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CHAPTER V

WOMEN IN TRADE UNIONS IN 1920 AND 1910

Women in the American labor movement have been subjected to many inquiries, but the statistical yield of these inquiries has been very meager indeed. Discussion has turned largely on the problem of organizing women into trade unions, on the general assumption, supported by stray facts, that women in industry were hardly organized at all. A continuous series of the membership of women in labor organizations is impossible to collect and where collected would be impaired by a high percentage of inaccuracy. This phase of the study of women in trade unions was accordingly limited to the statistics of female membership in the years 1920 and 1910. The data for 1910 were taken from an earlier study by the present author in which a careful collection was made of the female membership of all unions known to have women members. The figures for 1920 were collected through correspondence with the central offices of the various unions and were checked for their reasonableness.¹ Many labor organizations are now beginning to keep separate records of their men and women members. It should be easier in the future to assemble annual statistics of female membership in the United States.

Female membership, the next table shows, is more than quintupled in the decade from 1910 to 1920. The sources of the gain were many. All organizations but two, the musicians and the brewery workers, had a larger membership in the latter year. Three important new organizations, which were not in existence in 1910, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the Amalgamated Textile Workers, and the telephone operators' branch of the Electrical Workers, contributed practically 100,000 members, or nearly one-fourth of the total rise. Another organization, the Railway

¹Figures for 1920 are taken from the Appendix, Table V; for 1910 from *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May, 1916, p. 602, Table I.

Clerks, whose female membership in 1910 was negligible, was responsible for 35,000 more in 1920. In both years the membership of the clothing unions was the dominating item. The International Ladies' Garment Workers and the United Garment Workers had, in 1910, 40 per cent of the total; and in 1920 these same organizations, together with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, had 42 per cent. By 1920, however, the shoe, textile, railway clerks,

TABLE 20. — FEMALE MEMBERSHIP OF AMERICAN UNIONS
1910 AND 1920

NAME OF UNION	MEMBERSHIP	
	1910	1920
Actors.....	.....	3,900
Bookbinders.....	3,771	9,200
Boot and Shoe Workers.....	5,500	15,000
Box Makers.....	400	.....
Brewery Workers.....	550	200
Cigar Makers.....	4,000	7,000
Cloth Hat and Cap Makers.....	200	2,500
Clothing Workers, Amalgamated.....	.....	70,000
Electrical Workers.....	.....	14,000
Fur Workers.....	.....	3,600
Garment Workers, United.....	20,000	32,000
Glove Workers.....	365	700
Hatters.....	.....	2,000
Hotel Employees.....	2,015	5,600
I. W. W. (Chicago).....	2,000	.....
I. W. W. (Detroit).....	345	.....
Ladies' Garment Workers.....	11,122	67,700
Laundry Workers.....	2,000	6,200
Leather Goods Workers, Fancy.....	.....	200
Leather Workers.....	.....	3,000
Machinists.....	.....	500
Meat Cutters.....	.....	5,400
Musical and Theatrical Union.....	150	.....
Musicians.....	4,000	2,800
Paper Makers.....	24	.....
Paper Mill Workers.....	250	.....
Photo Engravers.....	3	.....
Post Office Clerks, Nat'l Fed.....	70	3,000
Post Office Clerks, United.....	500	2,600
Potters, Operative.....	100	1,500

TABLE 20. — FEMALE MEMBERSHIP OF AMERICAN UNIONS — *Continued*

NAME OF UNION	MEMBERSHIP	
	1910	1920
Powder Workers.....	100	.....
Printing Pressmen.....	1,500	1,500
Pulp and Paper Mill Workers.....	.....	1,000
Railroad Telegraphers.....	960	2,500
Railway Clerks.....	62	35,000
Retail Clerks.....	2,100	2,900
Shoe Workers' Protective.....	.....	8,000
Shoe Workers, United.....	300	13,000
Tailors.....	800	2,000
Teachers, American Fed. of.....	.....	5,200
Textile Workers, Amalgamated.....	.....	15,000
Textile Workers, United.....	5,955	40,000
Tobacco Workers.....	2,460	6,500
Travelers' Goods Workers.....	25	.....
Typographical Union.....	621	2,200
Vaudeville Artists.....	.....	3,500
Weavers, Cloth.....	2,500	.....
White Rats.....	2,000	.....
Total.....	76,748	396,900

