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British feminists' intervention in working women's trade unions and legislation 1873-1903

Teresa Mary Olcott
The University of Montana

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BRITISH FEMINISTS' INTERVENTION IN WORKING WOMEN'S TRADE UNIONS AND LEGISLATION
1873-1903

By
Teresa M. G. Olcott
B.A., University of Montana, 1972

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Approved by:

Chairman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date
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LADIES, WOMEN, AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Although suffragettes Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst stole the limelight in late Victorian England with their hunger strikes and militant tactics, the struggle for women's right began almost sixty years before the suffragette era and encompassed much more than the fight for the vote. Throughout most of the 19th century, feminists fought for the right to own property, to attend university, to divorce their husbands, to work at professions, to claim custody over their children, and to lead active public lives. Recognizing that legal and social conventions prevented them from enjoying these freedoms, feminists brought their cases before Parliament, society, and the press. The

1I have reserved the bibliographic analysis of this problem until the final chapter. The important works in the field are Gladys Boone, Women's Trade Union League (New York: Columbia Press, 1924); Barbara Drake, Women in Trade Unions (London: Trade Union Series, 1921); Barbara Hutchins, History of Factory Legislation (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1915); and Ivy Pinchbeck, Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1930).
vote became a central issue only when suffragists realized that it could become a powerful means of speeding other reforms.²

Suffragists and the feminists who led the various movements for women's rights were all of the middle-class.³ This status determined their perception of the problems facing women and affected the form and scope of feminist agitation, even when that agitation was on the behalf of working-class women. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the feminists' fight for the right to work. Since the 1840's, feminists had pursued the right to engage in the professions and other male fields. The legal and social restrictions they encountered in their efforts convinced them that all women faced a labor market in which women were restricted to a few occupations and could secure entrance to other fields only by proving that they could successfully compete with men. Feminists concentrated in

²Suffragists were those women who belonged to constitutional suffrage societies. Suffragettes were members of the militant groups, principally the Women's Social and Political Union founded by the Pankhursts in 1903. Throughout the suffrage campaign, suffragists sought the vote only as a means to social reform. The suffragettes made the vote an end in itself.

³Feminists are usually defined as "followers of the movement to win political, social, and economic equality for women." For clarity, I have restricted its meaning in this paper to women holding that view.

these years upon opening new jobs for women, taking little notice of what the wages or conditions of employment were.

Feminists imposed this experience upon working women's problems. When members of Parliament attempted to extend the regulation of women's hours of labor in factories, middle-class feminists saw this as one more attempt to drive women from work. They spent the next thirty years acting upon this belief, resisting factory legislation and trying to foster trade unions among working women. Not until the turn of the century did some feminists realize that women in the two classes faced much different circumstances. By that time, various groups of working-class women had already suffered the consequences of this zeal. Feminist interventions into working women's unions and legislation, the subject of this paper, comprise one of the most gallant, if mistaken, chapters in the history of the women's movement.

The origins of the economic differences between women of the two classes, as well as the birth of the women's movement itself, can be found in the social readjustments following the industrial revolution. That economic event completely altered the status and function of the middle-class women in British society.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the only women who were idle in England were the wives and daughters of the aristocracy. Since the Restoration, increasing
wealth allowed the women of these circles to turn from the cultivation of land to that of the arts and dress. For both middle-class and lower-class women, however, life was work. Middle-class women sometimes tried to imitate their aristocratic sisters as Daniel Defoe noted in 1738,

They act as if they were ashamed of being tradesmen's wives and scorn to be seen in the counting-house, much less behind the counter... In some cases, the tradesman is foolishly vain of making his wife a gentlewoman, forsooth; he will have her sit above in a parlour, receive visits, drink tea, and entertain her neighbours..., but as to business, she shall not stoop to touch it....

But few were the husbands who could spare money to hire apprentices and servants so that their wives might be idle. Marriage for the middle-class was a business partnership. Farmers' wives threshed and harvested, artisans' wives worked the trade beside their husbands, tradeswomen sold their husbands' wares, and wives of men in shipping and coal concerns kept the business accounts. Women were also active in the professions, particularly medicine and engineering. Further, they produced in their kitchens, gardens, and on their looms most of the goods necessary for the household.

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The industrial revolution ended these activities, one by one. Household duties lightened as goods began to be mass-produced. Family business concerns ended when production moved from the home to the factory, as scientific advances took the arts of bleaching, soap-making, and distilling from the amateur housewife to the professional workshop. Need for capital necessitated mergers and jointstock companies whose accounts were far too large and complex to be tallied by the untrained wife. Thus, the industrial revolution brought on economic changes which dissolved the business partnership in middle-class marriages. The husband became the sole provider and as such assumed a new importance. Leisured wives, untrained in any practical skill and completely dependent on their husbands, were the symbol of a man's wealth and status. As Wanda Neff, a historian of this change, noted, "the triumph of the useless woman was complete.... With the industrial revolution, the practice of female idleness spread throughout the middle-classes until work for women became a misfortune and a disgrace." 

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Novels and diaries of the period reflect this new idleness and its effects. Margaretta Greg wrote in her diary in 1853:

A lady, to be such, must be a mere lady, and nothing else. She must not work for profit, or engage in any occupation that money can command.... Men have pressed their way into nearly all the shopping and retail business that in my early years were managed in whole, or part, by women. The same in household economy..., ladies dismissed from the dairy, the confectionary, the store room, the still room, the poultry yard, the kitchen garden, and the orchard have hardly yet found themselves a sphere equally useful and important in the pursuits of trades and art to which to apply their too abundant leisure.11

Books on etiquette tried to find this sphere. A popular manners guide of the 1860's answered the question My Life and what shall I do with it? by saying, "A grownup daughter ought to nurse her mother if she is ill, or teach her little brother to read." Above all, she was "to dress as well as she can, and to play upon the pianoforte."11 Following the intent of these injunctions, Ellen and Emily Hall of West Wickham kept voluminous diaries, arranged flowers in the morning, and received guests in the afternoon.12 Other young ladies painted watercolors or wrote poetry--much to

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12 Ryder and Silver, Modern English Society, p. 110.
the disgust of one Miss Mitford who wrote in 1842 to a friend, "You are quite right about the want of objects for single women.... Among other evils, the want of better occupations drives girls to write bad verse."\textsuperscript{13}

The industrial revolution brought no such leisure to the women of the working-classes.\textsuperscript{14} For centuries, working-class women had woven at home; now they wove in factories. They had always transported the coal their husbands broke from outcroppings on hillsides; now they "hurried" it from the deep pits where miners dug. Despite the outcry that arose when Victorians discovered the conditions and hours under which women and children worked in these new factories and mines, both were in truth little different from the circumstances of industry carried on in the home. True, women were now tied to the relentless rhythm of machines, subject to serious industrial accidents, and often transplanted from pleasant countrysides to cheerless cities. Their homes,

\textsuperscript{13}Georgiana Hill, \textit{Women in English Life} (London: R. Bentley and Sons, 1896), vol. II, p. 103.

\textsuperscript{14}I have been discussing these classes as they were well-defined groups. As Asa Briggs pointed out in \textit{Essays in Labour History} (New York: Fernhill, 1967) in the essay "The Language of Class in 19th Century Britain" class lines were anything but clear-cut. Thus, determining who and how many were in each class is difficult. Hobsbawm cited a study done by R. Dudley Baxter in 1867 that reckoned seventy-seven per cent of the country belonged to the labouring class. (p. 154). As for the middle class, Hobsbawm calculated about 200,000 families in Britain in 1865-6.
however, were no longer crowded with looms, thick with cotton dust and fumes of bleach. As Ivy Pinchbeck, the first historian to study the effect of this change, concluded, "As regards long hours and unhealthy conditions, there was at first little to choose between the old system and the new."  

In one way, the industrial revolution improved conditions for some working women: new industries provided the unmarried with a way to make a living outside the family. Before industrialization, unmarried women were forced either to rely upon the charity of their relations or to roam the countryside in search of chance employment. The parish records of rural districts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are eloquent testimonies to the fact that single women were the largest class of paupers. In cities, suicide, starvation, or prostitution were frequent ends. Thus, single women flocked to work in the new factories. Throughout the nineteenth century, more than two-thirds of the women employed in factories were unmarried.  

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17 Pinchbeck quotes these parish records at some length, p. 2n. 
18 Ibid., p. 3. 
Further, a salary lent all working women new independence. Contemporaries remarked upon this fact, particularly in textile-making districts where women workers were preferred over males for their dexterity and their willingness to accept lower wages. Charlotte Tonna, a popular novelist of the day, disapproved of the sight of fifty women meeting together in a public house (after their days' work) and enjoying themselves in drinking, singing, and smoking for two or three hours.... If the husband urges the wife to depart, she will generally show some signs of rebellion, and insist on having her own way in these matters. He, poor man, well knowing that his living depends on her labour, is obliged to submit....20

A government inspector found this new spirit healthy:

One of the greatest advantages resulting from the progress of the manufacturing industry... is its tendency to raise the conditions of women.... In Lancashire where profitable employment for females is abundant,... the consciousness of independence in being able to earn her own living is favourable to her best moral energies.21

Novels of the time echoed this self-reliance. In Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, of the Two Nations*, working girls enjoy their earnings, manage their own homes, and discuss intelligently the laws which affect their work,

'We'll have the rights of labour yet; the ten-hour bill, no fines and no individuals admitted to any work who have not yet completed their sixteenth year.'

'No, fifteenth,' said Caroline eagerly...22

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22Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, of Two Nations*. 
Elizabeth Gaskell's heroine in *Mary Barton* does not particularly enjoy her work, but she does like her wages and independence. She possesses enough self-esteem to dismiss forthrightly a suitor who wants to keep her in luxury at the expense of her honor.\(^{23}\) Women had come a long way from the days of Pamela.

In spite of the fact that industrialization did not harm working women and even helped them slightly, Victorian reformers, seeing in factories conditions that had hitherto been hidden in private homes, persisted in pitying the working woman. This pity was a new phenomenon:

To the Victorians belongs the discovery of the woman worker as an object of pity, and in the literature of the early nineteenth century one finds her portrayed as the victim of long hours and general injustice for whom something ought to be done.\(^{24}\)

What it was that ought to be done about working women sparked a century-long battle among reformers who would remove women from the factory altogether, male trade unionists who hoped to use public sympathy for women workers to obtain better factory conditions for men, and feminists who fought for working women's right to work—and to be exploited.


\(^{24}\)Neff, *Victorian Working Women*, p. 11.
Middle-class women might pity working women, but the latter possessed a freedom that growing numbers of middle-class women coveted: a way of earning a living. The Victorian vision of women clustered gracefully around the hearth had several flaws. One was that it did not provide a place for the woman who did not marry. In the nineteenth century, that was a considerable number. The Napoleonic wars and constant male emigration reduced the number of marriageable men. In 1841, there were 1037 females per 1000 males and 1054 per 1000 in 1861. Further, middle-class men married late and, often, not at all. Joseph and Olive Banks, sociologists, attributed this to the rising standard of living: a man dare not marry until he could support a wife in style, even luxury. In George Gissing's novel The Odd Women, Mr. Mickelthwaite continues his engagement for seventeen years until he is able to provide a home and a piano for his bride. Engagements were not usually quite that prolonged, but the average age of marriage for the middle-class male was 29.93. In 1851, the census revealed

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that forty-two per cent of the women in Britain between the ages of twenty and forty were unmarried. 29

Victorians hardly needed statistics to tell them something of the sort was happening. Countless women lived out their lives in father's and brother's homes. In Middlemarch, the pastor cannot marry because he must support his mother and aunt. Bevin, a character in The Odd Women, is the sole support of his mother and three sisters. A male cousin in Anthony Trollope's The Way We Live Now is obliged to provide for female cousins he barely knows. 30 In 1868, W. R. Greg asked in an article "Are Women Redundant?"; his audience answered "yes." 31

Not all women could turn to a male relative, however. Increasing numbers were forced to make their own livings. Harriet Martineau, a spinster herself, described the occupations open to these women in her novel Deerbrooke:

"Can you not tell me of some way in which a woman may earn money?"

"A woman? What rate of a woman?...a woman from the uneducated class can get a subsistence by washing and cooking, by milking cows or going into service and in some parts of the kingdom by working in a cotton mill or burnishing plate...."


But, for an educated woman there is in all England no chance of subsistence but by teaching ... or the feminine gender of the tailor, tutor, and the hatter.'

'Is this all?'

'All.'

These professions, aside from being the only ones for which middle-class women were in any way trained, allowed them to "keep up appearances". Remaining a nominal member of the middle-class seemed to be as important a consideration as staying alive to these women.\(^\text{32}\)

The great numbers of women trying to pursue these genteel callings quickly glutted the market, however. Wages, never high for the governess, dropped to such a low level that £10 a year was considered reasonable pay, --that, when a common male laborer earned £1 a week.\(^\text{34}\)

A needlewoman called her profession one which gave her "the right to starve."\(^\text{35}\)

\(^{32}\)Harriet Martineau, Deerbrook.

\(^{33}\)The Times, August 22, 1873 had a letter from Emily Faithfull saying, "Women prefer to become governesses rather than lose status by taking part in any industrial pursuit." On April 4, 1874, she wrote "The cherished feeling of caste teaches women to despise industrial pursuits and this leads to poverty of the bitterest kind--the poverty of gentlewomen." Charles Booth observed the same in Life and Labour of the London Poor (London, 1891), p. 447:

"In this class there is a tendency among girls to exaggerate the income... and to imagine that to work for a living is a thing to be ashamed of...."

\(^{34}\)"Governesses" by Bessie Parker in Transactions of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, 1862 (London: John W. Parker and Sons, 1861, p. 433.

\(^{35}\)The Times, February 22, 1878.
These deprivations caught the public eye. Queen Victoria gave £5 to help found the Governesses' Benevolent Institution for destitute governesses. Serious journals debated whether emigration might be the only answer for women who must earn their livings. Novelists used governesses and seamstresses as stock characters to elicit pity. It is no surprise that serious middle-class women believed the greatest problem facing independent women was lack of employment and narrowness of occupation.

A second flaw in the Victorian vision of women in the home was that many energetic women felt nothing but boredom while watercoloring or playing the piano. Novels, again, reflected this ennui. The heiress in Charlotte Bronte's Shirley asks

"Caroline, demanded Shirley abruptly, 'don't you wish you had a profession--a trade?"

'I wish it fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts.'

'Can labour alone make a human being happy?'

'No; but it can give varieties of pain, and prevent us from breaking our hearts with a single tyrant

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36 Strachey, The Cause, p. 98.

