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 Sullivan (Mary Kenney); Perkins (Frances)

## ABSTRACT

This document consists of one page chapters each documenting women's roles in changing the conditions for U.S. workers during and after the industrial revolution. Each chapter is a series of period style drawings with captions detailing the story of that particular incident and cartoon balloons offering humorous comments from the participants. The document contains 83 chapters and covers the role of the woman worker from the first strike of factory workers in the United States, in 1824 at Pawtucket, Rhode Island, the site of the first successful water powered cotton mill, to the New Deal legislation of 1933. Some of the lessons are parts of a series. In this case the lesson is extended over several of the one page chapters. Each of these specifies that it is part of a longer series. One of these is a section on a strike by women, children, and immigrant workers in the international textile industry center of Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. Individuals such as labor organizers Mary Kenney O'Sullivan and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn are profiled. Different strikes throughout the history of the U.S. labor movement are detailed. A chapter on the tragic fire at the Triangle Shirt Company is included. This tragedy, with its loss of 143 lives, so affected Frances Perkins, a witness to the fire in 1911 that she spent her life fighting poor labor conditions. In 1912 she became chief investigator for the New York State Factory Commission. In 1933 she became the first woman to serve in a presidential cabinet when President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her U.S. Secretary of Labor. (DK)

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# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

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# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

CHAPTER 2.  
THERE FROM THE FIRST!



**WOMEN WORKERS WENT ON STRIKE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 1824, TAKING PART IN WHAT WAS PROBABLY THE FIRST-EVER STRIKE OF AMERICAN FACTORY WORKERS. THE STRIKE TOOK PLACE IN PAWTUCKET, R.I., SITE OF THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL WATER-POWER COTTON MILL...**

...NOT TO MENTION, FIRST SUCCESSFUL SWEATSHOP!!

**ON MAY 24<sup>TH</sup> THE MILL OWNERS DECIDED TO INCREASE THE WORK DAY BY AN HOUR (BY ELIMINATING BREAK TIME), AND TO REDUCE THE PIECE RATES OF WEAVERS, YOUNG WOMEN, BY 25%...**

SAY, WHAT?!!

**THE EMPLOYERS CLAIMED THE WEAVERS MADE \$2 WK. 'ABOVE THEIR BOARD,' AND THAT REPRESENTED 'EXTRAVAGANT WAGES FOR YOUNG WOMEN'...**

BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, THEY'LL EXPECT TO BE PAID AS MUCH AS MEN!!

GEE, I HOPE THIS STRIKE STUFF DOESN'T CATCH ON!!

**THE MILL WORKERS RESPONDED IMMEDIATELY. ALL 102 WOMEN WEAVERS AGREED TO STRIKE UNTIL OLD RATES WERE RESTORED!!**

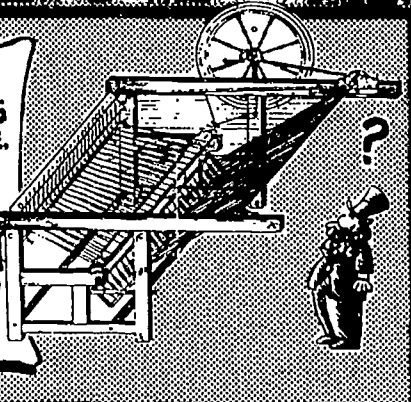
# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 2 THE MILLS WERE IDLE

THE FIRST ALL-WOMEN STRIKE TOOK PLACE IN DOVER, N.H. IN DEC. 1928, WHEN MILL WORKERS REBELLED AGAINST COMPANY ATTEMPTS TO IMPOSE NEW RULES INCLUDING FINES FOR TARDINESS AND A BAN ON TALKING AT WORK.



"ONE FINE MORNING THE MILLS WERE IDLE. EVERY OPERATIVE WAS OUT, LEAVING THE OVERSEERS TO RUN THEM ALONE," A WITNESS LATER WROTE.



LEDED BY A BAND, THE STRIKERS MARCHED THROUGH TOWN WITH FLAGS AND INSCRIPTIONS, AND SHOT OFF GUNPOWDER. THEY DEMANDED TO KNOW HOW THEY, THE WOMEN OF DOVER MILLS, COULD EVER BEAR THE SHOCKING FATE OF SLAVES TO SHARE!"



A NATIONAL NEWSPAPER SUGGESTED SINCERELY THAT THE GOVERNOR MAY HAVE TO CALL OUT THE MILITIA TO PREVENT A GYNOCRACY. NO TROOPS WERE CALLED. THE COMPANY ADVERTISED FOR "BETTER BEHAVED WOMEN," BUT REPORTEDLY WITHDREW THE "OFFENSIVE RULES."

\*GOVT. RUN BY WOMEN



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 8: "TAILORESSES" TAKE A STAND

IN THE EARLY 1800s, MANY WOMEN FOUND EMPLOYMENT AS "TAILORESSES," WORKING EITHER AT HOME OR IN "SLOP SHOPS" TURNING OUT CHEAP CLOTHING FOR SOUTHERN SLAVEHOLDERS AND THE ARMY AND NAVY. A MISERABLY LOW PIECE RATE MEANT LONG WORKING HOURS. IN 1831 WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS IN NEW YORK ORGANIZED THE UNITED TAILORESSES' SOCIETY IN HOPES OF BETTERING THEIR CONDITIONS.



THE "TAILORESSES" QUICKLY RAN AFOUL OF THE NEWSPAPERS WHEN LAVINIA WRIGHT, THE SOCIETY'S SECRETARY, UNASHAMEDLY SPOKE UP FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS. EMPLOYERS CLAIMED THAT BEING WOMEN THEY WEREN'T BREADWINNERS AND SO DIDN'T DESERVE HIGHER PAY. BUT WRIGHT POINTED OUT THAT MANY WOMEN IN FACT HAD FAMILIES TO SUPPORT, AND MANY SINGLE MEN NONE AT ALL!



WOMEN SHOULD BE NO MORE WILLING THAN MEN TO ENDURE OPPRESSION, DECLARED SARAH MOORE, A UNION LEADER! HER SISTERS AGREED: IN JUNE 1831, 1600 TAILORESSES STRUCK WHEN EMPLOYERS REFUSED A NEW SCALE. WITH FEW ALLIES AND LITTLE MONEY THEY WERE FORCED BACK TO WORK AFTER A TWO MONTH STRUGGLE.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 4: SLAVES IN FIELD AND FACTORY

THE OPPRESSION EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN WAGE EARNERS IN THE EARLIEST U.S. FACTORIES AND TRADES COULD NOT COMPARE WITH THE HARDSHIP AND DEGRADATION FACED BY FEMALE SLAVES. THE UNPAID LABOR OF BLACK PEOPLE PROVIDED FABULOUS FORTUNES FOR THE SOUTHERN ELITE.



WHETHER WORKING IN THEIR MASTERS' HOMES OR IN THE FIELDS, SLAVE WOMEN WERE SUBJECTED TO SEXUAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT FROM OWNERS AND OVERSEERS. WITH A BAN ON THE FOREIGN SLAVE TRADE (1807), SLAVEHOLDERS CYNICALLY LOOKED AT YOUNG SLAVEWOMEN AS A SOURCE OF ADDITIONAL SLAVES... AND PROFITS.



THE MAJORITY OF SLAVES WERE FIELD HANDS, WORKING SUNUP TO SUNDOWN, SIX (AND SOMETIMES SEVEN) DAYS A WEEK. WOMEN SHARED THE SAME TASKS AS MEN, BUT WHEN THE LONG WORK DAY WAS DONE, THEY HAD THE ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF COOKING, SEWING AND LOOKING AFTER THE CHILDREN.



ENSLAVED BLACK WOMEN WERE THE BACKBONE OF EARLY SOUTHERN INDUSTRY, WORKING IN COTTON MILLS, SUGAR REFINERIES AND RICE MILLS, IN THE MANUFACTURE OF HEMP AND TURPENTINE, IN FOOD AND TOBACCO PROCESSING AND IN FOUNDRIES, SALTWORKS AND MINES. AS SLAVES THEY HAD NO RIGHTS AT ALL... ESPECIALLY... NO RIGHT TO QUIT, ORGANIZE OR STRIKE!



HUCK KUMACK  
HUCK-KUMACK!

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 5: "RISING UP AGAINST PRIVILEGE"

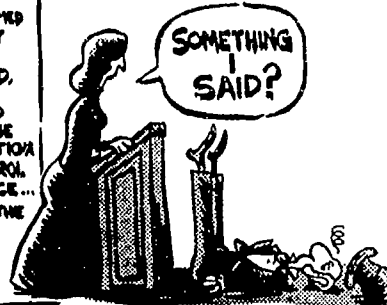
THE EARLY TRADE UNIONS HAD A FIRM SUPPORTER IN FRANCES WRIGHT (1795-1852), A POWERFUL SPEAKER AND WRITER BEST KNOWN AS AN ADVOCATE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND ABOLITION. BORN IN DUNDEE, SCOTLAND, SHE SETTLED IN THE U.S. AT AGE 30, ALREADY WELL KNOWN AS THE AUTHOR OF A BOOK ON AMERICAN LIFE BASED ON A PREVIOUS VISIT.



FRANCES WRIGHT HAD INHERITED HER PARENTS' RADICALISM AND THEIR WEALTH AS WELL. WHEN SHE CAME TO THE U.S. IN 1825, SHE SPENT HALF HER FORTUNE FREELING SLAVES AND ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY FOR THEM. SHE LECTURED WIDELY ON THE EVILS OF SLAVERY.



IN HER LECTURES FRANCES WRIGHT PROCLAIMED THAT WOMEN SHOULD ENJOY THE SAME LEGAL RIGHTS AS MEN. WOMEN, SHE SAID, SHOULD BE FREED FROM ALL "POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC HANDICAPS." SHE ENDORSED EQUAL EDUCATION FOR WOMEN, BIRTH CONTROL AND LIBERALIZED DIVORCE... DARING TOPICS FOR THE 1830s!



SPEAKING UP FOR AN EARLY LABOR PARTY IN 1833, SHE DESCRIBED IT AS "LABOR RISING UP AGAINST IDLENESS, INDUSTRY, AGAINST MONEY AND PRIVILEGE." IT HAS LONG BEEN CLEAR TO ME THAT IN EVERY COUNTRY, THE BEST FEELING AND BEST SENSE ARE FOUND WITH THE LABORING CLASSES. FRANCES WRIGHT WROTE, HER SYMPATHY LED TO THE RECOGNITION THAT UNIONS WERE THE BEST HOPE OF WORKING PEOPLE !!

**Working Men's Advocate,  
and Women's Advocate.**  
NEW YORK: PUBLISHED  
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 31, 1833.

### WORKING MEN'S TICKET.

- ASSEMBLY.
- ALEXANDER MING, scotch, Printer.
  - FREDERICK FRIEND, Brass Founder.
  - THOMAS SKIDMORE, Machinist.
  - CORNELIUS C. BLATCHLEY, Physician.
  - ROBERT M. KERRISON, Whitesmith.
  - LOREN POTTER, Machinist.
  - NOE WILLIAMSON, Carpenter.
  - BENEZER WHITING, Cooper.
  - HON CLANNON, Painter.
  - NEZER FORD, Carpenter.
  - JOHN MOTT, Grocer.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

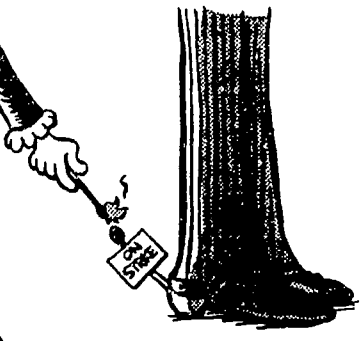
## CHAPTER 6 "THE WOMEN ARE COMING"

EXPANDING SHOE PRODUCTION IN LYNN, MASS., A CENTER OF THE SHOE TRADE SINCE THE 1700s, SAW MANY WOMEN EMPLOYED IN THEIR HOMES AS SHOE BINDERS. THEY WERE PAID ON A PIECEWORK BASIS, OFTEN IN SCRIPT REDEEMABLE AT CERTAIN DRY GOODS STORES. BY 1833 WAGES HAD BEGUN TO FALL.



"THE WOMEN ARE COMING." THE LYNN RECORD REPORTED ON JAN. 7, 1834: 1,000 SHOE BINDERS ATTENDED A MEETING TO ESTABLISH A "FEMALE SOCIETY OF LYNN AND VICINITY FOR THE PROTECTION OF FEMALE INDUSTRY" BASED ON THE BELIEF THAT "WOMEN AS WELL AS MEN HAVE CERTAIN INALIENABLE RIGHTS." THE BOSSES WERE WARNED: "WOMEN WANT MONEY AND MUST HAVE IT!"

THE SHOE MANUFACTURERS SAID THE TOWN WOULD BE RUINED IF WOMEN'S WAGES WERE RAISED. THE TOWN'S WELFARE, THE WOMEN REPLIED, WAS NOT THE PRIVATE GAIN OF A FEW BUT THE PROSPERITY OF ITS WORKING PEOPLE. THE SHOE BINDERS STRUCK, AND WERE BACKED BY THE MALE CORDWAINERS' UNION.



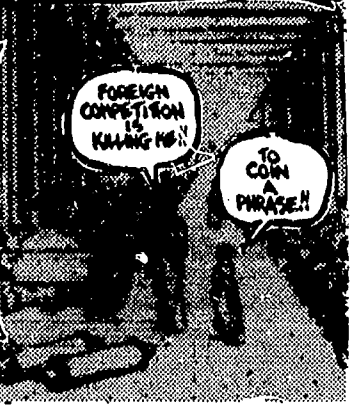
THEY STAYED OUT FOR TWO MONTHS UNTIL MANUFACTURERS CONCEDED A NEW WAGE SCALE BUT THE VICTORY WAS SHORT-LIVED. SOLIDARITY PROVED HARD TO MAINTAIN WITH THE SHOE BINDERS WORKING IN THEIR OWN HOMES. THE TIME WAS NOT RIGHT FOR A UNION OF WOMEN SHOEWORKERS -- BUT THEY WOULD BE HEARD FROM AGAIN!!



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 7 "UNION IS POWER"

BLAMING FOREIGN COMPETITION (FROM ENGLAND) AND THE HIGH COST OF RAW COTTON, TEXTILE FACTORY OWNERS HAD INSTITUTED LABOR COST CUTTING MEASURES: WAGE CUTS, SPEED-UP AND OPPRESSIVE WORK RULES. WOMEN MILL WORKERS FOUGHT BACK IN SEVERAL COMMUNITIES.



MORE THAN 700 WOMEN WORKERS IN DOVER, N.H. REFUSED TO ACCEPT THE OWNER'S PLEA THAT LOWER WAGES WERE REQUIRED BY THE "UNUSUAL PRESSURE OF THE TIMES." THERE WAS NO PAY CUT FOR THE BOSSES. THE WOMEN POINTED OUT, THEY VOWED NOT TO WORK UNTIL THEIR WAGES WERE RESTORED.



IN LOWELL, MASS., 600 FEMALE MILL WORKERS WALKED OUT TO PROTEST A 15% PAY CUT - BUT NOT BEFORE THEY HAD ALL WITHDRAWN THEIR SAVINGS FROM THE COMPANY OWNED BANK. THE EMBARRASSED BANK HAD TO SEND TO BOSTON FOR FUNDS.



"UNION IS POWER," THE LOWELL STRIKERS PROCLAIMED UNLIKE PREVIOUS STRIKES, THIS WAS NO SPONTANEOUS REBELLION BUT A PREMEDITATED ACTION. TWO YEARS LATER WHEN THE LOWELL WOMEN STRUCK AGAIN, THEY ORGANIZED THE "FACTORY GIRLS' ASSOCIATION" TO GIVE THEIR PROTEST GREATER STAYING POWER. WE WERE LEARNING!!



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 3: "ON OUR SIDE"

WORKING WOMEN OF 1830s COULDN'T ALWAYS COUNT ON BROTHER WORKERS FOR SUPPORT, BUT THERE WERE TWO MEN WHO WERE OUTSTANDING ALIENISTS: JACOB THOMAS GAREY, IRISH BORN PUBLISHER AND PHILANTHROPIST, AND BETH LUTHER, A YANKEE LABOR AGITATOR.

GAREY, OUTRAGED BY HARSH CONDITIONS OF WORKING WOMEN, PUBLICIZED THE PITIFULLY LOW PAY ENDURED BY SEAMSTRESSES, WASHWOMEN AND DOMESTICS. THESE POOREST OF WORKERS, HE WROTE, WERE FORCED TO BEG AND STEAL, AND TO PROSTITUTION, TO SUPPLEMENT THEIR MEAGER INCOMES.



IN 1835 GAREY ASSISTED IN FORMATION OF PHILADELPHIA'S FEMALE IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY, THE FIRST-EVER CITYWIDE FEDERATION OF WORKING WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS. SEVERAL TRADES WERE REPRESENTED. THE WOMEN DREW UP WAGE DEMANDS AND PROTESTED THE LOW WAGES PAID TO SEAMSTRESSES FOR THE U.S. ARMY ORDERS.

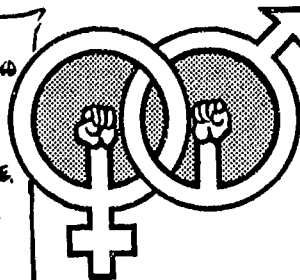


BETH LUTHER (1795-1846) CONDEMNED MANUFACTURERS FOR BETRAYING AMERICA'S REVOLUTIONARY IDEALS. THE FACTORY OWNERS WERE TRYING TO CREATE A NEW ARISTOCRACY ON THE BACKS OF FACTORY MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN, HE CHARGED.

I HAVE NOT YET BEGUN TO EXPLOIT!!



AN OUTSPOKEN CRITIC OF THE "PRISONS OF NEW ENGLAND AND COTTON MILLS," LUTHER WAS ESPECIALLY SYMPATHETIC TO THE PLIGHT OF THE WOMEN MILL WORKERS. HE SAW WOMEN AS PARTNERS IN COMMON STRUGGLE. "IT IS QUITE CERTAIN THAT UNLESS WE HAVE THE FEMALE SEX ON OUR SIDE, WE CANNOT HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH ANY OBJECT WE HAVE IN VIEW," LUTHER DECLARED.





# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

CHAPTER 2 NEW ENGLAND'S

## DARK, SATANIC MILLS



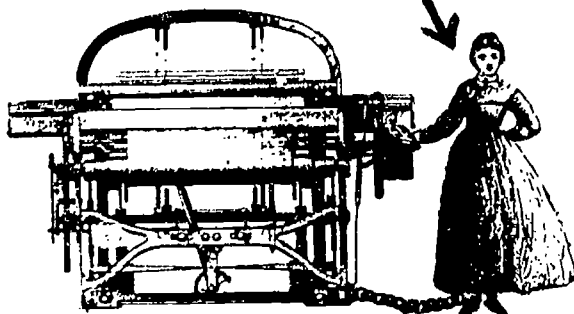
THE TEXTILE MILLS ESTABLISHED IN NEW ENGLAND IN THE 1820s AND 1830s REPRESENTED A NEW FORM OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATION WITH SERIOUS IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN. THE MILLS WERE ERECTED BY A NEW KIND OF ECONOMIC COMBINE -- JOINT STOCK CORPORATIONS OWNED BY WEALTHY MEN WHO POOLED THEIR CAPITAL. THE NEW FACTORY SYSTEM DEPENDED ON:

### 1. POWER:

FULLY-INTEGRATED FACTORIES IN WHICH ALL PROCESSES FROM RAW MATERIAL TO FINISHED PRODUCT WERE COMPLETED UNDER ONE ROOF WITH THE USE OF POWER-OPERATED LOOMS.

### 2. LABOR:

THE NEW POWER LOOM DEMANDED A CERTAIN KIND OF LABOR: INTELLIGENT, DEXTEROUS AND NOT NECESSARILY PHYSICALLY POWERFUL. THE YOUNG DAUGHTERS OF NEW ENGLAND FARMERS FITTED THE MACHINE.



### 3. CONTROL:

THE COMPANIES DEMANDED TOTAL OBEDIENCE AND COMMITMENT. STRICT COMPANY RULES ENFORCED BY OVERSEERS IN THE MILLS FOLLOWED THE WOMEN BACK TO BOARDINGHOUSES WHICH WERE MANDATORY PLACES OF RESIDENCE. INFRACTIONS OF COMPANY RULES OUTSIDE THE MILLS COULD LEAD TO DISMISSAL AND BLACKLISTING!!

TO BE CONTINUED!

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 9 DARK SATANIC MILLS PART 2

21 FEW CITIES LIKE LOWELL, MASS GREW UP AROUND TEXTILE MILLS WHICH ATTRACTED YOUNG WOMEN IN DROVES, AS FARM GIRLS RESPONDED TO THE UNHEARD OF OPPORTUNITY TO WORK FOR CASH WAGES AND BE ON THEIR OWN.



23 OWNERS, OBSERVERS AND EVEN SOME OF THE MILL WORKERS THEMSELVES REPORTED GOOD WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE EARLY YEARS. SOME "FACTORY GIRLS" FOUND TIME TO ATTEND LECTURES AND WRITE POETRY AND ARTICLES, PUBLISHED IN THE LOWELL OEEERING, THE FIRST MAGAZINE WRITTEN EXCLUSIVELY BY WOMEN.



25 BUT RAPID TURNOVER - THE AVERAGE MILL WORKER STAYED FOR LESS THAN 3 YRS. AT FIRST HELPED KEEP HIDDEN FROM PUBLIC VIEW THE HARSH REALITY THE FACTORY SYSTEM HELD FOR MOST WORKERS. WOMEN TOILED 12-13 HRS. A DAY, 6 DAYS A WK., IN MILLS STIFLING IN SUMMER AND FREEZING IN WINTER. WAGES (AFTER DEDUCTING FOR BOARD) WERE \$1.75 A WEEK.



26 AS PRICES SKYROCKETED DURING THE 1830S CONDITIONS DETERIORATED: BOARDING HOUSES BECAME OVERCROWDED, THE QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF FOOD DECLINED. RULES BECAME MORE IRRITATING. SPEEDUP, WORK RULES AND PAY CUTS SPARKED STRIKES (SEE CHAPTERS 2-7) THEN CAME THE 1837-40 DEPRESSION... (NEXT: THE FIGHT FOR THE 10 HR. DAY!!)

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 10 REVOLT AGAINST LONG HOURS

WHEN MANY NEW ENGLAND FAMILIES LOST THEIR FARMS DURING THE 1837-40 DEPRESSION, MANY "FACTORY GIRLS" LOST AN ESCAPE ROUTE FROM MILLS TO HILLS, CALLED "POVERTY'S DAUGHTERS" BY A CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL, THE MILL WORKERS IN NUMEROUS CASES BECAME THEIR FAMILIES' PRIMARY BREADWINNERS.



DECREASING INCREASED NUMBERS OF STOCKHOLDERS CREATED A GREATER DEMAND FOR PROFITS. THE "COTTON BARONS" CUT WAGES, SPED UP WORK AND INCREASED HOURS IN LOWELL AND OTHER TEXTILE TOWNS. OBSERVED HENRY DAVID THOREAU IN 1842: "THE PRINCIPAL OBJECT IS, NOT THAT MANKIND MAY BE WELL AND HONESTLY CLAD, BUT UNQUESTIONABLY, THAT THE CORPORATIONS MAY BE ENRICHED."

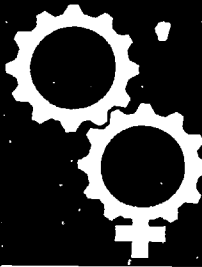


IN RESPONSE TO THESE CONDITIONS THE FEMALE LABOR REFORM ASSOCIATION WAS ORGANIZED IN JANUARY 1845 IN LOWELL, MASS. BY 12 COTTON MILL WORKERS. IT GREW BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS. THE FOLLOWING YEAR MASS MEETINGS OF WOMEN WORKERS BROUGHT THE ORGANIZATION TO MANCHESTER, NASHUA AND DOVER, N.H.

"THE PRINCIPAL GOALS OF THE NEW ORGANIZATION WERE TO REDUCE WORKING HOURS FROM 12-13 HOURS TO 10 HOURS A DAY, AND TO OBTAIN IMPROVEMENTS IN SANITARY AND LIGHTING CONDITIONS IN THE MILLS. SAID AN ANONYMOUS MILL PAMPHLETEER, "A LARGE CLASS OF FEMALES ARE SLAVES TO A SYSTEM OF LABOR WHICH REQUIRES THEM TO TOIL FROM FIVE UNTIL SEVEN O'CLOCK WITH ONLY ONE HOUR TO ATTEND WANTS OF NATURE..."

**Time Table of the Holyoke Mills,**  
To take effect on and after Jan. 24, 1862.  
Standard being that of the Western Rail Road, which is the Standard time of Cambridge.

<b>MORNING BELLS.</b> First Bell ring at 6 A. M. Second Bell ring at 6:15 A. M.	<b>DO NOT ASK FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS...</b>
<b>YARD GATES</b> be opened at ringing of Morning Bells, at West Mills, at 6:15 and kept open until 6:30.	
<b>WORK COMMENCES</b> commences after last Morning Bell, and the moment after Bell at each Mill.	
<b>BREAKFAST BELLS.</b> First Bell ring at 7:15 A. M. Second Bell ring at 7:30 A. M. Third Bell ring at 7:45 A. M.	
<b>DINNER BELLS.</b> Ring out at 12:30 P. M. Ring in at 1 P. M.	
<b>EVENING BELLS.</b> Ring out at 6:15 P. M. Ring in at 6:30 P. M.	



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 11 DEMAND FOR 10 HOUR DAY

THE FEMALE LABOR REFORM ASSOCIATION, REPRESENTING THOUSANDS OF WOMEN WORKERS IN NEW ENGLAND'S TEXTILE MILLS, PRODUCED OUTSTANDING LEADERS SUCH AS PRESIDENT SARAH BAGLEY AND MENTABEL EASTMAN, CO-EDITOR OF VOICE OF INDUSTRY LABOR, NEWSPAPER AND SECRETARY OF THE NEW ENGLAND WORKINGMEN'S ASSOCIATION.



THE WORKING WOMEN JOINED FORCES WITH THE NEW ENGLAND WORKINGMEN'S ASSOCIATION IN A CAMPAIGN TO LIMIT WORKING HOURS TO 10 HOURS A DAY. THE WOMEN IN THE MASSACHUSETTS MILLS COLLECTED THOUSANDS OF SIGNATURES ON PETITIONS TO THE STATE LEGISLATURE DEMANDING A 10 HOUR DAY.



RELUCTANTLY, THE LEGISLATURE RESPONDED BY INITIATING THE FIRST EVER GOVERNMENTAL INQUIRY INTO FACTORY CONDITIONS. SIX MILL WOMEN, INCLUDING SARAH BAGLEY, TESTIFIED ABOUT LONG HOURS, LOW WAGES, POOR VENTILATION AND HURRIED MEAL TIMES.



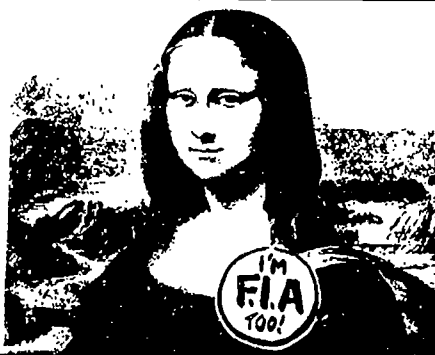
THE MASSACHUSETTS LEGISLATURE BALKED AT REFORM. BUT DUE TO THE MASSIVE PRESSURE CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED BY THE TWO WORKING PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATIONS, NEW HAMPSHIRE IN 1847 BECAME THE FIRST STATE TO ENACT A LAW SETTING 10 HOURS AS THE LEGAL WORK DAY. THE LOWELL MILL OWNERS AGREED TO SHORTEN THE WORK DAY TO 11 HOURS IN 1853.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 12 NEW YORK AND PITTSBURGH

THE NEW ENGLAND "MILL GIRLS" WHO SET UP THE FEMALE LABOR REFORM ASSOC. WEREN'T THE ONLY WORKING WOMEN ORGANIZING IN THE 1840s. FOR EXAMPLE, THE FEMALE INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION ESTABLISHED IN NEW YORK IN 1845 REPRESENTED A CROSS SECTION OF THE CITY'S WOMEN WORKERS: CAP MAKERS, STRAW WORKERS, CRIMPERS, LACE MAKERS AND SEWERS.



LED BY THE ARTICULATE YOUNG ELIZABETH GRAY, THE FEMALE INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION FOUGHT EMPLOYERS LIKE THE BOSS WHO THREATENED TO SEND HIS WORK TO CONNECTICUT IF WOMEN DIDN'T ACCEPT 20¢ A DAY WAGES, AND STRUCK FOR HIGHER PAY FOR SEAMSTRESSES.

WHEN PENNSYLVANIA PASSED A 10HR. LAW IN 1848, COMPANIES TRIED TO FORCE WORKERS TO ACCEPT A LONGER WORK DAY. IN THE PITTSBURGH MILLS, WOMEN WORKERS REFUSED, DESPITE THREATS THAT THEIR LOOMS WOULD BE MOVED OUT OF STATE.



THEY STRUCK EARLY IN JULY 1848. ARMED WITH AXES, WOMEN WORKERS ATTACKED FACTORY GATES AND FORCED THEIR WAY INTO A MILL TO SUCCESSFULLY EVICT STRIKEBREAKERS. ALTHOUGH MANY WERE ARRESTED, THE STRIKERS HUNG ON UNTIL AUG. 28 WHEN THE COMPANIES GAVE IN. TEN HRS. WOULD BE THE LAW IN FACT AS WELL AS ON PAPER!!



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 13: BIRTH OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

WOMEN OF 140 YRS. AGO WERE DENIED MOST BASIC RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO VOTE. THEY HAD FEW PROPERTY RIGHTS; HUSBANDS COULD SPEND THEIR WAGES WITH LITTLE INTERFERENCE. AN INFLUENTIAL NEWSPAPER EDITOR EXPRESSED THE DOMINANT VIEW WHEN HE COMPARED WOMEN TO BLACKS; BOTH, HE WROTE, ARE BY THEIR NATURES "INFERIOR" AND "DOOMED" TO SUBJECTION."

WOULD YOU WANT YOUR BROTHER TO MARRY ONE?



WOMEN WERE NOT PREPARED TO BE "SUBMISSIVE." ON JULY 19-20, 1847, SOME 260 GATHERED IN SENECA FALLS, NY TO ASSERT "THE SOCIAL, CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS RIGHTS OF WOMEN." FOLLOWING SPEECHES BY LUCRETIA MOTT AND ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, THEY ADOPTED A "DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF SENTIMENTS," WHICH CALLED FOR THE RIGHT OF WOMEN TO VOTE, EARN EQUAL WAGES AND CONTROL THEIR OWN PROPERTY.

SISTERS ARE DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES!!



MS. STANTON



MS. MOTT

3 YOUNG GLOVEMAKER, 19-YR. OLD CHARLOTTE WOODWARD, EXPLAINED LATER WHY SHE ATTENDED THE SENECA FALLS CONFERENCE: "EVERY FIBER OF MY BEING REBELLED... ALL THE HOURS THAT I SAT AND SEWED GLOVES FOR A PITTANCE WHICH, AS IT WAS EARNED, COULD NEVER BE MINE. I WANTED TO WORK, BUT I WANTED TO CHOOSE MY TASK AND I WANTED TO COLLECT MY WAGES."

RESOLUTIONS PASSED AT THE WOMAN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION HELD IN THIS VILLAGE ON THE 10TH AND 20TH INST.

Resolved, That the great precept of nature is conceded to be "that man shall pursue his own true and substantial happiness." Blackstone, in his commentaries, remarks, that this law of Nature being coeval with mankind, and dictated by God himself, is of blind, and superior in obligation to any other. It is binding over all the globe, in all countries, and at all times: no human laws are of any validity if contrary to this, and such of them as are valid, derive all their force, and all their validity, and all their authority, mediately and immediately from this original.

Therefore, Resolved, That such laws as conflict in any way, with the true and substantial happiness of Nature, and of so va-

Resolved, That woman is man's equal, was intended to be so by her Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such.

Resolved, That the women of this country ought to be enlightened with regard to the laws under which they live, that they may no longer prohibit their degradation by declaring themselves satisfied with their present position, nor their ignorance by asserting they have all the rights they want.

Resolved, That inasmuch as man, while claiming for himself intellectual superiority, does accord to woman, moral superiority, it is pre-eminently his duty to encourage her to speak and teach as she has opportunity in all religious assemblies.

Resolved, That the same amount of virtue, delicacy, and refinement of behavior, that is required of women in the social state, should be required of men, and the same transgressions should be visited with equal severity on both man and woman.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 14 WOMEN AGAINST SLAVERY

ENSLAVED BLACK WOMEN, WHOSE LABOR HELPED CREATE THE WEALTH ENJOYED BY BOTH PLANTATION OWNER AND TEXTILE MANUFACTURER, WERE SUBJECTED TO UNIMAGINABLE DEGRADATION. TAKE FOR EXAMPLE CELIA, A SLAVE WHOSE MASTER REGULARLY FORCED HER TO HAVE SEX WITH HIM. ONE NIGHT IN JUNE 1855, PREGNANT AND ILL, SHE BEGGED HIM TO LEAVE HER ALONE. HE IGNORED HER, AND SHE KILLED HIM. THE MISSOURI AUTHORITIES WAITED UNTIL HER BABY WAS BORN BEFORE SENDING CELIA TO THE GALLOWS.



OTHER BLACK WOMEN REBELLED, SOME FLEEING NORTH TO FREE STATES AND CANADA. ONE WHO DID WAS HARRIET TUBMAN, WHO ESCAPED FROM A MARYLAND PLANTATION AT AGE 29 IN 1850 -- AND RETURNED TO THE SOUTH 19 TIMES TO HELP OTHER SLAVES ESCAPE. CALLED "MOSES" BY HER PEOPLE, THIS INCREDIBLE WOMAN WAS HATED BY SLAVE MASTERS, WHO OFFERED A \$40,000 REWARD FOR HER CAPTURE, DEAD OR ALIVE. SHE WAS NEVER CAPTURED. AS A CONDUCTOR ON THE "UNDERGROUND RAILROAD," SHE BOASTED THAT SHE NEVER LOST A PASSENGER.



ISABELLA BAUMFREE BORN IN NEW YORK IN 1797, AS THE PROPERTY OF A DUTCH MASTER. WHEN NEW YORK ABOLISHED SLAVERY IN 1827, ISABELLA LEFT HER MASTER AGAINST HIS WISHES AND STARTED A NEW LIFE WITH A NEW NAME. AS SOJOURNER TRUTH SHE BECAME KNOWN AS A POWERFUL SPEAKER AGAINST SLAVERY AND FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS. SHE HELPED ORGANIZE ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETIES THROUGHOUT THE NORTH.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 15 WARNING NOT HEEDED

INSPIRED BY QUICK AND EASY PROFITS, CAPITALISTS CAME TO LAWRENCE, MASS., BUILDING THE PEMBERTON AND OTHER MILLS IN THE EARLY 1850s, BUT MARKET CONDITIONS REVERSED; DEPRESSION WAS BROUGHT ON BY OVEREXPANSION. ERASTUS BIGELOW, A MANUFACTURER, SAID OF THE PROFIT FRENZY: "CAPITALISTS WHO HAVE INVESTED UNDER THE STIMULUS OF HIGH PROFITS ARE IMPATIENT FOR RESULTS, AND URGE... HASTY ACTION OR ILL-CONSIDERED PLAYS." HIS WORDS WERE A WARNING UNHEEDED!!



