

[연구논문]

# WTUL, an Attack on the Society Hostile to the Working Women at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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## 1. Introduction

In the winter of 1909, the working women of the garment shops in New York City surprised not only their employers but also the politicians, the police, the newspaper reporters, the male unionists and many other people who never thought that the “working girls,” a label usually attached to the working women, could gather themselves to strike against the exploitative employers. The great strikes, later often named the Uprising of Twenty Thousand, indeed occurred and were successful without help of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and in a sense, they succeeded despite the objections of male leadership (Kessler-Harris 287). Behind, and many times, on the working women’s picket lines, there were college students who were mainly women, feminists, female socialists and middle-class social reformists. Many of the supporters got to participate in the strike

through one of the most important women's labor organizations at that time—the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). WTUL contributed to the strikes by publicizing the causes of the strikers and by coordinating the women who wished to actively assist them (McCreesh 137).

The United States at the turn of the twentieth century was experiencing great social, economic changes. Most of all, American industry entered new phase quite different from the previous one. American industry grew around 1780 when Tench Coxe, the “father of American industries,” started the United Company of Philadelphia and established a factory with as many as four hundred female workers (MacLean 183-84). After the Civil War, American industry changed in its size, and technology-driven management. Big corporations such as Railroad companies, Standard Oil and the Carnegie Steel Co. appeared. After them, the chemical, electric-power, and automobile industries followed their big predecessors. According to Cashman, within thirty years between 1870 and 1900, the number of factory employing more than five hundred workers grew from only a few to over a thousand (198).

As the industry grew rapidly, women, who had been thought to stay at home, began to participate in the economic activities. In fact, women's participation in labor had a long history. Women were employed from the very beginning of the factories. In 1784, one cotton factory employed 1,200 women and children as its laborers (MacLean 184). However, the employment of women was not a general “phenomenon” until late nineteenth century. Christine Bose asserts that it was the short period between 1890 and the end of

World War I that resulted in the labor of woman in the twentieth century. The period was “a crucial historical period in which a wide array of changes occurred that affected many facets of women’s (and men’s) employment”(Bose 2). Industrialization and urbanization created great demand for laborers, and, accordingly, employment of industry became greater than that of agriculture. Still male workers were the major labor force, but many times the lower rung of the workplace was filled with women and children. By 1890, the number of women workers grew enough for the census bureau to gather the data of “female factory workers.”

Without the revolutionary mass-production technique, women could not have become a significant part of industrial workers. The introduction of assembly line to the shop floor made each task very simple and repetitive. It did not require any skill or understanding of the whole production process (Baxandall, Gordon and Reverby 129). As most of the women at that time lacked skills that male workers had, this change offered woman a great chance of employment. However, the working women suffered from both the lamentable work conditions and the hostile social prejudice against them. The Uprising of Twenty Thousand was an important event in that the women themselves took action to improve their working conditions with the support of their middle-class sisters, many of whom were WTUL members.

WTUL founded in 1903 in Boston, where AFL’s national conference was held in the same year. However, the initiator of WTUL was not AFL, but William English Walling, a son of millionaire and socialist intellectual and settlement worker who worked as a factory inspector

(Tax 96; McCreesh 86-88). Walling, who was interested in improvement of working women, traveled to England and impressed by English WTUL. Later, when he visited Boston and was introduced to Mary Kenney O'Sullivan, an active socialist and union organizer, they agreed to put the agenda at AFL convention. At the convention, Boston settlement house workers, and other prominent women such as Vida Scudder, Helen Dudley and others participated a meeting for new women's organization, and agreed to set up WTUL. In the meeting, Mary Morton Kehew, a socially prominent Bostonian, was elected as president, and Jane Addams, the founder of Chicago Hull House, as vice president, and O'Sullivan as secretary. After a few years, WTUL had several chapters mainly in the east and mid-west states. Among them, Boston, Chicago, and New York chapters were very successful (Tax 21).

Though WTUL was started by some group of pioneers who acted for the women workers in the 1903 AFL convention, the organization did not come from nowhere. As Edward T. James points out, WTUL was a converging point of three different social currents: "the labor movement, the women's movement, and the urge for social reform that flourished in the Progressive Era before World War I" (11). The labor movement at the turn of the century was severely divided between conservative AFL and the radical Industrial Worker of the World (IWW). The situation in the feminist movement was no better than the labor movement. Feminists were irreconcilably in disagreement with one another. With these disruptions, the improvement of the lives of working women that the Progressivists were pursuing could not be achieved. WTUL was a good alternative for all the parts that

were interested in the issue.

