LAWCHA
The Labor and Working-Class History Association

Gendered work, gendered struggles: women's activism at the work-place in long-term and comparative perspective

Posted on April 5, 2018 by Eileen Boris

The study of women's workplace activism advances the evolving inclusive and conceptually innovative historiography on women, gender, and labor. It focuses on a large group of workers who have often labored under precarious conditions and without adequate compensation, as day laborers or occasional workers from the 19th century onward, or as unskilled "mass workers" in the period of Fordism and state-socialism in the second half of the 20thcentury. In addition, working women across time and space have continuously juggled multiple types of labor, and combined paid and unpaid labor in varying arrangements over their life-course. Working women thus epitomize a group of workers which the new global labor history has identified as the majority of the global workforce. Their lives and struggles have been visibly shaped by their involvement in overlapping cycles of social reproduction, a defining feature of labor activism, which neither the classical history of the labor movement nor the new global labor history have systematically addressed. These women, when engaging in social and political struggle, and working to stabilize and improve their place in the factory, home, work-shop or other workplaces, faced multiple political marginalization even amongst potential allies. They encountered male-dominated trade unions and social milieus when collaborating with the workers' movement and faced disinterest about and containment of working women's class- and labor-related interests and activism when cooperating with women's groups and women's organizations. The new transnational and intersectional history of women's movements and women's activisms has highlighted the tension of gender and race, especially in the imperial dimensions of this history, and with regard to some world regions. It has not so far systematically explored the consequences of putting gender first (and over class) for the involvement of working class women in women's activism and the history of women's

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.

This specialized theme puts the agency and sometimes radicalism of working women center stage. It moves beyond the marginalization of these struggles by both male dominated labor movements and elite and middle-class women's organizations, which, subsequently, has been reproduced by some of the related historiography on working-class struggles and women's movements. It highlights the concepts and practices of livelihood of working women, who both accommodated and challenged the logic of modern economic life at the point of

We seek papers that span the period of the 19th and 20th centuries. The session invites research on the history of women's organizing, resistance and radicalism at the workplace and beyond, including involvement in trade unions, strikes and everyday politics, and agency and self-identification on the shop-floor and beyond the work-place, such as "just price" riots, protests over housing evictions, or activism aimed at securing protection at the workplace or the implementation of gendered welfare measures. The session will trace continuity and change over place and time, focusing, for example, on the interaction of women workers of different generations, or women workers laboring during their life-course under radically different economic and political circumstances. It seeks research on the interaction between laboring women participating in various activist traditions and from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, including both migrants and citizens. Particularly welcome is research which explores working women's activism in the context of unequal social and economic development, which at times generated collaboration yet in other circumstances generated conflict amongst working women, both locally and across borders. It compares working women's activism and organizing centered at the work-place in divergent political systems. While some of these systems claimed to tame or overcome class difference, with ambiguous consequences of how the gender of class could be addressed, others compelled working class men and women to forge solidarity against class oppression, without resolving gender struggle within working class activism.

To be considered, please send short abstract to Susan Zimmermann, zimmerma@ceu.edu, before April 25, 2018

Author

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.

- 
  Eileen Boris

© LAWCHA. All Rights Reserved.