

## Introduction

It appears that [John] Highland and a companion visited Wood's warehouse, and . . . peered into the windows and tried to induce some of the girls who were assorting tobacco to join the strikers.

—*Wisconsin Tobacco Reporter*, February 27, 1891

One of the men pickets, "Sam" Feldman, was arrested for speaking to a young woman who he thought was going to take the place of a striker. . . .

"Girls, let's chip in one cent each to pay Sam's fine," cried Miss Drubin, climbing on a table and waving her hat around her head.

The suggestion was taken up with enthusiasm and Sam's hat was passed around by Miss Gussie Cohen. When it came back it contained 350 pennies, which were turned over to Sam, who spent the extra 50 cents in buying ice cream soda for the girl pickets.

—*New York Tribune*, August 5, 1900

"Everything is good natured, and that's what I like," said John C. Kness at the close of a meeting of the weavers held in Loomfixers' hall.

Mr. Kness had taken his violin to the meeting, and at its close he had started up a lively dance air, and another weaver had seated himself at the piano and played the accompaniment.

The incident brought a crowd of men and women of the union about the platform.

—*Lowell Courier-Citizen*, April 1, 1903

The small incidents described above capture brief moments within larger strike situations. While these might seem to hold little historical significance, they actually can begin to uncover the worlds in which workers' lives and experiences unfolded. In times and places when women and men held jobs strictly segregated by sex, such moments of camaraderie among men and women in strike situations seem quite unlikely. Yet, at the turn of the twentieth century, when both the labor market as a whole and individual jobs at the workplace were segregated by sex, it became clear to workers in certain industries that their jobs were so intertwined with and dependent on others that any sort of strike or other job action would fail without the support of co-workers who held different jobs and were of a different gender. Such strikes of men and women together form the basis for this book. In every

case, both the larger narrative of the strike and the small incidents of the strike can provide the historian with important insights into not only the outcome of the strike, but also the daily interactions of co-workers at work, at home, and in the union halls.

In 1991, Ava Baron credited historians working to create “a gendered labor history” with “seek[ing] to understand how gender operates, and the ways it has shaped and been shaped by economic institutions and relationships.” The present book carries that project forward, “exploring the ways in which gender bias is structured into the fabric of unionism.”<sup>1</sup> A close look at what I call “cross-gender” strikes—strikes in which both women and men participated—can uncover interactions among male and female co-workers that would normally remain hidden to the historian. Mirroring the sexual division of labor within each industry, these cross-gender strikes furnish snapshots of both cooperation between the sexes and the many fractures that existed just below the surface of such cooperation. In the heightened tensions of a strike, when workers have put their livelihoods on the line, incipient tensions among workers often come to light. While these tensions could revolve around issues of race, ethnicity, religion, age, or any number of other issues, as well as issues of gender, the emphasis here highlights gender as a category of analysis. Nongender issues necessarily complicate an analysis made on the basis of gender. The ways in which all these possible categories interact, intersect, and reinforce or undercut one another are crucial to uncovering the various possible dynamics of the strikes and workplaces under consideration.

The forty strikes that form the basis of this book took place in four broad industries: the boot and shoe industry, the clothing industry, the textile industry, and the tobacco industry. Over the decades between 1880 and 1910, women made up between 11 percent and 80 percent of all workers in those industries (see table 1). At the same time, the women in these industries made up between 73 percent and 86 percent of all female manufacturing workers (see table 2). Although failure might arise from any number of factors, the success of a strike depended on cooperation among its participants, both male and female. In fact, between 1887 and 1905, women constituted more than one-quarter (26 percent) of the almost 173,000 strikers in these four industries. Women made up close to half of all strikers in the textile industry and more than half of those in the chewing and smoking tobacco segment of the tobacco industry<sup>2</sup> (see table 3).

From Auburn, Maine, to Los Angeles, from Oregon City to Key West, Florida, the locations of the strikes in this book crisscross the United States.

1. Ava Baron, “Gender and Labor History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future,” in *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*, ed. Ava Baron (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 20, 13.

2. U.S. Bureau of Labor, *Twenty-first Annual Report, 1906: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907), pp. 90–91.

Table 1. Women as percentage of workforce in selected industries, 1880-1910

Industry	1880	1890	1900	1910
Total manufacturing workforce	16.7	18.1	18.5	16.4
Boots & shoes	10.8	15.7	18.9	23.1
Clothing <sup>a</sup>	77.0	79.4	77.9	73.4
Textiles <sup>b</sup>	38.2	50.6	51.1	50.2
Tobacco	14.1	25.1	51.1	44.5

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Population 1910: Occupation Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), table 15, pp. 55-56.

<sup>a</sup> Includes "dressmakers, milliners & seamstresses," "glove makers," "hat & cap makers," "sewing machine operators," "shirt, cuff, & collar makers," and "tailors and tailoresses."

