A Place to Speak Our Minds: Locating Women’s Activism Where North Meets South

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Abstract

Eighty years ago a sizeable cohort of activists, scholars and labor organizers argued that the future of the North American labor movement depended on the successful organization of women workers in the U.S. South. In 2005, activists, scholars and labor organizers make markedly similar arguments about the important role being played by young women entering maquiladora factories and sweatshops in the Global South. Divided by time and place, these two groups of workers share the legacy of paying the human costs of industrialization and globalization. In both groups, a significant minority of women responded to the economic and social changes confronting them by turning to activism and fighting back. Collective organization, workers’ education and feminist cooperation were hallmarks of women’s activism for social and economic justice in the U.S. South in the mid-twentieth century. The success of these efforts depended on women locating places where they could develop historical consciousness, find their voices and openly “speak their minds”. The experiences of women workers in the U.S. South of the 1920’s, 1930’s and 1940’s, provide concrete models for women in the Global South today.

The U.S. labor movement began to pay close attention to the "New South" as early as 1880, when scores of hastily constructed factories began to dot the landscape, like "beads on a necklace", in an arc that eventually stretched from southern Maryland to eastern Texas. Labor organizers sent into the region in the early 20th century struggled to establish unions in an avowedly anti-union region heavily dependent on child labor. From Texas in 1911, one organizer wrote, "Unionism is a signal failure...about one-third or more of the hands are children, most of them too small to take into a union." World War I speed-ups made child labor less practical and shifted the focus to young women who entered the mills between age 14 and 16. Gradually a plethora of activists, scholars and writers, along with representatives from women’s organizations, workers’ education alliances and political organizations focused their attention on the South, arguing that the future of the US labor movement depended on the successful organization of the thousands of young women filing into mills and factories across the region. Southern industrialization was rapid, investments made huge returns, and state and local incentives attracted manufacturers like a magnet.

In 2005, activists, scholars and labor organizers make markedly similar arguments about the important role being played by women entering maquiladora factories, U.S. owned multinational corporations and sweatshops, in the Global South. Beginning in the mid-1960’s, not coincidentally as southern industry racially integrated its workforce, numerous companies crossed the border into Mexico to chase even lower wage rates, escape from U.S. unions, locate a malleable workforce, and take advantage of economic enticements being offered by Mexican state and local officials. Just as the move a century earlier from New England to the U.S. South resulted in increased profits and a sharper competitive edge, so did forays into the Global South yield enormous benefits for the corporate bottom line. In 2005, business journals advise industrialists to keep looking south to find the "fastest path to increased profits with minimum expenditures and responsibilities." Few of these articles openly discuss the specific advantages of a majority female workforce. The place of women in ads about maquiladoras is in the subtext, hidden in the "immense pool of labor...available at extremely competitive wages". 
The experiences of women workers in the 1920’s, 1930’s, and 1940’s, provide historical models for contemporary employees in the maquiladoras. Despite enormous obstacles to organizing, a significant minority of women responded to the economic and social changes confronting them by turning to activism and specific forms of gendered resistance. Collective organization, workers’ education and feminist cooperation were the hallmarks of women’s activism for social and economic justice in the U.S. South. Most importantly, the success of efforts in each of these areas depended on women workers locating places where they could see themselves as part of labor history, find their voices and openly “speak their minds”.

The life stories of women in the American South in the first half of the 20th century and the maquiladoras of the early 21st century, follow strikingly parallel narratives. In each region women migrated to factories from rural areas; in both places women were often the first members of their families to work in a factory, and not infrequently the first to earn cash wages. All of the women involved, across time and place, have worked for wages so low that they could not support themselves or their children above poverty levels; in both cases these wages provided more cash than any other available job, except possibly prostitution.

In the U.S. South, white women came into racially segregated factories from families whose economic situation was in decline; just as in today's Global South decreasing standards of living and downward mobility across generations delineate the lives of workers in the maquiladoras. In both regions young women came of age in communities where religion reinforced traditional ideas about male authority and female submission. In the U.S. South many of these young women came from families where harsh child rearing practices socialized both girls and boys to emotional and physical violation. In the Global South machismo and domestic abuse have also restricted the lives of both women and men. In both locations, incidents of exploitation within the family increased exponentially during frequent periods of economic crisis.

The colonial nature of industrialization in American South, with a majority of manufacturers based outside of the region, meant that workplace conditions in southern mills and factories operated at a 1:4 wage differential when compared to northern factories. In the global south that differential is often even greater, with some workers being paid as little as 10 percent of the wages earned by their northern counterparts. In both areas women have been pulled into factories by the promise of jobs and cash wages, as well as by hopes for a better life and an increased measure of personal autonomy. In the U.S. South a system of racial occupational segregation set aside industrial jobs for white workers. But industrialists hired black workers as strike breakers and took full advantage of the reserve labor force that waited on the other side of the color line. In the 1920’s and 1930’s those white southern workers who held coveted industrial jobs were pitted against both higher paid workers in the North and even lower paid workers across the region as industrialization spread from the states of Maryland to Virginia, to the Carolinas, then further south to Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, and west to Tennessee, Arkansas and Texas. This pattern is being repeated now as Mexican workers compete against northern workers in the U.S. and workers even further south, as maquiladoras open across Central America.

