

# The Labor Origins of the Next Women's Movement

Dorothy Sue Cobble's book, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2002), retrieves the forgotten feminism of the previous generation of working women. Their reform agenda – an end to unfair sex discrimination, just compensation for their waged labor, and the rights of their families and communities – launched a revolution in employment practices that has carried over into the present. It is the first book to link the continuous tradition of feminism to the leadership of labor women within that movement. The following talk was originally presented at the Labor and Working Class History Association's Annual Luncheon Address at the Organization of American Historians Convention in April 2002.

IN 1937, 23-YEAR-OLD Myra Wolfgang strode to the middle of one of Detroit's forty Woolworth's five and dime stores and gave the signal for the planned sit-down strike of salesclerks and counter waitresses to begin. The main Woolworth's store was already on strike, and the union was threatening to escalate the strike to all of the stores in Detroit. Wolfgang was an art school dropout from a Jewish-Lithuanian immigrant background who had already given her share of soapbox speeches for the Proletarian Party, a small Marxist group, before settling down to union organizing in the early 1930s.

Nicknamed the "battling belle of Detroit" by the local media, Wolfgang eventually became an International Vice

President for the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union. But in the 1940s and 1950s, she ran the union's Detroit Joint Council, which represented thousands of cooks, bartenders, food servers, dishwashers, maids, and other hotel and restaurant workers. She relished a good fight with employers, particularly over issues close to her heart. A lifelong member of the NAACP, she insisted, for example, on sending out racially-integrated crews from the union's hiring hall in the 1940s and 1950s, rejecting such standard employer requests as "black waiters only, white gloves required."

In the 1960s, Wolfgang, now in her fifties, led a sleep-in in the Michigan state house to persuade legislators to raise the minimum wage. She also brought Hugh Hefner to the bargaining table to talk about the work conditions of Playboy Bunnies at his Detroit Club. HERE eventually won a national contract covering all the Playboy Clubs by 1969, but Detroit was the first to go union. In these initial bargaining sessions in 1964, Wolfgang and her negotiating team debated with Hefner over the exact length in inches of the Bunny suit, that is, how much of the food server's body would be covered. They proposed creating company rules for customers not just for Bunnies – rules such as "look but do not touch." The union also spent time challenging Hefner's policy of firing Bunnies as they aged and suffered what management called "loss of bunny image," a somewhat nebulous concept, I would think. But not so, claimed the Playboy employee handbook. "Loss of bunny image" occurred at the moment bunnies developed such employee defects as "crinkling eyelids and drooping derrieres."

These fascinating labor-management conversations, I should add, came only after an extensive seven and a half-month organizing campaign. Wolfgang launched her assault by sending her younger daughter, 17-year old Martha, in as a union "salt." She was promptly hired, despite being underage. Martha then fed to Mom a steady diet of useful information, particularly about the club's wage policies, or I should say

their no wage policies. Bunnies, it turned out, were expected to support themselves solely on customer tips. Wolfgang and her volunteers picketed the club, wearing bunny suits and carrying signs that read: "Don't be a bunny, work for money." They also secured favorable media coverage, lots of it. To the delight of scribbling reporters, Wolfgang "scoffed at the Bunny costume as 'more bare than hare' and insisted that the entire Playboy philosophy was 'a gross perpetuation of the idea that women should be obscene and not heard.'"

I first stumbled across Wolfgang, or better put, she reached out and grabbed me when I came across her papers in the archives at the Walter Reuther Library in Detroit. But it was not just her entertaining antics that kept me awake. I was intrigued by her political philosophy, particularly her gender politics. She considered herself a feminist, and she was outspoken about her commitment to end sex discrimination. Yet at the same time, Wolfgang actively opposed the ERA as late as 1972, defended the woman-only protective hour laws in Michigan when NOW led a push for repeal in 1967, and she accused Betty Friedan and other feminists of demeaning household labor, romanticizing wage work, and caring not a wit about the needs of the majority of women. Indeed, in a 1970 Detroit debate between Wolfgang and Friedan hosted by Women's Studies at Wayne State University, things rapidly devolved into mutual name calling with each accusing the other of being an "Aunt Tom." Friedan called Wolfgang an "Aunt Tom" for being subservient to the "labor bosses" and Wolfgang returned the favor, calling Friedan the "Chamber of Commerce's Aunt Tom."

