

# A Higher “Standard of Life” for the World: U.S. Labor Women’s Reform Internationalism and the Legacies of 1919

Dorothy Sue Cobble

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In 1919, in the immediate aftermath of World War I, women labor reformers from nineteen nations and three continents gathered in Washington, D.C., to hammer out a set of international labor standards and worker rights. The ten-day International Congress of Working Women (ICWW), called by the National Women’s Trade Union League of America (NWTUL), with the counsel and encouragement of British and French labor women, was timed to coincide with the inaugural meeting of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the body charged by the Treaty of Versailles with formulating international labor policies in the postwar world. The two hundred women who responded to the call demanded a voice for working women in shaping a new world order. Through international labor legislation and worker organization, they believed, “the standard of life of women workers throughout the world” could be raised. They met at a time of heady possibility. Women’s suffrage in the United States and in much of Europe was imminent. The Bolsheviks had seized power in Russia in 1917; socialist movements and labor parties were on the rise across Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. The 1919 ICWW adjourned on a high note with plans for a permanent organization, the International Federation of Working Women (IFWW).<sup>1</sup>

In the last few decades, U.S. history has been transformed by research on international organizations and on the global movements of peoples, ideas, and commodities. Histori-

Dorothy Sue Cobble is Distinguished Professor of History and Labor Studies at Rutgers University.

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Readers may contact Cobble at [cobble@rutgers.edu](mailto:cobble@rutgers.edu).

<sup>1</sup> “International Federation of Working Women,” [1922], pamphlet, folder 1, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records, 1919–1923 (Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.). For the larger historical and political context of the time of “heady possibility,” see Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, 2000), 251–377; Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (New York, 2002); and Stephen S. Large, *The Rise of Labor in Japan: The Yūaikai, 1912–19* (Tokyo, 1972). I use the phrase *labor women* to refer to women, regardless of class background, who worked closely with organized labor and identified it as a principal institutional vehicle for social reform.

ans of women, stirred by the pioneering work of Leila Rupp and others, have produced superb accounts of U.S. women's international initiatives and transnational political cultures. U.S. labor historians also have revived an older scholarship on international worker solidarity, pushing it in new and less celebratory directions. Yet scholars of U.S. women's internationalism have focused primarily on elite women and on suffrage and other campaigns for political and civil rights, while the attention of labor historians has centered on the internationalism of working-class men. The internationalist ideas and efforts of non-elite women and of women's transnational campaigns for economic and social rights have received less attention. Moreover, although there is a rich body of scholarship on immigrant and working-class women's politics in the United States and excellent studies of women in socialist, communist, and anarchist movements, neither body of literature captures the internationalism practiced by labor women associated with the mainstream U.S. labor movement.<sup>2</sup>

This essay expands scholarly understandings of U.S. internationalism and America's interaction with the world by focusing on the internationalist endeavors of the NWTUL and the transnational labor women's politics it hoped to forge. I trace the emergence of the league's internationalism on the world stage in 1919, probe the dynamics of the encounters between NWTUL women and labor men and women abroad as U.S. labor women attempted to bring their reform vision to the international community, and I conclude by assessing the import and legacies of the league's efforts. Throughout, I consider U.S. labor women in a comparative framework, placing them in conversation with the labor women reformers outside the United States who were their closest collaborators—primarily women in Great Britain, France, and Scandinavia. A study of the internationalist ideas and initiatives of the NWTUL suggests the robustness of U.S. social-justice internationalism in the aftermath of World War I, the saliency of class concerns among Progressive Era reformers in the United States, and the significance of the 1919 moment in laying the foundation for later transformations in global gender and social policy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On international organizations and the global movement of people, ideas, and commodities, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Thomas Bender, ed. *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2002); and Eric Rauchway, *Blessed among Nations: How the World Made America* (New York, 2006). On U.S. women's internationalist endeavors, see Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, 1999); Bonnie S. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830–1860* (New York, 2000); and Christine Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned: Race, Class, and Internationalism in the American and British Women's Movements, c. 1880s–1970s* (London, 2004). On transnational women's political cultures, see Nancy A. Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s–1920s* (Urbana, 2001); and Kathryn Kish Sklar, Anja Schüler, and Susan Strasser, eds., *Social Justice Feminists in the United States and Germany: A Dialogue in Documents, 1885–1933* (Ithaca, 1998). On international worker solidarity, see Marcel van der Linden, "Transnationalizing American Labor History," *Journal of American History*, 86 (Dec. 1999), 1078–92; Dana Frank, "Where Is the History of U.S. Labor and International Solidarity? Part I: A Moveable Feast," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 1 (Spring 2004), 95–119; and Leon Fink, ed., *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (New York, 2011). On immigrant and working-class women's lives and politics in the United States, see Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900–1965* (Chapel Hill, 1995); Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington, 1999); and Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill, 2012). On women in socialist, communist, and anarchist movements, see Mary Jo Buhle, *Women and Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana, 1983); Margaret S. Marsh, *Anarchist Women, 1870–1920* (Philadelphia, 1981); Pernilla Jonsson, Silke Neunsinger, and Joan Sangster, eds., *Crossing Boundaries: Women's Organizing in Europe and the Americas, 1880s–1940s* (Uppsala, 2007); and Helmut Gruber and Pamela M. Graves, eds., *Women and Socialism, Socialism and Women: Europe between the Two World Wars* (New York, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> I depict the endeavors of the National Women's Trade Union League of America (NWTUL) as international in keeping with the language of the era. At the same time, many of the activities of women internationalists in

In comparing U.S. labor women to their counterparts abroad, I follow the lead of Daniel Rodgers in rejecting the conventional “exceptionalist” framework that, as he notes, exaggerates differences between the United States and other nations; homogenizes Europe and other regions; and renders invisible class, community, and other differences within nations. I seek to move beyond reductive dichotomies such as Europe versus the United States or gender versus class in depicting working women’s transnational politics. A theoretical framework conceptualizing gender and class concerns as discrete and dichotomous, for example, ignores the inseparability of these issues in the lives of those who are women and workers. Relying on these dichotomies, earlier accounts of U.S. labor politics in the early twentieth century emphasized the lack of class consciousness in the United States and contrasted the greater sex or feminist consciousness in the United States with the greater class consciousness of European men and women. In this essay, I revisit these interpretations and find considerable diversity of opinion among women labor reformers within nations as well as tensions between women from different nations within Europe. The political divisions among women labor reformers were not simply between the United States and Europe, nor were the disagreements that arose indicative of fundamental differences in class or gender consciousness between U.S. and European women labor reformers. Indeed, U.S. labor women, I argue, shared a class and gender politics with their counterparts abroad that enabled them to articulate a transnational working women’s politics in 1919 and forge a transnational reform network that would endure through the interwar years and beyond.<sup>4</sup>

### The League’s Social-Justice Internationalism

Founded in 1903 by social reformers and labor organizers inspired by the British Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), the U.S. league brought together working-class and

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this period—the personal and political networks they forged and the transborder exchanges in which they engaged—would now be called *transnational*, a term I also employ. The standard scholarly accounts of the league’s internationalist endeavors remains Robin Miller Jacoby, “Feminism and Class Consciousness in the British and American Women’s Trade Union Leagues, 1890–1925,” in *Liberating Women’s History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana, 1976), 137–60; and Robin Miller Jacoby, *The British and American Women’s Trade Union Leagues, 1890–1925: A Case Study of Feminism and Class* (New York, 1994). More recently, U.S. and European scholars have analyzed the International Congress of Working Women (ICWW) and the International Federation of Working Women (IFWW) from more global perspectives. See Geert van Goethem, “An International Experiment of Women Workers: The International Federation of Working Women, 1919–1924,” *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* (Brussels), 84 (no. 4, 2006), 1025–48; Ulla Wikander, “Demands on the ILO by Internationally Organized Women in 1919,” in *ILO Histories: Essays on the International Labor Organization and Its Impact on the World during the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jasmien van Daele et al. (Bern, 2010), 67–89; and Lara Vapnek, “The International Federation of Working Women,” in *Women and Social Movements, International: 1840 to Present*, ed. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Alexandria, 2012), [http://wasi.alexanderstreet.com/help/view/the\\_international\\_federation\\_of\\_working\\_women](http://wasi.alexanderstreet.com/help/view/the_international_federation_of_working_women). On U.S. labor women’s involvement in the ICWW and the IFWW, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, “U.S. Labor Women’s Internationalism in the World War I Era,” *Revue Française d’Études Américaines* (Paris), 122 (no. 4, 2009), 44–57. Counter to previous literature, my essay concerns the dynamics of transnational encounters and how the case of the NWTUL changes scholarly understandings of U.S. internationalism and political culture.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, “American Exceptionalism Revisited,” *Raritan Review*, 24 (Fall 2004), 21–37. On how gender and race are similarly problematic if used as separate constructs, see Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894–1994* (New York, 1999), 13–20. On U.S. labor’s exceptional lack of class consciousness in the early twentieth century, see William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991). For a rebuttal of William E. Forbath’s thesis, see Sean Wilentz, “Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1920,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 26 (Fall 1984), 1–24. On how NWTUL women prioritized feminism over class in contrast with European labor women’s priorities, see Jacoby, *British and American Women’s Trade Union Leagues*, 149–88.



The three phrases engraved on the 1903 seal of the National Women's Trade Union League (NWTUL) capture essential aspects of the feminist politics the group hoped to take to the world during the World War I era. The NWTUL insisted that the "eight-hour day" and "a living wage" were fundamental labor rights for women as well as men. Such reforms would help "guard the home" by ensuring sufficient economic support for women and their dependents and by allowing women more time to care for their families. *Courtesy Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M. P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University.*

elite women who put advancing the interests of wage-earning women through unionization and labor-law reform at the center of their politics. To accomplish these ends, the league worked closely with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the largest U.S. labor organization in the early twentieth century. The NWTUL also cooperated with other women's organizations in legislative reform, suffrage, and peace campaigns.<sup>5</sup>

Any person who embraced the NWTUL's goals of organizing women wage-earners could join, but from its earliest years the league's constitution stipulated that a majority of

<sup>5</sup> Allen F. Davis, "The Women's Trade Union League: Origins and Organization," *Labor History*, 5 (Winter 1964), 3–17; Jacoby, *British and American Women's Trade Union Leagues*, 9–17; Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 87–168; Elizabeth Anne Payne, *Reform, Labor, and Feminism: Margaret Dreier Robins and the Women's Trade Union League* (Urbana, 1988); Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia, Mo., 1980).

executive board members be women “who are or have been trade unionists in good standing.” Such rules did not end class privilege in the league, nor was the organization free of the racial, religious, and cultural prejudices that divided women reformers in this era. White, middle-class, Protestant women, such as Margaret Dreier Robins and her sister Mary Dreier, held the top leadership positions in the organization until the mid-1920s. Nevertheless, the NWTUL was unusual among Progressive Era women’s reform organizations in its large working-class and immigrant membership and in its insistence on developing working-class women’s leadership.<sup>6</sup>

The league’s reform internationalism is part of the contested and expansive tradition of U.S. liberalism depicted by historians such as James Kloppenberg and Howard Brick. As “progressive internationalists,” to use Thomas J. Knock’s term, NWTUL women sought peace, prosperity, and collective security through expanded democracy and international law. At the same time, in contrast to the free-market, laissez-faire economic internationalism associated with Wilsonian liberalism, the league’s vision of economic global justice necessitated state and union regulation of markets in tandem with the free movement of peoples. Their conception of the new liberal world order thus differed in significant ways from that of many other liberal American internationalists.<sup>7</sup>

NWTUL women also advanced a social-justice reform vision (combining women’s rights and economic justice) that distinguished the group’s vision from the internationalism of the AFL. As labor liberals and advocates of social democracy, the league shared with the mainstream U.S. labor movement, including the AFL, a belief in private property and constitutionalism as well as a commitment to reforming capitalism by making markets and corporations more democratic and equitable. Also like the AFL, the NWTUL saw the collective organization and empowerment of working people as crucial to the achievement of economic justice. Yet the league supported a greater role for the state and for regulatory laws in the economy than did the AFL. Its commitment to advancing the interests of women and to a more inclusive unionism also brought the league into conflict with the AFL. The NWTUL opposed the AFL’s nativist immigration policies, for example, and pursued a labor movement at home and abroad in which workers of all nations would be welcome.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the best of intentions, NWTUL internationalists did not always live up to the egalitarian ideals they espoused, nor did their policies always have the desired effect. As

<sup>6</sup> Jacoby, *British and American Women’s Trade Union Leagues*, 15. Nancy Schrom Dye, “Creating a Feminist Alliance: Sisterhood and Class Conflict in the New York Women’s Trade Union League, 1903–1914,” *Feminist Studies*, 2 (Summer 1975), 24–38; Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 89–91.

<sup>7</sup> James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York, 1998); Howard Brick, *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Ithaca, 2006). For a definition of progressive internationalism, see Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (New York, 1992), vii–viii. For a discussion of leading proponents of progressive internationalism, see *ibid.*, 50–55. On the NWTUL’s vision of global economic justice, see Cobble, “U.S. Labor Women’s Internationalism in the World War I Era,” 54–55; Alice Henry, *Women and the Labor Movement* (New York, 1927), 212–19; and Gladys Boone, *The Women’s Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America* (New York, 1942), 123–31. On Woodrow Wilson’s economic liberalism, see Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890–2010* (New York, 2012), 66–75. On Wilson’s limited commitment to self-government and the free movement of peoples, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York, 2007), 28–30.

