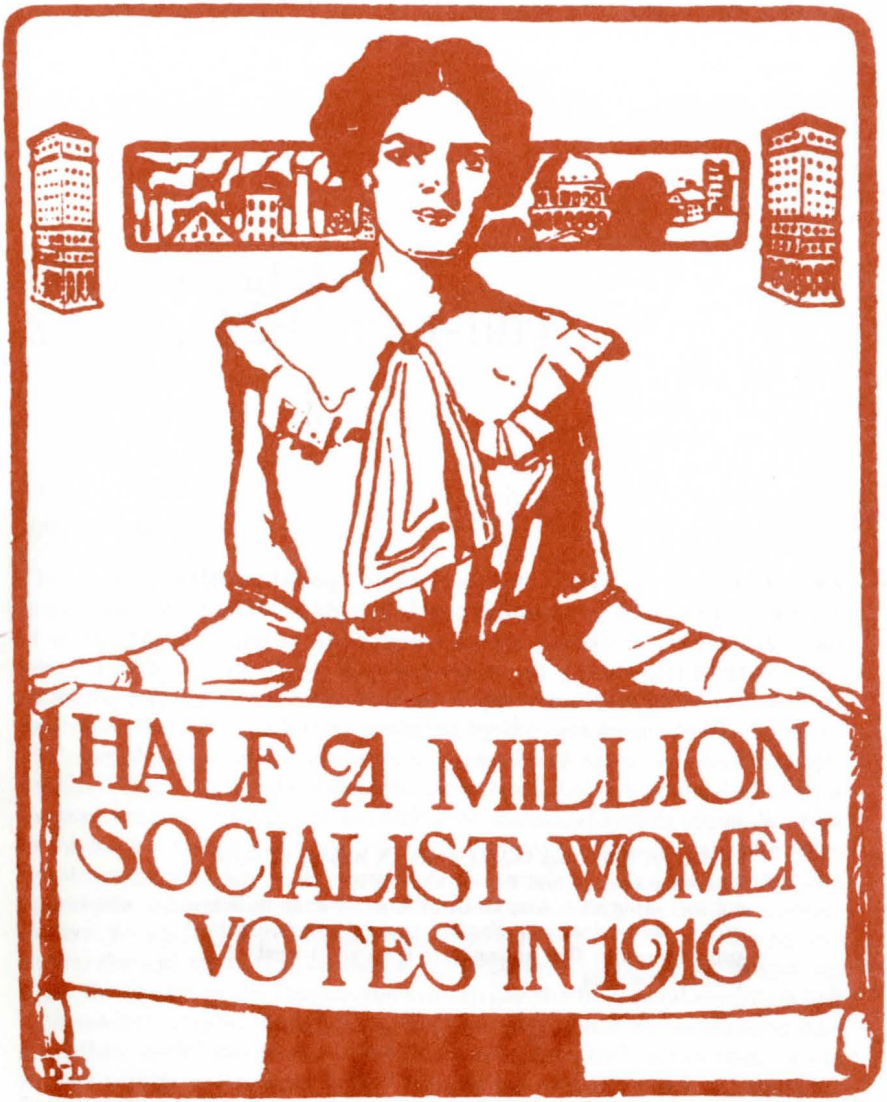

Women and the Socialist Party, 1901-1914

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Introduction

The basic problems facing women within American capitalism have undergone little qualitative change. The mechanical innovations of a century of technological progress, while lightening the burdens of household drudgery, have contributed to the reification, or "professionalization," of woman's role as housewife. Modern Capitalism staved off the disintegration of the family, a horror predicted by the first generations who grappled with the implications of the transformation of American economy after the Civil War. The family remained as a vestige of economic production of a by-gone era, but through certain technical and social ramifications, lingered as the basic social unit of American society, perpetuated with new rationales for strapping women to the institution. The protests of women against the oppression inherent in such a system are transhistorical, but the contradictions become most explicit during periods of intense social crisis, for example, the linkage of the women's rights movement with ante-bellum reform. Similarily, as the Progressive Era marked the first social confrontation with modern corporate capitalism, tensions heightened as institutions outgrew their usefulness in industrial society. Women took active roles in the various reform movements of the turn of the century, from agitation for factory safety legislation, pure food laws, Temperance, and conservation to their long-standing demand for the right to vote. The entry of masses of women and girls into industrial labor once more dramatized the inequalities; as they saw the possibility of economic independence, the standards which demanded their submission seemed without justification. The most outspoken protest against their irrational inferiority took form in the wave of Femin-

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ism, which sought to shatter the myths of the Victorian Woman. The most radical sector of the women's struggle worked not only for absolute equality but also for the ultimate abolition of capitalism.

Socialist women in the Progressive Era reacted to the tensions in much the same way as radical women today react: they demanded day-care centers, discarded bourgeois clothes fashions, kept their maiden names or joined them to their husbands' with a hyphen, and sometimes rejected marriage entirely to carry on a career in a social movement. But the historical situation which faced them implied a different set of relationships. The Socialist Party itself occupied a unique position in the reform movements of American society. It was the *only* Party that allowed women's participation, and until 1912 it carried within and around it the bulk of all progressive forces in the nation. Therefore, the Party naturally provided the women with the organizational experience and expertise which they could utilize in all their political activities.

Within the Socialist Party the women's interests and functions varied greatly. Especially during the Party's early years, prominent women were socialists foremost and interested in the Woman Question only secondarily, if at all. The famed labor agitator Mother Jones, her younger counterpart Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the popularizer of Marxian ideas May Wood Simons and several outstanding public lecturers were notable examples. Thousands of lesser-known women provided organizational aid in auxiliaries in every part of the country while relinquishing political decision-making and participation to their husbands. Increasingly numerous but always present were the women of a third type, militant socialists who insisted that the struggle for sexual equality was essential to their agitation for the socialist cause.