MY CURIOSITY ROUSED, I set out to discover more about the Myra Wolfgangs of the post-depression decades. And what I have come to understand is that there were multiple and competing visions of how to achieve women's equality in the so-called "doldrum years" – the supposedly quiescent trough of feminist reform between the 1920s and the 1960s. And that the Wolfgangs

of the world, far from being oddities, were the dominant wing of feminism in that era. My talk today is about this group of social reformers – who they were, what they thought and did, and what difference their history makes to those of us who write history as well as those of us concerned with making it – two groups I should say that are not mutually exclusive, especially in this gathering.

The women I'm writing about could be characterized from a number of angles. First, they could be seen as a "missing wave" in the history of twentieth-century feminism – the wave that existed between the so-called first wave of women's reform that ended in the 1920s and the so-called second wave of feminism in the late 1960s. I say "so-called" since as I speak the history of women's reform is being "re-waved," to use the language from an earlier panel at this conference. But as my friend and fellow historian Nancy Hewitt observed, we should perhaps go further and "ban all permanent waves – referring of course to the need to keep our chronologies of feminism ever flexible."

Second, they are the intellectual daughters and granddaughters of women like Jane Addams and Florence Kelley. As we know from the work of Nancy Cott, Estelle Freedman, and others, social feminism did not expire in the 1920s or even in the 1930s. Indeed, I argue that stimulated by the rise of a new labor movement in the 1930s and the heady experiences of World War Two, social feminism emerged refashioned and modernized by the end of the war. And significantly, unlike the social feminism of an earlier era, it was now led by labor women, women who identified with and worked within the labor movement, arguably the largest and most powerful social movement of the period.

Third, they are the generation who came of age in the depression and World War II. For some of us, such as myself, they are "our mothers" [mine was born in 1912 and was in her teens when the depression hit the South], and for others they

are your "grandmothers" or perhaps your "great-grandmothers." Many were the "Rosies" who took on wartime jobs and who at the war's end supposedly returned to the home and embraced a conservative gender ideology centered on domesticity. Yet the majority of women war workers, as we know, had jobs before the war and the majority kept on working afterward. And, many of these women turned their energies to building unions in the postwar decades and to making those unions more responsive to the needs of women.

The story of union growth in the 1930s is the familiar, oft-told tale. But for women, the 1940s proved just as crucial. For one, the labor movement feminized significantly. Yes, the numbers of women in the labor movement skyrocketed in wartime and then plummeted during reconversion, but what often gets lost is that the numbers rebounded in the late 1940s and then remained far above the 1930s levels both in absolute and percentage terms. By the early 1950s, for example, some three million women were union members, a far cry from the 800,000 who belonged in 1940, and the percentage of unionists who were women had doubled as well since 1940, reaching 18 percent. In addition, at least a million women belonged to labor auxiliaries by my estimates. Auxiliaries took in the wives, daughters, mothers, sisters, and on occasion, friends of union men. By the 1940s, however, many of these women were also wage earners, albeit in unorganized sectors. Through the auxiliary, they could participate in the union movement and they did.

Of equal or even greater significance, especially for my story, the 1940s witnessed the move of women into local, regional, and national leadership positions within the labor movement. I'm not talking gender parity here – what they're currently approaching in France with the help of national legislation – but I am talking about an increase in women's influence and the emergence of a critical mass of women union leaders who were committed to women's equality as well as to ending class injustice. Women like Myra Wolfgang but others

such as Gladys Dickason, Dorothy Robinson, Anne Draper, or Esther Peterson of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA); Selina Burch or Helen Berthelot or Catherine Conroy of the Communications Workers of America (CWA); Mary Callahan or Gloria Johnson of the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE); or the group of women at the United Auto Workers (UAW) which included Caroline Davis, Lillian Hatcher, Millie Jeffrey, Olga Madar, and Dorothy Haener. Some, like Ruth Young of the United Electrical Workers Union (UE) or Elizabeth Sasuly and Luisa Moreno of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America (FTA) disappeared from the public stage by the early 1950s, due in part to Cold War politics, but they were the exceptions not the rule.

Obviously, time prohibits me from giving each of these women their due but let me offer two brief sketches – one of Addie Wyatt of the Packinghouse Workers and a second of Caroline Dawson Davis of the UAW. Hired on in 1941 at Armour's meatpacking plant in Chicago, Mississippi-born Addie Wyatt, like most African-American women labor leaders in this period, began her union activism during the war. By the early 1950s, her local, the majority of whom were white men, elected her as vice-president. Later, she took over the presidency of the local and later ran successfully for the UPWA's national executive board on a platform emphasizing women's rights and the advancement of racial minorities. In 1954, she was appointed to the UPWA national staff, a position she held for the next thirty years.

