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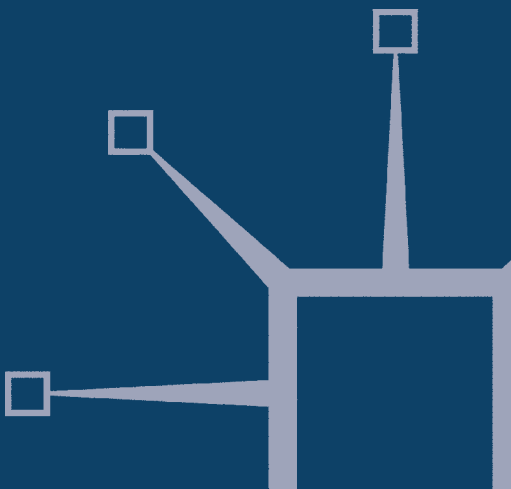
The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906–1921

Cathy Hunt



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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2014 978-1-137-03353-6

First published 2014 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-44152-5 ISBN 978-1-137-03354-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137033543

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by MPS Ltd, Chennai, India.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Nuffield Foundation who awarded me a Social Science Small Grant (2008–10) which allowed me to travel to archive offices and local studies libraries to conduct my research. Thanks are due to all of the many archivists and librarians who gave expert advice and help. There are too many to list here, but I would like to give particular thanks to the staff of the TUC Library at London Metropolitan University, the Working Class Movement Library in Salford, the Labour History Archive and Study Centre in Manchester, Enfield Local Studies Library and Archive, Glasgow Caledonian University Archives and Coventry History Centre. Thanks are also due to Coventry University for granting me study leave to write the book.

Many people helped to ensure that the task was completed. My family gave constant support and sought to distract me when the whole project seemed too daunting. Huge thanks are due to them for their proofreading and invaluable comments. Rachel Field gave friendship and sound indexing advice and I would like to thank Charlotte Peavoy for her research on Amy Hurlston of Coventry. My biggest thanks go to Bill Hunt, who read endless drafts of chapters, offered thoughtful and wise suggestions for improvement and always gave much encouragement and love.

When I was writing the book, someone asked me if it would be the definitive history of the National Federation of Women Workers. My emphatic answer was that it would not. It is merely my interpretation of its work and its place within the British labour movement, and I present it in the hope that others will go on to uncover more details, offer new insights and deepen our understanding of the lives of women workers in the early 20th century. This book is dedicated to two women, Annie Elizabeth Juett and Ellen Mary Gibbons, my London great grandmothers, who worked and raised families during the years of the Federation's activity.

List of Abbreviations

AR	Annual Report
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
CCEW	Central Committee for the Employment of Women
CCWTE	Central Committee of Women's Training and Employment
DC	District Committee
EC	Executive Committee
ELFS	East London Federation of Suffragettes
Federation	National Federation of Women Workers
GFTU	General Federation of Trade Unions
GTP	Gertrude Tuckwell Papers
GW	Gas Workers and General Labourers' Union
GWJ	*General Workers' Journal* (journal of the NUGW)
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IWM	Imperial War Museum
IWSA	International Woman Suffrage Alliance
IWWU	Irish Women Workers' Union
LCC	London County Council
LL	*League Leaflet* (journal of the WLL, which became *Labour Woman* from 1913)
LP	Labour Party
MDT	*Midland Daily Telegraph*
MRC	Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick
NA	National Archives
NFGW	National Federation of General Workers
NI	National Insurance
NUGW	National Union of General Workers (from 1916)
NUWW	National Union of Women Workers

NWTUL	National Women's Trade Union League of America
PA	Parliamentary Archives
RPWPA	Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act
SJCIWO	Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations
TC	Trades Council
T&LC	Trades and Labour Council
TOSI	Textile Operatives Society of Ireland
TUC	Trades Union Congress
USA	United States of America
WCG	Women's Cooperative Guild
WD	*Woman's Dreadnought* (journal of the ELFS)
WEU	Women's Emancipation Union
WLL	Women's Labour League
WPPL	Women's Protective and Provident League
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union
WTUAC	Women's Trade Union Advisory Committee
WTUL	Women's Trade Union League
WTUR	*Women's Trade Union Review* (journal of the WTUL)
WU	Workers' Union
WW	*Woman Worker* (journal of the Federation)
WWS	Women, Work and Society (collection at IWM)

