Women’s Card and Label League: 
Declaring Dignity During the General Strike Era

During February of 1919, more than 65,000 workers in the Seattle region unified in labor movement solidarity for a six-day strike. Fueled with passion, strikers abandoned their job responsibilities to demonstrate rejection of vile labor conditions and low wages in the city. Historical accounts of the six-day strike often neglect to acknowledge the presence and impact of female roles during the course of events. Specifically, the Women’s Card and Label League displayed loyal presence and activism in the fight to better labor class conditions. The league’s portrayal of first wave feminism displayed efforts of not only developing better labor conditions, but proving legitimacy of women’s political consciousness and agendas.

Initially established in 1905, the Women’s Card and Label League developed as an organization dedicated to purchasing and persuading the public to buy only union labeled goods. Composed mostly of the wives of the male leaders of the labor rights movement, the women involved displayed spousal support and solidarity towards their male counterparts in the labor force. Using a consumerist strategy known as purchase power, they were strictly selective about where to spend their husbands’ money. They consciously rejected non-union labels and promoted union labels through both primary and secondary consumer boycotts. In doing so, not only did the women offer increased financial support for union businesses who were on their husbands’ side of the battle, but they simultaneously worked to reduce enemy profits. Ultimately, the tactic was a resilient method of manipulating businesses into negotiation with unions and labor leaders- or expediting a company’s failure.
The league’s ploy to attacking unjust labor conditions did not only exemplify union strength, but more significantly it was instrumental in validating housework and political power in womanhood. The Women’s Card and Label League demonstrated attitudes of first wave feminism which prioritized women’s suffrage and respect for their predetermined positions in the patriarchy. As political protestors, they complied to traditional gender roles of the 20th century, upholding expectations of domesticity and kinship. Women first involved in the league were satisfied with gendered obligations like grocery shopping; they did not challenge conventional marriage responsibilities. Although not completely breaking chains of patriarchy, broadcasting authority within feminine scripted roles through the league’s political engagement created tangible awareness of female capability in the public arena. Historian Dana Frank discusses in her work entitled Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929 that women involved were full-time housewives who embraced the roles men prescribed for them, they wanted respect for their contributions to society. Frank clarifies why women sought out roles as politically rebellious kin-keepers, explaining that the responsibilities of label league promotions gave housewives a place in the labor class movement. Shoppers found empowerment in their chores; wives developed political bonds with their husbands- the invisibility of women declined.

Seattle Union Record articles from 1914 set the stage for the attitude of the women’s league. In an article entitled “Weekly Department of Women’s Label League” correspondents firmly tell their intended female audience readers, “you are a factor of either progress or

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2 Ibid
stagnation.”³ The article continues to threaten female readers, “do not sit with folded hands or limit yourself to the four walls of the home when a larger activity is open to you.”⁴ These proclamations at potential female members purposefully persuaded them into believing the feminist agenda. Depicting an image of a woman in pageant-like dress, the league worked to provide allure of league’s womanhood. But beyond appearance, the label league wanted women to recognize opportunity for fullness as critically thinking women who need to “enter into a sphere of human usefulness.”⁵ The tone of this call to action article is more assertive than the preconceived notion of a submissive housewife.

The assertive attitude that league women provided, offering hope and better tomorrows, prompted a large white middle class following. Karen Blair discusses in her anthology entitled Women in the Pacific Northwest that many of Seattle’s female political respondents of the early twentieth century had “learned about feminism through participation in the Women’s Card and Label League.”⁶ The league was far too convincing for women entrapped to their husband’s households to pass up. The Seattle Union Record compared the women of the Seattle Women’s Card and Label League to some of the white female ‘greats’ like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Florence Nightingale.⁷

At the time, women involved in the league’s political efforts were considered radical white feminists. Retrospectively, the organization obeyed the labor movement’s patriarchal arrangements and satisfied male agendas, not entirely radical. Label league’s engagements

³ “Weekly Department of Women’s Label League” Seattle Union Record. February 28, 1914.
⁴ Ibid
⁵ Ibid
⁷ “Economic Organizations of Women Great Driving Power” Seattle Union Record. May 30, 1914
bittered male labor rights causes; however, women received pushback from their husbands.