and electrical workers' unions had risen to a place of importance, with a combined membership of more than one-third of the total. Most of the unions dropped a large part of their female, as well as their male, membership during the years following 1920. The textile unions and the railway clerks were particularly heavy losers. Any estimate of the total loss between 1920 and 1923 can be little more than a guess; but it is judged that it was not much more than 100,000. A considerable part of this loss, moreover, is probably ascribable to the exodus from industry of the many women who found employment in industry during the war.

The course of the labor movement among women in this country is unintelligible without some conception of the number of women who work and the nature of the work they do. Women have, of course, always constituted a relatively small part of the gainfully occupied portion of the country's population. Both in 1910 and in 1920 women represented just about one-fifth of the

100 THE GROWTH OF TRADE UNIONS, 1880-1923

total number of persons, who in the United States worked for an income and were, therefore, counted in the occupation census. While the number of women who work is small in absolute magnitude, it has since 1880 increased at a much more rapid rate than the total working population. Their rate of increases, in comparison with that of all gainfully occupied, is shown in the accompanying table.¹ While the total working population rose from

YEAR	PER CENT	
	FEMALES GAINFULLY OCCUPIED TO FEMALE POPULATION 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER	TOTAL GAINFULLY OCCUPIED TO TOTAL POPULATION 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER
1920.....	21.1	50.3
1910.....	23.4	53.3
1900.....	18.8	50.2
1890.....	17.4	49.2
1880.....	14.7	47.3

47.3 to 50.3 per cent of the population 10 years of age and over, the female working population rose from 14.7 to 21.1; and the male gainfully employed moved from 78.7 in 1880 to 78.2 per cent in 1920. The female working population, like the male and total, also apparently slackened in its rate of increase in the decade from 1910 to 1920 and constituted in the latter year a smaller percentage of the entire female population 10 years of age and over than in 1910.

Like the total working population, also, the number of women workers decreased most markedly in agriculture and domestic and personal service. The relative position of the groups of gainfully employed women in 1910 and 1920 in the general divisions of industry is presented in the next table.

Thus in agriculture and in domestic and personal service there were large absolute and relative declines. The substantial gains took place in trade, professional service and in clerical occupations. Manufacturing and mechanical industries hardly moved.

¹ Taken from Table I, Census of Occupations, 1920, p. 33.

TABLE 21.— WOMEN 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER ENGAGED IN GAINFUL OCCUPATIONS, DISTRIBUTED BY GENERAL DIVISIONS OF OCCUPATIONS^a
1920 AND 1910

GENERAL DIVISION OF OCCUPATIONS	1920		1910	
	Number	Per Cent Distri- bution	Number	Per Cent Distri- bution
All Occupations.....	8,549,511	100.0	8,075,772	100.0
Agriculture, Forestry, Animal Hus- bandry.....	1,084,128	12.7	1,807,501	22.4
Extraction of Minerals.....	2,864	^b	1,094	^b
Manufacturing and Mechanical In- dustries.....	1,930,341	22.6	1,820,570	22.5
Transportation.....	213,054	2.5	106,625	1.3
Trade.....	667,792	7.8	468,088	5.8
Public Service.....	21,794	0.3	13,558	0.2
Professional Service.....	1,016,498	11.9	733,891	9.1
Domestic and Personal Service.....	2,186,924	25.6	2,531,221	31.3
Clerical Occupations.....	1,426,116	16.7	593,224	7.3

^a Census of Occupations, 1920, p. 34.

^b Less than one-tenth of one per cent.