Caroline Dawson Davis, who directed the UAW Women's Bureau from 1948 to 1973, grew up in a poor Kentucky mining family steeped in religion and unionism. In 1934, she got a job as a drill press operator in the same Indiana auto parts plant that hired her father. She helped organize her plant in 1941, was elected vice president in 1943, and shortly thereafter, Davis recalled, she "moved upstairs when the union president was drafted." By 1948, she had taken over the reins

of the UAW Women's Department. A year earlier, Life Magazine had run a feature story on "the strikingly attractive lady labor leader," accompanied by a four-page photo spread of Davis. In one photo, Davis lounges at home reading Freud, a thinker whose ideas, she explained to the interviewer, proved indispensable to running her local union.

THE GROUP OF LABOR WOMEN I'm describing was a diverse group, racially and ethnically. It was also a mixed group in terms of class backgrounds – not what I expected to find when I first began. Many came from working class and poor backgrounds, women like Davis or Wyatt, but others came from decidedly elite backgrounds. A generation earlier, many politically engaged college women would have moved into settlement house work perhaps, or joined the National Consumers' League, or pursued a career in social welfare. But in the context of the 1930s, they gravitated toward the labor movement. And by the 1940s many held union staff jobs – as lobbyists and political action coordinators, as community service reps, in research and education departments. A few also held key government positions.

The central players here are women like Esther Peterson who grew up in Provo, Utah, where her father was the local school superintendent. She attended Columbia Teachers' College and taught PE at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers before becoming ACWA's first legislative representative in 1945, and the AFL-CIO's first woman lobbyist in 1958. (Eventually, she became the highest-ranking woman official in the Kennedy Administration). Or Kitty Ellickson, who graduated from Vassar in 1926, did graduate work in economics at Columbia before joining the staff of the United Mine Workers in the early 1930s. By 1942, Ellickson had secured a full-time job in the CIO research department. She stayed on (moving into the AFL-CIO Research Department after the merger) until 1962 when she became the Executive Secretary for Kennedy's

Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. Or Frieda Miller, the life-long partner of ILG veteran organizer Pauline Newman, who headed the Women's Bureau from 1944 to 1953. Miller's father was a lawyer, and she had a college degree plus years of doctoral work in economics at the University of Chicago.

By the end of World War II, these labor women had articulated a broad-ranging and concrete social reform agenda – one that put them in direct opposition to the National Women's Party agenda, to the policies and principles being touted by conservative employers and politicians, and, at times, to the priorities advanced by their union brothers. They came together nationally at a series of Women's Bureau conferences held for trade union women leaders between 1944 and 1946, and they continued to socialize and work together for the next twenty-five years, first through the Women's Bureau Labor Advisory Committee, a group that served as a national think tank for top women in the labor movement from 1945 to 1953, and then through the National Committee for Equal Pay, which existed from 1953 to 1965, and other ad hoc coalitions.

But what was their reform agenda? Their "vision of equality" and of women's rights? Their own language is revealing here. They talked of ending "unfair sex discrimination," of securing "equal job rights for women," and of achieving "first-class economic citizenship" for women. Let me take each of these three phrases in turn, paying attention to how each illuminates the underlying assumptions guiding labor feminism in the postwar decades.

First, "ending unfair sex discrimination." Like their opponents in the National Women's Party, labor feminists recognized that discrimination against women did exist – an assumption not widely shared in the 1940s. Yet their goal was not to end all distinctions on the basis of sex – what they feared would be the result of the passage of the ERA – but to



end only those distinctions that harmed women, that is only the "unfair" or "invidious" discriminations. Some distinctions – such as the woman- only state laws setting wage floors or hour ceilings – benefited the majority of women. These should ultimately be amended and extended to men, they felt, but until that happened, the laws should be retained – hence a major source of their opposition to the ERA.

The two sides in the postwar debate over women's equality squared off most dramatically in 1948 before the House Judiciary Committee in hearings called to consider which women's rights bill, if any, should be passed: the ERA legislation supported by the NWP, the Chamber of Commerce, and others, primarily conservative Democrats and Republicans, or the "Women's Status Bill," first introduced by Democratic Congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas in 1947, conceived largely by the labor women I've described, and backed by a broad coalition of labor and women's groups.

