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Dorothy Sue Cobble: The Other Women's Movement

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INTRODUCTION

The Missing Wave

NEAR THE END of the presidential election of 1996, political analysts discovered “Soccer Moms.” It was these women, they declared, that would make or break the election. They were the undecided, the swing voters. It was their vote that Bill Clinton had to win if he were to ensure his reelection. Only much later did it become apparent that these women had been mislabeled. They were not Soccer Moms at all. Indeed, as one observer wryly noted, “Waitress Moms” might be the better catch phrase.¹ The majority of American women didn’t drive new SUVs, live in the affluent outer suburbs, or spend their afternoons chauffeuring their kids around. Rather, they owned aging minivans, worked long hours for low pay, and jerry-rigged their child care through neighbors, relatives, and friends.

Once it became evident that the real swing voters were actually blue- (and pink-) collar women,² Clinton’s advisors began to target them in their campaigns. They developed literature emphasizing Clinton’s pro-abortion stand, and they touted his career mobility and employment opportunity initiatives. But as puzzled advisors admitted, they didn’t seem to be hitting the right notes. It was surprising since these issues had worked in their outreach to women before. What could be going wrong? they wondered.³

What was wrong had to do with class. Class differences exist among women just as among men, and class has always been a salient political divide in American culture. Class distinctions did not disappear in the supposedly homogeneous, “classless” 1950s, and they persist today. Yet the prevalent cultural tendency is to operate as if class makes little or no difference. It is assumed that the experience of most women matches that of professional college-educated women. If they desire upward mobility and job opportunity over job security and guaranteed benefits, then so do all women. If reproductive freedom and breaking the glass ceiling are political priorities for professional women’s organizations, then so must they be for labor women’s groups. Lower-income women are no longer “absent from the agenda,” as Nancy Seifer argued in 1973, but they continue to be misunderstood and misrepresented.⁴ In policy and in scholarship, they remain murky and enigmatic—one-dimensional figures, depicted more by what they are not than by what they are.

The Other Women’s Movement is an effort to help change that state of affairs. In writing it, I have assumed that class differences have always affected the lives of women and that their views of what reforms were desirable and possible have been shaped in a class crucible. Certainly, class is not the only difference

that constructs and divides us, but as long as economic inequality flourishes and as long as our very self-definitions and moral judgments of ourselves and of each other rest on material distinctions, so class remains potent.⁵

IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHER'S POLITICS

In 1937, 23-year-old Myra Wolfgang strode to the middle of one of Detroit's forty Woolworth's five-and-dime stores and signaled for the planned sit-down strike of salesclerks and counter waitresses to begin. The main Woolworth's store was already on strike, and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) was threatening to escalate the strike to all of the stores in Detroit. Wolfgang was an art school dropout from a Jewish Lithuanian immigrant family. A natural orator with a wicked wit, she had already given her share of soapbox speeches for radical causes as a teenager before settling down to union organizing in her early twenties. In the 1940s and 1950s, Wolfgang ran the union's Detroit Joint Council, which bargained contracts for a majority of the cooks, bartenders, food servers, dishwashers, and maids in Detroit's downtown hotels and restaurants. By 1952, she had become an international vice president of HERE. Nicknamed the "battling belle of Detroit" by the local media, she relished a good fight with employers, particularly over issues close to her heart. A lifelong member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), she insisted, for example, on sending out racially integrated crews from the union's hiring hall, rejecting such standard employer requests as "black waiters only, white gloves required."⁶

In the 1960s, Wolfgang, now in her fifties, led a sleep-in at 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 working conditions of Playboy bunnies at his Detroit Club. HERE eventually signed a national contract covering all the Playboy Clubs in 1969, but Detroit was the first to go union. In these initial bargaining sessions in 1964, Wolfgang and her negotiating team debated with management 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." And they challenged the Playboy practice of firing bunnies as they aged and suffered the loss of what management called "bunny image," a somewhat nebulous concept according to the union but not in the eyes of the Playboy Club. Bunny image faded, Playboy literature warned, at the precise moment bunnies developed such employee defects as "crinkling eyelids, sagging breasts, crepey necks, and drooping derrieres."⁷

