**The Trade Union Woman**

*The following excerpt is from the Preface to Alice Henry's book, The Trade Union Woman (1915). Henry was a member of the Office Employees' Association of Chicago (a trade union) and former editor of the journal Life and Labor. What are some of the major issues concerning working women and the need, from her point of view, to regulate their hours, wages, and working conditions?*

This brief account of trade unionism in relation to the working-women of the United States has been written to furnish a handbook of the subject, and to supply in convenient form answers to the questions that are daily put to the writer and to all others who feel the organization of women to be a vital issue.

To treat the subject exhaustively would be impossible without years of research, but meanwhile it seemed well to furnish this short popular account of an important movement, in order to satisfy the eager desire for information regarding the working-woman, and her attitude towards the modern labor movement, and towards the national industries in regard to which she plays so essential a part. Women are doing their share of their country's work under entirely novel conditions, and it therefore becomes a national responsibility to see that the human worker is not sacrificed to the material product.

Many of the difficulties and dangers surrounding the working-woman affect the workingman also, but on the other hand, there are special reasons, springing out of the ancestral claims which life makes upon woman, arising also out of her domestic and social environment, and again out of her special function as mother, why the condition of the wage-earning woman should be the subject of separate consideration. It is impossible to discuss intelligently wages, hours and sanitation in reference to women workers unless these facts are borne in mind.

What makes the whole matter of overwhelming importance is the wasteful way in which the health, the lives, and the capacity for future motherhood of our young girls are squandered during the few brief years they spend as human machines in our factories and stores. Youth, joy and the possibility of future happiness lost forever, in order that we may have cheap (or dear), waists or shoes or watches.

Further, since the young girl is the future mother of the race, it is she who chooses the father of her children. Every condition, either economic or social, whether of training or of environment, which in any degree tends to limit her power of choice, or to narrow its range, or to lower her standards of selection, works out in a national and racial deprivation. And surely no one will deny that the degrading industrial conditions under which such a large number of our young girls live and work do all of these, do limit and narrow the range of selection and do lower the standards of the working-girl in making her marriage choice.

Give her fairer wages, shorten her hours of toil, let her have the chance of a good time, of a happy girlhood, and an independent, normal woman will be free to make a real choice of the best man. She will not be tempted to passively accept any man who offers himself, just in order to escape from a life of unbearable toil, monotony and deprivation.

So far, women and girls, exploited themselves, have been used as an instrument yet further to cheapen and exploit men. In this direction things could hardly reach a lower level than they have done.

Now the national conscience has at length been touched regarding women, and we venture to hope that in proportion as women have been used to debase industrial standards, so in like degree as the nation insists upon better treatment being accorded her, the results may so react upon the whole field of industry that men too may be shares in the benefits.

But there is a mightier force at work, a force more significant and more characteristic of our age than even the awakened civic conscience, showing itself in just and humane legislation. That is the spirit of independence expressed in many different forms, markedly in the new desire and therefore in the new capacity for collective action which women are discovering in themselves to a degree never known before.

As regards wage-earning working-women, the two main channels through which this new spirit is manifesting itself are first, their increasing efforts after industrial organization, and next in the more general realization by them of the need of the vote as a means of self-expression, whether individual or collective. . . .

The labor movement, like every other idealist movement, contains a sprinkling of unpopular pessimistic souls who drive home, in season and out of season, a few unpopular truths. One of these unwelcome truths is to the effect that the world is not following after the idealists half as fast as they think it is. Reformers of every kind make an amount of noise in the world these days out of all proportion to their numbers. They deceive themselves, and to a certain extent they deceive others. The wish to see their splendid visions a reality leads to the belief that they are already on the point of being victors over the hard-to-move and well-intrenched powers that be. As to the quality of his thinking and the soundness of his reasoning, the idealist is ahead of the world all the time, and just as surely the world pays him the compliment of following in his trail. But only in its own time and at its own good pleasure. It is in quantity that he is short. There is never enough of him to do all the tasks, to be in every place at once. Rarely has he converts enough to assure a majority of votes or voices on his side.