

Historical Women

History of Women in the Labor Movement

Selected Article - A brief History of Women in the Labor Movement

Women in the Workplace: Labor Unions

By Juliet H. Mofford for *Women's History Magazine*

When Alexander Hamilton wrote his *Report on Manufacturers* in 1791, seeking ways to develop industry in the United States, he identified women and children as a source of cheap labor. Later, in the 1820s, the textile mills of New England, most notably those in Lowell, Massachusetts, hired young women from the surrounding farms as workers, viewing them as more tractable than men and more willing to earn less, since presumably they would stop working once they married.



To make matters worse for female laborers, workingmen often saw them as threats to their status, especially as new machines permitted less skilled operatives to perform tasks formerly assigned to craftsmen. Thus, it is not surprising that as men attempted to unionize in order to combat declining pay and status, their leaders often ignored female workers.

Women, however, were eager to assume roles in the fledgling labor movement. As early as the 1820s, female workers in Lowell engaged in "turnouts" or work stoppages when employers sought to cut workers' paychecks.

In 1844, women from the mills formed themselves into the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association (LFLRA). At a time when females seldom spoke in public, the women of Lowell, led by the intrepid Sarah Bagley, testified fearlessly before the Massachusetts legislature that new requirements forcing them to tend more machines at accelerated rates were endangering their physical well-being. Their petition drive compelled the legislature to investigate for the first time the question of worker health and safety.

When their petition was denied, the LFLRA forged an alliance with the New England Workingmen's Association, which published *The Voice of Industry*. Through this medium, the two unions declared that "in view of our condition--the evils already come upon us, by toiling from 13 to 14 hours per day, confined in unhealthy apartments, exposed to the poisonous contagion of air, vegetable, animal and mineral properties, debarred from proper Physical Exercise, Mental Discipline and

Mastication cruelly limited, and thereby hastening us on through pain, disease and privation, to a premature grave, pray the legislature to institute a ten hour working day in all of the factories of the state."

After the Civil War, which saw the deaths of more than 600,000 men and the maiming of countless others, it became necessary for women to enter the work force in increasing numbers. Some journalists and labor leaders called for the creation of a Women's Bureau to oversee conditions of female labor.

But that agency, later formed as part of the federal Department of Labor, did not actually materialize until 1920. In the meantime, even African-American women in the South had begun to unionize. Newly freed black women, working as laundresses in Jackson, Mississippi, formed a union and struck for higher wages as early as 1866. Married or single, these women participated in the paid labor force to a far greater extent than other American women, largely because racial discrimination limited economic opportunities for black men.

The Knights of Labor, established in 1869, was the first large-scale national labor federation in the United States. In 1881, its members voted to admit women. The organization grew significantly in the mid-1880s after a series of successful strikes. Stressing equal pay regardless of sex or color, the Knights relied heavily on the organizing efforts of women such as the beloved widow, Mary Harris Jones, better known as "Mother Jones."

By the 1890s, the Knights of Labor, weakened by lost strikes, poor investments, and battles with the newly formed American Federation of Labor (AFL), no longer carried much weight in the labor movement. Its early demise, however, could not detract from the unprecedented role played by the Knights of Labor in the promotion of women in the work force.

The most successful union at the turn of the twentieth century was the AFL. Unfortunately for women workers, Samuel Gompers, its first president, shared society's belief that a woman's place was in the home. It was the union's stand that "it is wrong to permit any of the female sex of our country to be forced to work, as we believe that men should be provided with a fair wage in order to keep his female relatives from going to work." If women engaged in paid work, it was felt, respect for them would diminish and they would "bring forth weak children who are not educated to become strong and good citizens."

One of the ways that working women sought to overcome male indifference or hostility was to join forces with upper-class women in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), an organization founded in the United States in 1903. Initially, the WTUL hoped to persuade male-dominated unions to take women workers more seriously. Female sewers in the shirtwaist factories, dismissed in 1909 for union activity, were joined on the picket line by their upper-class allies. When both groups were hauled before judges, public sympathy turned a localized strike into New York City's "Uprising of the 20,000."

The strike began after a meeting held at New York's Cooper Union in November, 1909, at which Gompers cautioned workers against a general strike. But Clara Lemlich, a young immigrant woman, stood and recited her hardships as a working girl, galvanizing the audience with her call for action. The impassioned crowd

affirmed its solidarity by taking the old Jewish oath, "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise."

Unfortunately, although women provided the backbone of the two-month-long strike, labor leaders settled it without due attention to worker safety. Shirtwaist workers were still crowded into lofts where the few existing fire escapes either were inaccessible or stopped several stories above the pavement. On March 25, 1911, as Frances Perkins--then a young New York City researcher and social reformer, but later Franklin D. Roosevelt's secretary of labor--was visiting a friend, she suddenly heard the clanging of fire engines close-by. Rushing out to the street, Perkins saw the top floors of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company engulfed in flames. She watched with horror as workers, mostly young women, leaped to their deaths. The tragedy, which claimed 146 lives, touched the conscience of Americans and led to the passage of more stringent laws governing working conditions.

During FDR's New Deal, which sought to revive the depression-riddled economy through a series of innovative regulations, Congress passed the Wagner Act of 1935, which created the National Labor Relations Board and required private employers to deal with unions and not discriminate against union members. Guaranteeing workers the right to collective bargaining, it also oversaw union elections and the settlement of labor disputes.

As the unemployment rate during the Great Depression exceeded 25 percent of the work force, many Americans came to believe that only men were entitled to jobs. Although many wives sought to help with the family finances by seeking work when their husbands were laid off, some public and private employers refused to hire married women. Because sex segregation in the workplace was so prevalent and unemployment was so much greater in higher-paying heavy industries, these women often had to rely on traditionally female jobs that were scorned by men.



The profile of the female wage earner was changing as the percentage of married women in the work force, increasing since the 1920s, actually rose during the thirties by more than 25 percent. The participation by the United States in World War II accelerated this change. Six million new women workers entered the labor force and took heavy industry jobs formerly available only to men. A popular song, "Rosie the Riveter," and a Norman Rockwell painting of Rosie that

was commissioned for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943 were invaluable symbols to weapons and munitions manufacturers.

When the war ended, many women had to give up their high paying jobs to make room for returning veterans. However, even though the entertainment and advertising industries portrayed the American wife and mother as totally devoted to domesticity, increasing numbers of women poured into the work force, taking positions in office work, retail sales, teaching, nursing, and other so-called feminine occupations.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Sex discrimination cases were low on the EEOC agenda until prodding by groups such as the National Organization for Women brought them to the fore. By 1970, when the courts had invalidated protective legislation, women found themselves eligible for many jobs formerly closed to them.

The world looks brighter now, but no one denies that women still face discrimination or that most female workers are still congregated in sex-segregated jobs. Perhaps the charismatic Leonora O'Reilly, who worked tirelessly in organizing women into labor unions at the beginning of the twentieth century, gave the best advice for future progress. Fearing the possibility that women would be divided by class, she wrote to her friend and fellow WTUL worker, Mary Dreier: "Women, real women, anywhere and everywhere are what we must nourish and cherish." In a world in which the work force is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, it might be well to heed her wisdom.

This article was written by Juliet H. Mofford and was originally published in Women's History Magazine in Spring/Summer 1996.