

Women Workers of Chicago

HOW THE PIONEER WORK WAS DONE BY A BAND OF SELF-SACRIFICING
WOMEN WHO PAVED THE WAY FOR THE POWERFUL UNIONS OF THE
PRESENT DAY.

Lizzie M. Swank Holmes

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CHICAGO has been called the best organized city, especially in regard to women workers, in the United States, and the demonstration on last Labor Day was sufficiently important to give spectators a fair idea of the immense strength of union labor in the city. The history of the economic movement among women wage workers of that city is typical of that in all other large industrial centers, and hence should be of general interest.

But this encouraging state of affairs, so far as women are concerned, has been the result of long years of patient, earnest work. Twenty-five years ago the situation was very different. A few of the trades were partly unionized and the influence of organization was beginning to be felt, but that broader, fraternal feeling which today prevails among all kinds of workers, to a more or less extent, was almost unknown.

Women who worked in factories and shops at that time had not arrived at a realizing sense of the situation. They did not know that a new condition confronted them. They failed to comprehend that the whole economic and social world had changed within the few preceding years and that their position as wage workers was but a part of a great evolutionary movement.

They took with them to the factory the traditions of their old secluded life. It was difficult for them to realize that they were now part of a great industrial army, and that the conditions, needs, and interests of all were related. The feeling of fraternity, which is the basis of trade unionism, was entirely unknown to them.

Therefore the earliest efforts toward organizing women workers were attended with great difficulties. Accounts have been given recently in various publications of the present work of organizing women wageworkers. Naturally such history commences after organization had grown to be an accepted thing, and the trades in which women work are fast falling into line. But before this time there were years of educational work in which earnest determination, courage, and patience had to be brought to bear upon the gigantic obstacles in the way.

In 1880 the writer was a wage worker in Chicago and deeply interested in the problems which were presenting themselves. I had pondered much over the lack of sympathy of the women among whom I worked, and wondered if anything could be done to bring about a deeper sense

of the common need among them all. And just at this time I discovered that an embryo working women's union existed. An evening paper's advertisement furnished the information that a meeting would be held the next Sunday. I talked with my fellow workers and urged them to attend this meeting; out of nearly two hundred workers four were present—an intelligent young German woman, an elderly English woman, my sister, and myself.

When we arrived at the place of meeting we found a fair-sized hall quite well filled with women and a few men.

Among the women advocating the organization of their sex into trade unions were Mrs. Elizabeth Rogers, the presiding officer of the meeting; Mrs. Lucy Parsons; Mrs. O. A. Bishop, who became quite popular for her ringing speeches in behalf of working women and children; Mrs. Bell, a young and earnest worker, and Mrs. George A. Shilling. Several stirring addresses were made and urgent invitations given for the women wage-earners present to join the union.

This first working women's union of Chicago had been organized about a year before by Mrs. Alzinah P. Stevens, who, for many years afterward, was a power in industrial circles, assisted by Mrs. Bishop and Mrs. Rogers. This series of meetings had been part of Mrs. Stevens' plan when she left the city for California, the hope being that a number of the actual wage workers of the city might be induced to form unions of their own. The meetings gave an impetus to the work, and I know we spared no pains or hard work to bring our fellow workers to a realizing sense of the principles of fraternity which our working brothers were beginning to comprehend. But it was very difficult to make any headway. Women looked askance at gatherings where "women spoke in meetin'," and they thought that trade unions were "bold and common *and* no nice girl would belong to one." The idea that working women had "a cause" was new and unconventional and scarcely to be entertained by these women so recently from the retirement of the fireside. They might be induced to attend a meeting or two, and even be delighted there, but joining a union—that was a different thing, and too bold and decided a step for women in those days.

Besides, most of the young and goodlooking girls looked upon their employment as only temporary; they would marry sooner or later, and thus escape from the shop. What became of sewing women as a class they did not care.

Our Chicago Working Women's Union had only a small membership of women who were willing to give their evenings and Sundays for "the cause" which they had at heart. When we had no money to hire a hall we met at each other's homes and discussed economic questions among ourselves, thus gaining an enlightenment on these subjects which we needed. We also talked and exhorted in public wherever an opportunity occurred to discuss industrial conditions, and perhaps wielded a wider influence than we knew.