Like the women's liberation activists of today, the militant socialist women emanated from several political sources. Some, like the tremendously popular public speaker Kate Richards O'Hare, came to see the necessity of a self-conscious women's movement through long participation in the party's agitational work. Others took their struggle for women's liberation into the socialist movement. In many cases their lives were shaped and transformed by their political activities within the party. Josephine Conger-Kaneko devoted her life's work to the publication of the only mass-circulation radical women's magazine in American history, known for most of its seven-year span as the *Progressive Woman*. Margaret Sanger, who later became the leader of the world-wide birth control movement, had her political beginnings in the socialist movement and press. For many prominent woman socialists, marriage became a burden which had to be cast off. The first woman elected to the party's national executive committee, Lena Morrow

Lewis, revealed in 1911 that, due to her lecturing, for fifteen years she had not spent more that a week in the same town. By 1912, she was embroiled in a National Office scandal for her relationship with the (married) National Secretary, J. Mahlon Barnes. Although prestigious in the Party, she was savagely attacked in much of the socialist press, above all in the *Christian Socialist*. Like many of her sister-comrades, Lena Morrow Lewis had tied her personal fate to her political beliefs.

In the study that follows, two principle categories of socialist women have been brought together chronologically. First, there were the women who formed themselves into autonomous, socialist-oriented groups. The Socialist Party was forced to recognize these separate organizations because it feared they would be drained off into reformist movements and would subsequently expose the party's failure to stand as the vanguard of all progressive social forces. The suffrage movement which supported thousands of semi-radical women was correctly deemed a particular threat to the integrity and leadership of socialists. Second, there were women within the Party who were *reacting* to the insurgency of the spontaneous women's groups. They often played a mediating role, organizationally successful, between the autonomous women's organizations and the Party structure. For a brief period, between 1908 and 1912, the aspirations of the two categories of women were complemented by their shared functions within the Party's framework. But as tensions grew within the socialist movement after 1912 and during the war, the question of primary goals was tragically sharpened. Ultimately the women parted ranks. While the die-hard socialists stayed on to fight internal Party battles, the majority of militant women left the Socialist Party and sought a new organizational form which they were never to find.

I. Beginnings, 1901-1907

At the founding convention of the Socialist Party of America, eight women served as regularly-elected delegates. The one hundred seventeen men who attended the historic unity meeting of 1901 took little note of the women and extended no special privileges, while the women participated with the usual vigor of socialist agitators, reflecting past experiences in Party work which set them off from other members of their sex. The female delegates were active in formulating the policies of the new organization, but their influence was and would remain that of individuals, neither representatives of women as a group nor of other women in the Socialist Party. The convention itself offered only a formal declaration demanding "equal civil and political rights for men and women." Yet, the future proponents of sex equal-

ity within the Party would look back to this minor motion as an initial stimulus to women's rights in the Party framework.[1]

The women, who sensed a special need for a social organization compatible with their husbands' political aspirations, organized themselves in social clubs and discussion groups on the periphery of the party. Their associations greatly resembled non-socialist women's literary societies and church groups and drew membership from among the wives of regular party members. The women, rarely dues-paying members of the Socialist Party, provided an auxiliary or supplement to regular party activities while giving formal homage — albeit abstractly — to the great struggle for Socialism among the working peoples of the world.

The most impressive display of energy in women's activities centered around the Socialist fund-raising bazaars, where the women handled entertainment, served the ice cream, and made the craft items sold for Party benefit. Occasionally the meeting of a party local would be devoted to a special "Women's Night" with a low-level political program. The few women concerned with politics in an on-going fashion expressed themselves outside the male-dominated meetings of the local, sharing the methods of their non-socialist "woman's rights" sisters, described by a male member as "pink tea-party propaganda; nice little lady-like salon meetings and scented notes to legislators begging their votes."[2] But the majority of socialist wives clung to the traditional woman's role of providing a social auxiliary and served the Party as they thought themselves best able. Perhaps their most autonomous activity was taking charge of children's education in the Socialist Sunday Schools. For the most aggressive women not directly agitating for socialism, the days of temperance agitation were not far behind, and their concerns continued to focus on essentially ethical questions.

As the Socialist Party began to organize locals across the United States, wives usually followed the example of women in New York and San Francisco, setting themselves apart in small auxiliaries of a few comrades. By 1904, the Party membership had grown in three years from scarcely four thousand to over twenty thousand. Such success in recruiting was not reflected by a proportionate increase of women members in the regular Party aparatus. At the national convention of 1904 the number of women delegates had not increased, and there remained neither acknowledgement of women's special needs nor any particular stress upon

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[1] *Proceedings* of the National Convention of the Socialist Party, 1912, Appendix I (Report of the Woman's Department).

[2] John Spargo, "Woman and the Socialist Movement," *International Socialist Review*, VIII (February 1908), 449-55.

reaching them and enrolling them into the Party. The only self-conscious activity of women at the convention was that of the German Women's Socialist Club, which extended an invitation to the delegates to attend a reception prepared for them at the Trade Union Hall.[3]

Yet despite the Party's official disregard, the growth of the socialist movement and woman's rights agitation had a combined effect upon the more independent-minded socialist wives and single women. While the regular delegates met in convention, a small group held several sessions in a separate hall for the purpose of organizing a Woman's National Socialist Union. The impetus for this move came from the California women, the most forward sector of the women's socialist battle and of suffrage agitation. Among women of the "less-informed" locals the idea of a woman's national movement remained unpopular at the time, thus the Union had little influence outside of California.

Between 1904 and 1908, the Woman's National Socialist Union movement proved only precocious, for separate women's branches of the Party sprang up spontaneously across the country, in every major city and in the rural areas like Kansas and Colorado where the Party was growing most rapidly. As the feminist movement and above all its suffragist component began to reach beyond the middle class to the rapidly increasing body of working-class women, male socialists began to recognize the social implications of masses of women entering into social and political activities. And if the Socialist Party was to speak for the most progressive forces in the nation, it could not easily stand aside when women, conscious of their new political and economic roles, were organized into non-socialist reform movements. Most embarrassing personally, perhaps, was the continual lack of interest the Party members own wives displayed toward the Party organization and function. Thus the reassessment which marked the period indicated a development of intent among socialists toward the neglected problem of women's liberty.