37 Emigration of Educated Women, "Transactions (1861-7). Female Middle-Class Emigration, Transactions (1863-9).

38 Patricia Thomson, The Victorian Heroine (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), chap. ii is an excellent discussion of novelists' treatment of governesses, and, to a limited extent, seamstresses.
master-torture. Besides, successful labour has its recompense; a vacant, weary, lonely, hopeless life has none. 39

In Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Dorothea finds the usual feminine occupations tedious; she designs and supervises the construction of better drainage systems for the villagers' cottages instead. Rachel, one of the heroines of Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family*, leaves her younger sister to learn the piano and to read novels. She writes articles descrying women's lack of training and tries to end the horrors of child apprenticeship in her village. Dinah Creik asserted in 1858 that the "chief canker at the root of women's lives is the lack of something to do." 40

No woman in England felt this lack more acutely than Florence Nightingale. She spent thirty-two years of suffocating boredom in her parents' drawing-room before she was able to escape to the Crimean War. 41 An essay she wrote in 1852 expressed the frustrations of idleness:

> We fast mentally, scourge ourselves morally, use the intellectual hairshirt, in order to subdue that perpetual day-dreaming (for a purpose in life).... Women often long to enter some man's profession where they would find direction, competition (or rather opportunity of measuring


the intellect with others), and above all, time to learn something seriously.... How different would be the heart for the work, and how different would be the success, if we learnt our work as a serious study, and followed it as steadily as a profession.\textsuperscript{42}

Instead, women were told to "play through life" or to spend their energies upon the family. Nightingale regarded that as a poor substitute for a profession:

The family? It is too narrow a field for the development of an immortal spirit, be that spirit male or female.... The time is come when women must do something more than the 'domestic hearth' which means nursing the infants, keeping a pretty house, having a good dinner, and an entertaining party.\textsuperscript{43}

Josephine Butler, the woman who scandalized Victorian England with her campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act, concurred with Nightingale that women's potential for social reform was wasted in the home. Her work among the prostitutes on the docks of London made her feel this waste doubly: through lack of employment (she reasoned) lower-class women were driven to the streets and because of social conventions that prohibited ladies from working, upper-class women were not allowed to help them. Butler wrote,

The demand of the women of the humbler classes for bread may be pressing, but it is no more sincere, than that of the women of the better classes for work.... The cry among the poor is hardly more

\textsuperscript{42}\textsuperscript{Florence Nightingale, Cassandra (1852) published as an appendix to Strachey, The Cause, p. 397.}

\textsuperscript{43}\textsuperscript{Ibid.}, p. 404.
strong for leave to work than it is among the rich for leave to be useful."^44

She was unaware that many of the prostitutes had jobs, but such low-paying jobs, that they were tempted to augment them by prostitution.^45 Nor did she seem to realize that prostitutes formed a small percentage of working women.^46 Again, feminist came to believe that one of the ills facing all women was lack of employment.

Butler, Nightingale, and other women did more than write about their boredom. They began to work at charity, an occupation felt proper for middle-class women, and quickly turned it from an occasional kindness to a serious business. Mary Carpenter established schools for orphans.^47 Frances Cobbe began serious supervision of workhouses.^48 Louis Twining revamped plans for city slums.^49

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^44Josephine Butler, Women's Work and Women's Culture (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869), p. xxix. The Contagious Disease Act attempted to control the spread of venereal disease among British soldiers and sailors by empowering policemen to arrest women they suspected of prostitution and have them medically examined and treated. Feminists resisted the law because they thought it legalized prostitution and that it punished the victim rather than the criminal.


^46Ibid., p. 145.

^47Transactions (Social Science) 1865, p. 268-9, 357-60. 1868, pp. 400-410. 1869, pp. 351-5.


^49Transactions, 1870, pp. 547-555.
charity was run on the best principles of self-help and
the newest findings in the field. Social science questions
became the recognized, if not socially approved, domain of
enlightened middle-class women. In 1848, Lady Stanley wrote
her husband that she had "met with a very useful publication,
The Family Economist, a penny mag; all in my line, about
ventilation and emigration and such like philanthropic pur-
suits" and in 1859, Rachel in Clever Woman of the Family
read the reports of the Social Science conference for enter-
tainment. Even the church acknowledged women's new activ-
ities. Canon Charles Kingsley urged women to go among the
poor and teach them sanitation rules.

This movement out of the home and into the hovels of
the poor was greatly facilitated by the founding of the
National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in
1857. Lord Brougham, Lord Shaftesbury, Lord John Russell,
and other prominent politicians and reformers founded the
society to study "practical subjects--the laws which govern
men's habits and the principles of human nature, upon which
the structure of society and movements depend" and acknowl-
edged women's contributions to the field by inviting them to

50 Nancy Mitford, The Alderley Letters cited in Thomson,
The Victorian Heroine, pp. 18-19.

51 Charles Kingsley, Sanitary and Social Lectures and
Essays (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902). The sermons con-
tained in the book were delivered between 1850-1875.
join as regular members. This was a departure from the usual practice of learned societies; as one feminist put it, "we were allowed to eat, and not merely look on, at the public dinners." At the first meeting Florence Nightingale presented a paper and the women present held a two-day conference on the problems of women engaged in serious charity. At following annual meetings, women presented papers on education for women, control of prostitution, the conditions of women's employment, and many other topics, all which were debated by the entire membership of the Association. Women members also helped prepare Association reports, notably the report on the study of men's trade unions and strikes made by Association members in 1860. Thus, the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science provided the first national co-operation in women's reforms.

One of these reforms was feminists' demand for work. In 1856, Barbara Leigh Smith, an heiress who had been horrified by the overcrowding in the genteel trades of teaching and sewing, wrote a pamphlet called "Women and Work" which

53 Strachey, The Cause, p. 87.  
54 Transactions, 1857, pp. 547-60.  
55 "Report of the Committee on Trade Societies, 1860" (London: John Parker and Sons, 1860).
exposed these conditions and advocated that women be allowed to train as clerks, shop assistants, doctors, and nurses.\textsuperscript{56} The pamphlet raised much criticism in the press, but it brought feminists together.\textsuperscript{57} In 1857, Smith, Bessie Parker, Adelaide Proctor, and Isabel Craig, aided by Harriet Martineau and George Eliot, published the first issue of the\textit{Englishwomen's Journal}, a paper devoted to opening new careers for women.\textsuperscript{58}

These feminists wanted to take an even more active role in preparing women for the job market and preparing the job market for women. Using their connections with the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science to find patrons and supporters, the feminists founded the National Association for the Promotion of the Employment of Women in 1861.\textsuperscript{59} This agency was to be a labor exchange and training center for middle-class women looking for work, but, more importantly, it was to form the center of the effort to break into the male work world. Olive Strachey, a suffragist of the time, caught their sense of crusading zeal well.

\textsuperscript{57}The Saturday Review answered the pamphlet by saying "Married life is a woman's profession; and to this life her training— that of dependence is modelled. Of course, by not getting a husband or losing him, she may find that she is without resources. All that can be said of her is, she has failed in business and no social reform can prevent such failures." cited in Strachey,\textit{The Cause}, p. 92.

\textsuperscript{58}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 93.

\textsuperscript{59}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 94-5.
in her description of their activities:

Why should not women be compositors, they asked? and forthwith one of them, Miss Emily Faithfull, went out and founded the Victoria Press. Why should not women do law engrossing? An office was opened at once and filled with women workers. Why should not women be hairdressers, hotel managers, wood engravers, dispensers, house decorators, watchmakers, telegraphists? Out! out! Let us see if we can make them do it! Why should the school of designe threaten to exclude them? We must have a petition at once; and the Royal Academy, why does it not admit women students? We must knock at its doors. And then there were the swimming baths at Marlybone, why were they not open to women? Did the manager say that women did not want to use them? Nonsense, of course they did. If thirty women came would they be opened? Very well, thirty women should come; and every Wednesday afternoon the young ladies trooped away from the office to help stir the face of the waters. Nothing must be let slip, be it small or great, in the campaign they had begun to wage.60

This campaign, as Strachey intimated, was laced with sex antagonism.

Feminists' efforts to break job barriers made lively headlines for newspaper readers. Almost daily, they were treated to letters to the editor demanding that women be allowed to train as doctors, lawyers, clerks, and civil servants.61 Frances Cobbes' appeals to Poor Law officials for women's right to visit and supervise workhouses filled more columns.62 When male medical students rioted, threw

60 Ibid., pp. 95-6.
61 Samples of such stories: The Times March 25, 1877; February 8, 1876; April 11, 1877; July 3, 1876; June 3, 1875.
62 The Times, April 11, 1877.
mud at Sophia Jex-Blake, Elizabeth Walker, and Irene Peachey as they tried to attend lectures, and boycotted the school until the women were removed, The Times reported every mud clump thrown.63

Feminists turned gladly to the suffrage movement as a way of speeding reform in employment policy. J. S. Mill had written at the beginning of the campaign, "men as well as women, do not need political rights in order that they may govern, but in order that they may not be misgoverned" and feminists demanding work took this axiom to heart.64 Misgovernment to them was a system which denied full opportunities of employment for women. Smith, Parker, Proctor, and Faithfull all joined the National Association of Suffrage Societies in 1867.65 Thus, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, feminists had their grievances fully articulated and three organizations and a newspaper with which to wage their battles.

These weapons were unsheathed when feminists discovered some Liberals in the House of Commons planning to introduce a bill to reduce further the number of hours a woman could work in the factories. Feminists were sure that this

63 The Times, Nov. 18, 1870.
64 J. S. Mill, Representative Government (1861) cited in Rover, Women's Suffrage, p. 34.
restriction was another way of forcing women from the labor market. In 1844, when the first Factory Acts were discussed, feminists had no ideology or organization with which to protest. In 1873, however, the feminists were organized; feminists from the National Association for the Employment of Women, and from the National Association of Suffrage Societies rallied to fight the new Factory Act.
Feminists began their Parliamentary battle for working-women's industrial freedom in June, 1873, when A. J. Mundella, a wealthy hosiery manufacturer from Sheffield, called for the second reading of the Factory Acts Amendment Bill.\(^1\) This private member bill brought forward by Mundella, Samuel Morley, and several other Liberals from manufacturing districts proposed to reduce the hours of labor for "children, young persons, and women" in the textile industries from sixty to fifty-four a week, to raise the age a child could work full-time in the factory to fourteen, and to extend existing factory legislation to the silk industry.\(^2\) As in former legislation, factories were defined as firms employing more than fifty operatives.\(^3\)

Mundella and his supporters presented the bill as an extension of existing Factory Acts. The Acts of 1833 and 1844 set the number of hours women and children could work at twelve a day; the amendments of 1847, 1850, 1853, and

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\(^1\)Hansard, series 3, vol. 216, p. 819.

\(^2\)Richard Shaw of Sheffield; R. N. Phillips of Bury, Lancashire; J. M. Cobbet of Oldham, Lancashire; and George Anderson of Glasgow.

1867 reduced them progressively to sixty hours a week. The age at which a child could enter the factory had been raised twice. Parliament had constantly expanded the industries covered by the legislation: in 1845 print works were included, in 1861 lace factories, 1863 bleach works, and 1864 potteries, bakeries, matchmaking factories, and others. Thus, the precedent for protective legislation for women and children was clearly established.

Mundella advocated a further reduction of hours in textile mills because circumstances had changed in that industry since the 1840's. As he said in debate,

Though the evils of factory labour... had been greatly ameliorated by the Act of 1847, the press of competition had very much intensified since then, and a very cruel system had been invented in many cases under which overlookers were paid upon the out-put, and a condition of things, little short of slave-driving, had resulted therefrom.5

Thomas Hughes, member from Leeds and one of the framers of the bill, offered detailed descriptions of these worsening conditions.6 The bill, if passed, would reduce the working hours of about 745,000 women.7

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6Ibid., vol. 217, pp. 545-50.

The matter was not new to Parliament. In 1872, Hinde Palmer, Liberal member from Lincoln City, asked the government to bring forward a bill to reduce hours in the textile industry or, failing that, to assure their support if such a bill was brought forward by private members. Gladstone's ministry was split within its ranks on the question of further factory legislation and tried to evade the issue by refusing to act or to commit itself to a bill without seeing it. Persisting, Mundella, Palmer, Morley, and Thomas Hughes presented the Factories Hours of Labour Bill, containing the provisions already mentioned, on April 15, 1872.

In Parliament the bill met the determined opposition of members who owned textile factories. These owners, many of them Liberals, resented further government interference and feared the loss of profits if women were prohibited from working ten and a half hours a day. Bolstered by these objections and by memorials from the Manchester and Glasgow Chambers of Commerce, opponents of the bill appealed to Gladstone. Mundella knew that the bill could not pass

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8 *Hansard*, vol. 209, pp. 1759-60.
10 *Hansard*, vol. 217, p. 1304.
11 *The Times*, June 6, 1874.
without government support and withdrew it on April 23.\textsuperscript{12}
The government, anxious to please both factions, instituted a Royal Inquiry into the conditions of women and children employed in textile mills.

The report of the Inquiry appeared in April, 1873.\textsuperscript{13} It documented, as Mundella hoped it would, the increased strain upon workers in the textile trade. The commissioners found that each operative had more machines to operate, that the machines were driven at a higher speed than in the 1840's, and that the practice of giving overseers a bonus for increased production led to "steadier and harder work" than previously.\textsuperscript{14} Further, the commissioners declared that textile mills were especially hazardous to operatives' health and required legislation for that reason.\textsuperscript{15} With this encouragement, Mundella introduced the Factory Acts Amendment Bill on May 18, 1873.\textsuperscript{16}

Again, manufacturers protested. Thomas Bazley, noted Liberal, textile factory owner, and a director of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, prophesied that such a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12}Hansard, vol. 213, p. 213.
  \item \textsuperscript{13}"Report of Dr. Bridges and Mr. Holmes to Local Government Board in House of Commons", \textit{Sessional Papers} (1873) LIV.
  \item \textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 40.
  \item \textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 8.
  \item \textsuperscript{16}Hansard, vol. 215, p. 890.
\end{itemize}
restriction would put the English textile trade in immediate jeopardy:

The manufacturers of this country were exposed to foreign competition—by Russia, America, Germany, Belgium, France and other foreign countries; and it was a fact that the competition in those countries had latterly purchased the very best machinery, that (they) were now competing with British manufacturers, and the cost of production to them being in every respect much less than...in England...17

Further restrictions, at a time when "manufacturers of this country, he believed, were already paying wages out of capital" would put England out of the textile race altogether.18

The manufacturers' opposition was not overwhelming, however. They conceded that the regulation of children's hours and ages of employment was warranted.19 Many had voluntarily instituted nine hour days in their own factories.20 Factory inspectors noted their "readiness to accept our suggestions, their anxiety to observe the law" of the existing factory legislation.21 Their chief complaint was that the state would enforce these restrictions rather than

17Ibid., vol. 217, p. 1304.
18Ibid., vol. 217, p. 1305.
19The Times, June 12, 1873. The Association of Employers of Factory Labour in Nancaster, York, Shester, and Darby.
leave them to the owner. Since manufacturers had capitulated many times before to regulations, they might have come to support Mundella’s bill if the feminists had not launched their assault on the bill. To the surprise of the entire House of Commons, Henry Fawcett, Liberal member from Brighton, rose to object to the bill on the unprecedented ground that it violated women’s freedom and slurred their intelligence.

Mundella was disconcerted by this attack. In debates on earlier factory bills, reformers’ zeal concentrated on protecting women. No member had argued that such protection reduced a woman’s freedom or denied her the chance to make her own decisions. J. S. Mill, champion of women’s causes, sat quietly through the 1866 debate on the extension of the Factory Acts to a new group of woman workers and evidently had had no objection.