Introduction

Aims, structure and sources

This book combines the story of the National Federation of Women Workers (the Federation) with details of the working lives of the women with whom it came into contact during its 15-year existence, and in so doing investigates the deeply hidden nature of women's working lives in early 20th century Britain. It does so by explaining how the policies developed by the Federation's leadership were experienced in the regions of Britain as it established a network of branches. The Federation was an all-female British trade union. Between 1906 and 1921 it sought to recruit women working in industries in which there was no other union for them to join or where they were excluded from male unions. It was founded by Mary Macarthur, who, as secretary of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), became frustrated with the limitations of the small, independent women's unions that the WTUL had helped to establish since the 1870s. Instead, Macarthur sought to establish branches of a federation uniting members in an organisation that could afford to give practical support, including strike pay, to its members. As a general union, distinct from the craft or skilled unions, it set out to recruit women from a wide range of industries, often in trades where they predominated, where wages were extremely low and trade unionism unusual or unsuccessful because, for a multitude of reasons, no one had invested time in labour organisation.

It is tempting, when researching the activities of a small organisation, to get drawn into its dramas and to interpret its enthusiastic reports as a story of progression and extraordinary achievement. With a lifespan of just 15 years and a membership that, at its height, represented at very best no more than 10 per cent of all organised women and 2 per cent

of all working women, historians examining late 19th and early 20th century trade unions could perhaps be forgiven for either affording it little space in their work or omitting it altogether.[1] Until now there has been no full-length published history of the Federation, and given its relatively small membership and the brevity of its existence this might come as no surprise. The Federation, however, punched well above its weight. It successfully campaigned for legislative change and introduced trade unionism into the lives of thousands of women workers. Its policy, wrote Mary Macarthur's biographer, 'was nothing if not heroic' and 'splendidly audacious'.[2] Even Macarthur seemed surprised at its success, reflecting in 1920 that, 'looking back to our early days, the progress and influence of the Federation seems almost miraculous. Great as our numbers and substantial [as] our balance today, the influence we possess in the country is out of all proportion to our membership and funds'.[3] The Federation provided vital publicity for women's trade unionism and forced men – politicians, civil servants, union leaders and members – to take notice of it. J. J. Mallon of the National Anti-Sweating League wrote that the Federation and the WTUL, 'with all their camp followers in attendance … were no more than a stage army but they said they represented the working women of Great Britain and they made so much noise that they came to be believed'.[4]

Its leaders made sure that the noise was heard by those with power. Before the First World War they made use of the WTUL's parliamentary connections to raise the profile of women workers. In 1920 Fabian social investigator Barbara Drake wrote that 'at Trades Union Congresses and Labour Party Conferences, on Government and statutory bodies, at public meetings or demonstrations, [the Federation] is recognised by common consent as the leading authority on women's questions, and fills a place in the trade union world which could be filled in no other way. Without its initiative, indeed, it would seem that women's interests and point of view would be too often entirely overlooked'.[5]

The merger with the mixed-sex National Union of General Workers (NUGW) in 1921 was, publicly at least, welcomed by the Federation, whose policy, throughout its existence, was to transfer its members into mixed-sex organisations whenever this became possible and to promote alliance between men and women workers. Mary Macarthur believed that one of the most important functions of a trade union for women was didactic:

> Great as is the work that trade unions are doing as levers to improve working conditions, and as benefit societies to render mutual aid to

> improve working conditions to their members in time of trouble, they are fulfilling an even more important function as schools of social and economic education – education in its widest and truest sense.[6]

The Federation aimed, by providing its members with a space to learn the rules of engagement, to disprove the dominant contemporary view that women made poor trade unionists. In 1907 an article in the socialist newspaper, the *Clarion*, sympathised with the overall position of industrial women. It also demonstrates the strength of an ideology that regarded women as temporary workers and natural home makers:

> Women are always more difficult to keep in unions than men. Their wages are so wretchedly small that it requires more self-sacrifice almost than human nature is capable of making, to spend money on that which yields no *immediate* return. Hope springs eternal in a woman's heart and tells always the same flattering tale. That mill work is only temporary and marriage and maternity the ultimate goal. Women always cherish the fond hope that a husband means good riddance to mill life and misery, and a glad entrance into the safe and sheltered harbour of home, sweet home. And it is a good thing they *do* cherish the hope, in spite of their disappointment when they find marriage often only adds the duties of wife, mother, and housekeeper to the mill work. Without that hope, we should lose the ideal of the mother at home, which heaven forfend we ever should.[7]