The studies of WTUL, however, have been mainly from the perspective of the labor movement and the feminism movement. From those perspectives, though there are some disagreements, most scholars agree that WTUL achieved little success. For example, Nancy Schrom Dye asserts that the WTUL failed to organize women and make them part of the larger labor movement mainly because the leaders of it simply supported the principles of AFL which were inapplicable to the unskilled workers like the sweatshop workers (111-25). Robin Miller Jacoby argues that WTUL was a failure in that Middle-class feminists were insensitive to the problems of working women (126-40). Yet, the scholars of WTUL tend to ignore the perspective of reformists who were one of the major groups of participants of the organization. Mainly based on the various articles of *Public Opinion*, this paper attempts to emphasize the important factors that draw people to the “working girls” movements. For that, it provides the context in which the working women and their—and their middle-class allies’—labor movements including WTUL before 1920 were.

This paper’s major interest is neither WTUL itself—extensive research has been already done on it—nor how it made itself successful. Instead, it presents main issues that one of the three currents that formed WTUL—i.e. the Progressivists—wanted to address to: the severe working conditions of the working women and the social prejudices against them. In the first two parts, it presents the two major targets that the Progressivists wanted to attack: the unfavorable conditions of working women in their workplace and the prejudices

of the conservatives and the male unionists against them. And then, it points out that the middle-class and high-class women, who were the Progressivists, were active participants of WTUL and sometimes led the organization. From these, in conclusion, it will briefly reevaluate the movement.

## 2. The Unfavorable Work Conditions of Working Women

Though many middle-class and some high-class women were supportive of working women, more of the Americans at the turn of the century were negative to them. As the mass participation of women in the industrial field in the late nineteenth century was a new “phenomenon,” it led to a great public debate, which was the war over the ideology on womanhood and the image of working women. Between 1890 and 1900, there appear numerous articles on working women in *Public Opinion*, which garnered various articles from other journals and newspapers and as such a good source for the study on the people’s opinion on the topic. According to *Public Opinion*, conservatives and male workers tend to criticize the working women as destroyers of womanliness and enemies of male workers. They successfully created “bad” images of working women, making use of traditional values of womanhood.

In 1900, about 1,250,000 women were working at factories, a great majority of whom were young, single, white immigrants (Schneider and Schneider 56). 75 percent of them were born in foreign land or the daughters of immigrants, and most of them were under the age

of twenty-five. They were wage-earners, and suffered from lack of job security. According to a survey, changing their job within a year was quite normal (Schneider and Schneider 56). The social status of the working women was low. They were mainly called working “girls” regardless of their marital status. Lucy A. Warner, a member of a Working Girls Club, once complained that people regarded the working women as mean “manual” workers and as those who lacked natural ability, education, virtue (37).

Working conditions of the female workers were unimaginably bad for the most middle-class and high-class Americans. When *The New York World* wrote that the “character of the [working] women concerned, their cheerfulness of face, their comeliness of person, their contentment with a life of work and their enthusiastic belief in themselves must surely warm the heart and encourage the mind of every man or woman who sincerely cares for humanity or desires the welfare and happiness of women” (“The Working Girls” 56), the description was so romantic and unrealistic that it did not reflect the actual working women at that time. In reality, the “sheer inhumanity and general hellishness” of factory conditions of the period was “so fearful in its character, and demonstrating conditions of life so tragic for the worker, and so shameful on the part of the employer” (Schneider and Schneider 57).<sup>1)</sup>

First of all, mistreatment of the employers was severe. Certainly, some of the employers were not intentionally cruel. In many cases, some harmful working conditions came into being because the

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1) Also see Helen Campbell, *Women Wage-Earners: Their Past, Their Present, and Their Future* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1893), 196.

employers simply did not care about the working conditions of the female workers (Campbell 221). In those cases, simple recognition helped them to improve the miserable working condition.