Obviously the working population of women is concentrated in industrial categories different from those in which men cluster. There are some groups that tend to become predominantly female and others predominantly male. The salient facts regarding this distribution of the sexes are shown in the next table for the last two census years. More than half of the gainfully employed women in 1920 worked in the professional, domestic and personal services, and clerical occupations. And in two of these occupational divisions, professional service and clerical occupations, women are gradually becoming as numerous as men. The rise in importance of women in professional service is attributable mainly to very great increases from 1910 to 1920 in the number of women teachers and trained nurses. The first group increased 160,000 and the second 40,000; whereas the whole increase in the number of women in professional service in the same period was, roughly, 250,000. Domestic and

TABLE 22.—PER CENT DISTRIBUTION BY SEX OF PERSONS 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER IN EACH GENERAL DIVISION OF OCCUPATIONS* 1920 AND 1910

GENERAL DIVISION OF OCCUPATIONS	1920		1910	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
All Occupations.....	79.5	20.5	78.8	21.2
Agriculture, Forestry, Animal Husbandry..	90.1	9.9	85.7	14.3
Extraction of Minerals.....	99.7	0.3	99.9	0.1
Manufacturing and Mechanical Industries.	84.9	15.1	82.9	17.1
Transportation.....	93.0	7.0	96.0	4.0
Trade.....	84.3	15.7	87.1	12.9
Public Service.....	97.2	2.8	97.0	3.0
Professional Service.....	52.6	47.4	56.7	43.3
Domestic and Personal Service.....	35.8	64.2	32.9	67.1
Clerical Occupations.....	54.4	45.6	65.8	34.2

* Census of Occupations, 1920, p. 34.

personal service was predominantly female in 1920 as it was in 1910, but there was a distinct recession as between the two census years, there being in 1920, roughly, 350,000 less women employed in this group than ten years before. In so far as the census figures are correct, this very great fall was due to losses of 140,000 for "laundresses (not in laundry)," 30,000 for "boarding-house keepers," and 300,000 for "servants."

These statistics on women in industry are open to much the same comment as has already been made concerning the movement of the total gainfully occupied population of the country. The conclusion that there has been a drop in the rate with which women enter gainful occupations must be accepted with caution and with some further inquiry into the sources of gain and loss between 1910 and 1920. During the intercensal period the female population 10 years of age and over increased more than 15 per cent and the number of gainfully employed women about 6 per cent. A table, similar to one included in an earlier chapter, indicating the percentage change in the number of gainfully employed women in groups in which they work in substantial numbers, is here presented.

TABLE 23.—CHANGES IN NUMBER OF GAINFULLY EMPLOYED
WOMEN
1910 TO 1920

GENERAL DIVISION OF OCCUPATIONS	PER CENT CHANGE
Manufacturing Industries.....	6.4
Transportation.....	100.0
Trade.....	43.4
Professional Service.....	38.5
Domestic and Personal Service.....	- 13.6
Clerical.....	141.3
Agriculture.....	- 40.0

All groups but agriculture, domestic and personal service, and manufacturing industries, had most striking increases in this intercensal period. The reasons for the drop in domestic and personal service have just been cited. The movement in the number of agricultural women workers is confused by factors affecting the nature of the census count. On this matter the census makes the following statement:¹ "In the case of women . . . the great decrease from 1910 to 1920 in the proportion engaged in gainful occupations may be in part apparent only and due to an over-enumeration in 1910. . . . The number of females returned by the Thirteenth Census enumerators as engaged in gainful occupations was excessive, especially as to the number returned as engaged in agricultural pursuits. The increase from 1900 to 1910 in the number of females returned as agricultural laborers was particularly striking—an increase of 129.5 per cent, as compared with an increase of only 23.3 per cent from 1890 to 1900. . . . It is believed that the Thirteenth Census enumerators, working under more liberal instructions and construing these instructions more loosely, returned as gainfully occupied females who would not have been so returned by the Fourteenth Census enumerators." The slight relative rise in the number of women employed in manufacturing industries is equally puzzling and may, perhaps, also be explained by this statement from the census. The drop in the number of women in the employer and self-employed class, composed largely

¹ Census of Occupations, 1920, pp. 23, 24.

of such groups as milliners, tailoresses, and in the employee class of the clothing industry is hardly to have been expected and would appear to be due more to changes in the methods of enumeration than to an actual retardation of the rate of entry of women into manufacturing industries.

