Sisters and Workers

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Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981, xviii +332 pages. $8.50.

The period of working-class militance with which Meredith Tax's book is concerned was rediscovered and re-examined by socialist-feminist scholars in the 1970s. The reason for their interest is political, for this was surely one of the heroic moments of the United States working class. It was the time of the great shirtwaist strike in New York City and the bitter strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which became a veritable community-in-arms (though without arms) united against the very well-armed forces of the mill and the state. It was also the time when the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) had some real power.

Established labor history had tended to neglect this pre-World War I period of activism in favor of the Depression era, when the CIO was created and the working class won government recognition of unions and the New Deal welfare package. Feminists, however, perceived that during the CIO period women were relatively less active in forwarding their own political, economic, and social interests than in the earlier period.[1] Furthermore, socialist-feminists tended to like the revolutionary, or, at least, the more radical moments of American history.

Women's historians built in part on the work of such radical labor historians as David Montgomery, Melvin Dubofsky, Herbert Gutman, and (later) Jeremy Brecher, who had explored other aspects of working-class history. The feminists naturally focused on women's activities

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Members of the WTUL demonstrate in the Murray Hill section of Manhattan. M.B. Schnapper, American Labor *(Washington, DC, 1972).*

(although feminist reinterpretations of men's and male-dominated militance would also be useful, a theme to which I will return) and created a significant body of scholarship which addresses working-women's militance in this century's first decades. Nancy Schrom Dye, Robin Miller Jacoby, and Sarah Eisenstein have studied the Women's Trade Union League closely.[2] Alice Kessler-Harris published a powerful study of the attitudes of union men towards women's unionization, an article that is essential reading for anyone approaching labor history.[3] And general histories of women's work emphasize this period.[4]

Meredith Tax's book is a qualitative step beyond what this new research has yet given us. Not only does it offer a narrative and interpretation of working women's organizational work from 1880 to 1917, but it compares that work in the two major cities of Chicago and New York. Tax looks at organizational leadership, maintenance and fragmentation over the whole period, and also at acute, explosive struggles and the factions that they generate. Most important, her inquiry is undertaken with political purpose: it is always related to contemporary issues and keeps the non-historian reader in mind.

In general, the previous historical thinking on this period has had certain characteristic distortions. There was a tendency to romanticize the great strikes and their working-class leadership. We—and I very definitely include myself in this criticism—savored what we believed to be the spontaneity of outbursts of defiance, the unbroken solidarity which we saw as based on some kind of instinctive class loyalty. We often in-

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vidiously contrasted the integrity of the working-class women to the untrustworthiness of their "bourgeois" allies. We exaggerated the radicalism and the strength of these struggles. From romanticizing it was but a short step to moralizing, a common failure of radical historians. There was a contemptuous tone towards the middle-class WTUL members, for example, condemning their betrayal and cowardice and concluding that cross-class alliances would subvert the working-class struggle.

It must be said that Tax's thought was once guilty of these distortions too. Now, perhaps, is the time to confess—in violation of the academic norms of book-reviewing—that Meredith and I are friends. When we lived in the same city (London and then Boston) we participated in the anti-war and the women's liberation movements together. What is more relevant, in 1969 we began meeting together with a few others in order to rethink history from a socialist-feminist perspective. In the twelve years since, many of us moved to different places. Our group became an informal, national, sometimes international, network of dozens. The conversations continued as a movable seminar—sometimes in formally constituted groups lasting a year or so, sometimes in private visits, sometimes in encounters at conferences, sometimes in correspondence. (I think of how many of us, in the acknowledgments and footnotes of our writings, in clumsy ways, wanting to avoid sentimentality, tried to communicate the collectiveness of our insights.) As Ellen DuBois, part of this mutually influencing network, reminded me in reading a draft of this review, parts of earlier drafts of Meredith's book have been circulating in typescript and influencing others for years.

Still, its publication, as *The Rising of the Women*, revealed what was to me a new book. It is disciplined, tightly argued, and relatively freer of romanticism and moralism than any other piece on this subject. It offers an analysis of, not an apologia for, two major efforts at cross-class women's alliances. It looks at working-class leadership respectfully, without condescending assumptions about its spontaneous, uneducated nature. It is committed to making these past events come alive and work for us without exaggerating the "lessons" that can be drawn. It is not a book for specialists. Do not be misled by the relative specificity of the topic—enormous issues are discussed here. A thoughtful reader is led by this material to reconsider the value of unions for women, the possibility of class solidarity between men and women, the question of cross-class alliances, the ultimate value of the Marxist view of the organization of wage laborers.

