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Sisterhood and Solidarity

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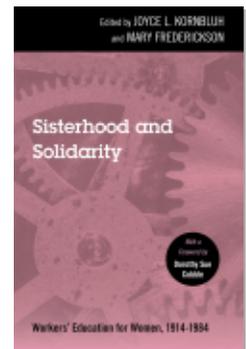
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Preface

The essays in this collection survey a number of innovative workers' education programs for women that span the years between 1914, when the National Women's Trade Union League initiated its Training School for Women Organizers, and the present. Our aim is to document and to analyze the contributions these programs made to labor history, women's history, and social history. The historians and labor educators writing here explore the relationship of female workers' education to changing patterns of women's work, to the trade union movement, to the meaning of feminism in the context of workers' education, to class conflicts within these programs, and to the changing nature of workers' education in the labor movement today. We also include some of the rich documentary material—essays, poems, plays, oral histories, and photographs—that was produced as part of these programs.

The reader will find in this volume new interpretations of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, the Southern Summer School, and the Affiliated Schools for Workers—organizations designed specifically as female workers' education programs; analyses of groups like the National Women's Trade Union League, the Young Women's Christian Association, and the New Deal-sponsored educational camps for jobless women that turned to workers' education to achieve their goals; and discussions of workers' education programs that were carried out within unions. Finally, we point to the important connections between the pre-World War II programs for women workers and the contemporary programs initiated by unions and universities.

By creating this anthology, we have in many ways given structure to a movement that had very little cohesion. The education programs for women workers documented in this collection had a multiplicity of specific goals. However, each program sought to provide experiences that would give women workers needed information, personal and organizational skills, and support for their participation in the labor force and in workplace organizations.

The cross-class coalitions of women who organized and staffed these programs envisioned the expanded participation of women in the labor movement as a means of democratizing organized labor and

strengthening the role of trade unions within American society. Early education programs for women workers built on the activism of middle-class women in social reform organizations, in the suffrage movement, and in campaigns to extend opportunities for women in institutions of higher education. Although the women differed in identifying themselves as feminists, the programs reflected the collaboration of women educators, social reformers, feminists, YWCA and settlement house staff along with representatives of unions and the worker-students themselves.

The founders of the early programs helped shape the workers' education philosophy that classroom learning must lead to social action. They developed new educational methods that linked the learning setting to the community context, and aimed to increase the participation and power of women in the public sphere. They experimented with teaching techniques—new for that time and accepted in ours—of involving adult women students in an informal, nonhierarchical learning process that afforded a critique of traditional teaching methods.

These early education programs for women workers were testing grounds for relating group work to education and involving participants in defining their own educational levels, developing their own curricula, and sharing in the governance of the projects. The founders of the programs drew on the work of progressive educators such as John Dewey, Eduard Lindeman, William Kilpatrick and James Harvey Robison as they helped students learn from their experiences, relate "schooling" to the "real world," and integrate their learning in a process leading to social change.

By focusing on individual growth as well as systematic change—the synchronization of personal and political transformation—many of these education programs offered a wholistic approach to social reconstruction. As women attempted to transcend the dichotomies of their private and public lives, the workers' education programs helped them to use their individual experiences to develop a political analysis. This concept and process were later used by women's consciousness raising groups in the 1960s that dealt with women's family relationships and affirmed for a new generation that "the personal is the political."

Workers' education for women flourished in twentieth-century America because it offered a way of mitigating conflicts between class and gender. For middle-class women it provided one way to become involved with the labor movement. For working-class women, the programs offered opportunities to interact with women of a different

race, ethnic group, or region on common personal, workplace, union, and community issues.

Initially developed in a period when relatively few working-class women finished high school and when there were few unions that organized unskilled or semi-skilled women workers, the early programs combined economics, labor history, and public speaking with classes on literature, art, music, and women's health issues. Later programs, developed for women workers with more formal schooling and in the context of a stronger labor movement, included more functional courses designed to empower women within their unions and communities.

From the earliest years to the present period, workers' education programs for women have advocated an increased response by government to the needs of women workers. Efforts to overcome economic barriers through legislation began with support for protective legislation and a minimum wage that would benefit women workers at the bottom of the pay scale. After World War II, the focus shifted to support for an Equal Pay Act, affirmative action, an Equal Rights Amendment, and legislation that would outlaw such practices as sexual harassment and protect the health and safety of women workers as well as men.

Women have had to overcome discrimination and institutional barriers in unions as well as in workplaces. The early programs were developed at a time when conservative leaders of the AFL openly excluded women from union membership on the grounds that their unskilled labor would deflate the wage scales of males. Union hiring practices also reflected this discrimination. In 1924, only eight national unions hired women organizers, and even the garment and clothing workers' unions with huge female memberships counted few women on organizing staffs or in elected positions.

Fifty years later, in 1974, when the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) was founded, there were still no women on the AFL-CIO Executive Council, and only two international unions were headed by women presidents. Today, when only seven million women belong to unions or to labor associations out of twenty-three million organized workers, organized women hold only 12 percent of all elected positions in unions, and only 7 percent of the elected and appointed positions in union offices on a national level. Current programs aim to give women union members the information, skills and support to become more active in workplace organizations and to run for office at all levels of their unions.

Contemporary programs continue to bring working-class and mid-

dle-class women together around common concerns. Black and Hispanic women are attending in greater numbers, coordinating workshops, and running for leadership positions in their unions and communities. The need to organize more women workers remains constant, and female workers' education continues to respond to these issues through programs sponsored by individual unions, by the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), and by university labor extension programs.

Today, the female workers' education movement serves as a bridge to the contemporary women's movement. Throughout the schools and educational programs, issues are discussed that affect women's personal as well as public lives. Child care, sexual harassment on the job, health and safety, reproductive rights, birth control, domestic violence, rape, substance abuse, assertiveness training, goal setting, the relationship of racism to sexism, and alternative family structures are discussed along with workplace issues of job discrimination, affirmative action, the opening of nontraditional jobs for women, comparable worth, on-the-job training and laws guaranteeing equal rights.

Over the past seventy years, education programs for women workers have played a unique role in developing working women's collective potential and individual concerns. As Sylvia Maniloff wrote to her union newspaper almost forty years ago, her program "taught me how much there is to learn and that I am going to make not an end but a beginning." At the end of the 1982 Southern Summer School for Women Workers, cosponsored by the University and Colleges Labor Education Association (UCLEA) and the national AFL-CIO Education Department, postal worker Betty Tsang touched on a continuing theme: "If I learned nothing more this week except that I am not alone, that there is a bunch out there making waves, causing changes, being heard, and at the same time being themselves—sincere, people-oriented and union-minded women, I'd still be proud."