However, the ignorance of employers was not the only and important cause of the “horrible” working condition. More important was the system that the employers thrust them into. As industry grew, the competition became fiercer than ever before. The fierce competition drove the employers to pursue higher “efficiency, increased production, and profits,” and the pursuit “almost always took precedence over considerations of health and safety” (Cashman 202). For efficiency’s sake, they did not regard the workers as human beings. They did not allow the workers to sing who wanted to keep themselves from falling asleep. They did not allow the employees to eat their lunch more than a half hour (Kerber and Mathews 223-24). They allowed no sick day, and “sometimes women even gave birth on the mill floor between the looms” (Schneider and Schneider 60). From this point of view, many employers were “vulture-like men, who will pick the bones of the weak laborer and cast the skeleton out upon cold charity, or death, or worse” (“Working Women and Girls” 72).

In addition to the bad working conditions that the working women were in at the turn of the twentieth century, their wages were extremely low. Even though the national wealth grew rapidly and the rich people earned more money than ever before, far more people suffered from poverty. In 1910, nearly half of nation’s wealth belonged to less than five percent of population, and more than thirty percent were poor people (Kerber and Mathews 210). Though the

wealth was concentrated on the upper and upper-middle class, the concentration was not gender-blind. At the working class level, the male workers earned far more money than women workers, even when those two did the same thing with the same level of productivity. Generally, women earned a quarter to two-thirds of what men earned, and \$4.84 was the average wage of working women (“Clubs and Working Women” 200). With the money, one could only pay cheap rent and meager board. In 1894, still 34 percent of working women in Chicago, 43 percent in Philadelphia, 54 percent in New York, and 60 percent in Baltimore earned less than \$5 a week (“The American Workwoman” 748). The inequality between male and female workers attracted a great deal of attention in those days. Majority of the articles on working women between 1890 and 1900 was about the inequality of wages. This attention did result in the act of the school board of St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1892, declaring that the same wages should be paid to teachers of both sexes in the public schools of that city, but it was an exception (“Women’s Work and Wages” 198-99). The inequality remained well into the twentieth century.

Allegedly, one reporter of *The Philadelphia Record* analyzed the reason for the low wage of working women. According to the reporter, the greater supply of female labor, the willingness of women to work for fewer wages, their marital status, that is, unmarried, and no women’s little consumption of liquor and cigars are the main reason for the low payment of the working women (“Woman’s Labor and Wages” 110). This analysis is just a reflection of the prejudices at that time. It is true that women were far less

likely to consume cigarettes and beer, but they needed more money for others such as cosmetics, clothes, etc. Though the majority of the “working girls” were single, the analyses of the articles of journals and newspapers give the impression that the one important real reason for the inequality resulted from the prejudice that male workers have family, usually with four or five members, while the “working girls” do not.

The working environment in factory was the center of the concern that people, particularly the middle-class progressive Americans shared. If Professor C. R. Henderson really meant it when he wrote, “Regular labor in sunny and well ventilated rooms, or even in the open fields, is far better for health than idleness and husband-trapping” (“Woman’s Work for Wages” 11), he would have found that that kind of labor was extremely rare among the working women at that time. As briefly mentioned before, the working environment in factories was deplorable. Bad ventilation systems resulted in much dust within factories. It also left a lot of vapors fatal to the human body. Many experienced mutilation by machines. Sometimes, women were jammed into very small space, with dim light and no ventilation (Campbell 217). In all large shops, women had to report before they went to bathroom, and they had to go through the male workers’ space. In this situation, women were unwilling to go to bathroom, and this often caused serious disease.

Strict and severe work rules were another aspect of the bad working conditions. The working women started working at seven or earlier time until six or later (Frowne 2281). All day long, they were forced to concentrate on their own work. They were not allowed to

sing. At some factories, singing was allowed only because “the rhythm kept [the workers] going at high speed” (Baxandall, Gordon and Reverby 166). Generally, they were not allowed to look around or to talk (Frowne 2280). To prevent communication among workers, factories employed women from the various ethnic groups and seated women who spoke different languages next to each other.

According to Rosalyn Baxandall and co-workers, employers imposed unreasonable burdens on the workers. For example, at a glove factory in Chicago, each (female) worker was forced to pay the electricity used for running the machines. If a needle was broken, the worker had to buy one from the foreman or others at their own expense. They had to pay even the machine oil themselves. When they ran out of the oil, they had to go out of the factory and to purchase one with their own money, and the time that they left the machine were not compensated by the factory (Baxandall, Gordon and Reverby 177).

