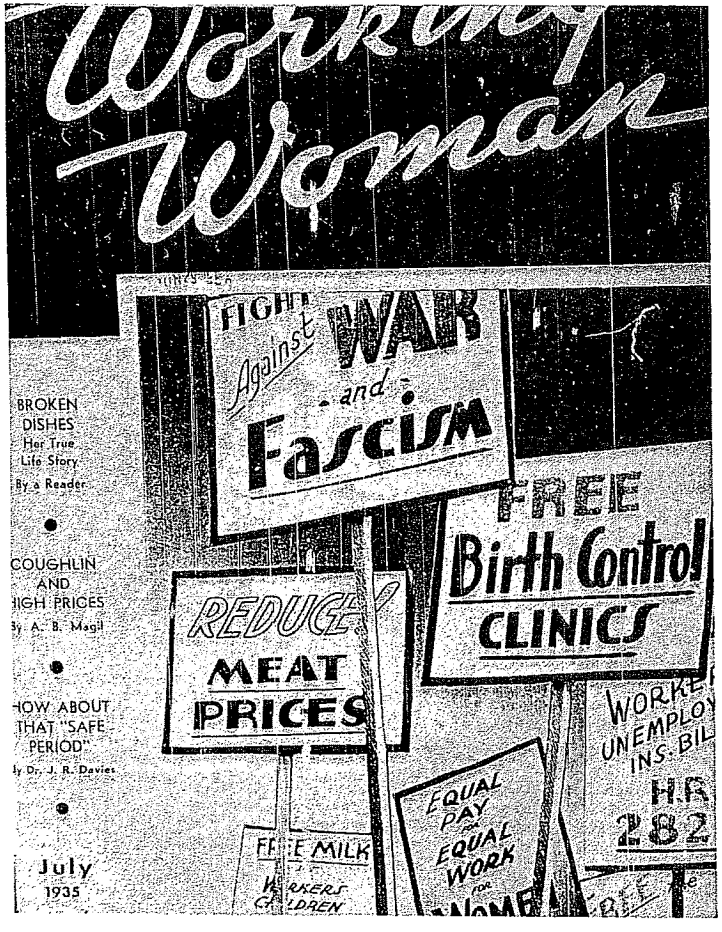


The Party arguably at its best. Courtesy of Tamiment Institute Library, New York University.

"To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home": The Gender Politics of American Communists between the Wars

Van Gosse

Recently, historians of the U.S. working class have recognized that to frame the character of working-class life at home, in the street, or on the job requires a perspective on how gender difference "constructs" the social—and therefore the political. Joan Scott notwithstanding, significant aspects of U.S. trade union and radical histories have already been rewritten to incorporate not only women but the entire politics of gender; the Progressive Era, for example, has been almost wholly recast as a result.[1] I want to further that rewriting process by moving forward to the history of the Communist Party U.S.A. (CPUSA). One of my goals is to illustrate the limits of older historiographical models and political dogmas at a time when the world of the Left, as we have known it, has turned upside down and inside out, and appears to be spinning off into space. To realize this goal is also to reclaim our past, and perhaps a usable future, in this case by demonstrating the contingency residing in the actual lived history of what remains, for better or worse, the most important organization of the twentieth-century U.S. Left.

At the outset I outline the crucial change in American Communists' awareness and use of gender at the beginning of the Great Depression in 1930–31 and relate this "turn" to the gender politics of left-wing discourses prior to the CPUSA. Then I take up the contradictions in Communists' understanding of gender in the 1920s, and the effective displacement of women's emancipation onto the Soviet Union. This discussion highlights the shift in late 1930, and allows me finally to claim that the

CPUSA's new awareness of home, family, and neighborhood as political spaces—all the determinants of what they had once denied, and now, under depression conditions, appreciated as women's sphere—heralded and undergirded the Party's expansion during the Popular Front in 1935–39.[2]

Throughout I focus on the CPUSA's political language, acknowledging what Gareth Stedman Jones has called "the materiality of language itself ... [and] the impossibility of abstracting experience from the language which structures its articulation."[3] My approach is accordingly attuned to the different voices of American Communists as they spoke of men alone, men and women together, and parents and children, because their language of class also contained, at every point, a politics of gender.[4]

FROM MALE TO FEMALE TERRAIN

Consider the *Daily Worker* of 22 January 1931. A small feature at the top of the front page reported a now-typical street skirmish to save a working-class home in Oakland, California: "A crowd of 1,000, mostly neighbors, fought fiercely against the brutal eviction of a widowed mother and her crippled daughter here Jan. 15." This was no Third Period polemic against capitalism, painting the necessity of a Soviet America, but a real-life melodrama. "The crowd gathered and denounced the action, but did nothing until 5-year-old Ruth Orias, crippled last November in an automobile accident, came out of the smashed home with her pet dog, her inseparable companion during her invalidism. One of the deputy's men launched a kick at the dog, and the crowd gave a yell of rage and went for him. The crowd chased the deputies half a block and beat them up and also beat up Marshall Wesolo, the landlord's brother who was there to see that he got his pound of flesh." After the battle, furniture having been moved back inside and the home preserved, came the *Worker*'s terse boast, "The Councils of the Unemployed fight all evictions."

The desperate men and women who rapidly swelled the *Worker*'s circulation to 40,000 in early 1931 read each day similar accounts of Communist-organized actions against homelessness, starvation, and family break-ups. The first of the mass "hunger marches" were beginning; the rest of the front page for 22 January described demonstrations in Los Angeles, Toledo, and Oklahoma City, and a photo from New York ran below the

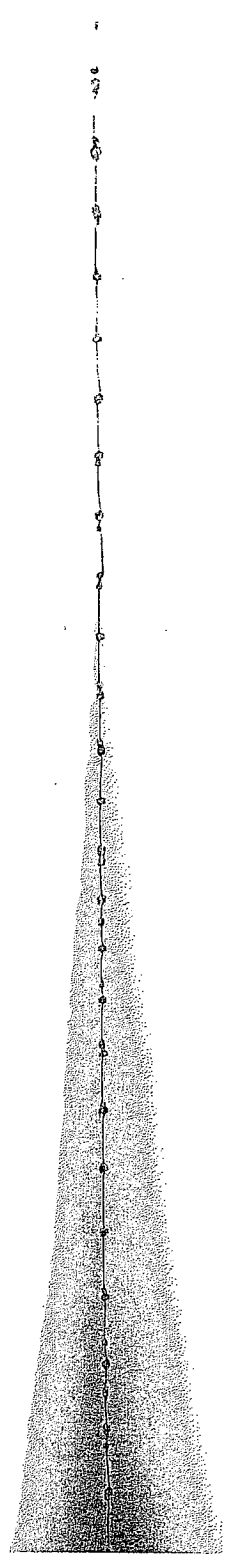
headline "Starving Jobless Demand Food; N.Y. Police Ride Them Down." The editorial, top left as always, set the prevailing tone: "City streets and city halls have resounded with the tramp of destitute and starving workers, men, women and children." Inside, readers found first-person narratives from people like themselves, as in this letter from a woman farm worker: "A family of us live in a tent with little camp stove which is burned out and the fire falls through at the front of the stove. This father had no money for gas to take the children to the field with them and there were four, the smallest seven months old, which cannot stand very much cold, and two little girls, one three and one five. While the parents were picking cotton the three-year-old child caught fire and burned almost to death." Indeed, one could not have opened the paper any day from late 1930 on without encountering a deluge of articles, letters, and comments reporting on broken homes, hungry kids, and wretched parents on the verge of suicide—or perhaps revolutionary action.

If it does not seem remarkable that the CPUSA would cast itself as the defender of the American home in early 1931, consider that only months before, even as the depression was turning the world upside down, U.S. Communists continued to insist, by omission, that the domestic world did not matter, no matter how "public" its collapse had become. For many months after the crash of October 1929, the Party remained oblivious to the personal and communal consequences of the crash, sticking with a blinkered emphasis on the immanently productive, class-conscious industrial workers no matter how far removed from the point of production. In the *Daily Worker* a year earlier, the familial crises facing women (single, married, divorced, widowed, young, or old) throughout the U.S., especially those in the urban ethnic factory enclaves where both unemployment and the CPUSA were concentrated, or the family in any sense—in short, women as anything other than "women workers"—were almost entirely absent. During the winter and spring of 1930, as the fabric of daily life rapidly frayed, and thousands lost jobs, homes, and the fruits of a vanished prosperity—cars, radios, and sewing machines bought on time—and were reduced to begging from private charity societies, the CPUSA spoke solely of the outrage of expelling workers from the arena of work and the wage-cuts and speed-ups hitting those still on the job. Even more telling than these textual lacunae were the

images chosen to dramatize the capitalists' Armageddon, which visibly proclaimed the Party's indifference to the sheer gender disorder at work, the havoc of mortgages foreclosed, and male breadwinners hitting the road in vast numbers to avoid their failure. Bannered across the top and bottom of the *Worker*'s front page in the first half of 1930 were photographs of masses of men, waiting at employment bureaus, on line for bread and soup, and marching in protest, as if to say "here are the workers, preparing to act."[5] But far more elemental processes of survival and defence were taking place, often if not usually under women's direction, in which both action and actors were very different from what the Party imagined.