ON JAN. 10, 1860, THE PEMBERTON MILL COLLAPSED, REDUCING THE FACTORY TO RUBBLE WITHIN 60 SECONDS OF THE 900 WORKERS TRAPPED IN THE WRECKAGE, MOST WERE WOMEN. FIRE BROKE OUT, HAMPERING RESUE EFFORTS. IN THE FINAL COUNT, 89 WORKERS WERE KILLED, 275 INJURED, THE IRON PILLARS SUPPORTING THE BUILDING HAD GIVEN WAY; REPORTS INDICATED THAT THE COMPANY HAD KNOWN OF THE PILLARS' POOR QUALITY CAST IRON WHEN BUILDING THE MILL SIX YEARS EARLIER. SOME POINTED OUT THAT THE MILL'S FLOORS WERE TOO WEAK FOR THE MACHINES, AND THAT NECESSARY REPAIRS WERE IGNORED.



Few attributed the disaster to an "act of God." The mill collapsed because of the factory owners' greedy haste to build the Pemberton mill, to cash in on textile industry profits. The collapse of the Pemberton mill was one of the first great industrial disasters to hit the U.S. and working women were the victims.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 16 WHAT THEY DID

PRIOR TO THE CIVIL WAR, MOST WOMEN WORKERS WERE EMPLOYED IN DOMESTIC SERVICE; THEY WERE HOTEL MAIDS, WAITRESSES AND COOKS, AS WELL AS PERSONAL SERVANTS, HOUSEKEEPERS AND LAUNDRESSES. ALSO WOMEN REPRESENTED 24% OF THE COUNTRY'S MANUFACTURING WORKERS. THE LARGEST CONCENTRATIONS OF FEMALE MANUFACTURING WORKERS IN 1850 WERE IN CLOTHING, COTTON TEXTILES, SHOEMAKING, AND WOOLEN TEXTILES.



THERE WERE ALSO WOMEN WHO MADE ARTIFICIAL FLOWERS, STRAW HATS AND UMBRELLAS, SLAVING AWAY AT HOME WITH THE HELP OF THEIR CHILDREN. THEY WERE DESPERATELY POOR. IN 1836 THE UMBRELLA MAKERS' WAGES WERE CUT FROM 14¢ TO 10¢; IN 1863 THEY EARNED ONLY 6¢ TO 8¢ PER UMBRELLA. A LABOR PAPER SAID OF THE UMBRELLA MAKERS, "NO CLASS OF FEMALE OPERATIVES... HAVE SUFFERED MORE FROM THE LACK OF JUST COMPENSATION FOR THEIR LABOR."



WOMEN WHO WORKED AS UPHOLSTERERS AND CIGAR MAKERS AND IN OTHER TRADES WERE PAID HALF OF WHAT MEN RECEIVED FOR COMPARABLE WORK. DUE TO THE DEPRESSIONS OF 1853-1854 AND 1857, AND IRREGULAR AND SEASONAL EMPLOYMENT WOMEN WORKERS' WAGES FELL FAR BELOW MINIMUM STANDARDS. IN THE 1850s, THE PHILADELPHIA EVENING BULLETIN SAID IN 1857, THAT "ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, THE LOT OF THE WOMAN WHO HAS TO LABOR FOR HER LIVING IS ACTUALLY HARDER IN THE UNITED STATES THAN IN ANY OTHER CIVILIZED COUNTRY IN THE WORLD."

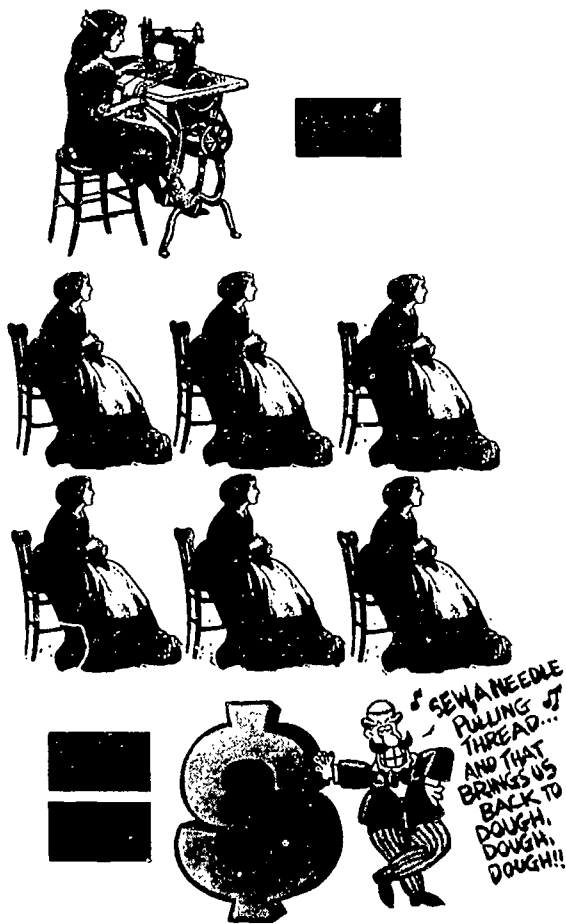


# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 17 THE COMING OF THE SEWING MACHINE

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE SEWING MACHINE IN 1846 (AND THE FOOT TREADLE IN 1851) ADDED TO THE BURDEN OF WOMEN WHO WORKED FOR WAGES, WHILE ADDING MILLIONS TO THE PROFITS OF THE MEN WHO EMPLOYED THEM. WITH A SEWING MACHINE, ONE WOMEN COULD DO THE WORK OF SIX SEWING 20 HOURS A DAY.

IN 1850, NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF THE 96,000 WORKERS IN GARMENT FACTORIES WERE WOMEN. BUT FOR YEARS AHEAD, MOST WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS WORKED AT HOME. BOSSES FOUND THE HOME WORK SYSTEM CHEAPER; AFTER ALL, THE WOMEN HAD TO BUY THEIR OWN NEEDLE AND THREAD, AND RENT OR BUY THEIR SEWING MACHINES.



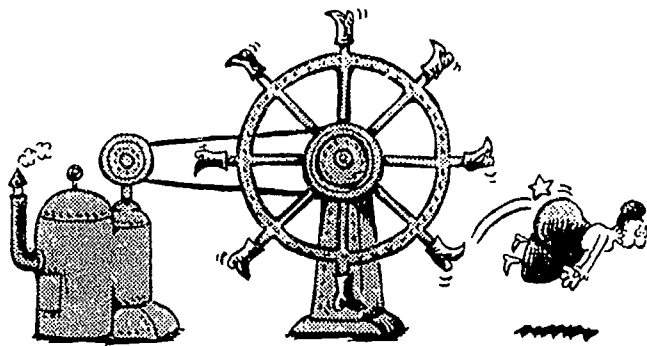
MANY HOME SEWERS WERE CONSTANTLY IN DEBT TO THE BOSS FOR SUPPLIES AND THE COST OF THE SEWING MACHINES. THE EARLIEST SEWING MACHINES WERE HARD TO CONTROL AND FREQUENTLY TORE THE FABRIC; THE SEWERS WOULD BE CHARGED BY THE CONTRACTORS FOR DAMAGE. COMPETITION KEPT PIECE RATES LOW; WOMEN HAD TO WORK LONG HOURS AT THEIR SEWING MACHINES.

THE SEWING MACHINE RADICALLY CHANGED THE SHOE AND BOOT INDUSTRY. UNLIKE THE GARMENT INDUSTRY, THE SEWING MACHINE BROUGHT WOMEN WORKERS OUT OF THE HOME AND INTO FACTORIES. THE SEWING MACHINE AND MCKAY MACHINE FOR SEWING UPPERS TO SOLES WERE 1850'S 'HIGH TECH' THAT INCREASED PROFITS AND WORKER PRODUCTIVITY, -BUT NOT WORKERS' WAGES.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 13 "WE'LL NOT BE SLAVES"

Mechanization in the shoe and boot industry brought dramatic changes to Lynn, Mass. but despite dazzling productivity and spiraling living costs, wage cuts followed wage cuts. Many women earned as little as \$1 a week, despite work days of up to 16 hrs. Men earned \$3 a week.



The male shoemakers struck for higher pay on Washington's birthday, 1860 - but knew that success depended on the female binders and stitchers. "If the ladies refused to bind and stitch, the bosses must accede to our demands," said strike leader Alonzo Draper.

On March 7, 1860 the 1,000 women binders joined the 5,000 male shoemakers. Despite a fierce blizzard, they marched through the streets of Lynn, carrying a banner that proclaimed, "American ladies will not be slaves! The wages of the work women, declared strike leader Ellen Darwin, are 'reduced far below a just compensation.'"



Newspapers warned of "rebellion in the north" and compared the female strikers to the women of the French revolution. The authorities called on the militia. The bosses tried to split the Germans and Irish from the Yankees, but failed. Eventually the strikers, female and male, returned to work with the promise of higher wages - but without union recognition.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

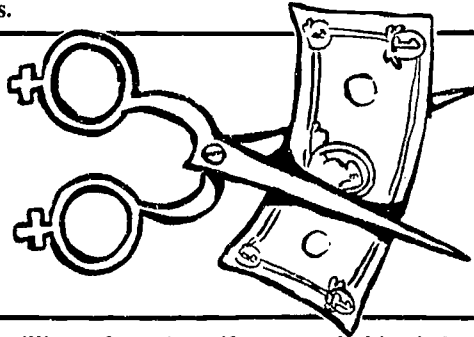
## Chapter 19 Civil War: New Jobs, Old Story

The Civil War (1861-1865) had a direct impact on tens of thousands of women, with many working out of the home in jobs never before open to female labor. By the end of 1862 -- due to wartime industrial expansion and a shortage of male workers -- more than 100,000 new jobs had opened for women in the production of clothing, boots, shoes, saddles, munitions and supplies for the army.



..AND I SAID,..I COULD GET A JOB,..AND HE SAID,..OVER MY..

"A woman can use scissors better than a man, and she will do it cheaper," said the Treasurer of the U.S., who for the first time hired women to cut U.S. treasury notes -- but at half the salary men received. Private employers took the hint, and for the first time hired women in print shops, telegraph offices, department stores and light manufacturing -- always for lower wages.



With millions of men in uniform, the clothing industry boomed. But there was no prosperity for the sewing women who made the uniforms. Increasing numbers looking for work depressed already low wages. It was not uncommon for women to work 15 hours a day and earn only 17 to 24 cents. They had to pay for their own thread and for lost or damaged goods. Unscrupulous bosses sometimes refused to pay them. "At the height of the war-time industrial boom, there were working women throughout the cities of the North close to starvation," wrote historian Barbara Wertheimer.



BUTTER!!

GUNS!

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 20 "Strong in Union We Will Stand"

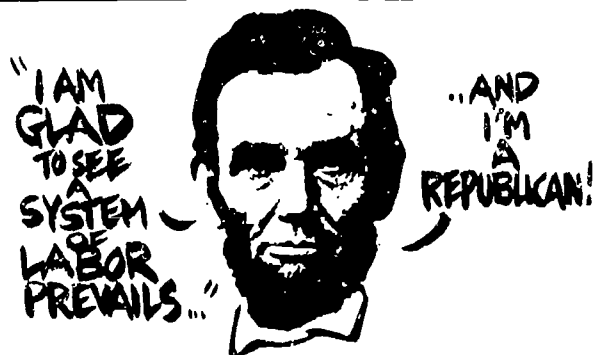
*\*From a song sung by the N.Y. Working Women's Union.*

At the time of the Civil War, sewing women were the largest group of female manufacturing workers. Their wages were desperately low, hours long, a situation worsened by the war-time introduction of the industrial sewing machine. Inevitably sewers began to strike and organize.



A mass meeting of workingwomen in New York in November 1863 led the following spring to the formation of the Working Women's Union. Ellen Patterson, secretary, explained the sewing women had organized to prevent wage cuts and to win "an advance of wages and shorter hours."

The New York organization inspired women doing war-related work in Boston and Philadelphia to organize. A delegation from the Philadelphia Working Women's Association met with President Lincoln and persuaded him to raise the prices paid to female arsenal workers. A month later Cincinnati sewing women appealed to the president for relief from the abuses of contractors; they requested direct employment by the government.



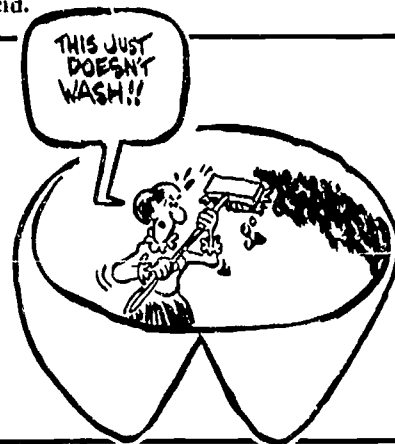
Sewing women organized in a number of cities, often with the help of workingmen's unions. In many cases the sewers' unions were also cooperative workshops; in Detroit, the union bought sewing machines to use right in the union hall -- by-passing and frustrating the clothing contractors.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 21 Revolt of the Laundresses

Production of detachable collars and cuffs and shirts used to be big business in Troy, N.Y.; washing, starching and ironing the collars was an important part of the process. Several hundred Troy women worked 12 to 14 hours a day, doing this back-breaking work in 100-degree heat, in air full of chloride and sulfuric acid.



In the summer of 1865, the Troy laundresses decided they had enough when the bosses introduced new starching machines. The machines were too hot to handle and cut prices for starching almost in half. Under the leadership of the fiery Kate Mullaney, the laundresses organized the Troy Collar Laundry Union.



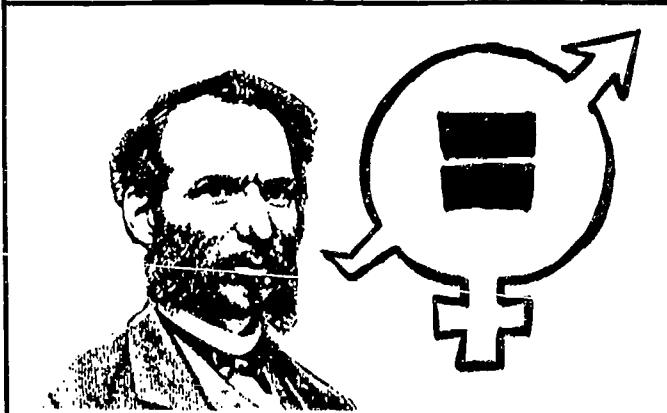
The Troy Collar Laundry Union succeeded in raising the wages of the laundresses from \$2-\$3 a week to \$8-\$14! Kate Mullaney became one of the most important women labor leaders of the Nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, in Jackson, Mississippi, a June 18, 1866 "Petition of Colored Washerwomen" startled the white establishment. The petition announced the intention of black laundry women to charge a uniform rate for their labor. Says historian Philip Foner, this was the "first known collective action of free black workingwomen in American history."

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 22 NLU and "The Daughters of Toil"

The need for a national labor federation led to the founding of the National Labor Union in Baltimore in August 1866. The NLU's founders -- all men -- adopted a resolution pledging support to sewing women and to "daughters of toil" and asked in return for the cooperation of working women and their organizations.



The new organization didn't take off until William Sylvius became its president in 1868. The young dynamic president of the Molders Union, Sylvius recognized the importance of organizing women workers, and supported their demand for equal pay for equal work. "Why should women not enjoy every social and political privilege enjoyed by men?" asked Sylvius.

At its 1868 convention the NLU admitted four women delegates, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the famous women's rights advocates. A heated debate broke out over whether Stanton should be seated. She didn't have credentials from an actual labor organization, but that wasn't the real issue. Many delegates objected to her campaign to win women the right to vote.



The NLU never did support women's suffrage. But it took important stands on behalf of the rights of women on the job. It encouraged women to join or form unions and "use every other honorable means to persuade or force employers to do justice to women by paying them equal wages for equal work."

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 23 Typos and Segar Makers

In the late 1860s the organization of women workers took a big step forward when two national unions became the first to admit women into membership.



In 1867 the Cigar Makers International Union became the first national union to admit women. Why? The union recognized that new machinery would encourage bosses to hire less skilled women for less money, undercutting union wage rates. The National Labor Union had encouraged the organization of women. And there may have been fear of independent organizing by women. In 1864, the "Lady Segar Makers" in Providence, R.I. had organized.

Women had been printers since colonial times; after the organization of the National Typographical Union in 1852 they were sometimes used as strikebreakers. Women printers in New York organized in 1868 with young Augusta Lewis as their leader. After assisting the printers' union during an eight-week strike in 1869, Women's Typographical Union No. 1 was formally admitted into the NTU. Around the country, women began to join the NTU on an equal basis with men. In 1870, 22-year-old Augusta Lewis was elected national corresponding secretary of the National Typographical Union.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 24 Daughters of St. Crispin \*

Conditions which prompted the great shoe strike of 1860 in Lynn, Mass. (Chapter 18) worsened in the years that followed due to increased mechanization. Rebelling against longer hours, lower wages and speedup, Lynn's male shoe workers organized a local of the Knights of St. Crispin, a national trade union of shoe workers. Shortly after the Lynn women organized the Daughters of St. Crispin.

### \* PATRON SAINT OF SHOEMAKERS...



From this beginning in Lynn the Daughters of St. Crispin became the first national union of women workers. A founding convention took place in "The Shoe City" on July 28, 1869, attended by 30 delegates who represented lodges in Massachusetts and Maine and in Rochester, N.Y., Philadelphia, Chicago and San Francisco. Two veterans of the 1860 strike, Carrie Wilson and Abbie Jacques, were elected president and secretary.

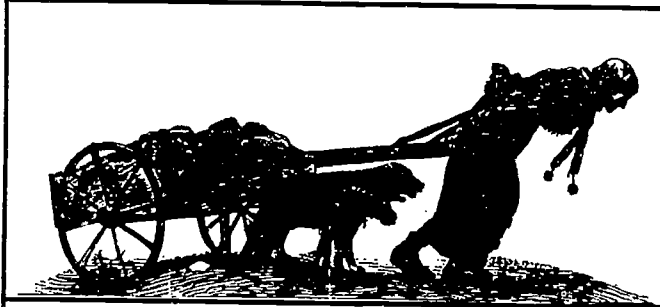


The Daughters of St. Crispin fought militantly for their rights, and in coalition with the Knights of St. Crispin, were able to force shoe manufacturers to increase wages. In three years the Daughters' organization grew from 11 to 29 lodges. But their success was short-lived. A determined effort by the bosses to break both shoe workers' unions, followed by the Depression of 1873, brought about the demise of the Daughters and the Knights.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 25 The Long Depression

In September 1873, the banking house of Jay Cooke and Company closed its doors, setting off a chain reaction of bank failures that brought about the longest and most severe depression the nation had yet experienced. Not until mid-1878 would the economy revive. In the meantime, one out of every five workers was unemployed; those with jobs worked part-time, or faced pay cuts. There was widespread hunger and misery; employers took advantage of workers' fear for their jobs to smash unions.