Among the hardship that the working women suffered, the unsanitary working environment caught the Progressive women’s attention. McCreesh asserts that in the 1890s the middle-class women worried that “the unhealthy conditions of sweatshop would spread contagious diseases to customers.” She shows that working-class women in WTUL and other organizations knew this. One women labor organizer complained that the middle-class women’s cooperation of trade unionism was out of their intention to stop contagious disease, which was very different from the motivation of the workers who had the economic motive (McCreesh 62-64).

Recognizing the seriousness of the problems of the factory-working environment, the state governments, with the help of the Progressivists,

began to regulate it and tried to improve it. The regulations varied according to the states, but they generally included inspection, hours of labor, sanitary regulations and seats provided (MacLean 190). Almost all the state limited the working hours within fifty-five hours per week forbidding night work. As for the sanitation, regulations generally emphasized the importance of the ventilation and separate toilet. For example, New York regulated that the employer should provide separate closets and dressing rooms for women in establishments where they are employed.

### 3. The Social Prejudice against Working Women

Regardless of the plight that women workers were in, the public debates on working girls' "problem" were hot at the turn of the twentieth century. As early as 1847, Walt Whitman was discussing the problem in New York: "How many *poor young women* there are in Brooklyn and New York—made so by the miserably low rate of wages paid for women's work, of all kinds, and in all its various departments, from that of the most accomplished governess to that of the washerwoman" (148). The conversation between the proponents and opponents were mainly about the image of "right" womanhood. The conservatives tried to preserve the traditional Victorian womanhood and to retain women within the domestic area, while the supporters of women working were criticizing it.

The critics of the women working at the factories and other places almost always connected corruption to working women. Whitman

himself had the same opinion (151). Laura Hapke also points out that the critics of working women at the turn of the century believed that when a virtuous woman is exposed to the corrupted outer world, one of the best examples is working place like factory, she cannot remain virtuous because she is too weak to overcome the vice (7).

They also asserted that the working women were casting away the responsibility and right of future motherhood. Working at factory was “unsexing” themselves because work “endangered” the future babies, and this meant that they were denying the most important female function—the maternal functions (Hapke 8). Though this prejudice died out after World War I, in the 1890s, it was the strongest. The doctors at that time supported this attack on the working women, which led the Progressivists to the factory sanitization movement, which eventually helped some of them to realize the real problems of working women and led them to the various women’s organizations including WTUL.

Another group that attacked working women severely was the male unionists. Unlike the Industrial Workers of the World, which included all kinds of workers within its boundary, AFL was, however, dominated by men and unfriendly to female workers (Baxandall, Gordon and Reverby 129-30). They believed that the female workers were encroaching their own domain. A writer in 1897 complained that the “invasion of the crafts by women has been developing for years amid irritation and injury to the workman” (Baxandall, Gordon and Reverby 167). Some believed that the influx of female labor increased the supply of labor in the labor market, and that they took the men’s jobs at very low wages. This contributed to lower the

wages of male workers. Such prejudice of the male unionists against women workers was an important reason for their indifference to the working women's problem. According to Nancy F. Cott, they regarded female workers as only temporary, and "saw women—even those in the industrial labor force—as actual or potential daughters, wives and mothers, rather than fellow laborers" (xii). They were also suspicious of the working girls' organization, particularly, of WTUL, because of the middle-class allies (Tax 102-03).

Incapable of presenting any solution to this problem, the male unionists poured their anger at the unmarried girls who lived under the "protection" of their fathers and brothers. A writer of *The New York Commercial Advertiser* explains the "vicious circle" in which the single girl was in. The single girl can accept the low wage job offer, because her father and brothers will support her. With her acceptance, the wages of male workers goes down ("Woman and the Labor Market" 446). He deplorably predicts that the "battle" has only begun and the "invasion" of women will continue, lowering wage of male workers further. America is a free country, therefore any woman can work if she wants but if she works with low wage will result in "a great evil" ("The Wages of Women" 532). Even though his solution to this problem was drastically different from that of conservatives and male unionists, a famous economist Richard T. Ely, Director of School of Economics, Political Science, and History, University of Wisconsin, Madison, agreed with this assertion. He explained that as women participated in manual labor, wages of male workers went down to the point that the income of husband and wife equaled the previous wage of husband alone (Campbell vi). Ely

regretted that this had disastrous results for the family. Because a mother cannot be with her children long enough, the children are demoralized and the health and strength of a future generation are impaired.