Evidently, some kind of shift took place over 1930–31. What is posited here is that a rhetoric and organizing practice radically reoriented to the disintegration of family life, and the resulting importance of women in the class struggle, however covered over by euphemisms like "unemployed work," put the U.S. Communist Party in the early 1930s for the first time in intimate contact with large masses of working people. This was a discursive relocation of the most crucial struggles of the working class from male to female terrain, a displacement not only in the apparent physical sense from shopfloor to tenement stoop, but also of the leitmotifs of "struggle," a move from exploitation (you are making me a wage slave) to hunger (your system is starving our children). It spurred a sweeping expansion of local Communist organizing, which had in the 1920s been confined to sporadic strikes, street agitation for socialism and against imperialism, and building solidarity with the new Soviet state.

The period 1930–34 becomes, by this reading, not a failure for American Communists and a measure of their insignificance, but the crucial "take-off point" without which their later flowering in size and influence during the Popular Front would have been impossible.[6] For the first time they engaged creatively with broader national concerns, and foregrounded, or radicalized, certain issues in the manner of an actual "vanguard"—not the beleaguered, alienated sect the Party had been almost from its founding. Here lay the seeds of the CPUSA's "Americanization" after the disastrous "Bolshevization" of the later 1920s, which had stripped away much of its base. In another sense, in its neighborhood and family-based mobilization of "hunger fighters," one can also see the CPUSA for the first time submitting to its own era, and giving up the claim



solely to determine the discourse of change or the explanation of reality; this was a halting, veiled recognition of contingency, that if people can make history, "they do not make it just as they please."

In the early 1930s the Communists, including a substantial cadre of neighborhood women, pioneered a new practice of constant contact around community issues: canvassing and home visits, attending and recruiting for every meeting, cultivating all possible allies, taking on the meanest tasks, embedding themselves in the minutiae of working-class life instead of "going to the workers" with a revolutionary message from afar. Unlike shopfloor struggles or street agitation, these activities required an awareness of shifting gender constraints and possibilities. Though no more inherently complex than shopfloor struggles, the connotations of "who's the boss?" and how to get around him were very different when organizing door-to-door, kitchen-table-to-kitchen-table. Besides the landlord, the butcher, and the grocer, or middle-class female social workers with their own prescriptive notions, the smoothing over of recalcitrant (or "backward" as the CPUSA would say) jobless husbands who objected to their wives' activism was a notorious problem. Where successful, this practice drew people, especially women, into the Party and its periphery, clearly delineating the differences between Communists and their rivals on the Left. Anna Taffler, a housewife and mother with an unsympathetic spouse, became a leader in the CPUSA's women's councils in New York in the 1930s and later recalled what attracted her and what it took to get her involved:

> I met the Communists in the Workers Alliance. Whatever fault there was, cowardice was not one of them. They were dedicated. They were militant. They really cared. When I saw all this, I began to admire them. ... So they approached me. I had such respect for how the people conducted themselves in the Party, I said that I couldn't keep up with this so I could not fit into the Party. After all, I had two small children and could not attend all meetings because of this. ... They said that it would be all right if I were to come in late. They respected me. ... I joined the Communist Party in March, 1931.[7]

Of special importance was the fact that no other party or working-class organization was prepared to go to these lengths on a national scale. Long before they were the dominant, or even the

largest, force on the Left, the Communists were apparently the hardest working. The Socialists, Anna Taffler noted, "were never known to fight for the people like we did. So the people knew us as the people who cared."

It should be noted that the family and neighborhood-focused organizing of the Communist Party in the 1930s has been analyzed by historians, but only as what it literally entailed: stopping evictions; demanding food and clothes for school children; a change in the monotonous content of relief food packages; rent strikes; meat and milk boycotts; restoring gas, water, and electricity. Just like the Party, however, these scholars have persisted in describing this organizing as "unemployed work," missing entirely its gendered character as an opening up of formerly private and putatively apolitical spaces (women's spaces). Neither its significance as a break with the prior male homosociality of the Party nor its relation to dormant traditions of family solidarity in the U.S. Left have been examined in any way.[8]

THE USABLE PAST

Traditions of family solidarity, and a highly gender-conscious language, had once been central to the U.S. Left. It would mistake the Party's response to the depression to pose its household-, community-, and even women-centered language and organizing of 1931 and after as the "new" versus the "old." Rather, by the end of 1930 the CPUSA had doubled back, discovering and reshaping rhetorics and practices submerged in its own, now-usable past. The pre–World War I left of the Socialist Party (SP), the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the larger milieu of radical labor from which the CPUSA sprang in 1919 had consistently articulated a gender-conscious class politics focused on hunger, white slavery, and all the other evils of capitalist home-wrecking. For much of this older Left capitalism *was* immiseration and the destruction of the family, so deeply ran these fears—and so potent was this appeal, year after year. Their language of class, often (but not always) emphatically patriarchal, targeted the gluttony, artificiality, whoremongering, fetishization of domestic animals, drunkenness, divorce, ostentation, and general corruption they saw as typical of America's new ruling class since the Gilded Age opened at the end of Radical Reconstruction. William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, the IWW's "two-gun man of the West" as he

sardonically described himself to eastern audiences, was perhaps the most impressive and most feared specimen of militant American socialist manhood. He knew exactly what he was doing in this famous speech soon after the Lawrence strike in 1912, as he pilloried one of the bosses:

> Turner [is] a man of many wives and some wards. He married his last ward. She lived in Brooklyn. They took their honeymoon in Chicago. They went there in a palace train. Two cars were preserved [sic] for her dogs. At the Chicago hotel at which they stopped, the dogs were assigned to private rooms and were fed only the choicest kinds of meats; they had porterhouse steaks, while the little children in Lawrence were starving. These are the men who ordered the militia. These are the men who used the militia to protect themselves in their licentious luxury. DOGS FEEDING ON PORTERHOUSE STEAKS AND CHILDREN STARVING.[9]

This leftist discourse that American Communists moved away from in the 1920s drew from broad currents of nineteenth-century working-class life in both Europe and the U.S. Ideas of "chivalric manhood" gained ground over the decades among self-described "knights of labor," supplanting an earlier, frequently misogynist artisan culture.[10] There was also the proliferation of plebeian literature after the Civil War—the magazine serials and dime novels whose richly gendered class meanings Michael Denning has recently uncovered.[11] In these fantastic melodramas, class and gender inhered simultaneously. The ever-ready protagonists, "virtuous working-girls" and "American working-men," remained themselves no matter what marriages or fortunes were made, or noble paternities discovered. By the beginning of this century, then, working-class men and women identified with and mobilized around a cluster of well-understood tropes and a distinct iconography: ruined girls, stunted boys, poodle dogs, heroic and desperate fathers, lionlike and stoic mothers, and always "a fat man smoking a cigar and in a top hat" to represent the plutocrats, as Eric Hobsbawm has noted for France in the Belle Epoque.[12] This imagery was after all no romantic fiction. Violent class struggle was endemic to American life from the general strike on the railroads in 1877 through the early 1920s. There was nothing sentimental or exaggerated about the mothers and children who were burned up in their tents at Ludlow, Colorado, in 1914, or

the fact that the state militia which killed them was operating at the behest of John D. Rockefeller. The language of the class struggle did have a violent, raw, and intensely emotional quality then, however ritualized it may appear now, and we cannot simply ascribe this quality to cultural and linguistic inheritaces.[13]

Family and women's issues and solidarities were not simply rhetorical linchpins. A series of major episodes illustrate the programmatic importance to the prewar Left of rallying women and their families. Among the key points in this earlier history, familiar to any but the youngest Reds in the 1920s, were Mother Jones' Children's Crusade, leading a troop of miners' kids to the summer home of President Roosevelt in 1902; the autonomous actions of immigrant women reasserting the moral economies of their communities (such as the repeated food boycotts by Jewish women in New York); the great IWW strikes at Lawrence, Paterson, and elsewhere, which were built around a potentially liberating ethic of family solidarity and women's self-activity, and finally the self-conscious, Socialist feminism of large segments of the Socialist Party itself, from whose majority left-wing came both the Communist Party of America and the Communist Labor Party of America in 1919. The SP had not only a functioning parallel structure for organizing women into the Party, through its Women's National Committee, but managed for a while to bridge the disparate traditions of German–American socialists' fraternal culture and relegation of women to auxiliaries, and the long experience of American women in organizing independently around "women's issues" and for women's rights. In the 1910s, this burgeoning Socialist women's sector had led to the maturing of a class-conscious analysis of women's oppression and a series of major campaigns, running the gamut from left participation in "social purity," or antiprostitution efforts; to championing women's suffrage; to the short-lived effort by socialist, anarchist, IWW-affiliated, and Progressive women to promote clandestinely Margaret Sanger's radical program of birth control and sexual emancipation.[14]

THE 1920s AND THE "WORKERS" PARTY

After several years of illegality and internecine feuding, the two Communist parties founded in 1919 were united at the insistence of the Communist International and surfaced as the legal Workers Party in 1922. Though quite recent, the struggles of the

years before World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the postwar Red Scare must have seemed far away. Like most Americans in the 1920s, one surmises, Communists believed they had at last entered the Modern Age and found the public discursive style of the prewar decades to be stilted and embarrassingly sentimental. In its place the conservative mainstream inserted the wisecracking boosterism of a Bruce Barton. But U.S. Communists looked more and more to the steely, utilitarian gravity of the Bolsheviks—heroes of October, victors in the Russian civil war, builders of socialism. After all, both societies venerated the organizational magic of Henry Ford, but the extreme productionism of the Bolsheviks (the apocryphal remark attributed to Lenin—"Soviets plus electric power equals Communism"—is a good illustration), while promising complete equality for women as workers in the workers' state, had rather opposite consequences for women in the Communist movements in the capitalist states. Turning resolutely away from the personal, "subjective," everyday concerns that were the stock-in-trade of earlier radicals, Communists expounded a whole new set of tropes. Most of these were drawn from the Soviet example (Lenin and then Stalin, the Five Year Plan, and so forth), but the most important by far and genuinely internationalist at that was simply "the workers": those whose labor power is expropriated, those who will make the revolution, the engines of history.