Working women were hard-hit. Maids were dismissed, sales clerks let go "factory girls" faced pay cuts; sewing women were destitute. These garment workers, working at home, saw sewing machines repossessed; unable to pay the rent, they were evicted. According to one historian, it was no exaggeration to say that working women in New York faced a choice between starvation and prostitution. "There never was a period at which working women were in more need of help than now," the New York Times said on December 1873.



Twenty thousand unemployed men and women marched in Chicago on Dec. 22, 1873 to demand "bread for the needy, clothing for the naked, and houses for the homeless." On Jan. 13, 1874, thousands of unemployed workers demonstrated on New York's Tompkins Square, unaware that the authorities had revoked their permit only hours before. Mounted police savagely charged into the crowd, clubbing women, children and men, in what one worker described as "an orgy of brutality."

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 26 The Great Labor Uprising

The long depression of the 1870s saw outbursts of worker anger. "Factory girls" went on strike against pay cuts in the mills of Paterson, Passaic and New Brunswick, N.J. in December 1874. When Fall River, Mass. textile companies cut wages by 10% for the second time in a year, women workers walked off their jobs for eight weeks in the summer of 1875. These strikes, although militant, failed to stop reduction of wages.

Women were out in force during the Great Labor Uprising of 1877. A strike that started in Martinsburg, W. Va. among railroad workers who objected to the second pay cut in eight months spread far and wide as railroad and other workers rebelled against depression conditions. Federal troops eventually crushed the strike, but only after pitched battles in several cities; 20 men, women and children were killed by soldiers in Pittsburgh.



Women took part in fierce fighting in Chicago, where a newspaper headline declared: "Bohemian Amazons Rival The Men in Deeds of Violence." The Baltimore Sun reported: "The singular part of the disturbance is in the very active part taken by the women, who are the wives and mothers of the firemen. They look famished and wild, and declare for starvation rather than have their people work for the reduced wages. Better to starve outright, they say, than to die by slow starvation."

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 27 Victory in Paterson

With the great depression of the 1870s over, workers were in no mood for further pay cuts. In Paterson, New Jersey employer greed collided with worker anger to produce one of the biggest strikes ever known in the United States of that era.

When Robert and Henry Adams, owners of textile mills in Paterson, announced the third pay cut in less than a year, the 550 unorganized mill workers, mostly women and children, walked out. On June 20, 1878, they appealed "to their fellow workingmen and women throughout the United States to aid them in their struggle against starvation and poverty."



Several demonstrations and processions took place during the strike; a highpoint was a demonstration of some 10,000 on July 20, which featured a march through Paterson to the Passaic Falls. Wearing their prettiest dresses, the defiant mill women carried placards proclaiming, "We ask to live comfortably and educate our children."

When the Adams brothers brought strikebreakers from New England, the strikers met them at the railroad station, convinced them not to scab, and paid their way back home with funds raised in the community. After nine months, the company gave in -- and offered a wage increase instead of a pay cut.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 28 The Working Women's Union

At the close of the 1870s depression, radical working women and housewives organized the Working Women's Union in hopes of convincing the women of Chicago to organize. United action, they said, could overcome appalling working and living conditions. Although the times were not right for organizing women wage earners, they were able to build an organization of some thousand women.

WOMEN  
OF THE  
WORLD  
UNITE!!



Leaders of the Working Women's Union were Alzina Stevens, who lost a finger at age 13 in a Lowell, Mass. textile mill; Lizzie Swank, an Ohio farm girl-turned-teacher at 15 who worked in Chicago's garment shops; Elizabeth Rodgers, who had organized "socialistic groups" in the Rocky Mountain states; and Lucy Parsons, a brilliant speaker who left her native Texas because of laws banning racially-mixed marriages and the post-Reconstruction terror.

While organizing women around shop issues, the Working Women's Union also took part in labor struggles like the campaign for the eight-hour day. The WWU entered a pink float with banners proclaiming union themes and women's rights in a 1879 July Fourth parade sponsored by the Chicago Eight-Hour League. By 1881 the Working Women's Union had become a women's assembly of a new national labor organization -- the Knights of Labor.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 29 Knights of Labor

From its beginning in 1878 as a secret society organized by nine garment cutters, the Knights of Labor had grown into the nation's largest labor organization by 1881, the year the Knights came "above ground." That was also the year the Knights voted to admit women over the age 16 to membership.

Five years later, women accounted for approximately 10 percent of Knight's membership, then at its peak. There were 192 all-female assemblies; women also joined what had been all-male assemblies. Most of the all-female assemblies united women in a single trade or occupation; these included several assemblies of laundresses, chambermaids and housekeepers in southern states, where black women were in leadership.

all organize financial exchanges, safe deposits and...  
 deposit of the savings of the people in small sums.  
 XVIII. That the Government shall obtain possession, by  
 lease, under the right of eminent domain, of all telegraphs,  
 houses and railroads, and that hereafter no charter or license  
 issued to any corporation for construction or operation of  
 lines of transporting intelligence, passengers or freight.  
 And while making the foregoing demands upon the State  
 National Government, we will endeavor to associate our own la  
 XIX. To establish co-operative institutions such as will  
 supersede the wage system, by the introduction of a co-oper  
 industrial system.  
 XX. To secure for both sexes equal pay for equal work.  
 XXI. To shorten the hours of labor by a general refus  
 work for more than eight hours.  
 To induce employers to agree to arbitrate all  
 ends which have arisen between their employes, in  
 the bonds of sympathy between them may be sought  
 redress.



Mary Stirling, a Philadelphia shoemaker from the first all-female assembly organized, was the first woman ever to attend a Knights convention. Another active woman was Elizabeth Rodgers (that's her holding daughter Lizzie in the photo of 1886 Knights convention delegates above). A leader of the Working Women's Union of Chicago (see Chapter 27), she was the first woman to be elected a master workman of a district assembly. She was also nominated to run for general treasurer of the order, but declined.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 30 General Investigator

At its 1885 convention the women delegates to the Knights of Labor convention asked for and got a committee on women's work. Committee members compiled figures on women's wages. At the 1886 convention, all 16 female delegates were named to a permanent Department on Women's Work, to inquire into "the abuses to which our sex is subjected by unscrupulous employers," and to agitate for equal pay for equal work and for abolition of child labor. Leonora Barry, a hosiery worker, was elected *general investigator*.

An Irish immigrant and the sole support of her two sons, Barry carried on a four-year investigation into the conditions faced by female and child wage-earners, the first ever conducted by a union. Her efforts led to passage of a state factory inspection law in Pennsylvania.



As a leading full-time officer of the Knights of Labor, Barry served as a kind of business agent as well as investigator. She assisted existing Knights locals, and helped establish two cooperative shirt factories. In an 11-month period in 1888, she received 537 requests for her to help women organize, visited nearly 100 cities and towns. On her speaking tours she advocated industrial training for women, state factory inspection laws, and laws prohibiting child labor.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 31 A Dismal Beginning

When the Federation of Trades' and Labor Unions was organized in 1881, not a single representative of America's 2.5 million working women was present at the founding convention. The next year the Federation invited women's organizations to affiliate; in 1883 Charlotte Smith, president of the Women's National Industrial League, was admitted as a delegate. Resolutions encouraging women to organize and join the federation were adopted but largely ignored.

Nothing changed in 1886, when the Federation of Trades' and Labor Unions was reorganized as the American Federation of Labor, an association of mostly craft and skilled workers' unions. AFL President Samuel Gompers urged unions to organize women, although women often lacked the skills necessary to join the exclusively-male craft unions. When women and men had the same skills, men didn't always want to share the benefits of organization. Only two national affiliates of the AFL, the Cigar Makers and Typographical Union, accepted women as members. Some unions actually banned women from membership!



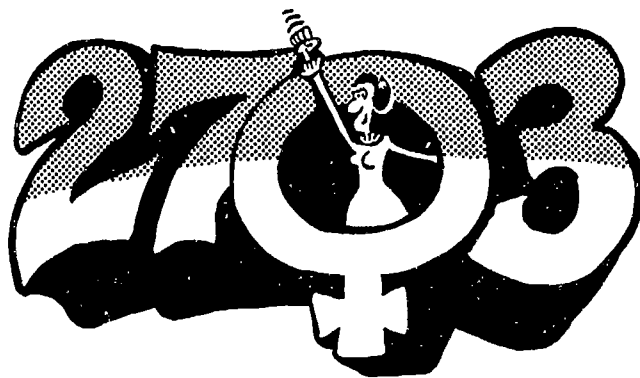
And when the AFL expressed solidarity with female wage earners, some "brothers" had a strictly selfish motivation. Gompers admitted that the "equal pay for equal work" rule endorsed by the AFL might benefit men more than women: Women were often hired because they were "cheap labor." If bosses were forced to pay women the same as men, they would hire men only.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 32 Ladies Federal Labor Union

Four years after the founding of the American Federation of Labor, in 1890, a federation convention had its first woman delegate: Mary Burke, a charter member and first vice president of the Retail Clerks International Protective Association. She introduced a successful motion calling on the AFL to appoint women organizers. It wasn't implemented for several years.

But women workers weren't prepared to wait – at least not in Chicago, where organized women of various occupations were collectively given a charter as “Ladies Federal Labor Union Number 2703.” (If an AFL craft union's jurisdiction did not cover a job category held by women, the AFL could charter a “federal local” directly affiliated to the federation.)



Ladies Federal Labor Union No. 2703 was chartered in 1888. Four years later it had brought to life 23 separate unions of women workers in Chicago, including unions of shirtmakers, shoeworkers, watchmakers and bookbinders. A key organizer in this impressive union effort was the local union's secretary, English-born Elizabeth Morgan.

She once wrote to AFL Pres. Samuel Gompers: “My education is but poor, but I will do the best I can as I like many other children had to work when but 11 years old. I went to work in a Mill and worked from 10 to 16 hours a day.” Despite her lack of education, the former mill girl was a brilliant and hardworking organizer. She gained national attention for her fight against sweatshop conditions in Illinois (see the next chapter!).

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 33 Illinois Women's Alliance

"City Slave Girls," an 1888 series of investigative reports in the *Chicago Times* on women and children in Chicago sweatshops, prompted Elizabeth Morgan and other leaders of the Ladies Federal Labor Union No. 2703 (see the last issue) to take action. With backing from the Chicago Trades & Labor Assembly, they launched the Illinois Women's Alliance – a coalition of virtually every women's organization in Chicago.

The Women's Alliance campaigned against sweatshops and for protection of children through tough enforcement of child labor and compulsory education laws. The Alliance exposed the abusive treatment of women in police courts and public asylums – and ran into direct conflict with the corporations and corrupt Democratic Party machine that controlled Chicago even then.



The Women's Alliance won enactment of a state compulsory education law – and goaded the graft-ridden Chicago school board into building new schools. And the Alliance secured a ban on child labor under the age of 14 as part of a state law in 1893 aimed at sweatshops. (See the next issue for more on the Illinois Women's Alliance and the fight against sweatshops).

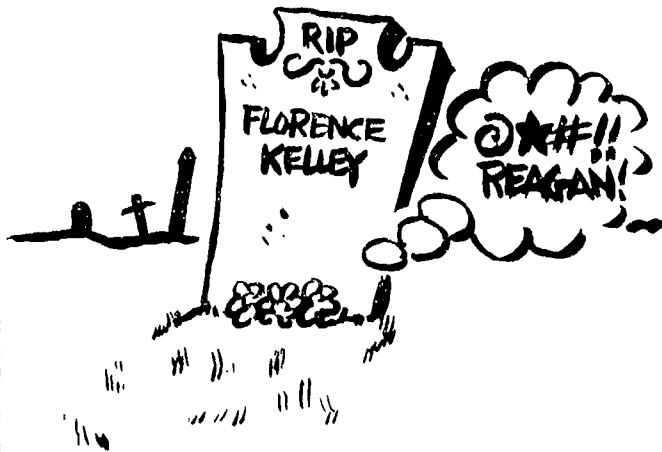
# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY



## Chapter 35 Florence Kelley

As we saw in the last chapter, the Illinois Women's Alliance and labor movement led a successful campaign for anti-sweatshop legislation. Following passage of the Sweatshop Act, Florence Kelley was appointed chief factory inspector by Gov. Peter Altgeld in 1892. She served in this position until 1897.

A native of Philadelphia, where she led evening classes for women workers, Florence Kelley in 1891 became a resident of Chicago's Hull House, the "settlement house" founded by Jane Addams for community service and worker education. Kelley and other members of Hull House had worked in the anti-sweatshop campaign described in the last chapter. As factory inspector, Kelley helped expose the dangerous and unhealthy conditions forced on many Illinois workers. An admirer described her as a "guerrilla warrior" in the "wilderness of industrial wrongs."



In later years Kelley became known as a campaigner for consumers' rights and the right of women to vote. But she remained active in the fight against child labor and sweatshop conditions. As historian Barbara Wertheimer pointed out, "she vigorously opposed tenement labor, both because it destroyed the health of sweatshop workers and because it forced down the wages of factory workers, competing with sweated labor for work." She would be horrified to learn that, because of the Reagan Administration, manufacturing returned to the home in January 1989.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 34 'Taking on the Sweatshops

At the insistence of Elizabeth Morgan of the Ladies Federal Labor Union, the Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly in 1891 agreed to an investigation of Chicago sweatshops. The result, according to labor historian Philip Foner, was "one of the most important and influential reports in American labor history, which eventually called the attention of the entire nation to the sweating system."

A labor investigative team including Morgan and accompanied by representatives of the city health department, city attorney's office and the press made unannounced visits to 30 sweatshops. Interviews with women and children workers revealed unhealthy working conditions and pitifully poor pay. Some of the worst shops were owned by a philanthropist, J.V. Farwell; one was a tiny 10-foot square basement where 23 people worked. Young girls received only \$3 for a 60-70 hour week making velvet cloaks for the wealthy.



The findings were published in a pamphlet, which aroused the public's fear of contagious diseases as much as its sense of decency. The report named names and detailed unsanitary conditions, hours and wages. This information became the basis for action: a campaign for an anti-sweatshop bill. Thanks to the hard work of Elizabeth Morgan, the Illinois Women's Alliance and the labor movement, the Illinois legislature enacted the Factory and Workshop Inspection Act in 1893.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 36 Homestead, 1892

In Homestead, Pa., where men made steel, women worked hard to make decent homes out of grimy, shabby houses. The working class women of Homestead, Pa. may not have worked in the town's steel mills, but they had a stake in the survival of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers when mill owner Andrew Carnegie and manager Henry Clay Frick targeted the union for destruction.

In 1892 Carnegie and Frick shut the mills and declared them non-union when the union refused a wage cut. In June the company attempted to sneak 300 armed Pinkerton agents into the mills via river barges, as a prelude to reopening the mills with scab labor. But the people of Homestead were waiting for them. When the barges pulled up to the landing place, several hundred men and women – “mothers, wives and sisters,” reported journalist Arthur Burgoyne – broke down the gates and rushed the beach. The Pinkertons fired into the crowd; the workers fired back, beginning a day-long battle. At least nine workers lost their lives.



The Pinkertons were forced to surrender – and run a gauntlet of townspeople. “Women, converted for the nonce into veritable furies, belabored Mr. Frick’s janizaries with bludgeons, stoned them, kicked them and spat upon them,” Burgoyne wrote.

Eventually, after a long and heroic struggle, the strike was broken by the military and the courts.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 37 Rise and Fall of the Troy Collar Union

After the loss of their union in 1886, women employed in Troy, N.Y. shirt factories were at the mercy of the boss. Wages were reduced down to an average of 50 cents a day. By January 1891, the Troy "collar girls" were fed up. Said Mary Evaline, their spokesperson: "Many of us have others dependent on our work, and this wholesale attack on our wages can only result in privation and want to those who are near and dear to us."

Collar, cuff and shirt workers employed at the Lansingburgh plant of the United Shirt and Collar Co. walked out. The strike quickly spread to other Troy factories; 500 young women were on strike. Strikers organized an American Federation of Labor union, and elected 23-year-old Mary Evaline president, Dora Sullivan vice president. With the threat of a New York AFL boycott, the company capitulated. The strike victory brought higher wages.



Placed on the New York AFL staff, Evaline and Sullivan organized several thousand garment workers in Troy and other New York cities.

The tide, however, quickly turned against them. When a Troy shirt company introduced a new starching machine in its laundries in 1892, Sullivan and the union women working there demanded guarantees of no job or income loss. The company refused and the workers struck. With less help from the AFL, the strike was eventually lost. Within a few years United Shirt and Collar broke the union during a bitter 13-week strike. The "collar girls" looked in vain to the Troy AFL central labor body for support; these leaders of exclusively male craft unions were hostile and unwilling to help.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 38 Mary Kenney O'Sullivan (1864-1943)

Mary Kenney didn't need a college degree to tell working women they should organize. Employer greed and cruelty were education enough.

Her parents were Irish immigrants, a railroad worker and a cook. She left school after the fourth grade to become apprenticed to a dressmaker. When her father was killed on the job, 14-year-old Mary went to work in a bindery to support her sick mother. Her wages for a 65-hour week: \$2. When she demanded more money she was fired.

Eventually Mary moved to Chicago and found work in a bindery. She joined Ladies Federal Labor Union No. 2703 (see Chapter 32), which helped her to organize the "Woman's Bookbinding Union." Mary also organized shirtwaist workers: she once marched into Marshall Fields's office, to protest the \$4.85 his factory workers received for a 60-hour work week.



