5: Recognizing Regional Differences: The Southern Summer School for Women Workers

Published by

Kornbluh, Joyce L. and Mary Frederickson.

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Chapter 5

Recognizing Regional Differences:
The Southern Summer School
for Women Workers

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Although the 1880s have been designated as the "take-off" period for southern industry, the 1920s were the years when the region's cotton textile industry gained ascendency over its northern competitors and during which southern manufacturing continued a race for dominance in synthetic fibers, clothing, and shoes. The number of southerners in industrial work doubled between 1880 and 1890, and the movement of workers into manufacturing increased steadily for the next four decades. As in the Northeast fifty years earlier, no group felt the impact of industrialization more than the young women who left the region's farms to become operatives in southern mills and factories.

Despite the importance of working-class women in the development of industrial capitalism in the South, however, little attention has been paid to their history. This undocumented history includes the crucial role of women within the southern family economy and the determined and often militant efforts of southern women workers to improve their individual lives through collective action. Working women in the South sought support in these efforts from a variety of sources. At times they were sustained only by their own fortitude and the solidarity of their co-workers. In other cases, women workers joined trade unions, although organized labor often lacked the resources or motivation to assist them. As a result, numbers of working-class women fighting for autonomy and better working conditions joined forces with middle-class women's groups in order to change the character of the industrializing South.

The twin issues of industrial and racial reform had become central to southern middle-class reformers in the early years of the twentieth century. Efforts to mitigate the inequities in a racially segregated society paralleled work to channel the New South's industrial capacity toward creating a better society for all of the region's citizens. Southern women working in groups as divergent as the Methodist Women's Missionary Council and the Communist Party scrutinized southern society during the 1920s and 1930s and prescribed change. Within this broad spectrum of reform and revolution, the labor movement offered a consistent blend of activism and pragmatism. In the 1920s, however, the position of southern women within the labor movement was circumscribed. Middle-class women (with the exception of those in teachers' unions) had little or no contact with organized labor, while few southern
working-class women were considered candidates for organization into craft-dominated unions. Therefore, working-class women looked outside the labor movement to find support for their efforts to organize, and middle-class women, concerned about industrial conditions, channeled their efforts into workers’ education for women. Thus workers’ education came to serve as a common ground for cross-class cooperation among southern women.

The single most important instrument for workers’ education for women in the South was the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry. Founded in 1927 by a group of women concerned about the human cost of industrialization, the school sought to build a network across the South which could both promote the organization of unions and fight for basic changes in the southern industrial system. For many years the Southern Summer School was directed by Louise Leonard McLaren, a native of Pennsylvania who came south in 1920 as YWCA National Industrial Secretary for the southern region. McLaren, together with Lois McDonald, the daughter of a South Carolina minister, provided the driving force behind the school.

The origin of the Southern Summer School can be traced to the YWCA’s work with women through its Industrial Department. In the nonunionized South the YWCA was an especially important organization for developing working-class leaders in dozens of southern communities. At the same time, through the YWCA middle-class women interacted with their working-class sisters in a way that both stimulated their reform impulse and provided practical experience on which to base an approach to solving the problems of southern industrial society.

The women working with the YWCA Industrial Department in the South, however, understood the limitations of an institution controlled and dominated by middle-class interests. Through their contact with the National Women’s Trade Union League (NWTUL), the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, and Brookwood Labor College, these women came to recognize the tactical importance of workers’ education in a strategy of promoting union membership among southern workers. Taking these workers’ education programs as their models, a coalition of working- and middle-class women created in the Southern Summer School an independent organization especially adapted to the needs of southern women workers.

In order to begin the process
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of building such an institution, the school's founders reached out to individuals and organizations from across a broad political and economic spectrum that included women's groups, contingents of liberal southerners, and organized labor. This coalition secured funds, recruited a predominantly female faculty, and selected students through YWCA Industrial Departments and local trade unions. The school was an immediate success and generated a great deal of enthusiasm among organized women workers, unorganized workers in the YWCA, and southern middle-class reformers.

Students who came to the Southern Summer School were recruited by local "workers' education committees," which provided money for travel and tuition. All of the school's students were rank-and-file workers, and most were between eighteen and thirty-five years old. Between 1927 and 1934, the majority of the women who participated in the program were active in the YWCA Industrial Department; after 1934, most belonged to unions of textile, garment, or tobacco workers. Only white women attended the Southern Summer School. Although the school's leaders were concerned about the conditions of southern black workers and wanted to operate an integrated school, they bowed to the mores of a segregated society. The student body itself reflected the segregation within the southern industrial work force in the period prior to World War II, when few black women obtained manufacturing jobs.

At the Southern Summer School's six-week residence sessions (held at Sweet Briar College in Virginia in 1927 and afterward in schools and camps in western North Carolina) students received instruction in labor history, economics, and public speaking. As the school's faculty introduced southern women to the history of American workers, they sought both to increase the self-esteem of individual students and to encourage women to solve their problems collectively. The school was a place where southern women workers learned new ideas about the world and forged skills to use in the daily struggle of organizing and educating their fellow workers after returning home.

For the 300 women who attended the Southern Summer School's sessions between 1927 and the beginning of World War II, the opportunity to participate in an educational program designed specifically for them was a unique, exciting adventure. Motivations for attending were no doubt as numerous as the students, but thirst for education was a fre-
quent theme. The organizers of the school realized the strength of this desire for learning and designed the school's program to channel this energy into the process of developing the leadership potential of the students. The curriculum in labor history and economics built on the experiences of the students, and the women were encouraged to express themselves and to develop communications skills by writing essays, poems, and plays. Above all, the school fostered among the workers a sense of self-worth as it prepared them for assuming leadership roles in the southern labor movement.

The women of the Southern Summer School created an atmosphere that encouraged students to expand their self-perceptions and to develop a sense of personal autonomy and group identity. In the first place, the school offered women a retreat from their social and familial obligations where they could talk to one another, reflect upon their lives, and obtain a fundamental sense of their own worth. Second, the school's faculty, young women who were themselves activists and dedicated to social change, became role models for their working-class students. Finally, the Southern Summer School offered women an ideological vision of a new social order in which a genuine democracy would be created. The social space to reflect and develop new ideas, nonpassive female mentors, and a new vision of the future provided students with the tools for forging the collective consciousness necessary for social change.2

The school's founders perceived the environment of the organization's summer sessions to be a key ingredient in creating the proper atmosphere for the education of women workers. The women who organized the Southern Summer School consciously sought to establish a cooperative community of middle-class and working-class women, teachers and students, in which all shared the work, studied together, and learned from one another. They wanted to create a true workers' school in which there would be no class lines and no formal academic hierarchy. To achieve this goal the faculty encouraged students to lead discussions, to ask questions, and to disagree openly with their teachers and with each other. When Louise Leonard McLaren wrote about the 1928 session, she emphasized faculty-student equality:

There was no line drawn between the faculty and the students such as is the rule in academic life; the simple fact that they all call each other by their first names is a kind of...
symbol that the school is in a very real sense a cooperative undertaking in education in which the "faculty members" may learn as much as the "students."

Students were also cognizant of the special relationship between those who came to the school to learn and the faculty. As Polly Robkin, a student in 1934, recalled: "The school made a big impression on me. It was the first time I had ever been away from home, but that didn't bother me. The school was so informal—it was like everyone was on the same level—it seemed as if the teachers wanted to learn from us."

In many ways, the school realized the goal of creating a community where women could come to share experiences and learn from each other. Most of the middle-class faculty members had several models to use as they worked to create a new organization that would bring middle-class and working-class women together. For example, Miriam Bonner, a faculty member who had taught at the North Carolina College for Women in Greensboro, described the atmosphere on that campus, saying, "There was a freedom about it . . . almost like a nunnery life in a way, and it was very comfortable and very pleasant." She depicted the Southern Summer School in a similar way, as a place where women could come together and talk with other women without pressure from bosses, husbands, or families. The Southern Summer School environment, to her, was "very friendly, very cooperative . . . just like one big happy family . . . a wonderful experience of freedom and security."

