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SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

"Too Hard on the Women, Especially": Striking Together for Women Workers' Issues

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Summary: This essay draws upon a larger study of over forty strikes which involved both male and female strikers in the United States between the years 1887 and 1903. Here the focus of analysis is on those strikes which began with demands raised by women workers. The essay examines the nature of women workers' demands, the ways in which cooperation with male co-workers altered those demands, and the affect that formal union involvement had on women strikers and their strike demands. Because the original set of case studies examines strikes across the United States, the strikes explored here also highlight a variety of geographic locations. The insights gained suggest future paths for research on the distinction between women's and men's strike demands.

In mid-February, 1895, an unusual cold snap hit Galveston, Texas. The management of the Galveston Cotton & Woolen Mill attempted to continue production, but they finally admitted defeat at noon on Valentine's Day, Thursday, 14 February. As the local newspaper put it, "though the engine and heating apparatus was run night and day at a very large extra expense for fuel, it was found impossible to keep the mill comfortably warm. The younger help was very cold and the mill had to be shut down."[1] The day after the shutdown snow rendered Galveston's streets impassable, so only a few workers showed up at the mill and production could not resume. The following day, Saturday, the mill still could not open. In all, production stopped completely in the mill for approximately twenty-four normal working hours.

In response to this weather-related shutdown, mill management posted a notice the following Monday calling for all workers to put in five hours of overtime, to be worked as one additional hour a day through that

1. *Galveston Daily News*, 22 February 1895, p. 10. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in the *Galveston Daily News*.

Friday. Now, the 400 to 500 workers – mostly women – at the mill had just lost almost half a week's pay. They would be paid for their five "extra" hours of work this one week. From a purely economic viewpoint, we might expect these workers to thank their employer for allowing them to make up even this small portion of the wages they had just lost. Instead, virtually all of the mill workers walked out in protest against the imposition of extra work. They returned to work the following morning, but found that the company had locked the doors against them. Workers at the mill ended up on strike and locked out of the mill for six weeks; most of them never regained their jobs there.

Why did these workers take such an action? They lived in a region of the United States in which labor unions were virtually unheard of and at a time when Galveston, like the rest of the country, was still in the grip of the economic depression of the 1890s. Refusing to work for a mere five extra hours would end up costing most of these women (and men) their jobs, their livelihoods. The immediate question raised by the story is, why did they do it? Why was the risk worth taking the action for this group of workers? But larger questions also rise out of this story. Where did these women workers get the idea of striking – of walking off their jobs – at this early point in the history of the US labor movement? Why did they even dare to think that taking such an action would be worth its consequences? How does attempting to answer these questions help us understand women's participation in the labor movement? Was the labor militance of women workers at this time any different from that of men?

Though this essay represents only a very initial attempt at answering some of these questions, I believe it opens many avenues for further research. In what follows, I use examples taken from the research done for my book, *United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism*.[2] For this book, I constructed case studies of almost fifty strikes from all over the United States, all of which took place between 1887 and 1903, and all of which involved both male and female workers attempting to go out on strike together, what I call "cross-gender" strikes. These strikes come from four broadly-defined industries: boots and shoes, clothing, textiles, and tobacco. Combined, women in these industries made up between 80 and 85 per cent of all women in manufacturing during the years under consideration. These industries (like the workforce as a whole), were marked by a rigid sexual division of labor; women and men rarely worked at the same jobs even when they worked in the same factories with each other. While the sexual division of labor meant that men's and women's labor tended to be highly interdependent, that interdependence was not always recognized by workers. Strikes – with all the tensions and risks

2. Ileen A. DeVault, *United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism* (Ithaca, NY, 2004).

inherent in such actions – could bring out the best qualities or the worst in their participants.

I selected the case-study strikes by surveying several key sources, including US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports,[3] industry journals,[4] and union records.[5] While I do not claim to have selected any sort of "representative sample", I chose strikes which appeared to have generated more than the usual discussion in industry and/or union records, which raised particularly gendered issues, or which involved varied ethnic or racial groups or took place in unusual locations for strike activity. My goal in selecting such strikes was to end up with the most varied collection of case studies possible, allowing me to move beyond labor history's "usual suspects" and suggest insights heretofore undetected. Once selected, I constructed each case study through the use of local and regional newspapers, union journals and records, industry journals, state bureau of labor statistics reports, and any other available sources.[6]

Here I re-examine these cross-gender strike case studies from a different angle than I take in the book. *United Apart* examines these strikes largely in order to explore the interactions among men and women workers. I argue in the book that the tensions of a strike bring to the surface fractures in relationships that might have remained obscured under normal circumstances. The strikes therefore provide insight into the assumptions about and experiences with gender which underlay the construction of early US unions. Here, however, I am less interested in the cross-gender implications of these strikes and focus instead on what these strikes suggest to historians about the women workers' actions themselves. Accordingly, I focus here on those strikes which began with women's actions and women's demands. Out of the forty-some strikes on which the book is based, approximately half were initiated by women workers.[7]

3. Especially, US Bureau of Labor, *Tenth Annual Report: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, 1896); but also US Bureau of Labor, *Third Annual Report: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, 1888); US Bureau of Labor, *Sixteenth Annual Report: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, 1901); and US Bureau of Labor, *Twenty-First Annual Report: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, 1907). See Gary L. Bailey, "The Commissioner of Labor's *Strikes and Lockouts*: A Cautionary Note", *Labor History*, 32 (1991), pp. 423–440, for useful insights into the possible strengths and weaknesses of these reports.

4. *American Wool and Cotton Reporter* (1887–1903), *Shoe and Leather Reporter* (1887–1903), *Tobacco* (New York) (1887–1903).