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22 Charles Dickens discussed manufacturers and their reaction to legislation in his novel *Hard Times*:

The wonder was Coketown was there at all, it had been ruined so often, that it was amazing it had borne so many shocks. Surely there never was such a fragile china-ware as that of which the millers of Coketown were made. They were ruined, when they were required to send labouring children to school; they were ruined when inspectors were appointed to look into their works; they were ruined when such inspectors thought it doubtful whether they were quite justified in chopping people up with their machines; they were utterly undone, when it was hinted that perhaps they need not make quite so much smoke....

23 *Hansard*, vol. 216, p. 821.
Mundella was also surprised that Henry Fawcett would lead this opposition. Fawcett was professor of economics at Cambridge and noted for his concern with industrial questions, trade unions, and protective legislation for agricultural laborers. He had worked closely with Mundella on two reform bills and had supported earlier Factory Acts. Fawcett was so well regarded as a supporter of working men that George Howell, trade union leader, said after Fawcett's near defeat in the election of 1868, "the working men of England cannot afford to lose the services of one of their best and most uncompromising champions." This bill, however, offended two of Fawcett's main principles. He was a free-trade economist who came increasingly to believe that government intervention in industrial questions would destroy England's primacy. True, he had supported factory legislation earlier, but his economic theory had since hardened. He answered Mundella's accusations of inconsistency by saying "Is it to be supposed that anyone coming into this House when still

25 Ibid., pp. 174-6, 265.
young, is to learn nothing from experience?" Second, the bill proposed to legislate for a group not represented in Parliament. Fawcett had long been sensitive to this defect in the English constitution. In 1868, he took a lonely position in advocating that Indian princes were not liable to British law unless they were allowed to vote. Only children, Fawcett maintained, should be the object of paternal legislation.

Fawcett was especially sensitive to legislation affecting women. He and his wife were deeply involved in the suffrage movement: Henry Fawcett collaborated with Mill in presenting the first women's suffrage petition to Parliament in 1866 and spoke at length in the debate over a women's suffrage amendment in 1867; Millicent Fawcett frequently spoke at suffrage meetings and later became the leader of all suffragist groups in England. Moreover, she had had experience with the curtailment of women's freedom to work. Her sister Elizabeth Garrett spent six years trying to train as a doctor. With the help of the Association for the Promotion of the Employment of Women, Garrett applied to university

28 *Hansard*, vol. 217, p. 1298.

29 *Stephens, Life of Henry Fawcett*, pp. 382-4. The Indian princes were so pleased by his stand that they sent him £350 for his re-election fund.


31 *The Times*, April 30, 1873; June 24, 1873; March 10, 1873. *Rover, Women's Suffrage*, pp. 64-66.
after university for admission, called on the government for help, and petitioned male students to demand her admission. All failed and Garrett was forced to go to France to earn her degree. Millicent Fawcett, thus, had reason to resent males bent on keeping women from work.

This antagonism—shared by other feminists who had suffered similarly—transferred itself to the floor of Parliament. Henry Fawcett, following what the feminists called "the official position of the women's movement", charged that the Factory Acts Amendment Bill was "prompted by the jealousy of men with regards to the labour of women." Feminists contended that male trade unions followed a policy of excluding women from factory work and were in this instance attempting to play upon Parliamentarians' sympathy for women and children in order to achieve a reduction in hours for all workers. The bill, Fawcett declared, would

...be a Nine-hour Bill for men as well as women.... If the Bill is intended to be a general Nine-hours Bill, then the House has not been fairly dealt with; for why do not the promoters of the measure boldly come forward and tell us what they want.... Do not let them cloak their intentions in the garb of a generous zeal for the welfare of women.

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The feminists had good grounds for their beliefs. Male trade unions had consistently denied membership to female workers or allowed them membership without the rights of full participation. Several unions openly supported resolutions to drive women out of the factories. Strikes often occurred when owners asked men to teach a new woman worker the trade. Despite their hostility toward women workers, males did not scruple to use them. Male unions and friendly societies organized Short Time Committees in 1844 to support the first Factory Acts, knowing that men's hours would be reduced if women's were. This support was hardly a secret: the Factory Inspector's reports measured industrial support for Factory Acts amendments—which would affect women and children only—by male trade unions' agitations. In his April 30, 1872, report, Alexander Redgrave, factory inspector, noted that men's unions had renewed their efforts for a nine hour day and "are determined and earnest promoters of further restrictions upon labour." Thus, feminists felt their charge of interference from men's unions was justified. Millicent


Fawcett fumed "the cloven foot is dextrously hidden under the drapery of philanthropy and chivalry." 38

Mundella tried desperately to deny this accusation. The "Sheffield Outrages" of 1866, a series of incidents in Mundella's own district in which unionists vandalized and assaulted workers who refused to join the union, had alienated many members of Parliament who would as a matter of course have supported the Factory Act Amendment Bill. 39 Lord Shaftesbury, "father" of the earlier factory legislation, was one of those disgusted by trade union violence; he announced in 1871 that he "would not undertake a measure proposed in the interest of Trades Unions." 40 Mundella, therefore, was obliged to maintain throughout debate that he was not influenced by the unions. 41

Feminists, and probably other members of Parliament, found this disclaimer hard to credit in the light of Mundella's parliamentary record as an ardent supporter of

38 The Times, June 9, 1873. The feminists were later proved right. On May 26, 1893, Thomas Ashton, the secretary spinners, wrote in the Cotton Factory Times, the official organ of the textile union, with reference to the eight hour movement, that "now the veil must be lifted, and the agitation carried on under its true colours. Women and children must no longer be made the pretext for securing a reduction of working hours for men." cited in Sidney and Beatrice Webb, The History of Trade Unionism (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1907), p. 297.


unions. In 1871 and 1872, he had led the battle to repeal the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which was curtailing the unions' freedom to strike. Morley and Hughes, other framers of the Factory Acts Amendment bill, were widely known as champions of trade unions. Besides, the unions were not circumspect in their support of the bill. The Times reported a meeting of the "Friends of Mr. Mundella's Factory Bill" the day after debate on the bill began. The "friends", all males, all members of unions or workingmen's societies, passed the following resolution:

That the best thanks of this meeting are due and hereby rendered to Mr. Mundella for the most effectual manner in which he introduced his Bill into the House of Commons last night, and for his bold and judicious advocacy of the claims of women and children employed in the textile manufactureries of Great Britain and Ireland.

Mundella's deceptions only increased feminists' distrust and animosity toward men's unions. Under no circumstances would feminists now turn to men's unions for help with their industrial policy or for cooperation with the women's unions they later began to form.

Fawcett hammered at this deception throughout the debate, making much of the fact that "women's opinion had not been consulted" and that male unionists were taking

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42 Pelling, Short History, p. 74.
43 Ibid., pp. 61, 63, 66, 68. DNB.
44 The Times, June 13, 1873.
advantage of their lack of suffrage to secure union ends.\(^{45}\) Fawcett, however, foresaw a larger danger than the fact men would benefit by women's reduction in hours; he argued that the bill "must inevitably place the most serious restrictions and impediments upon the employment of women... and will discourage their employment." Employers would hire men instead of dealing with this inconvenience or put women on half-time shifts; "like children".\(^{46}\)

Lack of work would have disastrous effects:

> Anyone who considers the social condition of this country, anyone who knows how many women there are who have a severe struggle to maintain themselves by toil; anyone who reflects that if a woman is driven from honest labour, she may be forced by dire necessity into a life of misery and degradation, will hesitate to sanction legislation which may possibly have the effect of throwing impediments in the way of women earning their own maintenance.\(^{47}\)

With these words Fawcett summarized the frustrations and beliefs that feminists had evolved during their twenty years struggle. Feminists who had seen governesses and needlewomen crowded into semi-starvation believed that all women faced severe competition for the few jobs open to them. Feminists fighting to secure a place in "male" professions were sure that employers would discharge factory women if they could prove that their labor was in any way


\(^{46}\)Ibid.

less convenient than men's. Moreover, feminists had been deeply impressed in their fights against the Contagious Diseases Act of 1870 and 1871 by the hordes of prostitutes around the docks of London. These women, feminists assumed quite erroneously, were working women who had been forced out of their jobs and been driven to prostitution. Thus, feminists were anxious to cure the disease that they were sure produced prostitutes: restriction on women's right to work.

Later in the debate, Henry Fawcett did acknowledge that some supporters of the bill were not motivated by jealousy of women's labor. Worse, they acted out of "mistaken philanthropy" that would destroy the self-reliance of women workers, "wrapping them in the swaddling clothes of babyhood." Women's rights as "free agents to make contracts with their employers" must be respected or the result would be pitiable: "...step by step we will so enervate them, that at length they will come to us like helpless children and ask us to be their guardians." He ended, "There is nothing more mischievous than meddlesome philanthropy."

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48 Peter Cominos, "Late Victorian Sexual Respectability and the Social System", International Review of Social History, Vol. VIII, pp. 18-48 and 216-50 is a fascinating discussion of this problem. Cominos contended that political economy, as espoused by Fawcett and others, extended to morality, producing a "gospel of thrift in semen". Cominos traced some reasons for feminists' feelings on the matter.

49 Ibid., vol. 214, p. 827.
With that, Fawcett called for support for his amendment that, in the opinion of this House, it is undesirable to sanction a measure which would discourage the employment of women by subjecting their labour to a new legislative restriction to which it was not proposed to subject the labour of men.50

A. J. Mundella countered Fawcett's objections by quoting statistics showing that women had not been displaced by earlier factory legislation.51 He presented a petition signed by nearly 35,000 working women who desired further regulation of hours and who had raised by subscription "not less than three-quarters of the funds" necessary to bring the matter before Parliament.52 He pointed out that women needed protective legislation because they were "too weak" to bargain for themselves, lacking strong unions.53 These facts and figures served only to infuriate feminists, however. Mundella interspersed his statistics with remarks contrary to all feminist ambitions. He declared that his bill would protect women from the unpleasantness of fighting for their own rights and he alluded to the golden day when no women would have to work, when men would earn enough money to allow women to remain in the home.54 Mundella and

50 Ibid., vol. 217, p. 1287.
51 Ibid., vol. 216, p. 825.
52 Ibid., vol. 216, pp. 825-6.
53 Ibid., vol. 216, p. 825.
54 Ibid., vol. 216, p. 824.
the textile owners of Parliament were divided only upon the question of government interference; they might, perhaps, have reached a compromise on the bill. Mundella and the feminists, on the other hand, were at complete cross purposes. No agreement was possible.

Fawcett's attack on the bill thus split the Liberals three ways. The government was naturally reluctant for the split to deepen or for it to be aired in public. Mundella was not allotted time to debate the bill until late in the day in the hopes that it would be "talked out". It very nearly was; the Home Secretary sat silent when Mundella appealed to the floor for a motion to continue debate another day. Only Conservative member Benjamin Disraeli's motion saved the bill.\(^55\) Once again, Mundella realized that he lacked government support as well as support from the floor. He withdrew the bill for a second time, prophesying

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\text{Although he was about the discharge the Bill, the House had not heard the last of it by any means, for it would be constantly before the nation. It had already been felt in Oldham; there were three candidates at Dundee, and they were all supporters of the Bill.}^{56}
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The next election proved Mundella's prediction true. Working men's gatherings before the day were replete with resolutions of thanks to Disraeli for his intervention on the bill and the Conservatives were returned by a majority

\(^{55}\text{Ibid., vol. 216, pp. 827-8.}\)

\(^{56}\text{Ibid., vol. 217, p. 1551.}\)
of eighty-three in the election of February, 1874. 57

Professor Beesley, editor of the trade unions' newspaper the Beehive, tied the Liberals' defeat to Fawcett's stand:

From what I hear, I am inclined to think that no single fact had more to do with the defeat of the Liberal Party in Lancashire at the last election than Mr. Fawcett's speech on the Nine Hours Bill in the last Parliament.58

Leslie Stephens, Fawcett's biographer, noted that Fawcett was "unpopular" for his stand on the bill. 59 The minutes of the 1874 Trade Union Congress suggest that male unionists' feelings against him were slightly stronger. The Congress passed a motion criticizing Henry and Millicent Fawcett for their accusation of deception on the part of the unions, saying "this Congress utterly repudiates such an allegation, and indignantly protests against the vilifications thrown upon them by such erroneous statements."

Mundella, who was present, refused to vote for the resolution because he believed "Mr. and Mrs. Fawcett were in utter ignorance of the results of their work", which explained if not excused their actions. Mundella added, "Some ladies, also, who were referred to as being opposed to his Bill were, he had no hesitation in saying, utterly ignorant of the .


58 Webb and Webb, History of British Trade Unionism, p. 297n.

Not surprisingly, Fawcett lost his seat in Brighton to a Conservative in the February election and was able to return to Parliament only by running for a safe seat at Hackney. 61

Feminists did not limit their opposition to the bill to Henry Fawcett's voice in Parliament. Throughout the debate on the bill, they had been active in publicizing the feminist beliefs. Millicent Fawcett wrote a letter to The Times on June 9, 1873, exposing the wiles of men's trade unions and urging Parliament to defeat the bill. She ended her letter by saying

> Even granting for the sake of argument that these women operatives suffer peculiarly from unhealthy conditions, it is far better that they should so suffer and in the meantime earn an honest and independent living than they should be driven to the dismal alternative of starvation or prostitution. 62

A woman signing a letter to The Times was unusual enough to cause comment. 63 This letter was mentioned repeatedly in the parliamentary debates and read in full at the Trade Union Congress Report 1874, p. 12. The Times, January 24, 1874, contained a letter from one of the trade unionists present at the meeting who said the 200,000 signatures of working women on the petitions presented to Parliament showed that discussing "Women's Rights from the practical point of having long hours at monotonous toil in a mill was very different from treating them philosophically from a warm studio."

Union Congress. Feminists also used that weapon of the suffrage movement, petitions, to try to convince members that working women opposed protective legislation. In the course of debate, they presented eight such petitions. 64

After the bill was withdrawn, feminists continued the attack, hoping to educate the public. Henry and Millicent Fawcett published a jointly written book, *Essays and Lectures on Social and Political Subjects*, which contained eight essays describing the evils of restrictive legislation for women. 65 *The Englishwomen's Review* of April, 1874, carried two articles on the subject. Mrs. Goodall, a popular essayist, condemned particular legislation for women because "such legislation would treat them as helpless children unfit to be left alone and to think for themselves." 66 Emma Paterson, a suffragist particularly interested in working women, wrote that she "was strongly in favour of legal regulation of children's work, and also of sanitary inspection of workplaces, but thought the time had come when no fresh legislation should be sought for in the work of women." 67

Feminists also presented the subject for debate at the annual conference of the National Association for the

64. *Hansard*, vol. 217, p. 1547.
Promotion of Social. At the 1872 conference at Plymouth, W. C. Taylor read a paper called the "Needlewomen's Case", tying the misery of these women's life to "the obnoxious provisions of Parliament" which did not allow "women to compete in an open labour market, but restricted them to certain employments, which were therefore overstocked."  

At the 1873 and 1874 conferences, three papers on the employment of married women in the factory were discussed. The consensus reached was

'Protection' is a well-sounding word, and is supposed to be especially so to women; but it assumes a singularly unattractive form when it cuts off half one's pay and degrades one to the position of a child.

Feminists had not changed their position that all women's problems were the same: sharp competition for a few jobs and lack of independence.