<sup>b</sup> Includes cotton mill, woolen mill, hosiery & knitting mill, silk mill, and "other textile mill" operatives.

Table 2. Women in selected industries as proportion of total female manufacturing workforce

Industry	1880	1890	1900	1910
Total manufacturing workforce (number)	631,034	1,027,928	1,312,668	1,772,095
Boots & shoes	3.3	3.3	3.0	3.4
Clothing <sup>a</sup>	56.1	58.1	53.1	45.5
Textiles <sup>b</sup>	25.2	21.2	20.5	20.3
Tobacco	1.7	2.7	3.3	4.0
All four industries	86.3	85.3	80.0	73.2

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Population 1910: Occupation Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), table 15, pp. 55-56.

<sup>a</sup> Includes "dressmakers, milliners & seamstresses," "glove makers," "hat & cap makers," "sewing machine operators," "shirt, cuff, & collar makers," and "tailors and tailoresses."

<sup>b</sup> Includes cotton mill, woolen mill, hosiery & knitting mill, silk mill, and "other textile mill" operatives.

Some of the nation's largest cities—such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco—are represented, as are some of the smallest: Edgerton, Wisconsin, and Haw River, North Carolina. Some strike locations are in what constituted the nation's industrial heartland a century ago (New Bedford, Massachusetts; Detroit, Michigan), while others took place in the developing New South of the post-Civil War years, and still others in the states of the far West. I selected many atypical strikes precisely because they highlight variations in race and ethnicity as well as factors relating to the industrial geography of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

This book begins chronologically with the formation of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in late 1886 and continues through the establishment of the Women's Trade Union League at the AFL convention of 1903.

3. For more discussion on the selection of the strike case studies, see appendix 1.

Table 3. Percentage of employees of each sex striking in four industries, 1887–1905

Industry	Percentage of women striking	Percentage of men striking
Boots & shoes	16.57	26.36
Clothing		
Men's	43.06	81.64
Women's	62.11	86.94
Textiles		
Cotton goods	27.59	29.72
Cotton & woolen goods	24.38	30.21
Woolen goods	18.07	18.72
Tobacco		
Chewing and smoking	48.55	36.46
Cigars & cigarettes	45.42	73.00

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor, *Twenty-first Annual Report, 1906: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1907), pp. 90–91.

Beyond the institutional importance of these years is their significance in strike history. The famed eight-hour-workday strikes of 1886 swept many workers out of their workshops and into the streets; more than 400,000 workers employed in some 10,000 establishments took strike action during that year. The next peak in strike activity took place in 1903, when at least 500,000 workers struck some 20,000 establishments across the nation.<sup>4</sup> Between these two years, workers all over the United States faced the massive economic depression of the 1890s, which shattered the faith many people had in capitalism and in the good intentions of their employers. The Knights of Labor withered away during that decade, while the unions of the AFL staggered under the adverse economic conditions but survived the downturn nonetheless. Before, during, and after the depression of the 1890s, the unions of the AFL, and workers in general, faced opportunities to define themselves and carve out new spaces for themselves in the coming century. This book examines how they would do this.

The roots of the AFL's fundamental attitudes toward women workers and union members are evident in the participation of women in strikes during these years. Examining the participation of women during these early years of the AFL provides insight into the militance of women and the attitude of the AFL toward women. But we also find, in these strikes—in their leadership, their results, and their aftermaths—larger gendered attitudes within the AFL. The AFL's experiences with female workers in its early years affected the organization's attitudes toward all workers in fundamental ways. One key point of inquiry in this book involves the ways in which the unions that made up the AFL came to encode gender into their very structures. In fact, I argue that the hallowed words “craft unionism” came to be read as “male” perhaps even more than they were read as “white.” In all their variations, the strikes

4. U.S. Bureau of Labor, *Twenty-first Annual Report*, table 4, pp. 478–79.

described in this book, and the issues those strikes raised for the unions of the time, played a role in determining how the unions of the AFL continued to deal both with women workers and with others they deemed to be “less skilled” than their own members.

In many ways, this book might be seen as a most traditional labor history in that its fundamental topic is strikes and unions. Stories and analyses of strikes and unions have been central to the field of labor history since it began with the work of John R. Commons and his associates, Selig Perlman and Philip Taft.<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s the work of E. P. Thompson inspired a new generation of labor historians. Combined with the concurrent rise of social history, these historians became known as practitioners of what is still, thirty years later, called the “new” labor history.<sup>6</sup> In this new history, there was more attention to how the categories of social history overlapped with workers’ experiences in the workplace. The result has been a rich history that examines the ways in which workers experienced divisions among themselves as much as they experienced moments of solidarity. Ethnicity, race, and gender all have become important categories of study.<sup>7</sup>

For some practitioners of the new labor history, life outside the workplace became just as important for determining how workers would react to their situations as life inside the workplace. The new labor history often moved so far from the field’s original interest in workplace organizations (unions) and their activities (strikes) that it came to be called, more properly, working-class history. In this new history, while the workplace might loom in the background as the final determinant of membership in the working class,

5. See John R. Commons et al., *History of Labor in the United States*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1935); Selig Perlman, *A History of Trade Unionism in the United States* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1950).

