REBEL GIRLS AND UNION MAIDS:
THE WOMAN QUESTION IN THE JOURNALS
OF THE AFL AND IWW, 1905-1920

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Between 1905 and 1920 the journals of the American labor movement, both the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the unions affiliated with the more conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL), established an ideology of gender in their articles, editorials, cartoons, fiction, and organizers’ reports which characterized women as either “Rebel Girls” or “Union Maids.” Joe Hill, the romantic IWW bard, captured the essence of the Rebel Girl in his 1915 song of the same name. Hill’s proletarian muse fired the revolution with her “spite and defiance” and fidelity to “her class and her kind,” as well as bringing “courage, pride and joy/To the fighting Rebel Boy.” Her hands “harden’d from labor” and her simple garb set her apart from the “blue blooded queens and princesses/Who have charms made of diamond and pearl.” Her common cause was not with women of the capitalist class but rather with the men of her own class. Despite her departure from conventional standards of ladyhood, however, the title of lady was still hers, redefined through the revolutionary struggle—“For the only and Thoroughbred Lady is the Rebel Girl.”

The Rebel Girl was not freed from domesticity by the coming of the One Big Union, the Wobblies’ mythic anarcho-syndicalist millennium. Rather, she played a domestic role both in the oppressed present and the liberated future. The Rebel Girl stood by her male comrade as muse or helpmate and instilled a pacifist and revolutionary ideology in her children. Sexuality was acknowledged in the Rebel Girl, while only alluded to in her trade union sister.

A musical tribute was not paid to the Union Maid until 1940. But in the labor press she, like her sister Rebel Girl, was also a

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lady, loyal to her class and her fellow workers. She did not repudiate relationships with bourgeois women and was receptive to liberal reform movements, especially feminism. She, like the AFL context in which she was found, accepted capitalism but strove to carve a space for herself within the capitalist structure.

The life cycle of the Union Maid was remarkably clear. She left her parents' home to work in a factory where her work experience heightened her sense of collective solidarity with sister workers. She joined a union and did not shirk strike activity, knowing that assertive action would in fact enhance rather than detract from her femininity. When she married, as marry she must, her union-formed consciousness made her a supportive wife and informed consumer and led her to socialize her children in correct union principles. Reflecting Progressive Era notions, the editorial pronouncements of the labor press conveyed a strong sense of woman caught in transition between the cult of domesticity—woman fulfilled through family relationships—and the self-actualization of modern individualism.

As either Rebel Girl or Union Maid, women's relationship to the American labor movement has been historically problematic. Following the Civil War, the cigarmakers, printers, and the National Labor Union accepted female members. During the 1880s the Knights of Labor made an active effort to recruit women from all walks of life, and throughout the nineteenth century women workers organized themselves into alliances and working women's associations. Despite this activity, though, until the turn of the century women workers were a negligible portion of the American wage labor force and were generally not welcome participants in the mainstream labor movement. Even with the growth of the female wage labor force to 20 percent of the adult female population by 1910, women continued to hold a marginal position in the industrial world. Their work was located in areas of low-skill and poorly paid employment, and trade unions viewed them with either indifference or hostility.²

During the early twentieth century, however, as women entered industries such as textiles, garments, and cigarmaking in significant numbers, the IWW and the AFL recruited female workers. They used the labor press as propaganda and recruitment literature, taking note of women's activities on the job, on strike, and in the community. Given the polarity of their political orientations as well as their antagonism toward each other, one might expect that these organizations, at least in their public pro-
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nouncements, would take sharply divergent positions on the woman question. But, despite increasing militance and rising labor force participation by women, in the pages of the labor press the Union Maids and Rebel Girls were both cast in essentially domestic roles.

The following article will contrast the differences and examine the striking likenesses between the AFL and the IWW approaches to the woman question through their treatment of four important women's issues of the day—issues which held the attention of social commentators, feminists, and other contemporaries concerned with women. These issues are, first, suffrage or the question of women's admission to full political citizenship; second, topics pertaining to female sexuality such as birth control, prostitution, and sexual exploitation; third, union organization or the admission of women to equal union membership; and finally, the nature of womanhood itself, especially as it contrasted with the middle-class ideal.

The concern of this article is ideology rather than behavior, prescription rather than description, and its conclusions will tell us far more about the labor movement than about women. There is no way of knowing how many working-class women and men read or were influenced by the prescriptions set out in these journals. But, because they represent organized labor's "official" thinking on social issues, they suggest how ideology was used to support male hegemony during an especially fluid period of historical change. They also help to substantiate the contentions of feminist scholars, such as Caroline Ware, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Heidi Hartmann, that trade unions have historically reinforced conventional social attitudes concerning women's role. For, given the lack of access to better-paid jobs or union leadership, women had little choice but to accede to powerful cultural and structural pressures which confined them to the private rather than the public sphere of life. The trade union thus reinforced a sexual division of labor both at home and in the workplace, for the ideas expressed in the American labor press clearly linked home and work and facilitated the transition between them for women.