5. *American Federationist* (March 1894–December 1903); *Journal of United Labor* (January 1887–17 December 1889); *Journal of the Knights of Labor* (19 December 1889–31 December 1891); *The American Federation of Labor Records: The Samuel Gompers Era*, microfilm edition (Madison, WI, 1981); *The American Federation of Labor and the Unions: National and International Union Records from the Samuel Gompers Era*, microfilm edition (Sanford, NC, 1983).

6. See DeVault, *United Apart*, Appendix 1, "Strike Case Studies," pp. 223–227, for more description of this process.

7. Officially, the book is based on forty strikes. However, I also researched a number of others along the way and some of those are included in my considerations in this paper. It is also

What can these strikes initiated by women workers tell us about women's labor activism? Why did workers like those in Galveston go on strike? Women workers at the Galveston mill had raised the issue of the hours of work before the February cold snap. The management of the mill had experimented with new looms in their weave room during the previous month. Perhaps because of the new looms, the weave room had begun running behind other departments of the mill. To make up for this, management had required only weavers to work one hour overtime each day. After several weeks of this, the weavers had presented a petition to management on January 21, asking that the overtime stop. When management did not respond to their petition, a group of weavers had taken matters into their own hands, walking off their jobs at 6:30 pm rather than at the requested 7:30 pm. After this brief but pointed protest, the weavers had returned to work the following day. Strike leaders recounted later that "the women especially were being overworked and suffering from [the overtime]".[8] The question of overtime in the mills remained unresolved, rankling in the minds and lives of the workers up until the cold-related shutdown of February. At this point, the suggestion of even five hours of overtime sent workers into an outrage. They decided to take the same action they had taken in January: to strike. The strike of the Galveston Cotton & Woolen Mill workers would drag on for more than six weeks, leaving most of the original strikers unemployed. Striking did not gain the results sought by these women workers – far from it.

Many historians (and economists) have studied the demands raised in strikes for different historical purposes. Here, I follow the ideas raised by Michelle Perrot, who stated that "grievances, like the needs which engendered them, are born, live, and die, fulfilled, or passed by; others appear; their trajectories clarify workers' actual and relative situation in society, they lay out the history of desire".[9] In this context, then, the question is to trace just what those desires were and examine the meanings we can assign to them. Some thirty-two years ago in these pages, Peter N. Stearns set out a typography of strike demands along a scale of "sophistication" of those demands: "the lowest level consists of strictly defensive wage strikes; next come strikes over personal issues; next, defensive strikes over conditions and intermediate wage and hours strikes; next, genuinely offensive wage strikes, the often related demands for

difficult to determine exactly who initiated some of the strikes. That is why I say here that "approximately half" of the strikes were initiated by women.

8. *Galveston Daily News*, 21 February 1895, p. 10.

9. Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève: France 1871–1890* (Paris, 1974), p. 258 (my translation): "les revendications, comme les besoins qui les engendrent, naissent, vivent et meurent, assouvies, ou dépassées; d'autres apparaissent; leurs trajectoires éclairent la situation réelle et relative des ouvriers dans la société, elles dessinent l'histoire du désir".

reduction of hours, and on occasion union and solidarity issues".[10] Since then, discussions of strike demands have often begun with reference to Stearns's categories.[11] Women's strike demands require an entirely different initial perspective. Once again, Michelle Perrot: "Feminine revolt was not fed by figures or distant images, but by concrete facts, by daily grudges kept alive in conversations in the local neighbourhood and at the local marketplace."[12] One might also add, "in the workplace itself". It is in this context that I examine the strike demands from my case-study strikes, comparing the demands made by women and men strikers.

What does the Galveston strike and other strikes initiated by women tell us about women's strike activities and demands? In what follows, I examine three aspects of women's strike activities, discussing what I see as some of the key differences between women's strikes and men's strikes. First, I will talk about the demands made in strikes; second, I will address the question of the impact of the formal union movement on strike activities and demands; and, third, I will discuss how strikes and strike demands were altered when women and men attempted to strike together.

WOMEN'S STRIKE DEMANDS

Between 1881 and 1905, the US Bureau of Labor gathered, compiled, and published a series of reports on *Strikes and Lockouts*.[13] These reports provide us with a general statistical picture of strikes in the US over this twenty-five year period. Table 1a reproduces the statistics on strike demands presented in these reports and compares them with the eighteen strikes considered in this paper. Table 1b privileges the eighteen strikes I'm looking at by listing strike causes in the order of their prevalence in these strikes. This helps highlight what I believe to be the keys to understanding women's demands.

Before I discuss these figures, I want to acknowledge a few caveats. First, a statistical caveat: I know that eighteen is a very small "n", especially compared to almost 37,000. The 5.55 per cents in the last column represent one strike. But my next two caveats are more important, historical, ones. The Bureau of Labor numbers cover a wider time period than my strikes

10. Peter N. Stearns, "Measuring the Evolution of Strike Movements", *International Review of Social History*, 19 (1974), p. 24.

11. See, for example, Jon Amsden and Stephen Brier, "Coal Miners on Strike: The Transformation of Strike Demands and the Formation of a National Union", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 7 (1977), pp. 583–616.

12. Michelle Perrot, *Workers on Strike: France, 1871–1890*, Chris Turner (tr.) (New Haven, CT, 1987), p. 105.

13. US Bureau of Labor, *Third Annual Report* (Washington, 1880); US Bureau of Labor, *Tenth Annual Report* (Washington, 1896); US Bureau of Labor, *Sixteenth Annual Report* (Washington, 1901); US Bureau of Labor, *Twenty-First Annual Report* (Washington, 1907).

