-paying men's jobs. But this was not the primary strategy pursued by labor feminists. Rather, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, they sought to upgrade and change the way the jobs held by the majority of women were valued and paid. They lobbied to raise the statutory minimum wage set by government; they organized unions and associations and pressured employers to close the gender wage gap; and they launched a national equal pay campaign to change the law and public attitudes about the worth of women's work.

In 1945, they introduced an Equal Pay Act into Congress, and they introduced it every year until 1963 when a version of the bill passed. They also succeeded in passing equal pay laws in eighteen states in the decades following World War II. What's significant here is not only their activism but their ideas. They defined equal pay broadly. Women should be paid the same as men when they do the same work, labor feminists argued, but they should also receive a fair and just wage when they do different jobs. The wage-setting systems used by employers undervalued women's skill, productivity, and responsibility, labor feminists claimed, and a fundamental rethinking of employer pay practices was in order. "Why should a woman [in a factory] who sits and packs be paid 20 to 25 cents less than a man who sweeps the floor?" one labor feminist queried.

To achieve this broad goal, they consistently relied upon the words “equal pay for comparable work” rather than “equal pay for equal work.” And they came close to winning “equal pay for comparable work” at the federal level. But the bill that ultimately passed in 1963 fell far short of what labor feminists had hoped. It substituted “equal” for “comparable,” a change of language that limited the law’s impact to situations where women were doing substantially the same work as men.⁶

The struggle over time in the postwar era was as fierce as the struggle over wages. The search for increased leisure did not end in the 1930s. After World War II, male-led unions no longer demanded leisure in the form of shorter workday, but they did bargain for paid vacations, holidays, sick leave, and early retirement -- what United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther called “lumps of leisure.” Labor feminists supported many of the postwar union campaigns to secure more paid time off. Yet the “lumps of leisure” approach did not go far enough for those shackled with the “double shift” of housework and market work. Mechanisms to make *shorter daily hours* a reality were still needed.

Labor feminists saw shorter hour legislation as the most promising route to limiting daily work hours. They were optimistic that the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which an earlier generation of labor feminists had helped pass in 1938, could be strengthened. Yet the state hour laws that covered women only – some forty-three states had such laws in 1957 – offered even better protection against long hours. Many state laws set ceilings on *daily* and *weekly* hours and forbid *any* work beyond those maximums. In contrast, the FLSA used the disincentive of overtime pay after a forty-hour

⁶ For more information, Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement*, 98-100; 105-110; 162-68. Quote from transcript, “Conference of Trade Union Women, April 1945.”

week to discourage long hours, but it did not forbid them. The FLSA approach, many thought, was an inadequate check on employer power and on the competitive market's relentless drive toward longer hours. The woman's standard, as represented by the woman-only state laws, should not be discarded, but universalized to cover all workers. The opportunity to earn was important, they pointed out, but so was a time policy that reined in market work and allowed for the right *not* to work as well as the right *to* work.

It was not to be. By the end of the 1960s almost all the woman-only state laws, including the hour laws, had been ruled illegal because they conflicted with the newly-passed Civil Rights Act outlawing discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, and national origin. And unfortunately, no new effective mechanisms for limiting work time were identified. Rather the FLSA became the nation's primary regulatory approach to curbing long hours. Recognized as increasingly problematic today, its weakness is certainly part of the reason why work hours in the U.S. are longer than in any other industrialized country.⁷

Labor feminists had greater success with other issues. For example, they helped to secure and enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the extension of the FLSA to cover the majority of workers in 1966. They also helped spur the rise of a mass women's movement by the end of the 1960s. In November 1963, Esther Peterson, now the highest-ranking woman in the federal government presented President Kennedy with the final report from the President's Commission on the Status of Women, the first federal commission to investigate the changing role of women and how government should respond. The report, *American Woman*, was a best seller, sparking a

⁷ For more on the debate over time, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Halving the Double Day: The Labor Origins of Work-Family Reform," *New Labor Forum* 12 (Fall 2003): 63-72.

national debate over women's unequal status and what could be done about it. The new feminism of the baby boomer generation built on these achievements. But as younger, college-educated, and professional women flocked into the women's movement, they also challenged the priorities of the World War II generation. Still, new working women's unions and associations arose in the 1970s that would continue the labor feminist traditions. Like earlier generations of labor feminists, they sought to achieve economic and social rights, to offer an alternative to the "masculine standard," and to demand that the work world become more woman-friendly.