Mary Macarthur wanted trade unions to bring 'new and wider interests to the women workers and educat[e] them to [be] better citizens, so that living a fuller life they need no longer look to marriage as a way of escape from the monotony and drudgery of existence, but were enabled to undertake its responsibilities more fitted physically and mentally to be mothers of the coming race'.[8] She saw no contradiction in this statement; to her, the question was not about women's *right* to work, but about their rights to fair treatment whilst they *were* workers. She advocated industrial harmony between the sexes and believed that trade unionism empowered women to demand more from life so that they would not be compelled to undercut men's wages, accept unregulated and dangerous work or be forced out to work when they wanted to stay at home and care for their children. The Federation accepted entirely the concept of the family wage that retained a pay differential between

men and women. It sought to protect women from the worst excesses of industrialisation but did not challenge the other contemporary discourse that as mothers, their natural place was at home. Although at times deliberately misunderstood or misrepresented by men fearful of losing status within industry, the Federation's work centred less on challenging men's positions at work than on seeking to secure and improve women's. In 1918 its retiring President, Gertrude Tuckwell, pointed out the strength that organised women had gained:

> You cannot exploit the women who are trained and organised … the industrial question is not a sex question. It has got to be decided in terms of skill, not of sex. Men and women's interests are identical. In the future there will be numbers of people who will want to widen the breach between them. But close up the ranks. Do not give people an opportunity of taking advantages of differences between you.[9]

The turbulent years in which the Federation existed are examined in three distinct periods. The first of these covers the years from 1906 to the outbreak of the First World War. Mary Macarthur wrote of men's resentment at the 'intrusion' of women, whose presence, it was believed, would result in a lowering of male wages as a result of unregulated competition.[10] During these years the Federation developed a range of tactics; it sought to establish a conciliatory relationship with male trade unionists alarmed at women's continued movement into industries traditionally regarded as male domains. It made use of a period of increasing industrial unrest among men and women workers, particularly between 1910 and 1914, to establish trade union branches and encourage workers to recognise that organisation was the most effective way of avoiding disputes in the first place. These years were also marked by the Federation's quest for an expansion of state intervention to tackle the problems associated with excessively low paid or 'sweated' labour, with emphasis on the 'scattered and oppressed home worker', for whom organisation was so difficult that 'a living wage must be secured … by other means'.[11]

The second period covers the years of the First World War, when attitudes towards working women shifted significantly, as many moved into the public spotlight. The Federation moved with them, gaining the ear of government ministers, with whom it developed an ambivalent but vital working relationship as it sought to ensure that women munitions workers received promised rates of pay and safe working conditions. It developed large branches in centres of munitions production

and, as a result, became closely associated with the engineering industries, but it also dealt with continuities as well as change. In contrast to enduring myths that the women workers of the First World War made up an almost entirely young and novice industrial workforce, my account echoes those of historians who remind us that the history of women's work in Britain does not start (or end) in the munitions factories.[12] The chapter on the war reminds us that although the lives of thousands of women were transformed, the war also represented years of exhaustive drudgery for many more and although there were new circumstances to adjust to, these were often simply variations or intensified versions of pre-war patterns. Women searched for affordable child care, went to work on impossibly crowded public transport, undertook long factory shifts, and worried about when to find time to shop and whether, by the time they got there, there would be any food left to buy. They ran the risk of being fined by the Munitions 'Court' if their reasons for absences from work were not regarded as legitimate.[13] Most women saw their wages rise, but as this was accompanied by a steep rise in the cost of living, there was often no accompanying liberation from financial anxieties.

The final period, from 1918 to 1921, saw a change of mood from optimism for a reconstructed world that recognised the improved status of women workers, to despondency, as women fought a losing battle against unemployment, reduced wages and a return to the low-paid, traditional women's industries from which many had been sprung during the war. Their union leaders sought to ensure that a decade's hard-won improvements were not wiped out by the return to peacetime production and then by recession. The Federation's decision to amalgamate with a larger mixed-sex general union, with greater resources and organisational ability, was made both to ensure the survival of its ideals and to fulfil its long-term aim of organising men and women within the same unions.