It is no new discovery to underline the "workerism" of American Communists in the 1920s, and feminist historians have in general underscored how the focus of Marxists on productive and waged labor excludes women, or puts them on the sidelines as tributaries of men in the class struggle. Yet the exceptionally masculinist character of 1920s Communist language needs to be specified in contrast to both earlier and later discourses. "The workers" in practice was so sharply gendered as to diminish and segregate the growing female sector of the proletariat and to deny absolutely the existence of those proletarians, housewives and children, who were not engaged in wage labor. American Communists by the middle of the decade had exchanged an earlier language of class pervaded by familial imagery for one that was functionally or effectively antifamilial. Family solidarity, once a rallying cry for the Left, became for them an illicit loyalty, a potential source of division and betrayal. Quite unaware, the CPUSA parodied the ideology

of separate spheres created by an ascendant bourgeoisie a century earlier, insisting on the most absolute division between the worker's "private" life, which was his own business (always "he" and "his") and not worth discussing, and the "public" space where he labored and therefore struggled. But, whereas the bourgeoisie gloried in the sanctity of the home, in which all its class consciousness could be rigorously nurtured and the masters' cares assuaged, the CPUSA instinctively distrusted and feared the seductive lure of these "havens in a heartless world." This was not surprising, since the 1920s was the decisive moment when the subjectivity of the middle class, the sense of one's self as an autonomous creature of wants and desires, invaded and reshaped the terrain of working-class personal life in the United States.[15] Communists might have met this new awareness and self-definition among working-class people head on by proposing and demonstrating an emancipatory set of alternative relations between men and women (as they did in confronting the racism so formerly acceptable even on the Left). Instead they chose to deny and denigrate the personal and the familial, thereby ignoring the reality of gender and the material existence of the majority of women in favor of an appeal towards the still large numbers of marginalized and exploited workers in nonunionized heavy industry, virtually all of whom were male. This policy of industrial "concentration," along with fixed ideas equating manual labor and revolutionary militancy with "sheer muscular effort," meant that several million laundry and textile workers, maids, and stenotypists—let alone housewives—did not figure in the Party's iconographic pantheon where overalls, imposing brawn, a rocklike jaw, and a thunderous brow were the only proper features for a proletarian.[16]

The Communist International had organized international women's congresses leading to a separate women's secretariat in the early 1920s, and the Americans dutifully formed their Women's Bureau, later Women's Department, in 1922 as part of this worldwide strategy.[17] The Workers Party, and later the CPUSA, of course had a point-by-point position on women's rights and a formal commitment to organizing women workers as a special group. Yet the Party's public analysis of women's oppression and eventual liberation was deeply split. Under capitalism relations between men and women, however unequal, did not matter because nothing could be done to change

them. This oppression was outside of history in one sense (in that the oppressors were never named or held responsible in the present), and laid entirely at history's door in another (it was not men, and certainly not Communist men, who subjugated women, but the accumulated weight of centuries, the "dead hand of the past"). Any diminution in this domination had to await the appropriate changes in the mode of production, as Engels had written and now the Soviets showed. Making an issue of male supremacy prematurely was a form of false consciousness, and worse yet a serious deviation because it echoed the claims of "bourgeois feminists," who were misleaders of the working class.

THE SOVIET EXAMPLE

Yet, however retrograde, antifeminist, and even antiwomen their line regarding the position of women in the U.S., American Communists also fervently asserted that the one actually existing socialist country was rapidly emancipating women from the drudgery of housework, economic dependence on men, the hypocrisy of the sexual double standard, and general "backwardness." Though all of these problems obviously existed in the here-and-now under capitalism, their exemplary solution was displaced onto the Soviet Union. In the U.S. at least, Party writers maintained well into the 1930s that this process was advancing towards a final destination of complete, classless, Soviet equality between workers who only incidentally happened to be male and female. American Communist women were noticeably enthusiastic about the possibilities socialism offered for what they called the "Collectivization of Everyday Life." An unsigned article in the *Daily Worker* on 24 February 1930 reported on a conference in Moscow under this heading, which addressed "the question of children's upbringing, the question of meals and of the construction of dwellings" as aspects of something more fundamental: "a decisive change in regard to the conditions under which the working and peasant women are still living, who for the greater part still bear on their shoulders the burden of old family relations and domestic work." The revered Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, describing "an elementary mass movement for the organization of children's crèches," noted that "a number of children's collectives already exist in the rural districts. In many cases the children express the desire to leave the family and to found special children's com-

Soviet Women Can Do Anything. Courtesy of Tamiment Institute Library, New York University.

munities." A woman comrade from the People's Commissariat for Public Health stated that, "As in the socialist towns the whole population is engaged in production, all the domestic functions and the bringing up of children must be socialized. ... This does not mean that children should be artificially separated from the adults, i.e. their parents. The parents have not only the right but the duty to occupy themselves with their children. ..." Articles like this in a steady stream suggested not only a firm commitment, but actual mechanisms for relieving women of what Lenin had called the "barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-wracking, stultifying and crushing drudgery" of housework, childraising, and all the ties that bind. Most importantly though, what made it possible for U.S. Communists to deny women's oppression on the one hand and hold up their liberation on the other as a premier Soviet achievement, was that the central relationship in this process (as described at long distance) was between the "genderless" Soviet state-power and Soviet women. Alexandra Kollantai, the closest thing to a Bolshevik–feminist leader and one of the best-known Soviet revolutionary leaders internationally and in the United States, said that Soviet women "must become accustomed to seek and to find ... support elsewhere, no longer in the person of the man, but in the person of society, of the State."[18]

What is most paradoxical, or peculiarly dichotomous, is that Soviet husbands, fathers, and boyfriends and their likely resistance were as *invisible* in these accounts as most American women, defined as mothers, wives, and sweethearts, were in the CPUSA's press. In reprints from Soviet publications, first-person accounts, and even cartoons, the Americans extolled the extensive maternity leave provisions, the professionally staffed daycare centers in the factories, the workers' cafeterias, and even the vacation resorts provided for young mothers in the Soviet Union, but gave much less play to married life, other than to stress the speed and simplicity of divorce under the Bolsheviks. Perhaps this reflected their belief that American women actually cared more about their children's security, and the possibility of real economic independence as regular wage-workers, than about the chimera of husbands sharing housework and babycare (which may have been an accurate estimation). This juxtaposition of incomplete and idealized schema, each denying the complexities and political struggles involved in gender relations, is in hindsight still startling: one

can see how complementary they were, by letting American Communist men off the hook while furnishing a usable future for American Communist women and some vicarious satisfaction in the present. These two poles of Soviet-families-without-men and American-men-without-families were staunchly maintained from the "bolshevization" of the Workers Party in 1924, through the beginning of the depression, as we have seen.[19]

EVOLUTION OF THE COMMUNIST LINE

It would be a mistake to see the Workers Party's extreme distancing from the recent radical past, looking only forward to the Soviet Union and the future Soviet America, as instantaneous. In their first halting years, the various groups that coalesced into the Party adopted various voices, some quite old-fashioned and some emphatically Bolshevik. Thus, *The Communist*, weekly journal of the Communist Party of America, founded in 1919 from the Eastern European "language federations" of the SP, mentioned women or the family in its first years only when reprinting a foreign article.[20] Otherwise its tone was emphatically workerist, and in any case the articles were mainly focused on international events and the fight with the rival Communist Labor Party of America, founded slightly later. Members of the latter, who emphasized the need to "Americanize" bolshevism, had brought with them out of the SP the popular *Ohio Socialist* and renamed it *The Toiler*, which eventually became *The Worker*, the paper of the newly unified party in 1922.[21]