These somewhat atypical labor-management conversations came only after an extensive seven-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 Mom a steady diet of useful information, particularly about the club's wage policies, or rather 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.'" ⁸

I first stumbled across Wolfgang, or better put, she reached out and grabbed me when I came across her papers some fifteen years ago in the labor archives in Detroit. 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 lobbied against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) until 1972, and she chaired the national committee against repeal of woman-only state labor laws. She also accused Betty Friedan and other feminists of demeaning household labor, romanticizing wage work, and caring not a whit 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. 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." ⁹

My curiosity roused, I set out to discover more about the Myra Wolfgangs of the post-depression decades. What I have come to understand is that there were multiple and competing visions of how to achieve women's equality in the half century this book spans, and that the Wolfgangs of the world, far from being oddities, were, at times, the *dominant* wing of feminism. By the 1940s, a new generation of labor women emerged who were dedicated to making first-class economic citizenship a reality for wage-earning women. This book is a history of their reform efforts and the ideas that inspired them.

The women like Wolfgang who led this movement can best be described as "labor feminists." I consider them "feminists" because they recognized that women suffer disadvantages due to their sex and because they sought to eliminate sex-based disadvantages. ¹⁰ I call them "*labor* feminists" because they articulated a particular variant of feminism that put the needs of working-class women at its core and because they championed the labor movement as the principle vehicle through which the lives of the majority of women could be bettered. ¹¹

The labor feminists of the post-depression decades were the intellectual daughters and granddaughters of Progressive Era "social feminists" like Florence Kelley, Rose Schneiderman, and Jane Addams. ¹² Like many of the earlier social feminists, they believed that women's disadvantages stemmed from multiple sources and that a range of social reforms was necessary to remedy

women's secondary status. And they too were at odds with the individualistic "equal rights feminism" of the National Woman's Party (NWP), the prime proponent of the ERA. Yet by the postwar era, labor women had helped modernize the older "social feminism." Labor feminist goals now revolved around the achievement of what they referred to as "full industrial citizenship." That meant gaining the right to market work for all women; it also meant securing social rights, or the social supports necessary for a life apart from wage work, including the right to care for one's family.¹³ They looked to the state as well as to unions to help them transform the structures and norms of wage work and curb the inequalities of a discriminatory labor market. In the pages that follow, I have tried to render visible their distinctive notions of equality and justice and to restore their political activism to its deserved place in the history of twentieth-century reform.

THE OTHER LABOR MOVEMENT

Labor women remain marginal to most narratives of political and economic reform after the 1930s. In part, this view predominates because no synthetic history of labor women's reform efforts beyond the 1930s exists. Nancy Gabin, Ruth Milkman, and Dennis Deslippe, among others, tell parts of the story I offer here in their thoughtful and compelling accounts of labor women and gender discrimination in various institutional settings, and I rely heavily on them in what follows.¹⁴ Yet despite the growing body of case studies documenting women's activism within *individual* unions in the post-depression decades, researchers often treat each new example as *exceptional* and not part of a larger pattern of working-class women's activism.¹⁵

Unduly restricted definitions of what is "political" and where "politics" takes place add to the problem. Recent research on U.S. middle-class women's activism in the Progressive Era has expanded older definitions of what is political and who exerts political influence, forcing a fundamental rewriting of the political history of that period. Middle-class women may not have voted, participated in political party deliberations, or held office in the early twentieth century. But they did affect the nature of the state and the direction of public policy. Their political agenda, once viewed as "special interest" or as affecting merely the "domestic" sphere, is now recognized as having society-wide consequences, not the least being its pivotal role in shaping the emerging welfare state.¹⁶

Labor history of the post-depression era has yet to learn from this scholarship. It is still assumed that labor women didn't have the numbers or the positional leverage within postwar labor institutions to make much of a difference in collective bargaining or in politics, and that the concerns they did articulate would not effect widespread change in the social or economic order.¹⁷ But these are untested assumptions this book aims to undermine.

