

WHAT'S
GLASS
GOT TO DO
WITH IT?

AMERICAN SOCIETY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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WHEN FEMINISM HAD CLASS

Dorothy Sue Cobble

Twenty-three-year-old Myra Wolfgang strode to the middle of one of Detroit's forty Woolworth's five-and-dime stores in 1937 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 shutdown to all 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. Nicknamed the "battling belle of Detroit" by the local media, she eventually became an international vice president of HERE. But in the 1940s and 1950s, Wolfgang ran the union's Detroit Joint Council, which bargained contracts for the thousands of union cooks, bartenders, food servers, dishwashers, and maids in Detroit's downtown hotels and restaurants. 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 in the late 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 at the Michigan statehouse to persuade legislators to raise the minimum wage. She also brought Hugh Hefner to the bargaining table to talk about the work-

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ing 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 the 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 rules not just for bunnies but for *customers*—rules such as “look but do not touch.” And they challenged the Playboy practice of firing bunnies as they aged and suffered what management called “loss of 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.”

These fascinating and somewhat atypical labor-management conversations came only after an extensive seven-month organizing campaign. Wolfgang launched her assault by sending her younger daughter, seventeen-year-old Martha, in as a union “salt,” shortly after the Detroit club opened in 1963. 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 its *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 some years ago in the Walter P. Reuther 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 led the national committee against repeal of woman-only state protective laws. She also accused Betty Friedan, author of the feminist best-seller *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and the first president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), 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.”¹

My curiosity roused, I set out to discover more about the Myra Wolfgang of the post-Depression decades. I came to understand that there were multiple and competing visions of how to achieve women's equality in the so-called doldrum years²—the supposedly quiescent trough of feminist reform between the 1920s and the 1960s. Moreover, the Wolfgang of the world, far from being oddities, were the *dominant* wing of feminism in that era. In other words, a feminism that put class and social justice at its core did not end with the Progressive-era generation of women reformers. Indeed, stimulated by the rise of a new labor movement in the 1930s and the heady experiences of World War II, it emerged refashioned and modernized by the end of the war. And significantly, unlike the social justice feminism of an earlier era, it was led by *labor* women, women who identified with and worked in the labor movement, arguably the largest and most powerful social movement of the period.

But why hasn't this history been told before? Why aren't the reform efforts of labor women part of the standard narrative of postwar labor and women's history? In part, the absence results from long-standing gender biases that are still operative among many historians of labor. Labor history as a field takes as its primary focus male workers and their activities in the public wage-earning arena. Gender as a category of historical analysis remains external to the narrative and theoretical frame.³ Yet labor women also are missing from the history of American *feminism*. Indeed, the scholarship on American feminism has a class problem. The history of feminism is largely the story of the efforts of white middle class and elite women to solve their *own* problems. The efforts of working class and minority women to achieve gender justice, as *they* define it, are relegated to the historical margins, if they appear at all.⁴

The labor women reformers featured in this chapter also had a class problem, but theirs was of a different sort. The class problem for them was, in many ways, what I assume it is for many readers of this volume, that is, how to create a *new* politics of class—one that recognizes the multiplicity of class experience and that refuses to take any single class identity or location as representative of the whole. In pursuing their aims, they chose to work closely with the labor movement, and they embraced many of its fundamental tenets. But at the same time, they sought to create a *different* labor movement, one that would include women fully in its governance and in its agenda. In so doing, they were pioneering an alternative feminism, a feminism that took class seriously and that sought a gender equality that would meet the needs of the majority of women, not just the

few. The history of this forgotten generation of women labor reformers can help us envision a new class politics and a new, more inclusive feminism, one that would once again have class.

THE OTHER LABOR MOVEMENT

We have much to learn from our foremothers, even those who lived, worked, and organized in that supposedly benighted prefeminist era before the 1960s. Their generation came of age in the midst of depression and war. Many were "Rosies" who took on wartime jobs and 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 were working class and had jobs *before* the war. The majority also kept on working *afterward*. Many of these women turned their energies in the postwar decades to building unions and to making those unions more responsive to the needs of women.