The first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the growth and eventual triumph of the AFL as the dominant form of labor organization in the United States. Dedicated to organizing skilled workers through its various affiliated unions, it viewed the
unskilled, including women, blacks, and immigrants, as a menace to be dealt with only as their numbers proved threatening. In 1905, however, American labor radicals founded the IWW. Rooted in an American tradition of frontier individualism and a radical philosophy of syndicalism, the Wobblies promised the "One Big Union," an egalitarian millennium, to the unskilled worker ground down by industrial capitalism. The IWW, with its structural base of industrial unionism, challenged traditional trade unions far out of proportion to its actual numbers.4

The IWW's commitment to organizing the unskilled appeared to offer an opening for women to gain greater representation in the labor movement. Rhetorically, this promise was given in 1915 by Joe Hill's "Rebel Girl" song, which he hoped would "line up the women in the OBU [One Big Union]." The Wobblies believed that female workers should be organized, along with men, at the point of production, and that socialism would alleviate the oppression of working-class wives and daughters. Although they perceived women's unique oppression under capitalism, the IWW never offered a feminist critique of, or a solution to that oppression. Rather, they analyzed women's situation along class lines. As Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the noted IWW organizer, succinctly stated, "To us society moves in grooves of class not sex."5

In this view an issue such as suffrage, which focused on sexual inequality, obfuscated the central issue of class exploitation and produced a false impression of cross-class sisterhood. In effect, the Wobblies would react this way to all specifically feminist issues. Women's oppression could be resolved only through the destruction of capitalism. Efforts for cross-class organization on issues were seen as vitiation for the overall struggle for class-based organization. Unlike the AFL, which endorsed suffrage and frequently cooperated with the middle-class reformers of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), the IWW labeled the suffrage movement a bourgeois "chase after the wind." They resented the efforts of the WTUL, which one IWW publication labeled "a female Civic Federation," for they felt that these "rich faddists for woman suffrage" exploited "girls'" strikes to make them the "tail of a suffrage kite."6 The suffrage movement was composed of women of the enslaving classes who had, as the Wobblies saw it, nothing in common with working-class females. The working-class woman, whether wife of a worker or a worker herself, would rise when her class rose, not with her sex. Even
Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, in her public pronouncements in the IWW press, found little of value for working-class women in the suffrage movement. To Flynn, it was "social revolution" rather than suffrage that would free women because women's situation was a result of "either wage slavery directly or personal dependence upon a wage worker."

Patriarchal though it was, the mainstream American labor movement did take a liberal stance on the woman suffrage question, in keeping with the Progressive reform tradition. Their position on this issue illustrates the compatibility the AFL felt with the American political process. The AFL endorsed women's suffrage in 1890 and continued to support the suffrage movement until its victory twenty-nine years later. Discussions of the issue appeared regularly in the journals of AFL-affiliated unions and often directly related suffrage to the situation of women workers in a particular trade.8

The Butcher Workman, for example, pointed out that women in a Connecticut munitions plant and waitresses in New York would be less hesitant to stand up for their rights at work if they had the power of the vote.9 The same journal allayed fears that legislatures would be overrun with female office holders by pointing out that there was a paucity of women in the legislatures of Arizona, Oregon, and Colorado—states with female suffrage.10 Reformer Lydia Kingsmill Commander enthusiastically proclaimed the sisterhood of suffrage to the working-class readership of the Shoe Workers' Journal with her statement, "Surely, Woman Suffrage is a live issue when a prima donna and a capmaker stand by side together demanding votes for women!"11

The labor press used the "nature" of womanhood both to endorse and oppose the suffrage movement. "Women are by nature and training housekeepers," the Shoe Workers' Journal stated. "Let them have a hand in the city's housekeeping, even if they introduce an occasional housecleaning."12 A later edition of the same journal felt that women's tender and emotional nature would have eliminated the child labor problem if only women had had the vote. "Women have not been petrified by the conduct of affairs as men have. They apply the mother heart to social questions instead of the business head, and I hope they will continue to do so. For I can not emphasize too strongly my belief that a high emotionalism is needed in dealing with questions of human life and happiness."13

The Ladies' Garment Worker, however, perceived female emo-
tionalism as a problem in the public arena. While supporting votes for women, it tempered this endorsement by the admission that women may not yet (in 1913) be "fit to vote . . . for a time women may show themselves to be politically petty, narrow, sentimental, hysterical. These characteristics and the character of the half-educated will disappear with broader opportunities and nobler tasks."14

Not all unions supported female suffrage. In 1904, the Weekly Bulletin of the United Garment Workers of America deemed suffrage inappropriate to woman's nature.15 And the cigarmakers expressed serious reservations about woman suffrage because they believed that once women had the vote they would vote for prohibition. Because cigars were sold in saloons, the demise of saloons would have grave repercussions for the cigar trade.16

By the early 1900s female suffrage was a fairly conventional demand of liberal reformers. In promoting suffrage, a cause which on some level acknowledged the commonality rather than the differences between the situation of middle-class and working-class women, the mainstream labor movement positioned itself near the center of the American political spectrum. This is not to say that suffrage ever became an issue which politically defined the AFL. But it does reflect the fact that the AFL, unlike the IWW, did not see itself as distinct from or in opposition to the fundamental goals of American society.

Like suffrage, the birth control issue also demonstrated the contrast in political vision between the AFL and the IWW and its effect on their perception of women. The IWW stance in favor of birth control was rooted not in a commitment to feminism, but rather in a class analysis of reproduction. By its silence the AFL took a particular ideological position on the birth control issue, implicitly accepting the separation between public and private that was a prominent feature of social ideology. Although trade unions and work and even suffrage fell within the purview of the public, the private was the domain of women and the family.