Table 1a. *Strike demands, in order of prevalence in the US.*

Strike demand(s) (%)	All US strikes, 1881–1905 (n = 36,757)	18 strikes begun by women workers, 1887–1903
For wage increase	40.72	11.11
Recognition of union and union rules	23.35	5.55
Against wage reduction	11.90	44.44
For reduction of hours	9.78	5.55
Employment of certain people	8.48	16.66
In sympathy with strikers elsewhere	3.74	5.55
Working conditions and rules	3.26	11.11
Overtime work and pay	1.34	5.55
Docking, fines, charges	1.06	5.55
All other demands	8.18	5.55

Source: US Bureau of Labor, *Twenty-First Annual Report: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, 1907).

Table 1b. *Strike demands, in order of prevalence in women's strikes.*

Strike demand(s) (%)	All US strikes, 1881–1905 (n = 36,757)	18 strikes begun by women workers, 1887–1903
Against wage reduction	11.90	44.44
Employment of certain people	8.48	16.66
For wage increase	40.72	11.11
Working conditions and rules	3.26	11.11
Recognition of union and union rules	23.35	5.55
For reduction of hours	9.78	5.55
In sympathy with strikers elsewhere	3.74	5.55
Overtime work and pay	1.34	5.55
Docking, fines, charges	1.06	5.55
All other demands	8.18	5.55

NB: Percentages total more than 100 per cent, since individual strikes may be counted under more than one category.
Source: US Bureau of Labor, *Twenty-First Annual Report: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, 1907).

do, and that time-period difference contributes to some of the difference between strike causes. First of all, the Bureau's numbers include the wave of eight-hour-day strikes in May, 1886; in that year, over 16 per cent of all strikes were undertaken in order to gain a reduction in the hours of labor. Furthermore, the seventeen years during which "my" strikes took place include five years of devastating economic depression, and in these conditions, it is no surprise that strikes against the reduction of wages would outnumber strikes for an increase in wages. My final caveat about these figures deals with the opacity of the Bureau of Labor's numbers.

While the Bureau's published reports do fairly well at explaining how each table was constructed, they give very little information about how the information included in each table was obtained. In other words, I know for my case studies how I decided what demand(s) should count as the "cause" of each strike, but I have little idea how the bureaucrats at the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bureau of Labor arrived at their decisions. Caveats aside, though, the comparison does begin to suggest how women's strikes might have been different from those of men at the same time.[14]

Strikes against wage cuts

Fighting for an increase in wages stands as the most common reason (41 per cent) strikes were undertaken in the United States, but only two (11 per cent) of my women's strikes began with demands for increased wages. Instead, the most common demand (44 per cent) of women strikers was the request that management rescind wage cuts. This was not just a reflection of the 1890s depression; of the eighteen strikes, only four took place during the depression, and only two of those involved the defense of wage levels. Instead, this suggests to us that women workers took a more defensive stance than men workers did. While women might not feel empowered enough to demand wage increases (even though they might become empowered over the course of striking), they did not hesitate long in defending what they often viewed as unfair attacks on their already marginal economic status.

In 1887, for example, striking glovemakers in San Francisco argued that their

> [...] movement is not for an increase of wages, but a protest against a reduction by which prices are in some cases cut down to one-half and mainly effected in women and girls, a class of society that already have difficulties enough to contend with in the shape of cheap competing labor and the efforts on every side to reduce their wage to a mere pittance.

Even before their employer announced new wage cuts, these women argued, their wages had barely covered their expenses, requiring many of them "to take work home evenings to make sufficient for their wants".[15]

Similar arguments were made in all the strikes against wage reductions.

14. The Bureau of Labor reports also do not summarize differences in causes of strikes by the gender of strikers. So a fourth caveat might be that the Bureau and I simply have very different plans in mind for our figures. See John I. Griffin, *Strikes: A Study in Quantitative Economics* (New York, 1939), pp. 28–33, for a discussion of the Bureau of Labor's methods in the *Strikes and Lockouts* volumes.

15. *San Francisco Daily Examiner*, 27 October 1887. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *San Francisco Daily Examiner*.

Annie O'Leary, leader of a strike of more than 200 women in the Maginnis Cotton Mills of New Orleans in 1894, described the conversation she had with Mr Maginnis after he announced a 10 per cent wage cut:

> We held a consultation and decided to go to Mr Maginnis and ask the reason for the reduction and when he thought he would restore the old wages. [...]. He said: "I don't know if I will ever raise you," and he went on to tell us that we were making good money, and that as flour and meat and calico were cheaper we could live on less than formerly. He also compared us with the weavers at Atlanta, where they have tenement houses, and do not pay any rent. We told him that in this city we had to keep up a decent appearance.

Annie went on to explain that "we have to depend altogether on our work for our living".[16]

In both of these cases (as in all the others from my case studies), women strikers fought against two common assumptions at the time: that they were supported by other family members and that their own incomes only provided for "extras". Toward the end of the San Francisco glovemakers' strike, several strikers "visited the factories where apprentices and unskilled workwomen were employed in the positions formerly occupied by union members and [...] in every instance their successors complained that they were unable to earn enough to support themselves".[17] In a Charleston, South Carolina, strike ten years later, striking shoe workers explained that "the girls could not earn enough money under the new scale of prices to buy bread to keep them alive".[18] All these women strikers felt it necessary to explain that their wages were crucial to their existence and that of other family members as well.

Relations with co-workers

Far behind strikes to defend wages, strikes "concerning [the] employment of certain persons", to use the Bureau of Labor's wording, stand as the second most common reason for the women's strikes in this sample. In addition, other strikes by women workers were undertaken as attempts to unseat someone they termed an undesirable foreperson. In some ways, these strikes took place for reasons that seem almost diametrically opposed to the economically based wage-strikes. Strikers could make no "logical" economic argument to the public for their actions in these strikes. Instead, strikes against co-workers or forepersons had to be justified emotionally, through appeals to morals or "fairness".

16. *New Orleans Picayune*, 13 July 1894. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in the *New Orleans Picayune*.
17. *San Francisco Daily Examiner*, 26 November 1887.
18. [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 12 October 1897. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in *The News and Courier* and the *Shoe & Leather Reporter*.

