



Halving the Double Day

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Katherine Pollak Ellickson speaking to West Virginia mine workers, November 19, 1931. Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

HALVING THE DOUBLE DAY

IN TODAY'S 24/7 ECONOMY, THE TIME SQUEEZE HAS MANY IN ITS GRIP. BUT NONE FEEL THE pressure more than those juggling full-time employment with what can seem like a second shift at home. An earlier generation of labor women termed this double burden the "double day," arguing that it weighed most heavily on women, particularly those in lower-income families. That inequity continues today. Lower-income women cannot contract out housework and care-giving responsibilities as easily as the more affluent. Nor is cutting back on the time spent on the job a viable option for the growing number of women who are the primary, and at times the sole, breadwinner in the family.

TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, THE BENEFITS OF work-family policies that currently are in place rarely trickle down to the nonprofessional classes. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allows some workers up to 12 weeks of job leave for personal illness or the care of a newborn, an adopted child, or a sick family member, provides no income support while on leave, thus making it impossible for many to take advantage of the law's provisions. Similarly, the highly touted family-

friendly workplace—that coveted market nook with flexible work schedules, job sharing, child care assistance, and comprehensive health and welfare coverage—is not yet a reality for the majority of salaried employees, let alone hourly workers. Those needing help the most, hourly workers stuck in low-paying rigid jobs, are the last to benefit. They cannot afford to send their children to the on-site child care center, should one exist. And in workplaces where bathroom breaks are still monitored, taking time off for a

child's graduation or leaving early to fix an aging parent's heater in the dead of winter can mean having to find another job.

Yet we are not the first generation to confront these class and gender inequities. Nor are we the first to advocate fundamental changes in employer and government policy to address the work–family dilemma. In 1942, Katherine Ellickson, who would be one of the staunchest advocates for working mothers in the postwar era, voiced her concerns about the “double day” in a revealing essay, “Short-time Work for Women.” A 1926 Vassar graduate who pursued a doctorate in economics at Columbia University before becoming a labor organizer and speechwriter for the United Mine Workers of America, Ellickson recently had joined the research department of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), the industrial labor federation launched in 1938.¹

Earlier generations of women, her essay begins, solved the conflict between wage work and family by embracing *either* one or the other. But her generation was the first to try in large numbers to *combine* the two, and their frustration was creating a new feminist politics. “These statements will seem heresy to many of the older generation of feminists,” Ellickson predicted. “Their fight was for the right to follow in men’s footsteps, to have a similar legal, political, and social status.” But now the problem was different. Rather than adjusting to a work world premised on men’s bodies, life patterns, and needs, the issue was how to adapt “the man’s world to women.” This task “transcended the isolated efforts of individuals,” Ellickson concluded. Societal reforms such as the six-hour day and inexpensive quality child care facilities were needed.

For Ellickson, such reforms were not impractical impossibilities but logical extensions of earlier efforts. Just as “legislation to protect women from too long hours paved the way for more widespread government action for the shorter work-week,” she reasoned, “perhaps married women’s special needs will now provide a stimulus to the development of still shorter shifts.” Her hopes for “shorter shifts” for all were not to be fulfilled. Yet Ellickson never stopped searching for policies that could ease the “double day”—the problem that, in her view, could no longer be ignored if “equal opportunity for women” was to be won.

Ellickson was not alone. She and many other labor women of her generation composed the core of America’s forgotten wave of feminism: the social justice feminism that was the dominant wing of the women’s movement from the 1920s to the 1960s. And as I detail in my forthcoming book, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*, in the decades following World War II Ellickson and her fellow labor feminists launched a movement to restructure employment and secure social support for America’s working families that carries on today. Their legislative and collective bargaining victories in the postwar era were hard fought and partial at best. Yet their vision of what employers and the state should do for working families, and their faith in unions as institutional vehicles for the realization of social justice for women, is an intellectual legacy worth reclaiming. It was this generation of wage-earning women who first confronted the dilemmas of combining care giving and breadwinning, and it was this generation who first devised a work–family politics for the majority not just for the few.