The 11 March 1922 *Worker* displayed all the unresolved contradictions and competing strains of the evolving discourse and U.S. Communists' split identity on the "Woman Question," even at a time when women, mothers, homes, and families were still fully present in their rhetoric. On the one hand, a front page story on the suppression of a strike in Kentucky resounded with the familiar threats to the patriarchal home and female virtue: "women carrying unborn children have been assaulted; soldiers have demanded admittance to homes where there were young women and insisted on spending the night. ... The life of the wife of a worker is just as sacred as the life of the wife of Elbert H. Gary and more valuable; a worker who believes that the head of the steel trust should sleep peaceably in his luxurious bed while the wives and children of the wage-earners are chased into the night by the bullets of his gunmen is a spineless

traitor who deserves what he gets." But close by this rhetoric of "treason," equating maleness with class identity all too clearly, the inside page devoted to International Women's Day (clumsily renamed "International Women's Labor Day," as if to communize it) featured an article by Kollantai on how "the so-called 'Question of Women's Rights' does not exist for Soviet Russia," because "the role of the women in the public economy, their passing over to productive labor instead of the unproductive slaving for their families—has wrought a radical change in the position of women and the attitude of toiling society towards them." At the same time, looking to capitalist America, two of the most prominent women in the U.S. Party, Katherine Gitlow and Rose Pastor Stokes, celebrated the presumably unproductive, enslaved "mothers of the proletariat," defined entirely in terms of their household role and self-sacrifice.[22] The latter emphasizes the very young Party's continued interest in nonworking women in starkly sentimental prose about the saintliness of a "mother who takes bread from the mouths of her hungry little ones to feed the famine-stricken peasants and workers of Soviet Russia. ... Sometimes, there is a baby at the breast—starving; sometimes, there is one pulling at her skirts and crying, 'Mamma, more!' But mamma remembers the nursing mothers in Soviet Russia whose breasts are dryer than her own; whose children are too weak to cry; and she robs herself, her infant, her little one, to feed the mothers and children of working-class Russia." Stokes, according to another article on the same page, had just been elected National Secretary of Women's Friends of Soviet Russia, to carry out a plan for "special organization work among working-class women for women's sewing circles, women's knitting circles, women's collecting relief circles, nursing mothers' relief circles ..." and so on. Finally, an inside editorial anticipates the exclusive focus on women as a subcategory of wage-workers, and sounds a misogynist tone as regards "militant feminism": "The task of the class-conscious workers is to show to the woman in industry that her problem is the problem of the whole working class and that it cannot be solved by the mere abolition of sex inequality—that will-o'-the-wisp followed by the idle females with more leisure than brains."

Within a few years, this cacophony of clashing conceptions and voices on woman's place in the movement and the working class, or what to hold up before "the workers," had resolved

itself with the disappearance of the apparatus of home and family, and therefore the unequal position of women, from most Communist propaganda. Women were not banished from the Party, but it appears that their role was reduced to that suggested by the "Women Friends of Soviet Russia" program outlined above—the familiar auxiliaries whose sphere within the Party's shrunken ambit of fraternal clubs hardly differed from the fundraising and social activities carried out by German–American socialist women in the last century.[23]

Only a shock as deep as the depression could shake loose the masculinist assumptions of Party members and leaders, no matter how often they might ritually include "women workers" at the bottom of a list of groups to receive special attention. It is important to note that, in contrast, African Americans and "youth" were made top priorities for the Party in these same lean years of the 1920s, and coherent ideological approaches and a commitment of scarce resources led to real organizational gains for both groups, a commitment the CPUSA was never able to make to women.[24]

Women Communists in the U.S. offered no open variation from the prevailing workerism and displacement of women's liberation onto the Soviet future–present. When the Women's Department finally initiated (or was permitted) a makeshift English-language monthly magazine at the end of 1929, *The Working Woman*, its editorials and other occasional articles in the Party press all stressed that women emerged from political and historical limbo precisely as they were drawn, or "forced," like filings to a magnet, into wage labor: "Before when the woman devoted herself to the family and home and did not take such an important part in production, she also played an unimportant part in political life." It was, simply enough, "the world revolution, which will finally liberate women socially as well as politically and economically," not a change in the actions of actual men, Communist or otherwise.[25] The only break in this front was a few Party women's indirect but persistent critique of the sexism for which they had no name, attacking the disparity between the formal importance of American women as workers (however unimportant as housewives) and most Party members' actual disregard for them.[26] CPUSA women leaders repeatedly pointed out that the supposedly "iron discipline" of Communists was being violated, in that both the Communist International and their own Central Committee had a precise

"line" on the necessity of organizing women, but no one was doing it. Anna Damon, head of the Women's Department, framed the Party's self-evident task in January 1930 in the purposely harsh, formal language of Leninism, perhaps better to convince the comrades that this was no longer a duty that could be shirked in light of the depression:

> The growing radicalization of the women workers is part of the general radicalization of the working class in the United States. ... The working women are an indispensable part of the class struggle, and an integral part of the working class and, as such, must be won away from the bourgeois influence, for the class struggle, for the revolution. This is the task of the revolutionary vanguard. ...

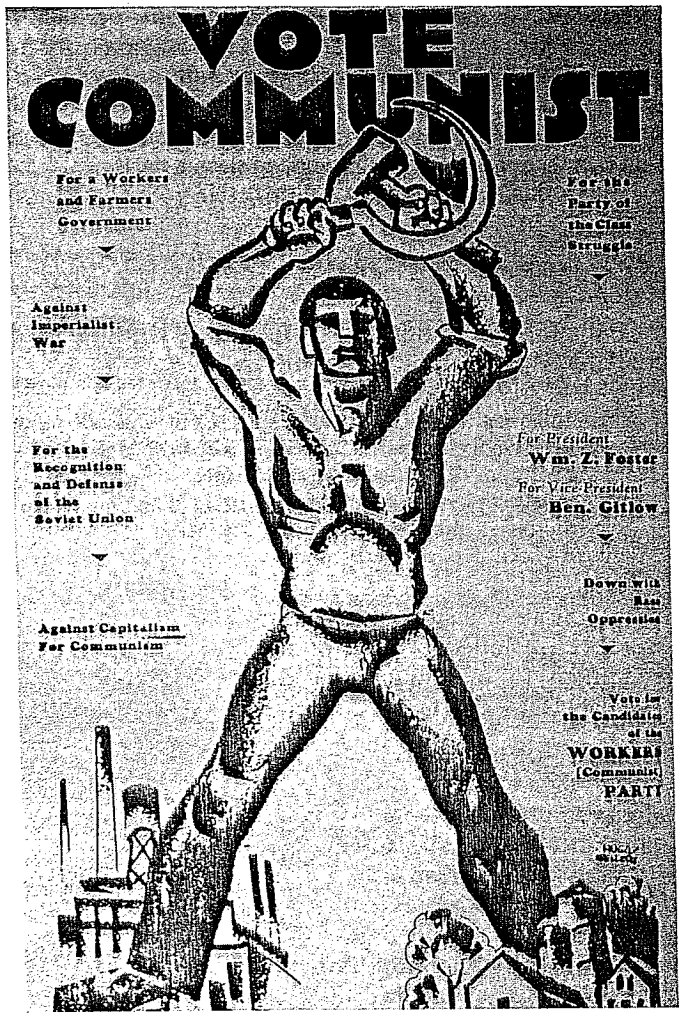
Her palpable frustration can be felt along with the martial Bolshevik intonation at the end of the article:

> Every member of the Party must rid himself of whatever remnants of social democratic tendencies still exist with regard to work among women. They must learn special means of approach. ... The Party must win every section of the working class for revolutionary struggle. ... But it cannot fulfill this task if it leaves it to the women's section of the Party alone.

Finally a note of sisterly frustration emerges: "To mobilize the miserably exploited section of the working class and not to leave them to the mercies of the social reformists and the capitalist class—this is the Communist task."[27]

1930: FROM "WORKERS" TO THE WORKING CLASS

There were many reasons for male Communists' disregard for women in 1930, besides the official policy of concentrating forces exactly where women were not (steel and auto plants, coal mines, the waterfront). For most of the 1920s the Party had been consumed from top to bottom by a struggle between highly organized factions, ending only when Stalin himself removed the master factionalist Jay Lovestone as general secretary in 1929. The hermetic character of this struggle had accentuated what Simon Gerson, a young field organizer in 1930 and later a longtime Party leader, damned as an inability to carry out "mass work" of any sort because of "immigrationist sectarianism" directed towards the English-speaking workers with their Model T's, mortgages, and affinity for the Ku Klux Klan.[28]



The Workers Party Worker, 1928. Courtesy of Tamiment Institute Library, New York University.

By the time the depression dawned, large parts of the Party had grown as conservative in their assumptions as any group of traditionally job-control-oriented, male, trade unionists, despite an otherwise extremely "left" politics, and found systematic organizing away from the familiar ambience of the shopfloor (or the soapbox) to be unknown territory. This lack of understanding of what was needed to mobilize in their own neighborhoods, and the plain inertia of fixed habits of talking and acting, as much as the official line, help to explain the narrowness of the CPUSA's approach to the "unemployed" for the first half of 1930.