We see this moral appeal most clearly in one of the most horrific (to modern eyes) strikes from my case studies. This was the strike of all 1,400 workers at the Fulton Bag company's plant in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1897.[19] Two hundred "girls" in the mill's folding department began this strike when the company's owner announced that he had hired a number of African-American women to work in the department. The *Atlanta Constitution* described the strike's inception as follows:

> Miss Brooks walked up to Mr Elsas and said she wanted to know if he intended to put a crowd of negroes in with her and the other girls. Mr Elsas informed her that he was running the business and that it was not a matter to inquire about. [...]. As Mr Elsas walked away she told him that they would not go to work if the negro women were allowed to remain. Mr Elsas disregarded this threat and the negroes were set to work. The 200 girls in the folding department refused to even enter the factory.[20]

In this case, strikers' appeals to post-Reconstruction Southern mores were incredibly successful, bringing 1,200 of their co-workers out on strike along with them and bringing the mill's management to its knees fairly quickly. Within four days, the African-American workers were fired and all the strikers returned to work, now under a written agreement that blacks would not be hired except in janitorial positions.

While the Atlanta strike provides an extreme example of moral appeals in strikes undertaken over co-workers, we see the same type of appeals used in less volatile strikes as well. While these strikes often had a more difficult time gathering public sympathy, they usually gained the sympathies of co-workers fairly quickly. This was the case in the strike of textile workers in Alamance county, North Carolina.[21] In mid-September 1900, "boss weaver" Jim May at the T.M. Holt Mill in Haw River threatened to fire fifteen-year-old Annie Whitesell and replace her with another. The "replacement" worker, another young woman, refused to take the job. A meeting of the Haw River local of the National Union of Textile Workers took up the question and issued a call for the mill to fire May. Strikers shut down all three cotton mills in Haw River. The strike would eventually see almost 8,000 workers on strike throughout the county.[22]

19. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in the *Atlanta Constitution*. (Note that this is probably the Atlanta company which O'Leary referred to in the New Orleans strike; the nineteenth-century world of women workers could seem quite small at times.)

20. *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 August 1897.

21. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in the *Alamance Gleaner*, the *Charlotte Daily Observer*, and the *American Wool and Cotton Reporter*. Jerome Dowd, in "Strikes and Lockouts in North Carolina", *Gunton's Magazine*, 20 (February 1901), pp. 136–141, discusses the inception of the strike.

22. The Alamance strike would also contribute to the collapse of the AFL's first attempt at

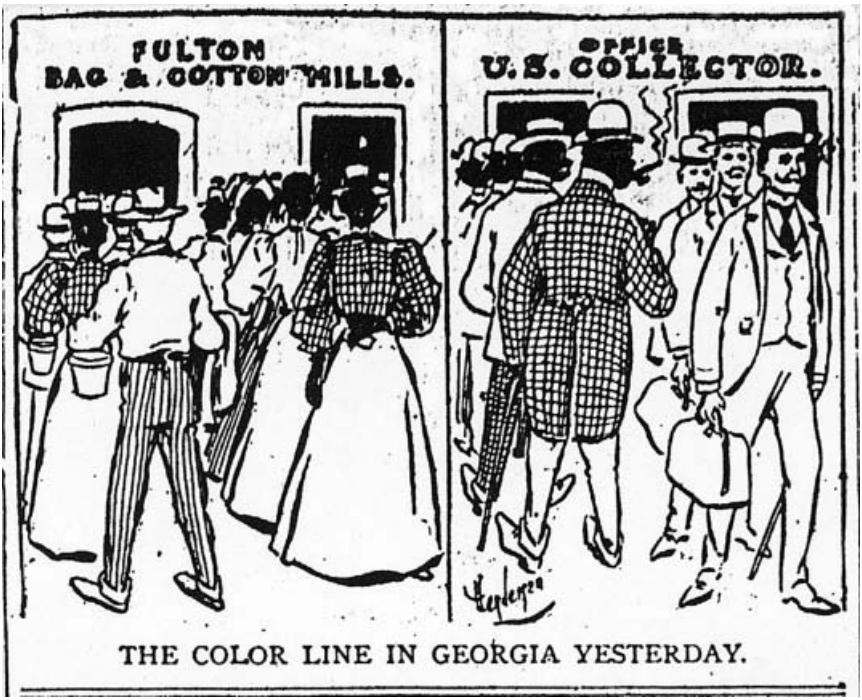

Figure 1. White workers replace African-American women in this cartoon from *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 1897.
The Atlanta Constitution, *Tuesday, 10 August 1897*

The North Carolina strike began with one employee in one position, but moved quickly to a demand that a foreman (the "boss weaver") be removed. Other strikes began with this demand. Like the Alamance strike, the strike which became a city-wide strike of shoe workers in Marlboro, Massachusetts, in 1898 began with the complaint of a group of women about a single forewoman in a single department of a single company.[23] In Kearney, New Jersey, women workers struck in 1888 in an attempt to have Herbert Walmsley, a new foreman in the Clarks' thread mills there, fired.[24] Walmsley, the strikers alleged, had been hired by the Clarks to halt the "good fellowship between the laborers and the supervisors". The strikers were quite vocal in their descriptions of Walmsley's "harsh and tyrannical" ways. *The New York Daily Graphic* interviewed several of the strikers, gathering stories such as the following:

amalgamating the nation's textile unions, but that is another story altogether.
23. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in *The Boston Globe*.
24. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in *The New York Daily Graphic*.

