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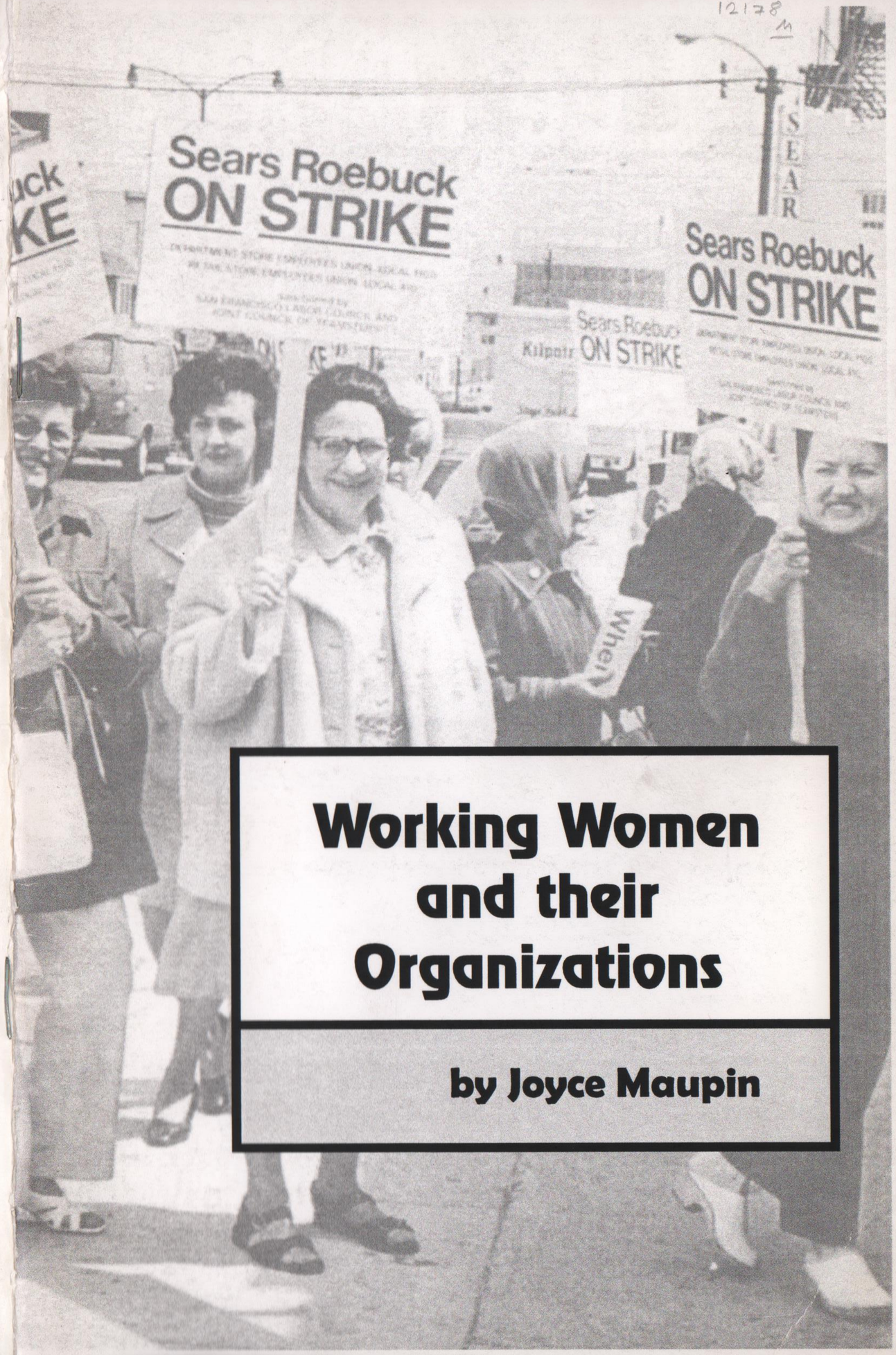

Working Women and their Organizations

by Joyce Maupin

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In 1824 when women in the United States first went on strike, the *Boston Transcript* described it as: ". . . an instance of woman's clamorous and unfeminine declaration of personal rights which it is obvious a wise providence never destined her to exercise." The first women's trade union was organized a year later by tailoresses in New York City, and in 1831 sixteen hundred tailoresses went on strike for several weeks. For 150 years working women have been fighting for better conditions and pay, but you will not learn very much about their struggle in conventional histories of the American labor movement.

WOMEN'S LABOR IN COLONIAL AMERICA

Since colonial times the labor of women has been a vital factor in the economic development of this country. While the legal status of women in the colonies reflected English law, and they had few rights, the realities of colonial life gave them some degree of independence. There was a shortage of men and many women worked in so-called "masculine" jobs. The first recorded occupation of women in this country is tavern keeper. They were also employed as school teachers, printers, and publishers; there are records of women running distilleries and working in saw mills.

The scarcity of male labor in colonial America, as well as in all periods of war from the Revolution through World War II, has been the underlying reason for women entering the work force. There are secondary causes; in colonial America the Puritans believed in work and had no prejudice against women working. On the contrary, women who were not employed were described as "doomed to idleness and its inseparable attendants, vice and guilt." In a period when women were barred from institutions of higher learning on the grounds that their nervous systems were too delicate for the burden of all that education, five year old girls were considered strong enough to work in the mills.

DOCILE WORKERS FOR THE COTTON MILLS

The manufacture of cotton was America's first major industry, and 95% of the workers in the early cotton mills were women. Women were experienced spinners and weavers as they had been doing this kind of work for a long time in their homes. The transition of women from home to mill workers was a conscious plan on the part of the most prominent cotton magnate, Francis Cabot Lowell. In her book *The Golden Threads*, Hannah Josephson explains:

> *"It was a common assumption that girls and young women who were not incessantly occupied were subject to temptations and vicious habits, as well as being a financial drain on their parents and a burden to society. By offering employment to this useless class . . . Lowell saw that he would not only have docile and tractable workers, but would overcome much of the opposition to his schemes that might be expected from the agricultural interests."*

An admirer of the Lowell system pointed out:

> *"Employing chiefly those who have no permanent residence in Lowell, but are only temporary boarders, upon any embarrassment return to their country homes and do not sink down here a helpless caste, clamoring for work, starving unless employed, and hence ready for a riot, for the destruction of property."*

WOMEN FIGHT FOR THE TEN HOUR DAY

The women did not prove to be as tractable as Lowell had hoped. There were a number of brief "turn outs" in New England mills in the 1820s. But it was in Lowell in 1834 and again in 1836 that thousands of women struck. The second strike lasted for a month and a Factory Girls Association was formed at that time.