American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers met Mary Kenney in Chicago in 1891. Impressed, he appointed her to the AFL staff as the first-ever female general organizer. In the summer of 1892 she assisted the Troy, N.Y. "collar girls" (see Chapter 37), helped the Homestead strikers (Chapter 36), and organized garment, bindery and textile workers and women printers.

Her best efforts were not good enough for the AFL Executive Council, who let her go after six months. Mary was told the AFL lacked the funds for a full-time woman organizer. She had a simple reply: If serious about organizing women, the AFL should have more, not fewer female organizers. (She married labor editor John O'Sullivan in 1894, moved to Boston and continued organizing.)

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 39 At the Dawn of the Century

As America moved toward the 20th Century, where did women work?



Most women worked in the home, although their labors extended beyond care of their family. In 1890 the U.S. Bureau of Labor found that one in five working-class families took in boarders to supplement their meager incomes – which meant additional work as cook, maid and laundress. Other women worked in the home as laundresses, dressmakers, cigar makers; some made caps and artificial flowers.

By 1900, one out of every five women worked for wages. Half of the workers in textile factories and tobacco factories were women. In garment shops, women outnumbered the men. According to historian Barbara Wertheimer, “women worked in the shoe industry, in food processing and canning, and in heavy industries such as foundries and tin-plate mills.”

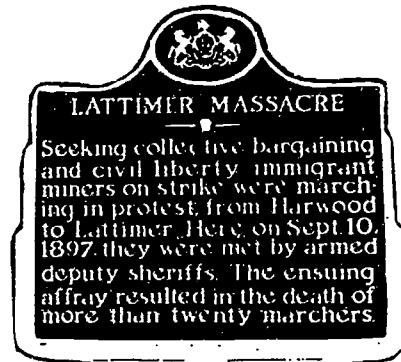
Women could be found in the new electrical manufacturing industry, winding coils and doing heavier work. Says Wertheimer: “They shaped bolts and screws, braided and twisted cable in the cablemaking companies (at a starting rate of 50 cents a day).”

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 40 "Slavic Amazons"

In the late summer of 1897, several mines around Hazelton, Pa. were closed by strikes as the northeastern Pennsylvania anthracite region seethed with rebellion. On Sept. 10, strikers marching to mines still working were stopped by armed deputies in Lattimer. Without provocation, the deputies fired into the crowd, killing 19 miners and seriously wounding another 36.

Despite the tragic loss of life, despite the presence of the National Guard following the massacre, the strike continued. And it was the women of the immigrant mining communities who kept the struggle going. They successfully shut down mines not yet affected by the strike. They were led by "Big Mary" Septak, operator of a miners' boardinghouse in Lattimer. Mary lost nine of her 10 children to disease; before they died, her little sons worked in the collieries picking slate. She believed in the strike.



IF  
HAD A  
ROCKET LAUNCHER...



Beginning on Sept. 15, "Big Mary" Septak led as many as 200 women in a series of raids on collieries and washeries which forced the men to stop working. Big Mary openly defied the National Guard. She told a mounted captain: "If we had guns, you'd pay the devil." National Guard officers complained, "the women are worse to handle than the men." The *Wilkes-Barre Record* despised the "Polish Amazons" for their "ill-advised and unwomanly demonstrations." But to the immigrant women, the fight for survival was more important than middle-class notions of femininity. And it paid off: the women's militance produced concessions from the mine owners.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 41 The Maud Gonne Club

Regarded derisively by the men as "petticoat butchers," women went to work in Chicago meat-packing plants for the first time in the early 1900s -- at pay scales 30% below male rates. Bosses made a point of keeping women's pay low. At one plant, when the take home pay of the fastest piece workers reached a certain level, the rates of *all* the women would be cut -- the slower workers penalized for the productivity of the fastest.

The rate finagling was first noticed by Maggie Condon, one of the fastest workers; she made common cause with Hannah O'Day, one of the slower workers. One day in 1902, Hannah raised her red handkerchief on a stick in the plant, and several hundred women followed her out on a strike. Their job action was unsuccessful, but Maggie, Hannah and other women workers were determined to organize. They formed a club, which they called the Maud Gonne Club after a noted Irish revolutionary.



In 1903 what started as the Maud Gonne Club became chartered as Local 183 of the Amalgamated Meatcutters and Butcher Workmen. Although not long-lasting, the local union twice took important stands for equality. Local 183 delegates to a Meatcutters' convention were instrumental in defeating a resolution calling for a ban on women meat trimmers. On another occasion, the Maudites did themselves proud when a black woman came to a meeting. "What'll I do with her?" asked sergeant-at-arms Hannah O'Day. Responded the president, Mollie Daley: "I say, admit her at once and let yez give her a hearty welcome!" Union members applauded warmly.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 42 'The Most Dangerous Woman in the Country Today'

America's most famous labor organizer was born Mary Harris in Cork, Ireland in 1830 and emigrated to the United States as a child. As a young woman she worked as a convent school teacher and later opened her own dressmaking business. She married George Jones, a union iron molder, in 1861; six years later her husband and four small children died in a yellow fever epidemic. Disaster struck again when the great Chicago fire of 1871 destroyed her dressmaker's shop.

Mary Jones joined the Knights of Labor. "From 1880 on," she wrote in her autobiography, "I became wholly engrossed in the labor movement." Mother Jones was nearly sixty when she started organizing for the United Mine Workers of America. In northeast Pennsylvania's anthracite coal fields, she organized miners' daughters as well as the men, leading a 1901 strike of Scranton silk mill workers.

MOTHER EARTH.  
MOTHER NATURE.  
MOTHER LABOR...



Mother Jones's first arrest came on June 20, 1902, as she was discussing a coal strike at a miners' meeting in West Virginia. The prosecuting attorney declared in court, "Your Honor, there is the most dangerous woman in the country today. She called your honor a scab. But I will recommend mercy of the court if she will consent to leave the state and never return." Mother Jones retorted, "I didn't come into court asking mercy, but I came here looking for justice. And I will not leave this state so long as there is a single little child that asks me to stay and fight his battle for bread!"

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 43

## The March of the Mill Children

When Mother Jones answered the call of striking Kensington, Pa. textile workers in the spring of 1903, she found that nearly 10,000 of the 75,000 strikers were children. Many were missing fingers and hands. "They were stooped little things, round shouldered and skinny," she recalled later. Many were not over 10 years old.

Mother Jones led the children on a parade to Philadelphia's Independence Square, to a rally where she declared, "Philadelphia's mansions are built on the broken bones, quivering hearts and drooping heads of mill children."



As the strike continued, Mother Jones decided to stir up the issue further. She took the children on a march to the summer mansion of President Theodore Roosevelt at Oyster Bay, Long Island. They carried signs that said "We want more time to play" and "Prosperity is here, where is ours?" For many of the kids it was the first and only holiday of their lives.

"We marched down to Oyster Bay but the president refused to see us and he would not answer my letter," Mother Jones wrote later. "But our march had done its work. We had drawn the attention of the nation to the crime of child labor." The strike was lost and the children forced back to work. But not long after the Pennsylvania legislature enacted a tough child labor law.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 44 National Women's Trade Union

To encourage and assist women workers in organizing, veteran organizer Mary Kenney O'Sullivan (Chapter 38), female labor activists and middle-class supporters initiated the National Women's Trade Union League in 1903. For years the only voice of working women, the WTUL lobbied for progressive legislation, trained women, and assisted in strikes and organizing. Many women workers became organizers and leaders in their unions during the first few decades of the Twentieth Century, thanks to the WTUL.

Born during an American Federation of Labor convention, the WTUL benefited from AFL funds and support. But relations between the two organizations were often strained. The league wanted to see AFL hire women organizers (one was, briefly), and place women on the AFL executive council (the AFL said no). And there were big differences of opinion over legislation.



Given the many difficulties facing working women, the WTUL pushed for progressive legislation that would improve their conditions. The league supported minimum wage legislation, believing that working women deserved a "living wage." The AFL opposed a statutory minimum wage. The WTUL endorsed a system of national unemployment insurance, labor protection laws and a labor party. But not the AFL. And the WTUL refused to back the racist Alien Exclusion Act (aimed at Asian immigrants) -- which the AFL supported.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 45

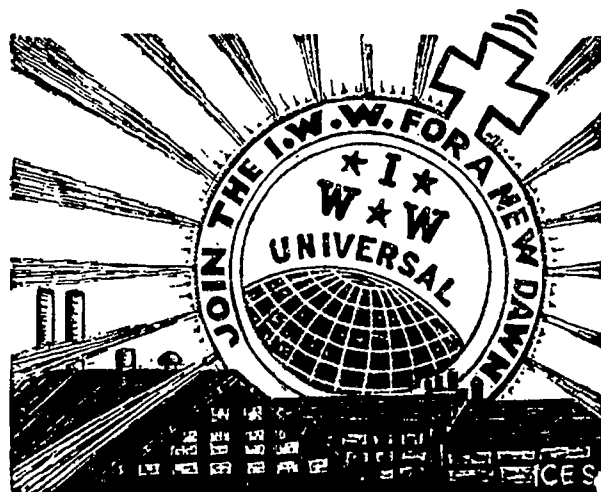
## A Chicago Convention

One participant called it the "Continental Congress of the working class." On June 27, 1905, workers from around the country met in Chicago to launch a new labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World. They were men and women who had seen some of the toughest labor battles of their era. They wanted to build a union to organize all workers, industry by industry, and engage in militant struggle against the bosses.

The IWW's founders had no use for the American Federation of Labor, which had organized only five percent of the workforce, mostly skilled, white males. We're not here to form a rival organization to the AFL, said William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, a tough leader of western miners. "We are here for the purpose of forming a *labor* organization."

Unlike some AFL unions, there were no membership restrictions on women or black workers in the IWW. Initiation fees were kept low.

Of the 200 delegates, 12 were women, among them famed organizers Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, Lucy Parsons, Emma Langdon of the Denver Typographical Union and Luella Twining of the American Labor Union. Twining served as presiding officer on the final day of the convention, Langdon as assistant secretary.



When Lucy Parsons addressed the convention, her words demanded attention. "We (women) are the slaves of slaves. We are exploited more ruthlessly than men. Wherever wages are to be reduced, the capitalist class uses women to reduce them. If there is anything you men should do in the future, it is organize women."

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 46 Mother Bloor in "The Jungle"

Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (published in 1906) was a forceful expose of the brutal and unsanitary conditions in Chicago's meat-packing plants. It was also an enormous hit with a horrified public, selling hundreds of thousands of copies. In describing the exploitation of immigrant women workers, Sinclair tried to make a case for unionism and socialist politics. But instead, middle class readers were struck by his descriptions of unsanitary and diseased food. "I aimed at the public's heart," he said, "and by accident hit it in the stomach."

President Theodore Roosevelt, under public pressure to clean up the meat industry, challenged Sinclair to prove the allegations made in *The Jungle*. Sinclair had two fellow socialists prepare testimony for a Presidential commission. Posing as husband and wife, Ella Reeve and Richard Bloor convinced Chicago packinghouse workers to testify before the commission, and arranged extensive publicity exposing conditions in the meat-packing plants. Ella Reeve Bloor's organizing and investigations contributed to passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906.



Ella Reeve Bloor\* returned to the stockyards the following year. At a journalist's request, she got work in plants owned by Armour and Swift in order to see first-hand whether the packing companies were obeying the new law. She found evidence of fake and faulty meat inspections. Through widely-published articles and lectures, she exposed the poor pay and horrific conditions in the packing plants and the threat to public health posed by the companies' dishonest practices.

\*The name Bloor stuck. As a union organizer, she became known as "Mother Bloor" throughout the country.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 47

## Call for General Strike

On the evening of November 22, 1909, Cooper Union hall in New York was filled to capacity with young immigrant women, many attending their first union meeting. Three garment shops were on strike, and the industry was seething with rebellion. On the podium were officers of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and various prominent guests, among them AFL Pres. Samuel Gompers. For two hours, speakers urged caution. Then a striker named Clara Lemlich rose, and asked for the floor.

**HISTORICAL  
HYSTERICAL WOMEN**



Although only 20 years old, she was a founder of ILGWU Local 25 and already a veteran of two strikes. She was still recovering from a beating on the picket line. "I am a working girl," she said, "one of those who are 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!"

Work in the garment shops was seasonal. Workers were either pushed for up to 60 hours a week, or thrown out on the street without income of any kind. Most workers were employed by small shops, which constantly tried to bid down prices and wages. Workers were charged for the use of sewing machines, needle and thread, fined for coming in late or spoiling cloth. Most workers were young women, who were paid a pittance; men were either skilled workers of subcontractors.

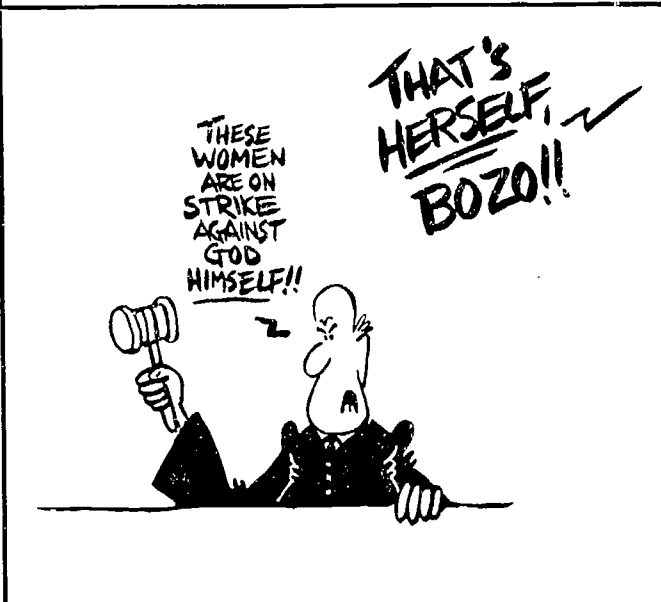
The men ran the union. But the women, exploited and abused, were going to make history. The meeting voted unanimously to adopt Clara Lemlich's resolution. The general strike was on.  
(To be continued!)

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 48 Rising of the 20,000 (Part II)

ILGWU officials expected that maybe 3,000 shirtwaist workers would join the general strike. The morning after the the Nov. 22, 1909 meeting in Cooper Union, 15,000 workers, many teenage girls, walked off the job. Only a few had been union members. By day's end more than 20,000 workers from 500 garment shops were on strike for union recognition, a union shop and higher wages.

Strike meetings were conducted in three languages -- English, Yiddish and Italian. The (all-male) union staff was too small too cope, so rank-and-file strikers, allies from the Women's Trade Union League and socialist women took over the day-to-day operation of the strike, run out of 20 halls spread over New York's garment district.



Picketing continued through the winter. Strikers braved harsh winds and snow, brutal police, and thugs hired to break up the picket lines. By standing up to the "gorillas" hired by the boss, the Switski sisters were credited with finally forcing their employer to settle. In 13 weeks more than 600 young women were arrested. Judges were viciously anti-union; one told a young woman: "You are on strike against God." Many young women showed great bravery; one 16-year-old was badly beaten by her father and brothers but still refused to scab.

The strikers rejected an offer in December because it did not include the union shop. But as the strike dragged on through January, the ILGWU settled with some large shops without the union shop or union recognition. The strike was declared over on Feb. 15, 1910 with many issues unresolved. Nevertheless, the more than 20,000 women workers had shown remarkable solidarity and courage. That proved to be their greatest achievement.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 49

## Triangle Tragedy

Few New York garment shops resisted workers' demands for union recognition and higher wages any more bitterly than the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. Scarcely a year after the Uprising of the 20,000 (see Chapters 47 and 48), Triangle's greed and hostility to unions became responsible for one of the greatest tragedies in labor history.

On Saturday, March 25, 1911, a muffled explosion from inside the Asch building drew curious passers-by to the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street. Smoke, then flame, could be seen coming from the eighth floor, the middle floor of three used by the Triangle Shirtwaist Co.

Suddenly, what one onlooker thought was a "bale of dark dress goods" came hurtling from the eighth floor; then another, and another. These were not bundles of cloth, but women fleeing the flames.

The one fire escape quickly collapsed from the weight of women rushing from the ninth floor, where the fire started. Others, their hair and clothing on fire, jumped to their deaths. The fire swept through the sweatshop so quickly that some women were later found at their workbenches.

The tragedy took the lives of 145 women and girls, most of them immigrants.

THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST CO. FIRE  
SISTERS MAKE, OH MY SISTERS: BRETHREN,  
HEAR MY SORROW;  
SEE WHERE THE DEAD ARE HIDDEN IN DARK CORNERS  
WHERE LIFE IS CHOKED FROM THOSE WHO LABOR;  
OH, WOE IS ME, AND WOE IS TO THE WORLD...  
- MORRIS ROSENFELD



Doors were locked to keep workers in and union organizers out. Floors were stuffed with flammable material. There were no sprinklers. There had never been a fire drill. Still, the owners were found "not guilty" on charges of manslaughter. Commented one newspaper: "Capital can commit no crime when it is in pursuit of profits."

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 50

## Pressed Steel Car

The 5,000 workers employed by the Pressed Steel Car Co. in McKees Rocks, Pa. had grievances against the U.S. Steel subsidiary as long as the nearby Ohio River. These Eastern European immigrants -- "Hunkies" to the bosses -- were overworked, underpaid, and abused. What's more, company agents often made sexual relations with wives and daughters a condition of employment.

One of their priests investigated the Pressed Steel Car workers' grievances, and angrily came to this conclusion: "Men are persecuted, robbed and slaughtered, and their wives are abused worse than death -- all to obtain or retain positions that barely keep starvation from the door."

When the men struck on July 14, 1909, the women took the opportunity to get their revenge. "Wives fought alongside their husbands to prevent scabs from entering the factory. Armed with household utensils -- pokers, brooms and rolling pins -- the women were an awesome force."\*



Women won the battle over housing. The company sent 50 mounted constables to evict strikers from company-owned dwellings. Women blocked their path, threatening to burn the houses themselves rather than be evicted. They shouted to their husbands, "If you are afraid, go home to the children!" The constables charged. The women threw rocks. The constables opened fire, first with blank cartridges, then with live bullets. Nearly 100 were wounded, 25 were arrested, but the evictions were stopped.