THE NEW WOMEN OF LABOR

THE RISE OF LABOR POWER IN THE 1930S IS A familiar, oft-told tale. But for labor women, the 1940s proved just as significant. Not only did the labor movement continue to expand in the 1940s, it also feminized. By the early 1950s, three million women were union members, a far cry from the 800,000 in 1940, and women had doubled their share of organized workers, jumping from 9 percent in 1940 to 18 percent. In addition, some two million women belonged to labor auxiliaries. Although not accorded the full rights and benefits of union membership by 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.

The 1940s also witnessed the movement of women into local, regional, and national leadership positions within the labor movement. Some, like Katherine Ellickson or Esther Peterson, came from elite backgrounds. Peterson, who was perhaps the most influential labor feminist of her generation, grew up in Provo, Utah, where her father was the local school superintendent. Like Ellickson, she pursued graduate work at Columbia University. And, like Ellickson, she got caught up in the dramatic labor struggles of the 1930s. She taught theatre, physical education, and economics to factory girls at the YWCA and spent her summers on the faculty of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers until Bryn Mawr closed the school in 1938 after the faculty and students persisted in such questionable activities as helping their maids organize.

Shortly before her fourth child was born

in 1946, Peterson moved from the education department of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACWA) to become its first Washington 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. In 1961, she was promoted to assistant secretary of labor, making her the highest-ranking woman official in the Kennedy administration. One of Peterson's top priorities was obtaining a presidential executive order establishing the President's Commission on the Status of Women, the first federal body devoted to assessing women's status and needs. She turned to her old friend Katherine Ellickson, now in the research department of the AFL-CIO, for help in drafting the rationale for the commission. Unable to secure leave, Ellickson eventually left the AFL-CIO, accepting a presidential appointment as the commission's full-time executive secretary.

But the majority of the women labor reformers who led the social feminist movement of the postwar era came up from the shop floor and were from decidedly different class and racial-ethnic backgrounds than Ellickson or Peterson. Dolly Lowther Robinson, an African American laundry worker, helped unionize 30,000 of her coworkers in New York City's laundry industry in the late 1930s. Mentored by ACWA cofounder Bessie Abramowitz Hillman—who also became the godmother of Robinson's daughter—Robinson accepted a full-time job as ACWA assistant education director in 1941. Later, she served as secretary of

the New York State Labor Department under Governor Harriman, overseeing the state's civil rights division. In 1961, she joined Peterson at the U.S. Women's Bureau.

Many others made their mark as well: Mary Callahan and Gloria Johnson of the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), Addie Wyatt of the United Packinghouse Workers, or Maida Springer-Kemp of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. And, of course, there was the formidable group of women off the shop floor at the United Automobile Workers (UAW), including Caroline Dawson Davis, the Kentucky miner's daughter and former UAW auto parts worker and local union president, who headed the union's women's department from 1948 until 1973; her close friend and ally Lillian Hatcher, a wartime riveter who became one of the international's first Black staffers; and UAW Recreation Director Olga Madar, who later served as an international UAW vice president and the first president of the Coalition of Labor Union Women.

Some of the most vocal and visionary labor feminists disappeared from the public stage by the early 1950s, due in part to Cold War politics—women like Ruth Young of the United Electrical Workers, or Elizabeth Sasuly and Luisa Moreno of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural Union. But they were the exceptions, not the rule. The social justice wing of the feminist movement survived and grew in the postwar era, led by left-liberal labor women concentrated in the newly revived industrial union movement.

FIRST-CLASS ECONOMIC CITIZENSHIP FOR WOMEN

IN THE EARLY 1940S, MEETING IN A SERIES OF CONFERENCES and national committees sponsored by the U.S. Women's Bureau, labor

women mapped out a broad reform agenda that would guide them for the next quarter century. Women had won full *political* citizenship in 1920, they proclaimed. Now the battle was for first-class *economic* citizenship. That would require, in their words, ending "unfair sex discrimination," winning "equal job rights" with men, and gaining "equal pay for comparable work." It also would involve addressing the "double day." Women simply could not be equal while they "continued doing two jobs to their husband's one," as shoemaker union leader and government official Mary Anderson wrote in *Good Housekeeping* in 1925.

But how could the two-job problem be addressed? One popular answer in the postwar era simply was to return women to the single job of homemaking. Labor women rejected this approach as economically and socially impractical and no longer desired by the majority of women. The American woman, Esther Peterson explained to a Swedish journalist in 1955, had "climbed over the walls of her kitchen, worked in the market place, and learned about the world beyond the doormat." There was no going back.

