Roundtable on Dorothy Sue Cobble's *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004)

Introduction to Roundtable

Eileen Boris

This roundtable originated with a session at the 2004 meeting of the Social Science History Association. That scholarly meeting has a tradition of book panels, which have proven to be productive spaces for interpretative engagement. *The Other Women's Movement* is precisely one of those paradigm-challenging works that invite reflection on the political, historical, and theoretical assumptions we bring to the construction of history. Standpoint matters, it reminds us, for establishing who counts, under what name, and to what end. Dorothy Sue Cobble focuses on a neglected group of women union activists, a second generation of social feminists who traded maternalist ideology for the quest for economic and social citizenship, who sought equal rights through recognition of female responsibility for social reproduction rather than by way of individualist striving in the marketplace or even a solidaristic "male" standard. By doing so, she unsettles four key areas of scholarship: the timing and character of the women's movement in the twentieth century; the trajectory of the labor movement from World War II to the 1970s; the shape of midcentury labor liberalism; and the importance of class in the study of intersectionality.

As reflected in the following astute commentaries, contemporary feminism's equality-difference conundrum haunts assessment of the past. Alice Kessler-Harris is particularly skeptical over the impact of labor feminism's gender conventionality on the attainment of economic citizenship. But also behind these contributions is, as Elizabeth Faue again stresses, the gender problem that labor history has inherited from the industrial and extractive unions that for so long constituted its object of study. Eric Arnesen notes the political context in which labor feminism flourished and its parallels with civil rights unionism, with which it was closely allied. Susan Porter Benson's query about the engagement of women from other racial/ethnic groups in the labor feminist project resembles the call for a deeper probing into the relationship between rank and file and leaders that other respondents more generally wish for. Labor feminism itself was not monolithic, as Cobble shows, nor was

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the labor movement or the men and women within its ranks. Recovering alternatives remains as important as explaining how they lost—or discovering they partially won, as this class-based interpretation of feminism underscores.

This story further challenges conventional understanding of the welfare state and American citizenship through linking economic to social rights by way of a focus on the double day and the revaluing of domestic labor. The labor feminist fight in the legislative arena, as well as through collective bargaining, also cannot be dismissed as merely a continuation of the old social feminist strategy of asking protection from the state when unions were pushing for labor standards legislation and labor law reform. Labor standards, as with Title VII and the Occupational Safety and Health Act, expanded, while collective bargaining constricted, which perhaps is more of a commentary on the failure of labor liberalism than the success of a feminist work and family agenda. But what the AFL-CIO most wanted, as Kessler-Harris points out, was not necessarily the same as the agenda of labor feminism. Male power within the house of labor remained, although this persistent masculinism was an anomaly in a sea of feminization—not only in terms of the rise of service labor and the composition of the labor movement but in the turn to legislation itself.

These commentaries, along with Cobble's spirited response, then, point to the future as well as interpret the past of a gendered labor history. A reconfigured labor force, Cobble concludes in *The Other Women's Movement*, demands a new class politics; "the next women's movement" (228) still must quest after economic equity. Speaking Spanish and organizing around immigrant rights, the next labor feminists are doing just that by continuing the unfinished struggle to upgrade care work, gain living wages, and enhance daily life for us all. Such labor histories can provide inspiration for this struggle.

Commentary: *The Riveting of a Women's Labor Movement*

Susan Porter Benson

In 1979 I gave a talk about working-class women's militancy to the Boston chapter of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). The audience was a historian's dream: enthusiastic, well informed, and full of astute questions. My own questions that day were not as astute, for I never thought to ponder what historical forces and experiences had produced this remarkable gathering. Fortunately for those who study the labor movement, working-class women's activism, women's history, and the late-twentieth-century United States, Dorothy Sue Cobble has asked exactly these questions and has produced a superb book that fundamentally changes our historical understandings and challenges us to rethink contemporary efforts for social justice.

The Other Women's Movement restores to the historical record the activities of those whom Cobble labels "labor feminists": women who from the 1940s to the present "articulated a particular variant of feminism that put the needs of working-class women at its core and . . . championed the labor movement as the principle vehicle through which the lives of the majority of women could be bettered" (3). Long before

post-structuralism warned us to avoid binary thinking, labor feminists were collapsing dichotomies. They denied the contradiction between "difference" and "equality" feminism, seeking both impersonal fairness and equality as workers and the special consideration they felt was due them as women. They rejected the notion of separate spheres, with its corollary that the private was inferior to the public, and insisted that their domestic work be given parity with their paid work. They refused to choose between collective bargaining and state action, pursuing their goals both through their unions and through governments at all levels, from efforts to broaden the coverage of the federal Fair Labor Standards Act to campaigns to revise sex-based state labor laws to battles for publicly supported child care centers in Detroit. Cobble adds labor feminists to the growing list of examples that contradict the trickle-down model of cultural change, showing how new patterns percolated up the class structure—both within the working class (as blue-collar women made both demands and advances before higher-status white-collar workers) and among women in general (as labor feminists insisted on the integral connection of life on and off the job before middle-class and elite feminists).

Cobble dedicates this book to her mother, a devoted member of the Women's Auxiliary of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, and "all the women like her" (xii), in the conviction that they have been "misunderstood and misrepresented . . . in policy and scholarship" (1). Who were these remarkable women? Unlike current union women, deprived until Cobble's book of more than a fragmentary understanding of their activist ancestors, these women knew where they had come from: they launched their careers when the early-twentieth-century generation of woman labor activists (Mary Anderson and Pauline Newman, for example) was still on the scene. Like their forebears, they came from workplace sectors dominated by women; unlike them, they were more likely to be born in the United States, African American, married, and mothers. The communists among them were winnowed by McCarthyism and "by the early 1950s, . . . the majority . . . were concentrated in CIO unions that shared a left-liberal anticommunist agenda and favored close ties with the Democratic party" (28). The ranks of wage-earning labor feminists were augmented by auxiliary members like Cobble's mother as well as by college-educated women who filled staff positions in unions.