In defense of this belated realization, the men repeatedly referred to the nominal plank in the 1901 constitution as evidence of their prevision and idealism in the struggle for "perfect equality of women with men in political and social matters." One socialist man commented," all of us believe that this is one of the proudest features the Socialist Party has in its program," but admitted afterward that "when we come to practice, we are not always in accord with this highly respectable principle of ours." The men

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[3] Josephine C. Kaneko, "The Activity of Socialist Women," *The Socialist Woman.* I (January 1908), 6.

searched out their own contributions to the indifference of their wives. Since the women were burdened by household cares which prevented them from thinking of the questions of the day, the men concluded that the great responsibility was on the part of the husbands to converse with them, to encourage their wives to study at home, so that the typical plight of an intelligent woman discussing her husband's socialism should not be repeated: "In the six years in which my husband has been a Socialist," one wife related, "he has a good deal of the time been interested in the local and in public meetings; and he has never yet asked me to attend any of them with him!"[4]

The active women in the party complained similarly of the apathy shown by the majority of wives toward political questions. The wives were even accused of willfully discouraging their husbands' devotion to his local or committee work. The women agitators pleaded, "if we cannot lead the columns in the battle for rights, let us be good followers. If we cannot teach our men, we can learn from them, we can cheer their efforts, we can give them God."[5] The role assigned to Party wives continued to reflect socially orthodox attitudes toward family life; the woman was at the side of her Socialist husband to offer him "courage of his spirit" in the struggles ahead. Socialism was man's struggle and women were to be educated primarily because an uneducated woman was assumed to be a naturally conservative influence. Moreover, since woman's suffrage was considered inevitable, the Party had a responsibility to educate at least its members' wives not to follow their intuitions and vote against socialism. Thus, while more real than before, the emphasis seemed to remain primarily negative, to prevent advanced women from being siphoned off into reform groups and ordinary wives from dragging their socialist husbands into inactivity.

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But the separate socialist women's organizations on the fringes of the Party continued to grow. They were greatly aided by the foundation of the *Socialist Woman*, in July 1907, which was both a popular magazine and a coordinator of news from the various women's branches. Serving as a sounding-board for national activities, the *Socialist Woman* made it clear to male Socialists that women engaged in their separate branches were not only housewives in search for an education in socialism but were in many cases articulate spokesmen of woman's rights who seemed to draw most heavily from a volatile Feminism. These latter women, especially, saw hope for the

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[4] As told to Kiichi Kaneko, "Where is Your Wife?" *ibid.*, I (August 1907), 5.
[5] Anna A. Maley, "Do You Help, or Do You Hinder?" *ibid.*, I (October 1907), 5.

future in the Socialist Party but believed the nominal "equal rights" plank was insufficient" so long as the rights stay in the program in cold, printed words and do not . . . manifest themselves in real pulsating life."[6] A woman, they declared, could never gain freedom and equality as long as she was satisfied being in the "dishwashing contingency," even to the Socialist Party. Holding that even under socialism, women could not be free until they had developed the power of freedom *within themselves*, the organizers stressed the significance of separate women's clubs. The women identified equally with socialism and with sex equality, recognizing their "special needs" and combining the appeal for immediate suffrage demands with the promise of socialism. Still, they remained indifferent to their role in the structure of the Socialist Party. As the editor of the *Socialist Woman*, Josephine C. Kaneko, wrote,

> We have said, half-heartedly, that women would come to our locals in these dreary places. But they haven't cared to come in any great extent, any more than the men would have cared to meet in the women's parlors. It has been plainly a discrimination in favor of one sex above another. But it has always seemed a matter of expediency.
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> As we have chosen our meeting places in favor of men, we have also directed our speeches and our published matter to mankind. His wrongs and his needs have filled our mouths and our newspaper columns, with the exceptional moment when we have given publicity to the oppression and needs of women. This, too, has seemed a matter of expediency; we have always had male audiences and male readers, and naturally have made our principal appeal to them. . . . But that belonged to the cruder days of our movement.[7]

II. The Woman's National Committee

In 1907 at the International Congress of Socialists at Stuttgart, the woman contingency met separately and urged a world-wide coordination of women's activities. The demands for equal suffrage in many European countries drew from a more advanced and militant movement than in the United States, and the strength of the women's influence was shown by the International's inclusion of a special woman's rights plank in their constitution.

[6] Eleanor Hayes, "Socialist Women in the United States," *ibid.*, I (November 1907), 10.

[7] Josephine C. Kaneko, "Are the Interests of Men and Women Identical?" *ibid.*, I (May 1908), 5.

Socialist Parties throughout the world were urged to make definite provisions for women in their platforms and to work more explicitly in every way in support of the suffrage movement. Confronting the difficulty of their locals easily assimilating these principles into their programs, the American delegates realized that sincere efforts would have to be made among the majority of male members, who gave only pious expression to the abstract commitment to the emancipation of women. But the most candid Socialists admitted that until special organization of women became more than theoretical, more than a resolution in favor of equal suffrage, the men in the locals would not regard it very seriously.

