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“WE WERE NOT LADIES”

Gender, Class, and a Women’s Auxiliary’s Battle for Mining Unionism

Caroline Waldron Merithew

“We Were Not Ladies” uses the 1930s dual union fight between the United Mine Workers of America and the Progressive Miners to challenge the historiography on women’s auxiliaries in the United States. While most labor and women’s historians have focused on the traditional and supporting roles that non-wage-earning women played in male unions, I show a more radical side to working-class housewives’ activism. Through the Women’s Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners, coal miners’ daughters and wives recognized that conventional gender roles could neither gain them political and economic power in their communities, nor could these roles encompass their evolving political consciousness. Because the mine union wars of the early 1930s opened up an opportunity for women to understand and rearticulate their identities, the episode provides a critical historical vantage on the gendering of class in the rural industrial multiracial heartland. Auxiliary women were engaged in a new “class struggle” that went beyond the traditional female spheres of home and family. This episode of dual unionism is significant not only because women became active in the movement but also because it exposes the contradictory ways that class and gender intersected and were understood by male and female actors.

I,—do solemnly promise of my own free will to bear true allegiance to and abide by the laws of the Progressive Miners of America; never to discriminate against anyone on account of creed, race, color, or nationality and to do all within my power to have all miners’ women folk join our union.

—By-Laws, The Women’s Auxiliary
Progressive Miners of America, District 1¹

In the 15 September 1929 issue of the *United Mine Workers Journal*, a cover cartoon depicts the all-male industrial union as a plump matronly middle-aged woman. At her kitchen counter, she stands over a pot of “Better Working Conditions” and serves a plateful of “Higher Wages” donuts to a boy miner.² (Figure 1) The portrayal hints at a paradox in the miners’ union culture: embracing a feminine image (always desexualized and with roots in the mythic Mother Jones) while rejecting women as activists. During the early years of the Depression, when women became more involved in



Figure 1. Though gendered rhetoric and imagery had long been a part of UMW culture, depicting the all-male industrial union as feminine was something new. This cartoon, which appeared in the *United Mine Workers Journal*, calls miners to support the UMW through the use of the maternal rather than the masculine. *United Mine Workers Journal*, 15 September 1929. Reprinted with the permission of the *United Mine Workers Journal*.

their husbands' and fathers' union, this paradox was more pronounced. As women encroached on the homosocial world of coal mining unionism, they challenged the masculinity of its members. Their challenges intensified when women, as part of the dual union struggle between the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the Progressive Miners of America (PMA), formed the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners (WAPM) and forced men to confront the gendered dimensions of class. So relentless were WAPM members in their attacks that UMW president John L. Lewis addressed the issue of female militancy in the 1934 annual convention. Lewis lambasted those men who "shove their women out on the picket line while they remained at home and did the cooking." Using gendered language to undermine his PMA opponents, Lewis told his audience, "You will remember that men who are members of the United Mine Workers will continue to do the fighting for the organization . . . while the women remain at home."³ Auxiliary women had discovered, however, that remaining at home and out of union business was part of the problem.

This article writes non-wage-earning women back into the history of dual unionism by looking at how and why female activists were able to gain power in a movement of coal-mining men—who responded to and constructed them in contradictory ways.⁴ The episode is significant not only

because women became active in the struggle but also because it exposes the fluid political subjectivities of male and female actors who melded old and new conceptualizations of class and gender as part of the UMW–PMA battle. Because this was a fight not only between capital and labor but also between workers themselves, it enveloped families and deeply divided working-class communities. The breadth of the union dispute, therefore, opens up the possibility of seeing the uneven ways class and gender intersected and how men and women conceived alternate visions of the labor movement. Given that the episode took place at the historical cusp between labor’s demise in the 1920s and its rise in the mid-thirties, and given the crucial role that women and Lewis himself played in both stories, dual unionism in the coalfields can reveal the foundational position of workers’ wives in the revival of industrial labor organization in the 1930s—something historian Susan Levine postulated, but could not fully answer, over a decade ago in her work on Ladies’ Auxiliaries in the 1920s.⁵

Since historian Alice Kessler-Harris asked labor and women’s historians, “Where are the Organized Women Workers?” in 1975, there has been increasing discussion of the auxiliary movement and the protests of housewives. Along with Levine, scholars Melinda Chateauvert, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Elizabeth Faue, Marjorie Penn Lasky, and Kathryn Oberdeck have revealed that despite labor’s tepid and uneven support of wage-earning women’s organizing, both the AFL and the CIO responded positively to the formation of auxiliaries and, in some cases, were responsible for initiating their charters.⁶ Historians Dana Frank, Darlene Clark Hine, Annelise Orleck, and Margaret Rose have shown that Black, white, and Hispanic women not only organized in auxiliaries but also mobilized within consumer cooperatives and union label campaigns. Bringing together the issues of production and consumption, women’s efforts were crucial—though often ignored by contemporaries as well as later historians—to working-class power.⁷

There is also debate regarding the political nature and capacity of non-wage-earning women’s place in male labor unions. Scholars Sharon Hart Strom, Frank, and Lasky have suggested that because women’s position tended to follow traditional gender arrangements, the auxiliary model was a poor vehicle for feminist critique.⁸ Corroborating these arguments, Faue has contended that in Minneapolis the auxiliary constricted women’s ability to act up.⁹ Chateauvert has questioned these assumptions and has noted that members of the Auxiliary of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters embraced traditional notions of female propriety as a rejection of racist stereotypes about Black female labor. Chateauvert agreed with Levine, who has asserted that because auxiliaries served as gateways to other forms of political activism, they should not be read as mere “social appendages of trade unions.”¹⁰ The works of Chateauvert and Levine are part of schol-

arship that has reread the rhetoric of maternalism among working-class housewives and has marked it as distinct from that of their middle-class contemporaries. From Ola Delight Smith and Clara Lemlich Shavelson to female immigrant anarchists, motherhood and a radical critique of capitalism and patriarchy went hand in hand.¹¹

The story of WAPM invites a rethinking of “housewives” as participants in the labor movement and deconstructs our current understanding of women’s auxiliaries. Because the UMW–PMA fight involved thousands of non-urban working-class women, it exposes the complicated mingling of gender and class in the formation of female political subjectivities outside of the large industrial cities featured in most of the historiography. The article explores four overlapping reasons for the meaning of female partnership in the PMA, as well as women’s emergence into and responses to it. First, by the early 1930s women were well prepared to take a central role in the decision making process of the union because they had been trying for over three decades—with fluctuating strategies and minimal success—to have their voices heard. The arguments Auxiliary women made (both for inclusion into the all-male world of coal miners and as a critique of class oppression) were based on lessons they had learned from their mothers and grandmothers. The language WAPM used to describe itself was charged with political and historical meaning—for example, members consciously named themselves a women’s, not a ladies’, auxiliary. The label reflected generations of female activism in the coalfields as well as the new economic and political circumstances women faced in the first years of the Depression. Second, although coal miners were often down and out, they were particularly so at this time—not only because of the dire economic circumstances caused by the chaos of the early Depression but also because the dual union fight wreaked havoc within their homes and in the mines. Because men needed women, the PMA was one of the few movements in which non-wage-earning women became leaders in organizing an industry that employed only male labor.

Third, Auxiliary women refashioned the rhetoric surrounding motherhood. While these women drew on inherited conceptions of class and gender oppression, by the early thirties their political understanding of themselves as female actors had been altered. Because women’s organizing involved both homo- and heterosocial venues, WAPM tempered the language of maternalism and difference that had been a central component of working-class feminism in the early twentieth century. Highlighting demands for equality threatened PMA men who eventually tried to curtail women’s involvement in the union. Fourth, miners’ unionism and the politics behind women’s activism in Illinois had been built on the ideals of an interethnic model of organizing that was shaped by immigrants’ transnational ties as

well as assimilation into multiracial communities. The Auxiliary pledged itself to an organic working-class internationalism that began with, but could not be limited to, local concerns. Part of this internationalism involved a dedication to interracial unionism—a significant occurrence both for historical and historiographical reasons. That Black and white women came together as WAPM members refocuses our view of the debates about, and the meaning of, miners' commitment to interracialism.¹²

Women in WAPM used their identities as "working-class housewives" to define their position in the PMA and against the UMW. Initially, Auxiliary members were engaged in what they defined as "class struggle"—a struggle that went beyond the traditional female sphere of home and family. To be sure, they rhetorically tied their class consciousness to the "kitchen" but they believed their work was more than an extension of maternal household roles into the community. WAPM's call for "bread and freedom" reflected this. The phrase also tied the PMA fight to earlier dual union battles, particularly the "bread and roses" strike of 1912 in Lawrence. When women called for bread and freedom, they made a rhetorical connection with women's traditional role of putting bread on the table (as opposed to the "breadwinning" of their husbands) and a new articulation of entitlement of women's rights as citizens.¹³ Unlike the Teamster auxiliary members who, Lasky has argued, "could not move beyond their conventional roles unless men permitted them to do so," WAPM openly confronted male union leaders with newer forms of protest that drew on an enlarged understanding of women's position in the movement and their place as actors in the struggle.¹⁴ WAPM members were allies, which distinguished them from helpmeets in other auxiliary movements.¹⁵ Describing their union participation as distinct from feminine tradition, they wrote, "This Auxiliary is unique among labor Auxiliaries. Social affairs and raising of strike relief are among our numerous activities, but these things are not the end and aim of this Auxiliary."¹⁶ Rather, WAPM focused their time on "labor legislation, labor education, a youth movement, independent working class political action" and opposing "all wars." These women recognized that conventional gender roles had not (and could not have) gained them the power they sought in mining unionism and did not encompass their evolving political consciousness.