The first real union of mill operatives was the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, organized in 1844, which soon had branches throughout New England. Sarah Bagley, one of the five founders, became a labor organizer, a public speaker, and editor of *The Voice of Industry*. These Lowell women spearheaded the struggle for a ten hour day. In 1844, as a result of petitions signed by more than 2,000 mill workers, a group of women workers testified in the Massachusetts Legislature before the Committee of Manufactures. This was the first legislative investigation of working conditions in American history. William Schouler, head of this committee, went to Lowell to look things over. In his report, after praising the grass plots and flowerbeds, he emphasized the healthful aspects of a fourteen hour day, pointing out that the girls rose early and went to bed early. The women retaliated by campaigning against his re-election. He lost, in spite of the fact that the women themselves could not vote.

LEGAL RIGHTS AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

All of this happened a few years before the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 when women first asked for the right to vote. Women's fight for the vote and other legal rights grew out of the abolitionist movement of th 1830s. Black women who had no legal rights, who did not even legally exist, were among the first to join the fight not only for the abolition of slavery but for women's rights as well.

Some, like Sojurner Truth and Harriet Tubman, are well known. Many other black women who played vital roles as writers, editors, speakers, and organizers are almost forgotten. One of the first was Maria Stewart, who spoke out against slavery and for the rights of women in 1829.

The writer Frances Harper made her living as a domestic while she worked with the Underground Railroad. Charlotte Forten, Anna Douglass, Sarah Redmond, and Mary Ann Cary, editor of *The Provincial Freeman*, are others whose deepest involvement was in the antislavery movement but who always emphasized the link between freedom from slavery and equality for women of all colors.

The movement for women's legal rights and the fight for women's economic rights developed separately. Women workers, who toiled fourteen to sixteen hours for less than subsistence wages, were more interested in a shorter workday and higher wages than suffrage and property laws. However, many leaders of working women's organizations were also abolitionists and suffragists. In 1831, Lavinia Waight, secretary of the United Tailoresses' Society, demanded not only the vote but the right of women to sit in legislatures. In the 1830s, Lowell and Fall River factory girls held annual fairs to raise money for the abolitionists.

EARLY WOMEN'S UNIONS

The basic structure of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, a separate women's union, is typical of the nineteenth century. One reason for separate organizations was that women were usually excluded from male unions; another was the sexual division of labor which has persisted to this day. In shoe plants, for example, the stitchers were generally women, the cutters were men.

These women's unions led many militant struggles. The Collar Laundry Workers of Troy, New York, went on strike in 1863, and in a period of five years were able to raise their wages from an average of $2 to a scale to $8 to $14 a week. In 1866 they were strong enough to give $1,000 to striking iron molders in Troy, and send another $500 to striking bricklayers in New York. A few years later, nine hundred wo-

men shoe workers in Lynn, Massachusetts successfully fought against a cut in wages.

But local organizations like those in Troy and Lynn did not have the resources to survive defeat in a strike, economic depression, or an influx of cheap labor. These early struggles were episodic and no permanent women's unions were built. The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association disintegrated because of the changing conditions in the mills. The Irish potato Famine of the late 1840s brought the first great wave of immigration, and by 1850 half of the workers in New England mills were Irish. Many native born women moved on to jobs which were just opening up. Sarah Bagley became the first female telegrapher in the United States.

WOMEN ENTER MALE UNIONS

The first national organizations which accepted women members were also short lived. After the Civil War, the National Labor Union under the leadership of William Sylvis, a remarkable non-racist, non-sexist union man, accepted women members and adopted the principle of equal pay for equal work. Kate Mullaney, president of the Troy Collar Laundry Workers, was appointed assistant secretary and national organizer for women, the first record we have of a woman holding such a post. The sudden death of Sylvis precipitated a crisis in this organization and within a few years it fell apart.

In the 1880s, the Knights of Labor also adopted the slogan of equal pay for equal work and set up a Women's Department headed by Leonora Barry. She was an extraordinary organizer, and 50,000 women joined the Knights of Labor during this period. Her investivations of women's working conditions laid the basis for protective legislation and for the development of state and federal Labor Departments. In spite of the rapid growth of their organization, the Knights were torn by internal conflicts and could not survive. The first Women's Department lasted only four years.

In some instances a women's local joined a strong national union where it soon lost its strength. The Women's Typographical Union #1 was granted a charter by the International in 1869. Women in separate unions did build their own leadership, and when Local #1 affiliated with the typographical union Augusta Lewis was already a recognized leader. She was organizer and president of the local, became corresponding secretary of the International, and did an outstanding job. Augusta Lewis held a higher position in the International than any other woman has held in the past one hundred years. But Local #1 never got much cooperation from union brothers, and in 1878 it collapsed. After that, women were accepted into the printer's union, but they remained an unwelcome minority.

—Women on Strike for an Eight Hour Day

THE AFL EXCLUDES WOMEN

The American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1880, soon became a stable national organization and by 1904 represented 80% of the more than 2 million union members in the United States. Unfortunately, the AFL concentrated on organizing skilled white men. While AFL conventions regularly passed resolutions on organizing women, women were in fact excluded from their unions. The Molders imposed a $50 fine or even expelled members who instructed women in any branch of the trade. Even when there were no fines, the high initiation fees (from $25 to $500) and dues of $1 to $5 monthly, effectively barred women from membership. For example, in 1900 a group of women shoe workers appealed to Frank Morrison of the national AFL office to urge the Boot and Shoe Workers Union to reduce its dues, stating, "We simply do not earn enough to pay them." Horace Eaton, secretary-treasurer of the Union, wrote to Morrison: "They evidently want to organize on the bargain counter plan, and we can do well without such members." The women then organized their own local and applied to the AFL for a charter, but their request was denied.

—Sharecroppers, Eulah, Alabama.

BLACK WOMEN IN THE WORK FORCE

The American Federation of Labor policies which excluded women from union membership also excluded minorities. Most black women worked in the fields and in domestic service, occupations which were and still are largely unorganized. A detailed statistical breakdown of "female breadwinners" in 1900 appears in *Wage-Earning Women* by Annie MacLean. Out of 5 million working women, 1,200,000 were black, approximately 43% of all black women in the population. Of the more than 1 million black woman workers, 434,000 worked in agricultural pursuits and 634,000 in domestic and personal service.

Only 32,000 black women were employed in manufacturing; for this reason not many among this tiny minority belonged to unions. One early record of a union accepting black members is Local #183 of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen. In 1903 Chicago women working in the meat packing industry organized this local of "petticoat butchers". At one of their meetings, when a guard announced that a "colored sister" was at the door asking admission, they gave her an enthusiastic welcome.

