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# Women in Labor Unions

By GLADYS DICKASON

IN Alabama recently a farmer's wife, who was also a shirtmaker in a small-town clothing factory, visited the Governor of the state with a union delegation to report a case of mob violence against union organizers. After hearing her story, the Governor ordered an investigation and issued a statement emphasizing that union members possessed the same rights under the law as other people.

This woman in the office of the Governor of her state epitomizes the progress that working women have made through union organization. We have come a long way since 1831, when the *Boston Transcript* denounced the efforts of the tailoresses of New York to form a union as an instance of woman's "clamorous and unfeminine declarations of personal rights which it is obvious a wise Providence never destined her to exercise."<sup>1</sup>

A double issue is involved in the organization of women—the rights of women and the rights of labor. These were two of the focal points of the nineteenth-century struggle to extend democracy; and in our own century they have been among the first victims of such counterdemocratic movements as nazism and fascism. Both the labor movement and the "woman" movement have had to wage a stubborn fight against the practice which seeks to grade human beings arbitrarily, by race or sex or class, into superiors and inferiors, into the elite few who give orders and the many who accept them with unquestioning obedience. Both movements are based on the principle that a healthy society depends upon equal opportuni-

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Delzell, "Early History of Women Trade Unionists of America," Women's Trade Union League pamphlet, 1919, p. 8.

ties for all men and women to participate actively in shaping the conditions of their lives.

Today it is evident that the survival of democracy, and perhaps of civilization itself, depends on the ability of people everywhere to understand their world and take their full share of responsibility in it. It is against this background that we must consider the work unions are doing in organizing women, in improving their economic status, and in enabling them to play their part as responsible members of society.

## WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE AND IN UNIONS

The organization of women workers has assumed increasing importance during the past several decades as more and more women have entered the labor market and as it has become evident that they constitute a permanent factor in the total labor force. This trend is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1—TREND IN EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN, 1910-46<sup>2</sup>

Year	Number of Women in Labor Force	Per Cent of All Persons in Labor Force
1910	7,789,000	20.9
1920	8,430,000	20.4
1930	10,679,000	22.0
1940	13,015,000	24.4
1944 (July)	19,110,000	34.7
1946 (Nov.)	17,020,000	28.9

Among the chief factors responsible for the entrance of women into the labor force have been: (1) inadequacy of in-

<sup>2</sup> Figures for 1910 through 1940 are based on U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (1946), pp. 170-71; for 1944, on *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 59, No. 3, p. 658; for 1946, on U. S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, *Facts on Women Workers*, December 31, 1946.

come of male members of family for a proper standard of living; (2) inadequacy of public provision for families deprived of male breadwinners; (3) insufficiency of available male workers (especially during war periods); (4) development of service and distributive functions in our economy; (5) simplification of mechanical jobs; (6) change in traditional attitudes towards women in industry and professions; and (7) the opportunity presented to employers to obtain cheaper labor, especially after mass immigration was halted.

The number of women in trade unions has increased notably in the past fifty years, and particularly within the past decade. No accurate statistics are available, but estimates that have been made (summarized in Table 2) provide a satis-

TABLE 2—TREND IN UNION MEMBERSHIP OF WOMEN, 1910-44<sup>3</sup>

Year	Estimated Number of Women in Unions	Per Cent of All Union Members
1910	76,750	3.6
1920	397,000	7.9
1930	260,000	7.7
1940	800,000	9.4
1944	3,000,000	21.8

factory picture of the progress achieved in the organization of women. However, in spite of the progress made in extending unionization to women workers, they are still organized to a much

<sup>3</sup> *Source*, column I: Figures for 1910, 1920, 1940 based on Gladys Boone, *The Women's Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America* (New York, 1942), pp. 241-42. Figure for 1944 from *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 60, No. 8 (June 1945), p. 1269, taken from the Annual Report of the Secretary of Labor for the fiscal year ended June 30, 1944. The estimate for 1930 is based on (1) Elsie Gluck, "Women in Industry: Problems of Organization," *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. XV, p. 457, who cites an estimate of 260,095 for 1927; and (2) Boone, *loc. cit.*, who cites an estimate of 250,000 for 1933. Column II: Percentages based on estimates of total union membership, 1910-44, in Florence Peterson, *American Labor Unions* (New York, 1945), p. 56.

smaller extent than are men. For example, in 1910 there were 7 men in labor unions for every 100 men in the labor force, but only 1 woman for every 100 women in the labor force. By the summer of 1944, at the peak of female employment and union membership, the figures had risen to 30 and almost 16 respectively.