In February of 1908, the Party's neglect of its women became a vital topic of discussion, noteworthy because one of the most respected male spokesmen publicly shamed the organization for its failure to appeal to the sister comrades. John Spargo, writing in the leading theoretical journal, the *International Socialist Review*, chided the male members for their indifference. The women, he declared, had taken matters into their own hands, had correctly chosen their own methods, and despite his personal urging to remain in the Party and fight for recognition from the inside, had formed their own separate organizations. Spargo urged the Party to pay more serious attention to women's stake in the movement; to provide for full cooperation and support, he proposed the establishment *within* the Party of a National Committee of Women devoted to specialized propaganda among their sex.[8]

During the months prior to the National Convention in May, 1908, both the Party and the women's organizations voiced their opinions on Spargo's proposition. Spargo apparently represented a small minority among the men, the majority of whom resented both Feminism and its implications and refused to acknowledge the women's branches as a potential strength for the socialist movement. For those women who identified themselves more with their own organizations than with the Party, the creation of a Woman's Committee seemed possible only if it existed as an autonomous branch. Under favorable conditions, they thought it better to have the men and women work together in every phase of the socialist movement. But they felt the masses of women were still backward, at least as any line of social progress was concerned and especially in the matter of socialism, and that it have proved difficult to induce them in any appreciable numbers to attend the sexually mixed locals, much less to join them. These women conceived of their separate organizations as a kind of preparatory school for women to learn about themselves, their history, and the traditions of their

[8] Spargo, *op.cit.*

sex. They believed that unless the men in the locals were particularly aggressive in their sympathies with the "woman question," they would be most unresponsive to the majority of women who were seeking the first steps in a socialist education. As for the locals where the men were openly hostile to any type of woman's organization, the women felt they had no choice but to go their own way. To them, it seemed a meaningless request to work in a Socialist Party — an ideal, perhaps, but not something actually feasible under the existing circumstances. Even in such places as New York City, where women's organizations had a relatively long history and were far advanced beyond an early educational stage, the New York Women's Conference in the spring of 1908 provoked only ridicule from the majority of male comrades.[9]

Even among those few women who were active in the Socialist Party, the proposal of a special Woman's Committee did not meet a consensus. But the strongest sentiment was conveyed in terms of hard realism; such women viewed the whole question of the Party's attitude toward the woman's movement as purly academic. As one able spokeswoman wrote: "It makes very little difference whether we approve of a separate organization of Socialist women or not. We have one — a real, live revolutionary movement writing its own literature, managing its own newspapers, planning its own campaign." Since these organizations were composed largely of women who were not *members* of the Socialist Party, the Party could have no jurisdiction if the clubs did not wish to affiliate. The women who had dual memberships in women's clubs and in the Party saw the only logical solution as the creation of a special National Committee composed of women to do the needed propaganda work; they opposed the Party's *creating* a separate organization which would only conflict with the functions of those groups already in existence. They held that such a move would divide the ranks, whereas the main goal should be the attraction of women to the goals of socialism, and only secondarily into the Socialist Party.[10]

Since Spargo's proposal had been made into a formal resolution, the National Convention of May, 1908, attracted many women to Chicago. But the majority of women seemed determined to settle their own problems. Responding to a call from the Chicago women's groups, they gathered for discussion during the week prior to the convention. The first joint meeting

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[9] Josephine C. Kaneko, "Separate Organizations," *Socialist Woman*, I (April 1908), 5; Theresa Malkiel, "Woman and the Socialist Party," *ibid.*, II (July 1908), 7.

[10] Jessie Molle, "The National Convention and the Woman's Movement," *International Socialist Review* VIII (May 1908, 688-90; Luella R. Krehbiel, "Woman and Socialism, *Socialist Woman*, II (July 1908), 7.

of the woman's Branch and the Socialist Woman's League, both Chicago organizations, was held on May 12 for the purpose of effecting a national organization of socialist women. The women agreed that it was expedient to follow the California example of 1904 and to attempt some sort of co-ordination among the numerous women's clubs. The following day eighty-five women assembled to discuss the proposition for a national organization. The first question on the agenda dealt with the role of the Socialist Party toward women. They decided to place a demand before the men at the National Convention to adopt a resolution favoring special agitation for woman's suffrage. Unless the Party officially came out in favor of woman's rights, any cooperation with it would be beyond discussion. The central question of this meeting was coordinating their activities. Mrs. Whilshire of *Appeal to Reason* said that many women had written her requesting some plan of action. After some deliberation on how to approach the study of socialism, she aided in the organization of the National Progressive League, which had then thirty-two branches and over three hundred paid members in different parts of the country. It was, Mrs. Wilshire claimed, the only national organization of women in the United States and she urged the women of the other clubs to join with her. A few of the women were willing to join the W.N.P.L., but the rest were divided over the choice of joining a new separate organization or allying with the regular-socialist locals. Arriving at no conclusion, the women voted to form a committee to study the matter more thoroughly and to report back to them later in the week. The substance of the committee's report favored a new federation of socialist women's clubs, recommending that each club already in existence appoint a member as correspondent to a committee set up in Chicago for that purpose.[11]

During the next week, the National Convention of the Socialist Party at last came to grips with the woman question. Even those male members who were absolutely opposed to women's organizations followed the lead of the Stuttgart Congress and endorsed the equal suffrage plank, making it clear at the same time that their decision was based on their loyalty to the International rather than on the strength of the feminists in their ranks. The women delegates, who numbered nineteen at this convention, debated the issue of the National Woman's Committee resolution. The Socialist Party majority report provided for a special committee of five, devoted to work or organization among women and supported with sufficient funds to

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[11] See the May 1908 issue of *Socialist Woman* for several articles reporting the various meetings held in Chicago.

maintain a woman organizer in the field, to be supervised by the national party. But even among these women delegates, a minority report asked that "great care . . . be taken not to discriminate between men and women or take any steps which would result in a waste of energy and perhaps a separate woman's movement." After a brief debate, the majority report was adopted by the convention and the first Woman's Committee was elected with May Wood Simons as chairman.[12]

For many socialist women this historical event had no practical effect. The tensions between the women's clubs and the male-dominated locals continued to reinforce their basic assumption that under then-current conditions women's interests were not, and could not, be identified with those of men. During the summer months of 1908, the women's branches were still searching for a central organization, a special federation to furnish information, arrange national conventions, and increase socialist propaganda among working women and housewives. They felt that women all over the country wanted to learn organization, learn socialism, and learn economics; they wanted to be part of the movement, and they didn't want "to be bossed and put into the background by a lot of men still moved by instinctive capitalistic impulses of domination."[13] The growing wave of suffrage agitation increased their vigor to spread the propaganda of socialism among those women who were just awakening to a new political consciousness. As the National Woman's Committee became a functioning entity, the women in the various organizations were provided with the pamphlets, leaflets, reading lists — the tools they wanted for education — that a funded organization could afford. The Federation of Socialist Women Clubs, that finally adopted a constitution and by-laws in September, 1908, promised this service. But in effect, this Chicago-based organization, although corresponding with local women's clubs across the nation, was a paper organization. Without the Socialist Party behind it, the Federation was incapable of even raising money. On the other hand, the National Woman's Committee, although provided with only enough money from the Party treasury to staff a field organizer, was able to work through Party channels to raise enough money to keep the rest of the committee functioning. It organized benefits through the locals and tapped the wealthy members for special contributions. The New York local for example was fortunate to receive a gift from Louise Kneeland of $1000, earmarked for the women's fund.