The extent of prejudice against all minorities is indicated by Alice Henry's account in *The Trade Union Woman* of a successful 1911 strike in the steam laundries of San Francisco:

> *"But both steam laundries and French laundries, both employers and workers, both unionists and non-unionists are at least found in agreement in their united opposition to the Japanese laundries, from whose competition all parties suffer, and in this they are backed by the whole of organized labor. The possibility of unionizing the Japanese laundries is not even considered.*

Again, in discussing the reluctance of organized labor to organize unskilled "nomad laborers" she says:

> *"...more discouraging still was it to gather from the speech of one who urged convincingly that while both for self-defense and for righteousness' sake, the skilled workers must take up and make their own the cause of the unskilled and exploited wanderers, that he too drew his line, and that he drew it at the organization of the Chinese."*

THE WOMEN'S TRADE UNION LEAGUE

It is not surprising that in this period there was a drop in the number of women in unions, from 4.6% of all union members in 1895 to 2.9% in 1908. From 1890 to 1910 the number of employed women doubled, from 4 million to more than 8 million, yet less than 1% belonged to unions! This was all right with Samuel Gompers and other AFL officials, one of whom wrote to Agnes Nestor (first woman to become

president of an international union) that membership in unions tended to unsex women and make them masculine. Philip Foner, in *History of the Labor Movement in the United States,* comments: "The AFL unions made their contribution to maintaining the feminine qualities of women workers untouched by demanding that all woman employees should be eliminated from their trade and by refusing to permit them to become union members."

It is surprising that in spite of a decrease in the number of women in unions and AFL policies barring them from membership, tens of thousands of unorganized women went out on strike. Their victories in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago brought the union shop to the garment industry.

The Women's Trade Union League first became prominent in these great garment strikes. This organization was founded in 1903 by a mixed group of trade unionists, socialists, liberal social workers, and women of wealth. They adopted goals of organizing women into unions, persuading unions to organize women, and lobbying for protective legislation. The majority of the Executive Board was to be made up of women trade unionists but the League also included "allies". An "ally" was defined as "a man or a woman of any class not a worker in any organized trade who believes in the organization of women and subscribes to the following League platform:

1. Organization of all workers into trade unions.
2. Equal pay for equal work.
3. Eight hour day.
4. A living wage.
5. Full citizenship for women.

Alice Henry, in *The Trade Union Women*, describes the function of the League:

". . .women belonging to various unions should come together to discuss the problems that are common to them all as women workers, whatever their trade, and aid one another in their difficulties, cooperate in their various activities, and thus, also, be able to present to their brothers the collective expression of their needs. . .many labor leaders, who have sadly enough acknowledged that the labor movement that did not embrace women was like a giant carrying one arm in a sling, have already gratefully admitted that such a league of women's unions can produce results under circumstances where men, unaided, would have been helpless."

WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS ON STRIKE

In 1909, at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory, 150 workers joined the Ladies Waist Makers Union #25 and were locked out. The women set up a picket line, thugs were hired by the employer, and picketing women were attacked and beaten. It was the women, not the thugs, who got arrested and fined. An average of twenty arrests a day quickly depleted the new union's treasury.

—"Knee-pants" at Forty-five Cents a Dozen—a New York City Sweatshop

At this point the strikers appealed to the Women's Trade Union League for help, and women from the League joined their picket lines. They were arrested too, but the police did not realize that some of them were socially prominent. When the president of the League, Mary Dreier, was taken to jail, the policeman who freed her said angrily, "Why didn't you tell me you was a rich lady?"

The story made headlines and the press carried all the details about the discharge of the union workers, the arrests, and the harassment of women strikers. Other workers in the industry were aroused and demanded an extension of the strike to all shirtwaist shops. On November 22, 1909, a mass meeting was held at Cooper Union. After long hours of speeches, a young woman described as "a wisp of a girl, still in her teens" stood up and asked for the floor. There was some grumbling but the chairman decided she had a right to speak.

"I am a working girl," Clara Lemlich said, "one of those on strike against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here for is to decide whether we shall or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared—now."

The meeting rose, everyone shouting, waving hats, canes and handkerchiefs. The chairman, carried away by the tremendous outburst, asked: "Do you mean faith? Will you take the old Jewish oath?" Two thousand hands were raised with the prayer, "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise."

"LIKE A MIGHTY ARMY RISING IN THE NIGHT"

The next day women poured out of every waist making factory in New York and Brooklyn, crowding the union headquarters at Clinton Street and overflowing into twenty-four smaller halls. An onlooker said it was "like a mighty army, rising in the night and demanding to be heard."

Thirty thousand unorganized workers answered the call. When the strike began, every shop in New York was open. When it ended after thirteen weeks, 312 shops had a full union contract. The most remarkable aspect of this strike was the uncompromising spirit of the women strikers. They were assaulted by strikebreakers, beaten by the police; 600 women were arrested. As soon as they got out of the workhouse, they returned to the picket lines. They were badly fed and thinly clothed in freezing midwinter weather, but many refused the meager strike benefits, insisting the money go to men with families. Helen Marot of the Women's Trade Union League said: "The same temper displayed in the shirtwaist strike is found in other strikes of women, until we now have a trade union truism that women make the best strikers."

The up-rising spread from New York to Philadelphia and then to Chicago. As many as a hundred thousand garment workers were on

strike at one time. Most of the strikers were women, half of them women under twenty years of age.

"All have been strikes," Alice Henry wrote, "of the unorganized. . . .they have been strikes of people who knew not what a union was, making protest in the only way known to them against intolerable conditions, and the strikers were mostly very young women. One most significant fact was that they had the support of a national body of trade union women, banded together in a federation, working on the one hand with organized labor, and on the other bringing in as helpers large groups of outside women."

Writing in 1915, Alice Henry refers to "this league of women's unions." At that time the majority of women trade unionists were in separate locals. Through the experience they gained in these locals and the encouragement of the Women's Trade Union League, which took women out of the shop and paid them to train full time as organizers, many women rose to national and even international prominence in the labor movement. To name only a few: Agnes Nestor of the glove workers, Leonora O'Reilly of the garment workers, Rose Schneiderman of the cap makers, Elizabeth Maloney of the waitresses, Mary Anderson of the shoe workers. In this same period Mother Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn were organizers in predominantly male unions. Today it would be difficult to name half a dozen women who are nationally prominent union leaders. There is not even one on the thirty-five member executive board of the AFL-CIO. What happened in the last fifty years?

THE 1920'S—A DECADE OF REPRESSION

In 1920, the year that women got the vote, the movement of working women that reached its peak with the garment strikes began its decline. Some women blame the stagnation of the women's movement, which lasted over forty years, on the single issue strategy of the suffragists. But in reality working women were never much involved in the suffrage movement. The fact is from 1920 to 1933 organized labor barely survived. The smashing of the steel strike in 1919 was the signal to employers for an all-out union busting campaign. This was the period of the Palmer raids, of yellow dog contracts, of thugs hired as strikebreakers and a huge network of industrial spies. Union membership declined from more than 5 million in 1920 to less than 3 million in 1933. During this period women continued to enter the labor force, and by 1930 there were 10.5 million employed, close to one worker in four. But because of repression and general decline in union membership, women did not join unions.

The labor upsurge began in 1933 when the National Recovery Act guaranteed the right to collective bargaining. In only two months, 300,000 new members joined the United Mine Workers; 100,000 joined

the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. In the next eight years union membership grew from less than 3 million to more than 7 million.