Cobble's chronology of labor feminism challenges the conventional periodization of both the labor movement and feminism. The labor's-new-millions 1930s were not the glory years of unionization for women, whose proportion among unionized workers remained virtually unchanged. During the next three decades, however, the labor movement feminized as women held their own in some manufacturing unions (the needle trades and food processing), increased their proportion in others (autos and meatpacking), and dramatically increased their participation in service-industry unions (food service, telephones, and department stores). These growing numbers provided the base from which women made demands of male leadership and generated pressure to increase women's leadership roles. Looking beyond the male-dominated

top levels of national and international leadership, Cobble finds a significant number of women, many of them African American, in secondary "positions as local and regional union officers as well as on national staff" (43).

Similarly, the labor feminists' 1940s and 1950s look very different from the conventional portrayal of these decades as the nadir of feminism. Departing from the dominant culture's militant domesticity, labor feminists articulated what Cobble terms a new version of social feminism. If the old had its base in organizations such as the Women's Trade Union League, the new was firmly allied with the U.S. Women's Bureau, labor unions, civil rights organizations, and a variety of ad hoc coalitions and networks that grew up in local areas and around specific issues. The heart of the new social feminism was a rejection of maternalism and a demand for "first-class economic citizenship" (56). Given the history of women's wage earning, this was no simple goal. It involved "transforming women's market work . . . [and] also paying attention to women's household labor," "accept[ing] the permanence of women's wage labor . . . and . . . claim[ing] a right to wage work equal to that of men" while insisting on "'special' accommodations for women's maternal responsibilities, what they later called 'social rights'" (57). By the mid-1940s, labor feminists had built a broad program on these general principles and continued to pursue that program through the mid-1960s. Not June Cleavers, indeed.

Labor feminists launched a campaign to implement first-class economic citizenship, debating particulars within their "shared ideological framework" (58) and staking out an independent political path. They countered the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) with the Women's Status Bill, calling for a commission on the status of women modeled on the Civil Rights Commission in the hopes of framing gender policy that was less grounded in elitism, free market ideology, and individualism than the ERA. Although the Women's Status Bill was no more successful than the ERA, the labor feminists nevertheless used it to keep issues of gender difference in the public debate. In claiming women's job rights—the securing of wage justice and seniority rights as well as an end to marriage, age, and especially racial/ethnic and sex discrimination—labor feminists challenged their male co-unionists and employers alike. Cobble points out, on the one hand, that women in different sectors interpreted these rights differently, pragmatically assessing their own situations rather than clinging to a rigid ideology. On the other hand, she argues, "despite potential fissures along the lines of industry and occupation, of race, of family status and other differences, the political consensus and coalition that labor feminists had forged by the end of the war remained intact" (92).

Cobble's discussion of how labor feminists pursued their varied goals is subtle and complex, emphasizing how positions evolved to meet changing historical circumstances; the labor feminists were not, unlike their adversaries in the National Women's Party, frozen in time. Child care centers, for example, first seen as an inadequate solution to the larger problems of women's low wages and long hours had, by the 1950s, come to be seen as "a legitimate social entitlement" (133). Labor feminists built a mixed record, but even when they failed to reach their specific objectives they kept

alive oppositional positions that would shape later discussions. For example, in a labor movement all too eager to trade time for money, labor feminists stood up against the exactions of the double day and involuntary overtime, even though their successful advocacy of state laws limiting work hours did not meet the needs of all women.

Labor feminism moved into high gear in the late 1950s, energized by the AFL-CIO merger, the civil rights movement, the waning of McCarthyism, and the hopes of a Democratic victory in 1960. The first national conference of union women in 1961 canvassed many of the issues that the President's Commission on the Status of Women would debate under the guidance of labor feminists Esther Peterson and Katherine Ellickson. The commission's report made much of the labor feminist agenda into a national agenda. Legislatively, the record was mixed: limited federal support for child care centers and the dramatic expansion of the coverage of the Fair Labor Standards Act to agricultural, retail, and service workers were countered by the failure of the Equal Pay Act to incorporate labor feminists' long-sought goal of comparable pay for jobs of comparable worth. This "high tide" of labor feminism was, however, soon to ebb: by early 1966, Cobble argues, the labor feminist network succumbed to the long-term "disputes over sex-based labor laws, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, and the ERA, [and] the threads of consensus binding labor feminists together finally snapped" (181).

It was in the wake of this fracture that CLUW was formed as the "realization of a long sought goal of labor feminists: the creation of a national organization for trade union women" and not, as was often thought, as a "trickling down of feminist consciousness of working-class women" (201). Both within and outside CLUW, organizing (especially among clerical workers), the campaign for the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, and revived commitments to comparable worth and to civil and social rights kept the labor feminist impulse alive during the 1970s and 1980s. Those women to whom I spoke in 1979 had a long and rich heritage indeed.

I have been able to give only the barest taste of the richness and subtlety of Cobble's arguments, of her discussion of differences among women according to race, ethnicity, occupation, industry, age, and family status. She does an admirable job of balancing a larger narrative of labor feminism with consistent attention to the experiences and ideas of particular groups, although I wonder if 1930s activists like the Latinas in the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America and the Chinese American women in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and in the National Dollar Store strike connected to labor feminism along with white and African American women. Cobble's research is wide ranging and meticulous, her writing clear and graceful. *The Other Women's Movement* poses powerful challenges to Alice Kessler-Harris's *In Pursuit of Equity*, showing that a vibrant working-class women's movement countered white, middle-class mainstream campaigns for equality and demonstrating that pressures for race and gender equity can go hand in hand. Working-class women were not merely, Cobble shows, the objects of the pursuit of equity: they were active shapers of it. Thanks to her, those of us concerned with rebuilding a women's labor movement now have a heritage, albeit a

mixed one, on which to draw. Those of us who are also historians now have the heretofore missing piece of the answer to the question of what happened to Rosie the Riveters: some retreated to home and family, some were shunted off into lower-paying jobs, but others forged labor feminism and in the process influenced the labor movement and the women's movement in the post–World War II United States. To my mind, this is the most important book in women's labor history in recent years.