By early 1909, even those women who once feared official ties with the

[12] *Proceedings* of the National Convention of the Socialist Party, May 1908, 301-06.
[13] Ida Crouch-Hazlett, "Women's Organizations," *Socialist Woman*, II (September 1908), 11.

Party were urging their sisters to join. One enthusiastic organizer wrote from Indiana, "The woman no longer sits alone at the meetings. . . . Now it is a matter of comment if there be no women at the Socialist propaganda meeting; and the men agitators print on their bills: 'Women Especially Invited!'" From across the country, women were reporting substantial increases of women members attending the local meetings. It was estimated that in Chicago and Kansas the numbers of women in the Party increased ten times within the year; "Everywhere that special attention has been give the matter, like results can be shown," a member reported.[14]

As women became an increasingly important sector of the Socialist Party organization, the ordinarily minor question of finances exemplified the internal tension. Traditionally, the women members, assumed to be wives of socialists, were allowed to pay one-third of the regular amount of dues. Apparently the male members, somewhat resentful of women's strong stance on equality, found the provision in the National Constitution somewhat inconsistent with the women's ideological goal. Proposing an amendment to the dues provision, the men urged the raising of women's allotment but keeping it less than the men's share. The women, in turn, reacted to this amendment as a distinction that suggested patronage, an objectionable "half-rate for children." The resolution adopted by the Woman's National Committee condemned "its implied inferiority and subserviance which smacks of that old chivalry which has ever granted to women these petty privileges and withheld from them equal responsibility with men."[15] On the local level, however, the financial matters were not settled so ideally. An organizer from Seattle described her "bitter experience":

> After the election of the nation committee on woman's work, we hastened to go before our local and put ourselves right by asking the local to make all women members of a committee of the whole to further the woman's work. At this time only a very few women belonged to the local ,and a large proportion of these are women who became interested in Socialism by attending the club.
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> Recently we opened headquarters, which we kept open in the afternoons, had a woman in attendance to sell literature and to discuss the social question with any who might drop in, and we were planning to

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[15] Resolutions adopted by the Woman's National Committee, reported in the *Weekly Bulletin* of the Socialist Party, Chicago, May 8, 1909.

[14] Mary Strickland, "What the New Year Should Mean to Socialists," New York *Call*, January 11, 1909; Mila Tupper Maynard, "Women in the Locals," *ibid.*, March 15, 1909.

> extend our literature work, when lo! and behold! the local woke up to the fact that the woman were really handling some money, a part of their own dues, and spending it as they thought best! This would never do of course, since in this respect even a Socialist man still has a capitalist mind, and still thinks the purse strings belong to the male sex. Consequently our 10 cents per month was cut off, and as an equivalent, we were offered our room rent free! Well, the Woman's Club has taken a vacation. . . .[16]

The Woman's National Committee defined its duties in this way: 'to make intelligent Socialists and Suffragists of women and to secure their active membership in the Socialist Party," and proceeded to use its most active organizers across the country in setting up various subcommittees within the women's locals. Accepting the general recommendations of the 1908 convention, they utilized their resources for special propaganda and education among women, planning detailed prescriptions for efficient organization. The most popular method for attracting women proved to be agitation for suffrage, with the Party's own "Votes for Women" campaign. Although other committees were planned for the locals, such as membership, literature, children's education, and music committees, the current appeal of suffrage became such a powerful issue that many members of the party as a whole, as especially male members, accused the women of favoring the sex struggle over the class struggle. But the women were out to prove the Socialist Party had risen to champion woman's cause, bringing the declaration for enfranchisement from the Party platform to real life. One of the most popular features of the Committee's diverse program was one that they succeeded in making into a national, coordinated affair. Through the Party presses across the country, the women announced the fourth Sunday of February as "Woman's Day." Socialists throughout the country held demonstrations in favor of woman suffrage on February 23, 1909, and the event was met with such enthusiasm that it continued as an annual "Anticipation Day" for economic and political freedom for women, celebrated in the United States and Europe.[17]

Within a year of its inception, the Woman's National Committee proved itself capable of functioning as a national coordinating service, providing the

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[16] Mrs. Anna Burgess, "Propaganda Among Women: The Bitter Experience of the Socialist Women of Seattle," New York *Call*, July 16, 1911.

[17] Woman's National Committee report, *Weekly Bulletin*, Chicago, June 17, 1909; Hebe, "Woman's Day," New York *Call*, January 23, 1910; Lena Morrow Lewis, "Woman's Day," *ibid.*, February 27, 1910.

women in the distant locals with literature, propaganda, and definite programs for organizing. They managed to win the support of the more prominent men in the Party, even Eugene Debs with his characteristic sentimental glorifications of woman and motherhood. Special sections of the Party's press, its newspapers, international and internal bulletins, and magazines, were devoted to the woman question. In 1910 the National Woman's Committee was incorporated into the Party constitution and made a permanent part of the bureaucracy. But despite its ability to win respect from the Party, the Committee's success would ultimately be measured not by its popular appeal but by its practical results.