<sup>8</sup> On the core tenets of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), see Dorothy Sue Cobble, “Pure and Simple Radicalism: Putting the Progressive Era AFL in Its Time,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 10 (Winter 2013), 61–87. On the exclusionism of the AFL, see Catherine Collomp, “Immigrants, Labor Markets, and the State, a Comparative Approach: France and the United States, 1880–1930,” *Journal of American History*, 86 (June 1999), 41–66.

numerous scholars have shown, Western women's reform efforts were often inseparable from Western imperialism and, at times, were ethnocentric, misguided, and condescending. U.S. league women shared the racialist assumptions of their day and they exhibited cultural and national chauvinism, as did many of the non-U.S. labor women and men with whom they associated. Still, the imperial frame for transnational women's reform, if applied universally and in isolation from other constructs, can be as homogenizing as the older "sisterhood is global" presumption. In analyzing transnational interactions I rely on U.S. and non-U.S. sources to consider how multiple structures of power framed such encounters; how political and other allegiances interacted with those based on race and nation; and how reciprocal influences can occur even in exchanges between unequal parties.<sup>9</sup>

Parts of the story of labor women's interwar internationalism are familiar to historians of women. As Susan Becker recounts, U.S. labor women, fearing the weakening of labor-standards legislation, opposed "equal rights treaty" proposals from the National Woman's party and its allies in the ILO, the League of Nations, and the Pan-American Union's Inter-American Commission on Women. Yet the history of U.S. labor women's internationalism has been told largely through the eyes of their "equal rights" opponents. There is an alternate history of labor women's social justice internationalism that requires further explication: compared to equal-rights internationalism, labor women's reform internationalism arose at different moments, for different reasons, and operated in different institutional settings. It began not in the mid-1920s with the battles over the equal rights treaty but a decade earlier in the prewar search for mechanisms to promote global economic justice and working women's rights. And although the formal institution that labor women founded in 1919—the IFWW—had disbanded by 1924, informal transnational bonds persisted. These networks sustained labor women's activism in the interwar years and beyond as they secured significant changes in social policy in the League of Nations, the ILO, and the international labor movement. When labor women's reform internationalism is reconceived within a social justice framework and located in informal and formal networks, its rich and continuous history becomes more visible as does the strength of a progressive tradition of U.S. internationalism aimed at global economic and gender justice.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> On Western women's reform efforts and imperialism, see Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, 1994); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, N.C., 2003), 1–42; and Megan Threlkeld, "The Pan-American Conference of Women, 1922: Successful Suffragists Turn to International Relations," *Diplomatic History*, 31 (Nov. 2007), 801–28. For the "sisterhood is global" perspective, see Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (Garden City, 1984). The NWTUL had no African American women in national leadership positions during this period. Thus, although I analyze the racism and racialist thinking of league women, I am not able to explore the transnational encounters or internationalist ideas of African American women. A pioneering anthology that moves beyond imperialist frameworks and assumptions about a "unidirectional exercise of power" is Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar, and Connie A. Shemo, eds., *Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812–1960* (Durham, N.C., 2010), 1–16.

<sup>10</sup> Susan D. Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism between the Wars* (Westport, 1981), 161–96. Nancy F. Cott, "Feminist Politics in the 1920s: The National Woman's Party," *Journal of American History*, 71 (June 1984), 43–68. For a more global perspective on interwar feminist debates, see Carol Miller, "Geneva—The Key to Equality": Inter-war Feminists and the League of Nations," *Women's History Review*, 3 (no. 2, 1994), 219–45; Nitza Bercovitch, *From Motherhood to Citizenship: Women's Rights and International Organizations* (Baltimore, 1999); and Carol Riegelman Lubin and Anne Winslow, *Social Justice for Women: The International Labor Organization and Women* (Durham, N.C., 1990). For histories of U.S. women's internationalism told largely from the perspective of reformers pursuing women's equal legal and civil rights, see Becker, *Origins of the Equal Rights*

## World War I and the Rise of NWTUL Internationalism

From its earliest days the NWTUL showed considerable interest in the world beyond U.S. borders. The world is “more and more one great community,” the league proclaimed in 1909, and “organization is no longer an American or a European question, but a world-wide one.” Beginning in 1911 the league’s monthly journal, *Life and Labor*, poured forth a stream of news and in-depth portraits of women and labor movements throughout continental Europe and in Great Britain, Scandinavia, Russia, Japan, China, India, Ireland, Canada, and Australia (the birthplace of the *Life and Labor* editor Alice Henry). In 1913 *Life and Labor* launched a regular column, “From Near and Far,” that also offered news from abroad.<sup>11</sup>

Ties were strongest with the British, however. The NWTUL had been inspired by the British WTUL, established in 1873, and philosophically the two leagues had much in common. They evolved different strategies for relating to the male-dominated trade union movements in their countries, however. Because the British league, like the U.S. league, was a mixed-class organization, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the umbrella group to which the majority of British trade unions belonged, refused it affiliation. To solve this problem the British league divided in 1906 and formed a working-class wing of women’s unions called the National Federation of Working Women (NFWW), which affiliated directly with the TUC. The remaining group kept the league name and continued its organizing and legislative efforts on behalf of wage-earning women until 1921, but the NFWW quickly eclipsed the British WTUL in numbers and stature. In contrast, the U.S. league retained a mixed-class membership throughout its almost fifty-year history, and although it cooperated closely with the AFL and was recognized as the leading organizational representative for wage-earning women into the 1930s, it never became an AFL affiliate.<sup>12</sup>

In the years leading up to World War I, U.S. and British labor women exchanged letters, visits, and news items in their publications, although they did not yet cooperate in formal joint projects. *Life and Labor* ran feature stories on British labor women’s activities, and the NWTUL hosted the two leading British trade union women, Mary Macarthur and Margaret Bondfield, at their conventions. This extraordinary duo shared the leadership of the British women’s trade union movement. They met through the Shop Assistants’ Union in 1902, where Bondfield, the working-class daughter of a Somerset lace maker, was a seasoned organizer. Macarthur, asked by her father—a prosperous Scottish

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*Amendment*; Paula F. Pfeffer, “A Whisper in the Assembly of Nations: United States’ Participation in the International Movement for Women’s Rights from the League of Nations to the United Nations,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 8 (no. 5, 1985), 459–71; and Helen Laville, “A New Era in International Women’s Rights? American Women’s Associations and the Establishment of the UN Commission on the Status of Women,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 20 (Winter 2008), 34–56.

<sup>11</sup> “S. M. Franklin’s Report, Sept. 27, 1909,” in *Proceedings of the Second Biennial Convention of the National Women’s Trade Union League of America, Sept. 27–Oct. 2, 1909, Chicago, Illinois* (Chicago, 1909), 1–11, box 22 (microfilm: reel 19), series 3: National Conventions, 1909–1947, Records of the National Women’s Trade Union League of America (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). For representative “From Near and Far” columns, see “From Near and Far,” *Life and Labor*, 5 (May 1915), 75; “From Near and Far,” *ibid.*, 6 (Nov. 1916), 174–75; and “From Near and Far,” *ibid.*, 8 (Jan. 1918), 19. For a sampling of full-length articles in *Life and Labor*, see Claire Gerard, “Trade Unionism among Men and Women in France,” *ibid.*, 3 (Oct. 1913), 292–96; Gertrud Hanna, “Organization of Women Workers in Germany,” *ibid.*, 4 (May 1914), 134–39; and Ernestine Friedmann, “China’s Woman behind the Machine,” *ibid.*, 10 (Oct. 1920), 255–58. On Alice Henry, see Diane Kirkby, *The Power of Pen and Voice: Alice Henry’s Life as an Australian-American Labour Reformer* (New York, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Jacoby, *British and American Women’s Trade Union Leagues*, 9–17; Boone, *Women’s Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America*, 20–40, 64–75; William L. O’Neill, *The Woman Movement: Feminism in the United States and England* (Chicago, 1969), 63–69.

draper—to find out more about the Shop Assistants' Union he feared, ended up joining herself. She rose rapidly through the trade union ranks, becoming secretary of the British WTUL in 1903 and, in 1906, the first president of the NFWW, which she and Bondfield had founded. Both women also became leaders in the British Labor party and its women's section, the Women's Labour League. In 1919 they would travel together to Washington, D.C., to attend the Women's Labor Congress and the founding convention of the ILO.<sup>13</sup>

Next to Britain, NWTUL ties were closest to Germany, the largest trade union center in Europe. At their conventions, NWTUL women hosted German delegates, including Gertrud Hanna, a leading trade unionist and member of the German Social Democratic party, and they avidly followed the rising tide of prewar German women's unionism. As Europe descended into war during the summer of 1914, the NWTUL kept open its channels of communication with Germany, inviting "foreign delegates" from all sides of the conflict to their 1915 convention and sending the labor organizer and suffragist Leonora O'Reilly as a NWTUL delegate to the 1915 Hague Women's Peace Conference, a gathering that included German and Austrian representation.<sup>14</sup>

When the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, however, the NWTUL backed the Wilson administration, and a number of the group's officers accepted government positions to advise on war policy toward women. League meetings "filled with talk of war problems" and, as the war progressed, of "how to safeguard the interests of workers, especially women workers," at the war's conclusion. At the NWTUL's 1917 convention in Kansas City, delegates endorsed a proposal presented by the French feminist Gabrielle Duchêne from the Syndicat Général de la Chemiserie Lingerie (White Goods Workers of Paris) that insisted labor rights be part of any postwar peace treaty. They then called on working women of all countries to gather at an international conference at war's end to formulate a common platform.<sup>15</sup>

With peace talks anticipated, the NWTUL executive board set up the twelve-member Committee on Social and Industrial Reconstruction to coordinate league lobbying in Paris, and, if possible, to hold an international gathering of working women to influence the proceedings. The committee developed a "working women's charter" which

<sup>13</sup> For feature stories on British labor women's activities, see "The Marriage of Mary Macarthur," *Life and Labor*, 1 (Nov. 1911), 350–51; Priscilla E. Moulder, "English Domestic Workers' Union," *ibid.*, 2 (Aug. 1912), 245; and Mary Macarthur, "The Organization of Working Women," *ibid.*, 4 (Nov. 1914), 1. On Margaret Bondfield, see Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (London, 1948); Mary Agnes Hamilton, "Britain's Veteran Campaigner for Equal Rights," *Independent Woman*, 27 (Dec. 1948), 353, 371, clipping, folder 2, box 1, series 1, Margaret Grace Bondfield Papers, 1864–1951 (Special Collections, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.); "Margaret Bondfield: Daughter of the People," *Life and Labor*, 19 (May 1919), 111–12; and Ross Davies, "Margaret Bondfield: A Biography," [1970], draft manuscript, folder H, box FL642, Papers of Ross Davies (Women's Library, Metropolitan University, London, Eng.). On Bondfield's 1910 visit to the United States, see Bondfield, *Life's Work*, 90–124. On Mary Macarthur, see *ibid.*, 112; Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions, 1874–1976* (Totowa, 1978), 51–77; unidentified newspaper clippings, May 5, 1907, June 19, 1909, file 321, Gertrude Tuckwell Papers (Trades Union Congress Library, Metropolitan University).

<sup>14</sup> Mary McDowell, "Some Observations on Working Women in Germany," *Life and Labor*, 12 (May 1912), 132–4; Mary McDowell, "A New Year's Greeting to the International Sisterhood of Union Women," *ibid.*, 2 (Jan. 1912), 1; Hanna, "Organization of Working Women in Germany"; Leonora O'Reilly, "International Congress of Women at the Hague," *Life and Labor*, 15 (July 1915), 125–28; National Women's Trade Union League of America, *Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Convention, New York, June 2–7, 1915* (Chicago, 1915), 391–93; Adelheid von Saldern, "Modernization as Challenge: Perceptions and Reactions of German Social Democratic Women," in *Women and Socialism, Socialism and Women*, ed. Gruber and Graves, 105, 110; Boone, *Women's Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America*, 120–21.