In 1874 a new Parliament began and the Conservative government quickly brought forward the Factory (Health of Women & c.) Bill. It was designed to consolidate working-class support for the Tories, but was, in fact, much less sweeping a reform than Mundella had proposed in his last two bills. The hours of labor were to be reduced to fifty-seven a week and the silk industry was not included. Mundella and

70 *Hansard*, vol. 218, p. 1739.
his supporters criticized the bill because it did not reduce the length of the working day at all, just allowing an extra half-hours freedom at lunch.  

After this criticism, Mundella and his followers supported the government's bill. Bazley and the members of the Chambers of Commerce agreed to it. The bill was passed 269 to 79, seventy-two of the dissenting votes being cast by Irish members indicating their general disapproval of the government.

Henry Fawcett cast one of the seven votes genuinely against the measure. During debate on the bill, he advanced exactly the same arguments as before, failing to provide any statistics to back his points. He presented the same amendment "That, in the opinion of this House, it is undesirable to sanction a measure which would discourage the employment of women....", which lost 105 to 57, fifty Irish members voting against the government. Once again, Fawcett had taken a lonely stand.

Feminists were not defeated by their failure in Parliament. Rather, the debates reinforced their desire to prove that women were not helpless beings in need of

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71 Sessional Papers (1874), II
73 Ibid., vol. 220, p. 325.
protection. Further, the debate pointed out the means of proof: A. J. Mundella argued women needed legislation because they did not have unions. Very well, feminists declared, women shall have unions. Thus began thirty years of feminist intervention in working women's trade union.
CHAPTER III

WOMEN'S TRADE UNIONS, THE NEW BATTLEGROUND
1874-1883

Henry and Millicent Fawcett both insisted during the debate over the Factory Acts 1872-4 that women workers did not need protective legislation because they were "free agents" who made mutually beneficial contracts with their employers. As Fawcett argued in Parliament, women workers "have not only the will but the power to protect their own interests."¹

To what power Fawcett was referring is obscure. If a worker's power to protect himself is measured by the size and strength of unions, women workers in 1873 were impotent. A bare 1600 of the 3,650,000 female laborers in Britain belonged to unions.² If power is measured in a workman's ability to fix satisfactory wages, women workers were one-half as powerful as their male counterparts. Male bookbinders earned 11s. a week, females 5s.6d.³ Men in textile

²Drake, Women in Trade Unions, p. 453.
industries brought home 25s. a week; women 15s. If a workmen's success in controlling his working conditions is an indication of his power to protect himself, women in trades not covered by the Factory Acts were completely powerless. Barmaids in railway stations worked one hundred and two hours a week with one night off a month. Female shop assistants stood for ninety hours a week on their feet behind a counter and were forced often to live in barracks behind the shop, where the employer specified what pictures an employee could hang and what company she could keep.

True, women in some trades made satisfactory arrangements with their employers. The Factory Inspector's Report of 1872 noted that no textile employer in Birmingham could convince his women employees to come in before 9:30 A.M. Women in the felt hat trade in Manchester held private negotiations with the factory owners which resulted in better conditions than those a male union was able to secure by striking. These women were, however, the aristocracy of female labor. Women in textile mills, in particular, had

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6Ibid., p. 551.


8Drake, Women in Trade Unions, pp. 40-1.
been protected since 1844 by legislation and from the 1860's by male unions (who had reluctantly allowed women to join the unions when it became obvious that they could not be driven from the factories). They earned 15s. a week working in government-inspected conditions fifty-six hours a week.

For women in less protected trades, conditions were entirely different. Women in confectionery factories worked eighty hours a week for 5 to 7s., subject to severe burns from the vats of boiling jam and sugar. Female laborers loading coal onto barges averaged over seventy hours a week for 6s. Matchgirls, knowing that they would eventually contract necrosis from the phosphorus used in the process, earned 2d. per gross of matchboxes made, or about 5s. a week. Women working as agricultural laborers, of whom there were 570,000 in 1871, often earned no wages at all, being paid in "truck", goods from the farm.

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12 Black, Sweated Industry, p. 4.
encouraged women compositors to come in as "blacklegs" in printing strikes because the women computed the bill for their services by calculating what the current rate for males was and dividing it in half. By their submissiveness, women of the working class had earned the right to work in almost all trades and industries, but this freedom was earned at the price of long hours and low wages. Henry Fawcett and many of the feminists were not aware of this bargain and did not realize how irrelevant their push for new occupations was to working women.

Feminists, largely unaware of industrial conditions but maddened by their defeat in the House of Commons, were determined to prove that women could handle their own affairs without protective legislation. They wanted to be sure that no member of Parliament would ever be able to justify intervention on the grounds that women workers were "too weak". Feminists decided that the formation of trade unions among working women would be the surest way to achieve this end.

The choice of unions was a logical one for feminists. Many of them had participated in the study of male unions made by the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1860, which concluded that workingmen's movements

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were much strengthened by combination. Furthermore, the years 1871-1874 were years of rapid growth and high hopes in male unions. Despite several adverse court rulings which threatened the legality of unions altogether, unions throughout England were growing at an unprecedented rate. The gas workers of East London were forming unions for the first time and seemed on the verge of securing a nine hour day. Patrick Kenney, an Irish workman, founded the General Amalgamated Labourer Union in 1872 and had 5,000 members by the next year. Joseph Arch, a lay Primitive Methodist pastor, founded the Warwickshire Agricultural Labourers Union early in 1872 and within months the movement, according to Arch, was "flowing over the countryside like a spring tide." By the end of 1873, the union had 1000 branches, 100,000 members, and a paper called the Labourers Chronicle that sold 30,000 copies an issue. Even the railway workers, failing to unionize many times in the past, were able in 1872 to build a semi-stable organization with 17,000 dues-paying members. With these examples before their eyes, feminists must have felt the moment was ripe.

Trade unionism among working women was not unknown. In 1788, handspinners in Leicester combined in a "sisterhood" to force their husbands to revolt against the introduction

15Infra., p. 19.

16Pelling, A History of Trade Unionism, pp. 79-82.
of machinery. In 1811, women lace workers in Loughborough had to be reminded by the local minister that their efforts to combine in order to raise the price of their product were illegal.\(^{17}\) Six female lodges took part in the great trade union upheaval of 1833-1834. These lodges, however, disbanded in the face of government opposition and were never reformed. For almost forty years there was no attempt by working women to unite.\(^{18}\) Contemporaries attributed this to women's hopes of leaving work when they married, to the traditions of subservience women were subject to, to women's lack of leisure, and to the hostility of men's trade unions.\(^{19}\) Whatever the reasons, in 1873, 1400 women belonged to male textile unions and 200 to female trade unions, of which three existed.\(^{20}\)

Male unions' history of hostility toward women workers and their attempts at deception in the 1873 Parliament insured that feminists would not look to them for help in organizing trade unions among working women. Feminists instead turned to their middle-class associates in the suffrages societies and social science groups.


\(^{19}\)Supra, pp. 80-1.

Dr. Mary Elizabeth Walker began the first organization to foster women's trade union. Dr. Walker had recently acquired her medical degree from Edinburgh University despite opposition from faculty, administration, and male students. She had been one of the five women assaulted by males throwing mud when she attempted to enter the medical lecture hall for the first time. She was forced to pay extra fees to take examinations which were part of her regular course of study and the University had quibbled about granting the degree even after she had passed the examinations and finished the necessary internship. This experience made her determined to fight male arrogance and restrictions upon female labor. She returned to Birmingham and founded the National Association of Working Women.

Walker solicited middle-class support to found the Association, drawing largely upon the Birmingham Suffrage Association. The charter members of the group decided that its purpose was to "enable women to form unions to maintain their proper value in the labour market." Its second goal was "to object to legislative provisions which interfere with the work of women." The Association did not list improvements in working conditions or wages that

21Strachey, The Cause, p. 177.
22Testimony before the Royal Commission on the Factory and Workshops Consolidation 1876. Q, 13358-13456. Sessional Papers (1876) XXI.
23Ibid., 13,358.
these unions could achieve. Rather, the unions existed for the purpose of "educating the public of the worth of women's labour and gradually recruiting working women." 24

The recruiting was very gradual. With a year's work, Walker and her supporters persuaded only one hundred women to join. 25 At the end of eighteen months, fewer than forty were still paying dues. 26 In her testimony before the Royal Commission inquiring into women's labor in 1876, Walker unwittingly provided the answer why feminists' first attempt at organizing working women was a failure; she testified, "I have not a very large experience among working women." 27

Feminists' second attempt was much more successful, probably because of the experience of its founder, Emma Paterson. Paterson was a middle-class woman who had industrial experience. She was born in 1848, daughter of Thomas Smith, a schoolmaster. Her father's profession allowed Paterson to receive an unusual education for a woman of her time, but it also required that she become self-supporting as soon as possible. Accordingly, she became a governess at sixteen. She found the work everything

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24 Ibid., 13,360.
25 Ibid., 13,423.
26 Ibid., 13,425.
27 Ibid., 13,442.
that Charlotte Bronte had portrayed in *Jane Eyre*: hard, underpaid, and lonely. At seventeen, disregarding class prohibitions against manual labor, Paterson apprenticed herself as a bookbinder.28

Women bookbinders were not the lowest class of female workers; they worked only sixty-five hours a week, under moderately comfortable circumstances, and earned 5s. 11d. a week.29 In 1843, the women had even organized a strike when a ten per cent wage was announced. The strike was unsuccessful, but women bookbinders considered themselves much superior to matchgirls or women who sewed fur.30 Still, Paterson found the conditions oppressive. She began to attend lectures at the Workingmen's Club and Institute to discover how men were able to bargain more successfully with their employers. She worked briefly with Emily Faithfull at the National Association for the Promotion of the Employment of Women, helping to establish the all-women press. In 1871, she became the secretary of the London Women's Suffrage Association, the chapter to which J. S. Mill and the Fawcetts belonged.31

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28 DNB
31 DNB
Emma Paterson was out of England during the agitation over the Factory Bills of 1873 and 1874. She married Thomas Paterson, the president of the Workingmen's club, in 1873, quit her work at the bookbindery, and went to America for a wedding trip. She did not forget her concern with women workers, however; while in America she inspected women's unions and factory conditions. She reported to the Society of the Promotion of the Employment of Women that she was "very impressed by the successful unions in New York, consisting of and run by working-women." 32

When Paterson returned to England, she published a series of articles in the Labour News, a small newspaper of the buildingmen's union, exposing the sweated conditions of most women's labor and advocating trade unions as a solution:

Not only are women frequently paid half or less than half for doing work as well and as quickly as men, but skilled women whose labour requires delicacy of touch, the result of long training as well as thoughtfulness, receive from 11/- to 16/- or 17/- a week, whilst the roughest unskilled labour of a man is worth at least 18/-. 33

Paterson noted that the earnings of seamers and stitchers in Leicester and women metal workers in the Black Country

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32 Drake, Women In Trade Unions, p. 11.
33 Ibid., p. 12.
were as low as 3s. a week.

So long as women are unprotected by any kind of combination, and are consequently wholly at the mercy of employers for the rate of their wages and the length of their working hours, working-men not unnaturally look with suspicion on their employment in trades.\ldots\ The fear that women will lower wages has led them to pass rules in many of their trade societies positively forbidding their members to work with women. They have also carried on, and are still continuing, an agitation to limit the hours of women in factories and workshops. Women more than ever need the protection afforded by combinations; for at the present women affected by the proposed restrictions have no means of making known their collective opinions.\footnote{ibid., p. 12}

Feminists rankling from their defeat in Parliament received these articles with enthusiasm.\footnote{Paterson reported at the first meeting that she received "many letters of encouragement from several towns in the country, promising co-operation." \textit{The Times}, September 1, 1874.}

Paterson was anxious to convert this enthusiasm into an organization to foster combinations (trade unions) among working women. Her experience in the factory had convinced her that working women could not form the nucleus of her organization: women working sixty-five hours a week and running homes had little time for the writing of constitutions and running parliamentary meetings. Paterson believed that "some initiatory step must be taken by persons having more leisure and more business knowledge than the great mass of women compelled to work for their living are likely
to possess. She wrote and spoke to her acquaintances in the suffrage and feminist circles and in August, 1874, called the first meeting of the Women's Protective and Provident League.

The charter members of the organization were a distinguished lot. All had sympathy for the women's movement and were well-known for their social reform projects. Arnold Toynbee and Anna Swanwick were both concerned with providing suitable meeting places for working people in the evenings and educational entertainment. The Honorable Herbert Auberon and Henry Crompton championed trade unions. Harriet Martineau, despite her earlier opinion that the poor should starve to death to ease over-population, had mellowed in her old age and was busy in her native village of Ambleide with social reforms that kept the village, as one writer said, "on its toes in a state of constant, charitable tension." Canon Charles Kingsley preached Christian love and reform in his well-attended sermons and his popular novels Alton Locke and Yeast. Mrs. Mark Pattison, George

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36 The Times, June 20, 1877.
37 Ibid., September 1, 1873.
38 DNB.
39 DNB. Pelling, A History of British Trade Unions, p. 75.
40 Thomson, Victorian Heroine, p. 18.
41 DNB.
Eliot's model for Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, was noted for her articles on French art and her efforts to instill social responsibility in undergraduates at Oxford. Paterson also invited four officers of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science: Rev. Stewart Headlam, Mr. and Mrs. Hodgson Pratt, and F. W. Verney. Last, Paterson included two male trade unionists who had shown themselves sympathetic to the women workers' problems. Henry King, secretary of the London Journeymen Bookbinders, and George Shipton, secretary of the London Trades Council, pledged their "wholehearted support" to the objects of the League.

At the first meeting, the members worked out a program which gave working women some support but stopped short of denying them the opportunity to help themselves. The League agreed to hold an initial meeting to organize women in a trade, to pay the preliminary expenses of the union by "providing office accommodations at a moderate charge", and to help guide the new union by providing "persons having leisure to act as provisional secretaries." Aside from

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42 DNB. Vera Brittain in *Women At Oxford* (Oxford University Press, 1964) states that Pattison was Eliot's model.
43 *Transactions*, 1857, p. 3.
44 *The Times*, October 13, 1874.
45 *The Times*, June 20, 1877.
that, the unions were to be independent and self-supporting; working women would pay an entrance fee of 1s. plus weekly dues of 2-3d. 46

The League proposed to exercise control over unions' policy, however. They declared that the unions were to harbor "no antagonism toward employers," that

The object of the League is to promote an entente cordiale between the labourer, the employer, and the consumer; and the revision of the contract between the labourer and the employer is recommended only in those cases in which its terms appear unreasonable and unjust to the dispassionate third party, the consumer.... 47

The League did not consider that wage increases or improvements in working conditions should be sought. Rather, they were concerned about preventing "further depression of wages and conditions." 48 Last, the League condemned strikes as "rash and mistaken actions." They did not allow for strike pay in the rules for the new unions, preferring arbitration. 49

Beyond the unions, the League made plans for a half-penny savings bank for the working women, a lending library.

46 Ibid., October 13, 1874.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
a swimming club, and a seaside house working women might rent for vacations.  