Nor did labor women reformers view the compromise solution relied upon by more affluent women—hiring household help and limiting market work to part time—as feasible for everyone. Lower-income women often did not have the luxury of being part-time or secondary earners, and their paltry take-home pay precluded hiring another woman to do the second shift.

But neither did postwar labor feminists call for men to take on homemaking responsibilities as women moved into market work. Certainly, working-class men "helped" in the domestic sphere, and many working-class fami-

lies devised complicated shift relays where as one earner's shift ended, the other's began. But few labor feminists of this generation thought that men should or would take the *primary* role in care giving. Indeed, with the divorce rate rising, and lower-income women increasingly raising children alone, who could count on even having a partner with whom to share the domestic load? Efforts to redefine masculinity and recast gender roles at home came later, with the rise of women's liberation in the 1960s.

In the postwar era labor feminists pursued other routes to ending the double day. The norms and practices of the work world itself had to change. New employment institutions and policies were needed that recognized women's lives off the job without sacrificing their claim to first-class citizenship on the job. That meant, for one, challenging what economist Eileen Appelbaum has termed the "uncumbered worker" norm, the legacy of a Victorian gender system that assumed all workers were available for full-time, long-term, and uninterrupted employment. Instead of arguing that women could and would soon achieve this ideal, labor feminists questioned its legitimacy as a universal standard. They wanted, as Frieda Miller, leading labor feminist and director of the U.S. Women's Bureau, explained, "to transform the masculine pattern."

Yet to transform these masculine patterns required a deep cultural shift and other far-reaching societal changes. Indeed, in their view, the problem of the double day for the majority of women would not be solved until policies were in place that raised wages, acknowledged and accommodated the work of

caring labor and homemaking, and shortened women's hours on the job.

RAISING WAGES

LABOR WOMEN SAW HIGHER HOURLY INCOME as a core ingredient of a family-friendly workplace. Throughout the postwar era, they argued forcefully that raising hourly wages for both men and women was a way of reducing the double day. For many lower-income women, long hours in a factory or restaurant was neither voluntary nor desired: it was simply a function of necessity. Lifting women's wages above poverty level allowed them to reduce coerced market work. In addition, many working-class women, particularly wives, saw higher wages for men as a way of raising overall family income and hence giving them more choice about how to divide up market and family work.

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Labor women pursued higher wages in a variety of ways: They lobbied to raise the statutory minimum wage set by government, they organized unions and bargained for higher wages, and they launched an aggressive national campaign for equal pay for equal work. In 1945,

labor feminists 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 1945 labor feminists introduced an Equal Pay Bill in Congress, and they reintroduced it every year until 1963 when the Equal Pay Act was passed.

in 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. Yet the federal law and many of the state laws that passed failed to define equal pay in the broad way they had hoped. In their view, equal pay was about raising a woman's pay when she was paid less than a man doing the same job. But it also referred to ending pay discrimination and sex bias in wage setting in the jobs traditionally held by women. Comparable worth was not invented in the 1970s. It has a long historical pedigree, rooted in the labor movement itself.

At times, labor women justified higher wages by relying on labor's longstanding call for a "living wage"—or what some scholars now 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. But rather than abandon the family wage tradition, labor feminists wanted to degender it, to claim it for women as well as for men. Some argued that 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. Their ideas did not prevail: The "market wage" or a wage supposedly determined solely by productivity or supply and demand calculations gained ideological hegemony. But their effort to win what could be called a "provider wage" for both men and women are important forerunners of today's campaigns to establish a living wage high enough to support dependents.

SOCIAL SUPPORTS FOR CARE GIVING

LABOR FEMINISTS ALSO BELIEVED THAT FAMILY responsibilities should be accommodated through increased job flexibility and the right to social supports for childbirth and child care. Theirs was a mixed welfare model, combining changes in both private and public policy. They pushed unions to negotiate improved pregnancy and maternity leave with job and income guarantees, health coverage for childbirth and dependent care, sick leave, and other kinds of paid time off. On the government front, they sought to expand state disability and unemployment coverage to pregnant women and mothers, and starting in the early 1940s, they lobbied repeatedly for federally funded universal child care programs and for new federal legislation expanding New Deal entitlements. When Frieda Miller and other labor feminists testified before Congress in the

1940s 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.