Commentary: *Evaluating the Missing Wave*

Eric Arnesen

Dorothy Sue Cobble has done a remarkable job of historical recovery in providing for us a comprehensive portrait of what she calls the "Missing Wave"—a distinctive "labor feminism" that emerged and flourished in the long decades between the winning of suffrage and the second-wave feminism of the mid- to late 1960s. There were "multiple and competing visions of how to achieve women's equality" throughout these decades, Cobble argues, as a considerable number of trade union women pursued a "labor feminism" and fought for "first-class" (3) or "full economic citizenship" (56) for women wage earners. Arguing against those who would dismiss the labor movement as an effective site of women's political struggle, Cobble contends that these labor feminists significantly influenced both collective bargaining and politics at the state and federal levels. Despite the labor movement's male dominance, unions proved to be fertile soil for a new "gender politics," offering women's rights proponents an institutional platform and "institutional resources," as well as a "new vocabulary and an ideological framework" to "justify their demands" (15).

Her argument that the "continuing dominance of men in *top* executive positions in the postwar decades should not be taken as the only or even the best indicator of female influence" (25–26) is an important one, especially in a field like labor history where political sensibilities, sometimes touched with more than a little absolutism, inform much historical scholarship. Cobble's argument suggests a rough comparison with the experience of African American labor activists' stance toward the union movement. Black CIO and AFL leaders alike never forgot for a moment that African Americans constituted a minority within most individual unions and certainly within leadership positions or that racial equality in the labor market and labor movement was an ideal never realized. But an imperfect labor movement did not prompt any mass exodus from the house of labor's ranks or fuel separatist tendencies, at least not until the 1960s. There is "one thing Negroes must understand," the sleeping car porters' union journal noted in 1944, "and that is that there is no organization in America composed of white people which does not have some racial discrimination in it, but if the Negro is going to take the position that he should come out of every organization [that] racial discrimination is in he will come out of both the A.F. of L. and the CIO. He will also come out of the Church and the schools of America. . . . In fact, this ridiculous position will lead him to the conclusion where he will be compelled to get out of America and eventually off the earth, for racial discrimination is everywhere." The same applies to gender discrimination. Numerous black and women's activists

worked within a flawed union movement to prompt it to abandon its worst practices and embrace a more progressive stance. Historians employing absolutist political yardsticks in their evaluations of union racial and gender policies do so at the risk of missing significant currents of often complex oppositional politics.

Cobble also effectively reminds us that the Left—or, rather, that part of the Left dominated by the Communist Party that has been disproportionately emphasized by labor historians—was not the only show in town on matters of gender and racial equality. Following the work of Kevin Boyle and others, she charts the vitality of a labor liberalism that was not communist (and, indeed, was in many cases anticommunist); this vision included a commitment to extending the New Deal, supporting black civil rights, and working within the Democratic Party. The demise of the Communist Party–Left did not mean the demise of labor feminism or, by extension, the demise of a civil rights unionism, as so many labor historians have suggested. It is just a matter of where you look. The leftwing United Packinghouse Workers of America's (UPWA) postwar "campaign against racial and gender discrimination in employment," she concludes, was "unusual in its sweep and intensity," but it was "not an isolated case," for the UAW, the ACWA, and "other unions shared the progressive racial policies of the UPWA" (81). This is a point worth stressing, for it is an assessment, as she admits, that might be questioned by some participants in the tumultuous debates on race and labor. Cobble's larger point about the efforts of this non- or anticommunist labor liberalism/labor feminism is a foundation worth building on.

To her credit, Cobble is up-front about the limitations of labor feminism. Her protagonists, not surprisingly, accepted many conventional gender assumptions of their day and did not always challenge the gender division of labor on the shop floor or question a familial division of labor that assigned women primary responsibility for home care and child care. Few, Cobble tells us, "were ready to embrace gender-blind job assignments or unimpeded competition between men and women" in part because of "almost unconscious beliefs" (87). A related limitation, Cobble argues, was reflected in the "ambiguous and unresolved intellectual legacy" of labor feminists' wage campaigns, particularly the "perplexing problem of the recognition and valuing of unwaged work" (120). Accepting women's dominant role in the realm of social reproduction, labor feminists pursued policies designed to better enable women to carry out their domestic obligations—to "combine mothering and wage work" (122)—including scheduling flexibility and limits on the number of hours women could work outside the home. Labor feminists and working-class women in general, Cobble tells us, "rarely if ever questioned women's primary responsibility for care giving and household labor, and they, like most other Americans, evinced a considerable amount of ambivalence about the wisdom of having young children cared for by anyone other than their mother" (123). That remained as true in the late 1960s as it did in the 1940s.

The labor feminists in *The Other Women's Movement* directed their efforts on two levels—that of their unions and collective bargaining contracts, on the one hand, and that of state policy, on the other. We learn far more about the latter than we do

the former. To take the matter of equal pay for comparable work or "equal pay of work of equal value" (148), Cobble observes that "by the end of the 1950s, labor feminists could point to significant changes in attitudes and practices in regard to women's wages" (119). Although they repeatedly failed to secure the "comparable work" language in law and were "far from reaching their goals of achieving wage equity," the real wages "of some women increased substantially in this period" as "unionization, equal pay provisions, and minimum wage statutes spread" (120). To what extent they did is not made clear, nor are the relative contributions of each of these factors. Campaigns focused on state and federal governments take precedence in the book over campaigns waged within individual unions and at specific workplaces. But assessing the actual extent of change requires more statistical data and examination of individual cases than appear in these pages.