Women's multifaceted articulations of politics were based on their experiences in their homes, in their multiethnic communities, on the picket lines, with men in the PMA, fighting John L. Lewis, making demands of state and federal authorities, and with other women. The changing expressions of themselves were so threatening that, over time, the dual union fight became a war against women. For example, though the PMA was his union's enemy, Lewis's gendered rhetoric resonated with men in the Progressives

and served to divide their ranks. Within a year of forming the Auxiliary, women had learned that regardless of the type of contribution they made or how they defined and perceived it, mining unionism was male unionism. Upon discovering this, however, they did not “pack up” and go home.

Organizing Before the Progressives

The Progressive Miners' challenge to the UMW provided a forum through which coal women could demand power in the union—a goal they had been trying to achieve long before the PMA's formation. In the 1890s and early twentieth century, Illinois was the epicenter of union organizing in the coalfields of the United States. In the legendary battle at Virden, Illinois—where UMW strikers engaged in a bloody fight to turn back scabs and win union recognition across the Central Competitive Field in 1898—women were on the front lines, feeding and clothing striking miners. These women “had taken no union vows but within their own souls they had pledged their lives to the Union.”¹⁷ By 1901, immigrant women from Italy, Belgium, and France had formed a vibrant anarchist feminist community with adherents in mining towns across the state. Anarchist women corresponded with one another through the Italian-language press and formulated a “Maternal Mission” that criticized the collusion between capitalism and patriarchy and demanded a place in the organizations of their male comrades.¹⁸

Similarly, some women read the *United Mine Workers Journal* and occasionally built up the courage to write to the editors to express their opinions to its mainly male readership. Letter writing signified a growing belief in women's right to speak to issues that not only affected their husbands, fathers, and sons but also themselves. In 1910, Dotie J. C. Edwards of Rockville, Indiana formulated a dual identity as housewife and union member that had global dimensions. “No question, however trivial, which concerns the mine workers of America can be beneath our [women's] notice (and our interest should likewise extend to the mine workers of the world at large),” she argued. Edwards's words both paralleled the language of anarchist women's maternalism as well as foreshadowed the claims that WAPM women would make two decades later. Edwards argued that coal women needed to educate themselves so their class and gender emancipation could be self-made. “We need a more thorough understanding of organization and its power—also an intellect so disciplined as to enable us to think . . . for ourselves. All of which will help us to discern the relation between capital and labor and make more practical application thereof to everyday conditions,” she said. Commenting on the distinct relationship non-wage-earning women had to the labor movement, Edwards defined

the basis for housewives' political engagement. "While the workingman's wife is at somewhat of a disadvantage compared with the working women who are out in the world fighting the industrial battles side by side with men . . . she is in a position to know well the privations and haunting fears which are ever present . . . [T]he workingman's wife . . . should make excellent material for a good class-conscious worker." Edwards not only reinforced women's convictions about the role they could (and should) play in the miners' union, but also suggested a means for doing so: "Personally, I believe the Journal might be made even more interesting if the miners' wives oftener availed themselves of the privileges of the Forum."¹⁹ Others in Illinois were reading, listening, and agreeing with her points. Agnes Burns was one of them.

Burns, who became the first president of WAPM, was one of seven children in a coal mining family whose roots were in the German and Irish immigrant settlements of the Midwest. Burns's father was a staunch supporter of the UMW and her mother, who died of tuberculosis when Agnes was ten, was one of the many women who were part of the 1897–98 battle for miners' union recognition. During that strike, Burns accompanied her mother to area farms, where they received food to sustain families through the fight. Memories of this mother-daughter organizing pushed Agnes to continue her activism in later life when she became involved in the labor movement in Illinois and beyond. In 1914, while reading the UMW *Journal*, Burns found an advertisement for the Women's Trade Union League's (WTUL) new "School for Active Workers in the Labor Movement" in Chicago. Burns applied and won a scholarship to attend—"The key that unlocked to me a big, new world," she remembered. Like Edwards, Burns recognized that housewives "in isolated coal camps"—not just "the working women in the larger industrial centers"—"were an important part in the development of an industrial democracy."²⁰ Burns committed herself to making "women from the cities" in the WTUL and miners in Illinois's coal camps understand this.

In 1916, Burns publicly echoed Edwards's belief in the need to expand housewives' place in the UMW. In her mid-twenties at the time, she was invited to speak to the all male audience of Illinois delegates at the United Mine Workers Convention that year. Though she was officially representing the WTUL, she made it clear that her home was with the miners: "I am not going to talk about the great honor it is to be with you, because I have been with coal diggers all my life." Burns's speech that day had an angry tone and it reflected women's sense of alienation from a union they called their own (and from men who refused to see their contribution). "Mr. President and Friends: I have waited a long time," she told them. "You have had your say and now I want mine. I don't want the President

or any one else to call time on me."²¹ Her words recast women's labor activism into an explanation of entitlement for inclusion into the UMW. Moreover, the speech foreshadowed the central arguments WAPM would make distinguishing power in the union from auxiliary support: "We have plans under way whereby we will gather together into our organization . . . women who, though they work in the homes of union men, can hold no union card. I believe the time will come in Illinois when these women will be fighting with us and standing with us with as strong and firm a spirit of unionism as that of any band of union men on earth!" Burns's formulation that women's unpaid work should gain them a say in all male unionism conveys her radical perspective as well as a central component in this struggle for recognition. Burns's perspective not only distinguished women in Illinois from the wives of workers in other industries but also from coal-mining women in other places. For example, in Colorado, coal miners' wives did not make claims for power and equality in the same way as Illinois women did (though the difference may be due to the UMW's difficulty in organizing the western field at the time).²² Burns and others accepted the gendered division of labor in the coal industry—neither she in 1916 nor WAPM in 1932 would call for the right to work in the pits as women would in the 1970s—while simultaneously claiming that women could rightfully stand as equal members in the union.

After World War I, women's increasing involvement in miners' struggles was part of the particular trajectory of mining unionism in Illinois. When John L. Lewis came into the presidency in 1920, Illinois's District 12 was still one of the strongest fields in the country. The 80,000 Illinois miners worked on a closed shop basis and their state officers had significant influence in the international. In mid-decade, two issues changed the relationship between leaders at the top and on the district level. First, a series of power struggles between Lewis and Illinois officers had the effect of giving the state organization more control over local issues (most importantly, the right to negotiate directly with the Coal Operators Association). The infighting undermined the links between the international and the district, damaging rank and filers' feelings of connection with the UMW leaders.

Creating an "Other" out of UMW's leaders made Illinois coal communities more cohesive. Because the UMW *Journal* no longer fully represented the voice of miners (and their wives) in the state, they began publishing their own paper, the *Illinois Miner*. During the 1920s, this paper—not "for men only"—became a venue through which women could voice their beliefs and concerns. The weekly Woman's Page invited an articulation of women's imaginings and encouraged them to continue to fight for a say in the union as previous generations had done.²³ The paper featured columns such as "Mother and Child" and "When We Have Time to Think" by Mrs.

Lotta Work, a pseudonym of Agnes Burns Wieck (now married to Edward Wieck, an active member of the UMW). In addition to the weekly features, editors published women's letters, which helped female readers to learn about, and from, one another as well as to explore the possibilities that involvement in the labor movement and politics might bring.

"The Woman's Page is not trying to find out who is the best cook among the wives of Illinois coal miners," an initial article stated. Rather, it was designed "to help in spreading knowledge and in creating a closer bond of fellowship among the thousands of women who, though not actually members are mighty strong props of the United Mine Workers."²⁴ Mrs. Mae Poma of Christopher expressed how important the medium of exchange was to her. "I always read it through a couple of times before I let it get away from me."²⁵ In its pages, coal miners' wives "talked" about what it meant to be women and working class through stories about what they held in common with each other—housework, taking care of children, and the mines. It was not always easy for them to engage in the forum. Jessie Crider from Cutler wrote: "O Mrs. Work, I just wish I could talk to you myself; I can't write very good and explain just what I would like to tell you."²⁶ But there was a sense that making their voices heard was essential for their access to power. Through the *Illinois Miner*, women also began to question older assumptions about the type of organizing they might do to force the issue of power in the union. A Johnston City woman wrote in on the subject of "War and Explosions": "It seems to me that there are enough of us women, if we would only put our heads to it, to put an end to these two things."²⁷ That sentiment reflected a belief that women could indeed change things—locally, nationally, and internationally.