The League's moderate aims for the unions were, in part, the result of recent legal rulings about unions. In 1867, a Royal Inquiry into the "Sheffield Outrages" had placed unions in serious danger of being outlawed. The case Hornsby vs. Close the next year stopped short of this action, declaring that unions were "illegal but not criminal". The most damaging decision was the Criminal Law Amendment of 1871 that made all militant actions, including picketing, illegal. Mundella and Thomas Hughes were fighting this law in Parliament and the Trade Union Congress leaders were trying hard to appear respectable to the public, even when this meant prohibiting member unions from striking. 

By 1875, most bans on unionism had been repealed. In 1874, however, when the members of the Women's Protective and Provident League were drawing up their constitution, they were much influenced by the illegality of trade unions. That they advocated unions at all was a measure of their seriousness in wanting to organize working women. The

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50 Drake, Women in Trade Unions, p. 11.  
51 Pelling, A History of British Trade Unionism, pp. 64-5.  
52 Ibid., p. 64.  
53 Webb and Webb, History of Trade Unionism, p. 223.
League's ban on strikes and antagonism toward employers stemmed from unions' legal difficulties. But the emphasis on self-help, separation of the sexes in unions, and the lack of a positive conditions and wages policy was a legacy of feminist prejudice.

Paterson put the new organization to work immediately—on her former trade. In September, The Times reported a meeting of "several hundreds of the female workers of the bookbinding trade" at which Paterson and Henry King spoke, outlining the advantages of belonging to a trade union. Three hundred women paid dues and enthusiastically arranged for further meetings. The new union voted to call itself the Society of Women Employed in Bookbinding and elected Mrs. Hodgson Pratt as treasurer, Paterson as secretary, and "a committee of ten female workers... to conduct the business of the society."54

In January, 1875, members of the League travelled to Dewsbury to organize women who had gone out on strike against the woolen mills. The League would not, of course, advance any strike pay or allow members of the League to serve as officers while the women were on strike, but they did provide guidance to the council of working women running the strike and handling benefit money. The strike lasted eight weeks, the women workers held firm, and they secured

54 The Times, October 13, 1874.
their demand that wages not be cut ten per cent. With this, the League helped to organize a union and arranged for affiliation with the London branch of the League. Male operatives whose union had collapsed during the strike petitioned to join the women's union. The Dewsbury and District Heavy Woolen Weavers, the women's union, agreed but would allow the men "no part in the management of the union."  

Some dressmakers in London heard of these successes and asked the League to help them organize. In February, Paterson and Pattison arranged for handbills to be passed out at the door of sewing firms throughout London announcing a meeting to organize a union. Four hundred working women answered the announcement and formed themselves into the Society of Dressmakers, Milliners, and Mantlemakers. The union appeared to thrive; every month more sempstresses joined.

In April, the League received a letter from the "town councillors and other gentlemen" of Leicester asking the League's help in organizing the women in the hosiery trade, Leicester's main industry. The League agreed to hold a meeting in the Town Hall, at which several hundred women

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56 Ibid.

joined and formed the Society of Seamers and Stitchers. The gentlemen persuaded the League that the union could survive only if something was done to improve working conditions. The League reluctantly allowed the women's union to demand a twenty-five per cent pay increase from employers. The factory owners immediately capitulated and, understandably, the union became overwhelmingly popular. Within a year three thousand women had joined. The members of the Society became so proud of their achievements that they refused to let male trade unionists listen in on the meetings in case they should learn how to bargain with employers more successfully. Their antagonism to male members of unions became so great that Paterson was obliged to write the union before the president of the Leicester Board of Trade was allowed to attend their meetings. 58

These events were repeated thirty-five times on widely varying trades over the next ten years, with thousands of working women joining new unions. 59 The League members reported their successes at the annual meetings and congratulated themselves on the "invaluable service" they were performing. 60 Millicent Fawcett prophesied at the tenth annual meeting that the League and the working women's unions had earned a place in history:

58 Ibid.
60 The Times, June 20, 1877.
Twenty years hence when the history of the nineteenth century comes to be written it would be seen that a great change had come over women workers. There was a great desire among them for improvement, and one of the characteristics of the present age was to better their conditions by opening up sources of employment for them.  

The League began publishing a magazine, the Women's Union Journal, to inform the widely spread unions of the progress being made.  

One element jarred their feeling of accomplishment: the unions they formed stagnated after their initial success. The Society of Women Employed in Bookbinding, for example, attracted no new members in 1875, sixty-three new members in 1876, lost members in the years 1877, 1878, 1880, and 1885, and gained thirty-two new members in 1886, after which it consistently lost members. The women who had attended the first meeting paid their dues regularly and still met, but they undertook no action to raise their wages or improve their conditions. Younger workers saw no point in joining the Society and it lapsed completely upon the death of the secretary in 1913.  

61 Ibid., July 2, 1884.

62 The only surviving set of the Women's Union Journals is in the British Museum. Since I was not able to use them, I have had to rely on Barbara Drake and Gladys Boone, who have read them.

63 MacDonald, Women in the Printing Trade, p. 34.
The Society of Dressmakers, Milliners, and Mantle-makers had little better luck. The number of members dwindled into powerlessness. A factory inspector noted that the women, although combined, did not feel strong enough to refuse to work overtime when the owners demanded it. A full seventy-four per cent of them worked at least six hours overtime a week.64 The inspector ended her report, "No class of workers that I have come across are paid so little in proportion to skill and cost of living."65 Yet, the Society had made no attempt to work for higher wages.

Even unions who had secured advances stopped agitating when left on their own. The Dewsbury Woolen Weavers continued to meet for some years, but the success of their first strike was not repeated and membership dropped drastically. In 1882, the remaining seven hundred members joined the men's Huddersfield and District Power Loom Weaver's Association. The women's spirit seems to have declined with the membership; the male secretary of the union answered inquiries of the League saying, "The tendency of the women was to leave the conduct of affairs more and more in the hands of men."66 Mrs. Mason, the secretary of the Leicester

65 Ibid.
66 Drake, Women in Trade Unions, p. 15.
Society of Seamers and Stitchers, wrote the League in 1878 that membership had fallen off when no further action was attempted and that "the women have become indifferent to the union." At the time of Mason's death in 1880, the membership was below a thousand. Two years later the union dissolved, bankrupt.

These stories were common among the League's unions. Women workers reported to the Factory Inspector that the remaining unions were held together only by the "tea-parties and picnics given by ladies interested in trades unions." The Factory Inspectors investigated and found that the unions were like "sickly plants, hothouse flowers" which died as soon as the active support of the League was removed.

The opinions of male trade unionists were harsher. They had not forgotten the accusations feminists made in the 1873 Parliamentary debates, nor did they welcome signs of strength--slight as it might be--among women workers. Union leaders jeered at the League's unions, calling them "mere friendly societies" and pointing to the swimming club.

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68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., p. 15.
and seaside vacations in place of industrial action policies. This contempt was demonstrated vividly by the treatment given women's unions at the Trade Union Congress.

In 1874, the League applied to send delegates to the Congress, since the government recognized the Congress as the official voice of unionism and allowed them to appoint factory inspectors. The Congress promptly refused the League's request on the grounds that "some middle-class ladies" did not represent the interests of working women. The two following years the League re-applied and was again refused. Finally, in 1877, Paterson and a Miss Simcox were allowed to attend, but as representatives of the London Society of Bookbinders, Upholsterers, and Shirt and Collar Makers rather than as representatives of the League. At this Congress, as Paterson and Simcox excitedly reported to the League, the men's unions seemed to take the women's efforts seriously. They allotted Simcox an afternoon to read a paper on the "Organization of Women's Labour" and voted to support the resolution that

The members regard with much satisfaction the development of the self-relying trade union movement among women employed in the various industries, and pledge themselves to assist in promoting it in their various localities.  

71 Drake, Women in Trade Unions, p. 22.  
72 Report of the Trade Union Congress. Manchester, 1874, p. 16.  
73 Ibid., 1877, p. 12.
By the next Congress this respect for women's unions had proven illusory. The delegates approved a resolution of the cotton unions in favor of extending the restrictions upon female labor under the Factory and Workshops Bill. The three members of women's unions protested indignantly, but male delegates all voted for it. As Henry Broadhurst, secretary of the Parliamentary Committee, explained firmly but kindly to the ladies:

They (the men) had the future of their country and children to consider, and it was their duty as men and husbands to use their utmost efforts to bring about a condition of things, where their wives should be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world. 74

Obviously, the male unionists and the League had different ends in mind.

The next year, after the Factory and Workshops Bill had become law, the women delegates tried to salvage what they could by demanding that women factory inspectors be appointed as well as men. The male delegates "jeered" at the idea of women factory inspectors and voted an amendment to that effect down. 75 At the next twelve Congresses, the women delegates advanced the amendment and the males voted it down. Not until 1893 was the amendment passed and a woman factory inspector appointed. 76

74 Ibid., 1878, p. 5.
75 Drake, Women in Trade Unions, p. 18.
76 Ibid.
By the 1890's the stagnation in women's unions and the hostility of men's trade unions had nearly destroyed the League's work. In the 1870's, however, these tendencies were only beginning to be apparent. Feminists were fresh with their successes and almost cocky. Paterson declared at the 1878 annual meeting of the League that "very few and only very obstinate persons would now dare to exclude women from a free and open career in almost every field." Feminists rejoiced that working women were organizing. Soon they would show Parliament that women did not need protection. Perhaps later they could begin a program to raise wages and better conditions.

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77 The Times, August 12, 1878.
CHAPTER IV

RENEWED PARLIAMENTARY BATTLES 1876-1885

The chance for feminists to test their new-found strength against Parliamentarians' desire to protect women came quickly. In 1878, the Conservative government brought forward the Factory and Workshop Bill, designed to consolidate the existing Factory Acts and to extend regulation of hours and condition to women and children in all sizes of manufactureries. Feminists, naturally, regarded this as a bar to women's freedom and prepared to fight.

Male trade unionists again supported the bill for their own purposes. Feminists, angry already at the trade unions' deceptions during the debates of 1873, became more hostile at their defeat in the 1878 Trade Union Congress over the resolution to support this very bill. They rallied their new unions, their newspapers, and their organizations to do battle against male arrogance.

The renewed attempt at factory legislation grew directly from the 1872-1874 agitation. A. J. Mundella, after two failures to convince the House to pass his bills, gave support to the Conservative government's Factory (Health of Women & c.) Bill on the understanding that the Home Secretary would appoint a Royal Commission to investigate at length the entire question of factory legislation.
with particular reference to the inconsistencies of the various Acts applying to hours of labor for women and children.\(^1\)

After only moderate prompting by Mundella and his friends, the government kept its promise.\(^2\) In March, 1876, the Right Honorable R. A. Cross, secretary of the Home Department, appointed a Royal Commission headed by Sir James Ferguson, military hero of the Crimean War and former sub-governor of South Australia.\(^3\) The other members were well-known, conscientious men who, although they had no direct knowledge of factory life, were well-received by both advocates and opponents of factory legislation.\(^4\) Cross directed the Commission "to enquire whether the Factory Acts legislation should be extended to young persons in trades other than textile."\(^5\)

Women workers were not mentioned in these directions. Feminists, however, were not reassured: "women" had been included with "young persons and children" in every Factory Act to date and an inquiry into the extension of factory legislation to other trades was sure to affect women workers.

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\(^1\)Hansard, vol. 217, p. 1551.


\(^3\)DNB

\(^4\)The other members were Lord Balfour of Burleigh, Thomas Knowles, Sir C. Ducane, the O'Connor Don, and Henry Branch.

\(^5\)The Times, March 31, 1876.
Feminists quickly announced their intention to testify before the Commission. Cross made public the appointment of the Commission on March 31. On April 1, Emma Paterson, listing herself as honorary secretary of the Women's Provident and Protective League, wrote a letter to The Times. Paterson did not indicate her stand on factory legislation for women; she simply pointed out the "utmost importance" of securing the opinions of women factory legislation affected. This had not been done in the 1873 report, she noted, probably because "there were no spokeswomen among factory workers". In 1876, however, the situation had changed:

Now that the women in several trades have successfully formed Unions, this difficulty no longer exists. The facilities for making known the views and wishes of large numbers have afforded one of the most important advantages of men's unions and women's unions may be similarly useful.

Paterson closed her letter by saying, "I trust that these considerations will not be overlooked by the Royal Commission" and that a "due proportion" of the witnesses examined would be working women. 6

The commissioners did interview those the legislation would affect. They visited factories and workshops throughout England in April and May, talking to workers of both

6Ibid., April 1, 1876.
sexes, to union leaders, and to employers. From June until October, they heard testimony in London from all those interested in the matter.7

The forty middle-class women who arrived to testify were very interested in the matter. They came in four well-organized groups, led by prominent feminists. The largest delegation was headed by Mary Sturge, leader of the suffrage association in Birmingham.8 Sturge identified the group as "ladies interested in the working of the Factory Acts... ladies who were engaged in philanthropic and public work, who would have had an opportunity of seeing workwomen at their own homes and know something about them." Sturge and her group held a meeting at which they voted to present two resolutions to the commissioners:

1. That this meeting earnestly deprecates any extension of the Factory Acts as regards women, being strongly of the opinion that all restrictions on the employment of women and on their freedom of contract, are injurious, as tending to depreciate the value of their labour, and by limiting their choice of occupation, to drive them into a few trades which thus become overcrowded and underpaid.

2. That this meeting, fully recognizing the hardships endured by many women engaged in laborious and unsuitable occupations, is nevertheless of the opinion that legislative enactments placing restrictions on their employment, although they in some cases apparently palliate, do not overcome the evil they are intended to remedy, but


8 Fawcett, What I Remember, p. 112.
rather perpetuates them and this meeting advocates the entire removal of all existing restrictions.9

Chairman Fergusson requested Sturge to cite specific industries in which women had been thrown into unemployment by factory legislation. Sturge could not be that specific, she answered, but added that restrictions upon women's freedom of contract were "injurious" even when women did not lose their places because they kept women from advancing in their professions:

It being necessary for a person in any position of trust occasionally to stay at work over hours, it will result that while a woman may undertake the lowest...most uninteresting, and worst paid work, she can never rise to the higher appointments in a business.10

Feminists seemed unaware that rising into management was not the immediate problem of a laundress working sixteen hours a day.

In all, the feminists led by Sturge seemed to have a hazy idea of factory conditions, as the parting questions of Fergusson indicated:

Q. Have you never known of cases where women were asked to work unreasonable hours?
A. Never. They work perhaps an hour of an evening, possibly, but that is very seldom, and it has never been objected to.

Q. But supposing a woman was asked to work very much overtime?
A. She has the power of objecting.

9Testimony before the Commission (by question) Q6646.
10Q6647.
Q. But supposing that if she objected it would involve her dismissal?

A. What an unreasonable person that would be. I should think that no one would ask unless it were really required and I never found one who objected.

Q. What I wanted to ask you was this; whether if an unreasonable time was asked to be worked and was made a condition of employment it would not be right that the law should protect the women?