#### OBSTACLES TO UNIONIZATION

The substantial discrepancy that exists results from the types of work which women have been forced, or permitted, to perform; the fact that women workers, as individuals, have been considered a temporary factor in the labor force; traditional ideas about the abilities and status of women; and policies of organizations adopted in the past. In most of these respects the situation has changed in the past decade, but the concentration of women workers in unskilled, semi-skilled, and white-collar jobs, and in nonmanufacturing industries such as laundries, restaurants, beauty parlors, domestic service, and the like, still remains the major obstacle to their rapid unionization.

The recent war caused a significant change in the pattern of employment. In 1940 only one out of every four women wage earners worked in manufacturing industries; in 1945 the proportion had risen to one out of three.<sup>4</sup> Since the war the proportion of women in manufacturing industries has declined but is still well above the prewar level; the proportion in service industries has increased but is still below the prewar level.

The spectacular increase in women membership in unions during the war can undoubtedly be ascribed to the type of jobs they entered, yet in the decade before the war the number of women union members tripled under the labor

<sup>4</sup> Women's Bureau Chart, "Working Women," June 1945.

legislation of the first two Roosevelt administrations which put collective bargaining on a firmer basis. This in turn made possible the new organizational policy adopted by the American labor movement in the later thirties, that of organizing workers on an industrial instead of a craft basis. As a result large numbers of unskilled, semiskilled and white-collar workers were unionized, and it was to these groups that the majority of women workers largely belonged.

Traditional prejudices about the abilities and status of women have played a part in retarding the organization of women workers. Among the unions themselves there has been in the past some distrust of women's loyalty as union members and a tendency to look upon them as an unstable and unreliable factor in the union—a "blithering liability" as one male unionist put it.<sup>5</sup> On the side of society there has been an idea that the participation of women in union activities, and especially in strikes, was unfeminine and improper. Striking women garment workers in 1924 were arrested and sent to jail after being called "low women, a disgrace to their sex."<sup>6</sup> Official government guarantees, after 1932, of the right to organize helped to remove the stigma of "disorderly" and "unfeminine" conduct from the union activities of women.

In the past some unions have had restrictions barring women from membership. Today all CIO unions and most AFL unions admit women without regard to skill, color or creed. In contrast to the common practice of twenty years ago, there is only one union today, the International Brotherhood of Bookbinders, which has a separate woman's organization—the Bindery Women's Local Unions.

The unions having the largest number

of women members in 1945 included the United Automobile Workers of America, CIO, with 280,000 women members, constituting 28 per cent of its total membership; the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, CIO, with 280,000 women members, or 40 per cent of its total membership; the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, AFL, with 225,000 women members, or 75 per cent of its total membership; the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, CIO, with 200,000 women members, or 66 per cent of its total membership; and the Textile Workers Union of America, CIO, with 180,000 women members, making up 40 per cent of its total membership.<sup>7</sup>

#### WHAT UNIONISM MEANS TO WOMEN

The problem of raising the economic status of women workers is, of course, a part of the larger problem of raising the economic status of all workers, but, for a number of reasons, the utilization of unions to raise wage levels and improve working conditions is of particular importance in the case of women workers and involves special problems. The most important of these are that the majority of women workers belong to the most depressed economic groups; most women workers have household and family responsibilities to attend to outside of working hours; woman's physical constitution involves special problems of health and welfare; and finally, traditional ideas as to women's "place" and abilities have led to discrimination against them in wages and job opportunities. All this means that any program for improving the conditions of women workers must involve, on the one hand, the elimination of various forms of unwarranted discrimina-

<sup>5</sup> Theresa Wolfson, *The Woman Worker and the Trade Unions* (New York, 1926), p. 204.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Women's Bureau, *Conference of Trade Union Women and Women's Bureau* (April 19-20, 1945), p. 32.

tion against them, and, on the other hand, special measures of protection or adjustment to meet their special needs. Unions have done and are doing much to solve the special problems of women workers, not only through collective bargaining but by drawing public attention to these problems and pressing for legislative action. And in the process of dealing with the economic problems of women, they have found it necessary to deal with the wider problem of enabling women to play their full part as citizens.