The struggle continued into the 1950s and beyond. “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.”

Unable to secure many of the government programs achieved in other industrialized countries such as paid maternity leave or universal health care, labor feminists redoubled their efforts to win employer-based benefits. In addition, they continued to advocate tax reforms that would benefit working families. In 1954, labor women’s energetic lobbying helped pass a tax reform allowing childcare expenses to be considered a legitimate business deduction, a proposal endorsed by the CIO in the 1940s. They also championed the expansion of dependency exemptions or lowering taxes for families with dependents. Indeed, in many ways, tax exemptions and tax credits for dependents were the American version of family or child allowances, the common form of government income support for children outside the United States.

THE SHORTER WORK DAY

IN THE POSTWAR ERA, THE LABOR MOVEMENT’S search for reduced work time without loss of income shifted from a shorter day to a shorter work week, a shorter work year, and a

shorter work life. 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 the postwar union campaigns to secure these “lumps of leisure.” Yet the “lumps of leisure” approach, while helpful, did not go far enough for those shackled with the double day. Mechanisms to make *shorter daily hours* a reality were still needed.

Labor feminists saw shorter hour legislation as the most promising route to limiting the work day. They were optimistic that the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which many had helped pass in 1938, could be strengthened. They also hoped that the still-existing woman-only state hour laws could be made more flexible and extended to men. The FLSA used the disincentive of time-and-a-half overtime pay after a 40-hour week to *discourage* long hours, but it set no maximum on hours. This approach, many thought, was an inadequate check on employer power and on the competitive market’s relentless drive toward longer hours. The woman-only state hour laws offered an important “second line of defense,” in Peterson’s words. These laws, which existed in some 43 states in 1957, often regulated *daily* hours as well as *weekly*, setting a ceiling on the number of hours that employers could require in a day or a week. The state laws also covered a large number of the lower-income women who fell outside of FLSA jurisdiction. The woman’s standard, then, as represented by the woman-only state hour laws, should not be discarded, but rather universalized to cover all workers.

With the Kennedy victory in 1960, optimism increased. Yet the postwar consensus

among labor women over preserving the woman-only hour laws until they could be amended and extended to men was starting to unravel. The first signs of strain were evident in the debate among the women leaders Esther Peterson assembled on the President's Com-

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mission on the Status of Women. The dilemma was clear: *Without* such laws employers could require women to work 10- and 12-hour days at the drop of a hat, an incredible hardship on those with dependents. Yet *with* the laws, employers could deny women access to higher-paying jobs where overtime and extra earnings might be possible. As more and more families came to depend on women's income from market work, the problem for women of having to choose between time and money intensified, and a growing number of women chose more hours rather than less income. The solution, as Frieda Miller had recognized in 1945, was to construct the issue like the "old 8-hour fight where we have reduction of hours without loss of wage standards." But that solution was not forthcoming.

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, a new government agency, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), now had much of the power over the

fate of state woman-only hour laws. Would these laws be extended to men or repealed? This time, in hearings before the EEOC, labor women faced off against one another publicly and with increasing animosity. The UAW women sided with the National Organization

for Women and the National Association of Business and Professional Women, insisting that the "opportunity to earn" could no longer be denied women, and that state hour laws should be repealed. Katherine Ellickson, IUE's Mary Callahan, Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union's (HERE) Myra Wolfgang, and others dissented. They warned that the opportunity for both sexes was important but so was

an hour policy that reined in market work and allowed for a life apart from wage work—a policy, if you will, that allowed for the right *not* to work as well as the right *to* work. They favored retaining the laws until they could be amended and extended to men. The FLSA was simply too weak to provide sufficient protection.

But the sex-based state hour laws were repealed, and no new mechanisms for limiting work time were identified. Rather, the FLSA became the nation's primary regulatory approach to limiting long hours. Its weakness is certainly part of the reason why work hours in the United States today are longer than in any other industrialized country.