As chapter 1 recounts, the numbers of women unionists rose after the 1930s, both in absolute and percentage terms. By the early 1950s, 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, reaching 18 percent. In addition, some two million women belonged to labor auxiliaries at their peak in the 1940s and early 1950s.¹⁸ Few of these women sat at the collective bargaining table. Fewer still stood behind the podium gaveling the union convention to order. But as Karen Sacks reminds us in her study of hospital organizing in the 1950s and 1960s, the dearth of women in formal, publicly visible leadership roles should not necessarily be taken as an indication of female powerlessness or lack of influence. Sacks uncovered an informal and hidden structure of power that differed from the formal and more obvious one. In the organizing committees and unions she observed, the male union “leaders” and “spokesmen” took positions only after consulting with and gaining the approval of key women on the shop floor—women who never held formal positions of leadership but who wielded considerable influence nonetheless.¹⁹

Of equal significance, the 1940s witnessed the move of women into local, regional, and national leadership positions within the labor movement. Gender parity was not achieved by any stretch of the imagination, and men continued to predominate in top executive positions. But there was an increase in women’s influence and the emergence in many unions of a critical mass of labor women committed to women’s equality and to social justice. Myra Wolfgang was not alone. There were others: Esther Peterson, Gladys Dickason, Dorothy Lowther Robinson, and Anne Draper of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA); Addie Wyatt of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA); Mary Callahan and Gloria Johnson of the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE); Katherine Ellickson of the Research Department of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO); Helen Berthelot, Selina Burch, and Catherine Conroy of the Communications Workers of America (CWA); Maida Springer-Kemp and Evelyn Dubrow of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU); and last but not least, the group of women at the United Automobile Workers (UAW), which included Caroline Davis, Lillian Hatcher, Millie Jeffrey, Olga Madar, and Dorothy Haener. Some of the early leaders, women like Ruth Young of the United Electrical Workers Union (UE) or Elizabeth Sasuly of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America (FTA), disappeared from the public stage by the early 1950s, due in large part to Cold War politics. But they were the exceptions, not the rule.

These women do not figure prominently in what are usually posited as critical turning points in postwar labor history: the 1947 Taft-Hartley Amendments to the Wagner Act, the CIO’s decision in 1948 to oust the unions associated with communism, the merger of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the CIO in 1955, or the McClellan Committee Senate hearings on union corruption.²⁰ Yet the reform agenda they championed—an end to unfair sex discrimi-

nation, equal pay for comparable work, a family or living wage for women and men, the revaluing of the skills in “women’s jobs,” economic security and shorter hours, social supports from the state and from employers for child-bearing and child rearing—spurred a fundamental reassessment of the norms and practices governing employment that is still going on. They did not always secure the contract provisions they desired from employers, nor were they able to expand the welfare state in many of the ways they envisioned. But they were among the principal actors in the postwar struggle over the course each would take.

Indeed, a history of what labor women *thought* as well as what they *did* is crucial to understanding the course of liberalism and New Deal reform in the post-depression decades. For as chapter 2 elaborates, the majority of these women were “labor liberals” as well as “labor feminists.” Not only did they embrace a political ideology distinct from the conservatism of their time, but they also promulgated a liberalism with a decidedly more egalitarian and populist bent than the version espoused by most New Deal liberals.²¹

Recent histories of the origins and nature of public welfare regimes in the United States and elsewhere reveal the myriad ways women have affected state policies. They also demonstrate how concerns over gender and race have figured as prominently in the creation of social and economic policy as has redistributive impulses and anxieties about consumer purchasing power.²² In the United States, however, social welfare cannot be understood without analyzing the employment-based entitlements developed in the *private* sector. The United States developed a *mixed* welfare system: supplemental income, health and welfare coverage, and other benefits were as much a function of one’s employment status as of one’s citizenship. Labor women operated in both the public and private realms, pursuing a dual strategy of reform through legislation and collective bargaining.²³