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Christman, "The IFWW," [1923], box 15: 1923–1927 (reel 14), series 2: Subject File, circa 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; Henry, *Women and the Labor Movement*, 212–13.

proposed specific labor rights and standards for women and men, including minimum wages; shorter hours; abolition of child labor; compulsory education to age sixteen; equal pay; equal opportunity; and social insurance programs covering maternity, old age, sickness, and disability. The working women's charter also called for "restoration of fundamental political rights" (free speech, freedom of the press and of assembly), the free "movements of peoples among the communities and the nations," "self-government in industry," and women's "full enfranchisement" (described as "political, legal, and industrial equality"). The NWTUL cabled President Woodrow Wilson its proposals for raising the "standards of life of all men and women" and informed him of their desire to present the charter in Paris. Wilson responded by appointing two NWTUL members, Mary Anderson and Rose Schneiderman, as official representatives to the peace conference to "aid in the solution of international labor problems, particularly as they affect women."<sup>16</sup>

The NWTUL's two emissaries were no strangers to travel and to the experience of being "foreign." Both were first-generation immigrants—Anderson from Sweden and Schneiderman from Polish Russia. Sixteen-year-old Anderson had set off for America in 1888. She washed dishes at a lumber camp and held a succession of low-paying domestic jobs before finding steady work in a Chicago boot factory. She soon became an officer in the Boot and Shoemakers' Union and joined the NWTUL, eventually accepting a league job in 1916 as a full-time labor organizer. During the war, she worked as the assistant director of the new Women in Industry Service, and in 1920, when the U.S. Women's Bureau was established, President Wilson appointed her its first director.<sup>17</sup>

Schneiderman settled into New York City's Lower East Side in 1890 where her father, like many eastern European Jewish immigrants, found work as a tailor. With the family impoverished after her father's death, Rose took a job at age thirteen, against her mother's wishes, in a tenement garment workshop, making linings for caps. In 1903 she organized her shop and within a year gained a national office in the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers' Union. Although never wholly comfortable in the multiclass, predominantly Christian world of the NWTUL, Schneiderman joined the organization in 1905 because it shared her dual commitments to trade unionism and legislative reform. The New York league hired her as its lobbyist in 1911, and in 1917 she became its president. Schneiderman also joined the Socialist party in 1905, and in 1920 she ran on the Farmer-Labor party ticket for a U.S. Senate seat in New York.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Dreier Robins to executive board, Aug. 16, 1918, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; NWTUL executive board minutes, Sept. 9–11, 1918, *ibid.*; "Plan Worldwide Union," *New York Times*, March 7, 1919, p. 12. Robins to Woodrow Wilson, Jan. 31, 1919, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; Secretary-treasurer to executive board, Feb. 10, 1919, *ibid.*; Mary Anderson to Wilson, Feb. 28, 1919, *ibid.*; Wilson to Anderson, March 1, 1919, *ibid.* John Mitchell to Whom It May Concern, March 11, 1919, folder 6, box 1, Rose Schneiderman Papers (Tamiment Institute Library, New York University, New York).

<sup>17</sup> Mary Anderson, *Woman at Work: The Autobiography of Mary Anderson as Told to Mary N. Winslow* (Minneapolis, 1951); Lily Lykes Rowe, "Mary Anderson: How an Immigrant Girl Rose to High Federal Office," *Ladies Home Journal*, 37 (Aug. 1920), 61–62, clipping, folder 92, box 4, Mary Anderson Papers, 1872–1964 (Schlesinger Library).

<sup>18</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 36–50; Rose Schneiderman, *All for One* (New York, 1967); Gary E. Endelman, *Solidarity Forever: Rose Schneiderman and the Women's Trade Union League* (New York, 1982). On Rose Schneiderman's later support for New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt, see Brigid O'Farrell, *She Was One of Us: Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Worker* (Ithaca, 2010), 16–24.



Rose Schneiderman, shown here in 1905 making cap linings in New York City's garment district. Her day's assignment of cloth, piled up behind her, awaits attention. As the National Women's Trade Union League's chief organizer for New York from 1908 to 1914, she gained national renown for her leadership in the 1909 citywide walkout of 20,000 garment workers and her founding in 1911 of the Wage Earner's League for Woman Suffrage. *Courtesy Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M. P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University.*

In early March 1919 Schneiderman and Anderson set sail for Europe, returning for the first time since their departure as children. While Schneiderman confessed in a letter to feeling "the immensity of the situation" and worried whether she was up to the task, her newspaper interviews betrayed no such hesitations. She stated clearly what was needed in 1919: internationalization of labor standards to remedy unregulated global competition and the inclusion of working women's voices in the new global governance structures. To further these ends, she vowed to join with British and French labor women to establish an international organization of working women. The "best way," she averred, "would be

if women had membership in the men's labor organization, but until that takes place the next best thing would be to have an international organization of our own."<sup>19</sup>

Schneiderman and Anderson landed in London and met briefly with Bondfield and other British labor women before traveling to Paris. The British women had recently returned from Bern, Switzerland, where, along with European socialist and labor leaders, they formulated a "Labour Charter" specifying worker rights, higher labor standards, and social insurance that they hoped to make part of the peace treaty. The British women had also been in Paris where they sought guarantees from the British peace talk delegates that women would be included in any deliberations affecting their lives and conditions.<sup>20</sup>

NWTUL women were less connected to the continental European labor and socialist movements than were their counterparts in Britain. Distance was a factor, but the escalating tension between the AFL and the European labor movement after World War I aggravated the geographic divide. In 1913 the AFL, under the leadership of Samuel Gompers, became the first non-European labor organization to join the German-led International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), the largest international labor body at the time. The IFTU collapsed during World War I, but in July 1919 trade union leaders, including Gompers, gathered in Amsterdam to reconstitute the group. Yet the AFL failed to rejoin, largely due to misgivings about the IFTU's socialist leanings and fears of U.S. marginalization in a Eurocentric and German-dominated federation. Instead, the AFL turned its attention to organizing a Pan-American labor federation and remained outside the IFTU, now almost wholly a federation of European trade unions, until 1937.<sup>21</sup>

Schneiderman and Anderson sped on to Paris from London, hoping to present the working women's charter to the Commission on International Labor Legislation, chaired by Gompers, who was President Wilson's labor appointee to the peace talks. To the women's disappointment, the commission had ended its deliberations and, despite pressure from French women's groups and others, had proposed a constitution for the ILO, the new body responsible for establishing international labor standards. In Schneiderman and Anderson's view, the commission's action made no provision "for the representation of working women in any place of real authority." Instead, it recommended that each nation include at least one woman as a nonvoting adviser among its ILO convention delegates "when questions specifically affecting women are to be considered" and that the ILO hire a "certain number" of women for its staff. This rebuff heightened the U.S. women's resolve for international action. Women's lack of voting representation at the ILO's first International Labor Conference (ILC), planned for Washington, D.C., in November 1919, presented a "magnificent opportunity," they concluded, for the world's working women

<sup>19</sup> "Report of Special Commission to the Peace Conference Meeting in Paris by Mary Anderson and Rose Schneiderman," in *Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America, June 2-7, 1919, Philadelphia* (Chicago, 1919), 74-77, box 24: 1919, June 2-7, Philadelphia, Pa. (reel 21), series 3: National Conventions, 1909-1947, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; Schneiderman, *All for One*, 130-39; Anderson, *Woman at Work*, 116-24. Rose Schneiderman to Robins, March 10, 1919, folder 6, box 1, Schneiderman Papers; "Will Urge World Labor Standard," *New York Sun*, March 7, 1919, p. 3; "Plan Worldwide Union," 12.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Bondfield, "Women and the Labor World," in *Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America, June 2-7, 1919*, 86-87; Lubin and Winslow, *Social Justice for Women*, 20-22. On the 1919 conference in Bern, Switzerland, see Bondfield, *Life's Work*, 163-72.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labour: An Autobiography* (London, 1925), 473-87; Lewis L. Lorwin, *The International Labor Movement* (New York, 1953), 32-85, 180-82; Geert van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International, 1913-1945: The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions, 1913-1945* (Burlington, 2006), 13-76.

to come together separately to determine their own course of action. Their final meeting was with President Wilson, where they made a case for the NWTUL's program and asked for female appointees in the U.S. delegation to the ILC. Wilson listened and ushered them out with the vague promise that he would "give earnest and thoughtful consideration" to their request.<sup>22</sup>

The two Americans stayed on in France, hoping to secure support for an international working women's conference. Duchêne, whom they knew from her 1917 visit to Kansas City, introduced them to Jeanne Bouvier, leader of the National Federation of Clothing Workers, and Bouvier's young associate Georgette Bouillot, secretary of the Embroidery Workers' Union. In 1919 Bouvier was the most powerful woman labor leader in France. Born in 1865 to a peasant family near Lyon, she had worked in the town's silk mills before becoming a Parisian dressmaker and organizer of her fellow seamstresses. Concerned about the problems of homeworkers, in 1913 she went underground, posing as a hosiery worker. Her report, commissioned by the French Labor Ministry, documented shocking employer abuses, including refusal to pay wages and extra charges levied by employers against workers for materials and machines. In 1914 she and Duchêne founded the French division of the International Homework Office in Paris. A few weeks before the Americans arrived, Duchêne, Bouvier, and Bouillot spoke passionately before the Commission on International Labor Legislation on the need for living wages for women, shorter hours, equal pay, and social wages for pregnant and nursing women.<sup>23</sup>

The transatlantic journey concluded with the Americans gaining the support they needed from both French and British labor women. On May Day 1914 Schneiderman and Anderson spent one of their last days abroad in London's Albert Hall with a crowd estimated at ten thousand people, where they listened to speeches from Bondfield and others. They left for home "restored," and, like those they had met, determined to surmount "the vast tragedy of the war" and rebuild "the world on new lines."<sup>24</sup>

They returned to a United States that was seething with unrest. Race riots raged, and government raids on suspected antiwar sympathizers and radicals were in full swing. A massive strike wave involving some 4 million workers was reaching its crescendo. Amid this social upheaval, the NWTUL's June convention opened in Philadelphia with Bondfield

<sup>22</sup> "Report of Special Commission to the Peace Conference Meeting in Paris by Mary Anderson and Rose Schneiderman"; "Minutes of the Meetings of the Commission on International Labor Legislation, Feb. 1 to March 24, 1919," in *The Origins of the International Labor Organization*, vol. II: *Documents*, ed. James T. Shotwell (New York, 1934), 219. Albertina Jordão, "Nos Arquivos da OIT . . . Associações Femininas Apresentam as suas Reivindicações" (In the ILO archives . . . women's associations present their claims) in *A OIT e a Igualdade de Género no Mundo do Trabalho* (The ILO and gender equality in the world of work) (Lisbon, 2011), 41–45, <http://www.cite.gov.pt/asstscite/downloads/publics/sociedade16.pdf>; Daniel P. Moynihan, "The Washington Conference of the International Labor Organization," *Labor History*, 3 (Fall 1962), 307–34; Anderson, *Woman at Work*, 116–24.

<sup>23</sup> On Gabrielle Duchêne, see Emmanuelle Carle, "Women, Anti-Fascism, and Peace in Interwar France: Gabrielle Duchêne's Itinerary," *French History*, 18 (no. 3, 2004), 291–314. On Jeanne Bouvier's life and activities, see Papers of Jeanne Bouvier (Historical Library of the City of Paris, France); Jeanne Bouvier, *Mes mémoires, ou, 59 années d'activité industrielle, sociale et intellectuelle d'une ouvrière, 1876–1925* (My memoirs, or, fifty-nine years of industrial, social, and intellectual activity by a working woman, 1876–1925) (Paris, 1936); and Lorraine Coons, "Neglected Sisters' of the Women's Movement: The Perception and Experience of Working Mothers in the Parisian Garment Industry, 1860–1915," *Journal of Women's History*, 3 (Fall 1993), 54–59. I am grateful to Pascale Voilley and Joel Rainey for translation of Bouvier's memoirs and documents from her papers. For the testimony before the Commission on International Labor Legislation, see "Minutes of the Meetings of the Commission on International Labor Legislation," 273–84.

<sup>24</sup> "Address of Rose Schneiderman," in *Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America, June 2–7, 1919*, 78, 81; "Report of Special Commission to the Peace Conference Meeting in Paris by Mary Anderson and Rose Schneiderman"; Anderson, *Woman at Work*, 116–24.

and Macarthur in attendance as fraternal delegates. The stakes were high, and the intensity of the convention mirrored the surging emotions in the streets, where league women, after hours, walked the picket lines with striking telephone workers. The fates of the League of Nations and the ILO were still unresolved. Labor movements in Europe—many still wedded to the idea of an all-labor parliament with supranational authority—objected to the ILO's tripartite structure of negotiation among representatives of government, labor, and employers. Many in the U.S. labor movement had reservations as well, but Gompers championed the ILO and, over opposition from the Right and the Left, won approval for the ILO at the AFL's June 1919 convention.<sup>25</sup>

NWTUL president Margaret Dreier Robins also weighed in publicly on these controversies. The daughter of a prosperous German immigrant and a woman of considerable wealth from her marriage to the self-made millionaire and nationally prominent progressive reformer Raymond Robins, she had devoted her life and much of her fortune to the NWTUL since assuming its presidency in 1907. Her reform impulses sprang from her Social Gospel Protestantism and her deep commitment to women's rights and to democratizing government and industry. Although disappointed with what she perceived as the vindictiveness of the 1919 Versailles Treaty toward Germany, Robins favored U.S. membership in the League of Nations and the ILO. Her first priority in 1919, however, was getting the voices of labor women heard at the upcoming ILC. "Working women of this country and of other countries," she proclaimed, held "certain opinions" and had in mind "certain purposes and plans" that will not be presented to the official labor conference "unless they come first from an International Congress of Working Women." A fierce internationalist, Robins believed that peace and economic security were attainable only through the cooperation of nations, the rule of law, and the valuing of all peoples. To her credit, she applied these internationalist values to domestic and international policy. At the 1909 NWTUL convention, for example, she and Schneiderman stood firm against a resolution to support an immigration bill that would exclude "Japanese, Koreans, Hindus, and other Asiatics," who were displacing "white men and women" and jeopardizing the "American standard of living." Schneiderman spoke first against the proposal, quieting the hall with her pointed rebuttal: "The movement we stand for . . . takes in every human being. It would be a shameful thing to . . . exclude anyone. We embrace everybody. We believe in universal liberty." Robins backed Schneiderman and echoed her inclusive sentiments. The resolution, much to the surprise of its advocates, met defeat.<sup>26</sup>

A decade later, at the 1919 NWTUL convention, Robins and Schneiderman pushed for labor women's internationalism once again. After delegates heard additional endorsements from Bondfield and Macarthur, they enthusiastically affirmed the international committee's proposal to host an international congress of labor women in Washington,

<sup>25</sup> Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton, 2003), 268–76. *Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America, June 2–7, 1919*, 83–91, 184–90, 265–67; "Plans Union of Teachers," *New York Times*, June 7, 1919, p. 14. Moynihan, "Washington Conference of the International Labor Organization"; Elizabeth McKillen, *Chicago Labor and the Quest for a Democratic Diplomacy, 1914–1924* (Ithaca, 1995), 97–165; Maud Swartz, "In Convention with the AFL," *Life and Labor*, 19 (Aug. 1919), 204.