Tax begins by conceptualizing a "united front of women," a form that has appeared frequently in working women's struggles and which is distinctly different from a union. The united front means the alliance of

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"women in the socialist movement, the labor movement, the national liberation movements and the feminist movement." (Only three groups figure here since national liberation struggles were not prominently involved in these events.) Unfortunately, Tax does not adequately distinguish this "united front" conception from a long history of Marxist-Leninist "fronts" and coalitions of many sorts. My own reading of Tax's concept makes it different, and important, because it directs a new look at all of labor and working-class history from the perspective of women's experiences. Placing women at the center has several consequences: it means studying the rank-and-file and not the leadership, at least in mixed organizations; it means, of course, studying the unskilled; it means looking at working-class households and family life as part of the class experience. And above all, it means revising the assumption that the trade union, as the form has been designed by men, is the only, or the essential, form of working-class organization.

After a general introduction about united fronts of women, the book then shows the operation of various united fronts in four historical "moments," some protracted and some brief: 1) women's labor organizing in Chicago culminating in the Illinois Women's Alliance (IWA), from about 1880 to the early 1890s; 2) the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) in New York from the late 1890s to 1917; 3) the New York shirtwaist strike of 1909; 4) the Lawrence woolen mills strike of 1912.

The newest material, and the happiest, is the story of the Illinois Women's Alliance. It substantially improved the conditions of poor and working people in Chicago and elsewhere in the state. The IWA success story, in turn, demands a reconsideration of the more well-known WTUL, for it is not possible to explain the latter's failure on the general and abstract grounds that working-class women cannot ally with and rely on bourgeois or middle-class feminists. In Chicago they did, and it worked.

Furthermore, in offering these careful and comparative studies of Chicago and New York efforts, the former from the 1880s, the latter from the 1900s. Tax is implicitly suggesting yet another re-periodization of labor history. Socialist feminists of the 1970s discovered the 1900-1915 period; Tax makes the 1880s the high point.[5] This earlier emphasis has important implications which should be explored further. It links the Chicago women's activity with the Knights of Labor and of course with the powerful Hull House.

Tax's major thesis emerges from the Chicago-WTUL comparison. She concludes that cross-class alliances can work where the working-class women have the collective strength to dominate or at least to match the political clout that the more upper-class women get from their class privileges—speaking and writing skills, connections with the press and

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other centers of influence, self-confidence—and where the working-class members can check the tendency towards compromise (or, worse, betrayal) that comes from class privileges. The working women, Tax argues, will have this collective strength primarily if they have a basis of support in unions. Where working-class sexism is at its most extreme, and the unions (as with the garment unions of New York) and the socialist organizations (as with the Socialist Party of New York) regularly ignore and even stand against the interests of women workers, the working women will be similarly victimized by their feminist allies.

But if this thesis were the truth and the whole truth, working women would have been trapped in a double-bind. It was usually precisely *because* of the inadequacy of unions to represent working women's interests that the latter turned to non-employed feminists for alliances at all. When women were well supported by established unions, or freely allowed to form their own unions, they would have been—still are—less likely to need these cross-class alliances. It seems to me that here, as in several other places in this book, Tax draws back from exploring the implications of her own evidence. It is important that this criticism should be understood in its context: the fact that it is possible to engage in a political debate like this with a book is evidence of the clarity of the book and of the author's conception of it as part of a *current* struggle, of which a *current* effort to understand the past is itself a part. Tax's argument suggests, I think, that cross-class *coalitions* can work but not cross-class *organizations.* Tax seems to doubt the possibility that women of different classes can join as *individuals* and work together democratically. She also doubts that "middle-class" feminists can offer much that is useful to social transformation.

In short, in the amalgam that is called socialist feminism today, Tax's book is biased against feminism. It is true that in Tax's critique of the anti-woman policies of unions and socialist groups, she makes some very feminist points. Though these criticisms have been published previously, her masterful familiarity with the strategic debates of the international socialist movement gives her new insights. For example, she notices the effects of centralism on the woman policy of the Socialist Party. Many SP decisions came from general policies established at international conferences, without regard to different national conditions. Centralism in the United States led to decisions based on New York conditions which were inappropriate to mid-western socialism, for example. Tax's own participation in the socialist movement adds sophistication to her treatment of intra-movement dispute and ideological disagreement; her condemnation of socialist sexism is never moralistic, always complex and historical.

By contrast, her condemnation of feminism for its faults *is* moralistic

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and ahistorical. An entire chapter discusses the struggle about the "woman question" within the socialist movement. At the beginning of that chapter, early twentieth century feminism is labelled conservative and racist; there is no appreciation of internal debate. It is not that she is wrong about the net conservatism of the mainstream suffrage movement by this time, so much as that she is repeating a caricature, one found decades ago in the work of Aileen Kraditor and William O'Neill and since challenged (pretty effectively, I should say) by the work of people like Mari Jo Buhle,[6] Allen Davis, Ellen DuBois, and others. That there was racism in the feminist movement is true; that there was as much racism in the union and socialist movements Tax does not mention. Similarly, the content of "conservatism" is not detailed. Electoral ambitions? Sexual rather than economic issues? Working for educational opportunities for the already privileged? What is conservative? Throughout her discussion of the Socialist-Party debates about a woman policy, for example, Tax relatively neglects the not-strictly-economic issues which were raised within the SP: birth control, sex education, marriage. Is the implication that these are nonsocialist, possibly even conservative issues? I don't really think Tax believes this, but there are frequent inconsistent slips into this kind of Marxist orthodoxy. Elsewhere she uses the terms "left" and "right," as in "left errors" and "right errors," in mechanistic and unexamined ways. (It is not clear to me that, as Tax argues, errors "which see only the class struggle as important and negate the need for any separate work against the oppression of women" are left; I would be inclined to call them "right.") The term "bourgeois feminists" is unanalyzed and used without quotation marks.