The story of union growth in the 1930s is an oft-told tale. But for labor *women*, the 1940s proved just as crucial. The labor movement feminized substantially during the 1940s, adding millions of women to its ranks. The number of women in the labor movement skyrocketed in wartime and then plummeted immediately after the war, but what often gets lost is that the number rebounded in the late 1940s and then remained *far above* the 1930s levels in both *absolute* and *percentage* terms. By 1953, three million women were union members, a far cry from the eight hundred thousand who belonged in 1940, and the percentage of unionists who were women had doubled since 1940, reaching 18 percent. In addition, some two million women belonged to labor auxiliaries. Auxiliaries took in the wives, daughters, mothers, sisters, and, on occasion, "friends" of union men. By the 1940s, many of these women were also wage earners, albeit in unorganized sectors. Although not accorded the full rights and benefits of union membership in the international unions, central labor councils, and labor federations that issued their charters of affiliation, women auxiliary members defined themselves as an integral part of the labor movement, and they participated actively in its political and economic life.⁵

These women union and auxiliary members comprise an "other labor movement" as well as an "other women's movement." This "other women's movement," as Karen Nussbaum, the former head of the AFL-CIO Working Women's Department, enjoys pointing out, is still the largest women's movement in the country, registering over six million women, a fact not lost on the *Wall Street Journal*. In reporting the January

2002 release of U.S. government statistics on union membership, which revealed a 1 percent loss in male membership, down to nine and a half million, and a close to 1.5 percent gain in the number of women, up to almost seven million, the newspaper opened its story with the query "Women's Movement?"⁶

In addition to the rise in the number of women who belonged to unions, the 1940s witnessed the move of women into local, regional, and national *leadership* positions in the labor movement. This development should not be confused with gender parity in union leadership, by any stretch of the imagination. Nevertheless, the power and influence of women in unions increased, and a critical mass emerged of women union leaders who were committed to women's equality as well as to class and race justice. Myra Wolfgang was not alone. Many others made their mark as well: Esther Peterson, Dorothy Lowther Robinson, Gladys Dickason, and Anne Draper of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA); Maida Springer-Kemp of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU); Mary Callahan and Gloria Johnson of the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE); and a remarkable group of women at the United Auto Workers (UAW), including Caroline Dawson Davis, Lillian Hatcher, Millie Jeffrey, Olga Madar, and Dorothy Haener. Some of the most vocal and visionary labor feminists—women like Ruth Young, the first woman on the international executive board of the United Electrical Workers (UE), and 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 large part to cold war politics. But they were the exceptions, not the rule.⁷

It is impossible to give each of these women her due in a short essay. But let me offer two brief biographical sketches—one of Addie Wyatt of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), and a second of Caroline Dawson Davis of the UAW. Hired in 1941 at Armour's meat-packing plant in Chicago, Mississippi-born Addie Wyatt, like many African American women in this period, had her first encounter with trade unionism during the war. It wasn't long before she filed her first grievance. The foreman had given her job to a newly hired white woman and reassigned her to a worse position on the "stew line." "I was very angry, and as I always did when there was something I didn't think was right, I spoke out." When the issue couldn't be resolved with the foreman, Wyatt and her union representative, a black woman steward, marched over to the plant superintendent's office. "What effect," Wyatt remembered thinking, could "two black women have talking to the two white, superior officers in the plant?" To her amazement, she and the steward won. Just as surprising was the union response when she got pregnant.

The steward explained the union's maternity clause: Wyatt could take up to a year off and her job would be held for her. "I didn't really believe them. But I thought I'd try it, and I did get my job back." By the early 1950s, her local (UPWA 437), the majority of whose members were white men, elected her as vice president. Later, she took over the presidency of the local and 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 staff as the first black woman national representative, a position she held for the next thirty years.⁸

Caroline Dawson Davis, who headed the UAW Women's Department from 1948 until her retirement in 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 had hired her father. Caroline Davis had a strong anti-authoritarian streak, and, like Addie Wyatt, had a bad habit of stepping in to stand up for anyone being mistreated. Both these traits propelled her toward union activity. "The worst thing about a job to me was authority," Davis once explained. "I loved people," she continued, and "I believed in people. I never saw the difference between someone who had a title and a lot of money, and Joe Doe and Jane Doe who swept floors and dug ditches." Thirty-year-old Davis helped organize her plant in 1941, was elected vice president of UAW Local 764 in 1943, and, shortly thereafter, "moved upstairs when the union president was drafted." By 1948, Davis 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. "If I hadn't been a union leader," Davis added, "I would have been a psychiatrist."⁹

The majority of labor feminists¹⁰ came up from the shop floor and were from working class and poor backgrounds, women like Wyatt and Davis. Yet some came from decidedly elite families—not what I expected to find when I first began my research. A generation earlier, many politically engaged college women would have moved into settlement house work, 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. By the 1940s many held union staff jobs as lobbyists and political action coordinators, as community service representatives, and as research and education directors. A few, like Esther Peterson, eventually moved into key government posts.