Arguing that working women threatened the male workers, some of them even asserted that all women should go back to their own place—home (“Woman and the Labor Market” 446). To them working women were simply not “natural.” They asserted that “[it] is against civilized human nature to throw the burdens of procuring sustenance upon those who have all they can endure in bearing, nursing and starting the education of children” (“Woman’s Work for Wages” 11).

The argument of the male unionists, however, was not built on the facts. It is true that many jobs were newly open to women, but it does not mean that women replaced men. From the late nineteenth century, American industry greatly expanded, and accordingly the demand of workers also greatly increased. As white male workers occupied the new skilled jobs and advanced to the higher hierarchy within working class, women took up the vacant seat where they left. And employment of women was a result of the effort of cost reduction which became inevitable in the fierce competition. With the fierce competition, even though there was no influx of women, the male workers would not have been able to earn more than they did. Between 1850 and 1890, the number of women workers increased by 270 percent, while men increased by 412 percent (“The American Workwoman” 748). This suggests that men rather than woman still enjoyed the greater chance of getting employed. Carroll D. Wright,

by showing the gradual increase of women employment in all kinds of occupations, asserts that women were not hurting men in business (“Are Women Hurting the Chances of Men in Business?” 556-57).

A close analysis of the arguments of the opponents of the working women reveals their two basic assumptions: One is that True Womanhood is the ideal type of womanly virtue, and the other is that the world outside of the domestic domain, particularly the realm of (manual) work, is corrupted and corrupting. At the turn of the twentieth century, the middle-class image of ideal woman was changing from the traditional dominant True Woman to the New Woman. The True Woman was “innocent, helpless, eager to please, morally strong but physically weak, displaying her virtue in willing self-sacrifice and ready acceptance of suffering—particularly labor pains. Contrast the New Woman with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman who took pride in immolating herself on the altar of motherhood” (Schneider and Schneider 16). Being helpless, she was supposed to be totally dependent to her husband. In other words, she was a beautiful parasite (Cogan 3).

Sometimes, women at the turn of the twentieth century were described to be enjoying equal relationship with men (“The American Woman” 294). In the 1920s, Americans saw clearly New Woman images were gaining popularity over traditional “ideal” womanhood. But the attackers of the working women worried that the working women were the ruining force of the ideal womanhood and eventually they would corrupt the American society as a whole. Almost all the articles that criticized the working women between 1890 and 1900 assert that women should go back to True Womanhood. In 1896, *The*

*Ladies' Home Journal* emphasizes that

thousands of our young women now risking their health and their honor in business houses will turn their attention to a channel where they more rightfully belong and where they can employ their God-given talents to a better advantage. And with the advantage to the girl will naturally come the advantage to the mistress, to the home, to our womanhood, and to our country. ("When Work Fits Woman" 14)

It also emphasized that "[the] best position that a woman can occupy is that of companion to man. She was made to be his friend and adviser; she was not made to imitate him either bodily or mentally" (Ashmore 10).<sup>2)</sup> She was a "moral arbiter of this world" who helped men to be morally perfect ("Woman the Moral Arbiter" 60). Grant Allen attacked the working women who seemed to try to live independently, and asserted "woman was not intended to take care of herself" ("Why Do Not the Women Marry?" 11). Frederic Harrison, in *The Fortnightly Review* argues that

"[the] true function of woman is to educate, not children only, but men, to train to higher civilization not the rising generation, but the actual society. ... This function of woman, the purifying, spiritualizing, humanizing of society, by humanizing each family and by influencing every husband, father, son, or brother, in daily contact and in unspoken language, is itself the highest of all human functions, and is nobler than anything which art, philosophy, genius, or statesmanship can produce." ("The True Function of Women" 59)

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2) Also see "Woman Is Not the Weaker Vessel," *Public Opinion* 7 Feb. 1891: 424. In this article, the writer claims that woman is not weak physically.