The question of the geographic basis of labor feminism is a matter largely unaddressed by Cobble. Many of her book's key examples are drawn from metropolitan communities or unions based in the North where, presumably, women were more receptive to labor feminism. How and why this might have been the case are not explored. On the matter of race, Cobble often invokes the admirable example of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, whose female members, whether black or white, "worked together in the same departments, used the same rest rooms and locker rooms, ate in the same cafeteria, and were entitled to the same union rights and benefits" (81) in many plants by the mid- to late 1950s. But where, when, and at what cost? Rick Halpern has vividly shown in the case of Fort Worth that the union's triumph on these issues did not come with an embrace of civil rights by white workers in the 1950s; to the contrary, civil rights victories transformed the Fort Worth UPWA into a largely black and Latino organization. Ultimately left unexplored in *The Other Women's Movement* are how southern workers, black and white, received or responded to labor feminism and the extent to which the soil of southern trade unionism, such as it was, proved resistant to it.

Particularly compelling are the numerous biographical portraits Cobble provides of midlevel union activists and leaders, and for these alone the book is worth reading. But her focus on these women suggests something about the book's structure. *The Other Women's Movement* is not exactly a top-down study. After all, none of her activist-leaders occupied the commanding positions of power in their respective trade unions that constitute the "top" in a top-down model; rather, they constituted a critical mass in midlevel positions in education, legislative, and other departments in many unions. But these women comprise a distinctive strata within the female labor force and the female union membership at midcentury. As leaders and activists, they articulated a clear vision and pursued it relentlessly over many decades. Largely missing from the pages, with some notable exceptions, is a sense of the relationship between these women activists and the rank and file below them. To what extent did labor feminists shape the agenda and impose it on rank-and-file union women? To what extent did that agenda reflect rank-and-file ferment? And to what extent did rank-and-file women actually embrace all of the multifaceted tenets of labor femi-

nism? *The Other Women's Movement* leaves the impression of both the importance of labor feminists' leadership and, to a lesser extent, the gap between the passionately held views of the leaders and those of the rank and file they sought to mobilize.

How did the founders of this "other women's movement" come to grips with feminism's next wave in the 1960s and 1970s, which touched the labor movement as it did much of American society? In her final chapters, Cobble briefly charts the tensions between the older and younger generations of activists. Times change, and so do activists (at least sometimes). To take one example: after decades of bitter opposition to the ERA and its supporters, the aging generation of labor feminists belatedly joined organized labor in finally endorsing the ERA's passage in the 1970s. How, precisely, did they arrive at this programmatic and ideological reversal? How did they justify it? In a revealing but unanalyzed passage, Cobble recounts an oral history conducted in the late 1970s in which her protagonists wrongly "identified themselves as longtime supporters of equal rights and the ERA" (195). In effect, they misremembered or misrepresented the past. They had "closed the ideological rupture by constructing a past politics that resembled their present" (195), Cobble notes in passing. But the way they did so obscured their earlier political rigidity and allowed them to avoid critically reflecting on their own legacy. Cobble, an open admirer of this missing generation, does not press the point.

I do not intend these observations to detract from my appreciation of *The Other Women's Movement*, which successfully restores the political activism of this earlier generation of labor women "to its deserved place in the history of twentieth-century reform" (40). Like the best of studies, it should inspire considerable research into the many rich subjects it touches.

Commentary:

Invisible Power or Lost Opportunity: The Limits of Labor Feminism

Elizabeth Faue

Dorothy Sue Cobble's recently published book, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*, recovers the "lost" history of women and the labor movement and the ideas and actions of labor feminists who came to professional maturity and political influence in the 1940s and 1950s. As a work of historical reconstruction, the book acknowledges the debt of contemporary women to the efforts of these now-forgotten activists. They were the generation of women who broke new ground in the struggle for women's job rights and wage justice and who first addressed issues such as employment discrimination and the existence of working women's double day. As Cobble argues, they providently understood and argued about the ambiguous and possibly harmful impact of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Thus when some labor feminists adopted the ERA in the 1970s, it was not without a sense of loss, nor without engendering opposition among their own ranks. At the same time, it was union women, Cobble argues, who created proposals for child care provisions, for pay for domestic labor, and for the organization of domestic workers that reshaped labor organization in the modern era.

By emphasizing labor feminism, Cobble seeks to shift the ground in women's history and, as a sidebar, to change the narrative in labor history as well. She both summarizes and extends the work of women labor historians in the past twenty-five years, including Nancy Gabin, Alice Kessler-Harris, Ruth Milkman, Sue Cobble, and myself, among others. But among historians engaged in rescuing the history of women's labor activism from the dustbin of history, there is disagreement about the timing, character, reception, and outcome of women's participation in the organized labor movement, even if we are somewhat more in sync on the relationship between union women's activism and the contemporary women's movement.

Overall, Cobble's book is an optimistic and positive account of working women's progress in labor's male-dominated corridors of power. Relying on the notion that union women maintained "an informal and hidden structure of power that differed from the formal and obvious one" (5), Cobble insists on the centrality and importance of labor feminists to the postwar labor movement, according them a power that their lack of public recognition and public visibility belied.

In her analysis, Cobble argues that the pivotal decade for women's increased participation at all levels of the labor movement was the 1940s. World War II created a window of opportunity for women's inclusion in the workplace and in labor unions, as millions of women took jobs in unionized defense plants. Despite the postwar retreat of women from manufacturing jobs, their wartime experience in unions brought millions of working women back to the labor movement. By the early 1950s, women accounted for nearly one in five union members, and their increased participation was mirrored in the rise of women union officers and administrators. These labor feminists were able to use their new positions, visibility, and power to work for women's equality, even in the midst of "the sea of masculinity" (as the historian Daniel Bender described the garment unions) that was the American labor movement.

Cobble's effort to reconceptualize feminism and rework the image of the labor movement hinges on the World War II generation to readjust our vision of the relationship between labor and women workers. There are two problems with this argument. First, in some ways, Cobble rather studiedly neglects the institutional context that women labor organizers and officers faced in the 1940s. By that time, the institutional structure and culture of unionism had already been shaped by the class language and masculine politics of the 1930s. The pattern for union governance had been effectively set by the time Cobble's labor feminists entered the door; and it would be hard, though not impossible, to dislodge unionism's discriminatory past.