THE 1930'S—WOMEN IN THE RANK AND FILE

We hear very little about women in this period except in supportive roles, like the Women's Brigade in the Flint autoworkers strike. Aunt Molly Jackson sang "Join the CIO", and photographs of southern textile workers show grim-faced women raising the banner "WE'LL HOLD THIS LINE TILL HELL FREEZES OVER." Clerks in Woolworth's had a sit-down strike, and friends outside broke through the guard and passed them cots, blankets, and food packets which they ate at the lunch counter on Woolworth's china. Women tobacco workers barricaded themselves inside three sheds for several weeks. Yet there was not a noticeable increase in the influence of women unionists, no new leaders like Mother Jones, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Agnes Nestor, and Rose Schneiderman. If any young women led workers out of the plants and organized unions, as women had done at the beginning of this century, their names have not been recorded. The new leadership which broke away from the craft unionism of the American Federation of Labor to found the CIO was exclusively male. Part of the explanation is that male workers dominated the industries that were organized: rubber, auto, and steel. The garment industry was an exception, but even there the male leadership remained solidly entrenched in the ILGWU.

Agnes Nestor comments in her autobiography that women got lost in the mass unions and did not build their own leadership as they had in the days when they were in separate unions.

BLACK WOMEN IN UNIONS

The rise of the CIO did bring about a marked change of attitude about organizing women. Industrial organization meant organizing all workers, regardless of skill, race or sex. But until the 1940s, when they entered war industries, very few black women were organized.

In the 1930s the employment of black women was still largely restricted to agriculture, domestic service and service industries. During the depression the unemployment rate of black workers was extremely high. For example, in Detroit in 1931, 60% of the city's black workers were unemployed as opposed to 32% of white workers.

Some black women workers overcame these obstacles. Herbert Northrup, in *Organized Labor and the Negro*, tells about a 1937 strike of 400 black women in the Richmond tobacco industry:

—ILGWU garment workers protest in New York City during the depression

—Shipyard Construction Workers, Richmond, California.

"There was no outside agitation; it seems to have been a spontaneous protest against wages of $3 a week and working conditions equally bad. They contacted the local TWIU[Tobacco Workers International Union] representative, only to have their case rejected as hopeless; but they soon obtained counsel from leaders of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, who helped them organize an independent union. Within forty-eight hours, the strikers had obtained wage increases, a forty-hour week and union recognition."

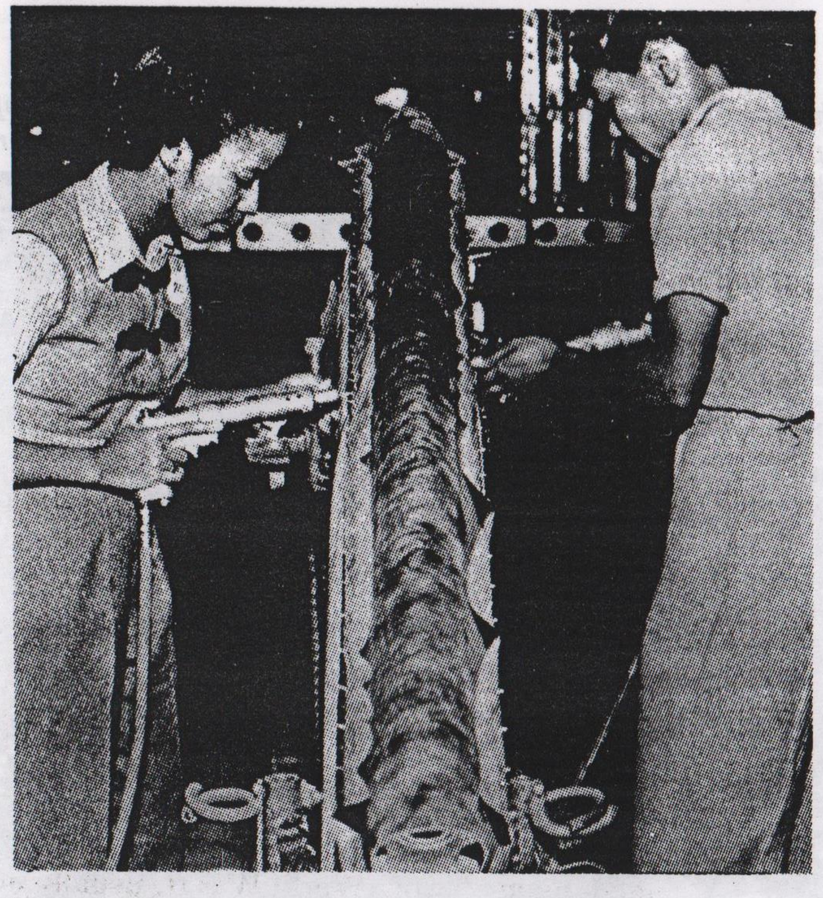
A few days after this settlement, a second successful strike took place in another Richmond plant. These were the first strikes in the Richmond tobacco industry since 1905, and Northrup points out: "What is even more remarkable is that the strikers were considered absolutely unorganizable before they walked out."

WORLD WAR II—JOBS BUT STILL NO EQUALITY

Even during the depression decade of 1930 to 1940, the percentage of women in the work force increased. This upward trend has held steady for at least one hundred years. While there was a drop for a brief period after World War II, the post war figure of 27.9% was higher than 1940, 24.3%. Since 1947, it has continued to rise, but without a corresponding growth in union membership.

Many women joined unions during World War II, usually because it was a job requirement. Women members increased from 800,000 in 1939 to over 3 million in 1945. The War Manpower Commission was formally committed to equal pay for equal work, and some union contracts did include equal pay provisions. But the National War Labor Board gave employers a great many loopholes, for example: equal pay did not apply in jobs which were "historically women's work"; it did not apply to inequalities in two plants owned by the same company. Wage rates for jobs on which only women worked were "presumed to be correct". The unions generally did not fight this, they did not raise any special demands for women workers, and they didn't set up apprenticeship programs so that women could qualify for jobs after the war. On the contrary, in many instances when a woman joined the union she had to sign an agreement that she would give up her job as soon as the war was over.

World War II put an end to the argument that women can't do any work except for the low-paid, dirty, monotonous tasks which are considered "women's work". In less than three years, over 4 million women were recruited into war industries and found capable of handling all jobs. In cases where the load was too heavy or the stretch too long for the generally smaller physique of women, employers adapted their machines.



—Black Women Work in Defense Plants.

CHANGING IMAGE OF THE WOMAN WORKER

A Manpower Commission report called *Womanpower,* published in 1957, states that the most serious handicap faced by many women entering war industries was their own conviction that they could not do the work. Some women had been so successfully brainwashed they were not able to adapt. The image of woman and where she belongs has changed frequently in the past seventy years. In the 1920s when jobs for women were expanding in the clerical fields, the working girl was an acceptable heroine in popular magazines and movies. This "career girl" always met the right man and when she agreed to become a wife and mother, she matured. Older women worked because no one would marry them and a mother who worked was abnormal unless she happened to be black or foreign.

