

WOMEN, WORK AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

Readings

Phillip Weiss
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What do "Women Workers in World War II, Michigan as a Test Case", by Alan Clive (Labor History, Winter 1979); "Feminism or Unionism: The New York Women's Trade Union League and the Labor Movement," by Nancy Schrom Dye (Feminist Studies, Fall, 1975); "Women Workers and the UAW in the Post World War II Period, 1945-1954," by Nancy Gabin (LABOR HISTORY, 1979-80); "Working-Class Feminism and the Family Wage Ideal: The Seattle Debate on Married Women's Right to Work, 1914-1920," by MARLEEN WEINER GREENWALD (Journal of American History, June 1989); Out to Work: A History of Wage Earning Women in the United States by Alice Kessler-Harris; and "Why Women Work: A Comparison of Various Groups-Philadelphia, 1910-1930," by Barabara Klaczynska (Labor History, Winter 1976) have in common? They all seek to answer two questions of great importance to the American labor movement and to American social history in general: namely, under what circumstances did women enter the work force, and how did the presence of women in the work force affect the trade union movement?

After reading these works, the evidence suggests that women entered the work force primarily due to economic considerations, with no intent to bring about fundamental change in the traditional view of women as homemakers, and that women in the work force were unwelcomed by the trade union movement whose male membership viewed women as competitors for their jobs.

Regarding the primary reasons why women entered the work force, the evidence presented in these works is clear. Economic factors, that is, availability of jobs or financial need, were the primary reasons why women entered the work force. Clive writes that "[during World War II] Women took jobs of all descriptions and skills in war industry," and that "Thousands of black domestics abandoned their positions as household servants for more lucrative factory work." Dye writes that a substantial and rapidly growing minority of female laborers made up New York City's

industrial work force [by 1900]." Gabin writes that "By 1943, however, it was apparent to management everywhere that women would have to be employed to meet the nation's wartime needs." Greenwald writes that "In those twenty years [1900-1920], the number of Seattle women who worked rose 594 percent ... while the city's general population in the same twenty year period rose 291 percent...." Kessler-Harris writes that "Everywhere the industrial process contributed its own pressures on women to enter the labor market The result was a steady rising in number of women, married and unmarried, who felt impelled to contribute to their families' economic sustenance." Klacynska writes that "Women worked because of a need for more income...." These authors firmly establish that the availability of jobs, and the need for income motivated women to enter the workforce.

There is also a consensus among the authors as to the trade union movement's negative reaction to the presence of women in the work force. Clive writes that "Male workers and union leaders did not go out of their way to welcome women employees" and that "Opinion polls found solid majorities opposed to female employment that jeopardized jobs for men." Dye writes that "Both the leadership and the rank and file of the A.F. of L. union were often openly antagonistic toward the unionization of women" and that "Federation leaders also argued that women ... cared little for maintaining hard-won wage and hour standards." Gabin writes that "When ... 85.5 percent of female UAW members said they wanted to keep their jobs in industry because they were better-paying and better-protected than the traditionally female jobs in the retail, clerical, and service occupational sectors, the union reacted unfavorably." Greenwald writes that "... the legitimacy of married women's right to work outside the home raised key social, economic and moral issues that split the

Seattle trade union community." Kessler-Harris quotes the AFL's treasurer who in 1905 said: "The great principle for which we fight is opposed to taking ... the women from their homes to put them in the factory and the sweatshop." Kessler-Harris also writes that "Unions often deliberately sabotaged their female members." Klacynska writes that "... the historian's usual focus on organized labor [has] led to the neglect of women as workers" and that "Female employment outside the home has been viewed as an aberation rather than a cultural pattern." If Klacynska is correct, then this view suggests that organized labor would have considered the presence of women in the workforce to be abnormal.

According to Dye, Greenwald, and Kessler-Harris, women organized groups to advocate for their right to work and for fair treatment at the work place. Cited by these authors were such organizations as the Women's Trade Union League of New York, "a feminist labor organization founded in late 1903;" the Women's Union Card and Label League, which fostered "A distinctly feminist consciousness ... within the Seattle working class" and advocated the liberation of "... women from confinement to the household;" and the "militantly feminist" National Women's Party, which "... angrily wrote to the New York Times ..." opposing a New York State law that prohibited women from working in restaurants from 10:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M. The emergence of these organizations suggest that women had a predominant interest in entering the workforce and defending their interests as workers. However, the evidence is inconclusive on this point, and in fact, the same authors present additional evidence which strongly suggests that the opposite was true - that the feminist position did not reflect the view

of most women concerning their role in society. Dye writes that "... women were usually temporary, transient workers" Greenwald writes that "... full-time mothers objected to married women's employment." Kessler-Harris cites a 1946 Fortune survey which found that "Only a third of the men and two-fifths of the women queried believed ..." that "'a married woman who has no children under 16 and whose husband makes enough to support her ... should be allowed to take jobs." Kessler-Harris also quotes a New York Times' headline from 1980 which said "MANY YOUNG WOMEN, NOW SAY THEY'D PICK FAMILY OVER CAREER." In addition, Klacynska writes that "By 1925 native mothers had achieved middle class status, adopted the role of American housewife and did not want to work."

Thus, there is conflict over the degree to which the feminist position was representative of women's views in general. If the Fortune survey and the New York Times' headline are to be believed, then the feminist position represented the views of only a minority of women, and that as late as 1980 the feminist position was out of sync with how the majority of young women felt about being homemakers. Yet there is incontrovertible evidence that feminist organizations did exist and function, which also suggests that at least some women did place their interests as workers ahead of their more traditional roles as wives and mothers. The question of how successful the various feminist groups were in developing working class consciousness among women is debatable because the evidence presented by the authors is inconsistent.

Another debatable point is the degree to which women acquiesced to their exploitation in the work force. There is unanimous consensus by all six authors that women historically have been subjected to unfair treatment in the work place.

But to what extent did women view themselves as victims? Again, the evidence is inconclusive. According to the authors, some women objected to the unfair treatment and the kind of work they performed, while to many others it simply was not an issue. When Clive writes that "With the exception of a few lay activists, it was the child welfare professional, not the mother, who demanded day care in World War II," this strongly suggests that for women working in factories, their responsibilities as mothers were more important to them than their responsibilities as workers. This does not mean that these women did not value their jobs, but that they still viewed themselves as being homemakers first and workers second.

As for the relationship between women workers and the trade union movement, in this area there is little ambiguity. There is substantial evidence that the relationship was marked by conflict and that workers were split along gender lines. There is no basis for doubting the veracity of the evidence on this point. However, after review of all six works, the attitude of the trade unions toward women workers, though not commendable, becomes at least more understandable when viewed within the larger historical context.