#### WAGES AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY ON THE JOB

It is a matter of union policy to devote special attention to bringing up the wages of the lowest-paid groups, not only in the interests of such groups themselves but in the interests of all workers, since the existence of low-wage areas depresses the general wage level. In the case of women this involves a double problem: not merely raising the general wage rate on the lower-paid jobs in a given plant or industry, but eliminating discrimination in wage rates between men and women workers doing the same kind of work in the same plant. Accordingly, increased emphasis is being placed by unions today on establishing the principle of equal pay for equal work and eliminating discriminatory job classifications based on sex.

The entrance of large numbers of women into industry during the war and the endorsement by the National War Labor Board of the principle of equal pay for equal work have given impetus to the efforts of unions to secure equal pay clauses in union contracts. A Women's Bureau study of 80 union contracts in a large midwestern war industry area revealed that half of the contracts had equal pay clauses.<sup>8</sup> A report made by

<sup>8</sup> Women's Bureau, *Differentials in Pay for Women* (November 1945), p. 10.

the New York State Department of Labor in 1943 disclosed that union contracts in three-fourths of the manufacturing shops studied had equal pay clauses.<sup>9</sup> As a third instance, the United Automobile Workers Union was instrumental in bringing before the War Labor Board the General Motors Company case, considered the leading case in establishing the principle that wage rates for women should be set in accordance with equal pay for comparable quantity and quality of work. And both the AFL and the CIO have endorsed the principle of state and Federal equal pay legislation, seven states now having such laws.

While unions have been generally successful in maintaining the "rate for the job" where women have been employed on work hitherto considered men's jobs, much less has been done to narrow the differentials between "men's" jobs and those traditionally considered women's jobs. The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers succeeded in narrowing sex differentials when, in 1942, it negotiated with the Westinghouse Corporation a wage increase equivalent to two cents an hour for all employees, to be applied, however, to raising wages on women's jobs only. In 1945 the union won a War Labor Board case against Westinghouse and General Electric to enforce contract provisions further narrowing the differential.<sup>10</sup>

Increased emphasis is also being placed by unions on eliminating other forms of discrimination against women workers in order to secure for them equal job opportunities, equal security in their jobs, and equal opportunities of advancement. One large international union has a model clause which reads: "The company agrees that it will not discriminate in the hiring of employees, or in their training, upgrading, promo-

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *UE News* (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers), Sept. 7, 1946.

tion, transfer, layoffs, recall, discipline, discharge or otherwise, because of race, creed, color, national origin, political affiliation, sex or marital status.”<sup>11</sup> A study of AFL and CIO unions with an aggregate membership of 200,000, of whom 75,000 were women, in a war industry area, disclosed that in four-fifths of the union contracts single seniority lists for men and women had been secured.<sup>12</sup> The National Federation of Telephone Workers brought before the War Labor Board a case involving discrimination by the employer against married women and secured a ruling that “no employee shall be discriminated against by the company with regard to benefits, terms or conditions of employment because of marital status.”<sup>13</sup>

The elimination of discriminatory practices protects the wage standards of all workers, male and female, and protects men’s jobs by removing the incentive to hire women at lower rates.

#### SPECIAL PROBLEMS: HOURS AND WORKING CONDITIONS

While it is important to eliminate false discriminations between women and men workers, it is equally important to recognize and deal with those genuine differences—physical, social, and psychological—which create special problems for women workers, or make more acute in the case of women the problems common to all workers. Women, more than men, are affected physically by long hours of work and unhealthy working conditions, and the double burden of home and job responsibilities that most women workers carry raises additional problems. Organized labor, through collective bargaining and through pressing for legislative action,

<sup>11</sup> *United Automobile Worker*, April 1946, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Women’s Bureau leaflet, “Seniority,” Union Series No. 1, 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Women’s Bureau Release, October 19, 1945.

has been chiefly responsible for shortening hours of work as well as securing standards and conditions of employment to protect the health and safety of workers, such as adequate heat, lighting, ventilation, sanitary washrooms, protection of machinery, reasonable lunch periods, seats wherever the nature of the work makes it possible or for the temporary relief of workers whose job requires them to stand, rest periods and sick leaves. Moreover, unions are the most effective factor in enforcing the protective legislation on these points. In many states much of it applies to women and minors exclusively, and in altogether too many cases, such regulations are not enforced, unless there is a union on the job to protest and report violations.