Then came World War II when women were needed by industry. No matter how many children she had, no matter how old she was, the working woman became a magnificent patriot. Over 75% of the new workers entering the labor force were married: 60% were over thirty-five years of age. Paul McNutt, head of the War Manpower

Commission, admitted that "getting these women into industry is a tremendous sales proposition."

However, one large group of women was not as difficult to persuade: the millions working at the menial jobs which were traditionally theirs. Two-thirds of the women employed in eating and drinking establishments changed to war work. Six hundred laundries closed because they couldn't find women workers. Black women in particular benefited: 400,000 left domestic service for war work. The number of black women working as domestics fell from 72% to 48% of all employed black women, and the number working in the fields from 20% to 7%.

THE WAR ENDS—BACK TO THE HOME

The pay was good, especially because of overtime; and women read and heard about their remarkable abilities, their strength, ingenuity, resourcefulness and courage in learning quickly to work just like a man. But at the end of the war, when employers wanted to get rid of women workers, the message changed: "A woman really doesn't like to work outside of her home. Not that she couldn't, not that she shouldn't, but she prefers the creative occupation of full-time homemaker, washing dishes, mopping floors, and doing the family wash." These propagandists ignored indications that women did not agree. Surveys conducted by organizations as diverse as the United Automobile Workers, the Department of Labor, the Saturday Evening Post and the Ladies Home Journal showed that a majority of women wanted to keep their jobs.

As a matter of fact, they did stay in the labor force, but not in war jobs. They reluctantly returned to the laundries, the eating and drinking establishments, domestic service, and clerical work. Carefully avoiding facts, the media continued to pour out happy homemaker slush from the end of the war right through the 1950s. All this time the number of women in the work force increased, including working mothers and older women. Women were too busy working to read or go to the movies and discover they didn't want to work. Most women will concede that putting a stack of paper in alphabetical order is about as dull as housework, but the obvious advantage of filing is that you get paid for it, though not very much.

BASIC CHANGES IN THE FEMALE WORK FORCE

The changing status of women, which began in the 1960s, has been attributed to many things: the President's Commission on the Status of Women in 1961, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Executive Order of 1967 prohibiting discrimination by federal contractors and subcontractors, and the Equal Employment Opportun-

ity Commission, with power to investigate complaints and to prosecute cases in court. Most of these legal measures preceded the women's liberation movement of the last five or six years. Various factions contend the women's liberation movement itself was inspired by the civil rights movement, the student movement, the New Left, the hippie subculture, and Betty Friedan. All of these factors may have played some part, but they are not the real cause of the change. Neither are the various Acts, Commissions, or Executive Orders, since laws are the expression of social change which has already occurred.

Womanpower, written in 1957, states that "The rapid growth of the female labor force in recent years has been reflected in the increasing emphasis upon governmental action to ensure equal pay." The *Womanpower* report also points out that, while women's groups disagreed on the Equal Rights Amendment, they did agree on equal pay, and predicts this unity will help get an equal pay law enacted. So it was really in the 1950s, when we are told nothing was happening, that change began. It was a decade in which more and more women were working, when married women first became a majority of the female work force, when the number of working mothers increased rapidly, and when older women remained on the job. In 1940 only 30% of working women were married and living with their husbands; for 1960, the figure is 54%. In 1940 only 9% of working women had children under nineteen; in 1967 it was 38%. The median age of women workers rose from thirty-two in 1940 to forty-one years in 1960.

CHANGES IN FAMILY STRUCTURE

These statistics are an indication that other changes were taking place. When a wife works, especially when a mother works, there is a shift in home responsibilities. Women begin to use babysitters, convenience foods and laundromats. The husband may not be enthusiastic, but he inevitably takes over some part of the housework. Women who earn a substantial part of the family income also gain more authority and have more to say when basic decisions are made. The children who grow up in homes where both parents are working and where housework and decision making are to some extent shared, have different ideas about a woman's place, different expectations from the children who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s when mother stayed in the kitchen and daddy brought home the paycheck, or the unemployment check. The school textbooks still show little Jane helping mother clean house and set the table, but in reality it may be little Dave who is helping father. Many of the feminists of the 1960s are the daughters of "Rosie the Riveter" and the less publicized working mothers of the 1950s. They expect and demand more than women who grew up in homes where mother was exclusively a housewife.

THE NEW FEMINISTS OF THE 1960S

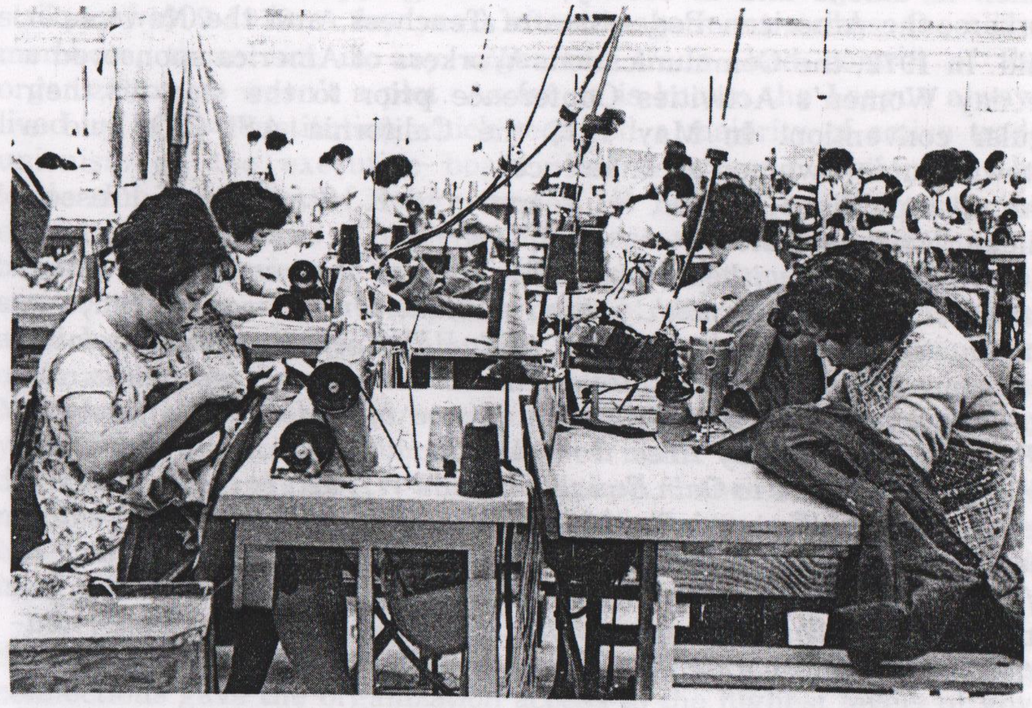
The economic changes which began with the mass employment of women in war industries in the 1940s are important, but they are not the only factor which led to the rebirth of feminism in the 1960s. It was a decade in which a great many things were happening: the civil rights movement and the protest against the war in Vietnam. It was a climate which encouraged change. William Chafe in a recent book, *The American Woman, Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1920-1970,* says:

> *"The evolution of any protest movement is a complicated phenomenon. In general, however, at least three pre-conditions are required: first, a point of view around which to organize; second, a positive response by a portion of the aggrieved group; and third, a social atmosphere which is conducive to change. To an extent unmatched since the last days of the suffrage fight, all three elements came together in the American women's movement during the 1960's. Articulate feminists presented a cogent indictment of society's treatment of women. A substantial number of females who had already experienced profound change in their lives were responsive to the call to end discrimination. And the society at large was peculiarly attuned to the need for guaranteeing equality to all its citizens. No one development by itself could have explained the rebirth of the women's movement, but all three together created a context in which, for the first time in half a century, feminism became a force to be reckoned with in American society."*

Some of the early manifestations of *new* feminism did not seem to bear much relationship to its economic roots. The leaders of the movement were predominantly middle-class professionals. Working women appeared to be either hostile or indifferent, partly because of the kinds of issues which were raised. As long as we have banks and bank presidents, it is legitimate for a woman to seek advancement to these kinds of positions, or any other management position; but the average working woman does not identify with such aspirations.