BABY BOOMER LABOR FEMINISM, 1960s-2000s

Like their middle-class counterparts, working-class and union women engaged in widespread gender activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Blue-collar factory women in the late 1960s embraced a new vision of gender equality and for the first time challenged en masse the division of work into women's jobs and men's jobs as discriminatory. Rank-and-file union women flooded the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the government agency set up to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964, with sex discrimination claims alleging unfair treatment in hiring, promotion, and benefits. Once stirred into action, the EEOC sought and won majority court decisions designed to end sex segregation and discriminatory practices by such prominent employers as US Steel and AT&T.⁸

Working women relied on workplace-based organizing as well as the courts to advance gender equality. Non-professional as well as professional women organized

workplace caucuses that took up issues of affirmative action and employment discrimination. In addition, they sought to transform the bargaining and legislative agenda of the labor movement. By 1974, union women had established the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). A self-consciously feminist organization, CLUW supported the ERA as well as women's reproductive rights, and the founders' goals included moving women into union leadership, increased attention to organizing women workers, and an end to sex segregation and other discriminatory workplace practices based on sex.

Yet what is less known is the activism among women in female-dominated jobs in the 1970s and 1980s and the ways in which their reform movements pioneered new forms of worker organization and new tactics and strategies. In some cases these activists found a receptive climate for their ideas within the traditional labor movement and they worked with and through their unions. In other instances, however, they rejected the leadership and strategies of the still male-dominated organized labor movement, seeking different allies and different ways of advancing their interests than had an earlier generation. Some broke entirely with the labor movement, casting their lot with all-female associations defined as much by gender as class solidarity. These new working women's associations built on the older reform traditions of World War II labor feminism, reworking these traditions for a new generation of working women. In particular, they expanded the vocabulary of workplace rights and invented new forms of workplace representation more suited for women service and professional workers.

In 1972, beset by problems their male-led unions seemed incapable of understanding or accepting as "real," female flight attendants took matters into their own

⁸ This section is based on Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, chs 7-8.

hands. They formed the first all-female national association of flight attendants, Stewardesses for Women's Rights (SFWR). Instead of building cross-gender coalitions with working-class men as had the World War II generation, SFWR turned to a closer partnership with middle-class women, including airline women in managerial and supervisory positions and prominent national feminist leaders such as Gloria Steinem. They also relied more on lobbying, lawsuits, publicity and other pressure tactics than on strikes and collective bargaining to achieve their goals.

SFWR aimed to end all forms of sex discrimination in the industry, including what they called "sexploitation," or the uses of their bodies and sexuality to sell airline tickets. They filed lawsuits against Continental and National airlines, alleging that their airline ads created a hostile work environment. They worked hard to change the company rules governing appearance. And in conjunction with the few female-led flight attendant unions, they made progress in addressing other issues such as promotional opportunities, workplace health and safety, and the rights of pregnant women and mothers. By the end of the 1970s much had changed for flight attendants. New, more dignified uniforms appeared, and flight attendants no longer resembled mass-produced life-size Barbie dolls.

Women's collective organizing, in contrast to men's, was on the rise throughout the 1970s and 1980s, particularly among women in service and professional jobs. Teachers, librarians, social workers and other state and municipal employees joined unions as well as professional associations. By the early 1980s, some 40 percent of public sector workers were organized into unions, a proportion that has held steady ever since.⁹ Clerical workers in the private sector organized as well. They created 9to5 in 1973, a

working women's organization that had considerable impact without ever signing a collective bargaining agreement. Office worker groups used lawsuits, petitions, "informational conga lines," "worst boss contests," and other creative stunts to draw attention to the plight of secretaries. Their office-worker "Bill of Rights," and their campaign for "Raises Not Roses" (later changed to "Raises AND Roses") instigated a public debate over the working conditions of clerical and the gendered norms governing boss-secretary interactions. By the end of the 1970s, the movement had helped win millions of dollars in back pay and gender equity raises, spurred the development of employer affirmative action plans, turned "National Secretaries Day" – a publicly-celebrated American ritual in which bosses show their appreciation by taking their secretaries out to lunch and giving them flowers instead of raises – into a hotly debated event, and inspired a hit song, movie (with Dolly Parton, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin), and TV show. As *Business Week* noted in 1980, 9to5 also had changed public "notions of fairness," of "what a boss may fairly ask an office worker to do."¹⁰

NEXT WAVE LABOR FEMINISM, 2000-

What can we learn from this past about building the next wave of working women's activism? As a way of starting that discussion, one that should surely be a cross-cultural, group exchange, let me draw attention to three cross cutting themes that I have observed in writing about twentieth-century U.S. working women's organizations.