Before a "turn" to fighting hunger and saving homes could be made, Communists did bull their way through to a single major coup in spite of themselves with their bellicose, wholly "worker"-centered approach. On 6 March 1930, dramatic nationwide demonstrations of the newly unemployed took place under CPUSA auspices in which perhaps a million people participated. The narrowness of the day's demands—"Fight for Work or Wages! Demand Full Wages For All Part Time Workers! Fight for the Seven-Hour Day! Long Live the Unity of Black and White Workers! Down With Imperialist War! Defend the Soviet Union!"—the degree of police repression and violent confrontation, and the resultant self-projection of Communists as street-fighting men meant, however, that 6 March was successful as a one-time-only mobilization. It tapped the seething public anger over Hooverist optimism, but could never be repeated or used as a model for systematic organizing at the local level.[29] In its aftermath the jerry-rigged Unemployed Councils pulled together for 6 March fell apart in many places, and ad hoc, unsystematic casualness remained endemic to most Party sections.

What finally impelled a radical shift that gathered force—so that by 1931 the whole language of the Party opened up and its organizing practice underwent a sea-change—were the catastrophes of daily working-class life in these months, combined with an acknowledgement that the Party would either overcome the limitations of its own history or cease to matter. The general crises of existence and subsistence both demanded a response and provided an opportunity that the CPUSA could ill afford to ignore. Over the summer and fall of 1930, the grassroots survival actions of many desperate men and women, including local Communists without any direction from their

Party, and the belated recognition by the leadership of the gap between its practice and what the working class needed, overdetermined a conjuncture in which Communists transformed themselves, beyond any dictates from on high.[30] The official slogan through August 1930, "Fight for Work or Wages," encapsulated the CPUSA's inability to respond adequately, as it was implicitly an appeal to male breadwinners at a time when the whole idea of a "family wage" had become irrelevant, excluding all those wives, mothers, grandparents, and children who were suffering most as savings, personal property, family networks, and local charities failed. Even more importantly, the patriarchal family was under intense strain in these months and in many cases was falling apart. By the summer of 1930, large numbers of wandering men had begun sleeping in parks or riding the rails, and in many homes women became the "sole breadwinners," as Anna Damon pointed out, since unemployment was disproportionately concentrated in heavy industry versus the light industrial, clerical, and service jobs where most women labored.[31]

Yet even as rich organizing opportunities abounded, the CPUSA continued to insist that the Unemployed Councils, its main "mass organization" for mobilizing large numbers of non-Communists, should be attached to the fledgling, Party-organized, industrial unions of the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL). Their priority was to bring together unemployed and still-employed workers from specific industries and, where possible, specific factories (another instance of the policy of "industrial concentration points"). Support for the unemployed was to be solicited at plant gates among the still employed, leading to city-wide demonstrations like 6 March. Recruiting was to be targeted on the employment offices, streetcorners, and breadlines where "the workers" congregated: crowds of idle men, where obviously women could not freely mingle. But in any case, most women, whether "working" or not, were hardly likely to be idle, as they were left with the final responsibility of getting some kind of food on the table whether or not men could get work. Even more than this recruiting directed explicitly at male workers, the impractical organizational model for "unemployed work" revealed confusion and a limited awareness of how to mobilize victims of the crisis. It is notable that the Unemployed Councils at first offered no means of incorporating all the residents of working-class neighborhoods, made up of

women and children as well as men, in the struggle. Should the wives of workers form auxiliaries for the Unemployed Councils? Should they attend the same meetings as their husbands? In particular, what role was there for the existing Party-led local women's groups, from New York's United Council of Working Class Women to the innumerable ethnic auxiliaries, clubs, and "circles," and the death-and-benefit lodges of the International Workers Order?

From such unanswered questions, a great variety of accommodations were developed by which Communist women and men organized to deal with their families' and friends' crises (evictions, being turned down by charity workers for food or coal, lack of clothes for children to wear to school). Combined with leadership initiatives, these impromptu strategies over the summer of 1930, particularly in battling evictions—crowds moving furniture back into houses again and again—led to the break in the Party's line of obliviousness to the home, family, and community issues.

The first stage of the new direction came at the CPUSA's Seventh Convention in June. Max Bedacht, editor of the theoretical journal *The Communist*, gave a major speech, "The Party Must Make A Turn," in which he insisted,

> Our Party must make the immediate problems of the workers the starting point of all its actions. To elevate the understanding of the working masses to the point of revolution does not and cannot mean to disregard the immediate problems of the workers ... to advise the workers on all occasions with the stereotyped phrase: "You cannot solve your problem except through revolution."[32]

Having described the failings of American Communists in a nutshell, Bedacht summed up what had to be done—"To organize them [the workers] for and to lead them in the struggles for the solution of their everyday problems." Gradually the content of the Party's demands and the focus of its organizing began to change. On 1 September, for national demonstrations of the unemployed, the CPUSA revealed its new slogan—"Don't Starve! Fight!"—replacing the shopworn "Work or Wages"; thereafter the metaphorical language of the Party began to evolve beyond the masculine, public spaces of street and factory. The *Worker* started to talk, albeit clumsily, about how "An old hen will fight for her chickens, and the workers must fight for food and clothing and shelter for their children!";

and that September a rash of stories appeared with headlines like "Driven From Homes; Toledo Jobless Workers Camp by Thousands by Lake Shore; Starving, They Search City Garbage Dumps for Food—Children Tuberculosis Victims" and "Three Jobless Commit Suicide; One First Kills Wife and Son." Israel Amter, a popular New York Party leader, declared that the new emphasis on "daily economic problems of the workers" meant that women, both in the shops and in the home, could no longer be ignored. Myra Page, whose earlier fictionalized depictions of Southern proletarian lives grounded in familial suffering and resistance had helped quietly to distinguish the still-ignored *Working Woman* (the men editing and writing for the *Daily Worker* commonly got its name wrong and referred to it as the *Woman Worker*) from other Party voices, began writing highly emotive, almost poetic features for the *Worker*—on children's breadlines in the Bowery, for instance, and babies dying in the wombs of their starving mothers—that muted its usual clipped, denunciatory tone, so redolent of Bolshevik machismo.

In discursive terms, then, there was a gradual broadening of the Party's language from the late summer of 1930 through the moment when little Ruth Orias and her dog came out of her "smashed home," from a single, monochromatic vision of capitalist America to a coexistence between two groupings of tropes, one of "the workers," and one of "the working class, men, women and children." The latter included all the once-common allegorical imagery, hardly changed from 1900 or 1910, that pitted poodles in steam-heated kennels and plutocrats' "sex parties" in Florida against families eating cats and dogs, fathers killing themselves, girls peddling their bodies, and mothers watching their babies starve. But now these sensational and titillating stories were told in the terms of the sentimental "realism" characteristic of 1930s popular and mass culture—Frank Capra had replaced Horatio Alger. Typically, *Worker* staff writers would refashion human-interest features from the capitalist press with the Communist touch, leaving in all the pathos, but avoiding melodramatic hyperbole. What underlined the accumulating ethos of everyday tragedy was the interspersing of brief factual accounts from anonymous "worker correspondents" on local battles for food and coal, and letters from angry people recounting their decision to join the Party based on a personal experience of indignity. Much of the new emphasis on familial dissolution came from this growing base among the newly radicalized, including many widowed, deserted, and older women:

> Today I joined the Communist Party. I have neared the point where I understand that nothing else helps unless we get together and do vote Communist. ... I was clerking in a department store here. To my surprise, I was told that I was too old for a job (old—am I old at 46?). ... Oh, God, and me a widow with a boy of 13 to keep and care. What can I do? I like to get up and speak. I do sincerely hope that the social insurance bill will be voted upon and it will be the best of anything that has been carried out by the Communists.[33]

At the formal level, the Party moved with increasing vigor to carry out the full implications of the "turn" towards the "daily struggles" of the proletariat. In late November, the 12th Plenum of the Central Committee assessed progress since the summer, and decided that despite many local successes, too many comrades were still locked into purely agitational habits. Earl Browder, well on his way to becoming the top Party leader, called for "Fewer High-Falutin' Phrases, More Simple Every-Day Deeds," and the Plenum declared that "unemployed work" was now the chief task for all, without exceptions. Immediately, a detailed winter campaign was kicked off that included "united front" conferences to frame precise local relief demands, local and state hunger marches that would specifically include women and children, and most of all a priority on physically stopping evictions everywhere and anywhere—for which Communists were rapidly gaining national attention. At the same time, in Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia, the first food boycotts led by Communist women's groups broke out, while new women's councils and tenant leagues formed as independent additions or partners to the Unemployed Councils, which had as yet no space for them or their demands.

