Second in a series of essays on the suffrage movement, accompanying the “Suffrage Speak: Honoring the 100th Anniversary of Women’s Right to Vote” program. Generously supported by a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission

For the Work of a Day We Want Something to Say: Social Change and Suffrage

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Unless otherwise noted, the following remarks are adapted from Lara Vapnek, Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865-1920 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009)

I. Introduction

It’s very exciting to be here at the Alice Paul Institute, and to participate in this series of lectures dedicated to understanding the meanings of women’s equality, in the past, present, and future. Suffrage is most often remembered as a middle-class movement. In fact, working-class women played an active role, and they brought a distinct style and perspective to women's long struggle for equal rights.

My talk will explain how working-class women's political activism grew out of their experiences in the workplace; and it will explore the tensions that sometimes arose between working-class women and the more privileged women who led the suffrage movement.

A variety of working women endorsed suffrage in the late 19th and early 20th century, but their advocacy of full political rights is united by a few themes. First, they explained that they worked to support themselves and their families. Second, they claimed that they were not protected or represented by men. And third, they argued that they deserved full political rights, and lack of those rights compromised their position in the labor force.

I am going to begin by giving you a few examples of women advocating suffrage from a labor perspective in the late 19th century, and then I am going to shift to the 20th century and speak at
greater length about some of the working-class women in New York City who fought more actively for suffrage in the 1910s, helping to build momentum toward the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

II. African American Women
If we rewind to the 19th century, we see that some of the first calls for equal rights for women come from within the abolitionist movement, which provided a public platform for African American women to discuss the meanings of freedom.

These women included Frances Harper, who was born into a free black family in Baltimore, MD in 1825. Harper became a teacher, a novelist, which advocated suffrage for women and for African American men, who were often disenfranchised.

In 1866 Harper attended a women’s rights convention where she remarked: “You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs.”

She went on to describe the challenges that she and other African-American women faced, including limited economic opportunities, constant threats of violence, and segregation on public transportation.

Harper doubted that the vote would solve these problems, but she found common cause with the economic issues raised by women’s rights advocates. Recently, her husband, who had been a farmer in Ohio, had died in debt, leaving her with four children to support. Three months later, all of her property had been seized, including the “milk crocks and wash tubs” with which she earned income by selling butter at the Columbus market, and taking in laundry.

She noted that if she had died instead of her husband, his means of making a living would have been preserved. Thus, she concluded “that justice” would not be “fulfilled so long as woman is unequal before the law.”

In the 1890s, Harper became a founder of the National Association of Colored Women, which advocated women’s suffrage as an important component of racial progress. Harper’s comments in 1866 suggest some of the links between women’s economic position and their lack of political rights.

III. Increasing Numbers of Women in the Workforce

The increased number of women working for wages from 1870 to 1920 made this a more pressing issue. During this fifty year period, the number of women working for wages in the United States rose from about 1.7 million to 8.3 million. In 1870, just 15% of women worked
for wages. By 1920, 25% of all women went “out to work.” In cities, the proportion of women who worked outside their homes reached one-third.

It is fair to say that by the turn of the twentieth century, participation in the paid labor force had become the norm for most working-class women, and many middle-class women, too. Unlike men, however, women tended to enter and leave the work force depending on their family responsibilities; women tended work full time in the years between school and marriage. Once they had children, they tried to stay out of the labor force, but as the biographies of individual activists suggest, this was not always possible.

Rates of labor force participation were even higher for African American women because African American men had so much trouble finding steady work. Mary White Ovington, a Brooklyn-born suffragist and sociologist, estimated that most African American women in New York City went out to work by age 15 and continued to work throughout their married lives, taking in laundry or going out to work in domestic service. As Ovington explained: “Factory and store are closed to her, and rarely can she take a place among other working girls.” In 1900, just 4.2% of married white women were counted as gainfully employed in New York City. Among African American women, the rates was 31.4%, or seven times higher. I think it’s fair to say that for many of these women, suffrage was not high on their list of priorities; it tended to be a demand more often articulated by African American club women like Frances Harper.

White working-class women’s suffrage activism grew out of their participation in the labor movement.

IV. A. Individual Activists – Jennie Collins

One of the first examples of this is Jennie Collins (1828-1887) who was born in New Hampshire in 1828. Orphaned at age three, she was raised by her grandmother. She went to work in a textile factory in Lawrence, Massachusetts when she was just fourteen years old. When she was fifteen, she moved to Lowell, Massachusetts.

By going “out to work” in a factory, Collins violated the domestic ideal, which asserted that women’s place was in the home.

As she later recalled, in seeking a job at the factory, she was “treated neither with politeness nor consideration.” She faced the man who did the hiring on her own, and made “her own bargain with him.” Earning “her own money,” she paid for her rent, food, and clothes. As a woman, she received no special consideration, and she knew that she “must work as hard and do her task as well as a man, or . . . be discharged, without ceremony or apology.”