In this supportive atmosphere, the Southern Summer School faculty encouraged students to speak about themselves, and teachers structured discussions that built on the individual experiences of working women. This was an important teaching method that prepared students to recognize their common history and to understand the need for communication and cooperation among women throughout the South. Furthermore, this teaching format helped southern working-class women realize the importance of organizing to protect their own interests. As an integral part of each teaching session, the faculty used the work histories of students as illustrations of specific historical developments within the southern region.

While the Southern Summer School sought to foster the building of a collective identity among students, the faculty also wanted to give working-class students with limited for-
mal education and few experiences beyond the restricted contexts of their home communities a larger, more universal orientation to history, economics, and the role of women in an industrializing society. To this end, background information was provided by courses in economics and labor history, and students developed communication skills in writing sessions and classes in public speaking. Thus, at the close of a summer term students who had initially concentrated on their own low wages, loss of a job, and individual employer were able to discuss across-the-board wage cuts and regional unemployment, as well as the implications of trade union organization and the advantages of industrial versus craft unions.7

Throughout its history, the Southern Summer School program was shaped by a board of advisers, faculty, and workers dedicated to expanding labor's political and economic role within southern society. As students from throughout the region came to the school they spoke about themselves, learned about each other, and reflected the influence of the five different instructors who, between 1927 and 1940, taught the core course in economics and coordinated the school's residence curriculum to give students a basic understanding of labor history and theory.8

In 1927, Broadus Mitchell of South Carolina, a young professor of economics at Johns Hopkins University, encouraged students, the overwhelming majority of whom were farmers' daughters, to discuss their individual role in southern industrial expansion. Lois MacDonald, a South Carolina native, former YWCA secretary, and member of the economics faculty at New York University, took over the economics course in 1928 and taught at the Southern Summer School for over a decade. MacDonald urged students to write about their role as women workers and to express their views on racial segregation within the southern region. In a labor economics course designed specifically for southern women workers, MacDonald focused attention on concerns of particular importance to southern workers and stressed the importance of improving conditions within southern industries. In 1937 the economics course was run by Caroline Ware, a Sarah Lawrence professor who had taught at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers. Ware advised students to concentrate on learning union procedures and practices. In the late 1930s, under the direction of Leo
Huberman, author, organizer, and chairman of the Department of Social Science, New College, Columbia University, students wrote essays about the labor spy system, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the Gastonia strike of 1929. By 1940, the school came full circle in many ways when H. C. Nixon, a southern liberal scholar not unlike Broadus Mitchell, came to teach economics. Nixon, an academic political scientist and a Vanderbilt Agrarian, taught workers who had lived through the political and economic changes about which he had written.9

Parallel to the school's goal of educating workers in labor history and economics was its program to encourage self-expression and to foster self-esteem among the students. Communication skills were developed through basic writing and public speaking instruction. But beyond these practical lessons, the students were urged to express themselves in poetry, to write and produce plays, and to join in good-natured songfests. These activities opened new vistas to southern workers, whose educational backgrounds had been limited, and at the same time permitted an outlet never before available for long-dormant creative talents.

Learning traditional labor songs put students at the Southern Summer School in touch with a rich work culture from which southern workers often had been alienated. As they sang "Solidarity Forever," "The Internationale," and "I'm Labor," students at the school were stirred by words and music that had inspired generations of workers in other parts of the world. Students were also encouraged to incorporate the experiences of southern workers into new lyrics or traditional melodies. For example, to the tune of the gospel hymn "When First I Heard of Pentecost," workers wrote:

When first I heard of the CIO,
I thought it must be right,
It seemed to suit the people,
and be a great delight.10

Another original song written by a woman during the school's first session and adopted by classes that came later included these stanzas:

Southern girls awake, Southern girls arise
Better conditions make, get your share of the prize
Although there's work it's true, if we will dare and do
We'll get a decent living wage, and a little surplus too.

Chorus
Agitate, Educate, Organize today
If we all together stay success will come our way
Agitate, Educate, Organize today
Oh, what fun when we get more time to live and play.11

The Southern Summer School’s emphasis on student expression was part of a larger goal of illuminating and validating southern working-class culture. This ambition reflected, within the southern context, a national movement during the 1930s to define a “culture by and for the working class of America.” Throughout the Depression era, reformers, intellectuals, and radicals alike sought, as Richard H. Pells has described, to “invest fiction and poetry with an almost missionary role in creating a new kind of society.” Gradually concentration on novels and poems shifted to other art forms, one of the most important of which was drama.12

Over the years Southern Summer School students wrote and produced more than a dozen plays. Hollace Ransdell, who had worked at Brookwood Labor College, coordinated the majority of these productions. Ransdell asserted that the students had “a very dramatic sense” and on occasion even “ran away with the plot.” Characterized by simple stories, colorful characters, and spontaneous dialogue, the plays focused on unemployment, the stretch-out, or bad working conditions and portrayed workers acting collectively to demand resolution of these problems.13

A pair of female characters generally had the leading roles in these plays. Traditionally one woman portrayed a “good” person, while the other played a “bad” character. Moralistic plots, in which the good women always won, dominated scripts in which a union heroine played opposite a misguided nonunionist, a virtuous poor woman opposed a mean rich lady, or a well-educated but witless middle-class character lost out to an illiterate but clever working-class woman. Even the undesirable female characters, however, always demonstrated the potential to be enlightened and the capacity to understand a working-class woman’s perspective.

Although female characters in Southern Summer School plays had the capacity for cooperating across class lines, male characters fell into three very separate categories. Working-class men, always good and kind, were sharp-tongued and headstrong. Capitalists were fat, well-dressed, cruel, calculating, intractable, and a bit ridiculous. Finally, the sheriff, a popular character to portray, represented capitalist law enforcers who were vile-talking and unsympathetic to the work-
ers. Sheriffs were frequently the villains of these plays: workers who had turned against their own class. At times sheriffs could be subdued, either by force or by collective opposition to their reelection, but these men were always characterized as unscrupulous and potentially dangerous.\textsuperscript{14}

Southern textile strikes provided students at the Southern Summer School with rich material to integrate into dramatic form, but one of the most powerful plays produced by the students focused on their everyday lives and working conditions. During the summer of 1928 students at the school performed a play entitled "Tobacco Shop," described by Louise Leonard McLaren as "an almost spontaneous production . . . [in which] what it meant to the girls to work in the hot, humid air of the tobacco factory was so well brought out by the characters that some of the spectators in the audience said later they almost began to feel the heat themselves."\textsuperscript{15}

These plays were fun and exciting for the students, in part because they declared open season on bosses, law officers, scabs, and other banes of southern working-class existence. Yet there was more to the attractiveness of labor drama than mere entertainment to these young women. The plots distilled their work experience, the characters embodied their heroines, and the themes articulated their yearning for autonomy and control over their own lives. The plays cast women as strong, courageous individuals who were in the right and who had the ability to change people's minds and mobilize others for action. These qualities, aspired to by the students, were precisely those that the school's faculty sought to develop in order to provide the South with an indigenous labor leadership. Thus this women's theatre spoke effectively to both the needs of the students and the motives of the faculty of the school.