In the U.S. South industrialists practiced a form of paternalism that although severe and harsh, appears relatively benevolent when compared to 21st century management styles in a global market economy which emphasizes worker "self-actualization", and absolves manufacturers of responsibility. In the early 20th century most factory owners had names and faces; 21st century corporate structures encourage industrial anonymity. Twentieth century mill owners often constructed entire villages for their workers. Some had hastily constructed tiny wooden houses without running water or sewers, but others had well-constructed company housing, schools, a newly built infrastructure, water systems, sewage treatment, parks and churches. These amenities drew workers to mill towns and also helped...
regulate the workforce, policing behavior and controlling individual choice within a closed community that “outsiders”, especially labor organizers, could not easily penetrate.  

How then, within this historical southern landscape of low wages, virulent anti-unionism and massive state support for industry, did women workers mobilize to resist oppression and shape the world in which they lived? First, unions gradually came to understand the key roles that women workers would play in southern organizing. Second, women workers from a broad range of industries: cotton textiles, hosiery, garments, rayon, tobacco and canneries, were recruited to participate in independent workers' education programs organized by activists from both outside and inside the region. And third, national and regional women's organizations committed to cooperation across class and racial lines worked to improve the working and living conditions of southern women workers.

**Collective Organization**

Unions organizing in the US South initially denied the importance of women workers. As early as 1900, however, in strikes and lockouts in three dozen North Carolina cotton factories, women played key leadership roles. The walkouts of the pre-World War I era, the wave of strikes in southern textiles from 1927 through 1934, labor battles in the post World War II period, and later union struggles in the Civil Rights decades of the 1960's and 1970's, all involved thousands of women workers. Women played multiple roles in these fights, at times leading hundreds of male and female workers out of factories; or walking in the front ranks of strike parades, or filling conspicuous posts on picket lines. Without question, the actions of women workers were crucial to labor's struggles in the South throughout the twentieth century.

A number of southern union drives specifically targeted women workers. In 1946, for example, the CIO's "Operation Dixie" focused specifically on union benefits for women workers in southern textiles. This was at a time when 75 percent of unionized textile-workers in the US were in the North, while almost three-quarters of all textile workers were employed in the South, where only 15-20 percent of the industry was unionized. A 1946 pamphlet prepared by the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) promised that "women get whatever men get" in a union drive, and concluded "THAT'S WHY ALMOST HALF OF THE TWUA'S 400,000 MEMBERS ARE WOMEN". Specific efforts to attract southern women to the unions were quite successful, although this campaign, like many that came before and those that would follow, was arduous, with bitter intra-union conflicts, anti-union police and National Guard forces, and employers who met the drive with armed violence and blacklists.

Women organizers worked closely with activist workers across the South. Heroic leaders, like the "Hellraising" Mother Jones, martyr Ella Mae Wiggins, and grandmotherly Lucy Randolph Mason, drew attention to women's issues in the workplace, the home and the community. But it was on the shop floor and in working-class neighborhoods that women forged the connections they needed to commit themselves to collective action. Gendered resistance had a powerful multiplier effect in workplaces and communities where women transformed their autonomy as workers into acts of confrontation. Southern women workers, as their predecessors in the North, gradually changed the terms of their employment by speaking their minds, whether quietly to each other, or loudly, in walk-outs or strikes. Today in communities across the Global South, new leaders, like "Hellraising" Martha Ojeda, supporters of the martyrs of Ciudad Juarez, like Mireille Rocatti and Lourdes Portillo, and Alma Mejia and Yesenia Bonilla of Honduras are once again stepping forward and putting themselves on the line for economic justice, working through independent organizations or in trade union federations, such as the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT).

**Workers' Education**

Southern industrial women increased the effectiveness of their actions on the local level by connecting
with workers' education programs established in the region after World War I. The National Women's Trade Union League (NWTUL), Brookwood Labor College and the Bryn Mawr Summer School were national programs that sponsored southern organizing initiatives as the region became increasingly industrialized. The Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry (SSS) was established in 1927, as a residential program to train grass roots leaders in union organizing, labor history, economics and public speaking. In 1932, Highlander Folk School established a workers' education program in Tennessee that served both men and women as it brought together labor leaders and activists from throughout the region. Both the Southern School and Highlander ran educational programs in numerous local communities and provided direct assistance to striking southern workers.