LABOR FEMINISM REFASHIONED

THE TWO- AND THREE-JOB FAMILY IS NOW THE norm, and the burdens that once bore down largely on working-class women in-

creasingly weigh on everyone. In response, a movement has arisen that takes many of its pages from postwar labor feminism. Close to a hundred living wage ordinances have now passed in communities across the country. Interest in legislative mechanisms for setting hour maximums has revived. Labor strikes over the right to refuse overtime are no longer an oddity, and overtime pay lawsuits now outnumber sex discrimination claims. Indeed, a movement for what could be called “time rights” is on the horizon.²

Unions also are beginning to champion workplace flexibility and the need for social supports for care giving. Since the passage of the FMLA in 1993, there have been numerous union-led state initiatives for paid parental and family leave, reflecting the recognition that paid time off is a high priority for working families. In September 2002, California became the first state to pass legislation providing for paid family leave, with the state labor federation leading the coalition.³

New ideas are being generated as well—proposals that the postwar generation had yet to envision. Welfare moms in Montana and other states have organized and won the right to use state child care subsidies when they care for their own children. Unions such as the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) have pioneered “community leave” provisions that allow for members to take paid time off for parent–teacher association (PTA) meetings and other community-based activities. And there is growing excitement over what could be seen as a new route to “shorter shifts”: upgrading and ending the marginalization of part-time work. In one of its hardest fought battles,

HUCTW won raises and enhanced job security and benefit parity for part-time employees. Claiming equity for part-timers in pay and benefits are goals that potentially could unite advocates of shorter hours, equal pay, and work–family balance.⁴

These are all heartening developments. Yet the problem of how to craft policies that do not require a trade-off between time and money remains, as does the challenge of creating a work–family politics that can bridge the deep class differences in the distribution of power and freedom in American society. The recent debate over amending the FLSA is but one example of how both these problems continue to plague the work–family movement. The legislation favored by the Bush administration allowed employers to offer the promise of time off (compensatory time) at a later date in lieu of pay for overtime. While some employees saw the proposal as allowing them a

The weakness of the Fair Labor Standards Act is part of the reason why work hours in the U.S. are longer than in any other industrialized country.

respite from an unrelenting nine to five schedule, that small potential “freedom” came with a high price tag. It required that workers give up money for time, an unacceptable “choice” for those with little of either. Flexibility during

the day would come at the expense of more overtime, particularly for workers where “voluntary” overtime is a myth. Conservatives presumed as the norm a workplace enjoyed by only a privileged elite: one where individual workers can bargain with their superiors without repercussions and where the family needs of individual employees can vie successfully against the corporate bottom line.

If the work–family movement of the future is to be successful, it will need to tackle these longstanding dilemmas. It also will need to reach out to new constituencies and frame issues so that broad-based coalitions can be assembled. Where such coalitions have been created, as in the struggle over paid leave in California, progress has been made. Labor feminists had few allies in their efforts to limit long hours a half-century ago. Today, however, a time movement whose goals included greater employee control over time and a fairer distribution of work, whether productive or repro-

ductive, would appeal to a broad spectrum of the population. For some, market work has become as much a realm of creativity and free-

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dom as one of drudgery and coercion. The question is how to spread that power and freedom to the majority, for the problem of the double day is as much how we experience our day as the length of it. Whether it be compulsory homemaking or compulsory market work, neither is acceptable. ■

Notes

1. Various drafts of the Ellickson essay are in box 92, file 1, Katherine Pollak Ellickson Papers, Part I, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. For additional citations and a fuller treatment of Ellickson and the other labor feminists who organized against the “double day,” consult Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, forthcoming January 2004).

2. A broad coalition of labor, religious, environmental, and other groups, for example, have set 24 October 2003, as the first national “Timeday” to draw attention to the “American epidemic of overwork” and to the nine extra weeks per year Americans work when compared with Europeans. For further information consult www.timeday.org.

3. For further information on the California victory, see *Putting Families First: How*

California Won the Fight for Paid Family Leave, a report by the Labor Project for Working Families available at <http://laborproject.berkeley.edu>.

4. On the Montana victory, see Betty Holcomb, “Montana Women Score Victory on Valuing Caregiving,” 23 April 2003, available at <http://www.mothersoughttohaveequalrights.org>. On HUCTW, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, “The Prospects for Unionism in a Service Society,” in *Working in the Service Society*, ed. Cameron Macdonald and Carmen Sirianni (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996): 333–58. For an inspired discussion of part-timer equity, see Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). The difficulties labor unions have encountered in representing part-timers are discussed in Dorothy Sue Cobble, ed. *Women and Unions: Forging a Partnership* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).