By the end of its first decade, the Southern Summer School had become well known within the southern labor movement, and 250 of the region’s women workers had participated in the program. A thoughtfully designed curriculum, egalitarian relationships between the faculty and students, and a carefully selected student body all contributed to create a successful organization for southern women workers. As is true of any institution, however, the Southern Summer School had to adapt and, as McLaren wrote, "recognize the changing situation in the south." One of the most important turning points in the history of the school was opening the summer
sessions to men. The transformation of what had been a tightly knit women's community into a coeducational workers' school involved substantial readjustments on the part of both women students and faculty. The first year men attended the school, the place where women students had openly voiced their opinions turned into a forum in which women had to defend their status as workers. In 1938, "a heated discussion" on the place of married women in industry "raged" for several days until, McLaren reported, "only statistics could convince differently those who argued that women's place is in the home." Moreover, while the CIO locals sending students to the Southern Summer School supported the theory of organizing workers regardless of skill, race, or sex, they selected more men than women as candidates for workers' education programs, and by 1940 over one-half of the school's students were male. Nevertheless, while admitting men meant the loss of the special camaraderie and supportive environment which Southern Summer School women had treasured, the move was a pragmatic one essential to perpetuate the school's influence in the southern labor movement and to ensure the continued advocacy within the movement of women and women's issues. Former students still looked to the school as both a vital part of their personal history and a conduit to increased participation in the labor movement. Female students coming to the school after 1938 also gained strength and inspiration from their contact with a workers' school dominated by women. For McLaren and the school's faculty and board members, the organization continued to be a place where they could come to renew their commitment to working for social change and to nurture the supportive relationships they had built over the years. Throughout the Southern Summer School's history, the lives of the young women students graphically mirrored the basic social and economic changes occurring in the South in the 1920s and 1930s. The stories of Southern Summer School students recounted the hardships faced by those who worked the land, the movement of families into mill towns and urban centers, and the high price paid for economic survival. These women also told of ways in which they coped with their situations and "made do." Although each individual had a different history, the southern working-class women who came together at the Southern Summer School shared their experi-
ences as workers, perceptions of their communities, and feelings about the hard times they had endured. Because of the Southern Summer School, these women left a written record. This written history, including student autobiographies and thematic essays, delineates the costs of industrialization as well as the benefits women workers gained in the changing social and economic structure of the South. The essays written by women at the school reveal the impact of these changes on personal lives and render understandable the political and social protests in which these women became involved.

During the ten years from 1927 to 1937 when the Southern Summer School recruited only women workers, an average of twenty-five students attended the residence school each year. After 1937, when both women and men were admitted, approximately fifteen women attended each summer. All together, over 300 women came to the school. The women invited to participate in the six-week session were rank-and-file industrial workers recruited from a variety of industries across the South. The largest number of women were drawn from the North Carolina industrial piedmont, but women from Virginia, West Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee also attended. Occasionally a student from as far away as Texas would hear of the program through the YWCA or a local union, and in 1937 a group of women sharecroppers recruited by the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union (STFU) came to the school from Arkansas. The industries these women worked in varied as much as their native states. Workers came from textile mills, from tobacco industries, and from box factories and canneries. Some of the women had been domestic workers, and many, especially in the first few years, had done agricultural work. Although they were selected for their potential as rank-and-file leaders, the backgrounds and work histories of these women are representative of southern women workers generally; the industries and the working-class communities they represented were prototypes of the industrialized South.

Because women came to the Southern Summer School from across the South and from a variety of communities and workplaces, the school's record allows a probing of work and family histories and the experiences of collective action among groups of women from agricultural and industrial backgrounds in rural areas, mill villages, and urban environments throughout the southern region. Moreover, comparisons
can be made between two generations of southern women workers, for between 1927 and 1944 the school served two cohorts of women.

The past, for most of the Southern Summer School women, revolved around the history of their family. Because they were young and only about 20 percent were married, they generally wrote and spoke of their family of origin. Almost one-half of the women who came to the school in the early years had been reared on farms. For their families, as for those of the rural women studied by Margaret Jarmon Hagood in the 1930s (Mothers of the South [1939]), while the concept of male dominance was accepted on one level, a rigid patriarchy did not exist. Young women had worked side by side with their mothers and fathers, performing numerous agricultural tasks, and their work experience reflected the diversity and flexibility required in agricultural labor. As one woman wrote:

*The two oldest girls and I did the planting and plowing, pulling fodder and corn, picking cotton and chopping the winter’s firewood from the woods. The smaller children did the hoeing and the weeding. With everyone in the field we often picked more than two bales of cotton a day and hauled it to the store house.*

Because they had participated in all kinds of agricultural work, these women brought with them sex-role definitions which, when applied to a manufacturing setting, emerged as relatively egalitarian. Most of the young women at the school had not left the work force since they first entered it. They worked to support themselves and their families and viewed their domestic and public work as a dual responsibility. Because of low wages for men and the necessity of women’s contribution to the family income, women in these families participated with their men in a joint economic partnership and continued an agricultural tradition of family work and shared wages far into the twentieth century.

Many women who had grown up on farms had pleasant recollections about their agricultural backgrounds, which, although tempered with hard work, were relatively secure. A student in 1929 recalled that “we always had a place to sleep and at least one pair of shoes during the winter.” One woman wrote that she was born in the Virginia countryside in “a little log cabin which is still a very dear spot to me.” Another student remembered a home sur-
rounded by oak trees and a happy childhood before she was old enough "to hoe corn and cotton, help tie and grade tobacco and after cotton opened, to pick cotton." This preadolescent child was hired out to work on other farms when there was not enough to do at home.23

Student writings chronicle the migration from farm to factory. In many cases this event was triggered by the death or ill health of a parent. From a young millworker in 1929 comes this testimony: "My father's health had been bad for several years. After he was not able to do farm work, we moved to the city. I was just 13. My sister who was two years older than I had to go to work in the mill to support the family."24

Moving into industrial communities, agricultural families readily translated a tradition of family participation for economic survival into the family wage economy:

Mother decided she would sell the farm for she was in debt and the farm was poor and small. She did not get much for it but did pay all she owed and had enough to go to the city where she could put my brother and me to work in factories. My brother got a job in a broom factory making $6.00 a week, I worked in a cotton mill and made between $4.50 and $7.00 a week. Mother washed, ironed and cleaned house for other people to keep the rest of the children in school.25

Even when each member had to go out to work, for many families a move into the industrial sector resulted in an improvement in living standards. Better housing and nearby schools were more frequently available than in the country, and while the paternalism of southern manufacturers varied from community to community, in many areas a company's philanthropy provided resources that had never been available to rural southerners.26 A student from one mill community wrote: "We have a swimming pool, theatre, and two churches. We also have a grammar school. After a child has finished grammar school he can go to high school without paying tuition if he lives in the village. You can have insurance if you want it."27

Families working in manufacturing had more cash than had been available in the agricultural economy. As one woman put it, after going to work in the mill, she "got the taste of a dollar." Another student recalled being paid $1.01 on her first job: "I gave mother the dollar and kept the one cent. I was so glad to be able to
give my mother money.” A North Carolina woman remembered that soon after leaving her family’s farm “marriage wasn’t in my mind because I was having too good a time making money and being with people, and I was getting some things that I had never been used to having.”

But while industrial work provided some benefits, it also brought new problems. Many mill villages, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, were horrible places to live. Most reports of bad living conditions came from women living in cotton mill towns. One student described her community: “The houses we live in are not nice houses and they all need repairing. There is no water or bath in the houses. The mill village is very unsanitary as they have no sewer line for the waste water to pass out.”

However, unsanitary conditions and the difficulties poor housing presented for mill workers paled in significance compared to the loss of autonomy that characterized life in a mill village. For individuals who had been independent farmers, the fact that “employers seem to have sole authority over the people” made southern mill village existence a particularly demeaning lifestyle to accept. Students at the Southern Summer School described many different forms of employer control, but perhaps the most exceptional example came from a woman who lived in a mill village where “the lights are connected with the mill and are turned on at 5:00 in the evening and turned off at 10:30 at night. Again in the morning at 4:00 they are turned on and stay on until 7:00 in the morning.”

As these women and their families exchanged the hard life of southern agriculture for work in manufacturing, they became involved in an intricate set of trade-offs. The cost-benefit ratio varied greatly for different groups of workers, in specific places, and at particular times. On the one hand, agricultural families traded autonomy for cash wages, while on the other, they escaped rural poverty only to “eat up today what they work out tomorrow” at the company store. But if the resources promised to workers moving into southern industrial communities were often unavailable, nevertheless most manufacturing workers had a better chance than their rural relatives of obtaining housing with electricity and running water and at least a partial education for their children.