From the Progressive Era to the 1920s, in the writings of Dotie Edwards and Agnes Burns Wieck, women had assumed men would take partial responsibility for organizing them. In Edwards's 1910 letter, for example, she stated that, "You miners have a duty to perform in regard to this matter [of getting women involved] which should not be shirked."²⁸ At her UMW convention speech, Burns told miners that the largest industrial union in the country had made a fundamental error in strategy by failing to include women: "[M]en have you ever thought of the thousands right in your own ranks, right in your own homes with whom you have been so little concerned? I don't believe union men, and especially coal miners, believe an autocracy is good for any division of society . . . Now, men . . . where have you left mother?" She assumed that if the UMW simply thought strategically, it would embrace them.

Burns made such arguments based on her own personal involvement in union business. For example, her experiences at the WTUL school pushed her to seek men in the movement to teach her the lessons of the miners'

cause. Just a few months after the convention address, Burns corresponded with John H. Walker, a future president in District 12, and asked him to "Tell me something of the Virden riot."²⁹

In the 1920s, women began to question the wisdom of expecting men to organize them and they would eventually blame their husbands for women's exclusion. To a woman in Benld, Illinois, Burns Wieck wrote, "Don't be too impatient and too critical of our women . . . Remember that our women have been isolated from the movement even though they have been in the struggle all their lives."³⁰ In one of her columns, Burns Wieck compared the Labor Party in Britain with the labor movement in the United States. The former had representation from housewives but the latter forgot the unpaid labor altogether in the last presidential race: "[W]e housewives had no share in the councils of that campaign. . . . Without organization our votes count for little."³¹ Women had to use their own experience to organize themselves. "Our women must not depend too much on the men, or they will not develop their own leadership," Burns Wieck wrote.³² The UMW-PMA split provided them the opportunity to do so.

Before the dual union fight, in a story published in the *Nation*, Burns Wieck imagined coal women marching from ignored housewife to equal participant in their husbands' union. The main character, Mrs. Mason, is a composite built from family members and acquaintances Burns Wieck knew in Belleville, Illinois.³³ Mason is "[b]lessed with a strong and vigorous body, she is well equipped for marching. Whether with broom, dust-cloth, or dish-rag, she marches about the house in a most amazing fashion. She marches right through a big week's washing in the time it takes the ordinary woman to get started. To wash, scrub, scour, shine, bake bread, can fruit, prepare supper for a houseful of unexpected company. . . . The work of raising her children has left no trace of wrinkles and the pranks of grandchildren do not vex her." Mrs. Mason marches from housework to the meetings of the Loyal Ladies Auxiliary—an auxiliary model Burns Wieck is critical of—"an appendage of 'just women'" not "equals." She juxtaposes the traditional auxiliary experience of Mason with "an opportunity to go marching in a *real* [my emphasis] crusade" to organize the wives of striking miners. To one woman—"a match for Mrs. Mason in physique"—Mason says, "Are you satisfied with the livin' you're a gittin'?" The story's conclusion was clear. Middle-class women were organized, men were organized, but working-class housewives like Mrs. Mason were left in their "kitchen unnoticed and unorganized." In the conclusion, Burns Wieck asks: "Is this woman to spend her days marching through her kitchen and her lodge hall?"³⁴ Reading about the possible empowerment of Mrs. Mason allowed women to conceive of themselves as partners rather than outsiders in politics and their husbands' union.

The character of Mrs. Mason is intriguing because she symbolizes the ambivalence of women's changing consciousness. Both Mason's masculine attributes and her experiences as a housewife open up possibilities for her. Unsure of their footing, as they tried to convince men they should be part of the movement, coal women snatched pieces of masculinity to re-form themselves.

The Homo- and Heterosocial World of Dual Unionism

In 1932, women got an opportunity to work with men to create a better union. That year, District 12 leaders failed to come to an agreement with operators and they asked Lewis for help. The result was a new contract offering a \$5.00 scale (\$1.10 less than they were earning at the time). The miners voted on the scale, but before their ballots could be counted, the tally sheets were stolen. Lewis argued that "in such cases miners' officials are empowered to act as they see fit" and he signed the agreement.³⁵ Illinois miners and their families were outraged at this usurpation of democratic control and they made it known. The rank and file here was a group always quick to point out inconsistencies and hypocrisy (of the government, bosses, and even the union itself) and it had a long history of confronting its leaders.³⁶ Jack Battuello, a long-time union man and one of the founders of the PMA, said that Illinois miners "were great activist[s]; they were busybody's [sic]. . . . And they had big mouths. They were always making speeches all the time . . . rabble rousers they called us. And that form of education left its seed; it germinated a little in Illinois, I think."³⁷ This spirit, combined with the immediate Lewis affront, caused miners to call a meeting in Gillespie, Illinois on 1 September 1932, which ended in the founding of the Progressive Miners of America.

Within a month the PMA was recognized by 115 coal operators and represented close to 20,000 men in Illinois (mostly those who worked in the northern and central part of the state). Though they claimed a majority of Illinois miners, the Progressives failed to get recognition under section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act. Later, the PMA did win support from the National Labor Relations Board to hold a referendum. That vote split the state between the two unions.³⁸ The political and legal maneuverings are important for understanding women's emergence into the movement because gender was at the center of these intra-class battles.

In opening the Second Constitutional Convention of the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners in November 1933, the officers of the organization reminded members: "We women have organized for power and we will use that power!"³⁹ The sentiment marked coal mining women's militancy and their belief that as the allies of their husbands, fathers, and brothers they could stand as partners, not just supporters.

While they believed that their work as housewives should give them a say in the union—and while this belief had been present for some time—the UMW–PMA fight gave them an opportunity to speak up. “Our right to voice our opinions on Union policy was based upon the fact that the Auxiliary women were sharing in the suffering and sacrifice to build the new Union,” they argued.⁴⁰ Their rhetoric of “power,” then, was distinct from the language of support in other union auxiliaries and reflected women’s class and gender politics. WAPM used this language when they felt the power that they had gained was being undermined.

The notion of power set WAPM apart from the Seattle housewives that Frank has discussed who settled on a “social” role through which to “serve” male workers. The rhetoric of power also reflects a militancy that separated WAPM from their contemporary sisters in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Women in WAPM were less concerned about the respectability that working-class Blacks sought than respect for their opinions and a say in union business. In this sense, coal-mining women’s class and gender ideas were different than the wives of railroad porters who, Chateaubert argues, embraced middle-class notions of ladyhood. Whereas the Auxiliary of the Sleeping Car Porters specifically chose the word “Ladies” to describe themselves, WAPM consciously rejected the term, dubbing themselves a “Women’s Auxiliary” instead.⁴¹ As president of the Auxiliary, Burns Wieck described the arguments in a letter to Robert Lovett, a professor from the University of Chicago who was sympathetic to the miners’ cause: “One after another got up in the convention and said there was no reason why we couldn’t be ladies just because we were miners’ wives. The argument about parasites, etc. influenced a minority but to get it over I had to use the Bible, wherein, I reminded them, the word *lady* never is used! This moved a very religious woman to get up and say that the mother of our Lord was called woman!” For many women in the rural industrial heartland of Illinois who were just as likely to go to weekly church services as to union meetings, the invocation of religion was convincing. But for Irene Allard, it was a sense of both class and gender that swayed her. “They changed the name to women’s auxiliary because we were not ladies, we were women.”⁴²

The working-class womanhood Allard hints at was a concept that would have resonated with anarchist women and Dotie Edwards because it was critical of capitalism and patriarchy as well as the labor movement. Like the female consciousness that historian Temma Kaplan found in Barcelona, this concept allowed mining women to accept the traditional division of labor within coal communities while at the same time critiquing the patriarchal structures that suppressed their voices.⁴³ Like Spanish women, coal women’s political ideology was based in the notion that femaleness made men and women different but this was cultural, not biological. Women

made clear that they had little in common with the middle and upper classes. In an open letter to a female British aristocrat who was running for parliament as a labor candidate, Burns Wieck wrote, "While you were playing with your dolls, Lady Mosley, I was cooking and washing and scrubbing."⁴⁴ Environment formed Burns Wieck's consciousness as it did other women workers. Burns Wieck further defined women's class identities in an article on a conference of British Labor Women which included miners' wives. She informed her readers, "America does have national gatherings of housewives but they are not wives of workers—they are club women, whose husbands draw incomes, not wages, and their homes are cared for by servants."⁴⁵ This was the essence of working-class womanhood's other.