A 1916 article in the Wobbly organ Solidarity, entitled "Birth Control Economics," illustrates the IWW's ideological perspective on contraception. The article linked reproduction to production, arguing that small families would reduce the general labor force, thus creating an increased demand for labor as well as higher wages. The poor continuing to produce children further enhanced the position of the ruling class.17 The Industrial Worker stated this dichotomy between rich and poor even more tren-
chantly. "We do know that large families live in small houses and small families live in large houses."19

The IWW's forthright endorsement of birth control frontally challenged the dominant ideology of docile passivity for women. The *Industrial Worker* boldly stated in a 1916 editorial: "Somehow or other we don't believe that babies are a 'gift of God' to be accepted submissively. We don't believe that woman is merely a sock-darning incubator. . . . We do know that too many babies lower the laborer's standard of living and make mental and physical prostitutes of the adult family members. . . . We think that society as a whole should have nothing to say regarding the prevention of conception until it guarantees some measure of well being to those who are born."19

In their treatment of the birth control issue, the Wobblies specifically sought to lighten the burdens of the working-class woman. The Rebel Girl was seen as having no common ground with her bourgeois sister, for birth control devices and information were available only to those who could pay for them.20

The IWW's active involvement in the birth control debate as well as their anarcho-syndicalist and direct action politics profoundly influenced the young Margaret Sanger and shaped her early writings.21 Long before middle-class reformers took up Sanger's cause, the IWW endorsed her work and distributed English and Yiddish editions of her classic pamphlet, *Family Limitation*. In the years before the First World War, working-class women and men crowded Wobbly meeting halls to hear Sanger, Emma Goldman, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn deliver stirring orations on the political and social importance of birth control.

Of the various IWW polemicists on the subject of birth control, Flynn was the most responsive to the female viewpoint rather than the purely class nature of the problem. She acknowledged the double burden of industrial and domestic work borne by many working wives and found at least a partial solution in the dissemination of birth control information to the poor. But hers was also a class analysis first and foremost. Large families "rivet the chains of slavery upon labor more securely," she charged. "It crushes the parents, starves the children and provides cheap fodder for machines and cannons."22

To turn now to another theme, the nature of womanhood, it is apparent that during a time when middle-class women bought Gibson Girl shirtwaists and working-class girls sewed them, both the IWW and AFL embraced visions of woman remarkably close
to the dominant cultural ideal—pure, moral, and chaste. In a vitriolic denunciation of Emma Goldman, "the notorious Chicago harlot," the Official Journal of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen attacked Goldman not for her anarchist politics, but rather because she "does not believe in marriage. She believes neither in the laws of God nor man, nor the observance of womanly chastity." She lived by "utterly immoral inclinations." Goldman should be restrained, the journal urged, from peddling her "obscene literature...amongst our young girls with their pure thoughts."23

Women's purity, of course, was clearly linked to her function as future mother of the race. The leitmotif of motherhood ran incessantly through labor literature on women. What determined an appropriate female occupation, asked an article in the Shoe Workers' Journal? Anything that did not unfit women for motherhood, was the reply.24 Why was the employment of women at the cleaning of pigs' feet and hog casing particularly offensive, queried the Official Journal of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen? Once again, because "such work has a degrading and demoralizing effect on the future mothers of our country."25

The labor press regularly used a domestic imperative to define woman's place in industry. In a 1918 editorial, the Shoe Workers' Journal urged readers to remember that even in wartime, women should not be employed at jobs injurious to their health which might jeopardize the "future of the race."26 Woman's marginal place at work, then, was clearly dictated by the inescapable demands of home and family.

While single women were in the work force, however, the AFL held that they should be organized and inculcated with principles of trade unionism. As the future mothers of the race, they were responsible for the socialization of children and thus could become "educators of unionism."27 As the Shoe Workers' Journal stressed, it was "essential... for happiness after marriage that the wage struggle of the husband and his trade union efforts shall have the full sympathy and support of the wife."28

Gertrude Barnum, an organizer for the WTUL, also tied union activity to future domesticity when she spoke to a meeting of female buttonhole workers in 1905. She urged the girls to organize and obtain better wages and then spend that money on good food and warm clothing because later in life others would depend on their health. Barnum, a social rather than an actual
housekeeper herself, stirringly exhorted the girls: "YOU remember that it is woman’s duty to give at least half a chance to the next generation. In all your demands and plans, put your HEALTH first. That is the one great thing. Without it you cannot do your ONE GREAT DUTY, which is to add to this earth a son or daughter whose work may help to make the poor better off." 29

Throughout the mainstream labor press, that "one great duty" for women was featured, applauded, and never challenged as the central focus of women's social role. Protesting the health of potential mothers justified women’s exclusion from certain types of industrial labor. When the flood of women into industry became overwhelming, it was argued that union activity would only enhance woman’s eventual fulfillment to her "one great duty." The labor press reassured readers that the woman worker and the female unionist, presented no challenge to a social order resting upon the nuclear family. 30 In fact, the same journal might assert that woman’s place was in the home at one time and then, a few years later, suggest that the experience of work and union membership made women better wives and mothers.

Samuel Gompers, the patriarch of the American labor movement, provided the classic example of this transition. He answered the question "Should the Wife Help to Support the Family?" with a resounding and unequivocal, "'No!'" In 1906, Gompers stated that "the wife or mother, attending to the duties of the home, makes the greatest contribution to the support of the family. The honor, glory, and happiness that come from a beloved wife and the holiness of motherhood are a contribution to the support and future welfare of the family that our common humanity does not yet fully appreciate." 31

Eight years later, writing in the same journal Gompers modified his tribute to the American madonna. "It is fantastic fiction to tell girls and women that their place is in the home... organizing will mean to these working women an opportunity for finding themselves as a genuine part of industrial organization. They will be responsible and responsive human beings ordering their own lives and destinies." 32 The rhetorical contrast in these two statements was especially striking because Gompers invoked the traditional ideal of domesticity in the first remark, and the second statement resonated with Progressive Era feminist concepts of autonomy.