<sup>26</sup> Payne, *Reform, Labor, and Feminism*, 28–32; Mary E. Dreier, *Margaret Dreier Robins: Her Life, Letters, and Work* (New York, 1950). On Margaret Dreier Robins's priorities for the 1919 international labor conference, see *Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America, June 2–7, 1919*, 379. On the 1909 NWTUL convention debate and resolution, see *Proceedings of the Second Biennial Convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America, Sept. 27–Oct. 2, 1909*, 5–28, esp. 5, 16–17.

D.C. The U.S. league, drawing on funds supplied largely by Robins, would provide accommodations and meals for the dozens of expected delegates. By July, a six-page "conference call" emerged, prepared by Anderson, Bondfield, and the NWTUL executive board member and Chicago glove maker Elisabeth Christman, summoning labor women from forty-four countries to the nation's capital, where they would "assume responsibilities in the affairs of the world" and move toward the "mutual faith and joint action which shall make for universal industrial justice."<sup>27</sup>

### The 1919 Women's Labor Congress

On October 29, 1919, Robins delivered the opening address of the Women's Labor Congress to more than two hundred participants. Reflecting postwar political realities, almost all the former Allied nations sent representatives, as did many of the new nations that had been carved from the dissolved Austro-Hungarian Empire. Voting delegates, most affiliated with the dominant trade union organization of their nation, came from twelve countries, with the largest delegations from the United States, Great Britain, and France. Delegates and visitors came from Asia, Latin America, and eastern Europe. Neither Germany nor Austria participated, in part because they had received belated invitations. There were also no women from Russia, Africa, or the Middle East. Thus, while the participants were internationalists, their gathering, like those of the ILO and the League of Nations, was not yet fully international.<sup>28</sup>

A diverse group of U.S. women attended the conference, including Robins, Schneiderman, and Anderson as well as the Irish-born unionist Maud O'Farrell Swartz, the Lithuanian émigré and garment organizer Pauline Newman, and their NWTUL ally and Vassar College graduate Frieda Miller, Newman's lifelong partner. Unfortunately, however, given the league's largely white membership and leadership in 1919, no African American women participated. Bondfield and MacArthur led the British delegation. The garment unionists Bouvier and Bouillot came from France. Alma Sundquist of the Trade Organization of Social Democratic Women represented Sweden, as did Kerstin Hesselgren, a factory inspector, suffragist, and social reformer. Betzy Kjelsberg, from the Women's Telegraphers Union, spoke for Norway. The new Czech nation sent Prague's municipal counselor Marie Majerova and Louisa Landova-Stychova, a member of Parliament. Both had been newly elected following women's enfranchisement in 1918. Tanaka Taka, a leading advocate for democratic reform, expanded suffrage, and women's rights in Japan and a

<sup>27</sup> *Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America, June 2-7, 1919*, 73-134. "The First ICWW, 1919," enclosed in Robins to executive board, July 30, 1919, folder 12, box 2, Schneiderman Papers; "Call World Congress of Women Workers," *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1919, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> Voting delegations came to the Women's Labor Congress from Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, India, Italy, Norway, Poland, and Sweden. Visitors and guests arrived from Cuba, Denmark, Japan, Netherlands, Serbia, Spain, and Switzerland. "The Call," n.d., folder 2, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records; "With the First ICWW," *Life and Labor*, 19 (Dec. 1919), 308-15; Boone, *Women's Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America*, 123-34. On the possible reasons for the delay in inviting representatives from Germany and Austria to the women's congress, see "With the First ICWW," 308. Representatives from South Africa, Liberia, and Persia were also invited, but none attended. See "Call." Russia is not listed among the countries invited to the 1919 congress in any of the documents I have examined. Such an invitation would have been surprising since the United States, Britain, and France had severed diplomatic relations with the Bolshevik regime and cut off trade in 1919. Margaret Robins did lobby for U.S. recognition of the new Bolshevik government, an end to the economic blockade of Russia, and a withdrawal of U.S. troops. See Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, vol. I: 1884-1933 (New York, 1992), 259-60.

professor of social work at Japan Women's University, attended, as did Tomo Inouye, one of Japan's first female physicians. Many of these women also participated as nonvoting advisers at the ILC, which in a few days would open in the nearby Pan-American Union building.<sup>29</sup>

During ten days of deliberations the 1919 women's congress passed a remarkable set of resolutions on international worker rights and labor standards. These were forwarded to the ILC for consideration and later published as a pamphlet in French and English. The resolutions included calls for an eight-hour workday and a forty-four-hour workweek; night-work protections for men and women; a minimum age of sixteen for child labor; maternity benefits "adequate for full and healthy maintenance of mother and child"; and detailed proposals on unemployment, hazardous occupations, and emigration. The recognition of women's right to self-governance underlay all other demands: a single-item preface to the ten resolutions called on the ILO to amend its constitution and require each nation to send women as voting delegates.<sup>30</sup>

As the ICWW resolutions reveal, U.S. labor women and their counterparts abroad were not pursuing a female-specific "protectionist" or conservative "maternalist" agenda in 1919. Rather, they supported rights and protections for both women and men. In the debate over working-hour laws, for example, the U.S. delegate Agnes Nestor spoke forcefully about how "we [in the NWTUL] stand for it not only for women but for men." The debate over night-work laws became heated at times, with the Scandinavian delegates opposing the British and the Italian representatives, but the majority voted to extend women-only protections to men.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, in the 1919 congress, as in those that followed in 1921 and 1923, U.S. labor women sided with the majority opinion and supported government social insurance programs, more open borders, and international labor standards, among other policies. In

<sup>29</sup> For the entire stenographic report of the ICWW, see *Proceedings of the First Convention of International Conference of Working Women, Oct. 28, 1919, to Nov. 6, 1919*, parts 1–13, folder 3, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records. For the list of delegates to the ICWW, see "With the First ICWW," 308–10. On Alma Sundquist, see Margaret Bondfield to Miss Spencer, Feb. 16, 1920, folder 10, box 6, series 5, Margaret Grace Bondfield Papers. On Kerstin Hesselgren, see Lene Buchert, "Kerstin Hesselgren (1872–1964)," *Prospects*, 34 (March 2004), 127–36. On Betzy Kjelsberg, see Lubin and Winslow, *Social Justice for Women*; and van Goethem, "International Experiment for Women Workers." On Czechoslovakia's changing support for women's suffrage and democratic governance, see Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950* (Pittsburg, 2006), 1–10. On Tanaka Taka, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Japan's Tanaka Taka and the 1919 ILO Debates on Rights, Representation, and Global Labor Standards," in *West Meets East: The ILO from Geneva to the Pacific Rim*, ed. Jill Jensen and Nelson Lichtenstein (New York, forthcoming); and Sharon H. Nolte, *Liberalism in Modern Japan: Ishibashi Tanzan and His Teachers, 1905–1960* (Berkeley, 1987), 118–30. On Tomo Inouye, see "'A Cosmopolitan Tradition': Tomo Inouye," *Bentley Historical Library: The University of Michigan*, <http://bentley.umich.edu/exhibits/cosmo/inouye.php>. For the list of delegates and advisers at the Women's Labor Congress, see *International Labor Conference, First Annual Meeting, Oct. 29, 1919–Nov. 19, 1919, Pan-American Union Building, Washington, D.C.* (Washington, 1920), 5–10. On the lack of African American representation at the ICWW, see "Memorial and Greeting to NWTUL from Representative Negro Women of the U.S. in Behalf of Negro Women Laborers of the U.S., First Convention of the ICWW, 1919," Nov. 4, 1919, in *Proceedings of the First Convention of International Conference of Working Women*, part 8, pp. 35–38. On the initiation of organizing among black women workers after the ICWW, see 1922 WTUL Constitution, box 3: 1923–1925 (reel 3), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

<sup>30</sup> "Resolutions Adopted by First ICWW," [1919], pamphlet, folder 2, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records. For a discussion of the 1919 ICWW, see Cobble, "U.S. Labor Women's Internationalism in the World War I Era," 48–52; and Wikander, "Demands on the ILO by Internationally Organized Women in 1919," 76–84.

<sup>31</sup> On the working-hour debate, see *Proceedings of the First Convention of International Conference of Working Women*, part 4, pp. 1–83, esp. 27, part 5, pp. 1–55. For the debate about night work, see *ibid.* part 9, pp. 25–45, part 10, pp. 1–44, part 11, pp. 1–30.



In this photo Jeanne Bouvier (left), the leading French female trade unionist of the World War I era, stands with her colleague Georgette Bouillot during a break in the proceedings of the International Congress of Working Women, held in Washington, D.C., from October 28 to November 6, 1919. *Courtesy Margaret Grace Bondfield Collection, Vassar College.*

so doing, they parted ways with dominant U.S. political opinion and, in some cases, with the AFL. The 1919 congress agreed on the need for adequate care and support for mothers, for example, and, after long debate, the majority, including the U.S. delegates, embraced the French proposal for six weeks of paid maternity leave before and after childbirth. Even so, the delegates could not agree on who should receive such benefits and how much the monetary allowance should be. The United States sided with France, Britain, Sweden, and Norway in favoring more generous and inclusive provisions and opposed Canada, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, which supported smaller benefits for fewer women.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, in the immigration debate, NWTUL women backed the freer movement of peoples between nations, subject only to transnational “labor treaties” negotiated among all concerned governments and labor organizations. At the insistence of the Polish delegation, who pointed to the shocking treatment of striking Polish immigrant steelworkers in the United States, league women affirmed the right of “foreign workers” to receive

<sup>32</sup> On the maternity debate, see *ibid.*, part 6, pp. 21–36, part 7, pp. 1–33, part 8, pp. 1–20, part 9, pp. 4–26.

“equal wages” and “equal rights” to social legislation with “native-born workers.” League women voted for the resolutions on immigrant rights despite their divergence from principles espoused by the AFL. A few months earlier, for example, at its 1919 convention, the AFL had condemned “Mexican” immigration and reiterated its support for restrictive federal legislation with bans on “Oriental” immigration and new, racially based immigration quotas.<sup>33</sup>

The resolutions that the women’s congress endorsed reflected shared transnational understandings among labor women. Even so, agreement did not come easily. National differences in economic circumstances and resources made setting universal labor standards difficult, if not impossible. Racial and cultural prejudices also threatened the fragile unity. The racist thinking of the day was most evident when the congress tried to choose future vice presidents who were representative of the “world’s peoples.” Confusion reigned as the assembly divided up the “world’s peoples” into “racial” groups. Delegates eventually decided on vice presidents for four groups: the “Slav Races,” the “Latin Races,” the “Scandinavian Races” and the “Anglo-Saxon,” with a fifth slot reserved for the “Central Powers.” But many of the world’s peoples were not represented by the five vice presidencies. One delegate wanted to know where, for example, Japan fit among those race categories. The assembly voted not to add an “oriental” vice presidency for the time being, citing “lack of organization,” but they expressed their “great desire” that at the next convention the organization of working women would be “so far advanced in the oriental countries, in India, Japan, China, and Egypt, as to secure the representation of working women from those countries.”<sup>34</sup>

The decision not to add an “oriental” vice presidency was based, at least in part, on the problematic notion that women everywhere should organize trade unions modeled along Western lines. It also reflected a race-based double standard since only the “oriental countries” were asked to demonstrate sufficient numbers of women in Western-style trade unions before inclusion among the world’s peoples. Still, the twelve-member executive committee of the congress included Japan’s Tomo Inouye, and after the women’s congress ended, league members and others pressed for an additional vice presidency for the “oriental countries” in the new constitution being proposed.<sup>35</sup>

The barriers to transnational solidarity in 1919 were not limited to those between the West and the East. The United States in 1919 seemed quite foreign to many European labor women and, at times, even shocking. Such sentiments did not surface in the official minutes of the congress but appeared in the letters, diaries, and memoirs of participants. Bondfield wrote of being “appalled at the raw savagery of these people,” referring to the Americans, after hearing “men in responsible positions—governors and mayors” talk about the violent tactics they would employ to quell the strikers in their communities. Bouvier found her visit to the United States disturbing in a different way. Although she “basked in the general good will that prevailed at the women’s conference,” the “prosper-

<sup>33</sup> On the debate over immigration, see *ibid.*, part 11, pp. 31–35, part 13, pp. 17–39, esp. 37–38. *American Federation of Labor: History, Encyclopedia, and Reference Book* (3 vols., Washington, 1919–1960), I, 447–48. Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> “Program of the 1919 ICWW,” [1919], pamphlet, folder 80, box 4, Anderson Papers. *Proceedings of the First Convention of International Conference of Working Women*, part 12, pp. 37–54, part 13, pp. 8–25, esp. 23–25.