Chapter 1 explores the origins and the structure of the Federation. It situates it within the British labour movement and examines its complex relationship with the wider women's movement. Whilst Chapters 2, 3 and 4 follow the Federation's chronological development, further detail about branches and people is included in the two subsequent chapters. Chapter 5 focuses on the work of its organisers and activists and Chapter 6 is a case study, offering a close-up look at the Federation's activities in Coventry, in the industrial midlands of England, where it had one of its most successful and enduring branches. Coventry, whilst not presented as a 'typical' branch, provides a detailed examination of how employers

and male workers dealt with women's increased participation in 'men's' industries in the metal and engineering trades. The book ends with appendices listing Federation organisers and identified branches along with those women (and some men) with whom they were associated. I make no claim that these represent a complete picture. In the absence of Federation branch records, these are instead the cumulative result of my research. Some of the branches barely got off the ground, others were short-lived. Some had more than one incarnation whereas others were a constant feature throughout the Federation's existence. Some cities had more than one branch, and others, particularly during the war, were associated with factories rather than towns. I hope that the names of paid and unpaid officials will allow future researchers to further explore the details of these women's lives and political activities. Women were very often involved in more than one aspect of the wider labour movement, with, for example, the same names cropping up as members of the Federation, the Women's Labour League (WLL) and the Women's Cooperative Guild (WCG).[14] Arguably this is the same today as it was a hundred years ago; it is often hard to find people willing to engage with grassroots activism and so, at least within the labour movement, there is often duplication of officials between different pressure groups. Further research is needed on women of the early 20th century labour and women's movements in order to discover the extent of their engagement within different but overlapping organisations and these two appendices offer a contribution.

Attempting to reconstruct the history of a trade union for which no executive or branch records have yet been found (presumed lost at the point of its merger with the NUGW in 1921[15]) is, of course, fraught with difficulty and I outline here some of the material consulted and the approaches taken that helped me to construct this particular picture of the Federation's regional work. Amongst the many collections of material examined, the Gertrude Tuckwell Papers (GTP) were a constant point of reference. Located within the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Library Collections, these comprise an extensive collection of published reports, writings and newspaper cuttings about women, work, trade unionism and political struggle in Britain (although with some comparative focus) in the years between 1890 and 1920.[16] Tuckwell was President of the WTUL and the papers provide a good sense not just of the extent of her organisation's campaigning work, but of the key issues that she identified as affecting women workers, including legislation, factory conditions and the campaign against sweated labour, and also some of the key strikes in which the Federation was involved.[17] Other vital records at the TUC Library include the minutes of WTUL

committee meetings and a collection of Federation annual reports. These, together with the journals of both organisations, the WTUL's *Women's Trade Union Review* (*WTUR*) and the Federation's *Woman Worker* (*WW*), provide building blocks of information about the regional work undertaken by their organisers as they embarked on campaigning and recruitment tours of the country. The *WW* was, from 1907, the Federation's monthly newspaper, and as such included, amongst articles and stories intended to teach the principles of trade unionism, brief news of the establishment of Federation branches.[18] From June 1908, when it switched to weekly production, it was no longer the Federation's organ and its union news was reduced. The paper collapsed in 1910, but was revived as the Federation's journal in January 1916.[19] From this point, it provides a snapshot of branch life during and after the war and it gives a sense of the frenetic pace at which organisers and activists worked in order to build and retain membership and of the many disputes and settlements in which it played a pivotal part.

The regional aspects of this study follow a historiographical tradition that brings to the fore the experiences of women activists across Britain, working for, but not always with, national leadership.[20] By exploring the work of the Federation's foot soldiers, I therefore build on an approach that emphasises the lives of organisations beyond their London headquarters.[21] Starting with the brief branch information included in the Federation's surviving printed materials, along with accounts of strikes and organising campaigns, I pursued further information from local and national archives. Although details of strikes, disputes and the relationship that Federation branches had with local labour movements come from a combination of trades council (TC) and trade union records, and local and socialist newspapers, as well as from the official record (National Archives, NA), I am acutely aware that the voices of the Federation members remain the quietest in the story. I wish that this could have been different. My earliest interest in the Federation came from two recorded interviews with Federation activists in Coventry, Edith Mayell and May Ford. These form part of a series of interviews with Coventry workers, recorded over 40 years ago as research for a book on 20th century Coventry by historian Kenneth Richardson.[22] Similar opportunities to learn more about grassroots Federation life have not, however, presented themselves. In recounting a strike involving women in the Vale of Leven in Scotland in 1911, George Rawlinson and Anna Robinson note that anonymity is a common feature of the labour history of this period.[23] I recognise their frustration at being 'left to wonder what the organisation at factory level

was like, who were the members of the shop and strike committees and what their political affiliations or persuasions [were]'.[24] A very real fear of victimisation accompanied industrial action and it is, then, unsurprising that the names of its leaders, national and local, stand out on its pages, while the membership remains largely unidentified. The activist view, preserved in accounts sent in to the union newspaper and reports, must of course be treated with caution. It tends to be rather optimistic, having been used to provide encouragement to the rank and file and strengthen organisation. It is, however, remarkable that, given the very real risks of unemployment, *any* women workers chose to take up positions within their local branches or in the national union.