For decades, then, women understood that their work in homes and communities was critical for miners' survival. By the early 1930s their working-class gender identity was rooted in notions that women could be equal partners rather than mere supporters in the movement. While the constitution of the Progressive Miners noted the importance of uniting and educating women, women had in fact begun to organize before men voted on that document. Prior to the initiation of the dual union struggle, coal miners' wives and daughters had agitated against Lewis' proposed contract. This was a political act that was based in their home experiences and union involvement. "Illinois mine women plunged into the revolt of their men against starvation and slavery," they said. "The starvation of a chaotic industry, the slavery of a corrupt labor officialdom."⁴⁶ Allard and her friend Hazel Ansbury marched across state lines to get support for their fight against the Illinois contract. At a mass meeting in Clinton, Indiana, "there were women in their white uniforms," Irene remembered. "Hazel and I were so impressed with this thing that on the way home we decided that we're going to organize a *Ladies* [my emphasis] Auxiliary in West Frankfort."⁴⁷ That Auxiliary would prove crucial to both the PMA and WAPM because of the way the dual union fight split the state geographically. Northern and central Illinois miners moved into the PMA fairly quickly. Most coal companies in these regions recognized the new union immediately. What followed was a long, drawn-out, brutal, and deadly fight for miners and operators in southern Illinois's "Little Egypt."

Women in Illinois seized the UMW-PMA split as an opportunity to begin fighting for the type of union they had long envisioned—one that recognized the entanglement of class and gender oppression and had a place for both male and female members. The Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners was formally organized in Gillespie, Illinois when 157 delegates representing 38 local auxiliaries and approximately 5,000 members met together on 2–4 November 1932.⁴⁸ The Constitution stated that women were the "militant ally of our men's Union" and the officers "contended

that our organization should have a voice" in questions about the strike, political action, and policies of the PMA. While the opportunity the dual union struggle offered them was new, then, women's demands (and the reasoning behind those demands) were decades old.

Anticipating a hesitant response, women allayed men's concerns by reminding them that men and women shared a common heritage that shaped their class identity. Rather than focusing on the lessons of gender and class, women initially incorporated a discourse that linked their activism with the lessons of fathers, grandfathers, and brothers instead. This was their strategy to create a heterosocial union space. Allard, the daughter in a radical Finnish family, summed up succinctly what that father-child relationship meant to the new union of men and women. Her father "instilled this unionism in me," she said, "more than he did my brothers. I never did figure that out, whether it was because I was the oldest, and he thought that I was gonna . . . well they thought I was gonna do something with my life."⁴⁹ If Allard's father believed in his daughter, male contemporaries should believe in this generation of women as well. "Let's fight like our daddies fought and let's stand for the right of our honor," urged Mrs. Rullman Ross of Springfield.⁵⁰

Women drew on the heroes of coal mining history to underscore the complementary roles that men and women could play in their movement. Mrs. Bertha Bradley, the sister of Alexander Bradley (an historic icon because of his role in the UMW's 1898 victory), wrote to the *Progressive Miner*, "At the present I haven't anybody connected with the union but my heart and interest lies with the miners as my dear old father was a coal miner and so was my dear brother, General Alex Bradley of Mt. Olive. I suppose you knew him."⁵¹ The battle of Virden was also an obvious rallying point, and one women used strategically. In one of the first mass marches of the PMA (and before the Auxiliary's formal founding) 15,000 Progressive men and women commemorated the Virden anniversary on 12 October 1932. Speaking at the memorial, Burns Wieck said: "The Virden martyrs will live forever in the hearts and minds of Illinois Miners. Their bones may be dust, but their deeds will never be forgotten. Let the memory of their courage inspire us. . . . [M]iners and miners' wives and children may find the courage to carry on, forever if need be, the fight for right and justice."⁵² One month later, when WAPM met at their Convention, among the featured speakers was a Virden veteran, Barney Flaherty. Flaherty's presence not only emphasized the strategy of upholding men's and women's common heritage in the coal fields, his words related the new history that men and women were making together. "Now was the first time in history that husbands and wives and fathers and mothers had gone together in the picket line," he said. Though the statement was not quite historically accurate (men and women had

been picketing together for a long time), his message was clear. "We want our constitution and yours to be an inspiration not only to every miner in Illinois and throughout the United States but to be an inspiration to every worker . . . in the land."⁵³

The public face of the Auxiliary's Convention was organized to bring male and female PMA members together. There were also internal discussions taking place that involved only women. One of the first issues the Auxiliary faced was whether or not to recognize delegates from southern Illinois whose husbands were in the UMW. West Frankfort women wrote into the *Progressive Miner* to pledge their allegiance—"We are 100 per cent behind the P.M. of A." Their Auxiliary had "voted not to work under the U.M.W. of A. charter" and they wanted to know if they were "eligible for representation at the P.M. of A. Auxiliary convention."⁵⁴ Allard, who had organized in southern Illinois and had now moved to northern Illinois, explained the controversy: "I thought they had a right to be in this convention because through them, I figured, they could get their men to join—go into—the Progressives. That was my theory. Maybe it was simple but that's what I felt. And, I fought for their being allowed delegates. I wrote to Miss Hazel Ansbury [one of the delegates from the south] and I told her that you're going to have a little battle . . . be prepared for it."⁵⁵ There were arguments and "the debate was long and heated." One delegate argued "Until we [women] unite our forces, our men are forever doomed."⁵⁶ Mary Voyzey, a WAPM leader from northern Illinois, stood up in the convention and argued that southern women "could not be barred—They were women, miners' women, and they were entitled to be at this convention. And, she's really the one that smoothed the thing over."⁵⁷ So, West Frankfort, like other southern Illinois auxiliaries created under the auspices of UMW, became WAPM locals. These locals were essential for the spread of the PMA in the unfriendly field downstate. "Through these . . . women, they were able to get miners in Southern Illinois into the Progressives," Allard remembered.⁵⁸ WAPM's decision to allow women into the auxiliary regardless of men's affiliation meant that dual unionism not only broke up the UMW in Illinois, but it divided homes as well.

The discussion about whether to recognize women independently from their husbands was an important one for housewives to have. It underscores the unique political subjectivity of women and reminds us that while male and female class identities were similar, and even inseparable, women's consciousness was based on distinct experiences.⁵⁹ WAPM would eventually succumb to a type of family unionism in which women's place was subordinate to men's (the more traditional auxiliary model) but many women fought hard against this model and some women left the Auxiliary in disillusionment when the change was made. In the initial episode

of women's emergence into the union fight, however, they strove for an alternative path.

Once the initial delegate controversy was over, WAPM spent their energies on the dangerous undertaking of what they termed an invasion of Little Egypt. In the PMA's effort to unite the state, women were at the forefront. Moreover, they understood their position, not as mere supporters of the Progressives, but as its leaders. "An Auxiliary is a branch, but in this situation, the tree grew from the branch," they stated. Auxiliary members set up underground cells in which women did the hard work of organizing—they knocked on doors, met in supporters' homes, got arrested and beaten up, and, when able, even spoke at UMW meetings. "Encouraged by their women taking the lead, the men of the south worked day and night to establish the new union." Within months the PMA had enough support in a couple of southern towns to hold an open march, which ended when members from the north and the south met midway in the town of Bellville (though they still were contending with much resistance in Franklin County where they were barred from having meetings or even walking the streets in groups).

When WAPM women became what a St. Louis newspaper called "the leaders of men" by organizing miners into the union, they challenged long-held understandings about male and female positions in coal communities.⁶⁰ To have the type of power the Auxiliary demanded, women first needed confidence. Ollie Schloeman, a member of WAPM, called herself "dumb and ignorant" before her experiences in the Auxiliary.⁶¹ Female leaders in the movement used gender-segregated meetings not to reinforce traditional assumptions about female space and place but rather to alter them. As president, Burns Wieck told women: "This movement is going to educate you and some morning you are going to wake up and wonder if it is really you."⁶² Women had to be educated to take leadership roles, and this was a process that many believed had to happen without men. Burns Wieck wrote to an officer of the Dowell local: "While I do think it is nice for the women to hold an open meeting now and then, inviting the men, still our women must not depend to[o] much on the men, or they will not develop their own leadership."⁶³ Women spent time, then, building up mental strength to face their opponents in the UMW and work as equals with male supporters in the PMA. It worked. "[Y]ou always gave us undue credit and bolstered up our spirits . . . until we almost believed we could do the things you said we could," Schloeman told Burns Wieck.⁶⁴ The *First Annual Report* noted: "Forced to do things they thought they couldn't do, they have lost their shyness, their timidity, their feelings of inferiority. They preside over meetings, keep books, write records, letters, news reports, form committees to visit public officials, mount improvised rostrums and take their turns at spellbinding."⁶⁵ When women believed they were ready,

they began talking to men.