Second, Cobble reconstructs a kind of collective biography of the women activists, some from the middle class and some from the working class, who worked within the labor movement on issues of gender and race discrimination. The histories of long-neglected women union leaders, such as Addie Wyatt, Caroline Davis, and Gloria Johnson as well as Esther Peterson and Mary Dublin Keyserling, surface in Cobble's tale and buttress her argument about labor feminism's intrinsic importance to labor's political agenda. The elasticity of the definition, however, places Betty Friedan, with her past as a labor reporter, outside the boundaries, while the Women's

Bureau director Esther Peterson is central to the book. Cobble's story, then, of labor feminists standing against their middle-class others fails to capture the complex class reality of labor feminists who were only partly working class in origin and effectively not working class by occupation (since most served in administrative, organizing, or research positions). The labor feminism she describes was characterized by an ideological and political agenda, not class origins and occupation.

In the introduction to *The Other Women's Movement*, Cobble notes that women's historians have neglected this tale of working women's ingenuity and pluck in creating new ways to conceptualize women's job rights and industrial citizenship. They have, she asserts, failed to see the roots of the contemporary women's movement in working women's activism. Cobble tentatively sets out an argument reminiscent of Nelson Lichtenstein and Robert Korstad on the relationship between labor and the civil rights movement of the same era. Just as they argue that labor was a civil rights movement before the civil rights movement was viable, so too does Cobble assert that the labor movement of the 1940s and 1950s was the women's movement before Friedan. Receptive to the innovative gender politics of labor feminists, the labor movement, she implicitly argues, provided economic and political clout for their efforts to improve working women's lives and wages. "The New Men of Power" in the 1940s created an institutional context in which it was possible for the "New Women of Power" to dream large dreams and explore legal remedies for women's inequality in the workplace.

One need not, however, dismiss Cobble's evidence of union women's contributions to note that, while women unionists and officials often used the labor movement to achieve feminist ends, labor leaders rarely articulated more than rhetorical support for the goal of women's workplace equality. It is both ironic and not surprising that unions like the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, which was overwhelmingly female in membership but overwhelmingly male in leadership, opposed the adoption of the ERA. While this stance was defended publicly as support for sex-specific protective labor legislation, it is unrealistic to assume that the lack of support was divorced from fact that men were in charge. Moreover, once affirmative action (a word that does not appear in Cobble's index) was in place, the labor movement had a range of prickly, contradictory, and sometimes hostile reactions to its use on either race or gender grounds. Lichtenstein and Korstad thus talk about labor's "lost opportunities," while Cobble imagines found ones.

Cobble's submerged target is an argument among feminists on the relative weight and importance of equality versus difference, especially over the ERA and sex-based protective labor legislation. In many ways, Cobble argues that labor feminists' rejection of the ERA was legitimately grounded in their collective realization of women's equality requiring different treatment under the law, a position little questioned before the 1960s. Only in the 1970s did union women and labor feminists reconsider whether equal rights guarantees were not more important than protective labor laws, especially in view of the changed circumstances of women's work and of the law. Women from such unions as the United Auto Workers and the United Elec-

trical, Radio and Machine Workers of America led the charge, in part because they saw the fight for equal pay and against sex discrimination in hiring, promotion, and seniority as the key to improving women's status and even, as the historian Nancy Maclean argued, an effective antipoverty strategy. Their calculated retreat from protection met opposition from women in other unions who remained wedded to sex-based protective labor laws and segregated women's locals as the only way for women in a sex-segregated workforce not to lose ground. While Cobble does not emphasize it, it is worth noting that this argument, which some historians have attributed to class differences among women, is by the 1960s an argument taking place among labor feminists, many of whom shared class origins and class politics.

While other books have explored working women's activism as part of the nascent feminist politics of the 1950s and 1960s—Susan Lynn's *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (1992), Dennis Deslippe's *Rights Not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945–1980* (2000), and Susan M. Hartmann's *From Margin to Mainstream: American Women and Politics since 1960* (1996)—*The Other Women's Movement* employs that history to remind us that class was a salient aspect of women's lives and labor feminism the mother of all feminisms. Few women historians would disagree with either proposition, especially given the historic relationship between social movements based on class and the emerging feminist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moving the story of labor feminism then to the center of feminist history seems not only wise but timely. What may be the harder sell is whether labor historians can make the same gracious concession to the centrality of women's and gender history as a part of their tale. That problem is one that such well-documented tales as Cobble's have yet to solve.

Commentary: *Labor Feminists and a Feminist Labor Movement*

Alice Kessler-Harris

Dorothy Sue Cobble debunks two central myths in her moving volume *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*. The first one is that feminism has historically been a white, middle-class women's movement; the second, that the labor movement has been motivated largely by the needs of its skilled male membership. In a feat of wide-ranging research, Cobble argues persuasively that women, black and white, functioned at influential levels within the labor movement, fostering an agenda that promoted the family as well as the waged-work interests of women wage earners. Their agendas, she reasons, helped keep feminism alive from the 1930s to the early 1960s when it had been all but abandoned by middle-class women. This is an inspiring argument that provides much fuel for the notion that, as Cobble concludes, "workplace justice is only achievable in tandem with social rights."

Cobble identifies a dozen or so labor feminists of the midcentury, so called because they created a feminism that "put the needs of working class women at its core" and "championed a labor movement as the principle vehicle through which

the lives of the majority of women could be bettered." She weaves the stories of these women into a tale of commitment to goals that would guarantee "first-class economic citizenship" for wage-earning women—a citizenship that could be achieved only with the attainment of such social rights as maternity leaves, child care, and equal pay. Their battles, often led by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, provided no clear victories, but, according to Cobble, set the agenda for the women's movement that would emerge in the 1960s. The story is rich, anecdotal, national in scope, and spans several occupational categories. It offers a protean view of feminism and a generous assessment of the twentieth-century American labor movement. With all this to her credit, it feels churlish to challenge Cobble to move yet a step further, but one of the accomplishments of this remarkable book is to enable us to do just that. The comments that follow constitute questions for all of us to debate. They follow from the implicit tensions within the meanings of feminism and around the labor movement's relationship to women's issues that *The Other Women's Movement* raises.