Turning now to the image of womanhood projected by the IWW journals, we can see traditional as well as modern elements
in the character of the Rebel Girl. Despite the Wobblies’ overt repudiation of bourgeois womanhood, and the compassion which they expressed for the misery of the working-class woman, they created a fundamentally domestic and inspirational image of femininity in the pages of their journals. Perhaps because they only confronted actual working women in any significant numbers in the textile industry the Wobblies focused their attention on an ideal of woman in her moral, domestic role. The sanctity of the home, and woman’s place in it, they seemed to say, would be neither threatened nor disturbed by the coming of the One Big Union. Flynn’s writing best demonstrates the accommodation of traditional norms for women with the social reality of an industrial age.

Flynn was deeply sensitive to the realities of working-class life for women in a way that only a daughter of that class could be. Her writings testify to an ongoing commitment to heightening the awareness of her fellow Wobblies to the unique problems of women of their class. She decried the path taken by women from “wage-slave” to “sex-slave”—from marginal member of the labor force into an escapist marriage which offered only another form of bondage. Flynn acknowledged the changing relationship of women to wage labor when she stated that “women are in industry to stay. They cannot be driven back to the home. Their work left the home and they followed. They are part of the army of labor and must be organized.” Despite this analysis, however, Flynn saw little challenge to the traditional domestic role from women’s industrial roles. She soothingly assured the Wobblies that “the union factory girl of today is the helpful and encouraging wife of the union man of tomorrow.”

In invoking this image of the supportive wife, Flynn sounded a common theme found in the IWW press. Workers, the Wobblies felt, should educate their families so that women could “sense the real importance of the philosophies of economics.” Then, “the proletarian and his woman” will be able to “start the collapse of Capitalist Society.” Though this may have been a paternalistic sentiment, it did view the working-class wife as actively striving toward the IWW millennium, albeit within a family context.

Outside the realm of theory also, the Wobblies recognized the connection between women’s private and men’s public sphere, separate yet reinforcing each other. They applauded women’s participation in the great Lawrence textile strike of 1912, and they celebrated female support of the Minnesota Iron Range strike
of 1916. Headlines such as "Women Disarm Deputies" portrayed the wives of strikers on the Mesabi Range as they wrested clubs from company guards.36

The role of wife was transformed, then, by her supportive participation in the working man's struggle. She could be an effective helpmate in the public as well as the private sphere of life. A cartoon in a 1921 issue of Industrial Solidarity glorified the worker's wife. Strong and mature, wearing an apron labeled "Kansas Striker's Wife," she resolutely confronted a surprised soldier with a United Mine Workers scab hiding behind his coat. The cartoon bears the staunch legend "They Shall Not Pass."37

Strong though she might be, the wife was still a dependent within the family structure, and as such she must be defended and protected. In another cartoon, vicious dogs labeled "Steel Trust" and "Hunger" are shown held at bay by a stalwart Mesabi Range worker with a large club inscribed "IWW." Behind him cowers a woman, babe in arms and two children clutching her skirt.38

This image of the defense of woman by man was further described in a 1909 editorial in the Industrial Worker. Under the romantic epigram from Schiller, "Honor the women, they wreathe and weave/Heavenly roses into the earthly life," was a tribute to the ladies and their knights of the working class. "True respect for women is mostly confined to the working class . . . it is the working men who are chivalrous, and the loafers [upper class] who are curs. . . . The sharpest note in the battle hymns of all nations has been the call to defend 'wife, home and children,' but how could this affect our modern American employing class? What a task! 'To defend wife? Which one of the modern employing class concubines could stir the spirit of bravery in the breast of a spaniel?'" Thus were nineteenth-century romantic concepts of manhood and womanhood infused with a proletarian spirit. The IWW portrait of stalwart manhood depended upon a definition of true womanhood to match it.39

IWW writers confidently asserted that once capitalism disappeared, gender and family roles would be equalized. Charles Ashleigh waxed eloquent on this theme in a 1916 Solidarity article. "In the IWW women and men fight side by side, in perfect equality, to realize that Coming Day, when little children shall no longer labor beneath the yoke of Profit, nor shall a stunted and feeble race be born from the womb of toil-worn, half-starved women, but mating in radiant harmony and health."40

A Solidarity editor was more direct than Ashleigh in posing the
question, “Is there a Woman’s Question in the Revolutionary Movement?” He urged woman not to challenge present moral or social standards until she wins “economic freedom,” following the triumph of the working class. Once this triumph is complete, he cautioned, “The ethical code of the future society will not spring full-blown with the advent of that society . . . it will find its roots immediately in the general movement of today whose goal is economic freedom.” The IWW promise to women, then, was a companionate relationship with men in this “general movement of today.”

The Wobblies attempted to fulfill this promise in specific areas where they encountered women at work—in textiles, in domestic work, and as telephone operators. It was here, at the point of production, that their commitment to making women equal partners in the One Big Union is most obvious. Of course, many AFL unions, especially those in industries with a large female work force, also organized women and wrote approvingly of their strike activity. But they did so out of a pragmatic need to build their organization, not out of a desire to realize a new world order.