A. Certainly, but I think that no woman would submit to unreasonable hours.11

This delegation offered no way for women workers to organize or protect themselves. They contended that the repeal of the existing Factory Acts would allow women to find better jobs with better conditions.12

The next delegation had equally little knowledge of working women's problems. They were led by Dr. Mary Elizabeth Walker, who had founded the National Association of Working Women as a result of her difficulties in securing a medical degree. The Association was opposed to all restrictions upon female labor. Walker admitted that her experience with working women was small and the co-founder of the group, pastor Alan Greenwall of Birmingham, summed up his expertise thus:

I myself, personally, have had some experience with regard to women's work. I have seen women working in agricultural districts, in manufacturing districts, and also in coal mines...So far as my experience extends, which is for five years I had an opportunity

11 Q6689-6695.

12 Q6701.
in a mining parish of seeing women working in the coal brows....

Walker and Greenwall argued against restrictions on the grounds of personal liberty. Both admitted that women were not pushed out of industry by factory legislation, nor were their wages lowered. Still, women were adults, they argued, and had the right to make their own contracts. Although they advocated forming unions among working women, Walker and Greenwall did not see these unions primarily as a way for workers to improve working conditions. That was not particularly necessary, since labor on the coal brows made women "physically stronger than any class of women" and "more healthy". The unions were, rather, created for the purpose of "educating the country" to the fact that women could make their own contracts and protect themselves. Greenwall reported that the Association had formed one union which failed within the year and that temporarily the National Association of Working Women was without a single working-class member.

The last two feminist deputations also advocated unions, but for much different reasons than the Association. Isabella Tod, M.A., member of the National Association for the

\[\text{References:}\]

13 Q13,860.
14 Q13,389.
15 Q13,442.
16 Q13,427.
Promotion of Social Science, who spoke on behalf of Miss A. B. Corlett and herself, knew industrial conditions. After graduating from the first college in England to admit women, she devoted her time to research and teaching among the working-class women of Leicestershire.17

Tod agreed with the commissioners that many working women desired factory legislation. She noted that this support came mainly from single women who could live easily on the salary. Women supporting children were, however, handicapped when they could not work overtime and earn extra. Tod acknowledged to the Commission that this in itself showed that working women needed protection: "These women are not at present able to say that they will not work to an injuriously late hour. ... We are a long way yet from a woman being independent of extraneous help."18 She denied, however, that this help must come from Parliament. She opposed legislation on the grounds that "legislation must always be based for their class upon very partial information and consequently must be more or less injurious, it cannot be otherwise."19 Tod cited several causes in which the Factory Acts had worked to the disadvantage of women workers who had made private arrangements with their employers. Thus, Tod argued

17 Q19071-19134.
18 Q19100.
19 Q19031.
that working women would be far better protected if they alone decided what they needed and bargained with their employers for these protections.

Before this bargaining could be successful two things were needed: education and unions. Working women, Tod believed, were forced to rely upon parliamentary intervention because of their lack of education and self-confidence:

Women have hitherto been so discouraged in doing anything directly for themselves in matters that they have not yet learned to combine and resent or show anything like strong displeasure with regard to breaches of the Act...and therefore they do need more protection now than would in itself be advisable.... It is because they are too uneducated rather than too irresolute. I know a good many women who have quite sufficient energy of character to carry through a matter of that sort, but are ashamed to let their bad handwriting and bad spelling be seen by their friends and neighbours and who for reasons like that do not choose to enter into any great Society.  

Tod and Corlett were trying to remove this barrier by holding night classes for factory hands of the district. They taught rudimentary arithmetic, English, and some crafts. At the time Todd testified, the schools had been open for three years and seemed successful. Tod hoped that unions would grow out of these classes. Women in the group presently joined only for benefits and sick pay, but gradually, Tod thought, women would begin to talk of bargaining with their employers. Tod admitted that most women workers still

\[20\text{Q}19124.\]
\[21\text{Q}19132.\]
looked to Parliament for help, but she saw hopeful signs that the "better educated and more intelligent ones are beginning to realize...." 22

Emma Paterson, who led the delegation from the Women's Provident and Protective League, argued against legislation on much the same ground as Tod. Legislation could not be effective until women had a sense of their own power, for the employer was free to ignore factory legislation as soon as the Factory Inspector left, as long as he knew that his women employees would not act.

Unless the Inspector is always at hand to enforce them, (the laws), we do not see how they can be carried out unless the women themselves insist upon them.... We think that no legislation can be effective without some united efforts on the part of the work people themselves. 23

Paterson talked of conditions in which women worked twenty-four and thirty-six hours at a stretch. She admitted that women workers "do not generally at present object to legal interference." 24 Unions, rather than legislation, were a better solution, however, and Paterson was hopeful that working women were learning this: "I believe that they are now beginning to see the great value of combination for their purposes and that very soon they will be in such a position as not to require legal interference and not to wish for it." 25

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22 Q19125.
23 Q2717.
24 Q2745.
25 Ibid.
Middle-class women who testified before the Commission were all, thus, opposed to further protective legislation for women, although for varying reasons. Other witnesses appearing before the commissioners were not so unanimous. Employers and doctors who were interviewed spoke both in favor of and against the extension of the Factory Acts. Joseph Chamberlain, the owner of a large Birmingham factory who was already making his reputation in the Liberal Party, brought statistics to show that women's employment remained steady and wages rose twenty to twenty-five per cent when women were covered under the Factory Acts. A. J. Mundella seconded his findings. Arthur Chamberlain, another industrialist, argued that worker's earnings and employment would go down if legislation was extended because England would fall behind Germany and America in production and factories would be forced to close. Such differences of opinion reoccurred frequently throughout the seven months of testimony.

Furthermore, both advocates and opponents brought working women whose testimony would support their cases. James Stewart, owner of a bleach factory, presented Mrs. Manley to corroborate his statement that factory women wanted the Acts

\[26^\text{q6689-95.}\]

\[27^\text{q6646.}\]
extended. Mrs. Barrington and Miss Wilson of the Edgeley Bleach Works in Stockport were sent by their employer to say the opposite. The Women's Protective and Provident League paid carfare for Mrs. Heatherley, secretary of the newly established Working Dressmakers, Milliners, and Mantle-Makers Association, to air her opinion that further legislation would force women from their jobs. Mrs. Amos came with the owner of an Old Hill chainmaking firm to testify that working women liked the existing Factory Acts and would welcome further regulation.

Faced with such contradictory opinions, the Commission itself divided. All agreed on the main question of the inquiry: Factory Acts should be extended to "young persons" in all trades. On the "woman" question, however, they could come to no agreement. Fergusson and four of the commissioners presented a report tentatively approving extension, denying that working women could in all cases protect themselves:

We greatly fear that competition for cheap production and the greed or need of many employers would soon

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28 Q15196.
29 Q10126-10150.
31 Q2786
32 Q5848
33 Report, p. xxix.
prove the reverse were the measures of regulation and protection removed.  

The O'Connor Don, Liberal advocate of personal freedom, felt that the Commission was delegating too much power to the government by recommending such a measure. If the Factory Acts were extended to domestic workshops, inspectors could "enter any private home at any hour and demand what the woman of the house was doing and make her stop if it was after 9 P.M." As a less important consideration, women were adults and had the right to freedom of contract. For these reasons, the O'Connor Don issued a minority report opposing extension of the Acts for women.

None of the commissioners doubted that the intervention of middle-class women during the inquiry had been important. Fergusson noted in a letter to The Times in 1880:

In the course of our visits to the chief centres of manufacture in the three kingdoms we were constantly met by certain ladies, whom I trust not to wrong by describing as champions of the rights of women, and who first, in nearly identical language, argued against all restrictions on the labour of women, and then personally conducted female witnesses, who in their prepared evidence supported those views....I should, indeed, say that there was little evidence offered in these scenes that seemed to be of a spontaneous character.

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., ix.
36 Ibid., x.
37 The Times, February 3, 1880.
Not unnaturally, the government was in no hurry to open floodgates of controversy by proposing a bill on the matter in Parliament. The report was submitted in November, 1876, and the government did not bring forward a bill until March, 1878, after several questions to the House by Mundella and his supporters.

During the interval, feminists continued to form unions among working women and to write articles denouncing legislation. The campaign, carried on mostly by the League's own magazine, was so intense that popular magazines began to take up the cause. On March 2, 1878, the Saturday Review noted

Philanthropy no longer spoke with a certain sound... it had come to be doubted whether we were not subjecting women to disabilities when we thought we were protecting them. It might be very well, when there was a husband or father, to restrict the women to home employment, but what if large numbers of women have to shift for themselves as completely as men have done? This consideration introduces a new element.38

One wonders how it had failed to come to the attention of the editors of the Saturday Review earlier that one-half the women in England worked to support themselves and often their families.

On March 29, the government finally brought forward the Factory and Workshop Bill of 1878. The bill was designed to consolidate the fifteen previous Factory Acts under a single

set of regulations, to provide for much closer regulation of children's hours and education, and to extend the existing Acts protecting women and children to almost all trades and sizes of manufactureries. Over eighty of the bill's one hundred clauses dealt with children's protection. Feminist spokesmen opposed the remaining eighteen in which women were mentioned. Debate on the bill, however, was greatly confused by the obstructionist tactics of Charles Parnell and Joseph Biggars, Irish nationalists.

In 1877, after the defeat of the Irish Home Rule bill, Parnell and Biggars "declared war on the House of Commons." Starting with the Prison Act of that year, Parnell began to perfect a technique of prolonging debate on bills and bringing about divisions. He was so successful that Parliament had several times to sit up all night in order to pass important bills. All efforts to censure or expell him had failed, and in 1878, he used his obstructionist tactics on the Factory and Workshops Bill. Ostensibly, he was arguing with the feminists for women's freedom of labor; in reality, he was arguing against the government, as his amendments show. On clause ten, "All women, children, and young persons

41 Ibid.
shall take their lunch at the same time, at which time employment must cease.". Parnell proposed that "married women or women under twenty-one years of age" replace the word "women" in the clause. This absurd amendment forced a division and consumed nearly an hour. Parnell proposed seventeen other amendments during the course of the bill, nine of which produced divisions.

When genuine supporters of the feminist cause were separated from the Irish obstructionists, it became obvious that the feminists had not gained much support in Parliament. Henry Fawcett, of course, led the opposition. He was joined by Charles M'Laren, whose wife was leader of the Edinburgh suffrage association, and Henry Hopwood, long-time supporter of women's causes who had helped draft the 1867 women's suffrage amendment. The O'Conor Don, while supporting their amendments, had no ties with the women's movement. He simply shared the conviction of these fellow Liberals that government intervention in private affairs was going too far.

These feminists spokesmen presented exactly the same arguments used against the Factory Amendment Bill of 1873. On a "general principle of right", women's labor should not

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42 Hansard, col. 238, p. 94.
43 DNB
44 DNB
be restricted. Women would lose employment if such restrictions were passed because employers would not find it profitable or convenient to hire them. If forced from labor, women would turn to prostitution, "the portal of misery and vice." And if women were taught to look to the government for protection, they would lose their initiative. Although women in the textile industry had been under protective legislation for over thirty years, Fawcett provided no evidence to support his claims that women were forced out of employment by regulation. His supporters did not refute the statistics presented by the Home Secretary that women were employed in greater numbers and at higher wages in the regulated trades. The feminist spokesmen based their arguments on principles carried to their extremes:

> It was no justification to say that women suffered, and had to be protected; for every particle of disadvantage resulting from overwork, there were ten times as much more from imprudent marriages, and yet none wished to make regulations on that point.

They used hyperbole to rebut the facts presented by the supporters of the bill:

> Nor was it sufficient to say that an evil existed, and had to be remedied by the House; any doctor could

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., vol. 238, p. 306.
give most harrowing details about the harm done to women by the gaieties of the London season, but they would think him mad if he proposed that no women should sit up till 2 o'clock in the morning more than two nights a-week.50

Fawcett and his supporters proposed six amendments to delete the word "women" from the various clauses. They failed on five. On clause thirteen, dealing with Parliament's right to legislate hours of labor for women and children in non-textile workshops and domestic workshops, they finally succeeded in convincing the House. Workshops were defined as establishments employing fewer than fifty workers, domestic workshops as those in which members of the family were employed in the home.51 The O'Connor Don used the smallness of these works to justify their exclusion. He argued that this clause would give Factory Inspectors the right to enter any home "rich or poor, bringing with him a policeman and a doctor" to see if the females of the house were being worked more than the prescribed hours of labor.52 "Drawing-rooms" and hovels alike would be subject to this intrusion.53 After a few moments more of this argument, he called for support for his amendment. One hundred and sixty-eight members of Parliament decided that they did not want Factory

50Ibid., vol. 238, p. 306.
52Ibid., vol. 238, pp. 121, 125.
53Ibid.
Inspectors coming into their homes. The clause was amended so that women in domestic workshops and workshops in which women only worked were not covered by any regulations whatsoever. 54

The arguments used by the feminist supporters to argue against women's inclusion in the other clauses were so similar to the ones used in the 1873 and 1874 debates that several members rose to say, "We have debated this question before and resolved it in 1874..." when the Factories (Health of Women & c.) Bill was passed. 55

That was the feminists' first and last success in Parliament. From 1882-1887, they fought Henry Broadhurst's bill to prohibit girls under fourteen years from working as blacksmiths. Feminists demanded that the bill prohibit boys under fourteen also. Although the bill was promptly defeated in Parliament by the owners of foundaries in which young girls made all the nails and screws, feminists and male trade unionists carried the battle to the Trade Union Congresses. 56 Every year Broadhurst introduced a resolution for the Congress to approve of the bill's reintroduction into Parliament and every year female delegates protested.

55 Ibid., vol. 238, p. 98.
The debates sunk to such ridiculous levels that Broadhurst finally withdrew the resolution in disgust at the 1887 Congress. ⁵⁷

In 1885, the Miners Federation proposed an amendment to the Coal Mines Regulation Act which would have prohibited women from working at the pit-heads of mines, a position in which about 4,450 women were employed. ⁵⁸ This bill occasioned feminists' most violent protests because it so explicitly discriminated against women. Throughout England and Wales, feminists organized marches of mine women and arranged for deputations of "pit-girls" to go to London. ⁵⁹ These agitations were unsuccessful.

Obviously, the League's Parliamentary policies were not flourishing. In thirty years of nearly continuous agitation, they had succeeded in amending one clause in one bill. They had developed no new arguments and no body of statistics to buttress their case. Support for their beliefs (in Parliament) declined rather than grew throughout the period.

⁵⁷ Reports of the Trade Union Congress, 1882-7. The debate did become absurd. A male trade unionists said that women should be excluded because "the women working side by side with the men were exposed to the grossest possible language and conduct." A chain-maker declared that "when he himself was thoroughly exhausted his daughter could go on", so women should be allowed to remain in the founderies. When a female delegate rose to say "women had a perfect right to compete with men", the men replied "shame" and "I wish my wife would try it." Small wonder Broadhurst finally withdrew his amendment.


⁵⁹ The Times, March 22, 1886, May 18, 1887.
CHAPTER V

LIMITED CHANGE, LIMITED FAILURE 1883-1903

Throughout these years of union formation and Parliamentary action, the Women's Provident and Protective League was a great success on its executive level. At each annual meeting, new members joined, lending their prestigious names to the cause. Helen Taylor, daughter of J. S. Mill, pledged her aid at the 1877 meeting and promised a round of speeches to publicize the League.\(^1\) In 1880, three dons announced their intention of opening a branch of the League in Oxford.\(^2\) Leonard Courtney and Charles M'Laren, well-known members of Parliament, reported their conversion to the League's principles at the same meeting. And in 1883, Lord and Lady Brassey, renowned for their charity to workingmen's colleges, praised the efforts of the League and invited all its members to a formal dinner.\(^3\) The League had travelled far from its days as an advocate of illegal combinations; it had arrived socially.