The strikers returned to work in September with a wage increase, a union (the IWW), time off -- and a company pledge that any Pressed Steel Car official who demanded sexual favors from workers' wives or daughters as a condition of employment would be immediately discharged.

\**Women and the American Labor Movement*, Philip S. Foner. Page 423

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 51

## Street Corner Speaker

With an Irish rebel for a father, and an ardent feminist for a mother, it's no wonder that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn became a Wobbly (a member of the militant Industrial Workers of the World) while still a teenager!

In the summer of 1907, Elizabeth celebrated her 17th birthday speaking on street corners during the IWW-led strike at American Tube & Stamping in Bridgeport, Conn. A popular and effective orator, she soon began traveling across the country to agitate for industrial unionism.



Two years later, in Missoula, Mont., Gurley Flynn organized migrant workers ripped off by racketeering employment agencies. The agencies and employers, to silence her, pressured the City Council to pass an ordinance making street speaking illegal. Wobblies from around the country moved into Missoula, and flooded the jails. The ordinance was revoked.

This was the first of several IWW "free speech" fights: in order to organize, the Wobblies had to first assert their freedom of speech. In Spokane, Wash., more than 100 Wobblies had been jailed for speaking at street meetings by the time a pregnant Gurley Flynn arrived in November 1909. An exasperated local official soon complained, "She makes all the trouble. She puts fight in the men." When the police arrested her and other IWW leaders, Elizabeth chained herself to a lamppost. The 19-year-old mother-to-be continued to "make trouble" in her jail cell. Publicity created by her arrest and imprisonment helped convince the City Council to repeal its ban on street meetings.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 52

## Rebellion in Mill Town

By 1912, Lawrence, Mass. had grown into an international textile industry center on the backs of women, children and immigrant workers. Twenty-five nationalities (speaking 50 languages) worked together in the world's largest cloth-producing plant and more than two dozen other mills, and lived together in crowded tenements. Lawrence was one of the most congested cities in the United States.



Nearly half of the Lawrence mill workers were women and children, who worked hard and died young -- the average spinner died at age 36. The pace of work was fast, and accidents frequent. In addition to losing fingers, women and girls were sometimes scalped when their hair became caught in unguarded machinery. Low wages required the entire family to work, even children as young as 10.

The average wage (skilled and unskilled) was 16 cents an hour, or \$8.75 a week. This includes incentive bonuses, but doesn't reflect short-time. It doesn't include overtime payments, because there weren't any -- even though the work week was 56 hours.

On Jan. 1, 1912 a new state law made it illegal for women and children to work more than 54 hours (but made no provision for protecting wages). The company's response was to cut everyone's hours and pay by two hours. When workers found their pay packets short 32 cents, they left the mills in droves, to gather outside in the snow and sub-zero temperatures. As the Italian workers said, this was the loss of five loaves of bread. It would make the difference between bare survival and outright starvation. "Better to starve fighting than to starve working," workers said. Although the IWW had only 300 members in Lawrence, there were now 20,000 on strike.

(This is the first of a three-part series)



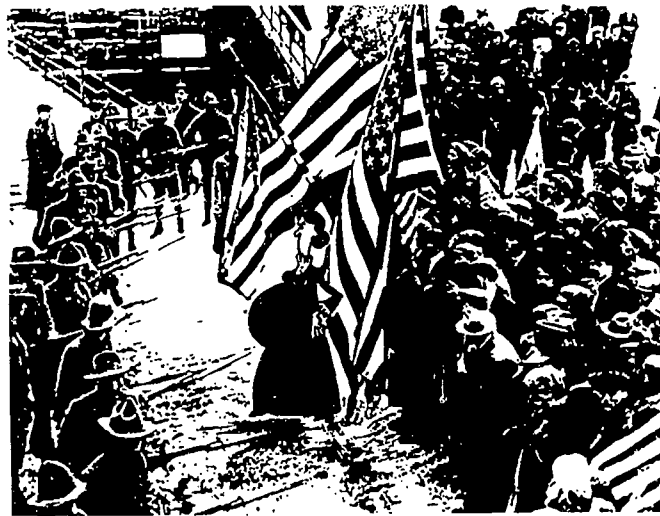
# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 53 Lawrence: Women at the Front

The American Woolen Co. had the governor call out the National Guard. Lawrence was now filled with soldiers, many of them Harvard students given time off to "have a fling at those people." Rich kids armed with guns joined police in combatting immigrant women, men and children.

The bosses' gunmen found a victim on Jan. 29. Anna LoPezza, a 34-year-old Italian immigrant, was shot through the heart by a soldier as she passed through a demonstration to meet with friends. The authorities arrested the two IWW organizers, Joe Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti, and charged them with inciting the mob to riot, thus causing the young striker's death.

Women continued to risk their lives to win the strike. A pregnant Italian woman and a friend, also pregnant, volunteered to lead a march. She told a rally that because of their condition, "policemen no beat us." It was a tragic error. The troops attacked the strikers, beating women indiscriminately. Both women lost their babies, and nearly their lives.



IWW leaders in Lawrence counseled non-violence, reasoning that reliance on the 20,000 strikers' collective strength was their greatest protection. The IWW helped the Lawrence strikers develop tactics never before seen in the U.S. labor movement, like mass picketing.

The IWW made special efforts to ensure that women could take an active role in the strike, often struggling against the Old World attitudes of husbands and priests. Said Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "The IWW has been accused of putting the women in the front. The truth is, the IWW doesn't keep them in the back, and they go to the front."

(This is the second in a three-part series)

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 54 "We Want Bread and Roses Too"

Concern for their children's safety, and the desire to see them securely fed, gave strikers the idea to send the kids into the care of supporters in New York and other cities. After a large number were greeted with fanfare by strike supporters in New York's Grand Central Station, the millowners resolved prevent other children from leaving Lawrence. The result was a vicious police attack on mothers and children at the Lawrence railroad station.



CARTOON BY ART YOUNG

The attention of the entire nation now focused on Lawrence. A Congressional inquiry, initiated by Wisconsin's socialist Congressman, Victor Berger, further exposed the poor health and miserable living and working conditions imposed on the Lawrence mill workers.

The pressure of public opinion -- and awkward questions being raised in Congress -- brought the bosses to the bargaining table eight weeks into the strike. The strike committee rejected three wage offers before accepting a sliding scale that would give the lowest-paid workers the biggest increase, 25 percent. The settlement, unanimously adopted by the 20,000 strikers at a meeting on Lawrence Common, also included time and a quarter for overtime and no discrimination against strikers.

Pioneering labor journalist Mary Heaton Vorse wrote of Lawrence: "It was a new kind of strike. There had never been any mass picketing in any New England town. Ten thousand workers picketed. It was the spirit of the workers that seemed dangerous. They were confident, gay, released and they sang. They were always marching and singing." The spirit of the Lawrence strike was best captured in the sign carried by women strikers: "We Want Bread and Roses Too."

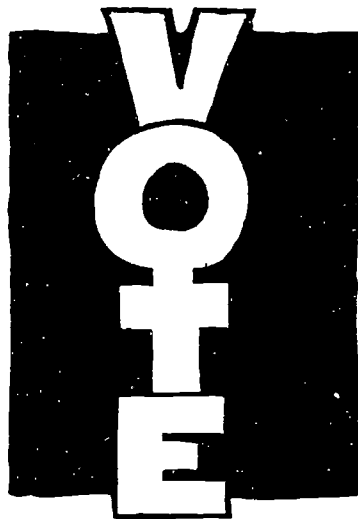
(This is the third of a three-part series)

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 55: Working Women and the Vote

Having the right to vote didn't always seem important to working women who labored in sweatshops for 60 hours and more a week, and still had responsibilities for household management, cooking, cleaning and childrearing. Many activists, like Mother Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, rejected suffrage as "irrelevant" compared to the need for union organization. "Woman suffrage is beginning at the other end. What the women need is *economic* emancipation, and Sister, dear, how they need it! And they can't get it without organization."

The attitude of many women workers towards the vote was in part a reaction to a suffrage movement dominated by wealthy women. Elitist, conservative, these women were unwilling to ally themselves with workers, blacks or immigrants.



But despite these differences, the women's labor movement and women's suffrage movement developed alliances. Suffrage leaders like Susan B. Anthony saw the need to establish links with labor, while women labor organizers appreciated the support of middle-class suffrage activists in strikes. Increasingly, the Women's Trade Union League began to see the connection between the right to vote and the fight for better conditions for women workers. The League hired Maggie Hinchey, a laundry worker, and Clara Lemlich, leader of the 1909 waistmakers' strike, as suffrage organizers.

On the eve of World War I, the Women's Trade Union League was campaigning for the right of women to vote as a way of abolishing the sweatshop, raising wages, lowering working hours and establishing the right of workers to organize, strike and bargain.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 56

## Paterson Silk Strike

Back in 1913, Paterson, N.J. the mostly female silk mill workers were fighting mad about deplorable working conditions and wages as low as \$1.86 for a 56-hour week. A walk-out by Doherty Silk Co. employees on Jan. 27 led to others; by March 3, 25,000 silk workers were on strike. Workers' demands included an end to the four-loom system (hated for its speed-up and elimination of jobs), recognition of the IWW, an 8-hour day and a minimum wage of \$12 a week.

The manufacturers struck back furiously, using the police, the courts and hired thugs to break the strike. There were mass arrests and clubbings: the police ignored the right to picket. Outdoor meetings were banned, so the IWW held rallies in neighboring Haledon, which had a socialist mayor.

IWW organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn won the strikers' admiration. Strikers produced heroes of their own, like 17-year Hannah Silverman, who would be back on the picket line each morning after her release from jail, and Carrie Torello, who brought her five small children with her to jail in the patrol wagon.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn addressing the Paterson silk strikers.



By the 17th week, the strikers and their families were in desperate need. Hopes were pinned on "The Pageant of the Paterson Strike" in New York's Madison Square Garden. Strikers acted and sang in this "first labor play" which inspired the audience but made no money. Some workers began drifting back to work. Reluctantly, the strike committee authorized shop-by-shop settlements. The strike officially ended Aug. 1. After 22 weeks, the strikers were defeated by starvation. But their heroic struggle inspired.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 57

## Not Deaf, Dumb or Blind

Helen Keller (1880-1968) is best known for her personal triumph over the handicaps of blindness and deafness. But she also deserves recognition as a lifelong ally of working women. Keller championed labor's cause despite the criticism of the wealthy, who sometimes would have preferred that she remained deaf, dumb and blind.

At age 17 months, Keller's sight and hearing were destroyed by an undiagnosed illness. At age seven, her family hired Anne Sullivan, a noted teacher of the blind. With Sullivan's help, Keller was able to enter Radcliffe College in 1900. After graduation she campaigned to clean up poor working conditions leading to accidents that cause blindness among workers.

Helen Keller joined the Socialist Party, and defended the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the one organization trying to organize all workers regardless of skill, craft, sex, race or national origins. In 1913, she came to the aid of poor immigrant women taking part in an IWW strike in Little Falls, N.Y., a major center for knit goods and underwear.



Declaring to the strikers that "their cause was her cause," Keller said: "It cannot be unreasonable to demand the protection of women and little children, and an honest wage for all who give their time and energy to industrial occupations."

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## CHAPTER 58

## The Ludlow Massacre

Rocky Mountain miners went on strike against the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel & Iron Co. in the fall of 1913. They were fighting long hours and hazardous conditions that killed hundreds of men each year. They and their wives were tired of being forced to live in company towns and of being paid in company scrip. Miners' families lived in tents as the strike continued through the winter of 1913-1914. Despite great hardships, they were prepared to strike until they won.

No one could have been prepared for the dreadful deed of Easter 1914. According to *Labor's Untold Story*: "That night, company-employed gunmen and members of the National Guard drenched the strikers' tents with oil. They ignited them after the miners and their families were asleep. When the miners, their wives and children ran from the burning tents, they were machine-gunned." Two women, 13 children and five men died in the massacre.



John Sloane, "Class War in Colorado." *The Masses*, June 1914.

Outraged by the murder of their loved ones, armed miners battled Rockefeller's thugs, seized mines and set fire to company property. Ten days later, federal troops entered Ludlow and restored "order" by throwing Mother Jones into jail for nine weeks. The National Guard commander hated and feared the 83-year-old miners' organizer. Mother Jones, he said, "seems to have, in an exceptional degree, the faculty of stirring up and inciting the more ignorant and criminally disposed to deeds of violence and crime." No one placed John D. Rockefeller in prison, although it was he who was responsible for the terrible violence of Ludlow.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 59

## Summer Strike Wave, 1915

In 1915, war blazed in Europe. Munitions factories boomed in the United States. Women entered the weapons industry by the thousands. Women were needed, employers said, because the operations "involve(d) delicate work, requiring deftness and dexterity in the use of fingers." But the lower wages received by women for long hours worked had much to do with employer interest in their female hires.

Among the biggest munitions centers was Bridgeport, Conn., where only a handful of male workers were organized. That didn't prevent thousands of munitions workers from walking off their jobs at Remington Arms and Lake Torpedo Boat, then busy filling orders for war-torn Europe. Like a summer heat wave, the strikes swept on, next shutting down machine shops, then rubber, textile and garment plants.



Many of the strikers were women production workers, who courageously struck for better conditions despite their lack of union protection. Among the women deciding to take a stand were 500 assemblers employed by the Bryant Electric division of Westinghouse. The company was shocked when the women walked off -- and even more dismayed when the remaining two-thirds of the workforce opted to join the strike.

Newspapers sowed rumors, warning that "scores of orders" in Bridgeport factories were being cancelled, and insinuating that the strikes were the work of "German agents" bent on disrupting the city's war production. But strikers held firm. Many employers gave in. Bryant Electric and other workers won reduction of working hours from 10 to eight a day; others got the work week reduced from 60 hours to 54 and 50 hours at 60 hours pay. (Bryant Electric and other Bridgeport factory workers would not enjoy union protection until UE and the CIO came on the scene some 25 years later.)

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 60

## Electric Valley Confrontation

Strikes for the eight-hour day took place in the Pittsburgh area in 1916. After two days in April, 13,000 of the 18,000 workers employed by Westinghouse Electric, Westinghouse Air Brake and Union Switch and Signal were on strike for eight hours of work at the same nine and half hours pay. Three thousand of the strikers were women employed in the production of shrapnel shells and airplane engines for the war in Europe.

Several women quickly emerged as strike leaders, among them Irish-born Anna Katherine Bell, 21 years of age. Turned out of her home for taking part in the strike, Anna Bell was arrested for speaking at an open-air meeting. Another women's leader, Anna Goldenberg, was arrested for holding a mass meeting without a permit.



On May 1 several thousand strikers marched to U.S. Steel's Edgar Thompson Works in Braddock, to gain the steelworkers' support. They were met by armed company guards; three strikers were killed and dozens wounded. The headline in a Pittsburgh newspaper roared: "Four Girls Lead Frenzied Mob of Strikers in Fatal Charge Against the Company." Blaming the violence on foreign-born workers, the newspaper also stressed: "Their women folk backed them up. When the men began to fall, the women rushed to the front and dragged the men away."

With the National Guard quartered in its East Pittsburgh plant, Westinghouse refused all further negotiations. The strike was finished. Twenty-three strike leaders were arrested and charged with inciting to riot, among them four women. All the women were acquitted except for Anna Goldenberg, who spent a year in the county workhouse.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 61

## The Murder of a Grandmother

Fannie Mooney Sellins was already known as a garment workers' leader when she took an assignment as a mineworkers' organizer in the bloody coalfields of West Virginia. An effective organizer, she quickly made herself unpopular with the authorities: she was charged with "inciting to riot" and imprisoned. It took a pardon from President Woodrow Wilson to get her out of jail after six months.

A  
MINER  
IS  
TERRIBLE  
THING  
TO  
WASTE!!



FANNIE SELLINS (1872-1919). Organizer for the garment workers, miners, steelworkers. Killed by company gunmen on August 24, 1919.

After four tough years in West Virginia, Sellins moved to New Kensington, Pa., where she quickly became involved in the UMWA's efforts to organize the miners of the Allegheny Valley — then known as "Black Valley" because of the employers' violent opposition to union organization. She became popular among miners and their families — which made her a marked woman.

Miners employed by Allegheny Steel's coal company struck for higher wages and better conditions in July 1919. The company continued operations with strikebreakers; at the company's request, the sheriff stationed a dozen deputies, armed with revolvers, clubs and riot guns, in what is now Natrona Heights, Pa.

There had already been an arrest on Aug. 26 when Sellins arrived on the picket line. She tried to calm the mostly women and children present when the deputies clubbed, then shot to death an unarmed, 60-year-old miner named Joe Starzeleski. As Sellins urged the women to take cover, she was struck by a rifle butt, then shot at point blank range. As she lay dying, the guards pumped three more bullets into her body. Sellins was 47 years old, a grandmother and the mother of a youth killed in France, fighting in a war "to make the world safe for democracy."

It took four years to bring the deputies to trial; a Pittsburgh court found them not guilty. Her killer became captain of shop police in an Allegheny Valley steel mill.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

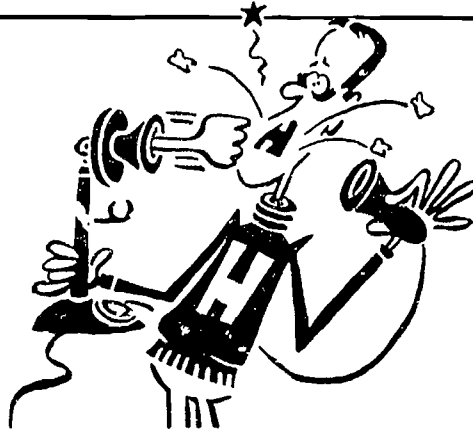
## Chapter 62

## Ringin' Up Some Changes

Of all the workers whose industries were placed under government control during World War I, only telephone operators had not received a wage increase. With their agreement expiring on Dec. 31, 1918, organized organizers in Boston demanded a new wage scale that would bring weekly wages to a range of \$10 to \$22.

The New England Telephone Co. referred the operators to Postmaster General Burleson, who sat on the operators' request for months. On April 11, 1919 the union again asked the Boston telephone company for relief. When the company refused, the union struck on April 15. Said union president Julia O'Connor, the operators "could expect no justice under the present system and they only way they could get it was to fight for it."