Accounts of women workers’ strikes illustrate the demands, rhetoric, and response to the collective action of women workers that fill the pages of AFL journals during this period. In 1920 an organizer for the cigarmakers reported on a strike of female workers from Ludington, Michigan. The “girls” had been on strike for six months demanding union recognition. They had spurned various offers made by the Consolidated Cigar Company, proclaiming: “Nothing doing, we stay out. We will work for any other firm even at a less price [sic] than our demands than go back to work for a firm that would take away all our rights and concede us nothing.”

In another example, canvas glove workers at Chicago’s Herzog factory walked out in 1915. Their grievances included low wages, a charge for needles, fines, poor sanitation, and “unequal division of work.” Fifteen girls, three of them younger than eighteen, were arrested for picketing. The girls were booked and held “incommunicado.” The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union and the WTUL rallied to the support of the glove workers, and the strike was successfully concluded within two weeks. Female workers, like their male counterparts, were affected by the early twentieth-century struggle for control of work and the workplace. The collective response to petty harassment, sweat-
shop conditions, and unjust treatment in the courts was to demand their right as workers to strike, organize, and collectively bargain. Union approval of this type of militant action on the part of women often came after the fact, but it did come.45

The adulatory language with which labor journals extolled female strikers, however, strangely evoked the Victorian dichotomy between venal man and moral woman. Women were not simply good strikers, they were the best strikers. Imbued with a superhuman spirituality, they inspired the working man. As the Cigar Makers' Official Journal expressed it in 1916, "The skeptical mind of man has always predicted that women in an industrial struggle, was [sic] like putty in the hands of a sculptor, but this fight has brought to the surface a denial of that erroneous charge." Their sufferings have "placed them on a pedestal of honor for the loyalty they have shown, and written across their brows a diadem that time will not erase." The girls "nobly standing out for their rights" were pitted against "the stupendous power of greedy wealth."46

Too often historians have cavalierly dismissed such rhetoric without considering the heavy cultural baggage it carried and without setting it in a social matrix. By describing women's strikes in "feminine" terms, the mainstream labor press validated an essential part of the female workers' experience. At the same time, the activities of working-class women themselves, on the job, in the community, and during strikes, modified and molded the image of the Union Maid, so that it became more than a simple reflection of patriarchal ideology.

The IWW helped to organize strikes of female textile workers in Little Falls, New York, and Paterson, New Jersey. But the famous Lawrence, Massachusetts, strike best illustrates the IWW's position on women and collective action. Several facts stand out in the legend of the Lawrence strike which relate to the IWW and women. Because more than one-half the textile workers in Lawrence were women and children, the Wobblies vigorously and effectively organized women. They sent topflight organizers such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn into Lawrence to make special appeals to women and to convince those workers who felt that women's place was in the home, not on the picket line, of the centrality of women's role in the strike. Soon women were not only on the picket line in Lawrence, but also in the front ranks of the striking thousands. The workers elected women such as Rose Cardullo, Josephine Liss, and Annie Welsenbach as delegates to
the strike committee. And when the strike finally ended after eight weeks, female as well as male workers received substantial wage increases. This hard-won victory was, unfortunately, a brief moment of triumph for Lawrence's working class. Within two years, conditions in Lawrence disintegrated to a prestrike level. Meredith Tax, in evaluating the outcome of the Lawrence strike for its women, sadly concludes that "when their class went under in defeat, they were the most submerged, for their struggle for equality within the working class movement was dependent on the success of the class struggle as a whole." 47

Despite this, the Lawrence strike does serve to demonstrate, both in fact and through the Wobbly press, the IWW's sincere inclusion of women in the One Big Union, at least during a major labor confrontation. 48 The Wobblies acknowledged that women had unique problems and they responded with special organizers; they envisioned women as members of the One Big Union and so welcomed them in the struggles leading to the millennium. 49

The IWW press repeatedly assured readers, however, that the new world order of the IWW need not threaten familiar social institutions or social relations. In often florid prose, the Wobblies responded to the charge that "the parasite hirelings of capitalism says [sic] the IWW will destroy the home" with proclamations such as the following: "We say it is not necessary to feed the bodies of infants, the virtues of women and the life and blood of the toilers to the vultures of privilege. Our aims are homes where love can grow and blossom in the fruitful soil of childish, carefree laughter, where womanhood can attain heights as yet undreamed and impossible under slavery, where man clear-eyed and unafraid, an unbound giant can climb to heights that we in the slavery of modern industry can not fully conceive." 50 The sanctified home, then, reconstituted in the Wobbly millennium was structured much the same as the prerevolutionary home. The separate spheres of women and men would be enhanced, however, in the transition from capitalism to socialism.

The Wobbly press viewed the family under capitalism with a moral outrage conveyed in graphic form in a cartoon on the front page of the Industrial Worker. Beneath the crepe-draped portrait of a man, a woman lies in a bed holding an infant. Two ragged children stand by a sewing machine in a room with a broken window and peeling plaster. A well-dressed man of uncertain identity stands menacingly in a doorway looking at the woman. The caption reads "%The Home We Intend to Destroy": A life subscription
to anyone offering a feasible prescription for this case."

The prescription, of course, was clear—the abolition of capitalism.

