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## Sisterhood and Solidarity

Kornbluh, Joyce L., Frederickson, Mary

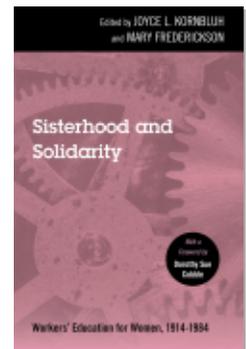
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# Foreword

## Dorothy Sue Cobble

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*Sisterhood and Solidarity: Workers' Education for Women, 1914-1984*, edited by Joyce L. Kornbluh and Mary E. Frederickson, is a pioneering and revelatory work of scholarship. I congratulate Temple University Press for making this neglected gem available digitally. The volume beautifully captures the centrality of education to U.S. women's labor movements and reveals the deep faith of these movements in the intellectual and political capacities of working people. Workers' education for women deserves more attention: it transformed the lives of elite and non-elite women in surprising and significant ways, fueled democracy and social justice movements, and eroded power differentials and prejudices based on race, class, and culture. In *Sisterhood and Solidarity*, current and coming generations of scholars, activists, and educators will find a newly relevant past from which there is much to learn.

The book emerged in a moment of promise for working women, with labor's ranks feminizing, comparable worth campaigns led by public-sector unions in full strike, and SEIU District 925 in the midst of a national campaign to organize officer workers. Key national unions and university centers across the country boasted flourishing educational programs for women, and the AFL-CIO had backed a series of regional residential summer schools for women workers. A new cohort of labor women was eager for their history, the editors of *Sisterhood and Solidarity* believed, and ready to "rediscover the movements led by women, like workers' education." The book would be "both a collection of stories about earlier generations *and* a playbook for what could come next."

The editors assembled a stellar group of authors, among whom were some of the best known labor and working-class history scholars of the time, including Joyce Kornbluh herself, whose books include *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (1964) and *Rocking the Boat: Union Women's Voices 1915-1975* (1996), with Brigid O'Farrell; Barbara Mayer Wertheimer, founding director of Cornell University's Institute on Women and Work and author of *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America* (1977) and *Labor Education for Women Workers* (1981); and Alice Kessler-Harris, now a retired Distinguished Professor Emerita at Columbia University and author of multiple prize-winning volumes. Also contributing essays, and bringing the fresh perspectives of young scholars just embarking on their careers,

## Foreword: Dorothy Sue Cobble

were Mary Frederickson, Rita Heller, Robin M. Jacoby, Susan Stone Wong, and Marion Roydhouse. Lyn Goldfarb, a young filmmaker, labor educator, and women's studies graduate, was working on *With Babies and Banners*, the award-winning documentary about the crucial contributions of women to winning the 1937 UAW Flint Michigan sit-down strike.

The first chapters of *Sisterhood and Solidarity* bring to life the vibrant era of workers' education stretching from the 1910s to the 1940s. Jacoby's study of the Women's Trade Union League (WUTL) School for Women Organizers, founded in 1914, serves as an excellent entree into this heady moment of reform possibility. Illuminating essays follow on the multicultural educational efforts of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the extensive interracial grassroots programs of the YWCA's Industrial Division, and the justifiably renowned Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, the eight-week residential school held from 1921 to 1938. A second cluster of chapters shows how the emancipatory vision of the Bryn Mawr Summer School spread, inspiring other all-female residential experiments such as the Southern Summer School for Women Workers, the Summer School for Office Workers, and the New Deal's nationwide program of rural camps for unemployed women initiated by Hilda Worthington Smith, the charismatic educational theorist and first director of the Bryn Mawr Summer School.

The volume concludes with Barbara Wertheimer's essay on the renaissance of educational programs for women workers in the 1970s and early 1980s and an engaging set of interviews with four leading figures of the mid-century movement: Alice Hanson Cook, Marguerite Gilmore, Esther Peterson and Larry Rogin. The editors interweave visual and other materials throughout, giving the anthology a lively, non-academic feel. They feature poems, lyrics, and letters by and from students who attended the various schools, open each chapter with an original graphic from the schools' archives, and include a marvelous gallery of photographs at the end.

Several of the essays are especially suggestive of the intellectual riches possible when educational experiments for women workers are foregrounded. The Y's Industrial Program emerges as something of a figure in the carpet, a largely hidden but fundamental shaper of the broader interracial labor and civil rights movements it helped launch. Thousands of girls attended its camps and participated in its self-governing clubs, all overseen by an autonomous division within the Y dedicated to workers' rights, industrial citizenship, and racial justice. The Bryn Mawr Summer School is revealed as yet another site of transformative power in individual lives and a place where friendships and understandings crucial to inclusive social movements and policy happened. The CCC camps for unemployed women (or as both its adherents and its distractors called it, the "She-She-She Camps") exerted an outsized influence on the labor and the women's movement as well, not

## Foreword: Dorothy Sue Cobble

least through the agency of such famous alumna as lawyer, feminist, and civil rights icon Pauli Murray, who met and became life-long friends with Eleanor Roosevelt after the First Lady visited Murray's camp in upstate New York.

Those coming to this history for the first time will be well served by the volume's "Selected Bibliography." The women's educational efforts recounted here were but one stream of a larger global movement to reform society and democratize education in the early twentieth century. During those years, trade unions, workers' movements, and socialist parties in the United States and elsewhere founded dozens of schools, lyceums, and study circles for workers. They sought alternatives to the anti-worker Social Darwinist philosophies and economic theories they saw prevailing in elite institutions of higher learning. They believed new ways of understanding the world were crucial to solving the great social and economic questions of their day. Influenced by John Dewey and other educational theorists, they also wanted new pedagogies of peer-based and experiential learning.