Work dominated the lives of southerners hired as operatives in the region’s factories and mills. For women entering in-
Industrial work in the 1920s and 1930s, the conditions under which they labored determined their tenure on the job and their response to speed-ups or stretch-outs. The working conditions in a particular factory or industry affected the short-term quality of women's daily lives (for up to twelve hours a day, six days a week) and their long-term health and well-being.\textsuperscript{32}

Many women who took manufacturing jobs after growing up on farms considered industrial work less demanding than farm labor, although several years in a mill or factory usually altered that perspective. "At first I thought work in the mill a great experience," a student wrote in 1929, "but I soon grew tired of working in such a place and would often long to be out in the open again." After five years in the mill, one woman described "the dreadful monotony of reeling" as the worst part of the work. "The same old grind day in, day out. It does things to you," she wrote in her autobiography.\textsuperscript{33}

The invariability of the work was one of many conditions women at the school considered when they described the factories where they held jobs. Industrial plants with hospitals and free medical services for employees were depicted, as were factories lacking ventilation, restroom facilities, or adequate seating. Conditions in garment factories were uniformly better than those in cotton mills. A Nashville garment worker described her unionized factory, complete with dressing room and a dining room that served hot meals, as "nice, clean and light." A fellow student employed in cotton textiles wrote that her work was "very tiresome" because she had to "stand up all the time." Furthermore, the cotton mill employee earned one-half the average wages a garment worker received.\textsuperscript{34}

Heat, cold, poor lighting, and inadequate ventilation made tedious and boring factory jobs harder to bear. Yet other physical aspects of industrial work were even more noxious. One woman argued that in the rayon factory where she worked there was "something in the air that makes the girls faint." She had "known as many as twenty-seven to faint in one day." Women complained about dust so thick you "had to hold your breath" and dangerous chemicals in synthetic fiber plants where, one woman reported, "I have known several [employees] to lose their eyes . . . and two I know of lost their lives." While the immediate effects of dust and fumes were only too apparent, workers
could only imagine the then-undiscovered threat of byssinosis or the still-unknown long-term damage done by chemicals.  

Early in 1929, conditions for southern textile workers worsened as employers began stretch-outs and speed-ups to increase production. While work in textiles had always been physically demanding and tedious, the pace in many mills had been tolerable. Many workers who lived near the mills went home for a midday lunch, and, as a North Carolina woman explained, “We didn’t rush; we’d just stand around and talk. We just sort of kept our work going, you know, the machinery running.” But with the stretch-out, she maintained, “they began wanting more work out of us. They’d put more work on you for the same pay. More work [and] they didn’t know when to quit.”

When a South Carolina woman came to the school in 1929, she wrote an essay entitled “A Strike Against the Stretch-Out,” which began:

For the benefit of those who may not know what the stretch-out is I will explain. In the weaving department of a cotton mill we had been running around the average of twenty-four looms. After the stretch-out system was introduced we were put on from eighty to one hundred looms and were given boys and girls to fill our batteries.

After having worked six months under the new system, another North Carolina student wrote, “Everyone in the mill is completely worn out at stopping time. They go home unable to enjoy supper or anything else. . . . [S]ome of them [are] just dragging along half dead and overworked until they don’t know what it is to take a rest and feel good.”

With the stretch-out came new organizing efforts, as workers “rebelled against doing more work for lower wages.” A Southern Summer School student who had gone out on strike in Danville, Virginia, in 1930 explained, “We started an organization because we made very low wages and worked long hours. We wanted to organize to try and get shorter hours and more money for our work.” Unions, primarily the United Textile Workers Union (AFL), gained some ground in the South in 1929–1930. Locals were established at Elizabethton, Tennessee and Marion, North Carolina after the workers walked out; and even in South Carolina, where the stretch-out system had resulted in so-called leaderless strikes, workers organized local unions. A South Carolina student at the school in 1929 wrote, “We had borne this abuse, for it was
nothing short of that, for quite awhile. But please don’t think we were ‘contented cows’ for we were far from being anything like contented.”

The willingness of these women to join unions in the late 1920s confirmed the school’s prediction that southern workers, especially textile operatives, would form the next large group of American workers to organize. The women who came to the school in 1929, almost one-half of whom belonged to unions, held a basic commitment to collective action. For these women unions had made “life a little more worth living” and had brought “a happiness to people that they never had experienced before.” The response of Southern Summer School students during the 1929 session provided an important impetus for expanding the program and enlarging the school’s institutional base. The fact that so many southern women became involved in protests, walkouts, or clearly defined strikes during this period convinced the school’s students that as a group they had an important role to play in ongoing efforts to organize workers across the South.

Throughout the school’s history the percentage of students belonging to unions correlated directly with the rise and fall of union membership within the South. In 1927, when organized labor in southern states offered little to workers outside the crafts and building trades, only 25 percent of the workers who came to the school belonged to unions. During 1929 and 1930, as labor revolts in the South made national news, student membership in newly organized unions in hosiery, textiles, rayon, and other trades increased to 45 percent. By 1933, as gains made by the unions evaporated in the wake of severe economic depression, only 9 percent of the students at the school belonged to unions.

Then, with the stimulus of New Deal legislation, labor organization increased throughout the South, and by 1934, 38 percent of the working-class women at the school were members of newly organized unions.

The succeeding years, 1935 and 1936, brought new organizing activity, especially among the hosiery and garment trades, as northern unions continued to respond to the threat of competition from unorganized southern workers. Most important, the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1936, and especially the Textile Workers’ Organizing Committee (TWOC) in 1937, increased organizing efforts among southern textile workers (in 1938 the TWOC claimed 25,000 southern members). At the same time, organ-
ization among southern garment workers escalated as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) launched drives to organize southern workers and stabilize the industry. During these years 80 percent of the school’s students were union members. In the Southern Summer School’s last years as a residence school, almost all of the women who attended came to the school as their unions’ representatives.

Because students came to the Southern Summer School throughout the transitional years of southern industrial development, preliminary contrasts can be made between two cohorts of southern women workers. The histories of these two groups of women reflect both changes and continuities in women’s lives during a period of rapid social and economic accommodation.

Among the first group of students, who came to the school between 1927 and 1934, about half had personally made the transition from farm to factory and had suffered through the worst years of the Depression as young adults. As we have seen, these women successfully adapted agricultural work patterns to an industrial setting. Moreover, in contradiction of the axiom of male superiority, the men and women in these families, subject to the demands of a family economy, practiced a relatively equal division of labor between the sexes. In the industrial family economy young women entered manufacturing and worked until they grew old; older women worked at home, often caring for their grandchildren. Husbands and wives frequently worked different shifts so that one parent could stay with the children. Nevertheless, women generally had primary responsibility for children and juggled schedules—their own, their husbands’, and those of their female relatives—to provide continuous child care. As a North Carolina woman whose working life spanned the years between 1925 and 1950 explained:

*I went back to work when my youngest girl was nine months old; my mother-in-law took care of her. But I worked on the third shift ten years; he worked on first shift. That way I could put the children to bed before I went to work at night; and then when I came home in the morning those that went to school, I stayed up and put them to school. And my sister stayed with me, and she worked on second shift. Managed that way, you know.*

These women, attuned from an early stage to working outside the home, organized their lives
and their families around that necessity.