Perhaps the most influential labor feminist of her generation, Peterson

grew up in Provo, Utah, where her father was the local school superintendent. She received her BA from Brigham Young University in 1927 and then pursued graduate work at Columbia Teachers College before being swept up in the dramatic labor struggles of the 1930s. She taught theater, physical education, and economics to working girls at the local YWCA, and she was on the faculty of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers until the school closed its doors in 1938, after the faculty and their worker students persisted in such questionable activities as helping the college maids organize. Shortly before her fourth child was born in 1946, Peterson moved from the Education Department of the ACWA to become its first Washington-based legislative representative. Then, in 1958, she became the AFL-CIO's first woman congressional lobbyist. As Peterson tells the story, she was assigned to John F. Kennedy, the junior senator from Massachusetts, because no one thought he would amount to much. Two years later, the newly elected president tapped her to direct the U.S. Women's Bureau. Eventually, she became the highest-ranking woman official in the Kennedy administration. She is often credited with playing a key role in the establishment of the president's Commission on the Status of Women (the first federal body devoted to assessing women's status and needs), the passage of the Equal Pay Act, and other significant federal breakthroughs of the early 1960s.¹¹

SOCIAL RIGHTS AND WAGE JUSTICE

By the end of World War II, this group of women labor leaders had mapped out a broad-ranging and concrete social reform agenda that would guide them into the late 1960s. It also put them in opposition to the National Woman's Party (NWP), 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 U.S. 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.¹²

Like their opponents in the NWP, labor feminists recognized that discrimination against women *did exist*—an assumption not widely shared in the 1940s. Their goal was not to end *all* distinctions on the basis of sex, which they feared would be the result of the passage of the ERA. They

sought only to end those distinctions that *harmed* women, that is, the “unfair” or “invidious” distinctions that amounted to discrimination. Some distinctions, they felt, actually benefited the majority of women, such as the woman-only state laws setting wage floors and hour ceilings. They wanted these protections extended to men; but until that happened, the laws should be retained. This conviction was a major source of labor feminists’ opposition to the ERA.

Yet the battle over the ERA was not the only source of their alienation from the feminists in the NWP. Sex discrimination was a problem, they agreed, but it was not the *only* problem. Class, race, and other kinds of inequalities needed to be addressed as well. But how? Here again, labor feminists parted ways with the more individualist, equal rights feminist tradition often celebrated in current histories. Individual opportunity, access to the market, and equal treatment with men were important and necessary. But they were also *insufficient*, particularly for poor women. Working class women, like working class men, needed *more* than access to the market or the opportunity to move into the few positions at the top. They needed to *transform* the market *and* the nature of working class jobs. To effect this transformation, labor women looked to the state and to working class organizations.

Space precludes any kind of comprehensive history of labor feminists’ reform efforts, but let me briefly describe their principal concerns. Making “no bones about the fact that there are certain things women need that men don’t,” labor feminists sought accommodation for women’s reproductive labor from employers and the state. Pregnancy was not “developed by women for their entertainment,” remarked one prominent labor feminist. It was a “social function” and as such should be borne by the community.¹³ Labor feminists pushed unions to negotiate improved pregnancy and maternity leaves with job and income guarantees, health coverage for women during childbirth, and contract language that would give workers more control over their work schedules and more time off for family emergencies. Labor feminists also sought to expand disability and unemployment coverage to pregnant women and mothers, fought for tax reforms that would benefit families with dependents, and lobbied repeatedly for federally funded universal child care programs. When labor feminists testified before Congress in the 1940s and early 1950s on behalf of bills amending the Social Security Act, they argued for the importance of universal health care insurance, including the cost of childbirth, and they made a strong case for the sections of the bill that provided four months of paid maternity leave. Caring labor was as deserving of social wages and state benefits as any other work, they reasoned, and the right to a life apart from wage work was an important aspect of what they

called “first-class economic citizenship” for women. “Women must not be penalized for carrying out their normal functions of motherhood,” Esther Peterson told a convention of international government officials in 1958. But, she ruefully added, “the achievement of our real goal of adequate maternity leave with cash payment and medical and hospital insurance for all women workers is still ahead of us.”¹⁴

These efforts are clearly forerunners to the work-family reforms that have become increasingly central to the current women’s movement. Yet the core of the labor feminist work-family agenda still has not been incorporated into today’s discussions. For theirs was a reform movement aimed at solving the problems of nonprofessional women. That meant, for them, finding *collective*, not *individual*, solutions to two crucial concerns: low wages and long hours.

The solution to raising women’s wages that came to predominate by the end of the 1960s was to move women into higher-paying men’s jobs. But this was not the primary strategy pursued by labor feminists. Rather, throughout the 1940s and 1950s they sought to upgrade and change the way the jobs held by the majority of women were valued and paid. The wage-setting systems used by employers undervalued women’s skill, productivity, and responsibility, the labor feminists claimed, and a fundamental rethinking of employer pay practices was in order. In other words, when the comparable worth movement burst onto the national stage in the 1980s, resulting in millions of dollars of pay equity raises for secretaries, nurses, and others in underpaid pink-collar jobs, the idea was not new. It had a long historical pedigree rooted in the activism of union women of a generation earlier.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, labor women urged their unions to bargain, picket, and strike over the gender wage gap. They also launched a national legislative campaign for what they called “a fair rate for the job” or “equal pay for comparable work.” They succeeded in passing new equal pay laws in eighteen states in the postwar decades, and, in 1945, they introduced a bill mandating equal pay for comparable work into Congress, reintroducing it every year until an amended version passed in 1963. But the amended version was a far cry from what labor women had envisioned. “Equal” had been substituted for “comparable” and the impact of the law diluted considerably. Women should be paid the same as men when they do the same work, the labor feminists had argued; they should also receive a fair and just wage when they do different jobs.