WOMEN WORKERS AND THE LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Some time passed before women workers and women unionists began to apply the ideas of feminism to their own situation on the job and in the unions. They began to ask what the unions had been doing to organize women and improve their working conditions, in these years of the unprecedented growth of women in the work force. The blunt answer is, not much. Although there are more women in unions than ever before, women are joining the workforce faster than they are being



—Asian Women in a Modern Day Sweatshop

organized. In the last fifteen years, from 1958 to 1973, the percentage of organized women of the total number of women working has dropped from 17% to 12%; only one woman in eight is organized. The unions haven't even been running fast enough to stay in one place; they have lost ground for fifteen years. In one respect women in unions have held their own: 4.7% of all union officeholders were women in 1958; in 1973 the figure is still 4.7%, although 21% of all union members are women.

One reason women are not organized is that their employment has increased primarily in job categories which are not organized, like clerical and service jobs. The plain truth is that labor unions have taken very little interest in organizing women. They have repeated the old excuses: women are hard to organize, they are temporary workers who will quit in a few years, and they don't really need the jobs.

UNION WOMEN GET TOGETHER

In the last few years union women have begun to make themselves heard. They have formed caucuses all over the country. They are raising women's issues and demanding that women be trained as organizers. Some unions have held national conferences to discuss

women in unions and in society, including the United Automobile Workers, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Newspaper Guild. In 1972, the Communications Workers of America sponsored a one day Women's Activities Conference prior to the start of their regular convention. In May 1973 the California AFL-CIO held a statewide union women's conference.

In an unpublished paper, V. Yeager and K. Stephens of Prescott College, Arizona state:

> *"Within and without their own unions, veteran women trade unionists are joining with young, militant female workers to form alliances and caucuses designed to demand action within the labor movement aimed at alleviating the handicaps and indignities the woman worker suffers. Striking evidence of this trend is found in Berkeley, where Bay Area women have joined to form the Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality [Union WAGE]. In a vein reminiscent of the old Women's Trade Union League, Union WAGE declares itself to be 'an organization of women trade unionists organized to fight discrimination on the job, in unions and in society. We are dedicated to achieving equal rights, equal pay and equal opportunities for women workers.'"*

UNION WAGE AND THE WOMEN'S TRADE UNION LEAGUE

A number of people have compared Union WAGE with the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), and some of them have concluded that WAGE took WTUL as a model. But it is unlikely that most of the founding members of Union WAGE had even heard of the Women's Trade Union League, and those who had heard of it didn't know enough about the program or structure of the organization to use it as a model. Similar needs can give rise to organizations which are in some respects similar.

The WTUL program is similar in many ways to the goals of Union WAGE: organizing women into unions, the education of unions in the need to organize women, the enactment of protective legislation, a shorter work week, and a living wage. WAGE is in agreement with Alice Henry when she writes:

> *". . .women belonging to various unions should come together to discuss the problems that are common to them all as women workers, whatever their trade, and aid one another in their difficulties, cooperate in their various activities, and thus, also, be able to present to their brothers the collective expression of their needs."*

There are, however, significant differences between Union WAGE and the WTUL. As stated earlier, a number of wealthy and socially prominent women belonged to the WTUL as allies. There aren't any wealthy socialites in Union WAGE. In fact, a dependence on wealthy members may have hastened the demise of the WTUL.

William Chafe's book, *The American Woman, 1920-1970,* sheds some light on what happened to the WTUL after the great garment strikes of 1909-1910. A few years after the garment strikes, the allied members, those not in any organized trade, had control of the organization. It wasn't a plot. As far as is known the League always lived up to its constitution which required a majority of active trade unionists on the executive board. But when one section of the leadership has a lot of money and a lot of time to devote to the organization, there is a tendency for those with money and time to become functionaries, to run the office, and to attend the conferences and conventions. As a result, their point of view inevitably predominates. In the case of the WTUL, this meant a shift in emphasis from organizing women workers to educational and legislative work. Margaret Dreier Robins, who was president of the League for many years, believed that the great value of trade unions was that they developed "personality". "The union shop," she said, "calls up the moral and reasoning faculties. . .". In 1920, she stated that the League believed the first need of working girls was "the awakening of their imagination and sense of beauty."

"In her own way", William Chafe says, "Mrs. Robins made a distinct contribution to the League's growth and prestige. Her connections gave the organization access to the highest levels of government and some of the wealthiest individuals in the country. . Ironically, the very qualities which made her a successful reform leader prevented her from transforming the League into a true labor organization."

By 1925 contributions to the League from friendly unions had dropped to 3% of the budget, while over 90% came from "allies". Many of these, the League treasurer stated, "would not find favor in union ranks." It is not surprising that the more money the League received from these sympathizers, the less time it spent organizing women into unions.

On the other hand, if trade unionists in the League had received more encouragement and support from the labor movement, they might have been more successful in challenging the leadership of women like Mrs. Robins.

WOMEN IN UNIONS TODAY: BUILDING UNITY

How do working women's organizations of today resemble those of the past? Women are no longer segregated into separate unions. The concept of all-women's unions has been raised by some women in the liberation movement, but union women themselves rarely express any interest in separate union organization. The reasons which made women's unions valid in the nineteenth century no longer exist. Women *are* admitted into male-dominated trade unions and the sexual

division of labor has been modified to some degree. While there are many occupations in which women make up a large majority of the employees, no jobs are exclusively "women's work", and one effect of the struggle for equal rights has been to bring more men into jobs which were traditionally for women only. For example, there are now many men working as telephone operators and typists. Even in household employment, 3% of the workers are men, and household workers, who are just beginning to organize, have shown no desire to keep men out.