\(^1\)The Times, June 20, 1877.
\(^2\)Ibid., June 18, 1880.
\(^3\)Ibid., August 22, 1883.
Furthermore, feminists' agitations were gradually convincing the public of the dangers of protective legislation for women. Since 1874, the League's magazine, The Women's Union Journal, had publicized these evils. At countless philanthropic and educational societies, Emma Paterson, Isabella Tod, and Henry King had lectured on the League's beliefs. The feminists' supporters in Parliament had tried, unsuccessfully, to hammer the message home. By the middle of the 1880's, the public was beginning to respond.

The Saturday Review discovered that some women made their livings by working. The Times, which had supported factory legislation for women in 1844 and 1874, called further legislation for women "drastic" in 1884 and urged caution upon the members of Parliament. The "Letters to the Editor" echoed this new belief. An example, although somewhat extreme in tone, was the letter of Ada Heather-Biggs, wealthy philanthropist, who ridiculed those who wanted pit-girls removed from mine work for reasons of health. Heather-Biggs contended that women must learn the true nature of the world instead of being shielded from it:

Rather is the world a place of infinite toil, where men, women, and even children are forced into merciless competition with each other for the bread that

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4Ibid., September 2, 1886; April 21, 1887.
5Hutchins, History, p. 189.
6The Times, August 12, 1884.
is their life, and where, therefore, perfect health,
perfect strength, and, as indeed, perfection of any
kind is not to be looked for.?

The idea of trade unionism for women was even becoming
fashionable. In 1887 the Duchess of Marlborough held a
bazaar to raise money for the cause. Lady Clarence Paget,
Lady William Pitt-Lennox, Lady Augusta Spencer Churchill,
and Lady Constance Howard sold homemade goods in stalls at
Westminster, dressed in the style of the Court of Louis XIV,
"thus giving a share of patronage to the skilled needlewomen's
society."\(^7\) The Bishop of Bedford held in 1889 a large meet­
ing of middle and upper class sympathizers to promote trade
unionism among the women of East London. The Countess of
Aberdeen, Cardinal Manning, Lord Somerset, Lady Sandhurst,
and the Reverend Hugh Price were among the three hundred
persons who pledged to support the movement.\(^9\)

This success must have been very sweet to the members
of the Women's Provident and Protective League. It could
not obscure, however, the fact that on its lower level—the
level of the working women—the League was proving a complete
failure. Paterson and the other officers of the League knew
in 1884 that of the thirty-five unions they had organized in

\(^7\)Ibid., June 11, 1887.
\(^8\)Ibid., June 11, 1887.
\(^9\)Ibid., October 9, 1889.
the decade, only eight remained.¹⁰ Nor had the unions accomplished much. Two had secured wage hikes, three had stopped wage reductions, and the rest had simply met.¹¹ The contrast with men's unions made this particularly disheartening, since men's unions had recently entered on a period of rapid growth, sharp rises in wages, and reduction of hours in several trades.¹²

As the 1880’s progressed, the League also could not fail to notice that women in men's trade unions were profiting. Women textile workers, protected by male unions, had gone from wages of 15s. a week in 1874 to 19s.6d.¹³ Equally disconcerting was the increasing realization that women in trades protected by the Factory Acts were prospering, while women doing "homework", or the type of work that Fawcett and his supporters had succeeded in exempting from regulation in 1878, faced worsening conditions every year. The match-girls' strike of 1889 revealed that these women worked for 2d. an hour, crowded four to a room in slums.¹⁴ Charles Booth's 1891 survey showed that women shirt-makers in factories worked sixty hours a week to earn 12-20., while

¹⁰Drake, Women in Trade Unions, p. 25.
¹¹Ibid.
¹²Pelling, History of British Trade Unionism, pp. 93-101.
a home worker doing the same job worked eighty or more hours for 3-7s.\textsuperscript{15} Corset-makers at home working long hours earned 6-12s., factory corset-makers earning 17-18s.\textsuperscript{16} Trouser-finishers at home earned 4s, a week, working as long as sixteen hours a day; women doing the same trade in factories worked sixty hours a week and earned 12s.\textsuperscript{17} Booth concluded, women who worked in domestic workshops "were women who had either to support themselves or to fall back upon charity or the workhouse."\textsuperscript{18}

Paterson reasoned that the failure of the unions—and thus, their inability to protect women workers from low pay and long hours—was due to middle-class interference. When she began the League in 1874, she called upon middle-class help only to begin the work. By 1881, she believed that this phase must end so that working women would have more interest in their own unions. Accordingly, Paterson started a pilot experiment in London, setting up the Women's Trade Council composed entirely of working women. Its leaders were drawn from the unions the League had already established.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15}Booth, \textit{Life and Labour}, p. 407.
\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 422.
\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 410-11.
The experiment was a failure. The working women were handicapped by their lack of experience in bookkeeping and organization. More serious was their lack of time for meetings after a day's work and an evening's housekeeping. But the salient point was that women who earned 5s.-7s. a week literally did not have 2d. to spare for union dues. Within two years, the Council dissolved.  

Paterson remained convinced that middle-class interference was at fault. She turned to reorganizing the League itself so that the middle-class element would be as small as possible. At the 1883 annual meeting she urged the League to change its name, saying "Rich people were always ready to urge women to be provident on 7s. a week." The name was duly changed to the Women's Protective League and the members agreed to drop its provident activities and to accentuate the protective. That meant the League now concentrated upon improving the conditions of women workers rather than sponsoring a swimming club, savings bank, and library.  

Other members of the League, particularly the younger ones, agreed with Paterson that the policy of the League must be transformed. At the 1886 annual meeting, Rev. Stewart Headlam, one of the charter members, made a formal

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20 Ibid., p. 25.
21 Ibid., pp. 23-4.
22 Ibid., p. 24.
resolution that "the best way to extend the work of the League is to lay stress on its protective as distinct from its provident element." The resolution was carried by a large majority, members declaring that the League must rid itself of its "air of patronage" and its image as a "goody-goody" organization.  

Trouble developed, however, when the younger members tried to carry the reform further. Headlam introduced a second resolution that "The League should use its influence to support all modes of action which may tend to bring about a better distribution of wealth." The resolution was supported by several members who were impressed with the ideals of that new organization, the Fabian Society. Paterson and a few of the other charter members remained the Liberal individualists they were when they began the League. This resolution violated their principles and they "bitterly" fought Headlam's resolution. The vote on the matter was close, but Paterson and her supporters won. Perhaps because of the unexpected disagreements of this

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23 Ibid., p. 22.
24 Ibid.
25 Amy Besant was the chief socialist of the group. See Webb, Modern England, p. 386.
meeting, the 1886 annual conference was the first annual meeting not reported to The Times since the League's founding.

That was not the only disagreement within the League. Mrs. Mark Pattison, charter member of the League and one of its most faithful organizers, felt that the League was mistaken in its policy of sex antagonism toward male unions. She tried to convince Paterson that the League should encourage women to join existing men's unions. Paterson disagreed and refused the action because "women were excluded from management" and "a proper share in the work of the union". Soon after this exchange, Pattison married Sir Charles Dilke, noted politician and trade union sympathizer. He reinforced his wife's belief that the League should merge men's and women's unions. At the 1884 annual meeting, Paterson bowed slightly to these urgings. She agreed that "whenever practicable, and the men desire it, we (the League) are strongly in favour of mixed societies, consisting of men and women in the same trade." She ended her speech, however, by denying the League's support to any male union which excluded women from office and full

28 Drake, p. 22
29 Gwynn and Tuckwell, p. 230.
participation. She argued that "women should not lose their separate identity." 30

No internal division occurred on the question, for Emma Paterson died in 1886. 31 Differences of opinion within the League had not dimmed respect or affection for Paterson. Lady Dilke, the new president, commissioned a portrait of her to hang in the League offices. 32 The League raised the Paterson Memorial Fund to purchase a building for the recreation and edification of working women. 33

Sincere as the League's appreciation of Paterson was, her death definitely marked the end of an old era. As Gertrude Tuckwell, the new secretary of the League, put it:

Lady Dilke found in the Women's Protective and Provident League a little closed corporation, full of sex antagonism and opposition to legislative protection, but under her away these limitations gradually disappeared, and the Women's Trade Union movements became an integral part of industrial progress. 34

Symbolically, the change was indicated by the League's new name, the Women's Trade Union League. 35 Practically, it meant that the League now encouraged women to join men's

30 Drake, 23.
31 DNB
32 Drake, 25.
33 The Times, July 9, 1887.
34 Gwynn and Tuckwell, The Life of Sir Charles Dilke, p. 244.
unions and they sought protection for working women rather than fought it. By 1886, the founding principles of the Women's Provident and Protective League had been completely reversed.

Men's trades unions were coming to some of the same conclusions. The advent of machines was yearly making women's labor more of a threat, as nimbleness began to count for more than strength. The increasing incidence of women as blacklegs convinced the most recalcitrant of unionists that male unions were not safe as long as women were unorganized. Until 1878, the Amalgamated Society of Tailors yearly passed a resolution that "the Society will use its strength against the increasing employment of women in the tailoring trade"; after that year they changed the resolution to read "the work of women must be recognized and renumerated." 36 Rev. Henry Wilkinson, minister in Dundee, founded the Dundee and District Mill and Factory Workers union in 1885 to organize women workers because "women and girls are the only kind of workers who come out on strike and throw a whole town out of employment." 37 Following this example, other men's unions began to allow women into their ranks or to organize allied women's unions. 38

36 Drake, p. 29.
37 Ibid.
The newly rejuvenated League was only too happy to cooperate. At the 1889 annual conference Dilke proposed a resolution which would allow any trade union admitting women to affiliate with the League for a small fee. In return, the League would send a member to the district to encourage women to join the union and pay dues. The members of the League approved the resolution and decided, further, to invite the officials of men's trade unions to form a Committee of Counsel to advise the League and its unions on policy. Several prominent officials answered the League's invitation and advised the unions for five years. Feminist pride was clearly no longer allowed to stand in the way of effective help for working women.

The League's resolution to provide organizers to men's unions was a great success. The League had so many requests for organizers and affiliation that they were forced to raise their prices. These demands were not prompted by solicitude for women workers, as one request made clear: "Please send an organizer at once, for our Amalgamated Society has decided that if the women of this town cannot be organized, they must be exterminated." But they were

39 Boone, *The Women's Trade Union Leagues*, p. 27.
40 Ibid.
41 Boone, p. 27.
42 Drake, p. 23.
signs of recognition that men's unions and women's unions would have to pursue the same ends if they were to improve their working conditions. In the decade 1889 to 1899, scores of men's unions revised their bylaws to include women members. 43

This new policy made women's membership leap. In the first seven years after its affiliation with male unions, female membership in all unions grew from 37,000 to 118,000. 44 All-women unions comprised less than 5,000 of this number. Moreover, these new unions tended to be stable and progressive. Women workers began to share in the wage increases of the era.

The League was making radical changes in other areas of its policy, too. In 1888, Clementina Black, new secretary, wrote a letter to The Times organizing a boycott of the products of sweat shops. 45 The League had broken its entente cordiale with the employer. In 1889, the League staged a large meeting in the Assembly Hall of East London to raise funds for the new unions among matchgirls. Present were the usual respectable businessmen and ministers, but the

43 Drake lists the Society of Journeymen Felt Hatters, the Amalgamated Union of Clothiers' Operatives, the London Society of Compositors, the National Union of Printers' Warehousemen, and many more, pp. 29-31.


45 The Times, May 22, 1888.
League had also invited Tom Mann and John Burns, the acknowledged leader of Syndicalism and the radical organizer of the London Gas Stokers Union.\(^46\) Both had ended the friendly society aspects of their unions and were concentrating on aggressive industrial action. Burns rallied this meeting with the words:

> What the gas stokers were capable of doing, the women, with the ability peculiar to their sex, ought to be able to beat. If they could not do it they (the gas stokers) would help them; and if they would not do it, they would do it in spite of them.\(^47\)

Respectability was no longer the League's axiom.

Most significantly, the League abandoned its stand against strikes. The 1889 constitution pledged "to assist working women in those cases of imposition and oppression which one found to occur; and to defray legal expenses if necessary."\(^48\) The League's strike fund became increasingly important in 1906-11, that period of intense industrial unrest in England. At one time, the League counselled twenty different strikes at once.\(^49\)

The most dramatic reversal of policy in the League was its new attitude toward legislation. The League was founded

\(^{46}\)Pelling, History of British Trade Unionism, pp. 93-4.

\(^{47}\)The Times, October 9, 1889.

\(^{48}\)Boone, Women's Trade Union Leagues, p. 27. Also Drake, 38.

\(^{49}\)Drake, p. 30.
as the aftermath of a battle against restrictive legislation for women workers. During its first ten years, the League opposed any attempt to extend Factory Acts or to prohibit women's employment. In 1878, they succeeded in striking women's workshops from the Factory Inspectors' lists. Yet, by 1891, the League began a campaign to bring this very group under the Factory Acts.

The controversy centered on laundresses, as they made the bulk of women working in their homes. The League surveyed 67,500 laundresses throughout England to discover what the conditions were and if the women themselves favored factory legislation. When the League found that a full 66,000 wanted regulation, Sir Charles Dilke introduced such an amendment to the Factory and Workshops Bill.

Dilke used the statistics the League had gathered and argued ably. The bill was, however, defeated. Most of its opposition came from manufacturers and industrialists who resisted government intervention as a matter of course. But a large part came from members who had come to agree with Henry Fawcett over the course of the years. Stuart Wortley of Westminster rose to say "the government has no right to determine the hours a grown women might work" and "women's

50 Drake, p. 28.
right to freedom of contract must be respected." Dilke tried to argue with this latter-day enthusiast, but Wortley was adamant. He opined "it is a terrible injustice to legislate for the poorest and most helpless class of the community when they are not represented in Parliament." Dilke, meeting an opponent who upheld everything the League had believed twenty years earlier, could only answer "who as much as the poor and helpless needed the protection of the law?" With this irony, the League's Parliamentary policy was again defeated.

The League and the laundresses were both upset. The League helped the Amalgamated Society of Laundresses to organize and then sent a deputation of them to the Home Secretary. The London Trades Council called a monster demonstration in Hyde Park to publicize the cause. The League held a similar demonstration in Brighton which four thousand women attended. The women delegates at the 1892 Trade Union Congress presented a resolution in favor of the

51 Hutchins, History of Factory Legislation, pp. 191-2. Drake, Women in Trade Unions, pp. 29-30. I am forced to rely on these two secondary accounts of the Parliamentary battle because I was not able to find Hansard for that year.