Yet labor feminists’ approach to raising women’s wages in this period was not limited to calls for equal pay. They also pursued higher wages for women by supporting the extension of collective bargaining to new groups of women, by lobbying for higher minimum wage statutes, and

by resuscitating labor's long-standing claim to a "living wage"—or what some historians refer to as a "family wage." The labor movement's wage demands historically were gendered: if a single wage high enough to cover dependents could be achieved, it was often assumed that men would earn it and their wives would contribute to the family economy as homemakers. Rather than abandon the family wage, labor feminists wanted to degender it, to claim it for women as well as men. A just wage 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.¹⁵ Well, unfortunately, the answer does not appear to be a provider or family 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—entities who exist apart from community, civic life, or caregiving responsibilities. This was not the world labor feminists sought.

ENDING THE "LONG HOUR DAY"

The struggle over time in the postwar era was as gendered as the struggle over wages. Mary Anderson, the immigrant boot- and shoemaker who became the first director of the U.S. Women's Bureau in the 1920s, argued then that the problem of women's inequality would never be solved until the "long hour day" was eliminated. But by the 1940s, the labor movement was seeking time off not in the form of shorter *daily* hours, but in the form of a shorter workweek, a shorter work year and a shorter work life. In the postwar decades, the majority of unions bargained for and won paid vacations, paid sick leave, and paid retirement—what UAW president Walter Reuther called "lumps of leisure." Labor feminists, for their part, supported many of these union campaigns. At the same time, they continued to press for shorter *daily* hours, because the "lumps of leisure" approach did not do much for those juggling the "double day" of household and market work.

Rebuffed in the bargaining arena, labor feminists turned to legislation. They were optimistic that the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), the fed-

eral law covering wages and hours that many had helped pass in 1938, could be strengthened. Yet the state hour laws that covered women only—some forty-three states had such laws in 1957—offered even better protection against the long hour day. Many state laws set ceilings on *daily* and *weekly* hours and forbid *any* work beyond those maximums. In contrast, the FLSA used the disincentive of time-and-a-half overtime pay after a forty-hour week to discourage long hours, but it did not forbid them. The FLSA approach, many thought, was an inadequate check on employer power and on the competitive market's relentless drive toward longer hours. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, then, labor feminists sought to preserve existing state hour laws and, where possible, extend them to men. The opportunity to earn was important, they pointed out, but so was a work time policy that reined in market work and allowed for the right *not* to work as well as the right *to* work.

But the sex-based state hour laws were repealed, and no new effective mechanisms for limiting 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 why work hours in the United States are longer than in any other industrialized country.¹⁶

AN UNFINISHED AGENDA

At the risk of oversimplifying the rich and complex history of postwar social justice feminism, let me conclude by drawing attention to a few of the principles that I take to be both central to that movement and worth reclaiming by those contemplating a feminist class politics for the future. The labor feminists 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 sought social as well as individual rights, and the reform agenda they championed—just wages, protection against long hours and overwork, and the social supports and job flexibility necessary to care for their families and communities—launched a debate over employment practices that carries on today. Yet the social and gender inequities they identified have not been resolved. Indeed, economic inequality is on the rise, and the burdens that once bore down largely on working class women—long hours, the incompatibility of parenting and employment, and the lack of societal support for caring labor—are increasingly the problems of everyone. Ending those inequities for the majority of women will depend on a new class politics emerging within the larger women's movement as well as within organized labor.

Such an effort could profitably take many of its pages from its mid-twentieth-century foremothers. The labor feminists whose stories are told here recognized multiple sources of inequality and injustice, and they tried to build a politics that addressed these problems *simultaneously*. Gender, race, and other identities were not add-ons to class experience but inseparable features of it. The question for labor feminists was not whether class or gender or race should be given priority, but how social movements can incorporate difference and how coalitions across difference can be sustained. For the labor movement, that meant understanding that workers come in all sizes and shapes, and that there is no *one* class identity or consciousness because there is no *one* worker.¹⁷ For the women's movement, it meant understanding that women differ among themselves, that is, that there is no one experience of gender, of gender exploitation, or even of gender liberation. Labor feminists believed, as do I, that the strongest political bonds are those that grow out of acknowledging differences as well as commonalities.