<sup>35</sup> “Women of 12 Lands in Labor Congress,” *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1919; “Report to All ICWW Parties,” [1920–1921], folder 4, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records.

ity" of the nation "dazzled" and troubled her; at times, she felt "at best a poor relative in the big family of the women's trade union movement." America's enormous wealth made her "nervous" for the future of the "rest of the world" and fearful of "an economic crisis."<sup>36</sup>

The most extensive commentary about the United States came from Sweden's Kerstin Hesselgren. Although she spoke English fluently, she felt herself a "fish on dry land" in the "motley," "chaotic," and "dirty" United States, with its "horrid food" and "barbaric customs." The U.S. women's labor movement, to her surprise, was open to all political and religious views, and seemed a cross between "a trade union and a religious movement." The explicitly Christian lyrics of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," sung daily at the women's congress, particularly distressed her. Decades later, in 1956, Hesselgren recalled the deep fear of foreign radicalism she found in the United States in 1919: "Americans were a bit afraid of us as they thought we might be dangerous. They even went so far as asking the President to send away those 'Reds, Radicals, and Bolsheviks.'"<sup>37</sup>

The ideological and political fault lines of 1919, still vivid to Hesselgren in 1956, would only widen as time passed. The formation of national Communist parties across Europe in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution and the founding of the Third ("Red") International of Labor Unions in July 1921 as an alternative to the social-democratic IFTU would tear apart the world's labor movements for most of the rest of the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup>

Yet in 1919 these fissures and disappointments were in the future. The women's congress ended with affirmations of the "new sisterhood" that had been born. Delegates wrote affectionate and comradely notes of remembrance as souvenirs, with Schneiderman penning to Bondfield: "Yours for the abolition of wage slavery."<sup>39</sup>

After the congress adjourned, a number of women stayed on for the month-long debate over international labor legislation at the ILC, a conference to which forty nations sent some three hundred representatives, including voting delegates (all men) and their nonvoting advisers and staff. Since the United States had neither ratified the Treaty of Versailles nor joined the League of Nations, the nation was not entitled to official representation at the ILC. The U.S. women, therefore, watched from the sidelines. Nevertheless, of the twenty-three women attending the ILC as official advisers, the majority had also attended the labor congress. This group, including Bondfield, Macarthur, Bouvier, Hesselgren, and Tanaka, spoke with passion and authority in support of the resolutions from the congress. Their advocacy, in the opinion of many, greatly shaped the provisions of the maternity standards. After strenuous debate, the ILC adopted the women's congress

<sup>36</sup> Bondfield to My Dear Colleagues, July 3, 1919, folder 8, box 6, series 5, Margaret Grace Bondfield Papers. Bouvier, *Mes mémoires*, 123, 127.

<sup>37</sup> "Anteckningar fran resan till Amerika hosten 1919" (Notes from the journey to America, 1919), file 61, collection L-55, Kerstin Hesselgren Papers, 1872-1962 (National Library of Sweden, Stockholm). I am grateful to Karin Carlsson for translating this document. Kerstin Hesselgren to Esther Peterson, April 27, 1956, folder 382, box 21, Esther Peterson Papers (Schlesinger Library).

<sup>38</sup> On the division of the world's labor movements, see "Resolution against the So-called Moscow Trade Union International," Nov. 1920, folder 2, Margaret Bondfield Papers (Trades Union Congress Library, London, Eng.); Lorwin, *International Labor Movement*, 45-162; van Goethem, *Amsterdam International*, 77-110, 229-58; and Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe, eds., *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-1943* (Manchester, Eng., 1998).

<sup>39</sup> *Proceedings of the First Convention of International Conference of Working Women*, part 12, pp. 36-42, esp. 40-41; "Handbook of the First ICWW," n.d., folder 10, box 6, series 5, Margaret Grace Bondfield Papers.

recommendation of twelve weeks of paid maternity leave (six weeks before and six weeks after birth) as one of the first international conventions passed by the ILO.<sup>40</sup>

In other areas, the congress's resolutions met more resistance. The ILC adopted standards on working hours and child labor below those proposed by the congress and, instead of endorsing night-work restrictions for both sexes, voted for laws covering only women and minors. Most galling, the ILC offered no guarantees of women's inclusion as voting delegates in future meetings. Nevertheless, the 1919 Women's Labor Congress not only deeply affected the women who attended but also directed the content of the first set of global labor standards. In the ensuing decades, these standards, known as the Washington Conventions, would be revised and extended, ratified by legislatures all over the world, and embraced by civil society organizations and grassroots movements as fundamental human rights.<sup>41</sup>

### Toward a Permanent International Organization of Working Women, 1919–1921

Over the next two years an interim organization, the ICWW, housed in Washington and financially supported by the NWTUL, operated as a central node for exchange about working women's rights and labor standards worldwide. Letters flowed in from Europe, Latin America, and the Pacific region. They were translated and published, along with other news and commentary, in the *Bulletin of the International Congress of Working Women*. Miriam Shepherd, the newly hired office manager and secretary to the IWCC, reported publishing eleven issues of the bulletin and sending the 1919 women's congress resolutions to a mailing list of over one thousand people in forty-nine countries. The entire text of the 1919 resolutions, she learned, had been reprinted and widely distributed in French, Italian, German, Polish, Czech, Norwegian, Swedish, Dutch, Spanish, and Japanese.<sup>42</sup>

The *Bulletin of the International Congress of Working Women* also served as a vehicle for debate about the future organization. One issue included an exchange with an Australian woman who complained bitterly about how the women's congress included representatives from Asia. Shepherd, reflecting the NWTUL's views, defended the inclusion of Asian women, adding that "many members" are now urging that "among our vice presidencies we should have one member of the Oriental races." She explained why: "An international organization of working women which did not offer its friendship to the industrial women of the Orient could in no way be sincere in its purpose," nor could it solve the "common problems we face."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> H. J. W. Hetherington, *International Labor Legislation* (London, 1920), 21–37, 129–90; International Labor Congress, *First Annual Meeting*, 5–10, 171–76, 189–91, 243–47; Lubin and Winslow, *Social Justice for Women*, 28–32.

<sup>41</sup> International Labor Congress, *First Annual Meeting*, 256–78; Lubin and Winslow, *Social Justice for Women*, 25–32; Gerry Rodgers et al., eds., *The ILO and the Quest for Social Justice, 1900–2009* (Ithaca, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> "Newsletter from the office of the First ICWW," n.d., International Congress of Working Women, box 14: International Congress of Working Women, 1918–1921 (reel 13), series 2: Subject File, circa 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; ICWW Bulletins, May 1920–June 1921, *ibid.*; ICWW Bulletins, Jan. 18, 25, 1921, prewar files, drawer 600/467, International Labor Organization Collection (International Labor Organization Archives, Geneva, Switzerland). Miriam Shepherd, "Report of Secretary to Executive Committee, ICWW, Jan. 1, 1921 to Aug. 31, 1921," International Congress of Working Women, 1920–1921, box 14: International Congress of Working Women, 1918–1921 (reel 13), series 2: Subject File, circa 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

<sup>43</sup> "Constitution of the ICWW: Summary of Criticisms," n.d., box 14: International Congress of Working Women, 1920–1921 (reel 13), series 2: Subject File, circa 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; *ICWW Bulletin*, Nov. 25, 1920, *ibid.*

In early 1921 Shepherd sent out invitations in French, Spanish, and English to a second international congress that was set for October in Geneva. Determined to build support for the new organization, President Robins embarked upon a month-long European tour. Her lengthy letters to her longtime Chicago ally Elisabeth Christman, elected in June as the league's national secretary, reveal the economic gulf separating the United States and Europe in the immediate postwar years and the multiple barriers to the creation of a permanent and powerful international labor organization for women.<sup>44</sup>

Robins's journey began in France, where she was stunned by the great unemployment and continuing economic devastation as well as the angry and violent divisions in the socialist labor movement and the "appalling" loss of trade union membership. Jeanne Bouvier, now secretary of the Bourse du Travail (the French labor council), and her coworker Georgette Bouillot were suffering greatly, Robins wrote league secretary Christman in a letter marked "not for publication." The once "radiant" Bouillot, now "pale" and "very very ill," was "so hurt" by "the divisions and terrible battles among the labour people" that she was "not at all sure she could go on with life itself." Bouvier, Robins reported, had financial problems and spoke bitterly about the growing strength of the communists and the betrayal of women such as her once-close friend Duchêne, who, in Bouvier's view, had sided with the "reds." (In July 1921, the French trade union federation, the Confédération Générale du Travail (General Confederation of Labor, or CGT), lost the majority of its members to a new labor organization, the Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (Unitary General Confederation of Labor, or CGTU), which later affiliated with the "Red" International of Labor Unions.) Robins sympathized and worried about what could be done, but she forged ahead with her plans to build what she called, in a telling slip, the "International Women's Trade Union League."<sup>45</sup>

Robins was even more unprepared for what she encountered in Amsterdam and Brussels. Befitting the classic stereotype of the American abroad, she appeared uninformed about the intricacies of the politics in which she found herself. At the same time, some of the European trade unionists she met brought their own stereotypes and parochialisms. In many countries in Europe a chasm separated the women's movement from the labor movement, perpetuated by mutual misunderstanding and mistrust. On the one hand, those in the women's movement faulted those in the labor movement for practicing a simpleminded socialism with little interest in the problems of women that might not be solved by a socialist revolution. On the other hand, some in the trade unions—socialists and others—labeled the women's movement "bourgeois" and judged it as a movement of elite feminists unconcerned with the problems of wage earners. Those committed to advancing both women's and worker movements were sometimes ostracized by both.<sup>46</sup>

The European male trade union leaders that Robins met freely expressed their prejudices against women's movements, joining their opinions with half-truths about U.S.

<sup>44</sup> Shepherd, "Report of Secretary to Executive Committee"; Robins letters to [Elisabeth] Christman, Sept. 25–Oct. 26, 1921, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> On the division among French unionists during this time, see Laura Levine Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender in the Making of the French Social Model* (Durham, N.C., 2008), 44–46. Robins to Dearest Elisabeth [Christman], Oct. 12, 1921, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

<sup>46</sup> Marilyn J. Boxer, "Rethinking the Socialist Construction and International Career of the Concept 'Bourgeois Feminism,'" *American Historical Review*, 112 (Feb. 2007), 131–58; Myra Marx Ferree, *Varieties of Feminism: German Gender Politics in Global Perspective* (Stanford, 2012), 25–52; Sklar, Schüler, and Strasser, eds., *Social Justice Feminists in the United States and Germany*, 1–75.

culture and politics. They were deeply suspicious, Robins reported in her copious letters from abroad, of this new “international women’s labor movement.” The ICWW, they believed, was a “bourgeois” women’s organization and not an organization primarily of trade unionists. To make matters worse, they feared it promoted a virulent form of American gender separatism that would destroy worker unity. Robins explained more than once that “we too in America believed in men and women organizing together and our unions were so organized,” but she made “no impression.” They had “fixed ideas” about the United States, she wrote.<sup>47</sup>

Robins’s class background and lack of trade union credentials heightened the distrust she encountered. Certainly, the NWTUL trade unionist Maud O’Farrell Swartz, a working-class woman who had learned German and French in convent schools before emigrating to the United States, suggested as much. A vice president of the league and of the ICWW, Swartz was also abroad in 1921, attending a labor congress in Cardiff, Wales. She and Robins had arranged to travel together on behalf of the ICWW, hoping first to meet in Berlin with Gertrud Hanna, among the most powerful German women trade unionists and now on the executive board of the central German trade union body. Then they would travel on to Bern to meet the secretary of the Swiss women’s trade union section. But Swartz asked Robins not to come to Berlin. “Better,” she explained, “that [she] as a trade unionist should go” by herself.<sup>48</sup>

Robins, for her part, brought her own prejudices and distrust of male trade union leaders to the encounters, and she judged the European labor men as much worse than American labor men. In Amsterdam, after repeated attempts to talk with IFTU leadership, Robins finally secured “two hours” with the IFTU secretary, the Dutch socialist Edo Fimmen. He promised to attend the congress, Robins continued, but “over that same cup of coffee” Fimmen also “told me the IFTU will of course wish to control the congress.” She then added defiantly: “Well, only the future can answer that.” When she asked to meet women labor leaders, “Fimmen and every other labor man,” she wrote, told her the “yarn” that “women were not interested, did not like meetings, cared little for the labor movement and so forth and so forth!” Her response, she recounted, was to “sputter furiously” about the “scores of women labor leaders” in the United States “because we have a woman’s movement in our labor movement supported by the finest of our labor men. Come to Chicago, Come to America! And my American Eagle flapped his wings ominously!”<sup>49</sup>