⁹ For more information about the upsurge of public sector organizing among women, see Deborah Bell, "Unionized Women in State and Local Government," in *Women, Work, and Protest*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston, Mass: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

¹⁰ For quote: "Rebellion Behind the Typewriter," *Business Week*, April 28, 1980, 89-90.

First, working-class women continually engaged in what we could call the “double struggle.”¹¹ By relying on their own powers, networks, and neighborhoods, they organized successfully against employers and built powerful and long-lasting organizations. Yet in many instances success depended on reaching out to “allies,” both elite women and working-class men, and forming coalitions. These alliances across class and gender, however, were often as fraught with tension, misunderstanding, and conflict as with trust, love, and cooperation. Thus, working-class women had to organize to protect their own interests in the face of the paternalism of working-class “brothers” and the elitism of middle-class “sisters.”

Working-class men, for example, particularly those not in the same trade or occupation, offered crucial assistance at pivotal movements. Yet they also treated women as second-class citizens in the labor movement, in the marketplace, and in the home. In response, working-class women organized separate all-female unions or when in mixed-sex organizations, they created separate and protected spaces such as women’s departments, women’s committees, and women’s caucuses.

The relationship with elite women was similarly problematic. Elite women at times suffered from what could be called “class blindness.” They gave their own issues priority and at times, defined their issues as universal when in fact they were the concerns of a particular class. Not surprisingly, working-class women had to organize separately from elite women at times just as they did from working-class men. And in cross-class coalitions, they self-consciously sought a space apart so that their leadership capabilities and their own distinctive perspectives could emerge.

¹¹ I first encountered the term “double struggle” or “lucha doble” in Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA’s Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 155.

Second, working women's organizations continually faced the challenge of how to address the differences *among* working-class women. The employer strategy of divide-and-conquer encouraged divisions within the working-class rooted in race prejudice, ethnocentrism, parochialism, or just plain fear of the "other." "White" women, for example, went out on strike to keep from sharing bathrooms, lunch and recreational spaces, and job opportunities with women of darker skin colors. Second and third generation immigrant women pushed for government policies restricting the rights of newer immigrants and closing the border to those seeking jobs and asylum. American labor feminists divided by family status as well with married women more often favoring high family wages for men than did single women. Debates among labor women erupted over how much credence to give the reigning cultural norms governing gender: what did it mean for women to be "good mothers" or "respectable women"? Should women honor the "domestic" or flee from it?

In the U.S., the working classes have been particularly heterogeneous, but divisions by race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, religion, family status, age, and sexuality are always present in any society. Indeed, because we are all different from each other, equality as well as solidarity is always a relation of difference. There is no *one* class identity or consciousness that can stand in for all the others because there is no *one* worker. Similarly, there is no one experience of gender, of gender exploitation, or even of gender liberation. Organizations that recognize and accommodate differences will have stronger and more realistic bonds of solidarity.

Third, working women's organizations have relied on multiple strategies and multiple structures to advance their goals. While their ends have remained fairly constant

over time, their means have varied. They used both economic and political organizing to make demands on employers and on the state. They created organizations whose primary purpose was bargaining collectively with employers. Yet they also formed professional and worker associations that chose other strategies such as lawsuits, changing public opinion, or lobbying for labor, civil, and social rights legislation.

Labor feminists today live in a world that is shaped by mass migration (increasingly female and increasingly illegal), global markets and global corporations (made possible in part by new technologies), and new transnational reform alliances and networks pushing for international labor standards, universal human rights, and global unions. We can stand on the shoulders of the past, but we also will need to invent new organizations that are appropriate to our global networked age. That will require that we learn from each other. At the September 2004 gathering in Detroit, I was inspired by the accounts from Japanese scholars and activists of the new working women's organizations emerging in Japan that are inventing new forms of worker representation and insisting on women's first-class economic and social citizenship. Americans have much to learn from what is evolving in Japan and many other countries outside the U.S. Thank you for providing the opportunity for me to hear about your history and struggles. I hope this short synopsis of American working women's efforts will be of value to you as well.