The 1948 debate opened by both sides declaring themselves in favor of "equality for women" and of removing discriminatory laws. But there the agreement ended. Neither could agree on what "equality" or "discrimination" meant nor on what kind of legislation would, in Frieda Miller's words, "in fact provide equality for the great majority of women." The Women's Status Bill rejected a uniform, gender-neutral legal approach. Instead, they called for a presidential commission on the status of women that would review on a case-by-case basis the laws affecting women. The Commission idea, pressed most audibly by Peterson and Ellickson, would consider the legal status of women but also inaugurate, they hoped, a national debate over "the political, civic, economic, and social status of women." The NWP retained its single-minded focus on a blanket constitutional amendment, and there the conversation remained until the 1960s, stuck in what William Chafe has called a "politics of recrimination."

Yet the battle over the ERA and the Women's Status Bill

was only a part of the reform agenda of labor feminists in the postwar decades. Let me move on the second of my three phrases: "equal job rights for women." This phrase often meant opening up jobs to married women, older women, pregnant women and mothers as well as challenging discrimination on the basis of race, religion, and ethnicity. It also meant ending wage discrimination against women and women's jobs. Later in the 1960s, union women would file some of the first grievances and lawsuits under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, claiming the right to move into so-called men's jobs and increase their earnings and status. But in the 1940s and 1950s, the primary approach to gender equality taken by both women labor leaders and the rank and file was to change the way the "traditionally female jobs" were valued and paid, to assert, if you will, a separate and equal sphere. In other words, they imagined ending gender hierarchies without necessarily ending all gender differences.

Their campaign for equal pay is perhaps the best example here. In 1945, they introduced an Equal Pay Bill into Congress, and they reintroduced it every year until 1963 when the Equal Pay Act passed. They also succeeded in passing equal pay laws in some 18 states in the decades following World War II and in pushing a number of unions to bargain, picket, and strike over the gender wage gap. What is significant here is not only their activism but their ideas. They defined equal pay broadly. It meant "equal wages" when women and men held the same job; it also meant raising the pay in the jobs traditionally held by women. The wage-setting practices and job evaluation systems used by employers undervalued women's skill, productivity, and responsibility they claimed and a fundamental rethinking of employer pay practices was in order. To achieve this broad goal, the Federal and state legislation they introduced consistently relied upon the words "equal pay for comparable work" rather than "equal pay for equal work."

They came close to winning comparable pay at the federal

level but were defeated by many of the same women they had debated in the 1940s. Katherine St. George, Republican Congresswoman from New York and NWP sympathizer, introduced an amendment to the Equal Pay Bill in 1962 that labor feminists regarded with horror. St. George asked that "equal" be substituted for "comparable" – in part because as she pointed out, women do not need "favors." When the sponsor of the bill retorted that substituting "equal" would destroy the bill, St. George responded: all we want is "identity" not anything more or less. But the labor feminists wanted "more." As Myra Wolfgang put it: we want to have our cake and eat it too, especially, she added, since we are baking it. Women should be paid the same as men when they do the same work, but they should also receive a fair and just wage when they do different jobs. Equality, then, would be messy and would involve a struggle over values and not just access.

As we know, St. George's amendment passed, and the Equal Pay Bill that became law the next year was a far cry from what the labor feminists envisioned. The comparable worth movement did not resurface until the end of the 1970s, led once again by labor women, this time centered in the large public sector unions. Oddly, however, many of these union activists had forgotten or never knew their own history: comparable worth was not new; it had not been invented in 1979. Rather, it had a long historical pedigree: one rooted in the labor movement itself.

WINNING "FIRST-CLASS ECONOMIC citizenship for women," however, the last of my phrases, involved more than "equal job rights" or the right to equal compensation. For these women, there was no equality without a transformation in the work patterns, norms, and practices of the work world itself. They did not want to move women into a sphere designed for men; rather, as Frieda Miller put it, they wanted "to transform the masculine pattern." In other words, they were challenging not the

feminine mystique but the masculine, the myth that the way men organized and thought about work was natural and the best for everyone. To transform these "masculine patterns" required a deep cultural shift, and it required new social policies that explicitly recognized women's diverse needs and realities. Thus, beginning in the early 1940s, labor feminists pushed unions to negotiate improved pregnancy and maternity leaves, better health coverage for childbirth and infant care, and more control over work time. They were also among the strongest advocates of governmental social supports for child bearing and childrearing. They sought, for example, to expand disability and unemployment coverage to pregnant women and mothers, and starting in 1943, they lobbied repeatedly for federally funded universal childcare programs. In other words, caring labor was as deserving of social wages or state benefits as any other work.

Here, their efforts are clearly a forerunner to the work-family reforms that have become increasingly central to the current women's movement. Yet the core of their work-family agenda still has not been fully incorporated into today's discussions. For theirs was a work-family agenda that was attempting to solve the particular problems of non-professional women. That meant, for them, finding collective not individual solutions to two crucial problems: low wages and long hours.