Of the few existing biographical accounts, these also reflect the activist rather than the rank and file membership perspective. They do, however, contribute vital parts to the Federation's narrative. Mary Agnes Hamilton's life of Mary Macarthur, whilst sentimental in tone ('she had the drive of the lightning, the unresting energy of the weather, the faith and the unself-conscious self-absorption of one who is the vehicle of something greater than herself'[25]), does provide a sense of the speed, urgency and breadth of the work of the trade union organiser as well as capturing the drive and vision of this charismatic leader. Margaret Bondfield, who became organising secretary of the Federation in 1915, includes some information about the union in her autobiography, but perhaps its greatest value is in its depiction of the many demands on the time of an activist involved not just in trade unionism but in national and international socialism, and seeking to establish a parliamentary career.[26] Unpublished memoirs by Gertrude Tuckwell and Dorothy Elliott, who became a Federation organiser during the war and replaced Bondfield as Chief Woman Officer of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers in 1935, add to the detail, while Doris Nield Chew's account of her mother's years as a WTUL organiser (often working to establish Federation branches) provides a sense both of the demands of the job and of potential communication problems between London-based staff and regional organisers.[27] It is important to stress, however, that, despite the many references in this book to the Federation's leaders, details of their personal journeys into political life do not dominate this account. This is deliberate. Whilst new biographies of Mary Macarthur and Margaret Bondfield are undeniably overdue, my purpose here is to emphasise the effect and impact of the leaders' work on women's trade unionism and hence, where possible, to shift the spotlight from union Headquarters onto the Federation branches and to highlight the work of less well known women and men.

Some of my most useful research sessions were those spent in combined archives and local studies centres, where it was possible to develop a more comprehensive picture of a local area than can be achieved through the archives alone, cross-referencing to locally produced social and economic histories of community and business. Local and socialist newspapers seldom provide merely factual accounts of women's strikes during this period. In Nuneaton, Warwickshire, the local paper justified its extended coverage of the strike of 200 women at a clothing factory because it was the first among 'the weaker sex' in the town and in addition contained 'more than a passing element of romance' because of the women's defence of their sacked foreman.[28] Whilst there could be considerable sympathy shown for plucky girls, editors, depending on their politics (and often, more importantly, the papers' ownership) might remind strikers of their employers' benefaction and openness to 'reason', in case they were too readily influenced by 'agitators'.[29] Socialist papers emphasised both injustice – during a 22-week strike of networkers in Kilburnie in 1913, the Glasgow *Forward* described the women who work 'with their boots off – legs, arms and heads being enlisted with unsparing zeal in their masters' service' – and militancy, taking part in huge daily processions that are 'offensive to the police who are servile in their loyalty to the Capitalists'.[30]

In order to construct a picture of the Federation, I have drawn on accounts of women and trade unionism, women and work, and women and politics. Traditionally labour history was written by men about men; women, if mentioned at all, were regarded as marginal to the development of the labour movement.[31] Histories of the two main general mixed-sex unions with which the Federation competed for members were published over forty years ago, before the 'take off' of women's history writing and neither include detailed analyses of the attitudes of the unions towards their female memberships.[32] As a result of work on women's labour history by socialist feminist historians in the 1970s and 1980s, there is now a greater readiness to consider more than just the statistics of women's trade unionism and to recognise and examine the barriers that historically prevented or limited women's participation in trade unions rather than assuming that their membership was of little consequence. Several important historical surveys of women's trade unionism, adding to Barbara Drake's comprehensive 1920 study, have resulted in an important redressing of the traditional male focus on the history of the British labour movement.[33] These in turn have paved the way towards more integrated examinations of men's and women's participation in trade unionism,[34] although there is arguably still some

way to go before women's place in industry and the labour movement receives as much historical attention as men's. Whilst, for example, in the 1970s, Sheila Lewenhak describes Mary Macarthur as 'unquestionably the greatest woman in the history of women's trade unionism'[35] and in 2005 Alastair J. Reid commends her ability to combine 'a detailed mastery of practicalities with a clear vision of broader goals and principles', neither Macarthur nor the Federation is as yet guaranteed a prominent place in all historical accounts of the development of British trade unionism.[36]