6. See David Brody, *The Butcher Workmen: A Study of Unionization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964); Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969).

7. On race, see, for example, Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), and *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878–1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Timothy J. Minchin, *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). For examples of the importance of ethnicity, see James Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago’s Packinghouse Workers, 1894–1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Cecelia Bucki, *Bridgeport’s Socialist New Deal, 1915–36* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Gender as a category is discussed separately below.

actions in the community and neighborhood, as well as working-class culture, took on greater explanatory significance.<sup>8</sup>

While working-class history continues to provide important insights into workers' lives, some of us in the field of labor history have returned to take a new look at the development of unions and that ultimate expression of working-class consciousness, the strike. These "new institutionalists" of labor history seek to bring the insights about community, race, ethnicity, gender, and other categories examined by the new labor history and working-class history back into the consideration of workers' attempts at institution-building.<sup>9</sup> This book is part of this return to questions of workers' institutions.

At the same time, this book is also very much a part of what has come to be called women's labor history. In many ways, changes in that subfield have paralleled the changes in labor history. For women's labor history, developments in women's history complicated and enriched its trajectory. Even more than in labor history, feminist poststructuralism has encouraged women's labor historians to pay close attention to discourse, agency, and essentialism.<sup>10</sup> As in labor history, this has meant growing attention to questions of race and ethnicity and to their influence on women workers' experiences. Over the last decade and a half, the plethora of studies that examine the gendered dynamics of specific occupations, often in single locations, has inspired the more comparative work found in this book.<sup>11</sup> Such studies demonstrate the importance of the contingencies of individual locations and workplace situations for understanding both the actions of women workers and their interactions with male co-workers. While such contingencies remain important considerations, works on such specific circumstances have called for an attempt to bring them together. In this book, I argue that bringing together the various geographic and industrial contingencies provides us with insights not only into the mutual workplace experiences of both men and women

8. See my own *Sons and Daughters of Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) for one example of this. See also Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

9. See, for example, Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Daniel J. Clark, *Like Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

10. See Baron, "Gender and Labor History," for an excellent discussion of these developments.

11. Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Patricia A. Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women, and Work Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Nancy Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s–1920s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Carole Turbin, *Working Women of Collar City: Gender, Class, and Community in Troy, 1864–1886* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

but also into the ways in which the leaders of the labor movement utilized those gendered experiences in their attempts at the turn of the twentieth century to bring together the first long-lasting national union movement.

While collecting materials for this book, I was also reading and thinking about how best to explain what I saw as the overlapping layers of workers' lives, layers identified by scholars as class, gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as other categories, such as age, religion, and family status. Then I chanced on Iris Young's use of Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the "series."<sup>12</sup> Young puts it this way: "Gender, like class, is a vast, multifaceted, layered, complex, and overlapping set of structures and objects. Women are the individuals who are positioned as feminine by the activities surrounding those structures and objects."<sup>13</sup> Here, then, was a way to think about the means by which workers manifested their gender, race, ethnic, and class identities both simultaneously and serially, one after another. On a theoretical level, then, this book argues that workers' perceptions and actions are "serial" in two senses of that term. One is Sartre's philosophical sense of individuals' consciousness of belonging to such categories in effect waiting to be ignited by external events and then acted on by the individuals in question. The other is the more ordinary sense of events being serial, of their occurring one after another—in other words, the standard understanding of historical narrative. My goal is to examine simultaneously how these two senses of the word "serial" explicate the ways in which individuals achieve awareness of their identities as members of specific categories.

My interest in using Sartre's theory is not to trace each of his many steps through the strikes in this book. Rather, I use his notion of the "series" to think about the complexities of these workers' identities. I pay particular attention to moments in strikes when the actions of the workers reflect their recognition that they are members of a particular "series" or category. Thinking about workers' identifications in this serial way does away with questions of whether any one category of identity is dominant over the others. Instead, the use of Sartre's concept underscores that every individual at every moment holds within herself or himself a simultaneous range of possible identities. Which of these identities will enter the consciousness of this individual, and therefore inform his or her actions, at any particular point in time depends on each person's role in the ongoing historical narrative, or serial.<sup>14</sup>

12. Iris Young, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," *Signs* 19 (1994): 713–38. See also Sonya Rose, "Class Formation and the Quintessential Worker," in *Reworking Class*, ed. John Hall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 133–65.