Throughout the late 1920's and 1930's, the Southern Summer School was a place where women workers and activists from across the South came together each summer. Students shared their individual life stories and came to see themselves as part of a long history of labor activism and struggle. Knowing about the past empowered them to act in the present, in the belief that they could shape a different future for their children. The school was founded by a group of educators and activists from various class and regional backgrounds. Breaking the boundaries of class and region, and eventually racial barriers as well, these women assumed what Edward Said defined as an "affiliative" social position, one that moved away from individual identity (or filiative legacy) toward a genuinely humane commitment to economic justice. Workers who attended the school were often leaders in their unions and local community organizations. Working together gave them a broader vision of what was possible: from connecting with regional and national organizations, to obtaining essential legal information, to honing organizing skills, to taking control of their own lives.

Today, groups that evolved from the Southern Summer School and the Highlander Folk School of the 1920's and 1930's, the Southern School for Union Women and the Highlander Research and Education Center, as well as STITCH - Women Organizing for Social Justice in Central America and US/LEAP - Labor Workshop and Studies Center, and the AFL-CIO Solidarity Centers in Guatemala and El Salvador, are working to end discrimination against women on the job and to help women workers become strong union leaders. All of these groups affirm the experiences of individual women workers and the power of the collective. They each run leadership training, research and education programs with a transnational focus in communities throughout the Americas.

**Feminist Cooperation**

Gender specific education and organization was crucial for women workers who had to negotiate a male controlled labor movement and mobilize against a male dominated industrial power structure. Cross-class alliances proved particularly useful as women workers practiced navigating unfamiliar terrain. Working women were particularly adept at garnering the support of cross-class women's organizations for educational resources and information about strategy and tactics. Groups like the National Consumer League (NCL) provided information about how to organize boycotts and label campaigns; the League of Women Voters (LWV) supplied information about legislation and government procedure; the YWCA organized dozens of "industrial clubs" across the South, many of them in communities where union organizing was difficult, if not impossible. Frequently these "clubs" raised questions about wages, hours, and health and safety issues in local industries by brokering support from progressive middle and upper-class women in the community.

While feminist cooperation across class lines in the South was never a substitute for unity among men and women in factories and unions, such alliances became resources women workers could tap as they sought more education and expertise. At the same time, these alliances transformed activist women from different class backgrounds, helped them forge affiliative social positions, develop critical engagement, and commit themselves to social and economic justice. For the women who participated,
These women-centered organizations offered vital social space in which they could articulate opinions, stake out positions, argue, compromise and grow.

Today, transnational feminist organizations include the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, Women on the Border, the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), the Colectiva Feminista Binacional and La Mujer Obrera, the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), the Comité Fronterizo de Obreros (CFO)-Committee of Women Workers, as well as groups as long established as the YWCA and the League of Women Voters, both of which have global initiatives that target women and build leadership skills through education and exchange programs.

Conclusion

Divided by time and place, these groups of "southern" women workers share the legacy of paying the human costs of industrialization and globalization. This is a pattern of development that goes backward and forward in time: from England to New England, from New England to the U.S. South, from the U.S. South to Mexico and then on to Central and South America, and simultaneously around the globe. What can be learned from two hundred years of industrial history in terms of women's resistance to economic oppression? At the first Southern Summer School, in 1927, Virginia textile worker Elbe Robertson, questioned, "Should we spend our lives making others richer, while our own wants are deferred?" Eighty years later, Honduran worker Alma Mejia, argued that "the transnational companies have always wanted to exploit and pay women less. Recently," she relates, "we had two or three companeros... speaking out about women's needs." The point where North meets South is constantly shifting, but the signification of women's activism does not change. In the Global South today, women's cross-border cooperation involves traversing different boundaries, and requires new forms of organization, but as UE member, Lynda Leech wrote recently about the UE's "Hands Across the Border" organizing of women workers: "Let history repeat itself, as oppression is overcome". Today's activists need access to the contested and suppressed labor history of "other souths", for while each generation creates its own future, the historical consciousness of workers, activists and trade unionists can move the struggle forward toward economic justice.

NOTES


15 Information about the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras is available at http://www.coalitionforjustice.net/; regarding Women on the Border, see:
http://www.womenontheborder.org/; La Mujer Obrera's website is: http://portal.mujerobrera.com/; for the Association for Women's Rights in Development see: http://www.awid.org/; and for material on the work done by the Comite Fronterizo de Obreros (CFO)-Committee of Women Workers see: http://www.cfomaquiladoras.org/english%20site/aboutcfo.en.html. The Binational Feminist Collective is an independent group organized to promote the human rights of female workers in the maquiladora industry with regard to gender issues. The Binational is associated with the non-governmental organization CITTAC (Centro de Información para Trabajadoras y Trabajadores A.C) in Baja California.

16 Quotes from: Frederickson, A Place to Speak Our Minds and STITCH, Women Behind the Labels: Worker Testimonies from Central America.