To everyone's surprise, more than 3,000 telephone operators at 90 exchanges throughout New England joined the Boston area operators, shutting down telephone service throughout the region. On the second day of the strike, the women were followed by 12,000 cable splicers and other workmen belonging to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.



The telephone companies recruited scabs from Harvard University and MIT. The Ivy League strikebreakers told the press they were looking forward to "sport and diversion." They got their excitement — several had their teeth knocked out by the striking women, who yelled, "He is taking our bread! Give it to him!"

It took the operators only five days on the picket line to make the right connections. At an April 20 meeting, company officials accepted the wage scales demanded by the union. The men, who walked out without demands of their own, got a 50 cent a day raise. Said Julia O'Connor: "It is the best agreement ever reached by the telephone operators." Soon after, she went on a nationwide speaking tour to urge operators to organize.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

Chapter 63

1919

In 1919, 275,000 steelworkers went on strike to gain a union and better wages and working conditions. Elbert H. Gary, chairman of United States Steel, denounced the strike as an attempt "to sovietize the steel industry." There was a general strike in Seattle in support of shipyard workers' demands for higher wages. The mayor called it a "Bolshevik plot." When New York's garment workers struck, bosses accused their union of raising the "red flag of Bolshevism" over the city. Textile strikers in Massachusetts, fully 60 percent of them women, were said to be bent on creating a "Soviet Lawrence."

The same year, scrubwomen and actors went on strike. Women workers struck garment shops and textile mills, and telephone companies, shoe mills and stockyards. They were joined by longshoremen, carpenters and subway employees. Even the Boston police went on strike that summer. In all, more than 4,000,000 Americans went on strike in 1919.



Most strikes were provoked by the rapid wartime increase in the cost of living. Between 1914 and 1919, the cost of milk had jumped from nine to 15 cents a quart, eggs from 37 to 62 cents a dozen, butter from 32 to 61 cents a pound. The overtime pay that allowed many workers to make ends meet disappeared with the end of World War I.

Outraged and alarmed, big business struck back with a red scare that convinced millions of Americans that every strike was the beginning of revolution. The employers' anti-red campaign put labor on the defensive. Workers' grievances were ignored, and civil liberties brushed aside.

(To be continued!)

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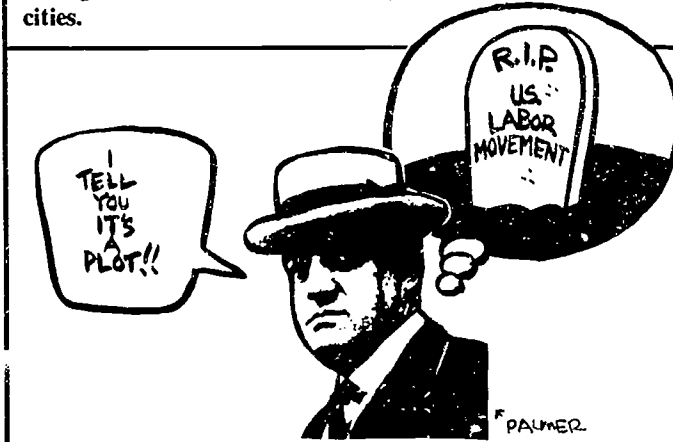
# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 64

## Red Scare

Early on the morning of Dec. 21, 1919, Emma Goldman was placed aboard the S.S. Buford, a creaky old army transport ship bound for Russia. Since her immigration to the U.S. in 1885, she had been among the nation's most controversial women. Radicalized by the 1886 Haymarket tragedy, she had been a courageous champion of workers' freedom, active in defense of the Homestead and Pullman strikers, in the San Diego free speech fight and in other labor struggles. Now, because of her unpopular ideas, she was being deported. Two hundred and forty-eight other immigrant radicals were on board with her. Others would follow her.

"On the night of Jan. 2, 1920, 10,000 American workers, both aliens and citizens, most of them trade union members and many of them union officials, were hauled from their beds, dragged out of meetings, grabbed from the streets and from their homes, and thrown into prison by the federal police under the direction of Attorney General Palmer and his aide, J. Edgar Hoover."\* The raids took place simultaneously in 70 cities.



Company spies aided Hoover's men by pointing out the active trade unionists to be picked up. Many of those seized had been active in strikes and in union affairs.

The *New York Times* proclaimed on Jan. 2, "200 Reds Taken in Chicago. Wholesale Plot Hatched to Overthrow U.S. Government." The only real plot was the one hatched by big business to weaken the labor movement with the assistance of the U.S. government. Big business regarded the American trade union movement as "an un-American, illegal and infamous conspiracy."\*\* So did Attorney General Palmer. The raids served their purpose — weaken organized labor, keep wages low and postpone the organization of basic industry.

\* *Labor's Untold Story*

\*\* John Kirby, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, in a 1913 pamphlet quoted in *Labor's Untold Story*

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 65 At Last — The Right to Vote!

During World War I, the women's suffrage movement intensified the campaign to win women the right to vote — and as part of this campaign, made special efforts to win the support of working women. For example, in September 1917, the National American Woman Suffrage Association urged “wage-earning suffragists everywhere” to work and organize for “the principle of equal pay for equal work.”

Working women were among those who picketed President Wilson in the White House, carrying banners that read, “All women should have the ballot, but we working women must have it.” Pickets were physically assaulted by men, some in uniform. The police stood by and watched, eventually arresting the women, who then faced brutal treatment in prison.



But the picketing continued, sometimes by members of the Women's Trade Union League. With so many women working in war-related industries, “doing everything for the Government,” they argued, they should have “the ballot as a weapon to safeguard the conditions under which both women and children work.”

Such arguments helped win over President Wilson, the Congress and state legislators. In August 1920, the 19th Amendment became part of the U.S. Constitution, stipulating that the right to vote “shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State on account of sex.” It had been 72 years since the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, N.Y. — long years of struggle carried out largely by women themselves, with occasional support from organized labor.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 66

## Speaking Her Mind

In May 1920, Kate Richards O'Hare gained release from the Missouri State Penitentiary where she served time for the crime of speaking her mind.

Born on a farm in Kansas in 1877, Kate Richards grew up there and in Kansas City, Missouri. In her late teens she became a machinist's apprentice, to the disgust of her fellow workers — who gave her the "dirtiest, greasiest work in the shop." But she stuck at it, and became one of the first female members of the International Association of Machinists. In 1895, a speech by "Mother" Mary Jones led to an interest in socialism. She became an organizer for the Socialist Party, a frequent candidate for office and an editor who investigated working conditions on behalf of unions.

I AM  
WOMAN!!



Once the U.S. entered World War I, Kate O'Hare traveled widely giving anti-war speeches. The war would benefit the profiteers, but not workers and farmers, whose problems would remain unsolved, she said. After an anti-war speech in Bowman, North Dakota, in 1917, she was arrested, tried and convicted of "espionage" and sentenced to five years imprisonment.

Protests set her free after a year and a half. She became respected for her prison reform work — especially her campaign to end the shameful practice of allowing garment companies to use convict labor.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 67

## Protection for Whom?

With the right to vote won, the Women's Trade Union League campaigned for legislation regulating women's hours and other conditions of work. The WTUL regarded such legislation as working women's best protection against exploitation.

Protective legislation curbed abuses, but proved a double-edged sword by excluding women from certain occupations. After World War I, thousands of New York women working as street-car operators, typesetters and telegraphers lost their jobs when the state legislature banned some kinds of night work by women.

Male-dominated craft unions welcomed protective legislation as a way of keeping women out of their trades. This came as no surprise to feminists like Alice Paul of the National Women's Party, who declared, "Men are not going to make laws which will place women in a position of industrial competition with them." The NWP gained the mistrust of female trade unionists by lining up with big business to oppose protective legislation.



Conflict sharpened in 1923 when the NWP proposed an Equal Rights Amendment that would have outlawed protective legislation. Said Melinda Scott of the United Textile Workers: "The National Women's Party does not know what it is to work 10 or 12 hours a day in a factory; so they do not know what it means to lose an eight-hour day law. The working women do know, and that's why they are unanimously opposing this amendment."

The real answer lie in union organization, but the American Federation of Labor was unwilling to take on the job of organizing the millions of unorganized workers, male and female.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 68

## Summer School

Women workers with a yearn to know more about the world than the daily grind could tell them got a chance to broaden their horizons in 1921 with the establishment of a Summer School for Working Women in Industry at Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pa. Both the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and the Labor Department's Women's Bureau had a role in setting up the school, which had some 100 participants each year in its eight-week courses.

Half the school's directors were college people, the other half labor leaders, a proposition backed by the student-workers. The courses stressed basic college education, although the students, as well as the WTUL and unions, insisted on discussion of economic issues. Among the instructors at Bryn Mawr's workers' school was Esther Peterson, later Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Kennedy Administration.

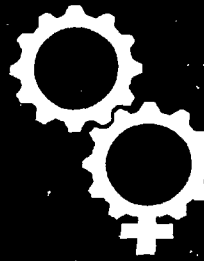
At the time, Bryn Mawr did not accept blacks as students. The women workers attending the summer school successfully overcame the opposition of the college president, and black working women were admitted. At first, blacks were segregated in a separate hall, but the students prevailed in their insistence on integration, too.



Many employers refused to give women time off to attend the school, so some quit their jobs in order to participate.

"The women workers who attended Bryn Mawr Summer School became leaders in their communities when they returned home, and many of them were instrumental in establishing evening classes for working women in their home communities," says historian Philip Foner. "For 15 years the Bryn Mawr School was a leadership center for working women."





# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

Chapter 69

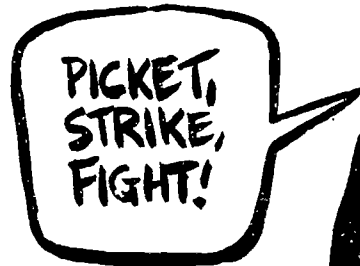
Chicago Blues

When 3,000 Chicago garment workers went on strike in February 1924, they placed their lives on the line for labor rights. But employer muscle and their own union's red-baiting doomed their struggle from the beginning.

The fight began on Feb. 27 as a general strike against garment manufacturers. Employers were quick to respond. A judge issued an injunction banning any form of picketing. More than 500 women strikers were arrested for walking a picket line. Police and company thugs ruthlessly attacked the strikers.

The strikes received a boost when 94-year-old Mother Jones stopped in Chicago on her way to California. "This strike of yours is a war," she declared. "Don't care about jails, courts or injunctions. Picket, strike, fight."

MY MOTHER DONE TOLD ME!...



The top officials of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union were engaged in a bitter struggle against the union's left-wing. A popular Chicago leader, Dora Lipschutz, had been expelled from the union despite her co-workers' protests. Notes historian Philip Foner: "While the strike dragged on and women strikers continued to be fined and jailed, the leadership of the ILGWU was devoting all its attention to the battle against the left-wing at the convention scheduled to open in Boston in May." By May, the Chicago strike had been defeated.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 70

## Wooly Bullies

Passaic, N.J. was a major center of fine woolens production in the 1920s. Its mills employed more than 16,000 workers, most of them immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Half were women who earned less than \$15 a week, working 10-hour shifts at an inhuman pace.

Many of the women worked nights; in fact, husbands were employed days on the condition that their wives would work nights. (New Jersey had a law banning night work by women, but woolen manufacturers ignored it.) Typically, a woman worker would put her children to bed and be on the job by 8 p.m. She would be home after 6 a.m. in time to prepare breakfast for the family. Then came housework, marketing, cooking dinner and somehow, sleep.

Botany Worsted Mills, the largest employer, imposed a 10% wage cut in October 1925, despite enjoying super-high profits from already low wages. Other manufacturers followed suit. There was little protest — unions had no real presence in Passaic. A United Front Committee of Textile Workers, organized by the Trade Union Education League, urged workers to resist the pay cut.

JUST WHEN YOU THINK THINGS  
COULDN'T GET WORSTED...



Although a Botany worker had already been fired for United Front activity, a committee of 45 workers went to see Colonel F.H. Johnson, company manager, to demand an end to the pay cut, time-and-a-half for overtime, and no discrimination against union supporters. Johnson fired the entire committee.

Word raced through the mill. Within hours, 4,000 workers were on strike. Within weeks, that number would almost quadruple!

(To be continued!)

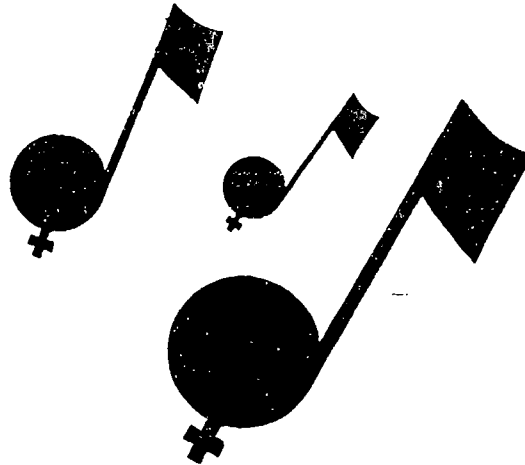
# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 71

## Strike Victory in Passaic

In early March 1926 the vast majority of the 17,000 workers employed in the woolen mills of Passaic, Garfield and Lodi, N.J. were on strike. Under the leadership of their United Front Committee, they demanded a wage increase, return of the money taken in the wage cut, a 40-hour week and time and one-half for overtime, decent sanitary conditions, no discrimination against union members and recognition of the union.

The mass meetings and huge daily, singing picket lines were new to the labor movement. "The long, singing line became a regular feature of the strike, creating an atmosphere and a feeling of unity and power," wrote historian Philip Foner. "The strikers' families were drawn into all of the activity. Many of the women, of course, worked in the mills, but even those who did not joined their husbands on the picket line. Women served on all committees and a number of them were picket captains."



Strikers faced police brutality — including use of tear-gas bombs and firehoses — as well as the anti-union terrorism of a so-called "Citizens' Committee." The women held their ground and during the long strike developed strong leadership. And they had the help of experienced organizers like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and "Mother" Eila Reeve Bloor.

The owners refused to deal with the United Front Committee. Then in August strike leader Alex Weisbord, a Communist, withdrew and by agreement leadership passed to the United Textile Workers. The owners who wouldn't negotiate with radicals decided they couldn't bargain with a moderate union either. But in December, 321 days after the strike began, Botany Worsted Mills agreed to restoration of the wages cut and recognition of the union. Other mills followed suit. The workers had won.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 72

### NEW BEDFORD'S 'COURAGEOUS WOMEN'

Wages were already low in the cotton textile mills of New Bedford, Mass. in April 1928 when the manufacturers slashed wages by 10 percent. The 5,000 skilled workers, represented by several unions affiliated to the American Federation of Labor, went on strike to restore the 10 percent.



The mills also employed some 27,000 unorganized workers, more than half of them women, who were urged to strike by the radical-led Textile Mill Committee. And strike they did, united behind the TMC's demand for a 20% wage increase and equal pay for equal work. Production stopped in 58 mills owned by 27 companies. Headlines in the *New Bedford Evening Standard* revealed that "Four Out of Five Pickets Women." Veteran organizer Ann Washington Craton, who came to assist the strikers, said: "Women are better at this sort of thing than the men. They are more courageous."

A showdown came on July 9, when the employers tried to open the mills. The owners turned to the law. The strikers held out despite mass arrests and the intervention of armed troops. The strike spread to nearby Fall River. And in September, New Bedford and Fall River strikers attended the founding convention of the National Textile Workers Union.

The AFL unions agreed to accept a five percent wage cut. The National Textile Workers Union fought on, but was forced to call off the strike in October with winter coming and the mass arrests of activists and supporters. The courageous women strikers had brought to birth a fighting new union and had helped stop the wage-cut trend.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

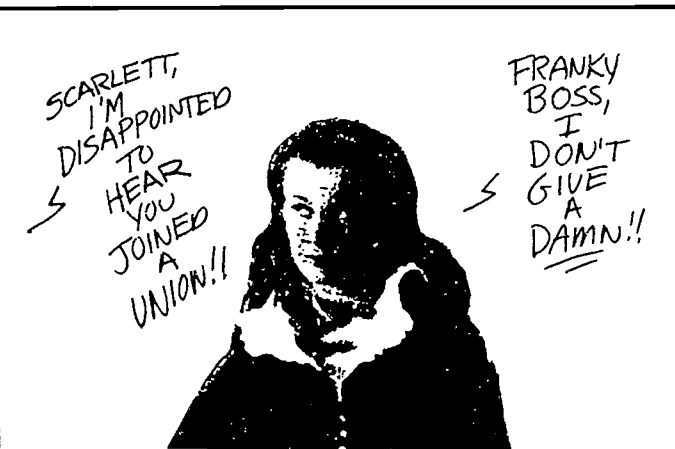
## Chapter 73

## Looking Southward

The Wall Street investors shifting capital from the Northeast textile industry to Southern mills in the 1920s convinced themselves that Southern workers were incapable of organizing, but didn't convince the workers. "We are not happy and by no means contented, said one working mother.

And no wonder. The little mill towns were completely dominated by the companies. The companies owned the shacks where workers lived and the stores where they shopped. The mills built the schools and churches, paid the teachers and ministers. "Law and order" was company, too.

Workers at the German-owned Glanzstoff rayon plant in Elizabethton, Tennessee rebelled in March 1929 when Margaret Bowen asked for a raise and got disciplined instead. Within a few days, 5,000 workers (mostly women) were on strike. A United Textile Workers local came into being, with Margaret Bowen as secretary-treasurer.



The company's use of the National Guard and injunctions did not sway the young women's resolve for higher wages. On March 22 a strike settlement committed the company to increase wages and take back all workers.

But the company reneged. Active union members were fired. AFL officials were kidnapped and threatened with death. Inspired by a militant strike in Gastonia, N.C., the rayon workers walked out in April. The company flexed its muscle: National Guardsmen, special police and deputies. As machine guns protected scabs, more than 1,000 strikers (including girls as young as 15) were thrown into jail.