In addition, unions are helping to solve the special problems of the working mother by securing maternity-leave clauses in union contracts and maternity benefits in union insurance plans, as well as working for an adequate community program of day nurseries and child care. Adequate maternity leave, without loss of seniority, is essential to protect the health of mother and child and to insure that women are not penalized for motherhood by loss of their jobs. An increasing number of unions are incorporating such leaves in their contracts, some specifying a maximum absence of a year without loss of seniority.

Union insurance plans, achieved through collective bargaining and without cost to the worker, have contributed greatly to easing the financial burden accompanying illness, accident or motherhood. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers administers a plan which provides, in addition to a \$500 life insurance policy: (1) \$50 in case of maternity; (2) \$5 daily hospitalization allowance for as many as 62 days annually; and (3) disability benefits covering illness or accident for as many as 26 weeks.

Psychological factors must not be overlooked. Good working conditions are not merely a matter of health and safety but of human relations—of personal dignity and self-respect. Workers must feel free to offer criticisms and suggestions, not only for removing unnecessary inconveniences and injustices but for improving the efficiency of the work they do. As one girl put it, "Sometimes you want to talk things over instead of having them handed down to you." The traditional idea that women are more docile and more easily "put upon" than men creates special difficulties for women in this respect. Women workers, sitting at their machines, might very well determine how the work could be made to flow through more smoothly, but without a union there is no channel for them to express their ideas. It is taken for granted that, being working women, they have no ideas, and if they do venture to speak to the foreman they are likely to get "bawled out." The attitude of too many factory owners is that they are conferring a favor on the workers and the community by offering jobs at all, and that the workers should make no criticisms, not even suggestions which benefit the employer as well as the employees. This attitude that workers should be "humble" is an important factor in employers' opposition to unionism, which is often based, not on economic considerations alone, but on the employer's desire for power over his workers.

How union activity may help break through long-established custom and prejudice is demonstrated in the experience of a large clothing factory in Virginia, employing about a thousand Negro workers, in which all the foreladies and supervisory employees were white. Two Negro girls from this factory, together with two white girls from another plant owned by the same company, were chosen as members of a union committee

to negotiate with the employer. After meeting with the committee he made the two Negro girls foreladies. While this action may have been partly motivated by a desire to get the girls away from the union and weaken the union among Negro workers, there is no doubt that it was also inspired by a discovery of the girls' abilities. In the course of the negotiations they had shown such keen intelligence and such a grasp of the problems of the firm that the employer realized for the first time that he might find forelady material among his Negro workers. And this action had a tremendous effect on the morale of the other girls in the factory, who saw for the first time an opportunity of advancement for members of their race.

#### UNIONS AND CITIZENSHIP

The importance of union membership to women is by no means limited to the economic sphere. Unions promote the political education and community activities of women workers in a number of ways, both direct and indirect.

Women attending union meetings, discussing the concrete problem of whether management can afford to give them a raise, are led on into talking and thinking about such matters as the future of their industry, the relation of their industry to other industries, whether there will be a depression in 1947, what causes depressions, and so on, until they find themselves discussing and analyzing the fundamental social and economic problems of our time.

Through union activity women get to know their community and its problems as they could do in no other way. They become acquainted with fellow workers from different sections of the community and of different social, religious, and nationality groups. Seeing each other at union meetings, working together on union committees, they learn to know each other as people and to understand

each other's problems. This helps to break down social barriers and racial and religious prejudices.

Working-class women do not as a rule belong to the Red Cross, women's clubs, and similar community organizations to which leisured middle-class women belong, unless the union provides an opportunity for them to participate. During the war unions secured for their women members a chance to work with the Red Cross, the United Service Organizations, civilian defense agencies, and similar groups. In some small towns local women leaders were doubtful about accepting the services of working girls, but the result of the experiment was an education in democracy both for the working girls and for the middle-class women. The latter, some of whom had complained that "ignorant" factory girls were making more money than their daughters who were school teachers, discovered that factory workers were women with the same capacities as themselves, who needed only the opportunity to bring out their abilities. The working girls, who were often self-distrustful because they lacked social and administrative experience, discovered that when put to the test they could acquit themselves as successfully as anybody else. In a number of cases the union women were made chairmen of their local units.