The second cohort of Southern Summer School students came after 1934. These women had come to maturity during the early years of the New Deal and had moved into industrial jobs at a time when a minimum wage, limited working hours, and the right to bargain collectively were becoming realities. After 1935 the majority of the women who came to the school had been reared in industrial communities rather than in agricultural areas. Like the women who came earlier, this second cohort viewed sexual divisions with a pragmatic eye. Men gardened and women canned, sharing tasks that in agricultural areas had been defined as women's work. Brothers worked in one factory for $6.00 a week, while sisters made from $4.50 to $7.00 a week on piecework in a mill on the other side of town. For both groups, the realities of women's lives belied the prevailing southern sex-role ideology that assumed that women did not work.46

Gradually, during the years between 1935 and 1940, with mandatory schooling and increased government regulation of hours and pay, family earnings gave way to higher wages for adult workers. Pay differentials by sex became more pronounced, and questions regarding women's place in the southern workforce became more common. During this period, some of the women who had attended the Southern Summer School before 1935, now older and married, but still in industrial jobs, came back to the school and found themselves warning younger students (after 1938, both male and female students) against the rhetorical argument that married women did not belong in industry. They maintained that few southern working-class women in the 1930s had stopped working outside the home when they married and contended that all women shared the responsibility for improving working conditions. Therefore, while changes were evident among the school's students in the transitional period between 1927 and World War II, women who had attended the Southern Summer School provided a sense of continuity for younger female students as they joined a growing network of southern women workers.47

The women who came to the school clearly viewed themselves as workers. Few of the students had ever voluntarily left the work force since they first entered it. They had left their jobs only when laid off or when fired for union participation or strike activity. This was true for the first cohort, women who entered industrial work
between the ages of eight and seventeen, and for the second group of women, many of whom finished high school before beginning full-time work. Both groups of women worked to support themselves and to provide for their families. They referred to themselves as part of a "working class," to their neighbors and relatives as "working people." When asked to describe their communities, the women at the school demonstrated a keen class consciousness. A student in 1929 wrote that she did not like to live in a mill village because "the people are looked down upon as lower class." Class divisions, so obvious in isolated mill communities, were no less obtrusive in urban areas. A woman from Georgia wrote in 1932 that while Macon was a "good sized town and had people of all classes in it, the most exclusive section of the city is only a few blocks from the poorest section, which is the Atlantic Mill Village."48

Just as the women of the school had a well-developed sense of their class status, they also reflected a clear perception of their role as women workers. A young garment worker from Tennessee wrote in 1927:

Among the working class, women have always helped to make the living. Women at the present time are employed in almost all kinds of work. Women are gaining for themselves a place in the industrial world, but should be careful to keep a high standard and not remain content to be cheap labor.

This woman was active in the labor movement after she left the school, until her death in the late 1960s. In this early essay she established her recognition of class division in southern society, the prevalence of the family wage, and the importance of women's work in the expanding industrial sector. Her words reflect a consciousness of sex discrimination and an awareness of social and economic change.49

The Southern Summer School program encouraged students to recognize their importance both as women and as workers. Therefore, it is difficult to discern precisely how much student themes reflect the school's influence. Yet an overt working-class feminism emerges from the writings of the women who attended the Southern Summer School. Nascent in the minds of the students, this viewpoint was positively reinforced and further developed at the school. Thus, the feminism displayed in student essays represented an amalgam of old beliefs and new ideas, a synthesis of working-class pragmatism regarding sex roles and the in-
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tellectually rationalized belief in sex equality of the postsuffrage decades.\textsuperscript{50}

For most working-class students, participation in the Southern Summer School marked a watershed in their experience, as it provided a first exposure to the world beyond the mill village or city factory. Forty years after her summer at the school, a Virginia woman claimed that the group was "responsible for whatever sense I have today." A North Carolina woman wrote in 1929 that the six weeks she spent at the Southern Summer School was "the first time ever in life that I could call my time my own." A striker from Marion, North Carolina, argued that the school "enlightened us . . . and put a fighting spirit in you," and a worker from Tennessee reflected that at the Southern Summer School she "caught on to a whole lot of things that I'd never dreamed about before."\textsuperscript{51} The school encouraged students to discover their collective history as southern women workers and gave them the hope and inspiration to plan together for a shared future.

When students left the school, however, many returned to communities with few sources of support for their expanded social consciousness, augmented organizing skills, and goals for building a labor network among southern working-class women. The two groups that women most frequently represented at the school, the YWCA and local unions, did not always respond positively to the Southern Summer School program. The school's commitment to trade unions aggravated existing tensions within local YWCAs between the industrial women who were dedicated unionists and general board members with ties to manufacturers. For example, in Winston-Salem in 1929 the president of the YWCA ordered the industrial secretary not to meet with Louise Leonard McLaren because it had been decided that the "Southern Summer School had lined itself up with union workers and was therefore not to be trusted."\textsuperscript{52}

Many of the students knew first hand the problems faced by women in trade unions before they came to the school, and they continued to argue for the full integration of women at all levels of union activity. A student from Birmingham stressed in 1935 that it was still necessary "to convince the men of women's ability and sincerity in unions." She argued that the survival of any union depended on the support of working women, who often dominated a factory work force and provided critical backing on picket lines and at relief sta-
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tions during strikes. But she explained that women often could not play an active role in unions because of the double burden of working in the mill and at home. Nevertheless, locals across the region increasingly looked to the school as an institution equipped to train new union members. At least ten Southern Summer School students became CIO organizers after 1935 and further augmented the school’s involvement in the southern labor movement.33

For some women, however, it proved difficult to sustain the reality of worker protests in local southern communities. To participate continuously in collective resistance, often without the support of a strong union, became an unattainable goal for many women who left the school with a deepened commitment to the southern labor movement. The tension that women workers felt between individual survival and collective gain is poignantly depicted in an exchange of letters between one of the Marion strikers and Louise Leonard during the fall of 1929. Leonard wrote to this former Southern Summer School student in October, after the second strike in Marion, in which six workers had been killed: “This morning I have a letter telling me that you have been scabbing in the mill since the murders and of course I am shocked to hear it. I hope there is some mistake about this and that you will write me and tell me how it happened.” The student, a twenty-year-old cotton mill worker, replied:

Louise, I am sorry you heard that I was scabbing. I will tell you how it was and you be the judge. They had a strike on Tuesday and we didn’t know anything about it until it was pulled and our boys got killed at the gate and then I quit work. . . . Our leaders never had any meetings to tell us what to do so nearly all the union people went back. I haven’t worked but two days and they asked me not to go back and now I am back home and . . . have got no job no money no anything and my man is gone and I can’t find out where he is whether dead or alive and I am in debt that it looks like I am going to have to do some scabbing so you can imagine what kind of shape I am in. I have got a little girl that has got to be clothed and fed . . . so now you have the truth from my heart what would you do if you was in my place.54

Despite the difficulties that many students faced once they returned home, the Southern Summer School provided the women who attended with a
strong affirmation of their personal power and individual self-worth. Moreover, the school encouraged students to channel the strength that came from discovering their common history and culture as southern working-class women into new forms of political action. The school stimulated women to take public positions on collective bargaining, union power, women's rights, integration, and workers' education. For many women this type of encouragement was unique. As one North Carolina student recalled: "It was a great inspiration to me to feel like women were considered capable of participating." At the Southern Summer School women could listen and learn, be exposed to new ideas and new world views. It was a place where southern working-class women, often for the first time, could speak their own minds.

In the spring and summer of 1929, workers in textile mills across the southern United States went out on strike to protest decreasing wages and increasing hours. These essays, written by students at the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry during the summer of 1929, describe conditions in several southern mill communities and outline the factors which precipitated the walkouts.

The Marion Manufacturing Company

The hours that the employees work at this mill are ten, eleven and twelve hours and twenty minutes. The day weavers and those that work in the cloth room get one hour off for lunch. The other departments get something less than an hour.

The condition in the mill is very bad. The floors are not kept as clean as they should be. Men and women use tobacco and spit on the floor. The toilets are not kept clean. They are not fit for a human to use. They sometimes overflow. These toilets are cleaned only in the day time. The weave room is very hot and has bad lights, has bad ventilation, and is very noisy. The other departments do not have good ventilation. There are but few seats provided for the workers and no washroom at all.
All these conditions could be made better if the company could be forced to look after this like it ought to be or if the owners of the mill thought enough of their help to have these conditions made better.