> Of one of the girls who had been absent for a day or so he inquired snappishly, "Where have you been?". "Sick at home", the girl answered. "The next time you are sick you had better die", he remarked so brutally that the girl felt outraged and lost no time in circulating the story.[25]

The young women did not win the 1888 strike, but Walmsley's treatment of them was used by male workers two years later to justify their own strike at the mill.[26]

Working conditions and hours

The Kearney strikers of 1888 also complained that their new supervisor had ended the previous practice of allowing girls to sit down and even read if their work was completed. This brings us to the question of working conditions and the hours of work. Working conditions alone appear as the tied-for-third-place cause of women's strikes; if we add to that the causes involving hours or overtime, this category as a whole is promoted into second place. These demands cross the categories of the first two sets of demands in some ways. Demands over the hours of labor represent a fairly clear economic issue for these workers, and working conditions sometimes also held financial implications. On the other hand, strikers for both of these types of issues would most commonly use emotional appeals to gain the support of co-workers and the public.

In the Galveston strike about overtime hours, strike leaders evoked women workers' crucial roles within their families. The women who acted as spokespersons for the strikers added other complaints to their cause over time, but they also consistently returned to the issue of the hours of labor, explaining that

> [...] they simply thought twelve hours [...] enough for a day's work. It was too hard on the women, especially, who had in many cases to do the cooking before and after work, and thus depriving them of sleep, they not being able to get through their housework at night before 10 o'clock, and having to be up again at 4 o'clock.[27]

By framing the issue with this invocation of women workers' family duties, the women of the Galveston strike took a familiar path toward striking. The phrasing of women's strike demands almost invariably utilized a rhetoric of women's family roles.

Behind this concern with family roles lay more than just rhetorical issues. Not only textile mills but also most of the other industries in my

25. *The New York Daily Graphic*, 25 January 1888.
26. See *The Tailor*, vol. 2:20 (April 1891), and my discussion of the strike in *United Apart*, pp. 78–79. The story of the later strike comes from coverage in the *Newark Daily Advertiser* and the *New York Times*.
27. *Galveston Daily News*, 21 February 1995, p. 10.

study often used family systems of labor to recruit workers. In Alamance county, for example, most of the twenty-one cotton mills hired workers in family units.[28] Only 4.7 per cent of all Alamance textile workers lived in households in which no other textile worker resided; for female textile workers this number was even smaller, with only 1 per cent living as the sole textile worker in the household.[29] Although the North Carolina mills in Alamance county provide an extreme example of the family system of labor, it appears in other places as well.

In the classic New England textile town of New Bedford, Massachusetts, family structure also played a role in the strike of 1898.[30] Though this strike began as a carefully thought-out action by a loose amalgamation of textile workers' unions against a 10 per cent wage reduction, women weavers in New Bedford added another issue to the mix. The Friday before the strike began, a mass meeting of weavers, including both weavers' union members and non-members, voted to add a second issue to the strike: the practice by owners of docking workers' pay for imperfect and supposedly inferior work. "The fines issue", as it came to be called, had a long-standing history for New Bedford weavers; months before the wage cut was announced they had voted to consider striking over this issue in April of 1898. The fines issue had festered among weavers for some time.

Despite multiple wage-earners in many families, textile workers still lived close to the margin. Often seeming arbitrary to workers, a deduction for less than perfect work could easily wreak havoc on a family's budget. Over 80 per cent of textile workers in New Bedford lived in households containing at least one other textile worker. As seen in Alamance, New Bedford workers' work lives were embedded in complex family economies. Though substantially fewer child laborers worked in the Massachusetts town (5 per cent or less, compared to almost 18 per cent in Alamance), New Bedford textile workers living with others working in the same industry included almost 45 per cent who lived and worked with siblings, almost 25 per cent with parents, and fully 15 per cent with spouses.[31] Just as in the allegedly quiescent southern mills, New Bedford workers

28. North Carolina Bureau of Labor and Printing, *13th Annual Report for the Year 1899* (Raleigh, NC, 1900), pp. 212–213.

29. Information on Alamance cotton-mill workers comes from a sample of every fifth cotton-mill worker in the county collected from the 1900 Federal Manuscript Census for Alamance County. See Appendix 2, "1900 Census Projects", in DeVault, *United Apart*, pp. 231–236, for more details of the data collection methods for this and the following datasets.

30. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in *The Boston Globe* [hereafter cited as *Globe*] and the New Bedford *Morning Mercury* [hereafter cited as *MM*], as well as the description of the strike in Mary H. Blewett, *Constant Turmoil: The Politics of Industrial Life in Nineteenth-Century New England*, (Amherst, MA, 2000), ch. 10, pp. 338–387.

31. Information on New Bedford cotton-mill workers comes from a sample of every tenth cotton-mill worker collected from the 1900 Federal Manuscript Census for Bristol County, Massachusetts.

Figure 2. "When the employees of the Wamsutta corporation were paid off yesterday, they were not allowed to wait their turn inside the buildings, but were forced to remain outside in the rain." Women in the New Bedford textile strike line up for their last paychecks from the company. The New York Journal, *Monday, 24 January 1898*

responded to perceived injustice from within tightly knit communities which linked family life and work life.

Even in Oregon City, Oregon, where weavers walked out against the order that they "run two looms instead of one" and simultaneously accept a wage reduction, we see a similar role of family ties in the workers' strike action.[32] Despite the fact that the relatively small Oregon City Woolen Mill was the only one of its type in town, half of the mill workers lived

32. *Oregon City Courier-Herald*, 25 April 1902. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from the *Oregon City Courier-Herald* and the *Oregon City Enterprise*.

with other woolen mill workers in their households.[33] Whether these women were the wives and mothers or the daughters of their families, work and family were tightly interconnected. While some historians have argued that family ties encouraged workers' dependence and lack of militance, in the strike situations examined here what we see is the way in which family ties supported women workers' demands for shorter hours and improved working conditions – all ways of preserving what these women viewed as the "good" parts of their jobs.[34]

So far, we have looked at the demands put forward by women workers when they went on strike. These demands were generally defensive rather than offensive in nature, tended to be framed in terms of defending women's families, and often focused on issues which involved preserving non-economic benefits of women's jobs. This examination has looked at the initial demands put forward by women strikers, but there have already been hints that these original demands changed over time. I turn now to examining two factors that contributed to those changes: the influence of formal unions and the presence of male workers on the picket lines.