In addition to their discussion of woman's family role, the IWW's preoccupation with the topic of prostitution casts a revealing light on their conception of womanhood. It should come as no surprise that the Wobblies viewed capitalism as the root cause of this social evil. The IWW articles reflected the same strain of environmental determinism that permeated contemporary reform literature. However, the empathy which some of the articles expressed for prostitutes—as individuals rather than as social categories—seemed to reflect proletarian experience. The Wobblly press made a clear distinction during this period between the hapless victims of urban vice and the frontier "capitalists with rooms" of mining and logging communities. And the IWW's discussion of prostitution, whatever the inference or conclusion drawn, decidedly acknowledged female sexuality. This sexuality, despite its deviant expression, was never morally censured. The prostitute, like the tramp, was a victim of capitalism.

A large cartoon in a 1914 edition of *Solidarity* graphically illustrates this theme. Entitled "The Real White Slaver," the first frame shows a tearful young woman seated at a sewing machine. Beside her stands a black-robed figure labeled "Capitalism" holding a sign that reads "The reward of Virtue: Misery, Consumption, Death." In the second frame, the girl has vanished and "Capitalism" laughs maliciously.

A more detailed Wobblly explication of the white slave menace was the melodramatic "open letter" of San Francisco "prostitute" Madeline Faraway to evangelical Billy Sunday published in 1916. Madeline regretted her sins, but was trapped in her nefarious trade, "a pawn in the game of white slavery." She protested, though, that "this is wrong and unfair. Every time a girl goes down to a life of shame there is a man to be found who helped to knock her down." Madeline described her personal path to ruin as the child of a mother who was unable to support her. Madeline migrated to Chicago where she found work in a candy store. There she "was insulted over one hundred times by men who came to buy candy." She moved on to selling hosiery in a department store where she was also insulted even though the customers were "classier." Finally, on a day when her feet were cold and wet, and she needed new shoes, she became a "fallen woman." In a final passionate outburst she proclaimed to her
sisters: "We are diseased, despised, destroyed, down—knocked down by a system known as capitalism . . . oh, yes, we will die here—victims of a social system—the private ownership of life by a few parasites who exploit and destroy the family, home and religion. . . . Mr. Sunday you cannot keep the homes going if we have low wages, unemployment and child slavery."  

IWW fiction also looked to the department store for tales like "Mary Shaughnessy," which told of the "sorrowful experience of a modern department store Magdalene," or the story of the widow Nell who fell into the white slave netherworld when unable to support her children and aged mother on her department store wages. Women and men of the "dangerous classes" were depicted making common cause against capitalism in a large cartoon of a hobo and a prostitute in a 1911 Industrial Worker. The caption reads: "He can't afford to have a home. She never had a chance. That's why they are selling themselves to the highest bidder."  

Whether in graphic, essay, or fictional form, though, the IWW press never faulted the prostitute. The economic failure of capitalism created prostitution, not the moral failure of women. Again and again the Wobbly publications showed that low wages and minimal job opportunities for women propelled women into prostitution. As Eleanor Wentworth put it in 1913, "Magdalene was born a woman, this fact according to the dictates of man, prohibiting her from every field of life except love."  

The mainstream labor press dealt more cautiously with themes of prostitution and sexual exploitation. Although historians have documented the practice of sexual abuse in which girls were urged to "come across" for benefits, labor journals skirted the issue. Those that dealt with it at all focused on the way in which tensions in the workplace were exacerbated by sexual exploitation. Gertrude Barnum, for example, warned readers of the Ladies' Garment Worker in 1912 that "no foreman . . . should . . . compel her to sacrifice her womanhood to secure an advance in wages. Neither should she have her work ripped apart and alteration demanded without pay because of revenge on the part of an inspector." Later that year the same journal exposed "immoral practices" and "filth and syphilitic disease" at a corset factory in Kalamazoo, Michigan.  

Samuel Gompers himself underlined the connection between "Women's Wages and Morality" in a 1913 editorial in the American Federationist. Gompers endorsed the findings of an Il-
linois Senate Committee investigating the white slave problem. He noted that wages below eight dollars a week often forced women workers into an "immoral" life even if they had "good and moral home training," and he urged unionization, especially of department store girls, to combat this problem.60

Although domestics and department store clerks were particularly vulnerable to white slavers, industrial workers were not immune. Barnum explicitly described a stock company in Michigan which employed "pretty, young country girls." This company "has carried on a business not only profitable but also pleasurable for the men managers, superintendents and foremen. The girls have been industrial bargains and social bargains as well." Barnum traced an "ugly undercurrent" of abortions and disappearances of women. Peculiar boarding arrangements and low wages led women to seek male favors or go into prostitution. Wage levels fluctuated and were contingent upon bribery or flattery of the "examiner." Bad sanitary conditions included an "alarming prevalence of venereal disease among salaried as well as wage-earning employees; but apparently the Board of Health was reluctant to shock the community by an exposure."61 Such frank discussions of the perils of white slavery were rarely found in the AFL press, however.

Although more ready to acknowledge female sexuality, the Wobblies, like the AFL, viewed women's essential nature as moral and gentle, unless corrupted by degrading surroundings. A good example is the character of "Mrs. Mac," Kate McDonald, the beloved bookkeeper for the Seattle IWW who was arrested on sedition charges in 1917. Mrs. Mac, the Industrial Worker recounted, always greeted workers with "gentle courteousness, refinement and womanliness, coupled with a reserve and firm control that won and retained friendship, yet repelled and held in check any who might overstep the bounds of decency." But Mrs. Mac was thrown into the Seattle jail "there to come in contact with all sorts of unfortunate and degrading women. . . . It is bad enough for men to be subjected to conditions that prevail in capitalist jails, but it is harder for women."62 This gentle and refined creature hardly fit the stereotype of "home destroyers and advocates of free love" found in mainstream society's view of IWW women. Of course, it would be unrealistic to expect IWW literature to be uninfluenced by the stereotypes of feminine gentility which pervaded early twentieth-century American society.