The company just recently built a YMCA. This is the only place in the Mill Village for amusement. In the YMCA is a swimming pool, ten pin alley, library, sewing and cooking department, shower bath department, and a basket-ball court. The people of the village pay ten cents for a shower bath, ten cents for bathing in the pool, and ten cents for a game of ten pins.

The employees of the mill walked out on a strike on the 11th of July, for shorter hours and for the same pay they were already getting for longer hours. This is the 9th day of August and we are still on strike. Do you blame us for striking?

—Unsigned, 1929

A Strike against the Stretch-Out

In the spring of 1929, the workers in the Monarch and Ottoray Mills of Union, South Carolina rebelled against the stretch-out system.

For the benefit of those who may not know what the stretch-out system is I will explain. In the weaving department of a cotton mill we had been running around the average of twenty-four looms. After the stretch-out system was introduced, we were put on from eighty to one hundred looms and were given boys and girls to fill our batteries.

We had borne this abuse for it was nothing short of that, for quite awhile. But please don’t think we were “contented cows” for we were far from being anything like contented.

I will not take you back to the day of our rebellion. We came out of our mills on the day formerly mentioned and six weeks and two days hence found us back at work with a very small victory. Our work was only reduced to sixty-nine from seventy-two looms.

I will tell you a little of our hardships during our strike for we did not have a union at that time although we have one now that is growing in number and enthusiasm. We organized a relief committee which traveled over different parts of South Carolina and collected money and food for the most destitute of us that we might hold onto our cause. Wherever our committee went they always met people who
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knew about us and what a fight we were making and everyone was glad to help.

—Unsigned, 1929

The following essay comes from Summer School students in the collection of autobiographies written by Southern.

My Struggle to Escape the Cotton Mill

After mother and father were married, they lived on a homestead in Alabama. The house was built out of logs with one large room. The cooking was done in iron pots. Some little distance from the yard to the north was built the crib, in which to keep feed of different kinds. Here were horse and corn stalls, for then we kept a cow and father had to keep a horse to plow his little farm and to pull the buggy for it was miles to where anyone lived and too far to walk.

I've heard my father say after he had made a crop and there was no work to do on the farm he would walk two miles night and morning to work for as low as fifty cents per day to make enough to buy the things we had to have that he could not raise on the farm. In this way he worked some on the railroad and learned how to build railroad track and later became a section foreman. Father made good crops and I can remember the little barn filled to overflowing with corn, while the hayloft would be full of peanuts and hay and several nice hogs could be found in a pen nearby getting ready to be butchered for the winter's supply of meat and lard.

"Hard times" forced my father to rent this little house and move elsewhere to run a farm for someone who had capital to farm on a large scale. This was the beginning of the end, for we moved from place to place until the home was finally sold. Then I was old enough to start to school; but we lived too far from a school and I was too small to go alone, so all the schooling I had up until I was eight years old was a few months when my aunt taught me. All this time the family was growing larger, there being six children. The 1907 panic hit the country. We moved to a town in Alabama, to the cotton mills, and my
father, my sister, and I went to work. I wasn't quite fifteen years old. In a short time another brother was born.

On going to work my sister and I were sent to the spinning room to learn to spin. My sister made better progress than I, but the bosses being harsh and I being timid I was half-scared to death all the time and could not learn the work. This kept up about three months. My father was making a dollar per day and my sister and I making fifty cents each per day. Then it was decided we had served our apprenticeship and should go on as "sides." I was given two sides of spinning and was paid eleven cents per side, making my daily pay twenty two cents, and was living in terror all the time in fear of the boss. When Father found I would no longer get fifty cents per day he told me to stay home. In the meantime my sister had been taken to the weave shop to fill "batteries," making seventy cents per day. After some red tape I was allowed to go to work in the weave shop and for nearly two years my sister and I worked for seventy cents per day. It took very little skill to keep this job going and there being no harsh bosses over me I was fairly happy here until Father began to insist that Sister and I become weavers. I hated the cotton mill and swore I would not stay in it all my life. My sister did not mind so much, tried, and became a good weaver.

After quite a struggle on my part to keep from learning to be a weaver, I gave it a thorough trial and found I could not learn weaving very easily, and being anxious to earn more money I began to think of how I could find better-paying work. Then I was allowed to go to the spooler and warper rooms where I worked at different times in both rooms making $1.25 per day and finally getting $9 per week.

The long hours and nervous state in which I worked had caused me to have much less strength than I would have had otherwise, and it was all I could do to keep the work up with the other worker who was required on the job and a boy to roll the bores for us. Then one day we were told that the boy could not help us anymore and I quit. My father had left the mill by this time because he had been too ready to talk to anyone he saw about conditions in the mill. With no one working in the mill but me, the company notified us to move and when I quit we were not living on company property.

The same day I quit the cotton mill I went to an overall factory to get work and succeeded. While talking with the owner of the business he told me that some of his employees made $10 per week and I thought if there was even a remote chance of me making that much money it was a wonderful opportunity for me so I went to work the next day. I worked four days that week and made $2.40 on piece work. I had worked eleven hours in the mill but here I worked nine hours
and conditions were so different. A very nice, kind, patient young woman was my instructor and the superintendent was never harsh spoken. This was a union factory and I advanced so well that in a short time I was making as much as I had made after years of working in the cotton mill. However, the things that cotton mill life did to me have just now, after many years, begun to leave me.

—J. W., 1930

This excerpt from a Southern Summer School autobiography was written in 1938. The strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina, was the largest and most famous of the series of walkouts in textile mills across the Carolinas and Tennessee in 1929.

I Was in the Gastonia Strike

I had been working for the Manville-Jenkes mill in Loray, near Gastonia, for eight years—ever since I was fourteen. We worked thirteen hours a day, and we were so stretched out that lots of times we didn’t stop for anything. Sometimes we took sandwiches to work, and ate them as we worked. Sometimes we didn’t even get to eat them. If we didn’t keep our work up like they wanted us to, they would curse us and threaten to fire us. Some of us made $12 a week, and some a little more.

One day some textile organizers came to Gastonia. They came to the mill gates at six o’clock, just when the daylight hands were coming out. They began to talk to the workers as they came out of the mill. Everybody stopped to listen. When the night-shift hands came up, they stopped to listen too. I was on the night shift. None of us even went into work that night, for the organizers were telling us that they would help us get more money and less hours if we would stick together in a union, and stay out.

This was the first time I’d ever thought that things could be better; I thought that I would just keep working all my life for thirteen hours a day, like we were. I felt that if we would stick together and strike we could win something for ourselves. But I guess we didn’t have a chance—the way “the law” acted after we struck.
That night we had a meeting, and almost all the workers came. People got up and said that unless they got shorter hours and more money they would never go back to work. We all went home that night feeling that at last we were going to do something that would make things better for us workers. We were going to win an eight-hour day, and get more pay for ourselves.

The next morning, we were all at the mill at five o’clock to picket, but we couldn’t get anywhere near the plant because the police and the National Guard were all around the mill and kept us a block away. We formed our picket line anyway, and walked up and down a street near the mill.

Every day for a week we picketed. One day, my husband, Red, went with me on the picket line. (He worked for another mill on the night shift.) Just as we started on the picket line two policemen came over and grabbed Red, put him in an automobile, and took him to jail. They beat him up with a blackjack, and broke his ring and tore his clothes. They thought he was one of the strikers, and they were arresting strikers right and left, hauling lots of them to jail every day.

In the second week of the strike, the bosses went to other towns and out in the country and brought in scabs. The police and the National Guard made us keep away from the mill, so all we could do was watch the scabs go in and take our jobs.