Even before they did, men were curious about, and perhaps even threatened by, the women-only meetings focused on union business. Waiting outside a packed room with auxiliary members and their children, a group of men tried to listen in. When curiosity overcame them, they became political peeping toms. Using a pocket knife to remove the cover of a peep hole, "The men lined up and took turns at the hole." "The row upon row" of women listening to Burns Wieck "met their approval," a newspaper reported. "It was the consensus of opinion among the men in the anteroom that if Agnes Burns Wieck wants to say a fighting four-letter word, she says a fighting four-letter word. 'just like that,'" one man said. And, another commented, "Well don't ever think them women don't know what they're doin[g]." ⁶⁶

Some men listened to women precisely because they agreed with what the women were doing; for others it was the novelty of the situation. In the early days of the UMW-PMA fight, men celebrated women's involvement and often repeated WAPM's claims that its work was "unique among labor Auxiliaries." In so doing, they again echoed the sentiments of Lawrence strike leaders twenty years earlier. ⁶⁷ Tom Tippet argued that the new union was "important in the history of labor 'only' because of the auxiliary." ⁶⁸ The anarchist newspaper *Man!* stated, "The women of the miners take an active part in the fight which is also theirs. . . . [I]n the coal fields of Illinois the women of the miners fight in the first rows, side by side with their men." ⁶⁹ Jack Battuello said, "In a struggle, women are great. . . . Once they're converted away from snake cultism to unionism or to some other social crusade, damn, you can't have a better supporter. . . . They're tough." ⁷⁰ Frank Fries, an Illinois Sheriff who was supportive of the Progressives, agreed: "Some of the women were better fighters than some of the men. . . . In courage and everything. And they didn't run neither when things were tough." ⁷¹ One enthusiastic report noted that in Buckner, "Right in the miners' hall the Auxiliary women held an open meeting and the men flocked to hear it." In Dowell, women "are strong Progressive. . . . The leader of the women there is loved and respected by everyone." In DuQuoin, "the women are surely real union women! They will see their men through." ⁷² Tippet, in what is meant to be a compliment to WAPM, wrote, "[A]nd those damn rag chewing cats of yours in the auxiliary—look at them—their record in the struggle. They are grand. My God if you women had this union." ⁷³ This praise hints at male acceptance of the Auxiliary, and perhaps even a shift in political consciousness.

On 26 January 1933, men enacted this new consciousness. PMA members lined the streets to watch 10,000 "Old and young mothers," "militant wives," "sweethearts," and "school girls" stop traffic as they marched through the state capital. These WAPM members sent a delegation of fifty to the office of newly elected Governor Henry Horner, and demanded a

meeting. Their orderly appearance—they came bearing “Peace” banners and American flags—and the reminder that they were merely “working class housewives” advocating “the interests of their homes and children” contradicted the militancy their rhetoric belied. “It is well for the State, that we come while we still have faith in government,” they told the governor.⁷⁴ The event was remarkable for a couple of reasons. It represented the upsurge and successes in women’s political activism that was a part of their organizing on behalf of the new union. In addition, the description of men gazing at Auxiliary members marching to see the governor transposed gender stereotypes in which women, not men, played a supporting role. Men’s behavior also meant an acceptance of an emerging female identity in which women might be the political voice of the union.

The march was significant not only because of the numbers and what it revealed about men’s evolving consciousness but also because of what it says about women’s political subjectivities. The uprising of 10,000 immediately became legendary. A week after the event, Agnes Burns Wieck wrote that generations of women would tell proud stories about their relatives being in “the Great March!”⁷⁵ Women repeated lessons about their experiences and in that telling they reinterpreted the events’ meaning. Auxiliary leaders who motivated members to join the march initially organized around their experiences in soup kitchens and suffering children who were in desperate need of food and clothing—women’s traditional work.⁷⁶ By the time they got to the capital, however, family needs were second to issues of civil liberties. Women and men, they told Horner, were facing a “reign of terror . . . in which officials of the old union, the coal corporation, county and municipal authorities, and even the State joined—clubbing, tear-gassing, shooting, killing our people, bombing our homes, making it impossible for us to assemble to enjoy any of the rights to which the Constitution of this nation entitled its citizens.” Declaring to themselves and reminding their men of their power, they threatened the governor with their numbers. WAPM told him that they had “rights as citizens.” And, if that did not convince him to support their cause, they believed electoral savvy would: the Auxiliary pointed out that “there are no women marching behind John Lewis to perpetuate the old union.” By the time the legend of the march was retold at the Auxiliary’s Second Constitutional Convention, it was called “the greatest women’s march in labor history.”⁷⁷

Motherhood and Equality

At the Springfield march and in their work in southern Illinois, WAPM women were enacting political subjectivities that were in line with the beliefs of their mothers and grandmothers. The earlier generation believed that

unionism encompassed both male workers in the coal pits and female labor in the homes. Before the thirties, they gained power through motherhood. To be sure, motherhood still could be used to create bonds between women. For example, in a letter to the Italian mother of an immigrant miner slain during the UMW–PMA battle, Burns Wieck wrote about the strength of maternal kinship: “I feel near to you although we are divided by language and by distant space of oceans. For after all there is close kinship between the mothers of men. . . . I say this because I teach my son to believe the principles of unionism, of liberty and justice, and to be ready, if need be, to die for these principles.”⁷⁸ The Great Depression, however, necessitated a reevaluation of how to use motherhood as it became associated culturally with poverty rather than bounty. The popular migrant mother images of FSA photographer Dorothea Lange are illustrations of this change.

There are other examples of the shift in the iconography of the maternal, less known today but part of the contemporary discourse in coal communities. The poem “Breed, Women, Breed” by anarchist Lucia Trent depicts the oppression, rather than the power, of motherhood.

Breed, little mothers
With the tired backs and the tired hands
Breed for the owners of mills and the owners of mines!
Breed a race of danger-haunted men,
A race of toiling, straining, miserable men
Breed for the owners of mills and the owners of mines
Breed, breed, breed!⁷⁹

Though it did not fully disappear during the Depression, the waning political use of motherhood existed alongside new political identities. With roots in the past—particularly the syndicalist struggle at Lawrence in 1912—Auxiliary members reinterpreted their maternal roles in ways that took into consideration class and gender oppression. Unlike the Lawrence activists, this later rejection of mother power reflected an emergent subjectivity that was based on female experience rather than women’s inculcation of the masculine striker.⁸⁰

The changing iconography of motherhood along with the demands placed on WAPM organizers caused a rethinking of the gendered division of labor in their homes and their maternal duties. For thirty years coal women had rejected middle-class maternalism, which was based on the rhetoric of difference. In the 1930s, because of their position in the dual union fight, they also began to question working-class domesticity that based women’s public role *solely* on their roles as mothers. It would perhaps be overdrawn, and ahistorical, to call this an ideology of women’s liberation. Its existence, however, challenges some earlier work on housewives and auxiliary ideol-

ogy during this period. Lasky, for example, notes the Teamster Auxiliary labor was "highly stereotypical 'women's work,'" and that "women's militancy was explicitly defined as an extension of their domestic roles and responsibilities." Orleck argues that housewives in urban areas became public activists in the 1930s because it was "impossible for them to fulfill their responsibilities to the home without leaving it."⁸¹ My argument here is not that home and family were unimportant to coal-mining women, but rather that their domestic and maternal experiences were just a part of the many components of their emerging political subjectivities.

Women first used the withdrawal of female labor as a means of convincing men to join the PMA, suggesting that they sensed both the economic and political power of their unpaid work. At the founding convention of the Auxiliary, Mary McKeever, one of the oldest members of WAPM, advised the "young women" present that "they should support their husbands and sweethearts and that if their menfolk did not have enough gumption to stand staunchly for their union that they should take over the task themselves and refuse to pack their dinner buckets or to keep house for them."⁸² Women's understanding that their voices were persuasive is also reflected in the statements of a Zeigler woman: "I'll go to my grave before I ever tell my husband to go back to John Lewis' rule. And every woman of our Auxiliary here feels the same way."⁸³ Angelina Castellani, the daughter of a WAPM member who was shot and killed by UMW sympathizers, thought about leaving her husband for going back to work during the dual union battle: "My husband went back to work. I sure [did] cry and told him I would leave if he did but my brother talk me out of it. [H]e said he couldn't help us any more has [*sic*] he did for the past 3 years."⁸⁴

As the dual union strife proceeded, women began rethinking gender encoded work and men's position in the home. Housewives asked their husbands to take care of the chores while they organized, picketed, attended meetings, and performed other necessary tasks for the PMA. Women's new sense of male and female positioning in home and union was exemplified by events at the 1932 memorial of the Virden riot. Thousands of men and women (most of them PMA supporters) came to Mt. Olive cemetery, in Christian County, for the annual pilgrimage. At this point in the dual union fight, the PMA had shut down the Peabody Coal Company's mines in the area. Things had been relatively peaceful until a bomb exploded at the city newspaper's offices. Because of the bombing, the governor sent the National Guard to the strike zone. The soldiers met and attacked the marchers, disrupting the march by jailing men and using bayonets to force women to stop the memorial. Women took it upon themselves to avenge the attack. "We who were there well recall how that news made our blood boil. We told our men to go home and mind the children, we were going to the

aid of our sisters of the Auxiliary."⁸⁵ What happened at the Virden march pushed women to take on the manly role of protecting their sisters as well as doing the work of carrying on the strike. Without a sense of themselves as leaders—that was so much a part of their organizer training and the experiences they had in the field—women would not have gone back into the strike zone or asked their husbands to stay at home.