However great the leadership of Mary Macarthur, her union remained small in comparison to established men's unions, such as the Miners' Federation (with 597,000 members in 1910) or the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (with 100,000 in 1910, a year when the Federation claimed a membership approaching 10,000[37]) and perhaps feminist labour historians have (so far) chosen not to write a separatist history of the Federation in case this was viewed as 'add on' women's history, or encouraged a view that a history of the Federation stood for the history of all women's union organisation. It has not, however, been ignored; several historians examining aspects of women's work at the start of the 20th century, particularly those with a focus on the home front during the First World War, have included analyses of aspects of the Federation's work and its influence.[38] Among these is Deborah Thom's essay 'The Bundle of Sticks' in *Nice Girls and Rude Girls*, in which she considers the relationship between union leadership and rank and file membership and urges the undertaking of further studies to advance our understanding of the significance to individual women of their membership.[39]

Situating the Federation in history

The overlaps in the political work of some of the Federation's leaders can be best understood in accounts of women's growing political participation during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[40] The origins of the Federation lie in the shift within sections of the British women's movement away from an emphasis on philanthropy towards campaigns influenced by socialism and with the spotlight trained on women's position within the workplace. Middle class women such as Mary Macarthur and Susan Lawrence arrived at trade unionism through educational and political experiences that exposed them to new ideas and provided them with opportunities to move into positions of leadership and authority. Others from working class backgrounds, including Margaret Bondfield and Ada Nield Chew, approached it through a combination of personal

experience of workplace injustices and initiation into Labour politics. Some women certainly joined trade unions because of their socialist beliefs and some did so as part of their vision for women's increased participation as citizens and as workers, but many more joined in order to seek redress for local grievances and because they needed the strength of Mary Macarthur's oft-quoted analogy that:

> A Trade Union is like a bundle of sticks. The workers are bound together and have the strength of unity. No employer can do as he likes with them. They have the power of resistance. They can ask for an advance without fear. A worker who is not in a Union is like a single stick. She can easily be broken or bent to the will of her employer. She has not power to resist a reduction in wages. If she is fined, she must pay without complaint. She dare not ask for a 'rise'. If she does she will be told, 'Your place is outside the gate; there are plenty to take your place'. An employer can do without one worker. He cannot do without all his workers. If all the workers united in a Union – strong as the bundle of sticks – complain or ask for improved conditions, the employer is bound to listen.[41]

From the 1880s, women campaigners investigated a range of solutions in the hope of solving the 'problems of women workers' in the belief that trade unionism alone would not cure all evils.[42] The Women's Trade Union Leagues of Britain and America, despite their commitment to organising women workers, also campaigned for protective factory legislation and the introduction of a minimum wage. Whilst the trade union member might also share this wider vision, her day-to-day focus was on the problems of the workplace. Historian Annelise Orleck found, when examining the lives of four working class women union activists in the early 20th century US labour movement, that their specific political objectives fitted neatly into neither middle class feminist agendas nor male-led working class activism. She applies the term first used by scholar Mildred Moore in 1915 – 'industrial feminism' – to the work of these women, whose vision 'extended beyond the shop floor to the homes and neighbourhoods of working class families'.[43] For such activists, trade unionism meant practical and grassroots politics in order to work for change in the local community.

At the start of his study of trade union and social history, A.E. Musson comments that whilst studies of 'mass movements and revolutionary slogans' excite students of working class history, trade unionism is far more mundane, 'relating to wages, hours, and working conditions,

with patient organising and negotiations'.[44] It is a point well made, for hiding in the 'mundane' is the very stuff of working women's lives. I do not suggest that the ideological debates of the labour movement were ignored at break times and in branch meetings, but very often local issues dominated the horizon and brought women to meetings in the first place. The defence of a victimised or dismissed colleague filled the hired halls or drew crowds at the factory gate. For many members, outrage at the introduction of new piece rates that undermined wage rates took precedence over socialist or feminist agendas. Often the union was initially alien to or separate from women's experiences of work; those who had not grown up with the concept of organisation first encountered it when industrial unrest spilled over into their lives. These were the issues that shaped and directed the union at the local level and this is the point of this book, focusing on the day–to-day work of the Federation rather than spending too much time examining the ideological issues that drove some of its leaders, except when these directly affected the members. I believe it is through such an approach that we begin to get nearer to the women whose lives were affected by the actions of their union.