IMPACT OF FORMAL UNIONS ON "WOMEN'S" STRIKES

The Galveston strike which began this paper involved no union of any sort, but most of the other strikes in my sample did see some form of union participation. In some of these, a formal union (either of the women workers themselves or of their male co-workers) existed before the strike's inception. In others, female strikers created or joined a union after walking off their jobs. In either case, the presence of formal unions altered the course of the strikes.

In the Oregon City strike which concluded the last section, workers had been encouraged to join an AFL-affiliated union just prior to their strike. In this case, the unionists who inspired this action were not co-workers of the woolen mill workers, but employees of Oregon City's more prevalent lumber mills. The month before the woolen mill workers' strike, workers at the Willamette Pulp and Paper Company organized what local papers termed the "local union of the American Federation of Labor". Although workers at the Oregon City Woolen Mill formed their own union, a branch of the United Textile Workers, the day their strike began, the line separating the two unions from each other often blurred. Four days after

33. Information on Oregon City woolen-mill workers comes from data collected from the 1900 Federal Manuscript Census for Clackamas County, Oregon.

34. See Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1980), for an example of the counter-argument. Most of these studies are not based on strike situations, which is probably why they do not see a link between family and militancy.

the woolen mill strike began, the *Courier-Herald* reported that 100 new members had joined the AFL's Federal Labor Union, while over 200 belonged to the textile union. The paper claimed that "some of the men belong to both organizations".[35] Whether the unions shared memberships or not, the "AFL union" would continue to provide both financial support and negotiating expertise to the woolen-mill strikers.

The family ties of Oregon City workers contributed to the bonds expressed through the two unions. While half of the Oregon City workers lived in households with other woolen-mill workers, almost 20 per cent of the woolen-mill workers lived in households containing paper-mill workers. Furthermore, about the same percentage of woolen-mill workers' households contained both more than one woolen mill worker and at least one paper-mill worker. In this case, the recent union efforts of strikers' family members and friends encouraged and sustained the woolen-mill strikers.

In several other cases, pre-existing unions had a more ominous impact on strikes begun by women workers. Strikes which began with fairly circumscribed demands often escalated into battles over the existence of the unions themselves. In Auburn, Maine in 1893, female stitchers in one of the town's shoe factories refused to accept their employers' proposed wage reductions.[36] Instead, they stayed away from work. Over the course of the following two or three weeks, the stitchers' male co-workers walked out in sympathy with the women. In return, the seven shoe companies in the town posted "iron-clad notices" announcing that they would no longer recognize any of the existing shoe workers' unions. The three shoe workers' unions quickly "forgot" the women's wage demand, as they struggled for existence over the course of a long and unsuccessful strike. The strikes of the textile workers in Alamance county, North Carolina, and shoe workers in Marlboro, Massachusetts, similarly began with relatively small demands by women workers, only to expand into fights over union recognition. Like the earlier Maine strike, these strikes also ended in failure for the strikers, who were caught off guard by the ferocity of employers' reactions to their workplace actions.

The New Orleans strike mentioned earlier involved a different type of escalation growing out of the presence of formal unions. In this case, the women of the Maginnis mill were aided by local AFL representatives in organizing themselves into a "Cotton Mill Operatives' Union". The New Orleans United Labor Council repeatedly "commend[ed the] grit" of the women strikers and discussed how their member unions could best assist the strike effort.[37] At one point, the Labor Council even debated the

35. *Oregon City Courier-Herald*, 25 April 1902.
36. Unless otherwise noted, the story of this strike comes from coverage in the *Lewiston Evening Journal*.
37. *New Orleans Picayune*, 19 July 1894.

question of whether they should call all the city's unions out on a general strike to support the Maginnis strikers. However, unlike employers' associations, which seem to have had little trouble cohering around decisions to smash unions in their industries, the labor movement of New Orleans could not bring itself to evoke a general strike to help Annie O'Leary and her co-workers.[38] In general, it is certainly fair to say that union solidarity across gender lines was attained much more slowly than was solidarity among employers.

In 1890, a group of "tailoresses" in Columbus, Ohio, gained both inspiration and support from their unionized co-workers.[39] The town already had a strong local of the Journeymen Tailors' Union of America, and the presence of that union among the male tailors of the town encouraged women to first ask for admission to the union and then push for pay equal to that of men doing identical work. The union itself was already recognized by the firms belonging to the Merchant Tailors' Exchange, so the women did not need to strike for union recognition. Their strike for equal pay, though, represents one of the only strikes for a pay increase seen in my set of women's strikes. In this case, membership in Local 27 provided these women with the guts they needed to take a much more assertive stance *vis-à-vis* their employers.

In San Francisco in 1887, the District Master Workman of the Knights of Labor had addressed the striking glovemakers at one point, telling them that

> [...] women, of all people, should recognize the absolute necessity of organization. Under the disunited condition of society in the dark ages, women were the creatures of man's lordly will. Today, by the grace of God and the strength of unionism, they have become the superior element in the stream of humanity.[40]

The Columbus tailors' strike illustrates this Knight's words well; unions could, in fact, provide women workers with the sense of empowerment they needed to take proactive steps rather than simply responding defensively to their employers' actions. However, especially at this early moment in the US labor movement, unions could also serve to call forth the wrath of employers. In these cases, women's original concerns and demands could easily be overlooked.