Considering the gender roles and political climate of the late 1910s would prompt assumption
that female activism was a threat masculinity. Women started proving their ability in the public
sphere, voicing opinions beyond the four kitchen walls they had been so long caged in. This was
intimidating to masculinity’s firm grip on society. The Women’s card and Label League was
intimidating.

Members of the league were frustrated with low turnouts, wondering how the male labor
movement was so immense, but their wives were missing in action. Historian Kathryn Oberdeck
references a league members letter in her article entitled “Not Pink Teas.” Mrs. M.H. Puttrick
published a letter in the Seattle Union Record in which she expressed frustrations during early
formations, evidencing confusion of why heaps ladies weren’t joining the organization. She
wondered if men were preventing their wives from joining, then questioning how “any real union
man would prevent his wife from belonging to the Label League and keep her from attending
meetings.” Puttrick’s concerns and hints at male disdain for the league reveals public hesitation
in celebrating female politicization. Publishing her upset attitude towards selfish husbands within
the Seattle Union Record prompted pressure at male audiences to encourage or approve of the
league for their own wives.

Keying in on consumer strategies that only wives could incorporate in their daily lives,
men recognized the potential power of female participation, but also that this gave room for
undermining traditional gender relations. In order to cope with their fragile masculinities, men
formed their own label league. In his novel entitled Class and Gender Politics in Progressive Era

8 Oberdeck, Kathryn J. ““Not Pink Teas”: The Seattle Working-class Women’s Movement, 1905–
Seattle, John Putnam reveals that men constructed a league not to rival the female organization but to enhance it. Having their own league meant “husbands no longer had to feel threatened by their wives”⁹ public participation. Putnam offers insight that the men’s label league would ensure that women in their own group could not “operate completely outside of their husbands’ control or influences.”¹⁰ Copying being a form of flattery, men attempted to keep women under their wing by mimicking their participation. However, men did not do the household shopping, purchase power did not hold the same impact for male label promotion.

Beyond husbands imitating, there was evident approval of the league’s efforts from the American Federal of Labor union, a national force of unionism. Oberdeck elaborately explains the AFL’s affirming attitudes of female label leagues across the nation. Like the Label League, the AFL explicitly prioritized the union label, further comparing women and the union label with conjoined importance. This dehumanizing parallel was supposed to glorify both as subjects of purpose. Oberdeck shares excerpts from an AFL pamphlet which describes “both stand for cleanliness, morality, the care of the young, the sanctity of the home.”¹¹ The national organization’s sexist approval of women advocating for the union label suggests that high amounts of male AFL members not only approved of, but similarly saw the immense significance of females as necessary labor success. The AFL described women as the “helpmeet” of breadwinners,¹² placing misogynist value on female subordination. Males following the AFL-

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¹⁰ Ibid
¹² Ibid
CIO progression approved of female activism because their patriarchal positions were pleased with an even higher pedestal due to swarms of female support.

The AFL routinely published journals to inform its members entitled The American Federalist. They regularly included sections entitled “What Our Organizers are Doing” in which they debriefed AFL associations across the nation that “participate in the struggles of the people for better conditions, help win the victories, aid in securing legislation- in short do the thousand and one things that go to round out the practical labor movement.”13 This being said, the AFL continues to describe Seattle’s “women’s card and label league is wide awake and doing good work.”14 The League’s efforts in 1919 impressed the AFL organization on a national level, alluding that Seattle female activists were a prominent force during the political climate of the General Strike. ‘Boosting the label,’ women in Seattle confirmed on a national scale that they were mindful of disorder in the capitalist atmosphere during the General Strike’s upheaval.

Dedicated to building solidarity in their organization, the Women’s Card and Label League encompassed a number of methods of exhibiting activism. Most important to their efforts were social occasions such as dinners, masquerade balls, luncheons, and infamous tea parties. The allure of masquerade balls, the attraction of dinner party invitations, the appeal of buying a new union label dress; all were contributing factors of social events that the league hoped would entice women to joining. After all, everyone wanted a reason to act like the bourgeoisie. In fact, many of these women appeared to lead too much bourgeoisie privilege, promoting and persuading label league purchases was a middle class pleasure. White female members saw this as political activism, outsiders viewed initial label league events as an excuse for social

14 Ibid
celebrations. Karen Blair, in her anthology entitled Women in the Pacific Northwest, explains that for member birthdays or wedding anniversaries they “orchestrated parties with elaborate meals and personal gifts.”\textsuperscript{15} Where working class women were struggling to make ends meet in recovering post war economies, women of the label league had time and money dedicated to celebrating. Middle class women involved had so much household time dedicated to putting on social events that league president Mrs. Minnie Ault created an elaborate dress composed of Seattle Union Record newspapers as fabric, the ultimate testament to loyalty.\textsuperscript{16} Criticized for superfluous hobbies and superfluous dresses, the public understood the league’s purpose as an excuse for females to spend time together outside of the household.