In terms of wages, as we have seen, labor feminists argued for a re-evaluation of the wages in women's jobs as well as "equal pay for equal work." In addition, however, many, but not all, sought to feminize labor's historic call for a "living wage" – or what some historians refer to as a "family wage." Rather than abandon the "living wage" tradition, they wanted to de-gender it, to claim it for women as well as men. A just wage was one that recognized dependency and acknowledged that, in many instances, a wage needed to support more than the individual wage earner. This is a

particularly important point, given the ideological shift today toward a "market wage" or a wage supposedly determined solely by productivity or supply and demand calculations. "What's after the family wage?" social theorist Nancy Fraser asked not too long ago. Well, unfortunately the answer does not appear to be a breadwinner wage for all but a wage based on what economist Eileen Appelbaum calls an "unencumbered worker ideal." This false ideal and the low wage it justifies extends to women and increasingly to men a new myth of individualism, one that denies the reality of our social interdependence and sets up a false world of always able-bodied, perpetually self-reliant individuals – individuals who exist apart from community, civic life, or care-giving responsibilities. This was not the world labor feminists sought.

Let me close with a brief nod to the time, and to the struggle over time in the postwar era. The search for increased leisure and control of work time did not end in the 1930s. Male-led unions continued to demand leisure in the post-WWII period – not in the form of shorter daily hours but in the form of what Walter Reuther called "lumps of leisure," that is, more vacations, more holidays, more paid sick leave, and earlier retirement. In other words, the struggle shifted from a shorter day to shorter weeks, shorter years, and a shorter work life.

Labor feminists, for their part, supported many of the union campaigns to secure these "lumps of leisure." Nevertheless, as Benjamin Hunnicutt reminds us in his study of the six-hour day at Kellogg, temporal policies were as gendered as wage. The lumps of leisure approach did not do much for those shackled with the "double day"; rather shorter daily hours was still the preferred work time reform for those juggling household and market work. Labor feminists, then, continued to search for mechanisms to make shorter hours a reality. Rebuffed in the bargaining arena, they relied

primarily on legislative means. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, for example, they sought to preserve existing state maximum hour laws – some 43 states had such laws in 1957! – and, where possible, make them more flexible and extend them to men. Maximum hour laws, they argued, offered better protection than the Fair Labor Standards Act. The FLSA used the disincentive of overtime pay to discourage long hours but it did not forbid them. The FLSA approach to limiting hours, was, in their minds, an inadequate check on employer power and on the competitive market's relentless drive toward longer hours. The women's model of hour protection, that is, laws setting mandatory hour limits, was the better approach. The women's standard should be universalized to cover all workers.

Yet there were no easy answers, and in many ways it was the debate over hours that ensured the breakup of the long-standing consensus among labor feminists in the 1960s. These debates followed in the wake of the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Law which called into question the legality of all women-only state laws, hour laws included. The UAW women, Caroline Davis, Dorothy Haener, and others, sided with the National Organization of Women and the Business and Professional Women's Groups, insisting that the "opportunity to earn" could no longer be denied women, and that state maximum hour laws should be repealed. Mary Callahan, Myra Wolfgang, Kitty Ellickson, and others dissented. They warned that opportunity for both sexes was important but so was an hours policy that reined in market work and allowed for a life apart from wage work, a policy that allowed for the right not to work as well as the right to work. In short, they wanted the state laws amended, made more flexible, and extended to men.

Despite their pleas, the state maximum hour laws were repealed, and no new mechanisms for putting a ceiling on work time were identified. Rather, the FLSA became the nation's primary regulatory approach to limiting long hours. Recognized

as increasingly problematic today, its weakness is certainly part of the reason for why work hours in the United States are longer than in any other industrialized country.

The labor feminists, then, who led the other women's movement in the decades following the depression, articulated their own distinct and evolving vision of women's equality. They defined economic citizenship broadly to include the right to wage work and to a just compensation as well as the right to care for one's family and community. A new feminism would emerge by the end of the 1960s, a feminism that opened up different and at times exhilarating new vistas on equality. Yet like the feminism that preceded it, it too failed to solve many of the crucial economic and class issues that still lie at the heart of women's second-class citizenship. The women's movement of the twenty-first century, if it is to succeed, needs to build on the liberatory gender politics of the sixties and seventies; it also needs to recapture its roots in the social feminist traditions of labor women.

## **Footnotes**