Robins’s assessment of American superiority was based on a somewhat rosy picture of the U.S. labor movement and its male leadership. A smaller percentage of U.S. workers belonged to unions than in most European nations, and the proportion of U.S. unionists who were female was lower than in many other European nations, including Britain and Germany. Moreover, top female labor officers were rare in the United States, and although the NWTUL received support from male labor leaders such as Chicago’s John Fitzpatrick, they also faced opposition from others. Indeed, in the weeks before Robins left for Europe, the league had been in a nasty dispute with the AFL over setting up “fed-

<sup>47</sup> Robins to Dearest Elisabeth, Sept. 30, 1921, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women’s Trade Union League of America.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

eral labor unions" for women in trades where the established unions excluded them from membership. When league representatives presented their case to the all-male AFL executive council, they met resistance and ridicule. The meeting devolved into jocularly and male bonding, with the vice president of the Street Car Men's Union starting the fun by remarking that the "rear end of a street car is certainly no place for a woman." Robins, who read the report of the meeting a few days before she left for Europe, expressed her dismay at the "attitude of the AFL" and its refusal to organize women.<sup>50</sup>

Somewhat daunted but still hopeful that the second women's congress would attract widespread European participation, Robins traveled on to Geneva. She confessed to a wish for "our Congress" to become "a parliament of working women" to which "socialists, Christians, Communists" could all send delegates. But, she admitted, given the "hatred" and "bitterness" between political groups she had observed in her travels, it is "a dream impossible of fulfillment."<sup>51</sup>

### The 1921 Geneva Congress and the Membership Question

Much to Robins's chagrin, many of the leading European trade unions, including those in Germany and Austria, did not send representatives to the 1921 congress. Even so, women came from some fifteen countries, including China and Japan, to "formulate just international standards" and establish "universal industrial justice." Great Britain, France, and the United States again sent the largest delegations. The 1921 congress, as had the one in 1919, formulated recommendations on matters coming before the next ILC, including night work, child labor, and agricultural work. The congress also weighed in on the "world crisis of unemployment." The "real cause" of unemployment, the delegates readily agreed, lay in the declining "purchasing power of workers": economic prosperity rested on raising global wages. In these debates, as in those of 1919, alliances between nations were hardly predictable, with the United States not "exceptional" or alone in its opinions.<sup>52</sup>

Then the delegates turned to drafting the new federation's constitution. They reaffirmed their aim of "raising the standard of life of all workers"—the wording sought by the American delegates. They also easily reached consensus on how to fulfill their aims: promote international labor standards attentive to all workers; organize women into unions; and insist on women's self-representation in the newly emerging global

<sup>50</sup> On women in the U.S. labor movement, see Henry, *Women and the Labor Movement*, 57–105, 202–11. On women in the European labor movement, see Silke Neunsinger, "Creating the International Spirit of Socialist Women," in *Crossing Boundaries*, ed. Jonsson, Neunsinger, and Sangster, 130, table 1. "Reports to Executive Board," Aug. 16, 1921, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; "Reports to Executive Board," Sept. 22, 1921, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Robins to Dearest Elisabeth, Oct. 12, 1921, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

<sup>52</sup> Voting delegations to the women's congress also came from Belgium, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Norway, Poland, South Africa, and Switzerland. "Delegates to the Second International Congress of Working Women," box 28: 1921, Oct. 17–24, Geneva, Switzerland (reel 25), series 3: National Conventions, 1909–1947, *ibid.* "Call to the Second Meeting of the ICWW," folder 5, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records; Jessie Haver Butler, "Second International Congress of Working Women, Oct. 17 to 25: Summary of Proceedings," *International Woman Suffrage News*, 12 (Dec. 1921), 35, clipping, *ibid.*; "Working Women Pronounce on World Questions," *Labour Woman*, Dec. 1, 1921, p. 188, clipping, *ibid.*; "Resolutions from the Second Congress," [1921], prewar files, drawer 600/467, International Labor Organization Collection.

governance and labor institutions. At the urging of Bondfield and others, including the U.S. delegates, the federation dropped the “racial” basis for vice presidencies and adopted a policy of “one VP from each country affiliated.”<sup>53</sup>

But deciding who could join the IFWW provoked contentious debate, with delegations pushing for membership policies similar to those they had in their own countries. The British delegates, for example, proposed an expansive organization such as their own Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women’s Organizations, which admitted women in trade unions and all working-class women—whether employed or not—active in the political and cooperative movements. The U.S. delegates were less united, but Robins too called for an inclusive organization, not unlike the NWTUL, which would welcome all working women of any political or religious persuasion, whether in trade unions or not, and their allies. Other U.S. women, however, such as Mary Anderson, favored an organization of trade union women only. Delegates from the majority of countries, including France and Belgium, agreed with Anderson and supported a “strictly economic basis” for the organization. Their position rested in part on their “bitter experience of trade union organizations being split by political factions” when non-trade unionists participated. Bouvier made her staunch opposition to the British proposal clear before the conference started, and she never wavered. “Nothing,” she declared in a letter to Robins, “is so dangerous as to allow people who are not workers to adjudicate questions concerning labor.”<sup>54</sup>

Eventually, the majority agreed to a compromise: only women in organizations either affiliated with the IFTU or “agreeing to work in the spirit” of the IFTU could join. The phrase “in the spirit” of the IFTU allowed Britain to send delegates from the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women’s Organizations, which was not affiliated with the IFTU; the phrase also made it possible for U.S. league women to participate. At the same time, the decision signaled that the new entity’s prime identification was as a trade union organization and that its political orientation would be social-democratic, or what one observer called “the middle ground of the great trade union movement of the world.” Those “affiliated with the International of Moscow” would not be admitted. Neither would the Belgium Christian unions and others “organized along a religious basis.”<sup>55</sup>

The new membership policy disappointed Robins as well as many in the British delegation. She had favored a broad organization of working women of all classes that was “accepting [of] working women in all their many divisions, religious and political.” The British were worried since whether non-trade union women from the standing commit-

<sup>53</sup> Henry, *Women and the Labor Movement*, 220–28; Robins to Christman, [1921], box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women’s Trade Union League of America; *ICWW Bulletin*, July 7, 1920, box 14: International Congress of Working Women, 1918–1921 (reel 13), series 2: Subject File, circa 1903–1950, *ibid.*; “Constitution Recommended to the Congress by the Constitutional Committee, Oct. 22, 1921,” folder 4, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records.

<sup>54</sup> “Minutes of the Regular Executive Committee Meeting, Nov. 4, 1919,” folder 4, Margaret Bondfield Papers; Miriam Shepherd to Maud Swartz, Jan. 30, 1920, box 14: International Congress of Working Women, Historical Data, 1903–1948 (reel 17), series 2: Subject File, circa 1903–1950, Records of the National Women’s Trade Union League of America. On Robins’s opinion, see “Second International Congress of Working Women,” Oct. 22, 1921, *Proceedings of the First Convention of International Conference of Working Women*, part 1, pp. 15–16; Boone, *Women Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America*, 128; Jeanne Bouvier to Robins, [1920–1921], folder 2, box 21, Bouvier Papers.

<sup>55</sup> Henry, *Women and the Labor Movement*, 224. Butler, “Second International Congress of Working Women,” 35; Marion Phillips, “Aims and Constitution of the IFWW,” *Canadian Congress Journal for Aug., 1922*, folder 2, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records.

tee would be welcome remained unclear. Nevertheless, each national delegation had one vote, and the majority ruled.<sup>56</sup>

The decision defining membership would have significant consequences for the new federation's effectiveness, direction, and legitimacy. In narrowing its membership, the IFWW became less inclusive than some national labor women's organizations, including the NWTUL and the standing committee. Just as problematic, the IFWW was now more institutionally linked to the IFTU than to the ILO, and, many feared, its membership and agenda would reflect that shift. IFTU priorities were trade union organizing rather than formulating international labor policy. Closer affiliation with the IFTU also meant a more Eurocentric focus, with more European meetings and less participation from women trade unionists outside Europe. Ties with the IFTU, some U.S. league members thought, would make the recruitment of "fraternal delegates from countries such as those of South-eastern Europe, the Orient, and Central and South America, where trade unionism was not yet developed among women," difficult if not impossible.<sup>57</sup>

The women's congress reelected Robins as president, but perhaps to facilitate relations with the IFTU and the ILO—both headquartered in Europe—the office of the new organization would move to London. The Australian-born British Labor party stalwart Marion Phillips, the new IFWW secretary, would manage financial and administrative affairs from London. On the last day of the women's congress, debate erupted briefly over the new organization's exact relationship with the IFTU, but the question was left unresolved.<sup>58</sup>

Still, the women's congress adjourned with bonds renewed and a sense of optimism about the tasks ahead. Eighty women, including "our Chinese and Japanese friends," Robins wrote, gathered for a final banquet with a spirit of "labor sisterhood" much in evidence. Beneath the surface, however, lurked the old national chauvinisms. In one of her last letters from Europe, Robins shared her pride in the United States and her sense of its special mission, feelings now strengthened by her European travels. "The women of America can honestly be called blessed. Never can we lose hope and faith in America," she wrote. "We know we have our black spots but we must come to Europe if we would know how black the night can be."<sup>59</sup>

### The Brief Life of the Federation

In early 1922 Phillips excitedly wrote Robins of her recent visit with the IFTU leadership and their promising proposal: all women belonging to the IFTU would join the IFWW and the IFTU would pay their dues. That meant, Phillips believed, there would be a women's federation starting "with something like two million members." An elated Robins called the proposal "a remarkable beginning in cooperation."<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Robins to Christman, [1921], box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

<sup>57</sup> Boone, *Women Trade Union Leagues in Great Britain and the United States of America*, 132.

<sup>58</sup> Robins believed the majority opposed the move, but I have found no confirming evidence. Robins to Christman, [1921], box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America. "Notes on the Development of the IFWW," 1921, folder 5, Margaret Bondfield Papers. Robins to Dearest Elisabeth, Oct. 26, 1921, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

<sup>59</sup> Robins to Christman, [1921], box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

<sup>60</sup> Marion Phillips to Robins, Jan. 8, 1922, *ibid.*; Robins to Christman, Jan. 25, 1922, *ibid.*

This remarkable cooperation was not to be, however. When the proposal came before the IFTU congress for approval a few months later, it met steep resistance, led by the German unions. Although approximately 40 percent of IFTU membership, the German trade unions had never sent delegates to the women's congresses; moreover, the influential German trade unionist Gertrud Hanna, despite her prewar contact with the NWTUL, condemned the idea of a "separate Women's International" and expressed concern over the federation's "bourgeois and purely feminist" elements. Instead, she favored a consultative group to the IFTU officers, without "the power to make decisions binding upon all."<sup>61</sup>

Others, however—including France's Jeanne Chevenard, a Lyon embroiderer, strike leader, and CGT representative who had attended the 1921 women's congress—stubbornly defended the proposal, noting the working-class and socialist character of the new federation and the importance of a separate organization for women. The tide turned when Britain's Tom Shaw spoke against the proposal, followed by Phillips's demurral that given such "strong opposition," perhaps the proposal should be reworked. The IFTU congress then passed a resolution reaffirming "the organization of men and women in one trade union" and calling on separate women's organizations to affiliate with their respective trade union body. The question of the new women's federation, they allowed, might be reconsidered at the next IFTU congress in two years.<sup>62</sup>

Phillips then wrote the NWTUL with a much less ambitious plan: to turn the federation into a "committee" or an "auxiliary movement" of the IFTU. There was no other way forward, she insisted. There was "opposition in the Continental countries;" and in Britain, she confessed, the Trades Union Congress, the central trade union body, was "certainly not enthusiastic" about the federation. She closed her dispiriting tale by detailing how federation affiliates were falling away: the Fascists had devastated the Italian labor movement and "from Norway and Czechoslovakia I hear absolutely nothing."<sup>63</sup>

The evolving attitude of the British women, at least in part, was a result of the TUC's increasing skepticism toward separate women's organizations. British labor women divided on the question of separatism, but they had recently negotiated—successfully in some minds—the absorption of the British league into the TUC and the merger of the NFWW with the National Union of General Workers (NUGW). In addition, the TUC was exerting more control over the federation's finances and activities in London. In April 1922 the British women accepted the TUC's financial support of the federation and in return reluctantly agreed that only trade union women would participate in federation affairs. A few months later, the TUC decreed the "British Section" of the Federation "should be

<sup>61</sup> On the German representatives' dominance of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), see van Goethem, *Amsterdam International*, 13–31. For Gertrud Hanna's opinion, see "International Trade Union Congress, IFTU, Minutes, Rome, April 1922," pp. 1–2, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America. An IFTU report congratulates the 1921 congress for repudiating the "old error of the bourgeois women's movement, namely: that the rights of women must be wrested from men" and for recognizing the "only real demarcation" is between workers and bosses. "Report on the 1921 Congress," [1921], folder 5, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records.