The female working population of the country is in the next table distributed among the classes of employers and self-employed, salaried persons, and wage earners, in accordance with the principles of classification already discussed in Chapter III. It is doubtful whether the statistics for women, in this regard, are as reliable as those for the total population. They are here presented for what they are worth. Of the total number of women gainfully engaged in industry, 70 per cent were in 1920 wage earners

TABLE 24. — CLASSIFICATION OF WOMEN INTO EMPLOYER, SALARIED AND WAGE-EARNING CLASSES
1920 AND 1910

	NUMBER OF WOMEN	
	1920	1910
Employers and Self-Employed.....	1,790,370	2,542,008
Salaried (Supervisory and Professional).....	710,386	516,402
Wage Earners (Manual and Clerical).....	6,047,922	5,014,520

and 62 per cent were in 1910 wage earners. The material drop in the employer and self-employed group from 1910 to 1920 is due to a fall of 600,000 in agriculture and a loss of 200,000 in manufacturing industries, to which reference has already been made. The decrease in agriculture is largely a result of the change in the methods of enumeration and there is some probability that the changes in manufacturing are due, in a measure also, to the same factors.

The number of women in trade unions is relatively as well as absolutely small. When female membership is compared with the number of women wage earners in all industry, as well as in the various classifications of industry, the extent of trade unionism is

found to run in every case substantially below that for men. A conspectus of the position of unionism among women in the major divisions of industry is submitted in this next tabulation. It shows in general that while all wage earners were in 1920 about one-fifth

TABLE 25.—PER CENT OF ORGANIZATION AMONG FEMALE WAGE EARNERS IN MAJOR DIVISIONS OF INDUSTRY
1920 AND 1910

DIVISION OF INDUSTRY	PER CENT ORGANIZED	
	1920	1910
Total Wage Earners (except agriculture).....	6.6	1.5
Manufacturing Industries.....	18.3	5.2
Transportation.....	6.5	0.9
Trade.....	0.5	0.5
Clerical Occupations.....	2.7	0.1
Domestic Service.....	0.6	0.1
Professional Service.....	1.5	0.8

organized, women, even excluding from the calculation the female agricultural wage earners, were in the same year only one-fifteenth organized. All of the groups but one, trade, showed some increase in organization in the decade, but in manufacturing alone does the movement assume substantial proportions. In the comparison, however, between the strength of unionism among men and women, it must not be overlooked that mining and building, two strongholds of labor organization among men, are industries in which women play no part. Furthermore, women happen to be working, in the largest proportions, precisely in those occupational divisions which are notoriously weak in labor organization even among men. In 1920 more than 60 per cent of the women gainfully engaged in industry were employed in trade, professional service, domestic and personal service, and clerical occupations; but in that same year less than 25 per cent of the male working population of the country was employed in the same groups.

In only a few of the manufacturing industries did women achieve fairly strong organization by 1920. The greatest gain from 1910

106 THE GROWTH OF TRADE UNIONS, 1880-1923

to 1920 and also the highest level attained in the latter year was reached in the clothing industry, where almost half of the women employees were in 1920 members of labor organizations. Large advances were made also in the leather industry, where unionism was much stronger in 1920 among both the shoe and miscellaneous leather branches of the industry. The percentage of organization in the liquor industry must be used carefully, first because there is some question as to the accuracy of the figures and second because there were credited to the industry in 1920 only 930 women employees, of whom 200 were organized. Unionism in the clay, glass and stone industries was localized entirely in potteries, where organization among women made great strides from 1910 to 1920. The very slight percentage of organization for the group of food industries in 1920, 5.6, conceals a substantial organization of 42.6 per cent among women packing and slaughter-house employees. Increase in the membership of the bookbinders' union explains the doubling of the percentage of organization in the printing and publishing industry. Since 1920 the unions in the slaughter and