In short, the women should stay at home and “educate,” or influence, the men in her domain. The outer world is not her place. William W. Phelps agrees with Harrison when he criticized woman suffragists: “Woman’s sphere is the home. Here she is queen, and nowhere else.” (“Woman’s Sphere Not in Politics” 293)

The other assumption that the attackers had when they attacked the working women was that the world outside of home, particularly the workplace, was corrupted (Hapke 7). The criticism of the workplace was mainly focused on the factory workrooms and commercial stores. To the attackers, those were the most corrupting place. Isaac H. Clothier, who has been an employer on a large scale for twenty-five years, gave a speech in 1896, that “more wrong had been done to thousands of girls who have gone into [their] commercial houses than the world dreams of”. He maintained that if women had to do some work for a living, they must find a domestic service position which seemed to be “safe from danger, where their surroundings might be elevating and congenial, and their occupation not only unobjectionable, but desirable in every sense.” To him “the business world” was the greatest factor that was “doing so much to degenerate our young womanhood as this mad race on the part of girls” (“When Work Fits Woman” 494). The reporter of *The Ladies’ Home Journal* does not present any specific example how the girls were wronged. The report simply agrees that Clothier’s assertion is true and deserves consideration. The reporter adds that the girls should follow Clothier’s premonition instead of “risking their health and their honor in business houses” and turn to “[domestic area] where they more rightfully belong and where they can employ their God-given talents

to a better advantage” (“Woman’s Work” 9). A writer of *The Iron Age* admits that women have the capability to do many jobs that were only for men. But the writer strongly insists that “the doors of machine shops should not be opened for [women]” because if so “[the] degradation of American women would proceed rapidly, while those who begun it would drive no particular benefit” (“Female Labor in Machine Shops” 494).

It is not easy to find what specific examples led them to believe that factory workrooms and commercial stores morally harmed the working women, but there must have been unspoken wide-spread prejudiced consensus, given Helen Campbell’s complaints. According to her, there was a popular belief that the corrupted women such as prostitutes and “night-walkers” mainly came from the group of working women (Campbell 210). This belief was baseless, but the attackers connected the morally unacceptable prostitution to the image of the working women. With this image, the extremist M. G. Ferrero asserted that all women should be completely exempted from bread-winning labor (“The Exemption of Women from Labor” 50).

#### **4. The Progressivists’ Participation in WTUL**

WTUL was created in 1903 in order to address to those two “working girls” problems. Its participants were mainly two groups of women: the working women as wage-earners and those of the middle class. Until 1920 when Margaret Dreier—a women of immense wealth and a long-time national president of the organization—resigned, the

middle-class women took a leading role in the organization. From the start, the lead of middle-class women was, in a limited way, intended. Considering that the founders of the organization set the purpose of WTUL “to aim women workers in their efforts to organize to assist those women already enrolled in trade unions to secure better conditions” (McCreesh 88), WTUL was—at least in the beginning—not of the working women but of the middle-class women who helped the wage-earning women to form their own organization or to transform WTUL into their own. According to Carolyn D. McCreesh, different from the other labor movements that prevented non-working-class from participation, the organizers of WTUL encouraged participation of middle-class women until it became supported by sufficient number of the working women (65). In reality, when the working-class members were weak, the middle-class or the high-class leaders who dissolved the class contradiction in a middle-class version of sisterhood elevated certain individual working-class women into a miniature version of the labor aristocracy.

The participation of the middle-class women in the working-class related organizations were not a new phenomenon. In fact, they had been creators of various organizations to help working women. Among them, the Working Girls Clubs were closely linked to the middle-class activities in WTUL. The first Working Girls Club was formed in 1884 by Grace Dodge, a well-off woman in New York. She created a club “in order to give young women factory workers an opportunity to hear ‘practical talks’ on moral and religious questions” (Tax 59). Even though Mary Kenney, a book binder and a founder of WTUL, complained that she was disgusted with the talk

of the group which was almost always about outings instead of the problems of working women (McCreesh 88-89), the clubs provided the women from the two different classes to get together, and helped middle-class women to articulate the real problems of their working sisters. Settlement houses also played similar function. Many Progressivists who volunteered met working women and heard from them the working conditions of the wage-earners at that time. Some settlement houses like Hull House provided the two groups with chances to meet each other, and resources for the regular meetings (McCreesh 65).