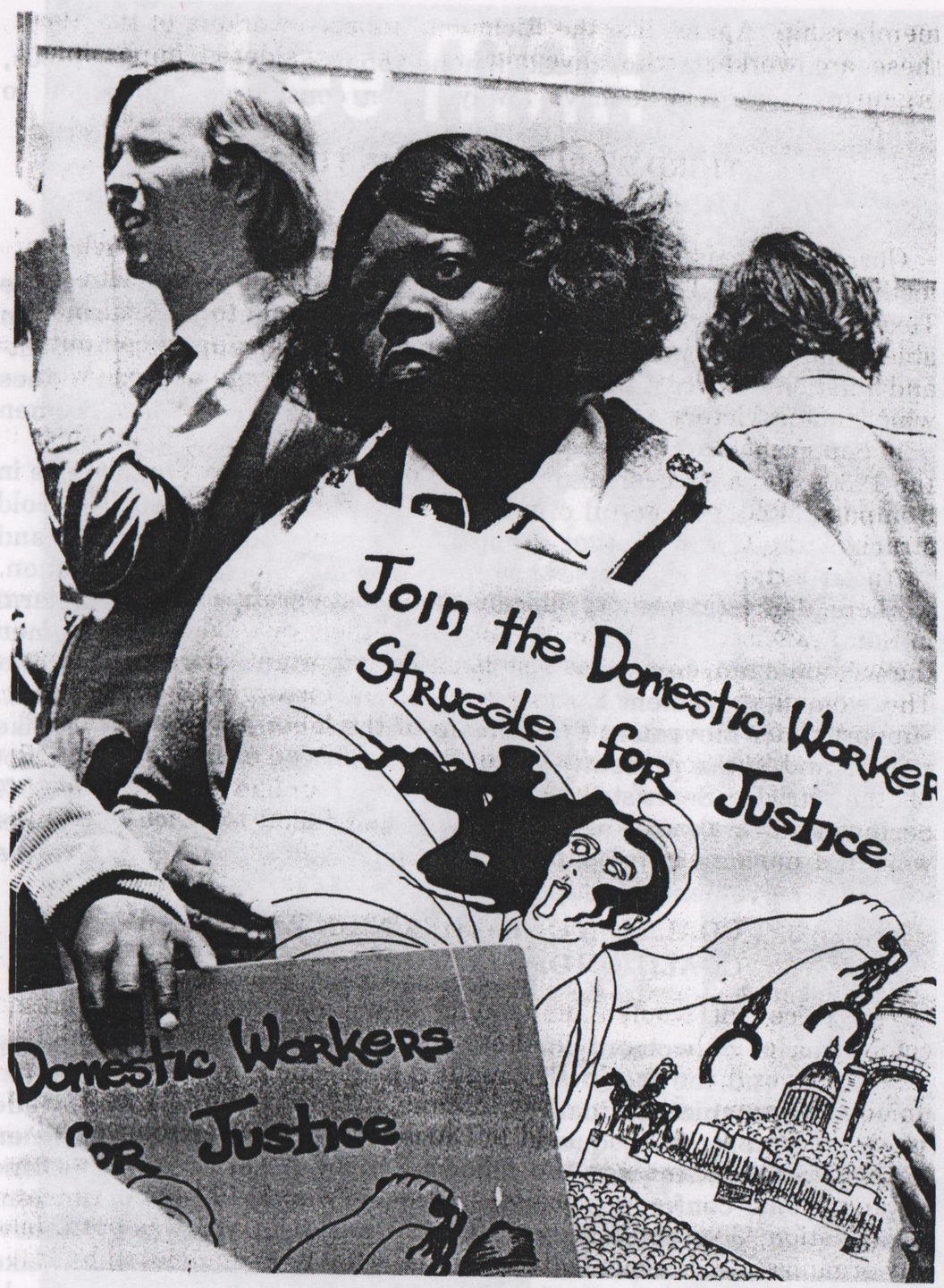
Separate unions are illegal under the Taft-Hartley Law which requires that the collective bargaining agent represent all employees. It is the need for unity and not the legal aspect of the question which influences women workers, however, as many are probably not aware of Taft-Hartley provisions. Only through unity can rank and file workers build strength to fight both the employers and the bureaucrats in their own unions.

Recently the union movement has shown greater interest in organizing women. The fastest growth of union membership has been among public employees, including a high percentage of women in teaching and clerical jobs. Unions are also beginning to recognize that it is possible to organize white collar employees in private industry.

Blue Shield in San Francisco was organized two years ago, adding 1700 office workers to the 1700 members already in Office and Professional Employees Local #3. This brought about some dramatic changes in a small, conservative union. Conversely, other clerical organizing drives in the San Francisco Bay Area have failed or are faltering as a result of the ineptitude of union leadership. More women organizers are desperately needed. Young women, pushed toward union organization by low wages and inflation, may be turned off because they are convinced that male bureaucrats dominate the unions, a conviction usually reinforced by the attitudes of male organizers.

The unions where women have played a significant role in leadership are those like the United Farm Workers which first organized independently from the official trade union movement, or others like the California Homemakers Association, which are still independent. Dolores Huerta, first vice-president of the United Farm Workers, and leading negotiator and lobbyist for the union, is the most remarkable woman unionist in the United States today. But she is not unique in the United Farm Workers; many other women are taking a vital part in that union's leadership. As in society in general, chicana women are subordinate to men, but their economic contribution to the family's survival gives them power, as indicated by their activity and influence in the union.

The California Homemakers Association is a union of household and attendant care workers which has organized more than 2500 workers in Sacramento County in the last year. It is the first union to win collective bargaining rights for domestic workers. Viola Mitchell, president of the union, is a black woman household worker, like a majority of the



—A Member of the California Homemakers Association Demonstrates for Protective Laws.

membership. Again, like the Richmond tobacco workers of the 1930s, these are workers who have always been considered impossible to organize.

THIRD WORLD WOMEN IN THE LEAD

Currently, it is the "unorganizable" minority women who are leading the way. The chicana workers at the Farah pants factories in Texas won a two year strike against what appeared to be insurmountable odds. While the women strikers had help from support committees and a national boycott, it was the tenacity and courage of these women which made victory possible.

In San Francisco, Chinese seamstresses, who last tried to unionize in the 1930s, led a successful organizing drive at the San Francisco Gold Company. Recently another group of Chinese women organized and struck at the Great Chinese American Sewing Machine Corporation.

An important factor in the organizing drives and strikes of farm workers, domestic workers, chicana women at Farah, and Asian women in San Francisco, has been support from their own communities. But the women's movement has also been an important source of support. The women's movement offers a potential for organizing and strike support which the present leadership of the labor movement does not understand. The Sears strike in San Francisco is an example. About 80% of the strikers were women, yet Sears, unlike Farah, did not become known as a "women's strike" and failed to reach out to the women's movement for support.

COALITION OF LABOR UNION WOMEN

The voices of women demanding equal pay and better working conditions, and the fact that these women were doing some militant grass roots organizing, finally caught the attention of the official trade union movement. Consequently in June 1973 a Conference of Women Trade Union Leaders was held in Chicago, and they announced plans for a national conference the following year to set up a permanent organization. The conference was held in March 1974 and the new organization, Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), was born. Like any organization planned by bureaucrats, CLUW is dominated by trade union leadership rather than the rank and file. The regional meetings held in advance of the national conference brought together large numbers of enthusiastic women.