Cobble begins with a notion of feminism that stretches the meaning of the concept as it existed in the 1950s. Labor feminists, she argues, wanted "full industrial citizenship." This meant the right to market work for all women; it also meant securing social rights, or the social supports necessary to women as mothers and family members who earned wages. In this respect they differed from middle-class feminists who believed that gender equality rested on treating women just like men in the workforce. Labor feminists, Cobble insists, asked for attention to both female differences and to equality in the workforce. These demands constitute their legacy to the contemporary women's movement. But the idea of full industrial citizenship, or "first-class economic citizenship," contains conflict and requires compromises between caring goals and labor market goals with which we are still struggling. It is these conflicts and compromises that I want to hear more about.

What, for example, melds labor feminists into a movement? While many of the individuals highlighted in this book came up through the ranks of the labor movement, others grew up in middle-class families and boasted college and university backgrounds. Together, labor feminists seem to reflect a particular generational and ideological stance, generally described as social feminist; and most of the time, they joined together under the aegis of the Women's Bureau, which provided the funds and the communications networks that brought them together. But I would love to learn more about how these women imagined "the working-class" woman they wanted to help. For example, I am struck by the unspoken tension between the changing and intersecting needs of consumption and time. In the 1940s the image of a working mother conjured up the abandoned family and the neglected child; by the 1950s women wanted jobs in order to enhance the prospects of their families, especially for better housing, consumer goods, and children's education. By the early 1970s, many women measured the cost of wage work against the personal satisfactions it produced. Those who needed to earn valued it quite differently from those

who chose to do so. Such feminist goals as "shorter hours" at work (without a raise in pay) and pay for housework (for those without partners) could serve the interests of some working-class women and disadvantage others.

In this context, our excitement at learning from Cobble that labor feminists wanted both special treatment for women and equality is tempered by our desire to find out how they proposed to get both of them. If labor feminists believed both that working-class women should be free to choose and that once in the labor market, they should be treated fairly, their practical solutions nevertheless placed them within the framework of the kind of social feminism long identified with the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau, which rotated around male breadwinner families. As admirable and as prescient as the imaginations of labor feminists were, they do not seem to have stretched toward imagining that care-giving roles could be the province of men; that family structures might be significantly altered; or that the competitive values of the labor market would have to change to accommodate their purposes. Had they done so, they would surely have run afoul of a rather traditional labor movement. We are led, then, to conclude that the labor feminists of the 1950s and early 1960s participated in a more traditional understanding. While acknowledging the claims of women with dependent families and jobs for economic security, most must have acknowledged that those who chose unpaid household or caring work would appropriately continue to sacrifice labor market opportunity and rewards. Those who wished to find their rewards in the labor market, in turn, would continue to sacrifice the satisfactions of caring roles either to other family members or to paid care workers.

The tension, then as now, lay in the difficulty of choosing to care and to earn at the same time. Arguably, at least, this was a productive tension, one that produced proposals for maternity leave and was played out successfully around such issues as seniority lists and protective labor legislation for women only. It also emerged in the efforts of labor unions in the fifties to win family benefits (health insurance, paid vacations, pensions) for full-time workers. Yet the tension inherent in asking for equality through a strategy of difference did not disappear. It underlined the deliberations of the 1961 President's Commission on the Status of Women; it plagued the newly founded Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in the late 1960s; and ultimately it encouraged female union members to establish the Coalition of Labor Union Women.

Despite Cobble's efforts to place the labor movement in a positive light as a vehicle of change, there is little evidence that the male leadership construed the family/work nexus as other than a female dilemma. To be sure, recent work demonstrates that labor was among the leading architects and proponents of some of the key public and private social benefits of the postwar period, including health insurance, retirement incomes, and an expansion of welfare-related benefits. That said, there remains a gap between the family-related benefits that labor supported and those that it either did not support or responded to halfheartedly. Among the latter are those that benefited, or seemed to benefit, female members in particular. These include integrated seniority lists; paid maternity leaves; leaves with no loss of seniority; and a range of

sex-discrimination measures including equalizing the benefits offered to wives of male workers and those offered to female workers. On these issues men and women of goodwill differed inside the labor movement as much as outside it.

Similarly, the tensions between and among men and women in unions of different kinds remain unexplored. We hear little discussion of feminist conflict in the male-dominated unions, or of what male trade union leaders thought about feminist issues. We learn that the UE was relatively supportive, its successor IUE less so. The UAW, as Ruth Milkman and Nancy Gabin have demonstrated, first accommodated women's demands and then turned its attention to gender-neutral benefits. The differences among unions speak to the divergent goals of different sectors of the labor movement. These goals ranged from protecting turf to expanding social benefits for the entire working population.

Leaving these tensions unexplored exposes *The Other Women's Movement* to a range of questions. We want to know why Cobble focuses on a relatively limited number of unions, and we want an assessment of the attitudes of others toward the goals of labor feminists; we want to understand how the particular goals of labor feminists affected the interests of male labor union members; we want to understand the conflicts and sympathies between articulated positions and goals of the labor movement itself and those of labor feminists. With two or three exceptions, most unions did not take the goals even of their female leadership seriously, leaving an unresolved tension between the desires of labor feminists (which are carefully explicated) and their achievement (which remains amorphous). Put another way, if this book beautifully reveals the persistent commitments of labor feminists, I am not yet convinced that their goals ever became central to the leaders of the post–World War II labor movement.

And what of the structural issues? Cobble tells us that women dramatically expanded their numbers and their positions as leaders in the labor movement, especially in locals and as lower-level officers in an increasingly bureaucratized movement. But whether this expansion increased their voice or enabled women to exercise power on behalf of women's issues, as opposed to enhancing women's visibility, remains at issue. The numbers of trade union women who turned to government mediation or sought legislative intervention would suggest otherwise. Esther Peterson's move from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers to the political ranks of Democratic policymaking is a case in point. Then, too, there is the inescapable evidence of female trade unionists deluging the late 1960s' EEOC with complaints of sex discrimination against their unions. This, Cobble tells us, illustrates their heightened consciousness. It is also evidence of the failure of trade unions with respect to women's issues.