The gender relations challenged in public reflected lived dynamics in homes as well. A glimpse at the personal relationship between Joseph and Katie DeRorre exemplifies how women's and men's lives were changed by dual unionism. Katie was the Auxiliary's Executive Board member from southern Illinois. Her work was essential for the PMA's success in Little Egypt. She did everything from opening her home to PMA organizers to driving "cross-dressed" leaders of the movement across hostile county lines. The DeRorres understood each other's strengths and needs. They joined and supported the dual union struggle together. But with young children at home, practical choices had to be made. Only one parent (at a time) could do the organizing, attend the meetings, and walk the pickets. Katie and Joe decided together that it was Katie who would be the one. Their daughter Catherine explained that her father "believed in the labor movement, and, I mean he, he had no reservations about my mother being so active . . . and he was glad that she was active. But he stayed at home with us kids, and . . . oh occasionally he would go, but Mom would go. . . . Mom was always gone, so somebody had to be home. But no, he was the quiet one of the family."⁸⁶ Friends also commented on the way Joe and Katie balanced union activism and family life. Thyra Edwards, an African American organizer in the field from Brookwood College, recalled that the first time she visited the DeRorres's home, "Katie was out. . . . [H]er husband, told us Katie is always out now, busy with the Movement. 'She can express herself better than I can so I'm glad to have her go.'" While waiting for his wife's return, Joe made supper for the guests.⁸⁷ WAPM members' working-class womanhood, then, looked more like the *womanism* of Ola Delight Smith—who envisioned a world where "Every woman must learn a trade; every man must acquire a 'knowledge of house-keeping'"—than the non-feminism that Strom identified.⁸⁸

Some PMA members, like Joe DeRorre, understood the practical necessity of women's labor in the movement and made strategic choices that balanced need and identity. "Are you a progressive miner? Are your mother, wife, sister and daughter Progressive? Or do you feel that your wife married the kitchen when she married you and that she belongs at home?" asked the *Progressive Miner*. "Does your wife grow more educated as she grows older, or does she forget how to spell, stutters when she meets new people, becomes a stay at home, never cares to dress up or go anywhere because she

has been tied to her kitchen and her home? . . . 'What did you [the miner] get from John L. and the U.M.W. of A? They had no auxiliaries; their women stayed at home in the kitchens. Did it help? No!'"⁸⁹ Women continuously reminded men of their important role. "It is well to remember," WAPM's *First Annual Report* noted, "that Lewis had succeeded in crushing every rebellion of the rank and file except this one, and he had not been able to crush this rebellion because the Illinois miners had a powerful ally in the Auxiliary."⁹⁰ Lewis's response to the PMA suggested that the organizing and rhetoric were working and he targeted Auxiliary women to weaken the dual union.

But when women began to encroach on the all-male world of coal miners they challenged the masculinity of their ranks. Men's responses to women's repositioning depended, in part, on which side of the struggle they were. The feminized imagery referred to in the introduction, which was used to depict the UMW in the late 1920s, disappeared during the dual union fight. It was replaced by gendered language that was intended to mock the Progressives' masculinity. From the moment of the march of 10,000 women on the state capital, WAPM organizers had been pushing the governor to call a referendum so that miners could vote for the union from which they would receive representation. As a part of that process, the Social Justice Commission (which had connections with the League for Industrial Democracy and the ACLU) called a hearing in St. Louis. Lewis spoke for the UMW. Claude Percy, PMA president, and Burns Wieck, Auxiliary president, represented the other side. Lewis argued that the Progressives were "disappointed office-seekers."⁹¹ Burns Wieck eschewed statistics and, instead, swayed her audience with the story of a dying miner's wife who cursed Lewis on her deathbed. Lewis responded with a "tirade against the Auxiliary women as active participants in an industrial struggle." Trying to provoke men back into the UMW, he ridiculed them for "hiding behind the skirts of women." Lewis was reminded by the *St. Louis Star* that Mother Jones had lived and died for the miners but, as Burns Wieck's biographer (and son) David Wieck has stated, "Lewis was no admirer of Mother Jones."⁹²

Ironically, Lewis would eventually learn to believe in women—he could not have built the CIO without female support. But in the early years of the 1930s, he was still prepared to vilify them for the glory of miners' male unionism. Lewis belittled women's work—and convinced others to do the same—through both sexism and red-baiting. Again the *Journal's* imagery exemplifies the point. In June 1933, the cover cartoon features a car full of "Dual Unionists" (Figure 2). Back-seat driving were two women, one of whom is standing up telling the miners up front to turn toward "The way to Moscow" rather than the "U.M.W. of A."

Lewis was obviously afraid of women in the PMA but his attacks had

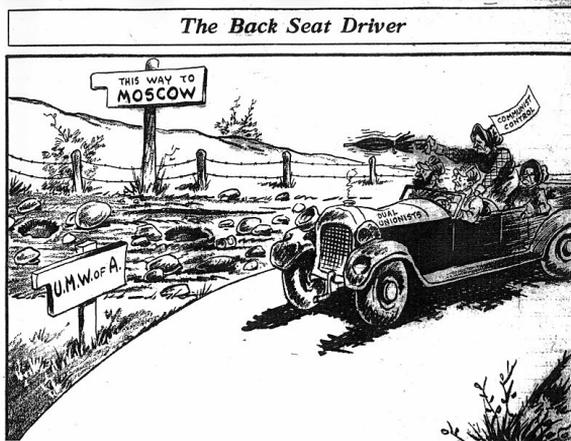


Figure 2. As the UMW–PMA battle intensified, women played an increasingly important role in defining the fight. The *United Mine Workers Journal*, picking up on rhetoric of the union’s leadership, highlighted women’s roles in the movement and depicted them as radicals who were pushing men in a hazardous direction. *United Mine Workers Journal*, 1 June 1933. Reprinted with the permission of the *United Mine Workers Journal*.

an impact on both male and female members of the dual union. Within a year of the split, WAPM members began to turn on one another and Burns Wieck received the brunt of it. She saw “the hand of John Lewis in this move to discredit” her. His work was “really a move to disrupt and destroy the Auxiliary,” Burns Wieck wrote to a friend. “For Lewis knows that he can never crush the P.M.A. as long as this army of women are shouting and singing ‘Solidarity’ and fighting in the manner of old Mother Jones.”⁹³

By the end of 1933, things were not going well for the PMA. The violence its members endured, the unending economic depression that the Progressives alone could not solve, and the NRA’s decision not to recognize them helped Lewis play his hand against both women and men in the fight. It was at this point that WAPM proposed that the union internationalize its organizing. The male leadership did not listen, believing that women should be blamed for the union failure. They tried to force the Auxiliary back into adjunct, rather than partner, status. “Perhaps you don’t know it,” Burns Wieck wrote Mary Rudolph, the President of the Bellville local, “but they have already got the officers of our State Auxiliary picked out for the women and I caught two Gillespie men electioneering right on the floor of an Auxiliary.”⁹⁴ Though women had articulated their essential role in the struggle for mining unionism, men listened but were unable to understand their power.