Ultimately, I have only one major disagreement with this book. I think feminism in itself, unqualified by any modifiers such as bourgeois or socialist, was much more radical than Tax thinks it was. Attacks on the sexual hierarchy and the whole sex/gender system were as subversive as attacks on the class system in the long-term goal of ending domination. Suffragists of the early twentieth century were, indeed, too conservative, but it is as much because they were not feminist enough as because they were elitist with regard to the working class. Socialist feminists, even within the Socialist Party, were sometimes successful because they were *more* feminist than the mainstream suffragists, thinking and agitating about sexual freedom, living as nonmarried women, criticizing male chauvinism in intimate and informal as well as in organizational forms. Tax is aware of this (e.g., pp. 156-7), but draws back from its implication about the best forms in which to organize the working class.

It is necessary to go further in questioning the ultimate usefulness of trade unions in fighting for the interests of working-class women (and possibly men too), but doing so is frightening because, without good

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alternatives, it is a negative subject. Tax, for example, cities the "double day"—the fact that women put in another full-time job of unpaid labor at home after their wage labor—as a major obstacle to organizing women. I would turn this perception around: what she calls an *obstacle* to organizing, presumably organizing towards some other goal, is also part of the *target*, the enemy, against which we must organize. Some part of that enemy, some part of its essential strength, is the men of the working class, the husbands and the fathers of the objects of women's organizing. It is not clear how unions, conventionally defined, can help women against this enemy.

In the nineteenth century there were instances of women workers organizing "unions" on a different model, or rather organizing themselves in a period before the modern definition of a union had hardened. The Knights of Labor, for example, included nonemployed women, housewives, in their unions. Women workers in many places formed groups which functioned more like support groups than like collective-bargaining organizations and which did not restrict their concerns to the workplace. Today, AFL officials and Marxist-Leninists alike would see these forms as diluting class antagonism. Women's tendency towards straying from a workplace, employee-vs-employer focus, is not a dilution of the class struggle but an expression of women's actually different place in social organization. It is not only that women were not as often in the labor force as men; it is that for most of industrial history the working class, men and women alike, have wanted the male to earn a "breadwinner" wage and allow mothers to spend full time on child-raising and housework. Lacking that family wage, women worked two jobs. Integration into the labor force was not their aspiration, even if it was Marx's. It is not only that men are sexist; it is that unions became, by the

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late nineteenth century, organizations that did not necessarily represent women's interests.

My disagreement with Meredith Tax should not be overstated. She would agree that men and their sexism are part of the problem against which women must organize; I agree that women's resignation (a mood often necessary for survival) about their duties at home has made it hard to promote political action among them (just as men's acceptance of masculine "duties" has often made it hard to promote action among them). We both agree that male-dominated unions and socialist organizations have not usually had as their goals the interests of women, and that it is therefore hardly surprising that women have not flocked to be included.

That Tax's book calls up these political arguments is a reflection of its merit, its politicalness and seriousness. It is not unimportant that it is written by a nonacademic, free of some of the pressures and constraints that create academic monographs. This is a book that serves simultaneously the development of history-writing and of history-making. ☐

Notes

1. Although this perception now may be proven wrong, as historians such as Ruth Meyerowitz reexamine women's roles in the CIO.

2. Nancy Schrom Dye, "As Equals and As Sisters." *Feminism, The Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia, Mo., 1980); Robin Miller Jacoby, "Feminism and Class Consciousness in the British and American Women's Trade Union Leagues, 1890-1925," in *Liberating Women's History,* ed. Berenice Carroll (Urbana, 1976); and "The Women's Trade Union League and American Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 3 (Fall 1975).

3. Alice Kessler Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and Their Union," *Labor History* 17 (Winter 1976); and "Where Are the Organized Women Workers?" *Feminist Studies* 3 (Fall 1975).

4. Beginning with *America's Working Women,* ed. Baxandall, Gordon, Reverby (New York, 1976); then Barbara Werthmeimer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America* (New York, 1977); Carol Hymowitz and Michaele Weissman, *A History of Women and the American Labor Movement From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York, 1979).

5. I am indebted to Ellen DuBois for noticing these implications regarding periodization and for other trenchant comments. For general critical comments on this review, and for teaching me what I know about women's working-class history in the first place, I am indebted also to Susan Reverby and above all to Ros Baxandall.

6. Since this review was written, Buhle's excellent *Women and American Socialism 1870-1920* (Univ. of Illinois, 1981) has appeared which takes the whole discussion of socialist-feminist connections and conflicts to a higher and more complex level.

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