In a letter written by Mark Litchman, a union-defense lawyer during the Great Depression, Litchman comments on Seattle’s labor movement relations after the Great Strike. Addressing Albert Brilliant in 1921, Litchman explains his wife’s frustrations with the label league, explaining that his wife is a member but expects to shortly quit because it is “merely a social organization where Ladies of the labor movement get together and gossip.”\textsuperscript{17} Prominence of get-together events prompted conventional assumptions of women as social butterflies or busy bodies, doubting any genuine political interests.

Though social events were largely critiqued, reputable labor movement leaders demonstrated respect for the league’s organizational expertise. In a Seattle Union Record article Sol Soltheimer, president of the International Cigarmakers, commented on the label league’s

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid
\textsuperscript{17} "Mark Litchman Letter to Albert Brilliant." Mark Litchman, to Albert Brilliant. 1921. In Pacific Northwest Historical Documents Collection. (Page 2).
diligent work coordinating a luncheon quickly after the strike. Soltheimer was proud of Seattle’s labor movement, he felt the six-day strike in the city “engineered and successfully concluded the most peaceful display of solidarity ever witnessed in this country.” With gracious acknowledgement towards the label league for their planning and invitation, Soltheimer implicates that his presence and pride in the city would not be possible without the league’s dedicated importance to the movement even after conclusion of the strike. The league was compiled of organizers; women who knew how to plan a dinner party evidenced they also knew how to plan a political meetup. The article states that this was the first in a series of luncheons of which league members extended invitations to all women of union families.

With obvious political tension in Seattle, the predominantly white married women league reoriented their purpose and began working harder to extend their outreach. Criticism for bourgeoisie tendencies prompted the Label League to consider cross-class dynamics and between working and middle sectors along with cross-gender dynamics. The AFL included a picture of the women’s league in 1913, depicting six middle aged, well dressed, white women. White middle class feminists recognized need to extend their helping hands to white lower class feminists, not necessarily women of color. There is no evidence of the league collaborating or speaking with women of color in the Seattle region.

Beyond their husbands’ interests, white women developed consciousness of working class women’s obstacles of citizenship, the eight-hour work day, abolishment of child labor, and women’s suffrage. In a letter to Senator Wesley Jones, three leaders of the Seattle Women’s Card and Label League stated their demand for equal gender voting rights. Written two years

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19 Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries, UW Negative 8965.
prior to the enormous strike, women expressed disgust of having of the war forcing them to
“give up their sons, husbands, and sweethearts in the name of U.S. liberty.”\textsuperscript{20} They referenced the Susan B. Anthony amendment, declaring that women “do not have the freedom of the ballot to guarantee them the liberty they have ever helped to gain,”\textsuperscript{21} angered that their citizenship is devalued because of gender. The women bluntly challenged the senator, demanding him not to delay legislation. As the war intensified frustrations with the government, and as living conditions grew more and more vial, women became increasingly assertive. Their fight was no longer just about union labels. It was no longer about their husbands. Once passive, white women in the league were feminist agents of social change in Seattle who tirelessly argued for their own futures.

Instrumental to the development of twentieth century white feminism in Seattle, the women’s card and label league exemplified increasing civil consciousness during the amplified political economy involving the Seattle General Strike of 1919. The league crafted female solidarity in the labor movement, working against capitalism for their ‘breadwinners.’ Though largely consisted of white women who consumed in activism to benefit white femininity, the Seattle general strike would not have received the recognition and success that it had without the label leagues promotion female participation and of the social organization. The league invited women into the political arena in Seattle, promoting female engagement beyond the household, while also asserting respect to constant unpaid labor within.

Word Count: 2646


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid
Works Cited


"Economic Organizations of Women Great Driving Power." *Seattle Union Record* (Seattle), May 30, 1914.


"Weekly Department of Women’s Label League." *Seattle Union Record* (Seattle), February 24, 1914.