But this first organization as such, went out of existence early in the eighties. In 1882 a woman's assembly was formed, Elizabeth Rogers being presiding officer. I was made statistician, my duty being to gather all possible facts concerning wages, sanitary conditions of work rooms, hours of labor, and other matters pertaining to the employment of women. Our first members were nearly all listed as "housekeepers," the time not having arrived when actual wage-earners "joined the union."

This woman's assembly did much excellent educational work during the next few years. Many open meetings were held. Good speakers addressed the audiences. The members often spoke or read essays on labor topics.

We also visited workshops and talked to the employes, sought out abuses, called the attention of the public to them, and in every way possible advanced the interests of working women. But

for many years it was slow work and we could see but little accomplished in comparison with our ardent hopes.

To show how little the spirit of fraternity among women prevailed in those days, I will relate an incident occurring in the factory in which I worked. When the spring work commenced some new rules and prices were made and rigidly enforced. They caused a great deal of dissatisfaction. The women would gather in a corner near me at the noon hour and complain, protest, and cry, but without suggesting any practical plan for relief. I was not particularly disgruntled myself, as I was doing as well as I usually did, but I said to them one day: "Why, girls, if you think the new rules unjust and the prices too low, why do you not go to Mr. S and tell him so? He might change them for you."

"Oh, we don't dare do that! He might discharge us."

"Well, you might write down your grievances, sign them, promise to stand by one another, and send the paper to him. He won't discharge all of you."

They approved of the idea and after talking it over a little longer, asked me to write out the paper, as they said I could do it better than any of them. I agreed, and set down only what they dictated. The statement concluded with a clause that if any were discharged all would go out. Then it was passed around the shop from one to another quietly. One hundred and fifty girls signed the paper. Four refused; two because being foreigners they could not be made to understand what it was all about, and two because they said "they were afraid of getting into trouble, and it was not becoming to ladies anyway."

In a little over an hour the paper completed the rounds of the shop without attracting the attention of the forelady, and then one of the employes, pretty, young Mrs. Davis, volunteered to take it to the office.

Every one stopped work pending the coming interview with the employer, except the four above mentioned and the pressers. The forelady came down the aisle to see what was the matter, but the spectacle of 150 girls sitting idly by their machines when there was nothing wrong with the steam was so unprecedented that she was frightened, and went back to her table without saying a word.

Presently we heard Mr. S. come storming up the stairs three steps at a time. Many of the girls turned pale and took some work in their hands. Mr. S. ordered the steam turned off, and an ominous silence reigned. He called the employes around him and then he commenced a tirade something like this:

"What do you silly hussies mean by sending me such a paper as dis? Dis is not ladylike; dis is shameful, outrageous! When me and my vife haf done so much for you! Ve are your best friends; ve know what is best for you, and what ve can do for you. You haf been listening to some of dem dangerous agitators; you should be shamed mit yourselves! If somedings does not suit you, why you not come to me as to a friend, and I fix it for you? My vife, she lay awake nights tinkering what she can do for you girls, and dis is de way you pay her. I know who wrote dis paper. Nobody here would or could do it but Mrs. Swank. She has been going to some of dem bad labor meetings and dere is where she got dis idea. She and her sister. Miss Hunt, may get deir books made out and go home. Mrs. Davis and her sister may do de same. De rest of you go back to work and see dat you behafes yourselves."

I tried to say a word in my own behalf, but he would not listen.

"You haf been teaching dese girls to be discontented, and I want you here no more.

However I did manage to say this much:

“Could I make your work hands discontented if they had no cause, Mr. S.? You commenced your business four years ago in one large room and you and your wife lived in one curtained-off corner of it, very economically. Today you may be considered rich and you live in a fine suburban residence. These girls who have been with you from the first, expending their youth, health, and strength in your service, possess not a penny more than they did in the beginning. They have had a poor living in the meantime, and that is all. Where are all the products of their labor? In your hands; why should they be contented?”

“That will do, Mrs. Swank. Such talk is incendiary. You may go.”