Women union members have taken an active part in the work of the CIO Political Action Committee and in the political activities of AFL and independent unions. They have helped to get out the vote, talked to their neighbors, studied the legislative records of their congressmen and representatives and enlisted support behind candidates with a good record on progressive legislation. These activities have not only made them more alert citizens but have added to their general self-confidence and self-respect.

Equally important as political education is service on union legislative committees, through which working women get a chance to present their views on community needs, such as day nurseries, better educational facilities, or more adequate housing. Government becomes alive to them when they talk to their state assemblyman in his office or go on a delegation to Washington to appear before a committee on minimum wage legislation. And this experience has a notable effect on the political education of the whole community, when the delegates return and tell what they have seen of the legislative process in action.

#### INFLUENCE OF WOMEN MEMBERS IN UNIONS

Many unions have expanded their educational programs in order to encourage women members' participation in union activities. The United Automobile Workers during the war established a Women's Bureau in its War Policy Division, and in 1944 held a national conference of women members. Some of the recommendations made at this conference were subsequently incorporated in model contract clauses and recommended to local unions for inclusion in their collective bargaining demands. This union is also training women as union officers through its Leadership Training Course, which educates members for administrative posts in the union.

Women members may be found in nearly all administrative union positions except that of national or international president, though they are not, as a rule, represented in proportion to their numbers in the union. This discrepancy arises partly from the fact that there are more men union members in highly skilled jobs and partly from the fact that women workers simply have less



spare time to devote to union activities than have men.

No recent survey is available of the extent to which women hold office in unions, but a Women's Bureau questionnaire on the subject is in preparation at the time this is written. Indications of considerable progress, however, are to be seen in the fact that at least a dozen national or international unions now have women on their national executive boards. In a similar number, women hold national offices, the most usual being secretary or treasurer, but others are vice-presidents, trustees or committee chairmen. In more cases women hold staff positions, such as organizers, heads of departments, international representatives, or business agents. More than twenty women are directors or assistant directors of education or research or both on the national level. A similar number are reported as officers of state organizations. On the local level, unions report women as presidents of locals, and as executive board members; in more cases they are secretaries or secretary-treasurers.<sup>14</sup> The Amalgamated Clothing Workers has two women vice-presidents, and women hold responsible positions in research, education, legislative, editorial, and organizational work.

Women have proved extremely successful as organizers and there has been an increasing tendency to use them for this work since World War I. The Women's Trade Union League, whose membership includes women both inside and outside union ranks, has performed an outstanding service in organizing women workers.<sup>15</sup>

Of outstanding women union leaders, space will permit only brief mention of a few: Sarah Bagley who led the fight

<sup>14</sup> Information supplied by Women's Bureau.

<sup>15</sup> For a critical appraisal of the League's work, see Boone, *op. cit.*

for the ten-hour day in Massachusetts in 1845 and was largely responsible for bringing about the first government investigation into labor conditions in the history of the United States; Mother Jones of the United Mine Workers, a woman leader in a men's union, who mobilized the embattled miners' wives to drive off strikebreakers with mops and brooms, and roused the conscience of the country by organizing a march of emaciated child laborers to Washington; and Dorothy Bellanca who worked in a sweatshop in her early teens, and later in life, as vice-president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, saw the sweatshop driven from the industry by the union she had served with such ability and devotion.

#### THE BASIC FUNCTION OF UNIONS

From what has been said, it is evident that the trade union movement, during the past several decades, has played an important part in the progress women have made toward full participation in the country's political, economic, and social life. It has done so primarily by working toward the achievement of full participation of all working people—men and women—in our society. What it has done for the male worker in giving him a greater degree of security, a greater measure of self-respect and confidence, a feeling of belonging, it has done similarly for the woman worker. But it has meant even more for the woman worker because of her special problems.

The labor movement has recognized these special problems and has helped solve them, as described above, by collective bargaining, legislative, and community activities. But the great contribution of the trade unions is in their concern for and protection of *all* workers, regardless of race, color, creed or

sex. By increasing the economic protection and equality for all workers, it is making a great contribution toward the special problems of women, just as it has contributed toward the special problems of other groups.

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