As a worker, her identity as a woman was a burden, rather than a privilege; She earned only half of a man’s wages, and no matter how hard she worked, she would never become eligible for skilled positions, since these were reserved for men.
In Lawrence, and in Lowell, Collins became part of a strong community of women who worked together in the mills and lived together in company boardinghouses. They spent their free time together, whether attending church, going to hear a lecture, or reading aloud to each other in the evenings as they did their mending.

This sense of camaraderie extended to organizing to try to improve their working conditions. In the 1840s, a group of female mill workers organized the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. They demanded a ten-hour day (at a time when women typically worked from 12 to 14 hours a day, depending on the time of year) and they protested when employers tried to increase profits by giving the women more looms to tend. At a time with no legal protection for labor organizing, employers simply fired and blacklisted the organizers.

In 1850, Collins moved to Boston where she took a position as a domestic servant and then as a vest-maker.

During the Civil War, Collins became active in organizing her coworkers to make keepsakes to send to union soldiers and volunteering at Boston military hospitals.

When the war ended, one of the regiments she had assisted her thanked her by giving her their headquarters, which she turned into a new center for working women that offered a non-profit employment agency, an industrial training program, and free lunches.

Collins became a popular author and speaker who linked working women’s difficult lives to the struggle for suffrage. She spoke for Civil War widows who struggled to make a living and pay their taxes, but had no voice in their children’s education. As Collins complained in 1871, working mothers “were obliged to do a man’s work, and all of a mother’s; under the double disadvantage of being physically weak and of possessing no political influence that would entitle them to respect.”

Once they gained the right to vote (which didn’t happen for another fifty years) Collins predicted working women could push for the government to become more responsive to their needs, by supporting legislation limiting the work day to eight hours and mandating equal pay for equal work.

So, at a surprisingly early point Collins grasped the social implications of women’s new presence in the workforce and used it to argue for economic equality and political rights.

IV. B. Leonora Barry (1849-1930)

My next figure, Leonora Barry was born in 1849, about twenty years later than Jennie Collins. Barry was born in Ireland. She migrated to upstate New York with her family as a small child. After she graduated from high school, she taught school until her marriage at age twenty-two.
Ten years later, her husband, who worked as a painter died of lung disease, leaving her with three young children to support.

Like many widowed mothers, she tried to make a living by taking in sewing, but eyestrain forced her to quit. So she hired a babysitter and went out to work in a large hosiery mill in Amsterdam, New York. The first week, she earned sixty-five cents. Outraged at her low pay, she joined the Knights of Labor because they welcomed women and supported equal pay for equal work.

Membership in the Knights of Labor peaked at about 800,000 in 1886 and included 65,000 women. The Knights sought to organize all “producers” to counter the growing power of corporations in politics, and to improve working people’s wages and conditions. They campaigned for an eight-hour day.

Barry rose quickly through the ranks to become the leading female member of the Knights of Labor. Barry criss-crossed the United States investigating women’s working conditions and seeking to enroll more women in the Knights.

Barry championed women’s new role as bread-winners, and she urged men and women to get over their nostalgia for the good old days, when men went out to work and women stayed home with the children. As her own life experience showed, women could never be sure that they would be supported by men, so they needed to be able to earn enough money to support themselves and their families.

Barry believed that women were underpaid and badly treated at work, in part, because they lacked political rights.

As she explained in a speech in 1889: “When I became one of the bread-winners of the land, I recognized how much the workingwomen needed enlightenment and assistance to maintain the dignity which by our form of government we are entitled to, and protection from the indignities and injustices heaped upon us, in many instances because of our voiceless, helpless condition.”

However, the Knights declined rapidly after about 1890. They would be replaced by the American Federation of Labor, which focused on the “labor aristocracy” of skilled white men, and didn’t yet have much interest in organizing women.

Barry remarried and left the labor movement, but she left a legacy that would be picked up by subsequent activists.

IV. C. Leonora O’Reilly (1870-1927)

Leonora O’Reilly, was born in New York City in 1870. Her parents were Irish immigrants. Her father died when she was just one year old.

Although her mother, Winifred, was a skilled seamstress, she was unable to support herself and her daughter on her wages. Many widowed mothers had to give their children up to orphanages or place them in foster care.
At age 11, O’Reilly left school to take a position in a collar factory on the Lower East Side. A few years later, she took a job operating a sewing machine in a shirtwaist factory.

Leonora joined the Knights of Labor when she was just sixteen years old. She may well have heard Leonora Barry speak, or read her reports on working women in the Knights of Labor newspaper. Although they admitted women, the leaders of the Knights in NYC were all male, and women who attended the organization’s meetings rarely spoke. As a result, Leonora O’Reilly and some of the young women whom she met at the meetings, who included needle workers, feather workers, box makers, and clerks in department stores, decided to establish their own, all-female labor organization, which they named the “Working Women’s Society.”