Statistics: a warning

Labour historians and students do well to heed US labour historian Alice Kessler Harris' warning about the notorious unreliability of figures for union membership,[45] and in the case of the Federation, it is very difficult to be precise about numbers of branches and their members. Most trade union leaders were probably guilty of over-inflating their membership numbers from time to time in order to stress the point that they were forces to be reckoned with (and more powerful than their competitors), in the same way that employers chose to play down unions' significance and strength. In 1918 both the Federation and the Workers' Union (WU) told the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry that they each had over 60,000 women members, figures that were more or less double those quoted for the 1917 women's membership of these two unions by the Ministry of Reconstruction's Report of the Women's Employment Committee.[46] Such significant rises were not inconceivable, although it is unlikely that either union could ever be completely confident about numbers. Certainly the unstable nature of women's membership in the general unions has become increasingly apparent in my research. Not only did numbers in Federation branches fluctuate wildly, it was also very difficult for officials to ensure that those on their books were, or remained, paid-up members with

immediate entitlement to benefits. Membership numbers cited by the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU), to which the Federation belonged from 1907, are consistently and considerably lower each year than those put forward by either the Federation or by the Trades Union Congress (TUC).[47] The only explanation I can advance for this (and I do so without evidence) is that the GFTU, which insured small unions against potentially ruinous protracted or widespread strikes, may have recorded only the most stable base of each union's membership (perhaps those who had been members for a year or more), and if this is the case, it says a great deal about the precarious nature of women's membership in the general labour unions.

After a successful strike in Millwall, the Federation branch secretary later reflected on the large increase in members and the 'remarkable regularity' with which they were paying their contributions, which rather suggests that this was far from her usual experience.[48] Branches might, then, start with a flourish, with dozens or hundreds of applications for membership handed in during a dispute, but later, as in Pontefract in 1914, would come apologetic reports that the girls had not kept up their membership.[49] In the autumn of 1908 there was 'cheering news from Darlington', where 150 membership forms were handed to organiser Julia Varley after a campaign conducted with the TC highlighted the 'urgent need for organisation throughout the district'. The Federation Annual Report for 1909, however, reported that poor trade had resulted in a significant falling off of members.[50]

Contrasting with the Federation's 'record' 20,000 members, recorded in its 1914 Annual Report, compiled just before the start of the First World War, Barbara Drake's estimate of 10,000 by December 1914 was much more conservative,[51] although it is likely that membership numbers dipped significantly due to the period of unemployment that affected women at the start of the war. By October 1915, the Federation's War Workers' Campaign was under way and, recruiting from the ammunitions and aircraft industries, it once again recorded membership of 20,000.[52] During 1916 alone Drake believed that membership doubled to 40,000 and by December 1918 her figure was an approximate 80,000.[53] This latter number has been often cited by historians (including me), yet, when discussing amalgamation with the Federation, the NUGW quoted a membership figure of 59,000 Federation members, with 20,000 in its Approved Society section (which dealt largely with matters of National Insurance).[54] In contrast, organiser Ethel Weaver believed that at its peak the Federation may have had 100,000 members.[55]

Although war increased membership, it did not stabilise it; women were transferred between munitions centres, they were laid off when government contracts expired, moving back to their home towns or seeking alternative work. North West Federation organiser Mrs Pearson recalled a 'brilliant victory' in May 1916 when girls at Armstrong Whitworth's factory in Manchester saw wages rise from as little as ten shillings a week to a pound. Her hope had been that this would encourage members to fully understand the benefits of belonging to the union but instead the branch encountered lapses and arrears and when trouble flared at the factory later in the year, Mrs Pearson admonished that 'the whole of the difficulties could have been avoided if the girls had remained union members and in touch with their union'.[56] Despite the fact that the Federation claimed to have 8,900 members in Newcastle by March 1917, a year later organiser Harriet Fawcett, on a return visit to the city which she had so successfully organised, expressed profound disappointment at the lack of interest 'which the members themselves seem to have given to what is their own movement and their own business'.[57]

Although the Federation might have been tempted to present to the world its most optimistic figures, its increased financial strength is clearly evident from its annual reports, which in 1918 recorded a closing balance of nearly £27,000 compared to just over £1,000 at the start of 1911. This reflects an increase in membership from an estimated 10,000 in 1911 to nearly 60,000 in 1918.[58]

Context

Notions of women's work

In order to explain the context within which the Federation began its organising work, this part of the Introduction explores the influence of contemporary dominant discourses on the gendered nature of employment in this period. It follows historian Pat Thane's assessment that 'women's earning prospects were not good, but neither were those of many men and little purpose is served by making them appear worse than they were. What is important is to establish what those earnings were and how they were constructed'.[59] It is also important, however, to explore the reasons why there was increased attention paid to women's work in the last quarter of the 19th century and why the debate about wages and the nature of employment became more public.