The U.S. Labor Dept. produced a skimpy settlement in May. The UTW urged strikers to put doubts aside and accept it. Again the company reneged. Hundreds of workers were fired and blacklisted. The owners' message: Southern workers would be "docile," or else.

(In the next issue: Gastonia!)

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 74

## Trouble in the City of Spindles

Priding itself as the "South's City of Spindles," Gastonia, North Carolina in the 1920s was the region's leading textile center — and the first to be controlled by Northern capital. The Manville-Jenckes mills were also the first to impose "stretch-out" — more production with fewer workers. A majority of the workers were women; as in Passaic (see Chapter 71) the mills wouldn't hire a man unless his wife was already working.

In early 1929, Gastonia workers met with Fred Beal and Ellen Dawson, veterans of the New Bedford strike (see Chapter 72), and decided to join the militant National Textile Workers Union (NTWU). Firings of union supporters provoked a walkout of some 1,700 of the 2,200 mill workers. Strikers drew up demands that included a five-day week, \$20 minimum weekly wage, equal pay for equal work, and lower rent and electricity charges in the company-owned housing.



The mill superintendent took only three minutes to reject the strikers' demands. Four days later, National Guardsmen patrolled the mills, their guns aimed at workers. Court injunctions made picketing illegal. Arrest meant a \$50 fine and 30 days on the chain gang.

"The strikers were clubbed and beaten in the streets and carted off to jail en masse," wrote observer Tom Tippettt. "Their parades were broken up by force every day, and just as consistently the strikers would form again the following day to march, with full knowledge of what they were doing, into the clubs and rifles."

On the night of April 18, armed and masked men demolished the union headquarters and then broke into the Workers' International Relief store. They dumped food into the street and torched the building. When the troops finally showed up, they arrested Amy Schechter of Workers' International Relief and some of the strikers. Worse violence — and greater injustices — lay ahead.

(To Be Continued!)

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 75 MURDER OF A SONGWRITER

The 1,700 women and men on strike in Gastonia, N.C. in the spring of 1929 already faced National Guardsmen, court injunctions and vigilante terror. Then in May, the company forcibly evicted the strikers from their homes in company-owned housing.

Workers' International Relief set up tents for the strikers. Fearing further attacks, union members kept guard. On the night of June 7, the drunken police chief and a carload of his drunken deputies pulled up to the tent colony. A deputy opened fire. Union guards fired back. In the ensuing gun battle, Chief O.F. Aderholt was killed.

Sixteen strikers were indicted for murder, three of them women: Vera Buch Weissbord, a NTWU organizer; Sophie Melvin, who worked with the tent colony's children; and Amy Schecter of the Workers' International Relief. A mistrial was declared on Sept. 7; in response, anti-union thugs kidnapped and beat three union supporters. With the strike at a critical point, the NTWU called a rally for Sept. 14.

### Toiling On Life's Pilgrim Pathway E.M. WIGGINS

Verse: Toil - ing on life's pil - grim path - way —  
 Where - so - ev - er you may be, It — will help you fel - low  
 work - ers — If you — will join the I. L. D.

Chorus:  
 Come and join the I. L. D.  
 Come and join the I. L. D.  
 It will help to win the victory  
 If you will join the I. L. D.  
 (Repeat chorus after each verse)

When the bosses cut your wages  
 And you toil the labor free  
 Come and join the textile union  
 Also join the I. L. D.  
 Now our leaders are in prison  
 But I hope they will soon be free  
 Come and join the textile union  
 Also join the I. L. D.

Now the South is hedged in darkness  
 Although they begin to see  
 Come and join the textile union,  
 Also join the I. L. D.

Ella May Wiggins was among those going to the meeting. A skilled weaver and mother of five, the 29-year-old striker was a rank-and-file leader who wrote songs about the strike set to old mountain tunes. Her songs, said a reporter, told "better than speeches or leaflets of the people's faith in the union to give them a better life."

Ella May never made it to the rally. The labor singer was killed when vigilantes opened fire on the truck carrying her and other strikers to the meeting. No one was ever convicted, despite the evidence of more than 50 witnesses. Ella May's murder marked the end of the strike. Terror — legal and illegal — forced the union underground.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 76

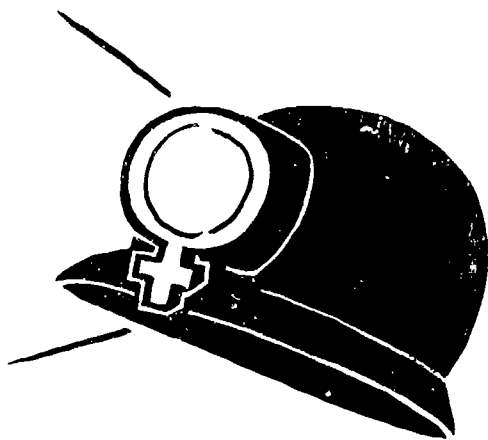
## Miners Rebel

A crisis in the mineworkers' union led to the formation of a new, progressive union at a Pittsburgh convention on Sept. 9, 1928. Taking their place at the founding of the National Miners' Union were 42 women representing women's auxiliaries.

Miners in Indiana, Ohio and western Pennsylvania had undergone long bitter strikes in 1927-1928. The women in the mining communities had been at the heart of those struggles. Many of them had braved (and in some cases beaten up!) Coal and Iron police, company thugs and state troopers and had withstood jail and tear gas.

Mrs. Ora Boyce, a black woman who represented the Indiana women's auxiliaries, became part of the new union's National Executive Committee.

"The NMU organized the women in the coal towns as well as the men," writes historian Philip Foner. "Women's auxiliaries played an invaluable role during strikes, and women were given a voice in formulating strategy."



A female organizer, Frieda Trugar, was assigned to set up women's auxiliaries in mining camps in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee. The auxiliaries campaigned for a program that included: the abolition of company stores; free medical and maternity services for miners and their families; and sanitary conditions in company housing.

In strikes, like the strike wave that swept through hundreds of northern mines in the summer of 1931, the NMU women's auxiliaries were a crucial component of the miners' struggles.



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 77

## "Which Side Are You On?"

In the summer of 1931, the National Miners' Union (see Chapter 77) sent organizers to Harlan County, Kentucky to assist striking miners. The company responded brutally with black-listing and evictions, and arrests, beatings and shooting. Women were an important part of the union struggle. Some wrote songs which union people continued to sing long after the strike in "Bloody Harlan" collapsed.

Aunt Molly Jackson, a ballad singer and a miner's wife, grew up in the mountains around Harlan.

I am a union woman  
Just as brave as I can be  
I do not like the bosses  
And the bosses don't like me.



Florence Reece married her coal miner husband Sam at age 16. This is how she describes writing her best known song:

"Sheriff J.H. Blair and his men came to our house in search of Sam. He was one of the union leaders. I was home alone with our seven children. They ransacked the whole house and then kept watch outside, waiting to shoot Sam down when he came back. But he didn't come home that night. Afterwards I tore a sheet from a calendar on the wall and wrote the words to 'Which Side Are You On' to an old Baptist hymn, 'Lay the Lily Low.'"

Come all you good workers  
Good news to you I'll tell  
Of how the good old union  
Has come in here to dwell

Which side are you on?  
Which side are you on?

If you go to Harlan County  
There is no neutral there  
You'll either be a union man  
Or a thug for J.H. Blair

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 78

## Greatly Depressed

The United States had known many economic depressions, but nothing like the deep, drawn-out depression that followed the stock market crash of October 1929. President Herbert Hoover assured the nation that "Prosperity is just around the corner" as jobs disappeared. The number of unemployed grew from 3 million in 1930 to more than 15 million just three years later. Wages dropped by 45 percent.



As the Great Depression worsened, more and more women workers found themselves out of work — and in 1933 unemployment seemed to be growing faster among women than among young male workers. Competition between men and women for jobs intensified. The president of the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh went so far as to suggest that 75 percent of available jobs be reserved for men.

Some state legislatures enacted laws removing married women from state jobs; although overturned, the intent of such discriminatory laws was carried out through executive orders in Indiana, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island restricting employment of married women. Factories, schools and public utilities laid off or imposed bans on hiring married women.

But fully 40 percent of women working in industry were married, most bringing home wages supplementing the meager earnings of others in the family. "If you are a woman, you will understand what it means to work in the factory and keep house," wrote one woman in 1930. "I have been working, even when my husband had a job, in order to make ends meet. Now he is out of work since last October, and don't ask me how we get along on my miserable earnings. But without it we would starve."

(To be continued)

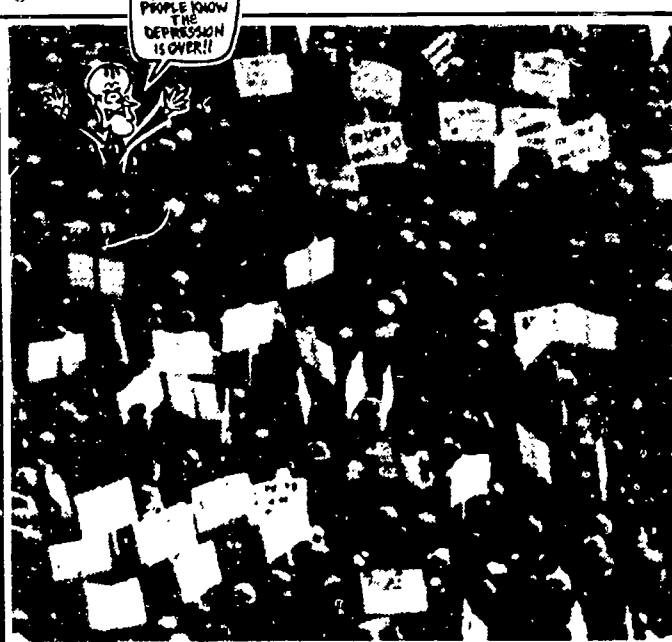
# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 79

## Unemployed Fightback

When the Great Depression hit, there was no unemployment insurance, no welfare. The unemployed faced grim and desperate conditions. Out of their despair came organization and a ringing call for change.

The fightback was signaled by rallies around the country on March 6, 1930. Hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers demonstrated in some 30 cities and towns; close to 100,000 filled Union Square in New York City. They were attacked by police; a witness reported: "Demonstrators and bystanders were slugged and kicked, blackjacked and knocked down by mounted police... Women were struck in the face with blackjacks, and many of the women were kicked as they lay on the ground..."



On July 4-5, 1930, some 440 women were among the 1,320 delegates attending the founding convention of the Unemployed Councils of the U.S.A. The Unemployed Councils called for passage of an unemployment insurance bill and maternity benefits, and opposed discrimination by sex or race.

Demonstrating with such signs as "Work or Wages," "Fight, Don't Starve!" and "United We Eat," the Unemployed Councils demanded equal unemployment insurance for single and married women workers, no dismissal of married women, free municipal lodging houses for unemployed women and free medical care for unemployed pregnant women.

In many cities, Unemployed Councils fought evictions with direct action. "We would move the furniture and people's belongings back into the houses emptied by the eviction notices," said Matilda Molina Tolly of Los Angeles.

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 80

## Trade Union Unity League

Some hope and direction during the grim depression years of the early 1930s came from the Trade Union Unity League. The TUUL was founded in 1929 at a convention attended by 690 delegates, nearly half of them from three militant unions — the National Miners' Union, the National Textile Workers' Union and the Needle Trades Workers' Industrial Union. Seventy-two delegates were women.



The TUUL took the place of the Trade Union Educational League, which had been organized around demands that craft unions in the American Federation of Labor amalgamate into industrial unions. The new organization had a more ambitious goal. "Its main task was the organization of the unorganized into industrial unions," recalled Ella Reeve "Mother" Bloor. "New unions were to be formed only where the A.F. of L. unions were in a hopeless state, or did not exist at all."

The founding convention elected legendary organizer William Z. Foster as general secretary, sent two women to the executive committee (Rose Wortis of the Needle Trades and Ann Burlak of the Textile Workers) and adopted a far-ranging women's program, described by labor historian Phil Foner as "the most detailed and advanced for women workers ever adopted by an American labor organization."

That program included equal pay for equal work, raising women's wages, a minimum wage for women workers in agricultural and domestic service and maternity leave of full pay for eight weeks.

Along with the convention was a women's conference, at which women from the needle trades, textiles, mining, electrical, auto and other industries talked about the problems faced by women in industry, and called for the organization of the eight and a half million unorganized women workers.

Unorganized workers were organized by the millions in the late Thirties by the CIO, but the TUUL helped prepare the way. And as Mother Bloor pointed out, "practically all the important strikes between 1929 and 1933 were carried on by the TUUL unions."

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 81 Cracking a Hard-Shell Employer

In the spring of 1933, the unity of women nutpickers cracked the arrogance of a wealthy company.

The R.E. Funsten Co. owned seven of 16 pecan processing factories in St. Louis; a workforce that was nearly 90 percent black and female worked in sweatshop conditions for as little as 63 cents a day. In early 1933, workers began to organize and made contact with the Food Workers Industrial Union, an affiliate of the Trade Union Unity League (See Chapter 80).

Funsten workers decided on a list of demands that included better pay scales, equal pay for black and white workers, an end to discrimination and union recognition. After stalling for three weeks, Eugene Funsten rejected the demands.

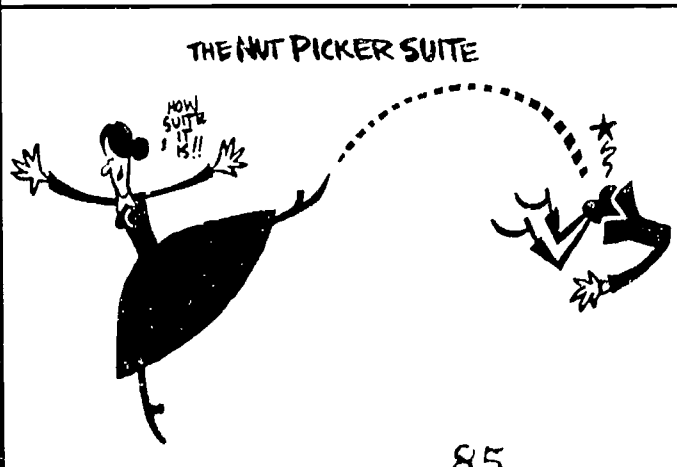
Within a few days, some 1,400 workers had walked off their jobs! "We think we are entitled to live as well as other folks live, and we should be entitled to a wage that will provide us with ample food and clothing," declared Connie Smith, a middle-aged black woman and strike leader.

Funsten made two offers; both were rejected by the strikers. He then brought in strikebreakers; two police cars and taxicabs carrying scabs were smashed by strikers. Fifteen women strikers and organizer William Sentner\* were arrested; 1,500 women, black and white, marched on city hall in protest. The mayor appointed a committee to seek a resolution to the strike.

\* Sentner later became a general vice president of UE!

After intense negotiations assisted by the mayor's committee, Funsten agreed to a 100 percent wage increase, abolition in rate differences between black and white nutpickers and recognition of shop committees.

In the midst of the Depression, before the passage of any labor laws, black women had taken on a powerful corporation and won!



# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 82

## Frances Perkins

When women workers leaped to their death from the windows of the burning Triangle Shirtwaist Co. on March 25, 1911, a horrified Frances Perkins watched below. "I felt I must sear it not only on my mind but on my heart as a never-to-be-forgotten reminder of why I had to spend my life fighting conditions that would permit such a tragedy," Perkins later wrote. She was nearly 32 at the time of the disaster, which claimed 143 lives.

Perkins, who had been secretary of the New York Consumers' League, in 1912 became chief investigator for the New York State Factory Commission. She made a point of educating politicians on the conditions that workers faced on the job.

"We used to make it our business to take Al Smith (governor of New York and Democratic nominee for president) to see women, thousands of them, coming off the ten-hour night-shift on the rope walks in Auburn. We made sure that Robert Wagner personally crawled through the tiny hole in the wall that gave egress to a steep iron ladder covered with ice and ending twelve feet from the ground, which was euphemistically labeled 'Fire Escape' in many factories."

Perkins successfully campaigned for factory safety legislation and reduction in working hours. She became the first woman to hold a major political office in New York when Gov. Smith appointed her to the State Industrial Commission in 1919. Ten years later, Governor Roosevelt appointed her State Industrial Commissioner, with responsibility for administering the state's labor and workers compensation laws.



In 1933, Perkins became the first woman ever to serve in a presidential cabinet when newly-elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her U.S. Secretary of Labor. Industrialists and labor officials alike grumbled about Roosevelt's choice. Said AFL Pres. William Green, "Labor can never be reconciled to the selection." Perkins wasn't "one of the boys."

# WOMEN WORKERS' HISTORY

## Chapter 83

## The New Deal and the Old

To revive an economy stuck deep in depression, the Roosevelt Administration pushed its "New Deal" legislation through Congress in the spring of 1933; among the laws passed was the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA).\* The NIRA created codes for each industry which set maximum hours of work and minimum wages, and guaranteed the right of workers to join unions and to engage in collective bargaining.

In most cases, the industrial codes provided for lower wages for women than men. Rose Schneiderman of the Women's Trade Union League, the only woman appointed to the NIRA labor advisory board, worked with Eleanor Roosevelt (the president's wife) and women's groups in arguing for a single minimum-wage standard for industries employing men and women.

Many codes were revised. Schneiderman hailed the reforms as representing a "Magna Carta of the working woman." But a fourth of the codes still specified wage differentials based on sex. And in the other codes — like the one for electrical manufacturing — the "old deal" often canceled out the benefits of the New.



In the electrical industry, the NIRA code set a minimum wage of 40 cents an hour. But a worker who had earned less than 40 cents as of July 15, 1929 was to be paid 32½ cents. And because the companies could pay inexperienced help at 80 percent of the minimum wage, many women who had been laid off before the code went into effect found it impossible to return to work. This provision, said the Women's Bureau, "defeated the real meaning of the minimum wage by perpetuating the status of any low wage group, such as women or Negroes."

Testifying on the textile industry code, Ann Burlak, secretary of the National Textile Workers Union (see Chapter 80), urged the government to adopt a clause barring discrimination against any employee because of race, sex or creed. Not willing to antagonize Southern mill owners, Congress refused.

\*The NIRA was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in May 1935.