I contend that class differences remained salient in the new Deal and after, although in newly disguised forms, and that labor ideologies and institutions had a powerful effect on the formulation and implementation of social and employment policy. This book thus converges with the work of historians who see the labor movement as a vehicle for social reform aspirations in the post-New Deal era rather than only an engine of reaction. Increasingly historians are taking issue with a postwar narrative that assumes labor-management accord and a “tamed,” conservative labor movement.²⁴ In *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism* (1995), Kevin Boyle sees labor liberals such as UAW President Walter Reuther as continuing to “promote democratic economic planning and an expanded welfare state throughout the 1950s and 1960s.” In his view, the inability to advance the left-liberal political agenda in the postwar era had more to do with the return of Republican dominance and a Democratic Party divided between southern conservatives and northern liberals than with a loss of will or vision on the part of social unionists.²⁵ Recent histories of steel unionism also stress the continuation of a progressive class-based politics in the labor movement after the 1930s and depict a labor movement willing to

engage in considerable conflict with employers over economic and social issues. Adding his voice to this revisionist wave, Nelson Lichtenstein, in this recent survey of labor in the twentieth century, points to labor's "remarkable combative" record from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, labeling this era "the unquiet decades."²⁶ It was in these "unquiet decades" that labor feminism flourished, tied institutionally and intellectually to organized labor and to the battles for social justice it waged.

THE OTHER WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The long-standing story of feminist reform as dormant in the fifty-year period following suffrage is rapidly being eclipsed. No longer is it merely the NWP valiantly carrying the banner of feminism in the supposed quiescent interlude between the 1920 triumph of the suffrage movement (the first wave) and the rebirth of the modern women's movement in the late 1960s (the second wave).²⁷ Rather, the activities of women in a variety of different organizations moving toward a variety of different goals become part of an expanded history of feminism.²⁸ The story of labor feminism that I tell here adds to these efforts to "re-wave" feminist reform.²⁹

It also speaks to the need to acknowledge multiple forms of American feminism and move beyond the "equal rights teleology" that shapes the narrative of twentieth-century feminist history.³⁰ In this construct, labor women appear as *opponents* of feminism because they failed to pursue an *equal rights legal strategy* for advancing women's interests: that is, they opposed the ERA and advocated the retention of sex-based state labor laws. Indeed, they are often depicted as lacking a true "feminist consciousness" until the early 1970s, when at last they abandoned their support for woman-only protective laws, embraced the equal rights amendment, began a concerted push for job integration and gender-neutral treatment, and asserted an identity based more on public waged work than on household labor.³¹

In this book I try to develop a different yardstick by which to measure labor women reformers. For one, I include in the history of feminist reform those who were committed to the elimination of sex-based inequalities regardless of the *tactics* they pursued. Sex-based state laws may have frequently been used to restrict women's opportunity and income, yet it is now clear that so-called gender-neutral legislation can also be used against women.³² The continuing inequality of women should not be laid at the doorstep of either "difference" or "equality" feminists.³³ Indeed, most labor feminists in this book never resolved the tension between equality and difference strategies, nor did they see the necessity of doing so. They wanted equality *and* special treatment, and they did not think of the two as incompatible. They argued that gender difference must be accommodated and that equality can not always be achieved through identity in treatment. Theirs was a vision of equality that claimed justice on the basis of their humanity, not on the basis of their sameness with

men. Where the male standard, or what labor feminists called the “masculine pattern,” didn’t fit their needs, they rejected it.³⁴ In the 1970s, labor women adopted a more gender-blind strategy in their pursuit of equality, as did the larger women’s movement. But rather than uncritically celebrate this ideological shift, I am interested in the ways in which relying on gender-neutrality and adopting the autonomous market individual as an ideal involved losses as well as gains for women.

I also include in the history of feminism those who deemed the issues of race and class to be as crucial as that of gender.³⁵ Feminism, in my view, need not require an unwavering single focus on gender, nor does gender-conscious reform reside only in all-female organizations. Mixed-gender institutions such as the church or the union can be sites for feminist reform. The struggle for a minimum wage, for an end to compulsory overtime, or for employment opportunities for low-income groups are examples of Denise Riley’s insight that some of the most beneficial social movements for women “did not speak the name of woman.”³⁶ For a reform agenda can be quite feminist in its conception and impact without being gender-specific. And just as a purely race-based politics may be limited as sociologist William Julius Wilson argues, so too may a purely gender-based politics, regardless of whether it speaks the language of equality or of difference.³⁷

The book proceeds chronologically as well as thematically. Chapter 1 sketches the historical transformations that sparked the rise of labor feminism: the influx of women into paid work, the disrupting and reorienting experience of World War II, the new political and economic power of organized labor, and the increasing leverage of women within the labor movement. Chapter 1 also offers biographical sketches of many of the key labor feminists. Chapter 2 describes the remaking of the social feminist movement in the 1940s: the move of labor women into leadership and the emergence of a refashioned agenda for women’s economic progress. During this period the labor feminist project gained some support from male allies in left unions, both communist and anticommunist, but met stiff resistance from conservative employers and politicians as well as from feminists who gathered under the banner of the ERA. Labor feminist efforts to pass new federal legislation ending “unfair sex discrimination” and setting up a president’s commission on the status of women made little headway in the late 1940s.