The women characters in the fiction found in IWW journals
were as genteel as Mrs. Mac. They also possessed some of the inspirational qualities of Joe Hills' proletarian ideal, the Rebel Girl, who brought "courage, pride and joy to the fighting Rebel Boy." They faced situations which effected a change in their consciousness and heightened their awareness of the class struggle—an awareness that often sparked the same transformation in others. Relations between women and men were highly romanticized in IWW fiction, however, as was the language used to describe them. And, in contrast to some fiction in the mainstream labor press, the IWW stories were not didactically geared to recruit women to union membership.

A comparison of two short stories from the IWW press and two from mainstream labor journals illustrates these themes. In "I Am a Revolutionist," the setting is the "neat and clean" room of a refined, frail, and beautiful female worker. A fat capitalist with a shining hat and diamonds—"everything about him shone but his intellect"—proposes marriage, and the heroine is outraged. Although born to noble parents she had been raised in poverty and was committed to the revolutionary class struggle. Weak and dying, she derives strength from the collective struggle and scorns the material advantages offered by the capitalist. This fragile "revolutionist" appeared an unlikely worker, but the story offered the challenge of the revolution to all readers, regardless of gender or class origin. At the same time, this graceful beauty served as an effective muse for the struggle.63

Another theme, in which true love conquers the class struggle, was developed through a formula plot in "A New Theory and An Old Story." The action begins with Winifred Sanderson and Bertha Blaisdell, "two girls of the upper ten," speeding along River Drive in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. Bertha has recently attended a lecture given by George Hunter, a socialist agitator who works as a mounted park guard. She quickly realizes that not only is Hunter's political philosophy true, but that he is "rather fine looking." By a not-so-strange coincidence, Hunter is watching the girls in the park, reflecting that "it is certainly tough lines [sic], to be a proletarian and be despised by the only woman that I could love. . . . And I am one of those great free Americans, one of the sovereign voters, what rot! And I dare not speak of anything but the weather to the woman I love, or I will be without 'visible means of support.'" After several twists of the plot Bertha loses control of the car, and Hunter pursues her on a horse. The car is wrecked, the horse breaks its neck, but in the
dramatic climax Bertha and Hunter are saved. "He was nearly broken by the death of his horse but the immovable barrier was removed and two loving hearts were forever united."64 A manly, chivalric deed brought the star-crossed lovers into each other's arms; not a common political awareness, but their shared commitment to socialism insured the continuance of their relationship. What was the message of this Algerish tale? Socialism is attractive to all classes? Love transcends class differences? A reminder that for Hunter his rights as a "free American" and "sovereign voter" were a sham in the existing class system?

The short stories in trade union journals frequently developed prescribed behavior for the Union Maid through their plots and characters. Although the stories do not have a unifying theme or elements, I have selected two with representative plots. The first revolves around female/male relations and has a tone of social realism that evokes the Progressive reform tradition. The second story has a didactic pronoun message, telling of how a woman's wage labor experience modified her domestic aspirations through a romantic plot.

In a rare break from the usual adulation of traditional domestic values, the *Glove Workers Monthly Bulletin* suggested the domestic travails of an active unionist's wife in "Glock and His Wife." Translated from Yiddish, this parable melodramatically illustrated the individual consequences of the sharply polarized female/male social roles.

On the long winter evenings, when in window after window the lights go out and sleep will not come, and there is no one with whom to exchange a word, the desire to live grows hot within her and will not be quenched—to live, to go out among people, to hear, to speak! Her heart aches and life goes out like the flame of a candle.

Pots and plates, washing and cooking, always and ever the same. It is not so for "him!" He talks, is enthusiastic, happy, hopes, lives.65

The *Weekly Bulletin of the Clothing Trades* told a happier if more improbable tale of the connection between unionism and womanhood in a 1902 short story entitled "The Tailor's Daughter: How a New Union Was Formed by the Aide of a Pretty Girl." Etta, the daughter of an elderly, sickly tailor, carries a large bundle of coats made at home by her father to a Fifth Avenue shop on Christmas Eve. The "fine, manly" young clerk who pays her secretly notices her delicate and dainty manner. Upon leaving the shop she is hit by a wagon and stunned, whereupon the chivalrous clerk escorts her home and asks if he might call again.
He arrives the next day bringing Christmas gifts. In response to his query about unions, Etta delivers a long soliloquy on the clash between Capital and Labor and presents a millenarian vision of a "New Industrial Republic." Her beau then offers her "a union of two hearts," and she shyly drops her head to his shoulder, accepting his marriage proposal.66

Consider the elements in this poor person's blend of Dickens and Horatio Alger with a touch of O. Henry. Etta is pretty, dainty, delicate, and a faithful daughter in her father's house. Although poor, she is pure—a model of womanly virtue. Her Prince Charming, an aspiring member of the bourgeoisie, is by contrast, "manly." He rescues her and protects her from danger. He observes conventional standards by requesting permission to call, and he arrives bearing gifts. He initiates the discussion of unions and is romantically receptive to her views—so receptive that he offers up the working woman's way to social mobility: marriage into the bourgeoisie. Like other simple and didactic little tales found throughout AFL journals, "The Tailor's Daughter" stressed that union activity need not unsex a woman, but rather could enhance her marital prospects.