Two of the most comprehensive (and still unsurpassed) classic surveys of these early worker educational initiatives, Marius Hansome's *World Workers' Education Movements, Their Social Significance* (1931) and Theodore Brameld's *Workers' Education in the United States* (1941) are listed in the "Selected Bibliography." The editors also offer an excellent sampling of the research of later generations on popular education and on U.S. labor and women's movements. In addition, readers may want to dip into the small but growing literature on workers' education published since this volume appeared. Karyn L. Hollis, for example, explores the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Workers as an antecedent for twenty-first century feminist and activist pedagogies and a site for working-class women's literature in *Liberating Voices: Writing at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Workers* (2004). A special issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History* 90 (Fall 2016) edited by Michael Merrill and Susan J. Schurman features historical studies of the workers' education movements in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Africa as well as essays on India's Self-Employed Women's Association and other female-led contemporary movements who judge emancipatory education as necessary to democratic movements and governance.

I find putting the story of U.S. working women's education in a global context quite revealing. M. Carey Thomas, the president of Bryn Mawr, is rightly given credit for her role in establishing the Bryn Mawr Summer School in 1921. But there is another part of the story having to do with the influence of the WTUL and of international women trade unionists that is often missed. In 1913, the WTUL wrote to all the elite women's colleges: since their beautiful, leafy campuses were empty in the summer would they consider opening their campuses to wage-earning women for summer

## Foreword: Dorothy Sue Cobble

study? Not a single college, including Bryn Mawr, replied in the affirmative. The WTUL pursued other educational options, including the scholarship program at the University of Chicago, which Jacoby thoughtfully details in her contribution to *Sisterhood and Solidarity*. But the dream of a residential summer program would not die. At the conclusion of the 1919 founding convention of the International Federation of Trade Union Women, WTUL president Margaret Dreier Robins took several international delegates with her to lobby the elite women's colleges and persuade them of the importance of summer schools for wage earning women.

Their visit produced results, as a 1921 letter from Robins to Jeanne Bouvier, a leading French trade unionist, tells:

“Dear Jeanne, you will rejoice with me in knowing that the visit we made to Bryn Mawr College during those wonderful ten days of our First Congress in 1919 has had a most far-reaching effect. This leading college for women recently announced that it is prepared to open a ‘Summer School for Working Women in Industry.’ Do you not agree that this is most significant? For years some of us have been dreaming of this happy day. But our educational leaders also had to see the vision and it was during that momentous 1919 visit of our international workers that the vision came to the faculty of Bryn Mawr College. Now Dr. Thomas, president of Bryn Mawr, will open the school this summer ... a happy augury of the day when the industrial worker may look to the colleges for cooperation in solving the problems of industry and equally important when the great heritage of learning, of poetry, of science, may be the common heritage of all.”

Thirty years later another international effort directly inspired by the Bryn Mawr School set in motion a series of events, the reverberations of which are still being felt. Immediately after the creation of the anti-communist International Confederation of Free Trade unions (ICFTU) in 1949, a group of women associated with its affiliates, including Esther Peterson, a faculty alumna of the Bryn Mawr Summer School, proposed that the organization sponsor an international summer school for trade union women in cooperation with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO). The ICFTU agreed and in June 1953 52 women labor leaders from 25 countries across the globe, including the United States, Turkey, Mexico, Tunisia, and India, attended the two-week residential program at a chateau outside Paris. The democratically run school with its participatory, student-centered curriculum and its pedagogy of self-governing small-group learning reflected the Bryn Mawr influence.

## Foreword: Dorothy Sue Cobble

The demands emerging from the women at the school were bold and pointed. They proclaimed their opposition to hierarchical relations between men and women and called for “democracy in the home” as well as on the job and in the union. The ICFTU, they declared, needed to change in fundamental ways. They wanted a union movement that recognized the work of the home and that paid attention to the full range of human needs and problems. The labor movement must acknowledge women’s “role as homemaker” as well as “wage-earner” and recognize women as “human beings with human problems.” Education and individual development must be part of any movement for societal transformation.

They won the right to form a Women’s Committee in the ICFTU to implement some of these changes and move women into leadership. In 2006, when the ICFTU joined with other trade-union bodies to become the 168-million member International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the Women’s Committee persisted. It was instrumental in electing Australian trade union leader Sharan Burrow as the ITUC’s first female President in 2006 and in 2010, its first female General Secretary, the organization’s highest office. The roots of her triumph ran deep. They stretched back to the 1953 International Women’s Summer School, which in turn rested on a long history of women’s emancipatory educational endeavors around the world.

In 2018, as I write, a new generation of educators, activists, and researchers is revaluing workers’ education, driven in part by the global rise of feminism and of female-led and female-majority worker movements. There’s a new appreciation of the need for spaces where workers can recognize their own wisdoms; learn from the considered insights of others, past and present; and together rethink how to change society for the better.

*Sisterhood and Solidarity* was one of the first volumes, and remains one of the few, to call attention to the importance of workers’ education for women. Let us hope there will be many more.

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## Notes

1. E-mail correspondence, Mary E. Frederickson to Dorothy Sue Cobble, 18 April 2018.
2. Letter, Margaret Dreier Robins to Jeanne Bouvier, April 8, 1921, Boite 23, Fond Jeanne Bouvier, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France. This paragraph and the three following draw on Dorothy Sue Cobble, “International Women’s Trade Unionism and Education,” *ILWCH* 90 (Fall 2016), 153-163.