38. This reaction echoes the New Orleans General Strike of 1892 in interesting ways. See Stuart B. Kaufmann *et al.* (eds), *The Samuel Gompers Papers: Unrest and Depression, 1891–94*, vol. 2 (Urbana, IL, 1989), p. 243.
39. Unless otherwise cited, the story of this strike comes from coverage in the *Daily Ohio State Journal*, the *Columbus Evening Post*, *Der Ohio Sonntagsgast*, and *The Tailor*.
40. *San Francisco Daily Examiner*, 9 November 1887.

ALTERATION OF DEMANDS AND ACTIONS IN CROSS-GENDER STRIKES

The discussion of the impact of formal unions on these strikes initiated by women begins to provide a fair amount of information about how the cross-gendered nature of the strikes altered women strikers' demands and actions. Male workers in the late nineteenth century were much more likely than female workers to belong to a union, and they structured those unions on the basis of a range of assumptions about the behaviors of men, women, and workers – and how those interacted. Though my focus in this paper is on what these strikes can tell historians about women's strike activities, they all took place in industries employing both women and men and, in fact, they were all strikes which involved both sexes as well. (The 1888 strike of women in Kearney, New Jersey, is the only exception to this in this set of strikes and, even there, men lurked in the background of the strike, itching to step in and demonstrate their allegedly greater knowledge and experience.) Even these strikes beginning with women's issues, therefore, were greatly affected by the presence of male co-workers, often coming forth with their own set of demands.

One of the clearest examples of this is found in the relatively short strike of Louisville, Kentucky, tobacco stemmers in the winter of 1900/1901.[41] This strike began with a demand for an increase in the price paid to the Continental Tobacco factory's female stemmmers: they wanted 25 cents more per 100. Workers, both African-American and white, gathered around the factory after the plant's 1,500 stemmers walked off their jobs on 28 December 1900. A representative of the International Tobacco Workers' Union was called in and set to work organizing the workers into two racially segregated union locals. After a mass meeting of all workers elected a negotiating committee, the committee set up the first negotiations session of the strike. At this meeting on 2 January, the strikers' committee (consisting of two African-American men, one white woman and a white man, and three "representatives of organized labor") laid out the strikers' demands.

These demands began with the original call for a wage increase, now phrased as 3.25 cents per pound of stemmed tobacco. A number of other issues also appeared in this conference: a full half-hour for dinner along with permission for workers to leave the factory to eat; abolition of the "docking system" of fines; abolition of the practice of workers having to pick stems out of the rubbish; and the re-employment of all strikers without discrimination after the strike. After taking these demands "under advisement", the company returned the following day ready to grant three out of the strike's five demands. Workers would now have a full half-hour

41. Unless otherwise cited, the story of this strike comes from coverage in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and the *Louisville Times*.

for dinner and the company would do away with the docking system in the plant. All strikers would be able to return to their jobs. The settlement of the strike made no mention of the women's original demand for a wage increase. The following day, strikers returned to work and Manager K.R. Smith reported to the papers that "every floor is full [...] except the floor on which the girls work. That floor is only about two-thirds full, as the girls did not understand that all the strikers were coming back this morning". The newspaper threw some doubt on that formulation, however, by quoting one of "the girls" as saying, "You boys want the docking board to come down, and you want your dinner hours. We want that extra quarter of a cent a pound."[42] In this case, the additional demands raised by the men completely overwhelmed the women workers' original wage demand. The women, however, clearly had not forgotten it.

The strike of Charleston, South Carolina, shoe workers mentioned earlier similarly veered away from the original demand of women strikers once their male co-workers became involved. Women at the factory had refused to work under a piece-work method of payment, claiming that in effect it reduced their wages intolerably. When the company responded to their action by hiring African-American replacement workers, male workers joined the strike. These men announced to the Southern world that "we are white men and we will not work in the shoe factory or any other factory with negroes".[43] If the men were satisfied to continue their strike on this philosophical ground, the women of the factory continued to maintain that the real issue of the strike was the reduction of their wages. As one spokeswoman put it,

> [...] it is utterly impossible for a girl to make over forty cents a day. That was why we struck. If these are not starvation prices I don't know what else they are. If the factory can get negroes to work for these wages it is at liberty to do it. We will not.[44]

For these young Southern women, the economic defense of their standard of living remained more important than the defense of whiteness and Southern manhood.

Similarly, the strike of textile workers in New Bedford demonstrates almost continual tensions between male and female workers. Though the 1898 strike itself began with the demand that the city's mills restore a 10 per cent wage cut, the weavers' insistence on fighting the fines system in the mills provided a clear fracture in the otherwise impressive solidarity of the strike. Four of the five textile unions in New Bedford had agreed to fight solely against the proposed wage cut, with only the weavers' union holding out to add the fines issue as well.

42. *Louisville Times*, 4 January 1901
43. [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 11 October 1897.
44. [Charleston] *News and Courier*, 14 October 1897.

Weavers represented one of the only textile occupations which came close to containing equal numbers of men and women. They also represented the largest single occupation in New Bedford, making up almost 40 per cent of the city's textile workers. The male president of the Weavers' Union framed the issue early in the strike, stating that if the battle were fought and won against the wage reduction alone, "victory will be but a shadow and a delusion, a thing without substance and without shape, something for which they have fought and suffered, and from which every one but [the weavers] themselves derive substantial benefits".[45] One of the major champions of the fines issue, weaver Harriet Pickering, pointed out in an interview with *The Boston Globe* that the causes of the "defects" for which weavers faced fines often came from the work performed earlier in the production process, explaining that "if the spinner or the speeder tender makes a bad piecing of the yarn and it breaks out in the loom, the fine comes on the weaver".[46] Weavers, in other words, were financially penalized for their co-workers' errors. The fines issue, based as it was in production differences embedded in the mills' division of labor, would exacerbate divisions among the amalgamated unions during the strike. Even the weavers' union president admitted that

> [...] viewed from the standpoint of the cotton operative who is not a weaver [...] the raising of the "fines system" at this time is considered, to put it mildly, extremely unwise. [...] [But] viewed from the standpoint of the great body of weavers, the fines system is a vital issue.[47]