The next three chapters (chapters 3–5) detail how labor feminists sought to transform other aspects of state policy and employer practice in the 1940s and 1950s. Chapter 3 describes the debate over women’s job rights in the postwar era and the efforts of labor feminists to secure the right to employment for all women, regardless of their marital status, race, ethnicity, or age. The primary focus of this stage of the employment rights revolution was on integrating and upgrading “women’s jobs” rather than moving women into “men’s jobs.” Wage justice emerged as a principal goal for labor feminists by the 1940s. Chapter 4

chronicles the extensive campaigns initiated by labor feminists to end what they perceived as sex discrimination in the wages paid in women's jobs. They sought federal and state "equal pay for comparable work" laws, and they pursued raising women's wages at the bargaining table. They also pushed to extend the economic benefits of the New Deal to those left out. That meant agitating for higher minimum wage ordinances and for the inclusion of all workers under federal and state labor laws. "The rate for the job" idea, a notion that was gaining ground in the larger culture, helped legitimize their case for equal pay and higher wages for women. It also collided with the older labor rationale for raising worker pay: the family or living wage.

Chapter 5 lays out the social supports for caring labor that labor feminists hoped to achieve. Although the American labor movement did not embrace family allowances, a form of social wages for caring labor instituted in many other industrialized countries, they did have a family politics. Labor feminists, with the aid of some male allies, pressed for changes in government and employee policy to accommodate childbearing and child rearing, including work-time policies that would meet the needs of caregivers as well as breadwinners. Many believed that first-class economic citizenship for women could only be won when women's unpaid labor in the home was acknowledged and valued, and when, in Nancy Fraser's phrase, policy and practice rendered "women's difference costless."³⁸ For this generation of labor feminists, there could be no equality without a transformation in the patterns, norms, and practices of the work world itself.

The last three chapters (chapters 6–8) trace the intellectual and organizational changes in labor feminism from the late 1950s to the present. Chapter 6 offers a rereading of the origins and impact of the dramatic federal policy breakthroughs affecting women in the 1960s. For labor feminists, the 1960s legislative initiatives to extend the New Deal and end unfair sex discrimination in employment were the culmination of a twenty-five-year reform effort. Their victories, although partial, served to open the way to the new women's movement at the end of the 1960s. Yet much of their reform agenda remained unrealized, and by the end of the 1960s the leadership of the women's movement fell to a younger generation. A new gender politics took hold in the workplace, best glimpsed in the cross-class all-female organizations formed by flight attendants and clerical workers. New issues dominated: dissolving the sexual division of labor and ending the oppressive one-way caring and sexuality expected in many female-dominated jobs. But in the late 1970s, many of the older concerns of labor feminism resurfaced. Labor women once again pursued social supports for childbearing and child rearing, and thousands joined the comparable worth movement of the 1980s, seeking to raise the pay and status of women's jobs.

The Other Women's Movement closes with some thoughts on the implications of this history for the present-day women's movement. There is, as the *Wall Street Journal* observed, a "rising chorus about the problems with modern feminism."³⁹ Yet all too often, the critics of feminism suffer from a kind of historical

amnesia. They end up rejecting feminism per se when in fact they are simply rejecting a particular variant of feminism, one created in a different moment in history. What is needed, I think, is not a rejection of feminism, but a reconstitution of it as an intellectual tradition and as a present-day politics. If history is to help open up a way forward, it will need to encompass the multiple varieties of feminism. Twenty-first-century feminism will look in part like the feminism of the last thirty years. But if it is to succeed, it will need to build on other traditions as well. Labor feminism helped inspire the birth of a new movement in the 1960s. It can also help point the way toward the next.