

## “More than Nine to Five” Conference

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In conjunction with National Women’s History Week, St. Louis Women Historians (SLWH) hosted a conference titled “More than Nine to Five: St. Louis Women and the Labor Movement” on March 7-8, 1986. The conference, the fourth in a series of annual gatherings sponsored by SLWH, was held in cooperation with the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), the St. Louis Labor Council and the University of Missouri-St. Louis. It benefited from funding by the Missouri Committee for the Humanities. The conference directors were Susan Hartmann and Anne Kenney. In its sharp focus, its excellent attendance, and its mixture of participation by union members and academics, the event was a model local labor history conference.

“More than Nine to Five” began on the evening of March 7 with a showing of the film *We Dig Coal* at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The film paints a superb portrait of three female miners and of male attitudes in coal communities, which are witnessing an end to the sexual segregation of mining work. Professor Ruth Milkman of Queens College-CUNY then gave the keynote address, an ambitious overview of twentieth-century trends in female labor-force participation, job segregation by gender, and women’s trade unionism. Milkman’s presentation was sensitive to the issue of periodization in women’s labor history and tended to regard the formation of the CIO and the merger of the AFL and CIO as watersheds. In treating the more recent past, Milkman stressed openings for the growth of women’s power within the labor movement, both because of the emergence of pay equality as an issue and because women’s trade union membership has held up relatively well during a period of declining male membership in labor organizations. Ola Kennedy of United Steelworkers of America, District 31, commented on Milkman’s address, drawing conclusions from her own work in a progressive local and finding both openings and obstacles to pressing the demands of women workers.

The following morning Rosemary Feurer of Washington University led off the “Solidarity in St. Louis” session by presenting a paper titled “St. Louis Women’s Trade Union League, 1905-1920.” Feurer’s description of WTUL activities in St. Louis showed a distinctive local league that avoided problems between working women and middle-class allies in the organization by minimizing the power and even the presence of the allies. Her observations on both the impact of separate women’s unions and of occupational segregation by sex in sparking WTUL organization and in limiting such organization were

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especially suggestive. At the same session, Ora Lee Malone and Winnie Lippman, veteran activists in the St. Louis garment trades, spoke on the founding and early history of the city's CLUW chapter. Malone especially emphasized that the refusal to "be reasonable" and to avoid connections with "radical" causes made the launching of CLUW possible.

The session on "Women Workers and Collective Action" began with a slide presentation on St. Louis women workers in the Great Depression. Patricia Adams of the St. Louis Art Museum and Nancy Brown of the Citizenship Education Clearing House put together a fine collection of images and an effective text. Materials from the unemployed demonstrations, the Funsten Nut Strike, and the garment trades organizing campaigns were especially arresting. Evelyn Battle White, president of the St. Louis Teachers' Union, concluded the session with eloquent commentary on the recent history of labor relations in the city's schools and on the contemporary use of sexism as a management tool in bargaining.

The penultimate session carried the title "From Protection to Equality" and began with a paper by Elizabeth Schmidt (University of Missouri–St. Louis and SLWH) on the pattern of women's labor legislation in early twentieth-century Missouri. She discussed the groups promoting and opposing the legislation and analyzed the laws' effects. Sharon Pedersen of the University of Colorado–Denver and SLWH moved the focus forward in time as she addressed policies concerning married women teachers. She examined the roots of the practice in St. Louis which banned married women from public school classrooms and demonstrated how a loose coalition of teachers, women's organizations, and unions obtained a court decision ending discrimination against married women.

Linda Krueger Maclachlan, an attorney with a specialty in labor law, discussed legal changes concerning women workers since the 1940s, and Peggie McCann, a union organizer for the Service Employees International Union, spoke about the effect of those policies on women workers. Their talks were followed by a lively discussion about the relative benefits of political activism and union organizing in promoting workers' interests.

After a brief summation of the conference themes by Ruth Milkman and Katharine Corbett of the Missouri Historical Society and SLWH, the audience raised questions and engaged in discussion with the presenters.

Both at the closing session and throughout all the sessions, the conference maintained its purpose of generating a dialogue between academic historians and actual participants in the events studied. The participants left with a better realization of the persistence over time of sex-segregation in the work force and of the place of pay equity legislation in combating discrimination. They learned of the role of women in collective action to obtain benefits at the bargaining table and in the courts. And they became even more aware of the importance of aggressive women in union leadership positions. Some of the

women who had “fought the good fight” and expressed concern that there might not be others coming on to take their places may have been heartened by the number of young women participating, not only in conferences such as this, but also in collective efforts to improve the position of women in the work force.