The fictional model of womanhood offered by the mainstream labor press bridged the distance between a wholly domestic feminine ideal and an autonomous figure. There was an intimate connection between the dominant culture and its social ideals and the images of women embraced by the mainstream labor movement. The continual casting of woman in a supportive role in both descriptive and prescriptive writings suggests the inherently paternalistic, if not patriarchal, nature of the labor movement during the Progressive Era and the limits it set upon female behavior and activism.

What does this contrast of Union Maid and Rebel Girl tell us about American labor organizations and women from 1905 to 1920? On the one hand, it is apparent that the Wobblies had a sincere concern for working women that went beyond a pragmatic desire to organize them as workers. They addressed broader social issues such as prostitution and birth control, they wanted to organize the "feminine occupations" of domestics and telephone operators, and they urged male workers to recognize the importance of their wives to the class struggle. Their vision of a revolutionary new society was limited, however, by their ad-
herence to the standard Marxist view which saw capitalism, and not patriarchy, as the root cause of women's oppression. As subsequent twentieth-century history would show, whether in the Soviet Union or in the Third World, class revolution has not eradicated sexual oppression or ended inequities between women and men. But the IWW press did not have a feminist vision, relying on socialism alone to achieve sexual equality.

On the other hand, the tendency of mainstream labor journals to consistently portray women's place at work, in unions, and in society as a secondary one served to reinforce and perpetuate the existing sexual division of labor. But the AFL journals responded positively when women's actual workplace experience of low wages, long hours, and marginality catapulted them into strike activity. The increased proportion of women in the work force and the realization of women's power as strikers in such areas as textiles, garments, and cigars did influence the image of women in the mainstream labor press. Yet the conception of women as marginal workers and as fundamentally wives and mothers persisted during this particularly fluid period of social and economic change.

The IWW, too, exhibited sexist and paternalistic behavior, and Wobbly journals, like those of the AFL and its affiliates, mirrored predominant cultural attitudes toward women. Yet, the Wobblies, at least theoretically, did go one step further than any other labor organization in their view of women. The Rebel Girl, whether worker or wife of worker, was an activist in, rather than an auxiliary to, the One Big Union. In the words of Joe Hill, "For it's great to fight for freedom with a Rebel Girl."

NOTES

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3. Caroline Ware, Introduction, in Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker, ed. Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977); Alice Kessler-Harris, "Women, Work, and the Social Order," in Liberating Women's History, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 330-43; Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex," pt. 2, Signs 1 (Spring 1976): 137-69. Hartmann, in fact, maintains that the trade union is a patriarchal institution of industrial capitalism. By this she means that trade unions are organizations led by men and that it is in their self-interest to use the trade union to maintain and sustain male control.

4. Melvyn Dubofsky estimates that at its 1912 peak, paid-up membership in the IWW numbered only 18,000. Membership rolls swelled, then contracted during and following major strikes, however. In Paterson, New Jersey, for example, the IWW had 10,000 new members two weeks after the beginning of the strike while membership dropped to 1,500 only six months after the strike. See Melvyn Dubofsky, We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World (New York: Quadrangle, 1969), 271, 285.


6. Industrial Worker (29 July 1929): 2; (1 June 1911): 4. The WTUL and the IWW cooperated in the 1912 Lawrence textile strike while the AFL remained critically on the sidelines. Wobbly rhetoric was not always consistent with practice.


8. This was well documented in Flexner, and in Aileen Kradiator, The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920 (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1971).


18. Industrial Worker (1 Apr. 1916): 2.


20. Historian Linda Gordon’s characterization of the intellectual strains found in one petition accurately sums up the substance of the rest of IWW literature on this topic as well: "Fifty years of different birth control arguments as they had reached the grass roots in the United States: Women's rights, hereditary social thought, social purity transformed by a faith in science and human dignity, and Neo-Malthusianism." See Woman's Body, Woman's Right: Birth Control in America (New York: Penguin, 1977), 227.
21. Gordon quotes (pp. 221-23, 227), for example, from Sanger's pamphlet, *Family Limitation*, (1914): "The working class can use direct action by refusing to supply the market with children to be exploited, by refusing to populate the earth with slaves."


36. *Industrial Worker* (26 Aug. 1916): 1. Another incident of women's supportive action in strikes was in Aberdeen, Washington, where wives were beaten and a fire hose was turned on them. *Solidarity* 3 (20 Apr. 1912): 1.


43. *Glove Workers Monthly Bulletin* 4 (August 1915); 4 (September 1915).


49. The IWW press displayed a sensitivity to the effect of particular working conditions on women in other occupations as well. They viewed the telephone exchange and the department store as a conduit to the white slave trade because of low wages and lack of organization.

51. *Industrial Worker* (25 Apr. 1912): 1. This cartoon was originally printed in the *Medical Review of Reviews* and later reprinted in the *Industrial Worker*.


61. Gertrude Barnum, “A ‘Hen Town’ Wakes Up,” *American Federationist* 19 (September 1912): 702-6. The article concludes that unionization saved the day. It is probably the same expose referred to in the *Ladies’ Garment Worker* of June 1912 cited above.