We kept on with our picket line, though we didn’t have much of a chance to persuade the scabs not to go in, because of the police and the guards. We were treated like dogs by the law. Strikers were knocked down when they called to the scabs, or got too near the mill. Every day more and more strikers were arrested. They kept the jail-house full of workers. Strikers were put out of their houses. All over our village you could see whole families with their household belongings in the street—sometimes in the pouring down rain, and lots of them with their little children and babies.

We had a relief station where strikers could get food and groceries. Red, my husband, had been fired from his job in the other mill when his boss found out that he was trying to help us strikers, so he opened a drink stand near the relief station. One night about nine o’clock, the police came to the relief station as they usually went anywhere there were any strikers. I don’t know what happened exactly, but there was a gun fight, and the chief of police was killed. Red, who was selling drinks there, was arrested along with a lot of others. Red and six others were accused of killing the policeman.

After Red was put in jail for the murder, my father and I moved to
another town. I was expecting my baby soon, but I went to work in another textile mill. Except for what I read in the papers, I didn’t know much about what was going on in Gastonia.

Seven months after the strike they tried Red and the six others accused of killing the chief of police. They had been kept in jail all this time. I couldn’t attend much of the trial on account of the baby, but Red told me about it.

Almost everybody thinks that the workers were innocent, and many people believe that the chief was killed by one of his own policemen. However, Red and the others were convicted of murder, and given anywhere from five to twenty years in the penitentiary. Red and the others got out on bail, and all of them left the country and stayed away for two years. Then Red came back to get me and the baby and he was caught, and sent to prison. He served three years and four months of his prison term, and got out last year.

After the trial, I moved to High Point, and got a job in a textile mill to support the baby and me. We have had a hard time of it, but I think what we went through in Gastonia was worth it all because I think people all over the country learned about conditions of textile workers in the South, and it helped the labor movement in the South.

—Bertha Hendrix, 1938

Southern Summer School students based this play on an incident described in labor leader Mother Jones’s autobiography. It was presented at the School in August 1933, and was recorded by faculty member Hollace Ransdell."

**Mother Jones’ Tin Pan Army**

*The Women Mop Up Coal-Dale*

Comic Sketch in One Act

Scene: The action takes place on a mountain road leading to the mines of the Valley Coal Company in West Virginia during the big coal strike of 1912.
Cast: Sheriff
    Deputy Sheriff
    Mother Jones
    Scab
    Mother of the Scab
    Union Official
    Women in Mother Jones' Army

When the curtain rises the sheriff is walking up and down with a gun over his shoulder looking anxiously down the road. The Deputy sits propped up against a tree, his gun beside him.

**Deputy:** Do you see 'em coming?

**Sheriff:** (Nervously) No. Oh Lord! I don't like this job!

**Deputy:** What's the matter? You ain't scared of a bunch of silly women are you?

**Sheriff:** You don't know what you're talkin' about. You ain't never faced Mother Jones and that army of wild cats of hers yet. She's a terrible woman. And that bunch of women obeys her like she had a magic spell over 'em!

**Deputy:** A withered up old woman like her! Why she is past eighty! What can she do? Them miners must be a weak lot to be led away by the dried up old prune.

**Sheriff:** You ain't never seen her or you wouldn't talk like that. There is something about that old woman... I don't know what it is... but there is something about her that gets you. Didn't you hear about the rumpus she kicked up over the next valley last week?

**Deputy:** I heard she was raisin' hell over there with that army of wild women she's got, yellin' around like cats. Why didn't you smack 'em and send 'em home to their dishwashin' where they belong. That's what I would have done.

**Sheriff:** Yes you would! You'll have a chance pretty soon to try out some of your talk. I'll bet you shinny up a tree the first word she throws at you.

**Deputy:** Why don't you arrest her when she comes? Lock her up! That'll shut her mouth, I bet.

**Sheriff:** Arrest her! My gosh, man. I'd have that mob of women after me with their mops and brooms. The jail ain't big enough to hold 'em. They'd mop the life out of a feller before we got 'em there anyway.

**Deputy:** (Getting up) Listen! I believe the tin-pan army is approaching. Hear 'em?

**Sheriff:** Oh Lord! Yes, that's Mother Jones and her Mop Brigade all right. I wish I was out of here. I don't like this job. (Sounds of tin pan
army are heard, gradually getting louder). (Sheriff edges away. Both look down the path, until Mother Jones appears leading a crowd of women with mops, brooms, etc. beating on pans with spoons. They shout to the tune of their beating:)

**Women:** Join the Union! Join the Union! Join the Union!

**Sheriff:** (Unconvincingly) Halt! Stop! Go back!

**Mother Jones:** Sheriff, the workers of America will not halt. And they will not go back. The workers are going forward!

**Sheriff:** (Weakly) I’ll charge bayonets.

**Mother J.:** On whom?

**Sheriff:** On you fool women if you don’t get back.

**Mother:** Bah, man! What nonsense are you talking? We’re not enemies. We are just a band of working women whose husbands and sons and brothers are in a battle for bread. We want our brothers in Coaldale to join us in our fight. We are here on this road for the right to eat and work and live. And in the name of that right we demand that you let us pass. We’re not going to hurt anybody now, if you’ll behave yourselves.

**Deputy:** You’re not going to hurt anybody. (Laughs) That’s a good joke. (Shakes his bayonet.) What do you think we’re carrying these little things for? To pick our teeth with?

**Mother:** (Sternly) Put that little old thing away. (She shakes her mop at his nose.) Women, where is this man’s wife? Go get her and tell her she’d better come and take this yelping yaller cur of hers home and clean him up, or we’ll take a hand at it ourselves. (She advances on him threateningly.) Get back there. Get! Take that little old knife of yours home and use it to a better purpose than threatening hard-working women. Go mow down some of those whiskers on your face with it instead of threatnin’ honest women who’re fightin’ for the right to get bread for their children. (She pulls his whiskers and pushes him back out of her way.)

**Deputy:** Hey, hold on there! That ain’t no way to treat the law. I’ll have you arrested for this. We got one of your fine union men in jail now. A common thief he is. Stole a pair of shoes.

**Mother:** If he’d only stolen a railroad you’d have elected him senator.

**Sheriff:** I ain’t got nothing against you, Mother Jones, but I can’t let you and them women of yours pass here, so you might as well turn around and go back. You ain’t going a step further.

**Mother:** Who’s going to stop us?

**Sheriff:** I and my deputy here . . . and this. (Thrusts out his gun.)

**Mother:** (Laughs scornfully) Do you think we’re afraid of the likes of you? You’d better go ask that scabby old judge to give you another injunction to help—that old guy who plays golf while the miners
starve, I mean. While we're serving humanity, he serves injunctions for the bosses. You'll find him in that swell country club where he plays around. Tell him the only club he allows the workers to have is the policeman's club—over the head. (A scab appears, stops when he sees the women, and takes refuge behind the sheriff.)

First Woman: Mother Jones, look! There's that Perkins scab slinkin' back there.

Second Woman: He thinks the law will protect him while he's sneakin' the bread out of our mouths.

Mother: Women, capture that man! Broom the life out of him, the sneakin' cur!

Third Woman: His mother's here. Let her tend to him! (Women grab scab, din in his ears with the pans, trip him up with their mops, push him with their brooms and haul him across the stage, stretching him out at his mother's feet as they shout, "Join the Union, Join the Union!" His mother bends over him and cries.)

Scab's Mother: Get me some water over there in the creek, one of you women. (Women talk together while one goes to creek and brings can of water. The sheriff takes advantage of the occasion to send his deputy off for help. He whispers loudly in the Deputy's ear.)

Sheriff: (Aside) Quick! Go call up the president of the Union and tell him to come up here as fast as he can and call off his wild cat women. Tell him they're clawing and scratching so I'll have to shoot 'em if he don't hurry. Scoot now!

Scab's Mother: (Sopping water on scab's forehead.) John, John, wake up! Come to, can't you? (Scab raises up slowly, cowering toward his mother as he sees women around him.) Come back to life there now, and join the Union!