Internationalism and the "New World"

WAPM members constructed their identities around the competing roles of female victim and obstreperous picketer that were part of what Julie Guard calls the "authentic unionists" of multiethnic working-class cultures.⁹⁵ Female activism, and the ideology that informed it, was shaped by the demographic contours of coal communities across Illinois. Italians, British, Austrians, Germans, French, Slovaks, Greeks, Polish, Russians, Belgians, and other Europeans had been migrating to the region from the late nineteenth century through the 1920s. Illinois had the second largest percentage of immigrant miners in the United States (after Pennsylvania), with approximately 40 percent born outside of the United States in 1920. The three largest immigrant groups in the state's coal towns were Italians, British, and Russians, making up, respectively, 10.3 percent, 5.7 percent, and 5.4 percent of the total population. Though some locales were dominated by one or two ethnic groups, most coal towns represented a relatively equal mix of nationalities from over a dozen different ethnic backgrounds.⁹⁶

While the gender politics of the United Mine Workers left something to be desired for Auxiliary women, PMA's commitment to organizing a multicultural democratic industrial union had its roots in the rhetoric of the UMW. In some communities, particularly in southern Illinois, the dual union fight became one between "foreign-born and American," reported the ACLU. Given this dynamic, John Lewis had pinned his hopes of winning Little Egypt on African Americans in the region who made up 2.4 percent of Illinois miners.⁹⁷

It was women who perceived Lewis's tactic, and then tried to undermine it. First, at their founding convention the Auxiliary pledged to enroll "every miners' wife, widow, daughters or sisters under the banner of the P.M. of A. and regardless of race, creed or color."⁹⁸ Second, women from southern Illinois, where racial animosity ran deep, made a commitment to build bridges between the Black and white communities. Katie DeRorre did so by pushing the issue with male and female leaders. For example, in January 1933, she "very strongly urged that the negro miners be organized and drawn into our union and that they would stand 100 per cent for the P.M.A."⁹⁹ Annie Stewart, president of WAPM's Harrisburg local, repeated the Auxiliary's commitment. "As I understand the Auxiliary . . . it shows discrimination toward none. We have many negro miners in Harrisburg and we want them in this movement." The *Progressive Miner* reported that "Mrs. Stewart is a leader in church work and is active in the Eastern Star. Her Christianity is the sort that embraces all working people, regardless of race, creed or color."¹⁰⁰ Finally, the invitation to Thyra Edwards to help organize the field was a recognition that the wives of Black coal miners might be more

apt to voice their concerns, initially, to another African American woman. As Edwards put it, "I came to southern Illinois to acquaint myself with the present mine war and particularly to see what part Negro miners are playing in the struggle and how they might be effective—and affected."

Because men had organized the UMW in the coal pits, white and Black women, who lived in segregated neighborhoods, had had virtually no contact with one another. The nature of PMA organizing in Little Egypt—where union halls and public venues were primarily under the control of the UMW—meant that the only other spaces available to meet were in homes (spaces where women felt more comfortable and in control). The DeRorre home was one of these central meeting places. Edwards remembered that it was Katie DeRorre whom she relied on to get in touch with African American men and women because it was DeRorre's home where they felt most welcome. When Edwards first arrived in Illinois, she recalled "Katie's dining room was crowded with Negro miners and we talked P.M.A. as we lunched [on] French endive salad, Italian spaghetti, dolci paste and pickled wild mushrooms." She asked Katie to get in touch with Black women and, despite the fact that the DeRorres had no phone, within hours, "Katie's front parlor was full past capacity, with the wives of Negro miners. And over cups of Katie's steaming coffee we talked Women's Auxiliary."¹⁰¹ Following that meeting, interracial unionism meant interracial sisterhood for many of its participants. It was "the first time . . . women folk had called each other sisters. . . . [T]he Negro spirituals sung by talented children, strengthened the solidarity of the two racial groups," the *Progressive Miner* reported.¹⁰²

Women's work on the state-wide level convinced WAPM that to achieve the interethnic and interracial unionism they were dedicated to, they had to broaden their struggle. A year of organizing experience had changed their characterization of the movement. They organized for two reasons: "First[, because of] the national and international character of the economic problems of the coal industry," and "second, the role played by Lewis and his political machine." The language of home and family was obviously missing from their points. "We must not confuse this rebellion against corrupt unionism with the more fundamental character of the struggle of the workers." Capitalism and imperialism were their real enemies; their struggle in Illinois was just a piece of the fight against "world crisis." The men were not convinced. By the end of 1933, WAPM women and PMA men were divided on the strategy the dual union should take. Their efforts were compounded by the connections Lewis had in Washington and the NRA's recognition of the UMW. "For us the promises of the New Deal," the Auxiliary leaders wrote, "have proved a cruel mockery."¹⁰³

Conclusion

Historians have shown the contradictory role the UMW played in building interracial solidarity; for example, the union included Black and white miners in their ranks but never Asian men. Female contemporaries saw different contradictions. Besides the iconographic tales of Mother Jones, and periodic depictions of women agitators, scholarship has been silent about what women's role tells us about miners' militancy. The rise of the PMA gave women a chance to expose the gender and class hypocrisy of all-male unionism in an industry which could not survive without women's work. That their struggle took place a few years before Lewis formed the CIO is significant. The UMWA president, whose anger at the power of women during the PMA battle could be murderous, learned two lessons well. First, he needed women. Thus, he took a pragmatic approach to the rank and file's "culture of unity" and welcomed men and women alike into the Congress. Second, feminizing the opposition emasculated its power. To beat the AFL, he needed not only arguments about industrial unionism, but also gendered depictions of craft unionism.

"I am still in the fight for the right kind of union," a friend of Agnes Burns Wieck wrote her in October 1934. This was two decades after Burns Wieck's 1916 speech at the UMW convention and two years since the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners tried to convince men that housewives could make the union strong.¹⁰⁴ It would take another generation before the male order in the coal mines would be truly "feminized." In the 1970s, women were finally allowed to work as coal miners in the United States and it was only then that they joined the UMW as equal members.

NOTES

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¹Folder "Illinois Women's Auxiliary Meeting, By-Laws and Minutes," Box 1, Subject File 1909-1977, Coal Mining in Illinois Project, Oral History Office, University of Illinois, Springfield Archives.

²*United Mine Workers Journal*, 15 September 1929, 1.

³*Proceedings, 33rd Constitutional Convention of the United Mine Workers of America, Indianapolis, Jan 23-31, 1934*, vol. 1 ([Indianapolis?]: Allied Printing, 1935), 315.

⁴The emphasis on housewives is important since there was a precedence of women wage workers' involvement in dual unionism in the IWW. See Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, vol. 4 (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 128.

⁵Susan Levine, "Workers Wives: Gender, Class and Consumerism in the 1920s United States," *Gender and History* 3 (spring 1991): 60.

⁶Levine, "Workers Wives," 48; Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 23–25; Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 139–41; Marjorie Penn Lasky, "'Where I Was a Person': The Ladies' Auxiliary in the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters' Strike," in *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 181–205; and Kathryn J. Oberdeck, "'Not Pink Teas': The Seattle Working-Class Women's Movement, 1905–1918," *Labor History* 32 (spring 1991): 193–230.

⁷Dana Frank, "Gender, Consumer Organizing, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919–1929," in *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor*, ed. Ava Baron (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 273–95; Darlene Clark Hine, "The Housewives' League of Detroit," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 223–42; Annelise Orleck, "'We Are That Mythical Thing Called the Public': Militant Housewives During the Great Depression," *Feminist Studies* (spring 1993): 147–72; and Margaret Rose, "'From the Fields to the Picket Line: Huelga Women and the Boycott,' 1965–1975," *Labor History* 32 (summer 1990): 271–93.

⁸See Frank's *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 241–42; Sharon Hart Strom, "Challenging 'Woman's Place': Feminism, the Left and Industrial Unionism in the 1930s," *Feminist Studies* 9 (summer 1983): 365–67; and Lasky, "Where I Was a Person," 198–99.

⁹Chateauvert, *Marching Together*, 71; and Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*, 12–13 and 140.

¹⁰Chateauvert, *Marching Together*, 15 and 71; and Levine, "Workers Wives," 50.

¹¹Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "O. Delight Smith's Progressive Era: Labor, Feminism, and Reform in the Urban South," in *Visible Women*, ed. Hewitt and Lebsock, 176–79; Orleck, "We Are That Mythical Thing," 152–54; and Caroline Waldron Merithew, "Anarchist Motherhood: Toward the Making of a Revolutionary Proletariat in Illinois Coal Towns," in *Women, Gender and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World*, ed. Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 218.

¹²Debates about interracial unionism continue. See, for example, Herbert Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America, the Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of Their Meaning: 1890–1900," in *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 119–208; Herbert Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2 (winter 1988): 132; and the responses of David Roediger, "History Making

and Politics" and Stephen Brier, "In Defense of Gutman: The Union's Case," both in *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2 (spring 1989).

¹³Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860–1912* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 69–70 for questioning maternalist roles and 117–70 for strike.

¹⁴Lasky, "Where I Was a Person," 198.

¹⁵*First Annual Report of the Illinois Women's Auxiliary Progressive Miners of America* (n.p., n.d.), 8. See Levine, "Workers Wives" and Oberdeck, "Not Pink Teas" for the language of helpmeets.

¹⁶*First Annual Report*, 8. For an auxiliary involved in more traditional work, see Elizabeth Faue, "Paths of Unionization: Community, Bureaucracy, and Gender in the Minneapolis Labor Movement of the 1930s," in *Work Engendered*, ed. Baron, 308–309.

¹⁷Quotation in David Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown: A Memoir of Agnes Burns Wieck* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 14.