<sup>62</sup> On Jeanne Chevenard, see Jean Maitron, ed., *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier Français publié sous la direction de Jean Maitron* (Biographical dictionary of the French labor movement under the direction of Jean Maitron) (Paris, 1984), 262–63; "International Trade Union Congress, IFTU, Minutes, Rome, April 1922," pp. 1–2; Minutes, IFWW secretariat meeting, April 20–26, 1922, folder 5, Margaret Bondfield Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Marion Phillips to executive board quoted in Minutes, Executive Board, Jan. 14–15, 1923, box 3: 1923–1925 (reel 3), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

brought under the control" of the TUC general council and its office moved to the TUC headquarters.<sup>64</sup>

After an extended discussion of Phillips's plan, the U.S. league's executive board decided not to respond directly. Rather, they proposed a third congress and committed themselves to sending ten representatives, their "full quota of delegates." A third congress was hastily agreed upon, with the London office choosing to schedule it in Austria, to coincide with a planned IFTU educational meeting, despite the desire of the U.S. league and others for a meeting in Geneva to coincide with the ILO's conference. As Robins explained to Phillips, a Geneva conference would draw more participants because those attending the ILC could more easily bear the costs of arriving early for the women's conference.<sup>65</sup>

On August 14, 1923, a diminished band of labor sisters met for four days in Vienna. Thirty-one voting delegates arrived from seven countries: the United States, Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, Hungary, and Sweden. "Fraternal Delegates" traveled from even longer distances, making their way from Argentina, Chile, China, Japan, and Romania. Once again, neither Germany nor Austria participated. Norway was no longer eligible because it had joined the "Red" International of Labor Unions. The largest delegations by far were from the United States and Britain, with the United States sending ten women and Britain sending eleven.<sup>66</sup>

The delegates quickly moved through the first agenda items: how best to organize women into unions, whether to regulate or abolish home work, and the preferred approach to family allowances. U.S. delegates found a warm reception for their ideas on these topics, including their recommendations on family allowances and other social provisions. Yet consensus broke down as delegates considered the British proposal for the IFWW to become a committee within the IFTU. Bouvier suggested a women's section in the IFTU with autonomy similar to that of the "industrial sections," but few, including Robins, thought the IFTU would accept that. Eventually, the British proposal won a majority of votes, with only the American delegation abstaining.<sup>67</sup>

In a final session, the federation chose new officers. The summer before, Robins had retired from the presidency of the NWTUL; some believed that the decision was prompted by her desire to devote all of her time to the federation. In Vienna she watched as Bondfield nominated, and the assembly confirmed, Belgium's Helene Burniaux as the next

<sup>64</sup> Pamela M. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics, 1918–1939* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), 118–53; and Mary Walker, "Labour Women and Internationalism," in *Women in the Labour Movement: The British Experience*, ed. Lucy Middleton (London, 1977), 84–93. Minutes, IFWW secretariat meeting, April 20–26, 1922, June 1922, Aug. 12, 1923, folder 5, Margaret Bondfield Papers.

<sup>65</sup> Minutes, NWTUL executive board, Jan. 14–15, 1923, box 3: 1923–1925 (reel 3), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America. "Minutes, IFWW Secretariat Meeting, March 19, 1923, London," *ibid.*; Robins to Phillips, Feb. 20, 1923, enclosed in Robins to Bouvier, March 7, 1923, file 3, box 17, Bouvier Papers.

<sup>66</sup> "IFWW, Biennial Congress at Schönbrunn Castle, Aug. 14 to 18, 1923," folder 7, call no. B-12, International Federation of Working Women Records; *Working Women in Many Countries: Report of Congress Held at Vienna, August, 1923* (Amsterdam, 1923), 3–4, box 28: Report of Proceedings (reel 25), series 3: National Conventions, 1909–1947, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America. The U.S. women in attendance included Margaret Dreier Robins, Mary Anderson, Rose Schneiderman, Elisabeth Christman, Maud Swartz, Frieda Miller, Pauline Newman, Agnes Nestor, Mary Dreier, and Agnes Johnson. See Agnes Nestor to Dear Friends, Aug. 22, 1923, box 15: 1923–1927 (reel 14), series 2: Subject File, circa 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America. On the ineligibility of Norway, see Minutes, IFWW secretariat meeting, Aug. 12, 1923, folder 5, Margaret Bondfield Papers.

<sup>67</sup> [Ethel Smith and Elisabeth Christman], "International Federation of Working Women," *Life and Labor*, 23 (Nov. 1923), 1–3; "Working Women in Many Countries: Report of Congress Held in Vienna, Aug. 1923" box 3:



Anticipating sharp disagreements at the upcoming Third Biennial Congress of the International Federation of Working Women, set for August 14, 1923, in Vienna, Austria, the National Women's Trade Union League (NWTUL) sent a large delegation. Pictured here on July 24, 1923, waiting to depart on the SS *Pittsburg* from New York to Cherbourg, France, are seven of the U.S. participants (from left to right): Maud O'Farrell Swartz; Elisabeth Christman; the former International Congress of Working Women executive secretary Miriam Shepherd; Rose Schneiderman (in front of Shepherd); the Chicago Boot and Shoe Workers' organizer Agnes Johnson; the NWTUL executive board and typographical union member Jo Coffin; and the Chicago NWTUL president and International Glove Workers officer Agnes Nestor. "New Yorkers Sail to Shoot Grouse," *New York Times*, July, 24, 1923. Courtesy Rose Schneiderman Photo Collection 10, Tamiment Institute Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives, Bobst Library, New York University.

president. The new executive board convened briefly after the congress ended, but it never met again. Still, the new officers—particularly Edith McDonald, who took over for Marion Phillips in London—carried on with federation activities. McDonald sent the resolutions from the 1923 congress to the ILO and translated and distributed the Chinese delegates' report "as a penny leaflet" to labor and women's groups.<sup>68</sup>

1923–1925 (reel 3), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; "IFWW Report," Nov. 1921–July 1923, box 28: Report of Proceedings (reel 25), series 3: National Conventions, 1909–1947, *ibid.*; "Report of the Delegates to the First Biennial Congress of the IFWW, Aug. 14 to 18, 1923," folder 5, Margaret Bondfield Papers; "Report on Vienna Congress," folder 81, box 4, Anderson Papers. Minutes, IFWW executive board meeting, Aug. 12, 1923, folder 5, Margaret Bondfield Papers. Christman to Co-workers, Aug. 22, 1923, ICWW, box 15: 1923–1927 (reel 14), series 2: Subject file, circa 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

<sup>68</sup> Swartz to Bouvier, Aug. 16, 1922, folder 3, box 17, Bouvier Papers. On Helene Burniaux as a teacher, government official, and activist in the Socialist party, see Dorothea Mary Northcroft, *Women at Work in the League of Na-*

Once back in the United States, Robins remained firmly opposed to the federation becoming a "woman's section" of the IFTU, and her irritation with the British labor women was evident to those close to her. In contrast, Maud O'Farrell Swartz, now the NWTUL president, remained open to such a prospect, as did others in the league. In March 1924, when the new officers of the federation consulted with the league about a possible memo to the IFTU asking for a "woman's department" and sufficient resources for a staff and a bi-annual international women's congress, the league's executive board concurred. Of those weighing in, only Anderson expressed reservations. She wanted to make clear that "the real difficulty" in the new arrangement was "from a trade union standpoint and no other." Since the AFL was not an affiliate of the IFTU she believed the league should not join a women's department of that organization.<sup>69</sup>

The proposed memo did not get very far. In May federation officers traveled to Vienna where they again met with IFTU trade union affiliates; their trip was covered by TUC funds, and the officers carried instructions "to maintain the principle of past decisions against setting up an independent international organization of women." McDonald presented a scaled-down proposal, asking only for "a permanent advisory body." Yet even this modest request met opposition from Hanna, who offered instead "the holding of special conferences for working women, when these should be necessary." Jeanne Chevenard, who replaced Bouvier as a federation vice president, once again supported a stronger, more autonomous women's division, but without success. The IFTU offered only to "examine the question of a women's committee" and convene a conference of working women "when necessary."<sup>70</sup>

Some league members, including Swartz, continued to favor U.S. membership in the federation even after the IFTU's rebuff, but Robins's view prevailed. At its June convention the NWTUL voted to withdraw from the federation. The league then sent McDonald a curt note, informing her of the action and severing connection with the federation. A few months later, the federation officially dissolved, replaced by a five-member weak and underresourced International Committee of Women Trade Unionists within the IFTU. As Bouvier bitterly recalled in her memoirs, by affiliating with the IFTU "we reduced the international organization of working women to zero." Mixed organization, in her opinion, rarely produced "mixed representation."<sup>71</sup>

*tions* (New York, 1927), 29. I have found no evidence of Robins's refusal to stand for reelection as president. Robins to My dear Mr. x, April 5, 1924, folder 83, box 4, Anderson Papers. After returning to the United States, Robins withdrew from public life. See Payne, *Reform, Labor, and Feminism*, 155–84. "IFWW, Final Report, Aug. 1923 to Dec. 1925," folder 5, Margaret Bondfield Papers; "Women Workers and International Labour Legislation," [July 1923], folder 80, box 4, Anderson Papers; Edith McDonald to Albert Thomas, Oct. 21, 1923, prewar files, drawer 600/467/1, International Labor Organization Collection.

<sup>69</sup> Robins to Anderson, Dec. 19, 1922, Jan. 28, 1924, March 21, 1924, folder 67, box 3, Anderson Papers. Swartz to Anderson, Dec. 21, 1923, folder 81, box 4, *ibid.*; Ethel Smith to Christman, Oct. 24, 1923, *ibid.* "Memorandum from the IFWW to the IFTU," [1924], IFWW, Jan.–April 1924, box 3: 1923–1925 (reel 3), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; Edith McDonald to Swartz, April 29, 1924, *ibid.*; Anderson to Robins, March 24, 1924, folder 67, box 3, Anderson Papers; Anderson to Swartz, March 24, 1924, folder 82, box 4, *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> McDonald to Swartz, Feb. 15, 1924, folder 82, box 4, Anderson Papers; Minutes, IFWW secretariat meeting, Sept. 11, 1924, folder 5, Margaret Bondfield Papers; "IFWW, Final Report, Aug. 1923 to Dec. 1925." "Report of the International Conference of Women Trade Unionists, Vienna, May 31, 1924, by the IFTU," pp. 1–2, folder 82, box 4, Anderson Papers.

<sup>71</sup> "Report on 1924 Convention," box 3: 1923–1925 (reel 3), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America. McDonald to Swartz, June 7, 8, 1924, folder 82, box 4,

## The Barriers to Transnational Women's Labor Organizing

The barriers to creating and sustaining a permanent international organization of working women after World War I were formidable. Internal divisions based on nation, race, religion, and class limited the internationalist endeavors of labor women in this era just as these divisions limited the endeavors of other internationalists. Yet as a labor women's international organization the federation faced substantial external obstacles as well. Working-class women had little time or money for international conferences and depended on the largesse of elite women supporters or male-led labor organizations. In a Europe that was still recovering from war and reeling from economic crisis, financial resources were sorely lacking. Socialist and labor movements in France, Norway, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere were increasingly chaotic and factionalized. In addition, labor women reformers contended with the reluctance of the ILO and the labor movements in Europe and the United States to recognize the legitimacy of working women's demands for economic organization and equal political representation. The German unions were the most outspoken in their hostility to a women's international labor organization, but the federation met resistance from other IFTU affiliates and from the TUC in Britain. In the end, a combination of internal and external stresses undermined the efforts of labor women reformers to sustain the federation.<sup>72</sup>

What does the story of labor women's international organizing reveal about U.S. political culture and the character of transnational working women's politics? The standard scholarly interpretation of the federation's collapse relies on a binary framework contrasting the politics of U.S. and European women: U.S. women favored "sex" concerns over "class" (as evidenced by their desire for a separate women's movement), while European women put "class" first and sought integration. The official account of the federation's demise published in the NWTUL newspaper told a similar tale. The split boiled down to "different points of view" held by the "American and the European women," the anonymous article explained. American women, the not-so-subtle heroines of the story in this account, "recognized the necessity for a woman movement within the labor movement." In contrast, "the European labor movements emphasize class consciousness and deprecate a woman movement within their own class" and in this, the league contended, "European working women agree with European working men."<sup>73</sup>

These inherited contrasts between working women's politics in Europe and the United States are problematic. First, neither captures the shared beliefs of the labor women who participated in the ICWW and the federation. Labor women reached agreement on a wide range of issues, including the need for enhanced social provisions, stronger trade unions, greater government regulation, and the economic and political empowerment of labor women. At bottom, the majority in both the United States and Europe wanted to address the needs of women as a class and as a sex, and they sought greater power within the ILO

Anderson Papers; Christman to executive board, July 15, 1924, ICWW May–Dec., box 3: 1923–1925 (reel 3), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America. Minutes, IFWW secretariat meeting, Sept. 11, 1924, folder 5, Margaret Bondfield Papers. Bouvier, *Mes mémoires*, 144–46.