These questions are rendered possible because Cobble has so carefully spaded the ground. If Cobble has not yet explored the competing tendencies within this other women's "movement," she has identified some powerful threads of thought that remained alive in and through their association with working-class women. And if Cobble has not yet demonstrated the centrality of labor feminists to the purposes of labor unionism in the fifties and sixties, she has revealed some of the interstices that nurtured desires for women's equality in a hard and barren time. For these pathbreaking accomplishments, we should all be more than grateful.

Response: *The Difference Differences Make*

Dorothy Sue Cobble

I welcome this opportunity to take part in a dialogue about the difference labor women make to the history of U.S. feminism and trade unionism. *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* argues for the multiplicity of feminisms and of "laborisms" as well as the need to rewrite our history with these differences in mind. A particular concern of the book is to move beyond the standard narrative of twentieth-century feminism, which privileges the reform goals and strategies of professional women and either ignores or mischaracterizes the alternative feminisms articulated by labor women and their allies. By the early 1940s labor women modernized the earlier social-feminist traditions of the Progressive Era, recasting its tenets for a new generation. "Rights" rhetoric took on new significance, overshadowing what remained of the older "maternalist" strand of social feminism. Labor women articulated a gender politics that was neither the dying gasp of a protectionist paradigm nor a kind of transitional prefeminism. Rather, it was its own coherent, evolving, and vital variant of feminist reform.

Labor feminists believed in women's equal right to market work. Yet they were clear that individual rights and access to market work were not enough. "First-class economic citizenship" for women was unachievable without addressing women's unequal responsibility for reproductive and household labor. It was also unachievable without policies countering the unequal balance of power between capital and labor. The market penalized those with outside commitments to family and community; it also offered an unfair advantage to those who entered it with accumulated capital. In *The Other Women's Movement* I sought to render labor women's distinctive notions of justice and equality visible and to understand how and why their social justice wing of American feminism emerged as the dominant feminism of its day.

After the 1930s, labor women breathed new life into social feminism by providing it with intellectual leadership, organizational resources, and a grassroots constituency. The most powerful institutions in the post–World War II Women's Bureau network were the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions. Moreover, labor-identified women such as Mary Anderson, Frieda Miller, and Esther Peterson (the latter, unlike Betty Friedan, worked steadily in the labor movement as an organizer, educator, and lobbyist for some twenty-five years) were at the helm of the bureau. Yet labor feminism in this period extended beyond the confines of the Women's Bureau network. Labor feminists sought to realize their social reform agenda through mixed-sex labor, civil rights, and political organizations, the reach of which extended into workplaces and communities across the country.

Some of the most prominent labor feminists—women like Katherine Ellickson or Peterson—came from elite backgrounds. But the majority of the women labor reformers of the postwar era—women such as Addie Wyatt, Mary Callahan, Caroline Davis, Lillian Hatcher, Maida Springer-Kemp, and others—did not have to "imagine" the needs of working-class women. They were working class—by family of origin, work history, identity, and ideology. And they brought their histories and

their political subjectivities with them when they accepted full-time public labor leadership positions—a decision that for many was truly daunting.

The labor movement feminized rapidly in the 1940s, despite the brief falloff in female membership immediately after World War II. By the early 1950s, 3 million women were union members, a far cry from the 800,000 in 1940, and some 2 million women belonged to labor auxiliaries. Women's activism and leadership surged as well, at least judging from the strikes they led; the contracts they bargained; the conferences, committees, and caucuses they convened; the legislative lobbying they initiated; and the offices to which they were elected and appointed. I locate this heightened activism and sense of entitlement among working-class women, many of whom were African American, in the rising militancy of the civil rights struggle; in the return of Rosies to lower-paying, low-status women's work; and the continued move of working-class wives and mothers into market work.

Historians may never agree about "how much power women have" because we may never agree about what power is and how to measure it. But to fully analyze the gender dynamics of labor institutions and how these dynamics changed over time, we will need to expand our definitions—beginning with what constitutes activism, power, and leadership. Progressive Era historians have reshaped our understandings of women's political power by moving beyond the traditional measures of political participation and influence. Labor historians should follow suit.

The labor institutions inherited from the 1930s were indeed "masculinist"—"women's voices were not dominant within the labor movement" as I note in *The Other Women's Movement* (26). But that was exactly what labor feminists set out to change. And even when looking out over a "sea of masculinity," labor feminists saw friends as well as enemies, allies as well as adversaries. Many of their union brothers believed, like them, that the organization of working people was a precondition for progressive social reform. A sizable number also favored ending race and other forms of discrimination, including discrimination on the basis of sex. But what they meant by that, as I point out, evolved over time, for women as well as for men.

Ending class injustice, a central goal of the CIO, was also at the heart of labor feminism. Labor feminists believed that women's disadvantages stemmed from multiple sources and that a range of social reforms was necessary to remedy women's secondary status. For many, confronting the injustices of class and race was experienced as inseparable from increasing their autonomy and freedom as women.

Disagreements between and among labor union men and women did occur, and at times were bitter. The 1955 United Auto Workers (UAW) convention careened toward bedlam, as men and women argued over reaffirming the rights of married women—an issue, significantly enough, on which labor feminists prevailed, despite the opposition coming primarily from men and single women. The opening up of women's jobs to African American and other minorities provoked another firestorm, with labor feminists relying on the backing of African American men as much or more than that of white women. Labor men supported labor feminists on other "women's issues" as well. The political and economic agenda of the Amalgamated

Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), the UAW, the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), and the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), for example, included such key labor feminist concerns as raising women's pay, expanding New Deal entitlements to those left out, gaining social supports for childbirth and child care, and ending sex discrimination in wages, benefits, and other working conditions.[1] A disproportionate number of union women did file sex discrimination claims under Title VII in the late 1960s, as Kessler-Harris notes, and their outspokenness helped the nation take sex discrimination seriously. But many of these claims involved pregnancy, marital, and benefit discrimination and it was as common for unions to be on the side of claimants as on the side of employers. Moreover, a large number of union women initiated such actions because they, unlike their unorganized sisters, had union contracts that helped protect them from employer retaliation.