We four women walked out, got our “time,” and went away. The others crept shamefacedly back to their seats, murmuring, “I didn’t complain; I didn’t say anything; it wasn’t me that wanted to raise a fuss. *Soon the steam was turned on and every girl was working away for dear life. No one spoke to us; no one had a word of sympathy, gratitude, or regret for us; each one thought only of her own little job and how she could best stand in with the boss.*” But, after all, Mr. S. followed me to the door, and said confidentially:

“Now, Mrs. Swank, I recognize your ability and I want to gif you some good advice. You let all such things alone and you try to make money. You’re smart enough. You come back to work in a couple of veeks; I gifs you your place again.”

I was foolish, perhaps, in those days. I answered:

“Mr. S., can you not imagine any one using their talents and strength for a better purpose than making money ? *And then I left him staring after me in a puzzled sort of way.*

The other two sisters, I learned afterward, went back to work, and the obnoxious rules were changed and some of the appallingly low prices were slightly raised. They reaped the benefit of the protest, and we the disgrace. Such was one of the crude attempts at bettering conditions. It must be remembered that we had not then succeeded in organizing permanent unions among women.

My work as statistician of the assembly was attended with great difficulty. It seemed impossible to induce a working girl to inform anyone how much she earned, how many hours she worked, what were the sanitary conditions of her shop, or if there were any unjust rules. I had the advantage of being a worker myself, of being with them and among them on an equal footing day after day, and yet it was only by shrewd watching and some strategy that I could gain the least information from them.

Mrs. Florence Kelly, inspector of factories in Chicago, often spoke of the same difficulty. Women would not tell her the truth about their work, no matter how kind or how tactful she was with them. It is hard to account for this strange secretiveness at first glance, but it was comprehensible when one came to know them better.

These women, most of them, were Americans who had been carefully looked after and protected in their own comfortable homes, and whose mothers and grandmothers before them had been similarly treated. Perhaps they had worked as hard in the home and as thoroughly earned their living as now, but it had been in a manner that the world knew nothing about.

With these traditional ideas, they still considered that their affairs were their own, and if they worked hard and got little for it, it was nobody’s business. They preferred to bear their privations alone, and allow others to think that they were comfortably situated, quite well off, and needed no one’s sympathy.

As yet each worker considered only her own case; she did not remember that she was one of a great throng, all with interests, needs, trials, hardships, very much alike, and that some knowledge of her particular case might lead to benefiting the whole.

They were slowly to grow into this realization, for, when the time came in recent years that working women were ready to unite in trade unions, they forgot that they had ever been utterly opposed to the idea. But at this time, however, they religiously kept their affairs to themselves, as though it were a sin to divulge their real condition.

To sink her love for privacy in personal matters for the good of her class was something not to be thought of for a moment by the woman wage worker.

The useful career of the woman's assembly came to an end with the troubles following May 1, 1886, when the eight hour movement was at its highest. A difference of opinion grew up among the members, some going on to extreme radical views, others turning back to absolute conservatism. But the work the members had accomplished was not lost.

They had really done more than they knew. They had blazed the way for future organizations to follow. They had familiarized timid, ignorant women with the idea of organization for mutual benefit. They had taught these women that the conditions of labor were not the same as in the old days of home work, and that it was necessary to meet new conditions with new methods.

The logic of events also helped, and when other organizers who were more clearly trade unionists and not amateur economists, came on the scene, they found the field partly ripe for harvesting.

Sewing girls as well as many other classes of women workers, fell into line as fast as they could be handled. Now they number their unions by hundreds and their membership by thousands. Today, when a poor sewing woman is wronged, she does not creep away and weep over it alone, unpitied and helpless, but a powerful organization through the proper officials sees to it that her wrongs are righted, and that employers shall be as nearly just as present economic conditions will allow.

It has seemed not an over-difficult task for modern organizers to bring the working women's unions of Chicago into the good working order they have; but, they deserve all the credit that has been given them.

The work of the pioneers can not be defined, counted, and set down in statistical figures. At first glance it may look as though there were little to show for their efforts. But it is true, nevertheless, that the latter workers could not have accomplished what they have had it not been for the devoted, earnest, often disheartening toil that the pioneers in trade unionism performed.

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