13. Young, "Gender as Seriality," p. 728.

14. See my use of Sartre's concepts in "Narratives Serially Constructed and Lived: Ethnicity in Cross-Gender Strikes, 1887–1903," *International Review of Social History* 44, supplement (1999): 33–52.

The serial nature of the historical narrative—the fact that one event follows another—is also crucial in this book. It is only within the actual twists and turns of the historical narrative that we begin to understand the shifting contingencies of specific situations. In turn, these contingencies both endow historical actors with the power of agency and at times deprive them of it. As described in appendix 1, the research for this book was conducted as research into each of the individual strikes that form the case studies at the root of the book. Long before I wrote anything like a chapter, I wrote narratives of the forty strike case studies. These narratives appear, often in bits and pieces, in what follows. I have attempted to maintain a sense of their narrative quality, of their seriality, of the fact that in each case certain things happened before or after other things. The decisions that workers or employers made at any point, the actions that they took, affected the course of the strike narrative. Such decisions and actions, however, were never predetermined, but rather always existed both within and despite the material constraints of the situation. Some strike stories appear several times in this book. Each telling of the story brings out different issues and highlights the importance of different “serial” identities. This examination of the narrative seriality of the case studies provides a sort of standpoint epistemology version of historical narration: the point at which actors stand in the narrative determines both their reactions to events and the unfolding of those events. Chapter 1, for example, introduces quite fully the narrative stories of four of the strike case studies, but even those strikes reappear in other places in the book, examined from slightly different angles to make other points. In other words, the same narrative, the same train of events, does not so much look different from another standpoint as it makes us look differently at certain issues.

The narration of the four strikes in chapter 1 introduces the reader to factors that are relevant to the mobilization of workers in each of the four industries covered in this book: the sexual divisions of labor the workers experienced; the types of unions they confronted or created; the choices they had to make. The strike stories thus show how the various possible complexities operated in the interaction of historical narrative, contingency, material conditions, and the actions of individuals.

Chapter 2 examines the strikes carried out under the auspices of the Knights of Labor during its dying years. Historiography on gender and the Knights has generally argued that the Knights provided women workers with greater opportunities than they had experienced before or would experience immediately after the disappearance of the organization. The cross-gender strikes under consideration here, however, show that the Knights organization, at least in its crumbling days, displays a much more ambivalent set of options for women. Chapter 3 goes on to look at the nemesis of the Knights: the new and growing American Federation of Labor. Cross-gender strikes undertaken under the auspices of AFL member unions demonstrate the ways in which

the AFL based its vaunted ideal of craft unionism on gendered definitions of skill.

Chapter 4 begins the exploration of how issues other than those related to union organization and structure operated in cross-gender strikes. It demonstrates the varied roles that ethnicity and race could play in cross-gender strikes. For many of these strikes, geographic location plays a crucial role in determining the influence of ethnicity. Accordingly, the chapter suggests the ways in which ethnicity was limited in its usefulness to leaders of the new Federation. Following on this theme of geography, chapter 5 illustrates the implications of cross-gender strikes taking place in the areas I identify as the industrial periphery of the United States. Such strikes, usually taking place far from the influence of established unions, made room for new roles for rank-and-file workers of both genders as well as for women workers in particular.

Cross-gender strikes in all four of the industries under consideration also demonstrate the power of “family,” both real and imagined. Chapter 6 explores the various roles family ties might play in different strikes. Family roles might provide the basis for strike solidarity or suggest important strike survival strategies for workers. At times, family relationships spurred the recognition of strike issues; at other times, however, family networks might impede strike unity. Chapter 7 returns to organizational issues, as it examines attempts made to broaden the AFL’s craft unionism. Sometimes these attempts expanded opportunities for women workers, but at other times they merely re-encoded gendered assumptions about male and female militance and the utility of the AFL’s craft union model.

The book’s conclusion, chapter 8, looks toward the opportunities that the Women’s Trade Union League, founded at the AFL convention of 1903, provided for women workers. Though this organization could not overcome completely the gendered craft unionism embedded within the AFL, it did attempt to bring more women into the AFL and to broaden the influence of women within that organization.

The American Federation of Labor entered the twentieth century ensconced as the primary vehicle for the nation’s organized workers. As such, the attitudes of the AFL toward women workers provided the basis for virtually all later attempts at organizing women. The cross-gender strikes that are the basis of this book illustrate both the ways in which men and women would move forward united and the ways in which they would remain apart. That both females and males could at times feel drawn together and at other times feel driven apart, and carry both those feelings into their actions and their organizations, is the ultimate lesson I hope this book conveys. That workers strove to unite in strike situations is an old lesson taught by labor history; that they often fragmented along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, or other categories is a lesson often hammered home by the new labor history. Both these tendencies are evident in the strikes discussed in this book, and the re-

reverberations of those tendencies appear in the very structure of the unions that attempted to mold their members' fragmented experiences into a sense of national unity.