TABLE 26. — PER CENT OF ORGANIZATION AMONG FEMALE WAGE EARNERS IN MANUFACTURING INDUSTRIES
1920 AND 1910

DIVISION OF INDUSTRY	PER CENT ORGANIZED	
	1920	1910
All Manufacturing.....	18.3	5.2
Chemical and Allied.....	....	0.6
Clay, Glass and Stone.....	8.5	0.8
Clothing.....	46.0	11.2
Food.....	5.6	....
Iron and Steel.....	0.7	....
Leather.....	42.6	8.0
Liquor and Beverage.....	21.5	24.4
Lumber.....	....	2.1
Metal (except Iron and Steel).....	....	....
Paper and Pulp.....	1.3	0.8
Printing and Publishing.....	25.0	11.6
Textile.....	11.5	2.6
Cigar and Tobacco.....	13.5	8.0

packing-house and textile industries have had particularly heavy losses in membership. Organization among women in those industries would therefore be not much greater than it was in 1910. For the rest, except clothing, which retains most of its strength, the case is doubtful, but they are probably all on a higher level of organization now than they were before the war.

Organization in the transportation industry is restricted to the telegraph and telephone industry. In this industry the railroad telegraphers' union and the telephone operators' branch of the electrical workers' union are responsible for an organization of 7 per cent.

The type of skilled craft union which is so prevalent among men and which plays so dominant a rôle in the American labor movement is practically non-existent among women. The nearest approach to it is to be found in the unions of professional workers, like actors, musicians, and teachers. Except in the case of actresses, who are now highly organized, unionism is very weak indeed. The statistics for teachers are in all probability an underestimate because they exclude the membership of independent teachers' unions of which there are a number in the country. But the extent of organization among women teachers would, even in the event of the inclusion of the independent membership, not be high.

Among women, as well as among men, there is likely to be a concentration of labor organization in the large cities and in certain sections of the country, particularly the East. A little light is thrown on this question in a survey, made in 1922 by the Division of Women in Industry of the New York State Department of Labor, of the extent of trade unionism among gainfully employed women in cities over 50,000 in population in New York State. A table from this survey is reproduced here. It shows that more than one-fourth of the total female union membership of the country is found in New York State. Without making allowance for the fact that computing the percentage of organization among women "wage earners" would yield a higher figure than that for organization among women gainfully employed in industry, the percentage in trade unions for this group is nevertheless about twice as large as in the whole country.

108 THE GROWTH OF TRADE UNIONS, 1880-1923

TABLE 27. — NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN TRADE UNION MEMBERS IN NEW YORK STATE IN CITIES OVER 50,000^a 1920

CITIES OVER 50,000	NUMBER WOMEN GAINFULLY EMPLOYED	NUMBER WOMEN IN TRADE UNIONS	PERCENTAGE IN TRADE UNIONS
Total.....	871,503	113,354	13.0
Greater New York.....	693,096	96,162	14.3
Albany.....	15,547	1,043	6.7
Binghamton.....	9,341	144	1.5
Buffalo.....	50,218	3,732	7.4
Niagara Falls.....	3,887	56	1.4
Rochester.....	37,725	9,515	25.2
Schenectady.....	8,331	515	6.2
Syracuse.....	18,814	481	2.6
Troy.....	12,039	1,213	10.1
Utica.....	12,261	469	3.8
Yonkers.....	11,244	24	0.2

^a Reprinted from "Women Who Work," New York State Department of Labor, *Special Bulletin, No. 110*, April, 1922, p. 28.

These figures for New York State could not easily be duplicated elsewhere because of the leading position that the clothing industry occupies in that state. And it is the clothing industry which in 1920 topped all other industries in the extent of organization among women. Thus in the preceding table Greater New York and Rochester contributed more than 105,000 of the total of 113,354 women members of trade unions. In Rochester more than 70 per cent of the 9,500 union members belonged to unions in the garment trades, and in Greater New York the percentage was 65. In Greater New York alone is there a noticeable sprinkling of union membership among other industries as well. But here, except for a substantial membership in the theatre and music group, the clothing and textile groups absorb 75,000 of the total 96,000 members in the whole city.¹

¹ *Ibid*, p. 31.