Scab: (Looking fearfully at women.) Sure, I'll never scab again.

Sheriff: (Soothingly) Now Mother Jones, take these women away, won't you? I don't want to have to hurt 'em, but I can't stand for this . . . . (In answer to a signal from Mother Jones, the women charge the Sheriff with brooms, mopping at his feet and tripping him up. He stumbles, nearly falls and runs off pursued by the women. While this battle is going on, the Union president appears from the other direction and watches the proceedings in alarm.)

Union President: (Shouts up the path) Mother Jones! Watch out! The Sheriff has a gun. He'll shoot! (He wrings his hands and runs back and forth excitedly). Finally Mother Jones comes back followed by the women.)

Mother Jones: Fine work, women! You've done a good day's work, I'm telling you. Now I suppose you'll want to be getting back to your
housework. Tomorrow morning we'll be meeting again at the same time, five o'clock, at Union headquarters. Goodbye to you. Take care of yourselves, and come ready for another scrap. We'll mop up the last scab tomorrow!

Women: (Leave, calling out greetings to Mother Jones.) Nothing like a good fight to scare sense into them scabs. Goodbye, Mother Jones. See you tomorrow, etc.

Union Pres.: (Anxiously) Didn't you get hurt, Mother Jones. Did any of the women get hurt?

Mother: Get hurt! Did we get hurt? (Dryly) No, we didn't get hurt.

President: But wasn't that the sheriff after you?

Mother: No, that was us after the sheriff. It was a grand fight!

Union Pres.: (Annoyed, says condescendingly) Well what do you think you got out of it?

Mother: Well while you and the other Union officials was taking your little beauty sleep in the hotel this morning, and the scabs was sneaking into the mines, we organized 500 men—took 'em right into the Union quick. We got 500 less scabs to fight now anyway.

Union Pres.: Took them into the Union? What do you mean? How could you do that? You didn't have the ritual!

Mother: Ritual be blowed! We made up one.

Union Pres.: Why you can't do that, Mother Jones! That's not according to the by-laws of the Union.

Mother: Say, what are we working for, to get men to join the Union and quit scabbing, or to teach 'em to say a little piece to rattle off just the way it reads in the book.

Union Pres.: Well, I think we ought to live up to what the rules say.

Mother: Yeh, if you had your way, you'd be so busy enforcing the rules that pretty soon you'd discover you didn't have no members to enforce 'em on.

Union Pres.: Say, how'd you get over here anyway. I heard them say over at the Hotel that one of the sheriff's men told the clerk at the desk to hold you and call him quick if you tried to go out. How did you get away?

Mother: Easy enough! That young clerk says to me when I came down: "Mother Jones, you mustn't go out. I've been given orders to watch this front door carefully and notify the deputy if I see you leave." "That's all right, sonny," says I, "Don't you worry about that. You just follow your orders and watch this front door carefully, and I'll go out the back door."

Union Pres.: Mother Jones, if you keep this up, somebody'll get hurt or killed, and then one of these days you'll land in jail and if they ever get anything like that on you, they'll hang you sure!
Mother Jones: That's all right, sonny. Let 'em do their worst. When I'm on the scaffold, I'll yell, "Long live the working class!" And the first thing I'm going to do when I see the Almighty is to tell Him how they're treatin' the miners on earth, living lean and lank and hungry as timber wolves! It's the producers, my son, not the meek that are going to inherit the earth. Not today perhaps nor tomorrow, but over the rim of the years my old eyes can see the coming of another day. But until that day comes, or until I leave this earth behind me, I'm going to fight like... well like my women fought today! And you men had better come and join us!

Curtain

Notes


2. See Sara Evans, Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). The Southern Summer School provided the essential elements for the development among working-class women of what Evans has termed "an insurgent collective identity." In her work on the history of the women's liberation movement, Evans has defined three preconditions for this process: sufficient social space for a group to focus on itself as an entity, role models with whom members of a group can identify personally, and an intellectual framework for understanding society and directing efforts toward social change.


4. Interview with Polly Robkin, November 2, 1974.

5. Interview with Miriam Bonner Camp, April 15, 1976.

mentation Center, Martin P. Catherwood Library, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y. (hereafter cited as SSS Papers, ILR).


8. See "Reports of the Director, 1927–1940," SSS Papers, ILR.


11. "Songs of the Southern Summer School, 1938," p. 34, SSS Papers, ILR.


14. Southern Summer School Playscripts, SSS Papers, ILR.

15. "Notes with playscript of 'Tobacco Shop,'" SSS Papers, ILR.


17. Ibid.; For women's participation in the CIO, see Ruth Milkman, "Organizing the Sexual Division of Labor: Historical

18. Student autobiographies and essays, SSS Papers, ILR. The life history material within this collection is weighted toward the years between 1927 and 1933. Most of the autobiographies were written anonymously; wherever possible students’ home states or communities are identified.

19. "Student Statistics,” SSS Papers, ILR; information obtained from each student usually included home community, age, marital status, educational background, age when started to work, years in work force, union affiliation, and religious background.

20. Students cannot be rigidly categorized into these cohort designations by age, life experience, or year of attendance at the school; however; the divisions provide a useful framework for interpreting the material in the life histories.

21. Margaret Jarmon Hagood, Mothers of the South (1939, reprint ed., New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977); quotation from student autobiography, SSS Papers, ILR.


23. Student autobiographies, SSS Papers, ILR.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.


27. Student autobiographies, SSS Papers, ILR.

28. Interview with Vesta Finley.

29. Student autobiographies, SSS Papers, ILR.
30. Ibid.
33. Student autobiographies, SSS Papers, ILR.
34. Ibid.
36. Interview with Vesta Finley.
37. Student autobiographies, SSS Papers, ILR.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.; evidence exists indicating that the strikes did have an effect on the stretch-out (see Tindall, p. 353).
42. Figures tabulated from union affiliation records in SSS Papers, ILR; for national figures on female union membership, see Theresa Wolfson, "Trade Union Activities of Women," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 143 (May 1929): 120–31.
43. Union affiliation records in student biographical materials, SSS Papers, ILR; regional union membership figures from Marshall, p. 171.
44. Cohort group divisions based on material from student autobiographies and essays in SSS Papers, ILR, and on interviews with former Southern Summer School students, including Vesta Finley, Rosa Holland, Lillie Morris Price, Bessie Edens, and three former students from Macon, Georgia (August 1979).
45. Interview with Vesta Finley.
46. Anne F. Scott has persuasively argued that the prevailing image of the "southern
"lady" did not correlate with the actual lives of southern white upper- and middle-class women in the first two decades of the twentieth century. For working-class white women, in both agricultural and industrial work, the ideology of southern womanhood appears to have had virtually no relevance, either as a prescription for behavior or as an image of women's role in the ideal society (see Anne F. Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970]).


48. Student autobiographies, SSS Papers, ILR.

49. Ibid.

50. More research is needed on the beliefs of working-class southerners, both women and men, regarding women's role in southern culture. For an excellent discussion of the prevalence and importance of working-class feminism among late-nineteenth-century industrial workers in the Northeast, see Susan Levine, "Their Own Sphere: Women's Work, the Knights of Labor and the Transformation of the Carpet Trade, 1870–1890" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1980).

51. Student autobiographies, SSS Papers, ILR; interview with Vesta Finley.

52. Eleanor Copenhaver Report, Industrial Department, March 1929, p. 14, Archives of the National Board of the YWCA, New York, N.Y.

53. Student autobiographies, SSS Papers, ILR.

54. Louise McLaren to Minnie Fisher, October 16, 1929; Fisher to McLaren, October 23, 1929, SSS Papers, ILR.

55. Interview with Vesta Finley.

56. SSS Papers, ILR.

57. Student autobiographies, SSS Papers, ILR.

58. Ibid.

59. "Labor Drama," Box 111, SSS Papers, ILR.