From the early 19th century, domestic ideology emphasised the perceived influence of middle class women on the moral behaviour of

their husbands and children, with the home viewed as a sanctuary from the cut-throat public male world of business and industry.[60] The influence of this ideology, spread by writers, social reformers and churches, extended into the lives of working class families, and the notion that men and women had separate spheres of influence was taken up with enthusiasm by the men of the labour movement. It was used not just in Britain but across Europe and in the USA to protect male status and pay when it was feared that these were being undermined by the increased numbers of women workers in industries that had previously only employed men. Christine Stansell notes, for example, how working men in 19th century New York objected loudly to the exploitation of their wives and daughters in the workplace but offered no protest 'when they watched women work themselves to the bone in other ways, keeping their houses, bearing and raising their children'.[61] In the call for the maintenance of a 'family wage', theoretically intended to sustain a man and his wife and children (and thus justifying the pay differential between men and women), the argument that a woman's true and natural calling was that of wife and mother became so strong that it has arguably dominated discussion about women in the workplace ever since. In their 1906 study of women's work and wages in Birmingham, Edward Cadbury, M. Cécile Matheson and George Shann conclude that 'working women usually accept the dependent inferior position as right and just, because they have always been accustomed to it'.[62] Beatrice Webb wrote that 'the axiom that the female of the manual-working, wage earning class needs less food, less rest, less recreation, and less instruction than the male follows her from childhood up to her seventieth birthday'.[63] Cadbury *et al.* disputed the public opinion that women had a lower standard of comfort than men and suggested that 'on the whole, facts seem to show that it would be more true to say that women's standard of comfort is often low because of the low wages they get, rather than the opposite'.[64] The TUC archive includes a printed budget for a 'factory girl' who earned nine shillings a week in 1910. For this woman, living independently of family, rent accounted for three shillings and a further three shillings and three pence was spent on a diet of bread, tea, sugar, milk (the cheapest tin), dripping, bacon (for Sunday lunch), six dinners (cheese or German sausage and bread or fish and potatoes) and relish for Sunday tea. The remaining amount went on soap, soda and blue for laundry, coal, light and wood, payments of one and a half shillings to clothes and boot clubs and death insurance. There was nothing left to spend on transport or leisure.[65] Echoes of what American organiser Rose Schneiderman described as the 'joyless

life of the working woman'[66] are found in the letters that the British tailoress Ada Nield Chew (who subsequently undertook organising work for the Federation) wrote to her local paper in 1894. There was no time for reading and 'as for recreation and enjoying the beauties of nature, the seasons come and go, and we have barely time to notice whether it is spring or summer'.[67]

Emphasising motherhood as woman's highest and most noble achievement, many European and American women's campaigning organisations fought not for the working class woman's *right* to work but to ensure that she should not be *forced* to work because of adverse economic circumstances. Many of these campaigns embodied so-called maternalist politics, forging links between women's involvement in the public world of politics and 'the virtues of domesticity'.[68] The first conference of the National Women's Trade Union League of America observed that the conditions of modern industry had forced young girls as well as married women away from the home and into the factory, workshop and store.[69] In her study of women's factory work in Germany, Kathleen Canning shows how reformist ideas became increasingly concerned with the importance of workplace improvements that emphasised women workers' primary roles as wives and mothers.[70] There was tacit support for the notion that the male wage should be a 'family' one and, as British socialist campaigner Margaret MacDonald wrote in 1911, 'with regard to young children we think there can be no two opinions – every infant should be cared for by its own mother, if possible'. She admitted that a wife's ability to supplement the family income benefited her children, but also believed that this could be 'a bad influence on many husbands … lessening their feeling of responsibility as bread winners' and resulting in lack of eagerness to find or to keep work'.[71]

Women's wages

Between 1881 and 1911, research shows that the employment of working class women rose by 24 per cent, from 2,907,600 to 3,687,000.[72] According to Barbara Drake, in 1906 just 166,803 women were trade union members, and the vast majority of these (nearly 90 per cent) were in the textile and clothing unions.[73] Sidney Webb used Board of Trade figures for 1906 to conclude that an adult woman's average net earnings were just under 11 shillings across the whole year (compared with 25 shillings and nine pence for an adult man), an estimate that took into consideration five weeks' absence each year as a result of sickness or unemployment.[74] Cadbury *et al.* found that in Birmingham an