Labor's demand for a wage sufficient for the support of dependents—what historians now refer to as a "family wage"[2]—is often presented as evidence of the labor movement's patriarchal consciousness. Yet many married (as well as some unmarried) working-class women supported a higher wage for breadwinners (even when defined solely as a male prerogative) because they believed it would raise overall family income and allow some women to reduce their long hours of waged work. Indeed, for many poor women, involuntary market work was a greater problem than involuntary domestic work. Labor feminists divided on the question of how to craft wage policies that recognized the multiple and often conflicting priorities of women. Some pushed for a degendered provider wage, arguing that women as well as men should earn a wage sufficient for the support of dependents. Others, men as well as women, embraced a version of "equal pay" that ended up helping equalize wages between men and women. Unfortunately, it also reinforced the legitimacy of a "market wage" determined without consideration for need.

Part of the problem with the current conversation is that it often seems as if, no matter what position labor men or labor unions have adopted, it is suspect. Whether they support equal pay or oppose it, whether they favor the ERA or object to it—it is taken as evidence of their opposition to women's rights and hence of the marginality of women to the labor movement and to labor's agenda. This general suspicion has a point: at bottom, class-based movements can never meet women's diverse interests fully; but neither can movements based solely on sex, race, or other identities.

1. Labor men and women also agreed that paid sick leave, vacations, and retirement were desirable goals and would increase leisure and family time. But as I detail in chapter 5 of *The Other Women's Movement*, labor women put more emphasis on shortening daily hours than did men. In this chapter, I also point out that labor feminists refused to trade time for money and sought shorter hours without loss of pay.

2. Lawrence B. Glickman, in *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), notes that labor unionists did not use the term "family wage" in the nineteenth and early twentieth century; rather, they relied on the term "living wage"—a more gender-neutral construct. "Family wage" was first used in the Progressive Era largely by middle-class reformers and later adopted by historians in the 1970s and 1980s to refer to the "living wage" traditions of labor union reformers.

Tensions among women are as important to *The Other Women's Movement* as the tensions between men and women. In particular, I assume that class differences have always affected the lives of women and that their views of what reforms are desirable and possible are shaped in a class crucible. The battles between "equal rights" feminists and social feminists, for example, which spanned much of the twentieth century, cannot be understood apart from class. That is not to say that all labor feminists were working class or that all supporters of the National Woman's Party (NWP) were members of the elite. But the differences in class composition, class identity, and class politics between the two groups did fuel the intensity of their disagreements over how to achieve women's equality.

"Classing" the history of feminism calls into question the reigning narrative that celebrates the politics of the NWP and those who supported the ERA. Labor men and women have for too long been judged as gender conservatives because they opposed the ERA and fought to strengthen and extend fair labor standards laws. *The Other Women's Movement* challenges that assessment. Labor feminists, like their opponents in the NWP, believed that the law discriminated against women; they differed, however, with the NWP on whether the ERA would effectively end such discrimination. They judged a single-minded focus on instituting a formal sex-blind legal equality between men and women as inadequate and narrow. They also disagreed vehemently with the economic philosophy of the National Association of Manufacturers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the other conservative, Republican Party supporters who, along with the NWP, formed the principal backing for the ERA from the 1920s to the early 1970s. Labor feminists never embraced an unregulated competitive capitalism as did those pushing for the ERA. Rather, they argued that state and federal regulatory measures—wage floors, hour ceilings, and other labor standards—needed to be extended to the millions of men and women still lacking coverage. These beliefs put them at odds with the more individualistic "equal rights" feminists of their day, who, in their view, uncritically celebrated "liberty of contract" and the benefits of women's labor market participation. Put another way, the battle over the ERA tells us a lot about differences among women over the state's role in a market economy and differences over *how* to achieve women's equality. It tells us much less about who did and did not support women's rights.

Class differences could also divide labor feminists as well as unite them. Differences in occupation or intraclass differences, for example, help explain why in the 1960s some labor feminists, notably the leaders of the UAW Women's Department, broke ranks with their long-standing allies, pushed for the repeal of woman-only state labor laws, and joined middle-class women in founding the National Organization for Women. Much more could be said—and I hope it will—about racial, sexual, geographic, ethnic, and other differences among labor women as well as the relationship between labor feminists like my mother and grandmother who never rose to leadership and the women who led the movement that I chronicle.

I would not characterize labor feminists as "difference feminists" or "equality feminists." One of the book's key contentions is that this distinction is a false dichot-

omy. None of us are the same; all of us are different. Equality must therefore be a relation of difference. Women, like everyone, deserve the social rights required for full and equal citizenship. There is nothing special about their demands unless men are posited as the universal standard by which all are to be judged.

Labor feminists did not find a way of resolving the tension between "care giving" and "income earning" that the majority of Americans could support in the decades after World War II. But the issue infused all their policy proposals and is among their greatest legacies to us today. Postwar wage-earning women were the first to confront this dilemma en masse. Thus it is not surprising that labor feminists were ahead of their time in launching a movement to revalue caring labor and restructure employment. They believed that there was a fundamental mismatch between the requirements and pleasures of household and community life and the culture, institutions, policies, and practices of market work. Market work, in their view, was organized around "masculine ways." It assumed a single male provider without responsibilities for childbirth and other reproductive labor, and it valued the activities of men over those of women. These gendered practices and hierarchies, they believed, needed dismantling. A movement was needed, then as now, that refused to romanticize market work and that sought a world in which mutualism and care were just as valued as individual achievement and power.