III. The Woman Question

The Socialist women were confident that no one in the Party could fail to be impressed with the rise of their organizations as a distinct force within the movement. At the 1910 convention, the Woman's Committee reported that new women's branches had been set up in 156 locals across the country and that five states had organized state-wide women's committees. Their success was symbolized by the election of the first woman, Lena Morrow Lewis, to the National Executive Board, and they "rejoiced" that her election was due solely to her outstanding agitational ability. Thus themselves impressed, the women demanded more autonomy within the Party and were given a Party-funded correspondent to assist the enlarged seven-member executive staff of the National Woman's Committee. For the first time, the women gained floor space in the national office in Chicago, and a special Women's Department was created for their clerical necessities. The women delegates to the National Convention also displayed more interest in the debates on the floor: they were elected to serve on most of the important committees, and they expressed themselves unhesitatingly on questions ranging from the new farm platform to immigration.

The 1910 Convention *seemed* a turning point for the socialist women, and offered them a precedent for future labors within the Party. In the immediate period following, they showed a willingness to forget their former attacks upon the men's failure to live up to the old sex-equality platform; sometimes they even congratulated their male comrades for casting aside traditional prejudices against "feminine politics."[18] One socialist woman wrote: "Let us hope that this example of a peaceful intelligent mingling

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[18] Mary E. Marcy, "Efficiency and Text," *ibid.*, May 8, 1910.
[19] Theresa Malkiel, "Woman and the National Congress," *ibid.*, May 29, 1910.

of the sexes will serve as a guide for the future" of society. And they compared their work with the futile attempts of women in other political parties. They praised by contrast the Socialist Party and urged women to take advantage of its program of full economic, social, and political freedom. Thus by 1910, the women had resolved the initial problems of organization. But the development of a positive program, based no longer simply on the prejudices against the "inferior sex" but rather defined by their unique position as *Socialist* women in practical, organizational terms, remained to be accomplished.

The previous emphasis on suffrage agitation was challenged by women who wished to extend propaganda along more general socialist educational lines. They felt that the suffrage question was being handled adequately by the women's reform organization. The Party, for them, had a greater responsibility to the working woman and her special needs. This question of priority was debated extensively, and although no explicit conception determined all their actions, many women rejected cooperation with the suffragists for broader social appeals. Particularly in those states where women already had the ballot, the Party could point to the negligible effect that socialist propaganda had on voting results. Although proclaiming itself the vanguard of all progressive movements in the United States, the Party claimed it gained no immediate political benefits from woman suffrage, and could therefore stress the need for less transient issues to build a socialist woman's movement.[20]

The limited advantages of suffrage agitation sharpened the contradictions for those women who believed their tactics should flow from fundamental socialist theory. Despite the class-conscious rhetoric of their agitation, it seemed to appeal not to the women who most needed political expression in American society but rather to the same class from which the reformist-suffragist organizations drew their membership — the professional women and middle-class housewives. Special efforts to reach working-class women through suffrage propaganda did not achieve the hoped-for results, since the majority of working class women could ill afford the time to join locals. Propaganda was then redirected to appeals around a more general oppression of females. The tactics came nominally from a general theory that had been their inspiration through the early days of the struggle, what they called a "Materialist Conception of the Woman's Struggle," which the Socialist women now integrated into the emerging Feminism of the decade.

The classic writings that most influenced their thinking were *Women*

[20] The Party Convention of 1910 debated suffrage as a key Party question. For the highlights of the debate, see *The Progressive Woman*, June, 1910.

Under Socialism, by August Bebel, and *The Origins of the Family*, by Friedrich Engels. Taken with the anthropological analyses popular at the time, these two texts, unimpeachable for at least most American Socialists, provided women with a view of history that denied a biologically determined role for their sex. Both Bebel and Engels depicted the dawn of man as an era of cooperative struggle for survival, based upon primitive matriarchical structures. The exodus from this secular paradise had at once created the system of private ownership and woman's bondage within it. Over the ages the burden had fallen hardest upon her, for while her mate's dominant attitude had been acquisition and personal control, she had desperately attempted to conserve the family as best she could. Capitalism, as in so many other ways, both rendered the burden unendurable and created the pre-conditions for its elimination by creating the productive mechanization which potentially would provide plenty for all. The future civilization, like that in the dim past, would offer general cooperation and the realization of woman's desire to be an equal and to conserve the race as she had through the ages conserved the family.

The special appeal to women as women brought the socialists into the main line of the burgeoning Feminist movement, and by 1913 they observed that younger women were being attracted to radicalism primarily for their complete sexual emancipation. The Socialist women tried to bridge the gap to the older agitation by urging that the Feminist program consisted "very largely in what Socialists have been demanding for women for years and years," and by pointing out that only socialists understood complete freedom to be unattainable short of the common ownership of the means of production. As one woman socialist wrote: "The Socialist who is not a Feminist lacks breadth. The Feminist who is not a Socialist is lacking in strategy." Hence they held that whether women possessed the ballot or not, they would need to unite with all oppressed groups for a better society, and that the Socialist movement would ultimately provide women the courage to be in the forefront of the final battle "fighting for the destruction of masculine despotism and for the right of womankind."[21]

But with the concurrent passing of the suffrage issue and the ebbing of the inertia in the women's socialist movement, Feminism proved *as an agitational issue* to be unacceptable to the bulk of the socialist movement. Although the militant women insisted that Feminism could not be limited to

[21] Anita C. Block, "New York Socialists Women's Conference," New York *Call*, April 5, 1914; Louise W. Kneeland, "Feminism and Socialism," *New Review*, II (August 1914), 442; Mary White Ovington, "Socialism and the Feminist Movement," *ibid.*, II (March 1914), 146-47.

any one reform, the men and more orthodox socialist women generally offered a blanket criticism of Feminism and all the implications of agitation "along sex lines." Feminism, they held, was middle-class, and socialist-feminists were warned that their activity could swamp the party with non-wage earning elements. While an occasional middle-class woman could bring along her vitality and intelligence, a large number of them, it was thought, were bound to bring their reformist taints. Thus even a mild variety of Feminism, which clearly disavowed free love and the destruction of the family, was feared as a divider of the movement along sex lines. With all the odds against them, the socialist-feminists failed to respond successfully to this plea for a return to traditional socialist agitation on all fronts, and a new wave of "Male egotism" was evoked which, according to some women, was even more objectionable than the male attitudes dominating the party before 1908.