Samuel Gompers, the president of AFL, keenly aware the contributions of the middle-class in WTUL when he warned that “rich women who offered their time and money to help working women could produce worthwhile results, but permanent true betterment of the lives of the working women can be secured when these women achieve it by their own efforts” (Foner 472). In spite of his warning, the middle-class allies, as they often called them, introduced various organizational techniques, and “they provided invaluable assistance, financial and inspirational, to the gifted working women already dedicated to unionizing women garment workers” (McCreesh 95). One good example of ally’s contributions is Margaret Dreier’s devotion to the organization.

Margaret Dreier was, as mentioned before, a wealthy and socially prominent woman of New York. She was an idealist and believed that her idealism could only be proved ideal when it was tested in the service of other people. She regarded WTUL as a chance to “test” her idealism. She believed that WTUL could assist self-supporting women to help themselves. She was elected second president of NY WTUL and later became president of national

WTUL. She viewed social conditions in terms of black and white, envisioning the industrial struggle as the universal struggle between the forces of good and evil. To assure victory for good, that is the successful organization of women workers into viable unions capable of bargaining effectively with selfish employers, she struggled to install working women and their middle-class sympathizers with her lofty ideals (McCreech 96-97). Supporters of the working women, some of whom were, like Dreier, the middle-class allies of WTUL, regarded more participation of female laborers as a historic trend that could not be reversed. They saw it as the triumph of civilization. They did not overlook the hardship which the working women were experiencing. The supporters wanted to fight along with them.

## 5. Conclusion

The fights that the middle-class allies fought with their working sisters were not only against the employers who exploited the female wage-earners and the male-dominant society, but also the unfavorable working conditions and the social prejudices against the “working girls”. From this perspective, the achievements of WTUL should be reconsidered. As a labor and feminist movement, as most critics say, WTUL may not have been successful, but the allies were successful from their own point of view. The purpose of them was not liberating the working women from their oppression of the employers, but helping them to stand on their own feet in order to fight their own fight. To do so, they needed to support the weak sisters to

stand up and fight with them for the time being. The working women and their well-off allies knew clearly what they were fighting against, and they achieved their aim.

Most of all, the middle-class allies divested themselves of the prejudice against the “working girls.” Though they eventually failed to fully realize the sufferings of the working women, they saw the plight of their working sisters and sympathized with them enough to actively participate in WTUL’s various activities. In addition, with their much greater resources, the allies played critical role publicizing the causes of the working women’s movements and, many times, of the strikers. Eventually, they were the progenitors of excellent female labor organizers who were wage-earners themselves. To name a few, Mary Anderson, a shoe stitcher and who was later appointed the director of the Women’s Bureau in the U.S. Department of Labor by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Elizabeth Christman, a glove worker, who was appointed by both Presidents Hoover and F. D. Roosevelt to labor posts, and Agnes Nestor, who was one of the most active labor organizers at that time. Pauline Newman, Rose Finkelstein Norwood, Leonora O’Reilly, Julia O’Connor Parker, Rose Pesotta, Rose Shneiderman, and Maud O’Farrell Swartz were the prominent labor movement leaders who actively participated in WTUL.

After 1920 when Margaret Dreier resigned the president of NWTUL, the leadership of WTUL went over to the leaders from working-class. WTUL existed until 1950. In its existence of forty-seven years, WTUL was the organization that provided invaluable helps to the “working girls” to fight their way to better future.

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## Abstract

# **WTUL, an Attack on the Society Hostile to the Working Women at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

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The Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), established in 1903, generally has been evaluated as a failure both as labor movement and feminist movement. Not objecting to such evaluation of WTUL, this paper attempts to address to the main issues that the organization intended to fight against: the unfavorable working conditions of working women and their bad images. Instead of investigating the organization itself, this paper presents in detail the working conditions of the "working girls": mistreatment of the employers, low wages, hostile working environments including bad ventilation and strict rules. It also presents the hostility of the conservatives and the male unionists who draw the working girls' negative images. It reminds readers of the fact that the Progressivists, mainly women, who launched and maintained the leading roles of WTUL targeted those two aspects. From this perspective, it asserts that WTUL may be evaluated to have achieved a certain level of success.

## **Key Words**

WTUL, Progressivism, Working Girls, Labor Movement, Feminist Movement