¹⁸See Carl R. Weinberg, *Labor, Loyalty, and Rebellion: Southwestern Illinois Coal Miners and World War I* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 21; and Waldron Merithew, "Anarchist Motherhood," 217–46.

¹⁹*United Mine Workers Journal*, 17 March 1910, 7.

²⁰*Twenty-Sixth Annual, First Biennial Conference United Mine Workers of America, District 12, 1916* (Peoria, IL: The District, 1916), 323–234.

²¹*Ibid.*, 317.

²²Priscilla Long, "The Women of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Strike, 1913–14" in *Women, Work and Protest*, 63.

²³Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown*, 9; and *Illinois Miner*, clipping in Folder 2–10, Box 2, Agnes Burns Wieck Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, hereafter ABW.

²⁴*Illinois Miner*, clipping in Folder 2–10, Box 2, ABW.

²⁵"Lotta Work," Folder 1–3, Box 1, ABW.

²⁶*Illinois Miner*, clipping in Folder 2–10, Box 2, ABW.

²⁷*Illinois Miner*, clipping in Folder 2–10, Box 2, ABW.

²⁸*United Mine Workers Journal*, 17 March 1910, 7.

²⁹Agnes Burns to John H. Walker, 9 June 1916, Folder 9, Box 1, John H. Walker Papers, University of Illinois Archives.

³⁰Diary entry 17 January 1933, Misc. Letters, Folder 2–34, Box 2, ABW.

³¹*Illinois Miner*, 25 July 1926, 6, quoted in Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown*.

³²Diary entry 17 January 1933, Misc. Letters, Folder 2–34, Box 2, ABW.

³³See Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown*, 90–92.

³⁴Folder 1–16, Box 1, ABW.

³⁵*United Mine Workers Journal*, 1 August 1932, 4. See Harriet Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers of America: A Study in Rival Unionism* (Urbana: The University of Illinois, 1952), 10–16. Dallas M. Young states that the founding convention happened in Benld, Illinois. See “A History of the Progressive Miners of America, 1932–1940” (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1940), 7 of the abstract of his thesis.

³⁶Caroline Waldron, “‘The Great Spirit of Solidarity’: The Illinois Valley Mining Communities and the Formation of Interethnic Consciousness” (PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2000).

³⁷Jack Battuello, Transcript, 35, Oral History Collection, University of Illinois at Springfield, hereafter UIS Oral History.

³⁸Hudson, *The Progressive Mine Workers*, 20, 32–33.

³⁹*First Annual Report*, 5.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 24.

⁴¹Frank, *Purchasing Power*, 241; and Chateauvert, *Marching Together*, 3 and 71. The only other “Women’s” as opposed to “Ladies” auxiliary specifically discussed is in Faue’s work.

⁴²Irene Allard, AL52, UIS Oral History. See also Lester Boetta’s interview, B634.2.

⁴³Temma Kaplan, “Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910–1918,” *Signs* 7 (spring 1982): 545–66.

⁴⁴“Lotta Work,” Folder 1–3, Box 1, ABW.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*First Annual Report*, 5.

⁴⁷Allard, AL52, UIS Oral History.

⁴⁸*First Annual Report*, 8.

⁴⁹Allard, AL52, UIS Oral History.

⁵⁰*Progressive Miner*, 23 September 1932, 2.

⁵¹*Progressive Miner*, 16 September 1932, 2.

⁵²*Progressive Miner*, 14 October 1932, 1; and 21 October 1932.

⁵³*Progressive Miner*, 11 November 1932, 1.

⁵⁴*Progressive Miner*, 4 November 1932, 3.

⁵⁵Allard, AL52, UIS Oral History.

⁵⁶*First Annual Report*, 12.

⁵⁷Allard, AL52, UIS Oral History.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹See Long, "Women of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Strike," 63.

⁶⁰*East St. Louis Journal*, Folder 1-32, Box 1, ABW.

⁶¹Ollie Schloeman to Agnes Burns Wieck, 18 November 1935? Folder 1-12, Box 1, ABW.

⁶²Jean E. Rosinos, "Marching Women of Illinois," in *Labor Age*, November 1932, 6.

⁶³Agnes Burns Wieck to Menzyk, 18 January 1933, Folder 2-32, Box 2, ABW.

⁶⁴Ollie Schloeman to Agnes Burns Wieck, 18 November 1935? Folder 1-12, Box 1, ABW.

⁶⁵*First Annual Report*, 14.

⁶⁶*East St. Louis Journal*, Folder 1-32, Box 1, ABW.

⁶⁷Michael Miller Topp, *Those Without a Country: The Political Culture of Italian American Syndicalists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 101.

⁶⁸Tom Tippet to Agnes Burns Wieck, 24 November 1933, Folder 1-13, Box 1, ABW.

⁶⁹*Man!* April 1933, 5.

⁷⁰Jack Battuello, UIS Oral History, 41.

⁷¹Frank Fries, UIS Oral History, 59.

⁷²*Progressive Miner*, 9 December 1932, 1.

⁷³Tom Tippet to Agnes Burns Wieck, 17 June 1933, Folder 1-13, Box 1, ABW.

⁷⁴*The Militant*, "Letters from Militants," 11 February 1933, 2; *New York Times*, 27 January 1933, 7; and "Correspondence," *The Nation*, 136 (March 1933): 234-35.

⁷⁵*Progressive Miner*, 3 February 1933, 1.

⁷⁶*Progressive Miner*, 20 January 1933, 1.

⁷⁷"Correspondence, 10,000 Miners' Wives," *The Nation* (March 1933): 234; and *First Annual Report*, 17–19.

⁷⁸Agnes Burns Wieck to Mrs. Laurenti, 1 November 1933, Folder 2–33, Box 2, ABW.

⁷⁹*Man!* May–June 1933, 7.

⁸⁰Topp, *Those Without a Country*, 119–21.

⁸¹Lasky, "Where I Was a Person," 181–82; and Orleck, "We Are That Mythical Thing," 150.

⁸²*Progressive Miner*, 14 October 1932, 4.

⁸³The letter from Zeigler is reprinted in the American Civil Liberties Union's pamphlet, "The Struggle for Civil Liberties in the Illinois Coal Fields," May 1933.

⁸⁴Angelina Castellani to Agnes Burns Wieck, 16 July 1937, Folder 2–34, Box 2, ABW.

⁸⁵*First Annual Report*, 11.

⁸⁶Catherine Mans, UIS Oral History.

⁸⁷*Progressive Miner*, 21 April 1933, 3.

⁸⁸Hall, "O. Delight Smith's Progressive Era," 181; and Strom, "Challenging 'Woman's Place,'" 367. Strom's point is further problematized given Nancy Cott's analysis of feminism, labeling, and periodization in "What's in a Name? The Limits of 'Social Feminism'; or, Expanding the Vocabulary of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 76 (December 1989): 809–829. Orleck also states that urban political housewives did not "think of themselves as feminists." "We Are That Mythical Thing," 167.

⁸⁹*Progressive Miner*, 5 February 1935, 1.

⁹⁰*First Annual Report*, 28.

⁹¹Robert Morse Lovett, quoted in Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown*, 148.

⁹²*First Annual Report*, 22. Thoreau Wieck, *Woman from Spillertown*, 149.

⁹³Agnes Burns Wieck to Mrs. Mary Golitko, 9 September 1933, Folder 2–33, Box 2, ABW. For a different model of female working-class solidarity, see James Cassidy, "A Bond of Sympathy: The Life and Tragic Death of Fannie Sellins," *Labor's Heritage* 4 (winter 1992): 34–47; and Stephen Burnett, "Women of Steel: Gender and Labor in the Great Steel Strike of 1919" (MA thesis, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1995).

⁹⁴Agnes Burns Wieck to Mrs. Mary Rudolph, Folder 2-33, Box 2, ABW.

⁹⁵Julie Guard, "Women Workers, Native 'Scabs,' and the Multi-Ethnic Politics of Identity in a Left-led Strike in Cold War Canada," *Journal of Women's History* 14 (winter 2003): 117-40.

⁹⁶*Report of the United States Coal Commission, Part III, Bituminous Coal* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1925), 1422 and 1509.

⁹⁷ACLU, "Civil Liberties in the Illinois Coalfields"; *First Annual Report*, 14; *Progressive Miner*, 7 April 1933, 1; *Report of the United States Coal Commission*, 1422.

⁹⁸*Progressive Miner*, 11 November 1932, 1.

⁹⁹*Progressive Miner*, 20 January 1933, 1.

¹⁰⁰*Progressive Miner*, 24 March 1933, 2.

¹⁰¹*Progressive Miner*, 21 April 1933, 3.

¹⁰²*First Annual Report*, 14.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹⁰⁴The Zintek Family to Agnes Burns Wieck, 17 October 1934, Folder 2-34, Box 2, ABW.