52 Hutchins, History, p. 192.


54 Drake, Women in Trade Unions.
amendment and the Congress approved it, sending the approval on to the Home Secretary.\textsuperscript{55}

The government bowed to this pressure and brought forward a bill of their own which embodied most of the laundresses' demands and satisfied the League.\textsuperscript{56} Interest and support was high and the League confidently expected the bill to pass. However, once again the Irish delegates intruded their politics into the League's proposals. Hiding behind the complaint that the bill would enable factory inspectors to enter convent laundries, the Irish voted with the opposition to bring down the bill and embarrass the government.\textsuperscript{57}

Laundresses had neither the time nor the patience to continue agitation. They returned to their sixteen hour day and abandoned the new unions.\textsuperscript{58} The League could secure no further opportunity to bring the matter forward.

Indirectly, however, they did secure protection for laundresses. In 1891, the League joined the male Pottery Workers in promoting an amendment to the Factory and Workshop Act called the Potter's Charter of Health. This amendment empowered the Home Secretary to investigate dangerous trades

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\item \textsuperscript{55}Report of the Trade Union Congress 1892, p. 24.
\item \textsuperscript{56}Hutchins, History, p. 193.
\item \textsuperscript{57}Drake, Women in Trade Unions.
\item \textsuperscript{58}Report of Commission on Women's Labour, 1893-4, pp. 601-2.
\end{itemize}
and to lay down "special rules" for the health of the workers in those trades. The amendment passed and in 1895, Home Secretary Asquith invoked it in limiting the hours of employment for laundresses. The amendment helped other women workers, particularly those in the white lead trades and the matchmaking works. This was the first instance of the League cooperating with a male union on legislation.

The League had changed its policy so completely that the secretary of the organization wrote in 1902, "It is the State alone which can take care of them (women workers), protect them against the rapacity of the oppressors...." In its change, the members of the League seemed to have forgotten their earlier tactics. After the laundry agitation, Lady Dilke chastised "the actions of some well-meaning

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59 Hutchins, History, p. 194.
60 Ibid., 195.
62 Black, Sweated Labour and the Minimum Wage, p. 36.
ladies in bringing to London the wealthiest workers they could find in order to protest against interference." 63

These changes, as revolutionary as they were for the League, did not produce a fairy-tale ending. Working women were still slow to join unions and often unfaithful once they joined. League organizers attributed this trait to a variety of causes. Miss I. O. Fords, League secretary to the Leeds Society of Workwomen wrote in 1900:

I consider the struggle to organize women workers a most disheartening and painful one. But I hold very strongly that the fault does not lie with the women themselves....Trade unions mean rebellion and the orthodox teaching for women is submission. The political world preaches to women submission, so long as it refuses them the Parliamentary franchise, and therefore ignores them as human beings. Society

63 Drake, Women in Trade Unions, p. 38. Noted feminists still, in 1895, did not agree with the League that protective legislation was acceptable. Jessie Boucherett, one of the earliest members of the National Association for the Employment of Women, wrote The Condition of Working Women in 1896 in which she insisted

The kindly legislator who wishes to protect women because they are helpless and ignorant only makes that helplessness greater by treating them as hopelessly helpless. To proclaim any set of persons are unable to take care of themselves, and can only exist under protection, is to point them out at once to the unscrupulous as an easy prey."

Georginia Hill never became convinced of the League's new view on legislation. She wrote in 1895, "Sex legislation is the most liable of all to misuse, and to cause injury to those whom it seeks to benefit. At the present day women of the industrial classes are forced by a combination of circumstances to earn their livelihood in factories and workshops like men.... Owing to the enormous pressure of population and the over-supply of workers, the competition is severe enough among the women themselves, without legislation making it more severe." Some feminists would never, it appears, have become aware of the real industrial conditions.
encourages selfish indifference among women, in that it considers a women's home must make her sacrifice to it everyone else's home and all public honour.\textsuperscript{64} Other union organizers emphasized women's lack of education:

One reason which, I think, tends to keep women out of the union is the lack of training which women have had in managing an organization, as a trade union. It is quite true that men-folks have been to blame on not educating their sisters and daughters; but, there it is, a stumbling block.\textsuperscript{65}

Will Thorne, leader of the Gasworkers and General Labourers, attributed women's apathy to the fact that women workers went home to household duties after a day's work, while male labourers were free.\textsuperscript{66} Dr. Keegan, secretary of the Birmingham Pen Makers, tied women's failure as unionists to the role they were forced to play by society. By always competing for male attention, they became natural enemies and "their uncharitableness to each other is probably the most biting and disintegrating force which works against their solidarity."\textsuperscript{67} In all, the final word on the subject must be given to the male trade unionist who ended his career of trying to organize women by saying, "I expect women will be the last thing civilized by men."\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{65}Drake, Women in Trade Unions, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{66}Ibid., p. 40.
\textsuperscript{67}Ibid., p. 41.
\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., p. 43.
Furthermore, the long-delayed entrance of middle-class women into the labor market retarded wages even further. These feminists, elated at breaking into new fields, paid little attention to the terms on which they entered. By 1899, there were 53,057 nurses, 146,385 teachers, 39,166 shop assistants, and 18,859 secretaries and all were working for starvation wages. As Strachey explained,

The valuation which the new class of women put upon their work, and the maximum of independence which they desired, were not as yet very exorbitant. Girls were satisfied to earn just a little money...and having no acquaintance with economics, they did not realize what troubles they were bringing upon themselves by the docility and gratitude with which they accepted low rates of pay.

The government was quick to take advantage of this new class of workers. In 1881, Henry Fawcett, Postmaster General of the realm, opened all civil service appointments to women applicants. Hundreds of thousands of women applied to be postal clerks, telegraphists, and typists. Although male clerks balked at their introduction, the government found them very attractive. As Henry Scudamore, a postal official, reported to his superiors,

The wages which will draw male operators from but an inferior class of the community, will draw female operators from a superior class. Female operators

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70 Ibid., p. 225.
thus drawn from a superior class will write better than male clerks and spell more correctly.... They are also less disposed than men to combine for the purpose of extorting higher wages, and this is by no means an unimportant matter.

On the whole, it may be stated without fear of contradiction, if we place an equal number of females and males on the same ascending scale of pay, the aggregate pay to the females will always be less than the aggregate pay to the males...and that there will always be fewer females than males on the pension list.  

So, for all the changes the League had undergone and for all its new policy, women workers were still far behind male workers. Only 166,803 of the 4,763,000 female laborers in Britain at the turn of the century belonged to unions. Female wages, Sidney Webb reported to the Royal Commission on Poor Laws in 1906, averaged 10s. 10d. a week.

The League did not cease to operate in 1900. Technically, it still exists today because in 1921 it merged with the modern-day Trade Union Congress. In 1903, however, the Women's Protective and Provident League, the Women's Protective League, and the Women's Trade Union League all vanished as Mary MacArthur, the energetic new secretary, severed all ties between the women's unions and middle-class members and affiliated them with the newly formed Labour Representation Committee. The feminists' intervention into working women's unions was over.

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72 Hilda Martindale, Women in the Professions, p. 76.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Feminist intervention into working women's legislation and trade unions is easy to dismiss as ineffectual or to condemn as damaging to the working-class women. Not only did feminists fail in all their objectives, but they sometimes used methods which lent themselves to ridicule.

Historians of the trade union movement have regarded their efforts as a footnote, at best, to trade union history. Henry Pelling did not mention feminist intervention at all, noting only the "sadly retarded development" of women's trade unions before World War I.\(^1\) Sidney and Beatrice Webb called Emma Paterson the "real pioneer of the modern women's trade union" in a footnote to general trade union expansion 1871-1874.\(^2\) Elsewhere, they condemn the feminists' legislative policy.\(^3\) G. D. H. Cole gave the feminists four sentences in his Short History of the British Working Class Movement.\(^4\)

\(^1\)Pelling, History of British Trade Unionism, p. 129.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 297.
J. Ramsay MacDonald passed over the unions they formed as mere "benefit clubs." 5

Even apologists for the feminists have not treated the movement kindly. Barbara Drake, Olive Strachey, Gladys Boone, and Erna Reiss all praise the individual feminists, particularly Paterson, for their efforts, but see the intervention itself as a "mistake". 6 Reiss noted thankfully that "on the whole their objections have had but little effect on the course of legislation." 7

One historian was scathing. Barbara Hutchins in the History of Factory Legislation called the basis of the movement "blank and unfruitful individualism, a distinct retrogression". She asserted that

The working woman has a far better chance to work out her economic salvation through solidarity and cooperation with her own class than by adopting the tactics or submitting to the tutelage of middle and upper class organizations which rise to no higher conception of women's work than that of ceaseless competition with men, and blindly fight for a so-called "freedom" to carry on that competition by outworn methods and in unhealthy conditions. 8

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5 MacDonald, Women in the Printing Trades, p. 36.
6 Erna Reiss, Rights and Duties of Englishwomen (Manchester: Sherratt and Hughes, 1934), p. 240.
7 Ibid., p. 241.
Hutchins did concede that the motives of the feminists were "unquestionable" but "it is all the more regrettable that their neglect to make themselves better acquainted with the history and the facts of the matter should cause inadvertently to throw their influence on the side of the sweater and the bad employer."^9

In many ways, these historians are correct. The feminists undoubtedly confused the social and legal restrictions that kept them from entering professions with the very necessary protective laws workers--male or female--require in industry. Feminists labored for over thirty years under the belief that the problems of industry were based upon sex, not class--that all women faced the same problems. Their ignorance of labor conditions prevented them for nearly thirty years from seeing that wages and conditions of labor were as important as the right to work.

Henry Fawcett's arguments in the House of Commons 1873-8 reflect this dogmatic belief at its worst. Despite the fact that women workers in the textile mills had been subject to legislation since 1844, Fawcett and his supporters made no effort to investigate whether restrictions on hours had indeed limited women's opportunities for employment. Had they examined the evidence, they would have seen the contrary was true.

^9Ibid.
Rigid individualism and feminine sex antagonism prevented those feminists who knew factory conditions and working women's problems from modifying feminists' policies. Emma Paterson, as we have seen, readily acknowledged that working women in the last quarter of the nineteenth century badly needed help in order to improve the conditions of employment. For her, however, this help came in only two forms: legislation or unions. Legislation could not be effective until women realized their own industrial strength; unions were built on this realization and were, thus, better. Never was Paterson able to consider the advantages of a combination of the two elements so that women workers might, for example, gain by legislation the leisure hours necessary to form unions. Nor could she envision the extension of factory protection to men so that both sexes would have the same restrictions upon their labor. Hindsight shows that this was probably the more fruitful course, given the men's desire to secure protection and the Parliament's increasing tendency to legislate for the protection of all workers. Feminist sex antagonism, however, prevented this cooperation.

By the middle of the 1880's, some feminists finally conceded that sex antagonism was a luxury working women could ill afford. The trade depression, falling wages, and increasing unemployment dictated that help was needed from any available source, even male trade unionists. Lady
Dilke, therefore, led the League in modifying its policy to encourage working women to join the general trade union movement. Even then, however, feminists halted progress for higher wages and better working conditions by the long-delayed success of their other agitations. By the 1880's their efforts to bring middle-class women into the labor force was finally bearing fruit. Elated at being able to work, however, few middle-class women questioned the low wages and long hours. Wages for women plummeted to lower levels.

Thus, for thirty years' work feminists had little to show. They had secured no significant advances in either women's right to work or in the repealing of Factory Acts. Women's unions had grown only a minuscule amount: after two years of feminist organization, .2% of women workers belonged to unions, after fifteen years work 2.5%, and after thirty years work 3%.¹⁰ Three years of war accomplished what thirty years of feminist agitation could not; in 1918, 21% of the women's labour force was unionized. Further, the war started the disintegration of all legal bars against women's economic, political, and social freedom.

Historians' censure is understandable. However, it is not entirely justified. Historians of the movement have

¹⁰Computed from the statistics in Mitchell, Abstract of British Historical Statistics, pp. 60 and 68.
persisted in viewing its successes and failures outside the context of the entire trade union movement and outside prevailing social conditions. In significant ways, the unions formed by the League paralleled development in men's trade unions.

This is particularly noticeable in the period, 1871-1880, difficult years for trade unions. Public hostility and legal restrictions forced both men's and women's unions to follow moderate policies and to avoid strikes. Both types of unions relied upon middle-class supporters to win public approval. A. J. Mundella and Thomas Hughes argued for men's unions in Parliament and Henry Crompton and Samuel Morley paid for a newspaper to present them in a favorable light. Henry Fawcett and Charles M'Laren upheld women's right to organize in the House of Commons and the members of the Women's Provident and Protective League raised money for the Women's Union Journal. Both groups were very interested in the repeal of special legislation affecting only their group. For male trade unions, this legislation restricted their right to organize: the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the Master and Servant Law, Hornsby vs. Close. Feminists and women trade unionists tried to remove restrictions upon their right to work. The males, in time, proved to have been engaged in a more profitable agitation, but the impulse to remove special legislation was the same for both groups.
Moreover, male unionists who taunted the feminists' unions as being "mere friendly societies" would have done well to look at their own unions. Until the "New Unionism" of the late 1880's, both male and female unions used friendly society benefits to attract members. Tom Mann and John Burns called for an end to these benefits in unions in 1886; the League had already changed its policy in 1883. Thus, feminists were not always behind the times in industrial questions.

Despite these parallels, men's unions grew and gained power while women's unions did not. Although much of the blame for this must be laid upon feminists' beliefs and misconceptions, male trade unionists had two advantages women did not: the right to vote and a tradition of organization. The right to vote helped keep unions alive and active because men were able to influence politicians and to secure their ends. Beginning with their upset of the Liberals in 1872, male trade unions made their presence felt. In 1871, they won the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment, in 1872 of the Masters and Servant Act, and by 1875, complete legal recognition of unions. Feminists agitated for legal changes in working policy from 1873 through 1895, but in only one clause of one bill were they successful. Their inability to influence Parliament in the Factory Act Amendment Bill of 1891 caused the new unions among the laundresses to die.
Males, furthermore, organized readily. Women did not. Feminists had to fight female reluctance to combine throughout the entire period. Hutchins’ criticism that feminists retarded the development of women’s trade unions is, thus, myopic. Working women made little effort from 1834 until 1915 to organize themselves. Feminists’ efforts, no matter how mistaken, could hardly have retarded a non-existent movement.

Not all of the feminists’ policies were mistakes. They established the right of delegates from women’s trade unions to join the Trade Union Congress. They convinced the government that women’s opinions must be consulted on labor legislation. They secured women factory inspectors. These rights became increasingly important during World War I when feminists’ efforts insured that women workers were protected and their wages raised. Further, feminists kept the idea of trade unionism alive among working women, even if the unions they created failed. These advances allowed the working women’s own movement for unions, which began after World War I, to grow more rapidly and to assume quickly something approaching equality with male unionists.

Feminists, most importantly, tried to do something for working women and themselves. In a time when most middle-class women ignored the existence of the poor and left all business matters to males, these feminists were traveling to dreary industrial towns to organize meetings among working
women and to discuss economic questions. They publicized the cause, often supporting union magazines from their own pockets. Feminists withstood criticism from their class, male unionists, and the press. Thirty years of such sustained effort, even if mistaken, is a sort of heroism.

True, feminists were completely wrong in their thinking and slow to change their course. But historians' censure has been unwarrantably harsh. A more fitting conclusion to this chapter of the women's movement is that feminists were gallant and occasionally right.
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