In February and March 1931, Browder and other authoritative leaders published directives for the Unemployed Councils that at last unambiguously transferred their focus from the wage-earner to the family. The amorphous, city-wide bodies were ordered to subdivide into neighborhood groups, where they would serve as social and organizing centers for everyone, not simply laid-off men, and "constitute the very life and spirit of the starving workers' families."[34] Their primary work was now to go door to door and discover which families were most in need of food, heat, water, shoes, or clothes, and then get these

items for them by organizing the whole neighborhood to demand it; when necessary, the local Unemployed Council itself would, on a short-term basis, collect and distribute relief after pressuring businesses in the community for donations. Throughout were injunctions to reach the housewives and include women in the leadership of the councils, references to how working-class women were both housekeepers and workers now (with several appropriate articles by Marx and Lenin published on the objective necessity of this change in women's role), and promptings to take up the high cost of living and reduction of rents as "class" demands. On 28 and 30 March, the *Daily Worker* ran demands above its headlines that summarized the urgency of the new line: "Fight Steadily for Relief! Visit the homes of the unemployed workers. List all cases of starvation, undernourishment, inadequate relief. Carry on a sustained and steady struggle for unemployment relief for the starving families"; "Enlist Women in Jobless Activities—Win the wives of unemployed workers and unemployed women workers for the neighborhood branches of unemployed workers. Enlist them in the struggle against high food prices, against high rents, for free meals for school children. ... The heroic fight of the women of Chicago against high bread prices and their partial victory should be a lesson to all neighborhood branches."[35]

CONCLUSIONS: COMMUNISTS AND GENDER IN THE 1930s[36]

To reach the masses and overcome its own isolation, the Party did foreground this communal practice of rescuing and drawing in families. But it would be false to suggest that the Party's discourse and organizational priorities underwent a permanent reversal in this period. Until the New Deal, "The Fight For Bread" stayed at the center of Communist practice and rhetoric.[37] Even so, once Franklin Roosevelt began to stabilize the situation, both politically with a variety of emergency innovations and the implied promise of the NRA and concretely with Congress's passage of an unemployment insurance bill in 1935 (since the summer of 1930 the CPUSA's main political demand), a considerably larger and more experienced Party faced new possibilities and new demands. Domestically, the leaders of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) that had broken away from the American Federation of Labor

needed, and in some cases explicitly asked for, the massive commitment of Communist organizers to build the long-dreamt-of industrial unions. Internationally, the Seventh Congress of the Communist International had announced the greatest shift in Communist policy since 1917, the effort to form "Popular Fronts" with all "democratic" forces to contain the tide of fascism and reaction.

Under these changed circumstances, hunger was replaced as the leitmotif of struggle by unity (of the people). Women and families, children and homes, had hardly disappeared from the Party's language, but they now had a familiar character, as Communists increasingly sought to portray themselves as no different from other Americans, just more aware of the dangers posed by "war and fascism" at home and abroad. Typically, in the steady stream of pamphlets the Party now issued, specifically directed towards women, their homemaking and motherly *supportive* role was upheld and reinforced as a bulwark of "peace." Already, before the Popular Front, while Party men and women were still leading occupations of relief bureaus across America, Ann Barton had begun a column in the *Daily Worker* called "In the Home," which featured dress patterns, advice on childrearing, and "personal relationships" with best-letter contests on what to do with husbands who would not let their wives join "working class organizations."[38] This peculiar combination of acceptance of women's household role, and advice on how to deal with what was sometimes called "Husband Trouble," could be found as well in the *Working Woman,* now turned into an attractive monthly magazine with a circulation of 7,000 by 1935, and in fact set the model for CPUSA "women's pages" and the general approach to women for many years to come.[39]

Eventually, in the period from the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union (September 1939 to 22 June 1941), women's motherly concern for their sons as potential cannon fodder was put at the service of unity in a rhetoric that, however sincere the women Communists involved may have been, still had a manipulated and consciously sentimental, declassed quality: "I Didn't Raise My Boy To Be A Soldier for Wall Street!" proclaimed one pamphlet by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. In some sense, women were now once again placed outside the class struggle, as creatures of sentiment and not reason. "Communist women candidates express what the vast majority

of the women of America want—peace, safety in their homes and for their loved ones. ... Let us give our closest attention to the problems of the women who are tied down by their household tasks and care of their children—provide squads of autos that will carry them to the polls and help in caring for their children," instructed William Z. Foster in an election-eve editorial in the *Worker* in 1940, demonstrating the ambiguity, extent and timing of Communist concern for "the problems of women."[40]

From massive denial in the 1920s, the Communist Party U.S.A. in the 1930s had come to recognize the significance of what Temma Kaplan has called "female solidarity" and women's sensibilities and experience as part of the class struggle. In one sense, this was a real gain for women, as well as for the Party. From almost total exclusion from the workers' movement, women and specifically housewives took center stage and even became exemplary in the early 1930s.[41] From complete omission in the program of struggle, the family became a central terrain to be defended and mobilized. American Communists, men and women, rediscovered and remade the distinctively American language of class into a potent weapon in working-class neighborhoods. Yet the CPUSA still lacked a program and a rhetoric that explicitly addressed the need for women's liberation and the duty of men to recognize themselves as oppressors in the home, on the job, and even in the Party. These fundamental changes in Communists' gendered language of class and appreciation of the role of women set the stage for the next and so far completely unexplored topic for scholars of women, gender, and the American Left: the move in the 1940s towards the naming of "male chauvinism," and the attempts by Communist women to move their Party and the broader labor and leftist movements towards a politics of gender equality.[42]

Notes

Most of the research and conceptualization for this article was developed in the Seminar in Women's History at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1987. I wish to thank the seminar leader Judith R. Walkowitz for her acute and generous criticism and my colleagues Janann Sherman, Tracey Weis, Gretchen Galbraith, Annette Igra, Joy Dixon, Susan Whitney, Jan Lambertz, and Lisa Silverman, as well as the reviewers for the *RHR* and another journal, all of whom forced me to clarify my ideas. Finally, Eliza Jane Reilly's editorial strictures were invaluable at every stage.

1. Joan Scott, "On Language, Gender and Working-Class History," *International Labor and Working Class History* 31 (Spring 1987): 1–13, with responses by Bryan D. Palmer, Christine Stansell, and Anson Rabinbach, 14–36; Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana, IL, 1983); Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women* (New York, 1980), among others.

2. This is not a history of specific Party-led women' s groups and their vicissitudes, whether the Women's Department of the Central Committee or the diverse local bodies. The best-known of these was the United Council of Working-Class Women founded in the mid-1920s in New York, which became the Progressive Women's Councils at the time of the Popular Front; the still-extant Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs are a lineal descendant. See Morris U. Schappes, "Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs," in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (New York, 1990), 211–12. None of the above groups was ever an organizational priority, though their adaptation to local conditions was often a source of new ideas for the Party, as with the rent strikes and food boycotts in the early 1930s. In any case, Communist women worked in all aspects of Party work, from the unions to antiwar and antifascist organizing, and a study of women as activists in the CPUSA would have to deal with the full spectrum of that work. The most intimate treatment of the New York women's groups, always the hard core of Party women, is Meredith Tax's, "Women's Councils of the 1930s," presented at the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, June 1984.

3. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), 20. Jones noted also, "We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest in the first place" (21). In plainer terms, "language" *is* the everyday material reality of practical organizing under any conditions short of guerrilla war and clandestinity, as some orthodox polemicists against poststructuralist influences have apparently forgotten; for any Communist activist, here or elsewhere, power most surely issued from his or her mouth and mimeograph machine, and only rarely the vaunted "barrel of the gun." Therefore, if one believes the study of political practice is still valid, one has no option but to study what was said and written, when and by whom, as well as how and under what conditions it was read or heard. Taking the "ideology" of Communists as seriously as we do country republicans, slaveholders, Progressives, and SDS members is a small step towards ending the perverse exceptionalism regarding the CPUSA, and for U.S. historians who are also radicals, towards understanding themselves.

4. This emphasis on language as a distinct ideological practice yields a different emphasis from that in the only full-length study (Elsa Jane Dixler, "'The Woman Question': Women and the American Communist Party, 1929–1941," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, New Haven, CT, 1974, esp. 153–55) which underlines the Party's monolithic, highly instrumental manipulation of "the woman question." Recently, Elizabeth Laue has also addressed many of the issues concerning the uses and abuses of gender in the class-struggle politics of the 1930s, though with a different emphasis than mine. See "Public Soldiers, Solitary Warriors: Labor, Sex and Solidarity on the American Left, 1929–1945" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, 8 April 1989); and "The 'Dynamo of Change': Gender and Solidarity in the Labor Movement of the '30s," *Gender and History* 1, 2 (Summer 1989): 138–58. Her coverage of the period went well beyond the CPUSA, drawing on a range of sources from the railroad brotherhoods to the *Daily Worker*, and is similar to Dixler's in that she found a "silence in the early 1930s" regarding gender issues, succeeded by a regressive emphasis on maternity during the Popular Front ("Public Soldiers, Solitary Warriors," 16).

However, her central assertion ("The representations of labor in the 1930s emerge within a web of symbols which identify the worker as male, solidarity as brotherhood, and struggle as both male and violent. ...") was centered on the claim that "what the labor movement of the 1930s had, which its predecessors did not have, was a romantic and heroic perception of violence" ("Public Soldiers, Solitary Warriors," 4–5). Yet U.S. labor's struggles from the Great Upheaval of 1877 through World War I featured

pitched battles, armed worker militias, dynamite wars, and, at least in the West, constant gunplay, all of which were hardly in contradiction to the "republican ideology" Laue cited to explain a lack of "heroic" violence. From my point of view, the latter's revival, at least discursively, in the 1930s may well have coincided with the resurgence of a familially based conception of solidarity. One could also argue that successful, disciplined mass action avoiding violence—as in the CIO sitdowns of 1936–37—epitomized the 1930s just as the violent defeats at Homestead, Coeur d'Alene, and Ludlow evoked the earlier failure of armed confrontation, indicating that the interplay between violent and nonviolent struggle (and masculinism) is hardly unilinear.