The founding conference was attended by more than 3500 women to the astonishment of the planning committee, which had originally estimated about 800. The high spirits and militancy of the delegates contrasted sharply with the heavy-handed control and rigid regulations

—Workers at Lee Mah Electronics in San Francisco strike for union recognition

—Women of the Sears strike

of the committee in charge. Female bureaucrats are in every respect the equal of male bureaucrats.

The work of the CLUW conference was to agree on guidelines for this new organization. One of the proposed guidelines, point fourteen, is a good example of the manipulation of the planning committee. Point fourteen stated that CLUW "shall not be involved in issues or activities which a union involved identifies as related to a jurisdictional dispute." This meant that CLUW would not support the United Farm Workers.

As early as Friday evening, women were meeting to protest, sign petitions, and demand that point fourteen be deleted. Unity with the Teamsters was the excuse given for point fourteen, but Teamster women, carrying picket signs and banners, took a leading part in the fight for Farm Worker support. By Saturday evening the rank and file won, and a motion to delete point fourteen carried by an overwhelming majority.

Although CLUW's Statement of Purpose included organizing the unorganized, both the unorganized and the unemployed are excluded from membership, as are members of many independent unions. Since rank and file members will not be in a financial position to travel to Chicago for meetings, the National Coordinating Committee will be dominated by the staff women who set up and ran the conference.

CLUW has been organized because of the ferment among working women in this country, and the intent of CLUW's leadership is to contain the movement within acceptable channels. Some of the women who have joined CLUW are putting up a valiant fight to change CLUW membership requirements, to make it a more democratic organization which is representative of rank and file working women. Present indications are that CLUW's national leadership prefers to have no chapters than to have chapters which break the rules they have arbitrarily laid down. They appear to be in a position to maintain control and to turn CLUW into little more than a pressure group on limited issues. (For a more extensive discussion of CLUW, by other members of Union WAGE who attended the founding conference, see *Union WAGE* newspaper, May-June 1974 issue.)

BUILDING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Many women who came to CLUW meetings with hope and enthusiasm; about the new organization are now looking for an alternative. Some have turned to Union WAGE; an organization uniting union and non-union women. One effect of the CLUW conference and the initial efforts to set up CLUW chapters has been a growing interest in Union WAGE in sections of the country where it was previously unknown. It began as a San Francisco-Berkeley organization but now has hundreds of members and subscribers to the *Union WAGE* newspaper in other areas. They are getting together to hold area

meetings and WAGE is revising its constitution so that chapters can be set up.

Separate organizations, which were forced on women in the nineteenth century, did result in the development of women leaders. Today, women's caucuses in unions, women's conferences, and an organization like Union WAGE all fulfill the need for separate organization. In this respect they resemble the women's unions of the past and the Women's Trade Union League. In groups of this kind, which are developing all over the country, women can get together to talk over their problems, support each other's struggles, and create the women's leadership so conspicuously absent in today's unions. Women's leadership does not mean training an individual woman to get ahead in her union. It means a collective leadership which will raise the issues discussed in these separate organizations and fight for ideas which will give a new direction to the unions.

The middle class women's movement generally sees the problem of working women in terms of the advancement and promotion of individuals. For example, the solution to a file clerk's difficulties is making it possible for her to become a management trainee.

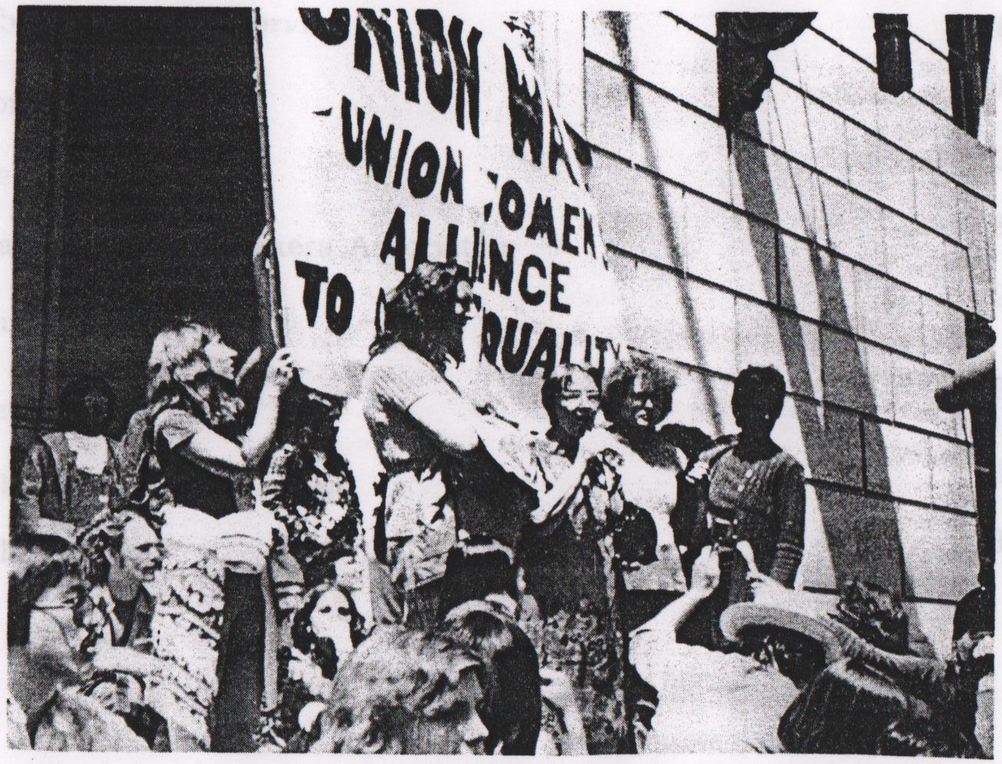
The goal of Union WAGE is to change the lives of all file clerks, factory workers, farm workers, and waitresses by improving wages and job conditions for all women. This will improve conditions for men, too. It's a case of mutual need. Women need union organization, and unions need women to survive. Women, in alliance with other minority workers, can revitalize the unions so they again assume leadership in the struggle to change conditions in our society.

—A Waitress Taking a Break.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joyce Maupin, a trade unionist for over forty years, first went to work at age seventeen. She has been a waitress, a textile worker, a shoe worker, a machinist [active in the 5-month strike of the International Machinists against Boeing Aircraft], and an office worker. She is currently a member of Office and Professional Employees Local 29 and in recent years served as shop steward and on the negotiating committee for her shop. Author of Pioneers of Women's Liberation [*included in* Voices of the New Feminism, *Beacon Press*], *articles in popular women's magazines on working mothers and child care, as well as many articles on the problems of working women for labor and political publications.*

Joyce Maupin is a founding member of Union WAGE [Union Women's Alliance to Gain Equality], an organization of union and non-union women organized to fight sex discrimination on the job, in unions, and in society. She is currently serving as Coordinator of Union WAGE.



—Joyce Maupin speaks at demonstration for protective laws

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