Women workers on strike often would find that they had two opponents to battle against in order to gain their "vital issues": employers and male co-workers. Either one could easily ignore, belittle, or misunderstand the women workers' concerns. Gaining the support of male co-workers in a strike thus became a double-edged sword. Given the interdependence of men's and women's work in these industries, women strikers almost always had to obtain men's support in order to have any chance at all of winning their demands. At the same time, male co-workers' support often came at a cost, and sometimes, as seen in most of the strikes described above, that cost was the very demands with which women had begun their strike.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief survey suggests that when women workers in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries went out on strike, they

45. *Globe*, 24 January 1898.
46. *Globe*, 20 January 1898.
47. *Globe*, 24 January 1898.

did so more often for defensive than offensive reasons as well as for preserving the small benefits they saw in their tenuous economic roles. Strike demands were almost always framed in moral or emotional terms, and women's roles in their families always played a part in that framing. The presence and creation of unions could help women on strike, providing them with support and inspiration, or they could refocus strikers' attention away from the women's original goals. For the bulk of women workers, in the four industries my strikes come from and in others as well, the cooperation of male co-workers was necessary for shutting down production. Like their unions, these men played a dual role in these "cross-gender" strikes, providing women with crucial support but also often misinterpreting their strike demands.

The strikes examined here were "unusual" in US history in a number of different ways. First and foremost, the women involved in these actions not only went on strike at a time in history when few women did so, but they initiated the strikes as well. They were strikes of women workers at a time when relatively few women took the action of striking and even fewer joined unions. These strikes also occurred in a variety of locations; though 75 per cent of the nation's strikes between 1887 and 1903 took place in just ten states (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri), less than half (42.5 per cent) of the strikes considered here took place in those ten states. In other words, the strikes discussed in this essay were far more likely than the norm to have taken place in what I have called elsewhere the nation's "industrial periphery".[48] I admitted openly at the beginning of this essay that the strikes here are not representative of US strikes during this time period; they are not even, I would argue, representative of all strikes in which women workers took part.

Despite all the ways in which these strikes are exactly *un*usual, though, this analysis suggests that women in more usual cases will also initiate strikes over very different issues than their male colleagues. My guess is that virtually all women workers began strikes more often for defensive than offensive reasons; that they relied on moral appeals calling upon the public's understanding of women's traditional family roles; and that both unions and men altered the ways in which women's strikes were ultimately carried to conclusion.

There are two broad sets of future research questions suggested by this initial foray. The first consists of the research necessary to confirm the insights suggested here, while the second carries that research forward in time and, perhaps, across geography as well. In order to test fully the hypotheses of this paper about the differences in strike motivations for women and men, this project should be continued on a larger and more

48. DeVault, *United Apart*, p. 132.

scientific scale. Although the Bureau of Labor produced thousands of pages of tables in its four volumes on *Strikes and Lockouts*, none of these tables examine the causes of strikes and the gender of workers involved. One starting point for research would be to construct such a table from the data presented in the *Strikes and Lockouts* volumes. Even such a massive quantitative study, however, would still not provide us with the information on strike initiation which I gained from constructing the further case studies. It would, however, give us an indication of whether the results presented here are at all representative of strikes and gender overall. This type of quantitative study would begin to confirm or reject the ideas presented here.

Beyond this basic research project, though, lies the question of whether women workers continued historically to have such different motivations for striking than men did. This question seems to me to have two parts.

First of all, what happened to the women workers I discussed here as they gained more experience in striking and union membership? Did later strikes by workers at the same factories become more similar to men's strikes? In other words, would women workers come to appreciate the characteristics of "mature bread-and-butter" unionism over time? Or would women's strike demands continue to carry a gendered cast which rendered them incomprehensible to the mainstream labor movement of the time? Unfortunately, answering this question would require the same type of painstaking case-study research I carried out for *United Apart*, but on a chronologically broader scale.

The second type of research along these lines would explore whether the characteristics of women's strikes outlined here were only typical of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century strikes. What about strikes initiated by women in the 1910s or 1930s or even later? As the twentieth century wore on, did women workers still raise their own, specifically gendered demands? If so, were those demands latter-day sisters of the demands I describe here: defensive, morally justified, and all too often flummoxed by male unionists and co-workers?

The same sorts of questions can and should be asked on an international and comparative basis as well. As Temma Kaplan pointed out in her study of women's movements in Barcelona in the early twentieth century, women's activism often appeared incompatible with stereotypes of women as docile victims. She found that Barcelona's women activists maintained "their consistent defense of their right to feed and protect their communities [...]. Their conviction [grew] from their acceptance of the sexual division of labor as a means of survival."[49] Other scholars examining women's workplace actions throughout the world have noted a similar

49. Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910–1918", *Signs*, 7 (1982), p. 565.

pattern of demands based on women's familial roles and responsibilities, from proto-Bolshevik women in 1910, to Lebanese tobacco workers in the 1940s, to today's female activists in South America and Asia.[50] While Stearns might have discounted all these women strikers as merely "unsophisticated", the intervening decades of women's history require us to examine seriously women's pre-institutional concerns. The similarities we find across both time and space may reflect how far both feminism and the labor movement still have to go to achieve anything close to workplace and union equality for women workers.

50. See, for example, Anne Bobroff, "The Bolsheviks and Working Women, 1905–20", *Soviet Studies*, 26 (1974), p. 552; Malek Abisaab, "'Unruly' Factory Women in Lebanon: Contesting French Colonialism and the National State, 1940–1946", *Journal of Women's History*, 16:3 (2004), p. 69; Angela Hale, "The Deregulated Global Economy: Women Workers and Strategies of Resistance", *Gender and Development*, 4:3 (1996), p. 9.