<sup>72</sup> On the postwar devastation of Europe, see Nolan, *Transatlantic Century*, 52–103. On the fracturing of European socialist and labor movements, see van Goethem, *Amsterdam International*, 77–111; and Gruber and Graves, eds., *Women and Socialism, Socialism and Women*, 3–16.

<sup>73</sup> Jacoby, *British and American Women's Trade Union Leagues*, 187; [Smith and Christman], "International Federation of Working Women." For an earlier version of the article that clarifies its authorship, see "Report on Vienna Congress."

and the trade union movement to do so. The argument at the 1923 Vienna labor congress was not over "sex versus class" or "separatism versus integration" but over how best to position the federation to survive and leverage power within a larger male-dominated, European-centered labor movement. In the end, there may have been no correct choice possible. As a minority within a male-dominated movement, women were limited in their power regardless of the strategy, whether separatist or integrationist, they pursued.

Second, there were numerous disagreements among labor women within the United States and Europe. U.S. women were not the sole voice for women's separatism and "feminism," nor were they unanimous in opposing mergers with male-dominated trade union bodies. U.S. league women divided over how to proceed after the 1923 congress in Vienna. Of equal importance, the league did not single-mindedly pursue separatism in its dealings with the AFL. While the league trumpeted the need for the women's federation to remain autonomous and separate from the European-based IFTU, it seriously considered a proposal from Samuel Gompers for a women's department in the AFL.<sup>74</sup>

If the NWTUL's commitment to separatism had limits, so too did non-U.S. women's commitment to integration. French labor women such as Bouvier and Chevenard repeatedly sought some measure of independence in relation to the IFTU. Even British labor women, often depicted as the most eager to give up autonomy and pursue merger, divided over questions of separatism or integration. Bondfield, for example, who was in charge of the merger of the NFWW and the NUGW in 1921, fought hard to preserve a "women's district" within the NUGW before losing the battle in 1927.<sup>75</sup>

What about the notion that class allegiances prevailed in Europe among working women while having little valence in the United States? The idea that Americans lacked class consciousness is deeply rooted in U.S. historiography as well as in transatlantic comparisons of political culture. Yet neither Europe nor the United States is homogeneous, and thus any construct that posits a singular United States in contrast with a singular Europe is suspect. Moreover, although the class consciousness of U.S. labor women was not always the same as that of their counterparts in other countries, labor women nevertheless had a class politics. Their shared class politics as much as their shared gender politics allowed labor women in the U.S., Europe, and elsewhere to take advantage of the pivotal postwar moment of 1919 and assert working women's rights and needs on the world stage.<sup>76</sup>

Still, although united by a shared labor women's politics and by the common problem of how to organize as a minority group within the larger male-dominated labor movement, the different national political contexts in which labor women operated made it difficult to agree on who should belong to a working women's international federation

<sup>74</sup> Anderson to Robins, Feb. 16, 1924, April 1, 1924, folder 67, box 3, Anderson Papers; Anderson to Christman, April 16, 1924, *ibid.*; Robins to Anderson, March 21, 1924, *ibid.*; Minutes, executive session, June 20, 1924, National Women's Trade Union League Convention, June 16–21, 1924, New York, p. 266, box 25: 1924, June 16–21, New York, N.Y. (reel 23), series 3: National Conventions, 1909–1947, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America.

<sup>75</sup> On Bondfield and the NFWW merger, see minutes, NWTUL executive board, June 6–12, 1921, box 2: 1915–1922 (reel 2), series 1: Headquarters, 1903–1950, Records of the National Women's Trade Union League of America; and Dorothy Elliot, "Women in Search of Justice," n.d., pp. 11–32, unpublished memoir, file E, Davies Papers. On disagreements among European labor women over whether women should organize separately, see van Goethem, *Amsterdam International*, 158–61.

<sup>76</sup> On the lack of class consciousness in the United States, see, for example, Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement*, 1–36.

and whether closer ties to the IFTU, a European-dominated labor federation, was desirable. U.S. and British women supported a working women's international with a broad definition of membership in 1921, but federation women in most continental European nations favored a narrower trade union organization. After 1921 the British women and the dwindling number of European women who remained eventually reconciled themselves to absorption into the IFTU, seeing it as the best of bad alternatives. The situation for U.S. women was different. Their national labor movement did not belong to the IFTU. They worried about the IFTU being not only male-dominated but also Eurocentric. Indeed, the IFTU in the 1920s and 1930s remained "an international of organizations from industrialized Western Europe," without active participation from the Americas, Africa, or Asia.<sup>77</sup>

### The Long Arc of Labor Women's Reform Internationalism

The shared politics of labor women could not sustain a formal international organization in the early 1920s, and the federation dissolved. Yet the international networks that U.S. league women were instrumental in launching in 1919 continued. A vibrant transatlantic network of labor women reformers—many now prominent leaders in domestic and international politics—had been created. These informal bonds sustained labor women's social-justice politics in the interwar era and beyond, laying the foundation for post-World War II breakthroughs in gender and social policy.<sup>78</sup>

The ties between U.S. labor feminists and their counterparts in Britain and Scandinavia proved particularly durable. Until her death in 1953, Margaret Bondfield corresponded regularly with her American friends, a group consisting of Mary Anderson and Rose Schneiderman as well as Frieda Miller, Pauline Newman, and Elisabeth Christman. First elected to the British Parliament in 1923, Bondfield became Britain's first female cabinet member in 1929, serving as minister of labour and on numerous occasions as Britain's ILO delegate. The group initially dubbed themselves "the gang" and then in the late 1930s—in what may have been a reference to the exacting, slow, and arduous work of transnational reform—christened themselves the "Stone Turners' Union."<sup>79</sup>

Anderson, who occupied the directorship of the U.S. Women's Bureau from 1920 to 1944, also stayed in regular contact with Betzy Kjelsberg and Kerstin Hesselgren, exchanging letters and overseas visits into the post-World War II era. Kjelsberg served in the Norwegian national assembly and as an ILO delegate in the 1920s and 1930s. Hesselgren became Sweden's first female member of Parliament in 1921, and in 1939 she became its first female presiding chair. Among the most powerful women in the League of Nations in the interwar era, in 1937 Hesselgren chaired the League of Nations Committee on the

<sup>77</sup> van Goethem, *Amsterdam International*, 27–29.

<sup>78</sup> Earlier scholars judged the federation as a brief and "abortive" attempt at internationalism, in part because they limited their scope to formal institutions and ignored informal networks. See, for example, O'Neill, *Woman Movement*, 90–91; and van Goethem, "International Experiment of Women Workers."

<sup>79</sup> On the Stone Turners' Union, see Christman to Bondfield, Oct. 11, 1938, folder 8, box 2, series 2, Margaret Grace Bondfield Papers. For evidence of transatlantic policy exchanges and lasting friendships, see correspondence between Bondfield and Christman, folder 8, *ibid.*; correspondence between Bondfield and Anderson, folder 2, *ibid.*; correspondence between Bondfield and Pauline Newman, folder 26, *ibid.*; correspondence between Bondfield and Frieda Miller, folder 27, *ibid.*; and correspondence between Bondfield and Schneiderman, folder 31, *ibid.* For evidence of the 1919 origins of these networks, see Margaret Bondfield Diaries, 1919–1920, folder 4, box 12, series 1, Margaret Grace Bondfield Papers.



The Labor party representative Margaret Bondfield, first elected to the British Parliament in 1923, laughs comfortably with a group of potential working-class female voters in 1931 as she campaigns to keep her seat in Parliament. June Hannum, "Women as Paid Organizers and Propagandists for the British Labour Party between the Wars," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 77 (Spring 2010), 71. Courtesy Margaret Grace Bondfield Collection, Vassar College.

Status of Women, the forerunner of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.<sup>80</sup>

Opportunities for European-based institutional internationalism waned for U.S. labor women after the federation's demise. Unlike many of the European labor women who had gathered in 1919, they did not join the European-based labor, socialist, and communist internationals that reemerged in the 1920s. However, they did participate informally in ILO and NWTUL activities, and also increasingly in Pan-American and Pan-Pacific organizations. In 1934, when the U.S. joined the ILO, league women such as Anderson and Miller took the lead in ILO affairs. There, they strengthened the transnational connections they had forged in 1919 and continued to promote the social-justice agenda they had championed earlier, calling for women's political and economic rights and expanded global labor standards for all.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Correspondence between Anderson and Hesselgren, folders 31 and 49, box 2, Anderson Papers; correspondence between Anderson and Betzy Kjelsberg, folders 31 and 32, box 2, *ibid.*; and correspondence between Anderson and Kjelsberg, folder 76, box 3, *ibid.* Buchert, "Kerstin Hesselgren," 1–12.

<sup>81</sup> June Hannam and Karen Hunt, *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (New York, 2002), 166–201; Neun-singer, "Creating the International Spirit of Socialist Women," Anderson, *Woman at Work*, 193–214; Anderson to Mary Winslow, Aug. 22, 1931, folder 16, box 1, Anderson Papers; Anderson to E. J. Phelan, Dec. 29, 1938, *ibid.*; Lubin and Winslow, *Social Justice for Women*, 42–53.



Margaret Bondfield is shown here touring Wallsend in northeast England during her 1931 parliamentary reelection campaign. In contrast to her animated engagement with her female constituency pictured on the facing page, Bondfield does not look directly at her potential male supporters. *Courtesy Margaret Grace Bondfield Collection, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York.*

In the 1940s and 1950s their proposals translated into formal policy in the ILO, the United Nations, and the international labor movement. Miller, the director of the U.S. Women's Bureau from 1944 to 1953, chaired the committee charged with working out relations between the ILO and the new United Nations. She also helped ensure that equal pay, social wages for mothers, and international protections for informal workers were part of the postwar ILO agenda. In 1951, at Miller's urging, the ILO launched a full-scale inquiry into raising the status and conditions of paid domestic workers globally. That same year, based on the recommendations of a "committee of experts," including Miller, Alva Myrdal of Sweden, and Indra Bose of India, the ILO drafted and adopted the Equal Remuneration Convention, a long-sought goal of labor women. Improved conventions on maternity, child labor, and employment discrimination followed.<sup>82</sup>

In these same decades, an international network of labor feminists, including Hesselgren and other women internationalist veterans of the 1919 ICWW as well as younger

<sup>82</sup> On Frieda Miller, see Dee Ann Montgomery, "Frieda Segelke Miller," *Notable American Women: The Modern Period; A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 478–79. On Miller's international activities, see folders 170, 172, box 8, folders 185–87, box 9, Frieda S. Miller Papers, 1909–1973 (Schlesinger Library). On the International Labor Organization's domestic work deliberations, see Dorothy M. Elliott, "The Status of Domestic Work in the United Kingdom," *International Labour Review*, 63 (Feb. 1951), 125; and Eileen Boris and Jill Jensen, "The ILO: Women's Networks and the Making of the Woman Worker," in *Women and Social Movements, International*, ed. Sklar and Dublin.

women such as the American garment organizer and labor lobbyist Esther Peterson and her close friend Sigrid Ekendahl of Sweden, also pushed women's issues to the fore in the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the IFTU's successor. They reinvigorated the lapsed IFTU women's committee set up in 1924, and by the mid-1950s they had established a permanent and more international committee that included women from Africa and the Middle East.<sup>83</sup>

In 1956 Peterson, later to be the highest-ranking woman in the Kennedy administration, agreed to write a history of labor women's internationalism for the ICFTU. She began by sending a letter to Hesselgren, asking her about the 1919 women's congress. "Dearest Kerstin," she began, "Since the International Congress of Working Women was the first world gathering of trade union women, it must not be forgotten. Please tell me your memories of it so I can write about it with some accuracy." Hesselgren shot back a long letter, with concrete details, drawn from her diaries of 1919, and with a long list of other women to whom Peterson should write. The list was probably unnecessary since Peterson, like other labor feminists of her generation, already knew many of these women and their accomplishments. Peterson finished her pamphlet and returned to the United States some years later, bringing from her decade abroad social policies that would eventually make their way into the President's Commission on the Status of Women, the 1963 Equal Pay Act, the 1966 Amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act, and other signal policy statements and legislation of the era.<sup>84</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s a vibrant global women's movement emerged. Labor women, too, were part of this upsurge, and international labor institutions such as the ILO and the ICFTU adopted gender equality among their core principles. These dramatic transformations, often seen as a "second wave" of global feminism, have been well documented. What is less acknowledged are the earlier advances that underlay these breakthroughs and the ways the reform agenda of "second-wave" international labor feminism rested on and fulfilled the long-standing aspirations of earlier labor women internationalists, including the women of 1919.

<sup>83</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Friendship beyond the Atlantic: Labour Feminist International Contacts after the Second World War," *Arbëtarhistoria*, 129–30 (Jan.–Feb. 2009), 12–20.

<sup>84</sup> Esther Peterson to Hesselgren, April 1956, folder 382, box 21, Peterson Papers; Hesselgren to Peterson, April 27, 1956, *ibid.* Equal Pay Act of 1963, 77 Stat. 56; Fair Labor Standards Amendments of 1966, 80 Stat. 830. Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Labor Feminists and President Kennedy's Commission on Women," in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick, 2010), 144–67.