5. See photo spreads in the *Daily Worker*, 9, 28 and 29 January 1930; 28 March 1930; 1 May 1930. Even when an evicted family was shown, as on 15 March, the caption refered to the "unemployed worker," and the rare drawing that included "working class women and children," as on 5 March, depicted them holding signs reflecting the demands the CPUSA assigned to male workers: "For a Seven-Hour Day/Against Capitalist Rationalization/Work or Wages," instead of calls for no evictions, free milk for school children, or even no discrimination against women on the job. Perhaps the most blatant representation of the working class as exclusively men in a man's world was the *Worker*'s regular cartoon strip, "Bill Worker," in which the tough-guy Bill showed up regularly (and often beat up) the forces of capital and the state. Bill had no problems that could not be dealt with by an uppercut, and certainly had no family dragging him down.

6. The traditional argument for the CPUSA's trajectory over the Depression decade begins with its miserable performance in the early 1930s, as measured by (at most) a doubling of the Party membership from 1929 to 1934, from which failure is ascribed to the blind extremism of Third Period policies. In contrast, the Popular Front is painted as the face of moderation that leads directly to a quadrupling or better in enrolled members, so that by 1938 the CPUSA and YCL together may have reached one hundred thousand after starting the decade with barely ten thousand. See Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism* (New York, 1984) for the most influential presentation of this view. In one sense then, this article is a small gambit in a continuing battle over the CPUSA's path, as various scholars have documented the richness of Party organizing before the official proclamation of the "United Front Against War and Fascism" at the 7th Congress of the Comintern in 1935. See, in particular, Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana, IL, 1983); Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (Bloomington, IN, 1981); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: The Communist Party in Alabama* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990).

7. Interview with Anna Taffler, 5 January 1978, Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY. Taffler was evidently remembering the Unemployed Councils as they were later known during the Popular Front, as the Workers Alliances. However self-justifying her comments may seem, one notes that they are borne out by many other women involved in Communist women's organizing at the time, at least in New York.

8. The standard work is Daniel Leab, "United We Eat: The Out-of-Work, the Unemployed Councils, and the Communists, 1930–33" (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, New York, NY, 1961), and a subsequent article, "'United We Eat': The Creation and Organization of the Unemployed Councils," *Labor History* 8 (Fall 1967): 300–15. The major revisionist treatment is by Roy Rosenzweig, "Organizing the Unemployed: The Early Years of the Great Depression, 1929–33," *Radical America* 10 (July–August, 1976): 37–60.

9. *Solidarity*, 8 June 1912.

10. This term, and much of my awareness of nineteenth-century artisan and plebeian gender ideology, is derived from Anna Clark, "Popular Morality and the Construction of Gender in London, 1780–1845," (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1987).

11. Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture* (London, 1987).

12. Eric Hobsbawm, "Man and Woman in Socialist Iconography," *History Workshop* 6 (Autumn 1978): 122. Though Hobsbawm's tentative treatment of European socialist iconography was suggestive in terms of the American case, it has also been severely criticized for accepting male representations of working-class life as literal reflections of social reality. See Sally Alexander, Anna Davin, and Eve Hostettler, "Labouring Women: A Reply to Eric Hobsbawm," *History Workshop Journal* 8 (Autumn 1979).

13. In her study of the rhetoric of pre–World War I radicalism, Aileen Kraditor insisted that Socialists and Wobblies largely ignored gender, and were committed to keeping the "private sphere" as it was, refusing any connection to the "public sphere" of politics. A more nuanced reading of the radical press would have shown a preoccupation with the changes in gender relations wrought by capitalism. A good example of her treatment was the assertion that the putatively western "hard core" of the IWW was committed to a "frontier machismo" that was often misogynist and hostile to families in any sense. See Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Radical Persuasion: Aspects of the Intellectual History and Historiography of Three American Radical Organizations* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1981), 143. Historians need to move beyond the myths of the road and "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" exalted by some western Wobblies (whose importance has been exaggerated), and examine the organization's politics of place and gender, its use of Marxism, and its theory of revolution more seriously. This would mean balancing the discourse of the *Industrial Worker* in Spokane with that of *Solidarity* in Pittsburgh, instead of privileging the former. As Mari Jo Buhle has shown for the Socialist Party, the Wobs had a utopian streak, in the West as well as in the East, that identified the Cooperative Commonwealth with free and happy families. More generally, I differ with the perspective that sees the IWW as fundamentally an expression of "Western radicalism," which made only episodic interventions into the Eastern and Midwestern factory belts. See my review of two books on the 1913 Paterson silk strike in *Radical History Review* 48 (October 1990): 169–76; idem, "'It's For the Kids We're Doing This': The IWW and the Practice of Family Solidarity" (unpublished paper); Mike Davis, "The Stop Watch and the Wooden Shoe," *Radical America* 9, 1 (January–February, 1975): 69–95.

14. Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, esp. 214–87.

15. See Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, The Family and Personal Life*, rev. ed. (New York, 1986), esp. chap. 4 on "Proletarianization and the Rise of Subjectivity," and pp. 44–52 on the shift from the family-wage economy in which "solidarity pivoted on the mother," to the private, consumptionist world of working-class individualism.

16. The phrase is from Hobsbawm, "Man and Woman," 136, where he suggested that in the era of the Comintern "in some sense the relatively unskilled, purely manual laborer, the miner or docker, was considered more revolutionary, since he did not belong to the labor aristocracy, with its penchant for reformism and social-democracy. He represented 'the masses'." It was cause for self-criticism and little else when the "Organizational Report to the Sixth Convention" of the renamed Communist Party of the U.S.A. in early 1929 noted that over half of the women Party members were housewives—so much dead weight, though the Party's claim to a special concern for actual "women workers" was patently not carried through in practice. This does not mean that male Communists *refused* to see women as proletarian fighters. When one came to the fore (as with the first, great, American Communist woman martyr, Ella May Wiggins, a white millworker shot down while leading the terrible 1929 strike at Gastonia, South Carolina), she was eulogized. But this overwhelmingly male organization did very little to support the specific organization of women on the job.

17. See Elizabeth Waters, "In the Shadow of the Comintern: The Communist Women's Movement, 1920–43," in *Promissory Notes, Women in the Transition to Socialism*, Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn B. Young (eds.) (New York, 1989), 29–56, for an

excellent overview of the early promise of this program for committing the international revolutionary movement to the liberation of women, and its rapid downgrading in the mid-1920s.

18. Alexandra Kolantay [Kollantai], "Communism and the Family," *The Communist*, 15 October 1920. Answering her own questions, "Will the family be maintained in the Communist State? Will it be just as it is today?" Kollantai declared unequivocally that "Life is changing under our very eyes; former habits and customs are gradually disappearing; the entire existence of the proletarian family is being organized in a manner that is so new, so unaccustomed, so 'bizarre', as to have been impossible to foresee." Conditions, politically and socially, in the Soviet Union, were certainly greatly different in 1920 than in 1930, including not only the degree of inner-party democracy, but also the acceptance of "utopian" plans for the remaking of all social and cultural life.

19. It is noteworthy that American Communist women maintained a focus on these emancipatory aspects of Soviet life well past 1930, though Elizabeth Waters suggested that in general, Communists in the capitalist world began to downplay the freeing of women in the USSR after the mid-1920s just as they discarded any emphasis on organizing women in their own countries.

20. See "Women in the Third International," *The Communist*, 27 December 1919 (reprinted from *L'Ordine Nuove*); and Kollantai, "Communism and the Family." The former did acknowledge "the important part which awaits working women in the creation of the new communist social order ... the realisation of the reform of family customs. ... All of this imposes on those parties which adhere to the Third International the necessity of considering a problem of the utmost importance: the concentration of all their strength and energy to draw the working women into the Party, the employment of all means to educate the workers in a spirit corresponding with the new social order, and with the new *Communist ethics* which they must introduce in their social and family life" (emphasis in original). Though this call did recognize that male workers must change, a demand which later disappeared both in the USSR and in the U.S., its premise was still that "the workers" are men, and that women must be led from above (in every sense of the word) towards the Party and the class.

21. The strength of the earlier legacies of family-conscious rhetoric and essentially feminist women's voices can be seen in the *Ohio Socialist* as late as 22 January 1919, with a front-page story, "Arrogant Parasites Roll in Wealth While Useful Workers Starve," about the "arrogant brutality" of the capitalists as evidenced by a "sable coat costing $75,000 ... lavished upon the back of a useless social drone" (the wife of a steel magnate), "The cries of starving babies, the agonized weepings of broken-hearted mothers, the despair of fathers is muffled in its folds." The paper also had a regular column entitled "The Women's Cause—A Department for the Women Who Think," which extolled the decades of struggle for women's rights in the U.S.