IV. The Declining Years, From 1912

During this period there were growing tensions within the Socialist Party which had undercut the development of an autonomous socialist women's agitational struggle and now worked against its revival. By 1910, American Socialism had accomplished basic propaganda tasks and entered a maturity, raising and sharpening internal differences that had been previously tolerated by nearly all concerned. Many Socialists long in the movement publicly warned against the influx of middle-class elements into the Party and the danger of encouraging agitation which resulted in the enrollment of non-wage-earners. More important, an internal Party struggle culminating in 1912 with the proscription of the advocacy of sabotage in Party ranks had the effect of tightening Party discipline against all potentially dissident elements. Finally, the success of "Constructive Socialist" locals, particularly the Milwaukee Social Democracy, provided the "lesson" of heavily concentrated agitation and propagandization within a city involving all socialists in a single-minded task. Cumulatively, therefore, women's agitation could have been seen to be divisive, disruptive and destructive to socialist energies. And without a body of important defenders within the ruling circles of the Party, women's agitation could not expect special treatment or solicitation for its case.

In retrospect, the true high point of women's agitation within the Socialist Party was the period around 1910 to 1912. Suffrage agitation died, for socialist purposes, as achievement loomed closer and the major political parties subsumed within them the energies that had been previously tapped

by socialist women. There was an Indian Summer for socialist women in 1912-1913, as the vigorous national campaign and the residual effects of suffrage agitation swelled the women's ranks from ten percent to fifteen percent of the Party membership. But by 1913 the erosive effects of the changing conditions could already be seen.

The lack of an issue with the strength and popularity of suffrage, along with the Party's internal betrayal of the woman question, made impossible a clear program of organizational activities and stripped the agitational program to Socialism alone rather than feminism or suffrage. Even by 1913, the inertia of the women's socialist movement had slowed. The National Committee was no longer effective as a woman's committee, and prominent female socialists became increasingly involved in ordinary Party work, above all action against the coming war. When in 1914 a proposal was made at the Party Convention to abolish the Woman's National Committee, its (female) Correspondent from the Party's Woman Department applauded the prospective amendment. Though remaining nominally in existence, the Committee ceased to function in any significant way.

The most ominous sign was the death of the *Progressive Woman*. Like other Party publications, the *Woman* had never been a solvent financial venture, and from 1912 onward the Party had subsidized its existence. But aid was at best partial, and at no point adequate to make up the deficit or provide a sound financial basis for the magazine's expansion to its own expected circulation of 500,000. The Woman's Committee in 1914 sought to abandon the sinking ship, and the magazine was salvaged only momentarily by its transformation into the *Coming Nation*, a name which its editor Josephine Conger-Kaneko derived from the enormously popular Socialist paper of the 1890's. By mid-1914, the socialist women had no publication of their own and more than ever were forced to rely upon the mechanisms of a Party decreasingly concerned for the welfare of an autonomous group of women.

During the declining years of women's activities in the Socialist Party, the remarkable example of Margaret Sanger's struggle served to typify the organizational obstacles in the path of prospective radical feminists. Her class position, the unusual interests and ability she brought to her work, and the nature of her estrangement from the socialist movement further indicated the limits of Party flexibility, especially on questions of sexuality in practical organizational terms.[22]

Margaret Sanger's entry into the Socialist movement, like that of many

[22] Margaret Sanger, *Autobiography*, (New York: 1938) and *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: 1931).

other women, came through her husband's activity (in this case in the New York Socialist Party). Frequently mingling with the salon crowd she came to associate a socialist perspective with her own ethical and humanitarian concerns. Although her anarchistic sentiments fostered an intellectual attraction to "individualistic" tendencies, the practical applications in an industrial society necessitated for her an organizational framework which she sought in the Socialist Party. She regularly attended local meetings with her husband, but only inadvertently did she become one of the most important activists in the movement. She was asked to replace an ailing speaker at one of the local women's meetings. Although she had never given a public speech before, she accepted on the condition that her topic be of her own choice. She had little confidence about her understanding of Marxian theory and decided to speak about her own specialty, sex education and hygiene.

Margaret Sanger's appearance and her introduction of the topic into public discussion generated enormous enthusiasm among women in the local, who repeatedly expressed their urgent needs for such information. Soon she was offering a series of lectures, during which so many questions were asked that Anita Block, editor of the New York *Call's* woman's page, asked Sanger to provide a regular column for publication. In this, her first experience at public writing, Margaret Sanger planned a series under the general title, "What Every Mother Should Know," in an effort to break through parents' rigid attitudes toward sexual development. Several weeks after its appearance, the title of the sequel column, "What Every Girl Should Know," was followed by the black-typed notation "NOTHING! By the order of the post-office department." For the first time, Margaret Sanger's work had been publicly censored.

Her writing for the *Call* continued sporadically into wartime, and even the censored article eventually appeared. But as she engaged in practical activities among working class women in New York and in such projects as the care of the children of strikers in Lawrence and Paterson, her sympathies were drawn increasingly to the direct actionists and syndicalists. She continually tried to work through the Socialist Party to disseminate birth control information among families of workers but met with constant frustration from the lack of help and the frequent scorn she received from the reformist socialist leadership. Meanwhile the IWW's Big Bill Haywood, a close personal friend, offered her contact with industrial workers and their wives. Finally, the attitude of the Socialists, that birth control would come with the victory of Socialism and was thus of negligible concern before the Revolution, turned her toward her original political inclination, anarchism.