O’Reilly’s support for suffrage grew directly out of her experience in the labor movement. As she explained in a speech to working women on the Lower East Side in 1899: “Women, whether you wish it or not, your first step must be to gain equal political rights with men. The next step after that must be equal pay for equal work.” (129-130)

In 1903, O’Reilly helped establish the Women’s Trade Union League, a cross-class group that worked to bring women into trade unions and to pass legislation that would limit women’s working hours.

The Women’s Trade Union League provided crucial support for the “Uprising of the 20,000,” a 1909 strike of 20 to 30,000 garment workers, most of them immigrant women, who walked off their jobs to demand union recognition. The “girls strike” as people called it at the time, showed that women could be organized, which male union leaders had doubted. Similar strikes spread to Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia, leading to women’s first significant presence in labor unions in the 20th-century.

O’Reilly’s experience in the shirtwaist factory made her an important leader strike headquarters. Based on their experiences, many of the other leaders, including Rose Schneiderman and Clara Lemlich became active participants in the suffrage movement in the 1910s.

During the strike, police arrested more than 700 striking female workers; strikers were treated roughly and arraigned in night court alongside prostitutes. Judges sentenced some to hard labor. The mayor of New York refused to see a delegation of strikers protesting police brutality and judicial hostility. As Rose Schneiderman remarked, the mayor could hardly have turned the female workers down if they represented 20,000 voters.

In March 25th, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire killed 146 workers, most of whom jumped to their death rather than be engulfed in flames.

In the aftermath of the fire, O’Reilly joined the New York State Factory Investigation
Commission, which recommended a new state labor code mandating minimum wages, setting limits on hours, and improving the inspection of factories.

That Fall, she worked with the historian Mary Beard to establish a “Wage-Earners Suffrage League”, modeling the group on similar organizations that existed in Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. O’Reilly felt that working women needed their own group because the middle class and elite women out campaigning for suffrage could sometimes be condescending.

Some elite suffragists advocated “votes for women” to counter the growing electoral power of immigrant men. Obviously, O’Reilly had no patience for this, and she believed that working women needed to become active on their own behalf if they were to have a voice in the suffrage movement.

The WESL worked to connect working women and working men to the suffrage cause. O’Reilly staged a suffrage vaudeville show

At noontime rallies in front of women’s workplaces, Clara Lemlich passed out fliers linking women’s lack of political rights with their low wages and poor housing conditions. Lemlich asked the workers, “‘Why are you paid less than a man? Why do you work in a fire trap? Why are your hours so long?’” The answer, she presented was simple: “‘Because you are a woman and have no vote.’” Lemlich went on to explain that women who wanted better conditions at work and in their neighborhoods ‘MUST vote.’”

O’Reilly organized large delegations of working women to march in suffrage parades, giving them new visibility. She reached out to working class audiences in new ways, staging a Vaudeville Suffrage Show, and organizing rallies where working women could speak on their own behalf.

At one 1912 rally, she countered the sentimentality of state senators who insisted that women belonged in the home, by having working women speak of their actual experiences. Melinda Scott, a hat trimmer, talked about the children who worked in tenements making artificial flowers because their parents’ wages were so low. Mollie Schepps, a shirtmaker, described working women and working men as engaged in an equal battle for survival. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire showed how little “protection” working women had without the ballot. Clara Lemlich warned that women sometimes made hasty marriages, just to get out of the shirtwaist shop, but then discovered that their husbands could not support them. And Rose Schneiderman argued that women’s lack of political rights made them easier to exploit than men, leading to longer hours and lower wages.

Later that year, O’Reilly travelled to Washington D.C., to testify before Congress, where she spoke on behalf of the nation’s eight million female wage-earners. As O’Reilly explained, “We women have dreamed of democracy but we have never enjoyed it.” (Breadwinners, 164).

The fact that so many women had joined the labor force proved to be a strong argument in favor of granting women suffrage; women’s visible presence in the workforce countered anti-suffrage
arguments that women’s place was “in the home” rather than in politics.

O’Reilly and Lemlich’s work undoubtedly contributed to the victory of suffrage in New York State in 1917, and to the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

V. Conclusion

The lives of these five activists shows how working women’s drive for equal rights emerged out of their experiences as breadwinners.

Together, these women, and the millions of female workers they represented, changed expectations for women. They argued that going “out to work” was nothing to be ashamed of, and they insisted that women deserved equal opportunities in the labor market.

In the decades that followed the winning of the vote, labor feminists worked to strengthen the social safety net, advocating maternity leave, unemployment insurance, and equal pay for comparable work.

A century after women’s suffrage was achieved, it is incumbent on us to think about what democracy means now, and to appreciate how questions of class as well gender and race remain important political questions.

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vi Marot, 126.

vii Vapnek, Breadwinners, 135

viii Quote from Breadwinners, 149.