22. See *The Worker*, 11 March 1922: "Newport, Kentucky! How Long?" (editorial); Alexandra Kollantai, "The Message of the Communist International to Working Women"; Katherine Gitlow, "An Appeal of a Revolutionary Mother to the Mothers of the Proletariat." Gitlow wrote about visiting her political prisoner son and how other "mothers of the working class" should "take their place in the ranks of the revolutionary workers" so that "there will be no jail for the sons of the workers and tears for the mother"; Rose Pastor Stokes, "Sing!"

23. The major exceptions to this generalization concerning a reversion to the "separate spheres" of left-wing ethnic fraternalism were probably the Finnish Communists (the largest national group in the Party then), because women appeared to have played stronger roles within Finnish fraternal radical culture than elsewhere. There was even a Finnish-language women's paper, *Toveritar*, that long predated (and had a much larger circulation than) the English-language *Working Woman*. I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer who brought this to my attention. A thorough study of women and gender issues in the CPUSA and its predecessors during the Jazz Age would require perusing newspapers in the nineteen languages of the Party press, as at this time it was still predominantly an organization of non-English speakers.

24. Paul Buhle has recently specified how the CPUSA's recognition of the "national question" regarding African Americans was its most important and long-lasting ideological advance. See his *Marxism in the USA* (London, 1987). Regarding youth and student organizing, I know of no substantive study, but the Party's self-perception as a young, dynamic organization was vital enough to justify its prioritization. The generation of Young Communist Leaguers recruited in the early 1930s, from Gil Green to Henry Winston to John Gates, went on to play leadership roles over the next half-century.

25. Rachel Holtman, "International Women's Day, 1930," *The Communist* (March 1930). Not only was this article historically inaccurate about the role women played in politics throughout history, as any number of older Communist women well knew, but it also strongly suggested that it was women's conscious choice to stay in the home, and thus women's own fault if they were powerless. What is interesting, given that Engels' *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* was the canonic text for all orthodox Marxists, and especially Soviet-influenced Communists, is how Holtman reversed the emphasis of Engels' paradigm of female subjugation as the origin of the class struggle. In Engels' version women had a double reason to liberate themselves, as part of the proletariat and as a class of people made into private property at the beginning of history. For Holtman, they are passive objects who will first be made subjects and proletarians against their will, and even then will be liberated by a force outside of themselves, the "world revolution."

26. Nothing points more to the importance of language in structuring and delimiting the character of politics—creating and channeling possibilities or closing them off—than the impossibility of defining oppressive male behavior without some kind of shared feminist vocabulary. Note how, in the following section, a leading woman comrade tried to damn sexism, using a code language, as "social democratic tendencies," implying a reactionary complacency that was highly insulting among Party members. In the 1940s, Communists began actively to employ the term "male supremacy," thereby placing the oppressor on the same plane with the "white supremacist," leading eventually to the term "male chauvinist" in current use, and opening up considerable space in their own ranks for direct struggle over women's roles.

27. See also Damon's article of 25 February 1930 in which she criticizes the Party's reluctance to organize women into unions, citing "paper decisions."

28. *Daily Worker*, 27 February 1930.

29. In an important policy statement a few months later, a major party leader sourly cited 6 March as typical of the "spectacular record action ... [that] does not create revolutionary life. It merely creates noise for self-deceptive purposes."

30. What I offer here is an hypothesis whose almost classical simplicity—the idea of the proletariat waking up and shaking off its chains, and the Party accordingly reforming and regenerating itself—should not automatically be seen as suspect; after all, this remains the deep-seated belief of revolutionaries everywhere as to how radical change can come about, and the point here is that in 1930, CPUSA members felt themselves ready to act on that belief. There is also, of course, the matter of the Comintern's role. Whether or not the foreign comrades actually urged a turn away from the strictly industrial "concentration" in the second half of 1930 (or earlier), and the degree to which this was resisted by the always quasi-syndicalist U.S. Party, would be an interesting question to explore. In any case, though, it is simply unreal to imagine that directives from Moscow regularly steered CPUSA organizing strategies and tactics on the ground throughout the U.S. We know too much now about the unpredictable mix of intention, subjectivity and sheer luck that characterized each local instance of what was, of course, a highly hierarchical and directed formation. And if Moscow's hand really is the *deus ex machina* for all aspects of the Party's history, then why did ten

years of repeated, unequivocal orders to end all organized factional activity have so little effect between 1919 and 1929? What seems most likely is that the CPUSA came under heavy criticism in 1930, and this prodding helped to impel the shift into the neighborhoods and the language of hearth and home. After that, the tangible successes that were quickly achieved gave this new kind of "unemployed work" its own reason for being.

31. See Anna Damon's article in the *Daily Worker*, 26 July 1930; also Ethel Shor, "Working Women Are Fighting," *Daily Worker*, 21 March 1930, which dealt directly with the double oppression of women as both workers and wives or mothers under U.S. depression conditions, in contrast to the liberated USSR. The shift in power within the family was studied at the time by sociologists, and has subsequently been analyzed by historians of American women in the 1930s. It also produced one of the U.S.'s most memorable female literary and cinematic icons in Ma Joad. James Green wrote a useful short summary of the effects of the depression on family life in *World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth Century America* (New York, 1980), 135–36.

32. Reprinted in the *Daily Worker*, 26 July 1930.

33. Letter from "Mrs. H.M.W.," *Daily Worker*, 5 September 1930.

34. Alfred Wagenknecht, "Carry on the Unemployed Struggles by Compact Organization," *Daily Worker*, 7 March 1931.

35. The treatment of International Women's Day indicates the scope of the change. Whereas a year earlier the Party had given it only perfunctory attention, on 8 March 1931 the *Daily Worker* published the month's entire issue of the *Working Woman* as an eight-page supplement.

36. My research has focused to date on the Third Period, and specifically 1930–31, as indicated. In addition, Robert Shaffer's excellent article, "Women and the Communist Party, USA, 1930–40," *Socialist Review* 45 (May/June 1979) and the bulk of Dixler's thoroughly researched dissertation (n. 4) deal with the Popular Front period. Therefore, I have chosen to concentrate on the earlier, largely unexamined areas of Communist discourse and practice, which illuminate the particular direction the Party took in the later 1930s.

37. This was the title of Browder's keynote address to the Eighth Convention of the Party in 1932 (issued as a pamphlet by Workers Library under that title); William Z. Foster's and James W. Ford's acceptance speeches when nominated for president and vice-president of the U.S., respectively, at the same convention were published as *For Food and Freedom*.

38. *Daily Worker*, 1 and 2 November 1934.

39. The "women's page" of the *Sunday Worker Magazine*, 5 July 1936, for instance, has a "Dear-Mr.-Husband" contest in which women were to write letters "telling him in what ways he treats you as an inferior, why you think he does it, and in what ways he is harming himself by doing so." In Ann Rivington' s column on the same page, "Women's Point of View," she described a conversation in the Women's Committee meeting at the recent national party convention where women discussed "Husband Trouble," as in the unnamed Detroit leader who had said that she and her comrades were allowed to keep house *and* go to meetings, but when they "forge ahead and become speakers and leaders, that's when our husbands clamped down. They don't want us to surpass them." On the evolution of the *Working Woman*, see Van Gosse, "The Working Woman/Woman Today," in Buhle, Buhle and Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left*. In 1936, it had become *Woman Today*, aimed at all "progressive" women, with some well-known feminists and non-Party women among its contributors. In 1937, however, for reasons that are still unclear, it ceased publication, indicating once again the so-far unexplored complications of the Party's formal "women's work."

40. *Daily Worker*, 1 November 1940.

41. A significant body of autobiographical work and family or oral histories indicates what a difference their own self-activity, in the context of the Party's long-term

validation, made to the lives of some working-class women who came into the Communist movement during the 1930s and 1940s. See Kim Chernin, *In My Mother's House: A Daughter's Story* (New York, 1984); Kate Simon, *Bronx Primitive: Portraits in a Childhood* (New York, 1983); *Full-Time Active: Sara Plotkin, An Oral History* (New York: Community Documentation Workshop, 1980); the oral histories collected in Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd (eds.), *Rank and File: Personal Histories of Working-Class Organizers* (New York, 1988); and the vivid testimonies in documentary films such as *Seeing Red* and *Rosie the Riveter*.

42. Several histories dealing with the New Left and the 1960s have noted that the rise of women's liberation benefitted substantially from the presence of "red diaper feminists" among young women from communist or leftist family backgrounds, who had been exposed to concepts of women's equality and plentiful examples of women's agency while growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, and who were not prepared to tolerate the notorious sexism of the New Left's male-student cadre. See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York, 1980), 62, 105 , 116–24.

A recent study of the United Electrical Workers union, or "UE," the principal bastion of leftist institutional strength from the late 1930s through the early 1950s, casts new light on the potential that may have existed among local women activists in the CPUSA's milieu and even among their male comrades. See Lisa Ann Kannenberg, "From World War to Cold War: Women Electrical Workers and Their Union" (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, 1990).