In the spring of 1914, Margaret Sanger marked both her political anar-

chism and her desire to test censorship laws by founding a newspaper expressly devoted to women's liberation, the *Woman Rebel.* Across the masthead was emblazened "No Gods, No Masters," and inside a mixture of rudimentary sex education and anti-political articles, such as "The Importance of Assassination in History." During the Colorado mining strike, she asked socialist women to send the fiercely-repressed miners guns rather than sympathy, adding that: "when 40,000 [socialist] women cannot follow up a protest by action, then truly it would appear that they have something other than their 'chains to lose.'" The *Woman Rebel* never reached any significant circulation, and since all issues were banned from the mails, it was generally limited to a few Eastern cities. After the seventh issue, Margaret Sanger was placed under indictment for "lewdness." Rather than face trial she fled to Europe.

A year earlier, Margaret Sanger's columns in the *Call* had opened a controversy within the Socialist Party, carried on in letters to the paper, which revealed the deep differences on matters of sexuality and woman's place generally.[23] As Anita Block noted, the purpose of the column was to "turn the searchlight on all those rotten spots which those in power today find it in their interest to keep dark and . . . keep turning on the light in one way or another even stronger and more penetrating until there is no part of our social structure that will not be clean and healthy and beautiful." Readers appreciative of the column sent in a variety of intense and even touching responses. One woman wrote of the loss of her "so-called innocence" which caused her husband to suspect wrongfully her past and destroy their marriage. On reading the column, the maligned woman's husband finally came to understand the possibility of a "natural" loss of virginity, thus ending his thoughtless persecution. Another woman, sixty-six years old and mother of eight, wrote that she learned more from Margaret Sanger's articles than "from any books or even from my own life." A male machinist, perhaps more typical of a sympathetic socialist reader, wrote that such lessons were important, for active socialists could not be recruited from a population sick with venereal disease. Above all, readers stressed the fact that the knowledge which Margaret Sanger made available was simply not accessible elsewhere. Even those who doubted the logic of such material in the *Call* often expressed their gratitude for her serious and factual presentations.

Readers unfriendly to Margaret Sanger's views revealed quite another side of American socialism. The most usual arguments against her column

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[23] For typical articles, see the Woman's Page of the New York *Call,* December 1912 through 1913.

came from those crude materialists who stressed economic determinism. Capitalism, according to this argument, was the cause of prostitution, and indeed all of the "evils of the sex question;" only when socialism arrived would a healthy society come into existence. A more serious objection was offered to the very publication of knowledge of venereal disease, reasoning that it "placed the demands of FEAR and DISTRUST in the minds of hundreds of prospective wives and mothers," with the effect upon impressionable female readers of a discouragement towards marriage. One writer charged that Margaret Sanger's column would "produce a panic which would cause women to lose all confidence in men and cause them to withdraw their capital (themselves) from the marriage market." Like other critical correspondents, the writer felt that Margaret Sanger scorned the mental and spiritual in favor of the "animal being." Some critics even openly argued for an "eternal" inferior status of women. One writer who wondered whether adequate contraception might eradicate "mother love and the exquisite loyalty of the eternal female," confessed his hesitation "before subscribing to a practice that would have the least tendency to destroy the spiritual qualities of women. Undoubtedly as an expedient for the individual, [birth control] is absolutely moral, but when, as a fixed social policy, it assumes an influence upon the social conscious, its morality is questionable."

In responding to Margaret Sanger's attackers, Anita Block made clear the fundamental objection of some socialists to "What Every Girl Should Know": Sanger had brought the issue out of the abstractions of idyllic life under Socialism and into the realities of women's immediate struggle for full equality. The editor of *Call's* women's page assumed that her readers, as socialists, were more intelligent than non-socialists and consequently would be logically more open to the notion of women's special oppression. But the obstacles placed in front of Margaret Sanger's Party activity, and the failure of any decisive sector of the socialist organization to move to her defense, revealed the contradictory character of the socialists' radical sympathies. As a group, the socialists would more than any other sector of the nation's population affirm the *ultimate* equality of women and the viciousness of their exploitation under capitalism. Indeed, any rank-and-file socialists could articulate and intelligently discuss the radical theories of Engels and Bebel. But even the advanced sectors, to say nothing of the Party as a whole, rejected any notion of a *special* struggle for women, as they rejected generally the special struggles of blacks and even of unskilled workers. In retrospect, the socialists' position was historically understandable, for they viewed the coming of a socialist society as inevitable, smooth and not too far distant. But the situation in which radical theory seemingly justified conservative practice

must have been all the more maddening for men and women who, like Margaret Sanger, had come to expect the socialist movement to represent the full liberating possibilities of mankind.

* * *

Like the apparent initial acceptance by the mass of socialists of Margaret Sanger's activities, the solicitations of the Party for the Women's National Committee and for the *Progressive Woman* had been deceptive. For as Margaret Sanger was judged by the irritation and even immediate danger she posed to the movement's internal stability, the National Committee and the magazine were judged by their results in recruiting females for the Party rolls, and any figure less than the goal the women had set — for fifty percent of the membership — was bound to be ultimately disappointing. Of course, such a figure was at all odds incredible: the Socialist Party drew predominately from the ranks of skilled workers, while women in the population as a whole were, with scattered exceptions, unskilled workers, workers' wives, or middle and upper-class housewives. Thus women's oppression was not generally felt at the point of production, and their needs were different and special. But the Party forced to extremes by internal disputes and the approaching world conflict, felt the necessity for such pragmatic yardsticks, and by such measurement there could be but one result for Margaret Sanger and the women as a group.

Yet, despite its rapid eclipse, the women's role within the Socialist Party was not a negligible one. At its best, it deeply touched the lives of the new women workers in mass trades such as garments, it moved leading radical literary figures such as Floyd Dell and Max Eastman, and it concentrated the energies of such outstanding women reformers as Margaret Sanger and Florence Kelley. More important, it left an indelible impression on the American radical movement, offering an early lesson—better than in any American radical movement since — of what women could do to link their sex-oppression with the general oppression of the social system.

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