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HST 420
Spinning a Yarn:
Newspaper Misrepresentation of Women Garment Workers on Strike
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In the January cold of Rochester, New York in 1913, thousands of garment workers took to the streets. For several months following “the streets were filled with young women marching, singing, protesting, and fighting.”¹ The social impetus among women to participate in this strike was so strong that when the garment workers began to picket, women in other industries risked losing their jobs to march in solidarity with them, though there was no immediate material gain for them in doing so.² Photographs of the strike show lines of women, bundled up in their winter coats and hats, with a handful of men in the mix, marching down the streets of the snowy Upstate New York city.³

When word of the strike spread, the *New York Times* reported, “more than 6,000 garment workers struck in the clothing districts in this city this morning and in the course of the day the strikers added about 2,000 more to their number. The men demand the abolition of all sub-contract work, an eight hour day, and an increase of twenty per cent. [sic] in wages.”⁴ In this brief report, the *Times* completely erased the faces and voices of the thousands of women who stood shoulder to shoulder demanding dignity and change in their workplaces. Were this reporting a single issue, it might not mean anything, but this omission was commonplace. Newspapers repeatedly ignored striking female garment workers in favor of a male-centered narrative.

Newspapers throughout the early twentieth century neglected the female voice and treated strikers differently when women were on the forefront of the crusade for workplace change. This paper will examine three different strikes in the garment and textile industries

¹ Joan M. Jensen, “The Great Uprising in Rochester,” in *A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike: Women Needleworkers in America*, ed. Joan M. Jensen, and Sue Davidson, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 94.

² Jensen, “The Great Uprising,” 94.

³ Albert R. Stone, photographer, “Garment Workers Strike of 1913,” photograph, (Rochester, NY: n.p., 1913), from Monroe County Library System, *Albert R. Stone Negative Collection*.

⁴ New York Times, “8,000 Strike in Rochester.: Garment Workers Oppose Sub-Contracts and Ask Fewer Hours, More Pay,” (New York, NY), January 24, 1913, 7.

during the early twentieth century- the aforementioned strike in Rochester, New York, the 1909 Uprising of the 20,000 in New York City, and the Paterson, New Jersey silk workers' strike in 1913. In each of these cases the workers, who were predominantly female, were either ignored or treated as inferior actors. Though the ways that newspapers marginalized the voices and actions of women were not uniform across the strikes or across papers, one consistent theme shines through the coverage of these events: the newspapers treated the women with a paternalistic and patriarchal approach. While historians have looked at women's activism through a variety of lenses, deliberately focusing on the sexist reporting on women's labor activism that was done by newspapers is a significant gap in the historiography that is worth exploring.

Historian Nan Enstad's book, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* examines the newspaper coverage of striking garment workers in this era. Enstad's book dedicates a chapter to understanding how the press and the leaders of the labor movements inadvertently collaborated to shape the public debate around the Uprising of the 20,000. Enstad's book and this paper have similar perspectives on the nature of newspaper coverage, but Enstad is focused specifically on the Uprising of the 20,000 and is less concerned with newspapers than with the shape of the public debate as a whole. While newspapers certainly form a large part of the analysis in *Ladies of Labor*, they are not its sole focus.

Enstad contends that reporters could not see working women as political subjects, "even when they enacted the recognized political script of a strike."⁵ A large portion of the coverage Enstad found was fixated on women's fashion, rather than the economics and politics of the strike.⁶ The coverage that did occur, according to Enstad, was heavily tilted toward the narratives favored by labor leaders, employers, and court magistrates, rather than exposing the voices of

⁵ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 84-85.

⁶ Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 85.

working women.⁷ To Enstad, when working women were portrayed as actors in their strikes, newspapers overwhelmingly viewed them as transgressive. The papers even went so far as to disproportionately give out striking women's names and addresses in their articles, when compared to 'scabs,' and men on the picket line, giving the appearance that striking women were the only ones that were getting arrested in large numbers.⁸ The papers further tried to delegitimize the striking women's claims to political subjectivity by presenting them as thrill seekers and ladies pretending to be on holiday, or as an irrational mob subject to the sway of union leaders.⁹ Enstad and this paper have quite similar analysis of the attitude of the press toward striking women in New York in 1909, where they differ is in the focus.

In short, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* is the only major work that examines women's strikes in a similar fashion to the one employed in this paper. Much of the historiography of the women's labor movement is focused on the coalition building between female workers and their male counterparts, as well as between working women and the middle- and upper-class reformers that had previously been divided along class lines. This paper will begin by exploring the history of women in the workforce, particularly in the garment industry, and the history of women organizing prior to the 1910's. The focus will then shift to exploring the context and events of the three strikes that form the central focus of the essay in chronological order, beginning with the Uprising of 20,000, followed by the strike in Rochester, and finally the Paterson strike. Newspaper coverage of each strike will be examined to elucidate the blatant sexism that was at the crux of the press' relationship with women in organized labor.

⁷ Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 85.

⁸ Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 92-93.

⁹ Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 96-97.

To understand what these women were fighting for, one must first understand the historical context of their work. In 1900, 18.8 percent of women and girls over the age of 10 had occupations outside of their homes.¹⁰ By 1920 that number had grown to 24 percent- nearly a quarter of females over the age of 10 were engaged in “gainful occupations.”¹¹ The year 1920 is outside of the scope of the events discussed in this paper, but by seeing the growth over this twenty year period, one can gain perspective on the scale of changes in the lives of the women who were now stepping out of the domestic sphere.

A persistent myth is that women in the workplace were almost exclusively young and unmarried, though nearly 20 percent of women in the workplace were married, and a third of them were over the age of 35 in 1900.¹² So engrained is this myth, that historian Kathy Peiss seems to take it for granted in her exploration of working women’s leisure time in turn-of-the-century New York City, claiming that women who could reject household work as their primary labor form were mainly “the young, unmarried, and American-born.”¹³ While Peiss is correct that a substantial number of female workers did fit into that particular demographic, her assessment is somewhat dismissive of the genuine diversity of women in work.

In this era, women had very limited options when entering the workforce, a fact that finds its origins in an intricate lace of factors composed of the nineteenth-century life cycle and social expectations, local and state laws that deliberately sex segregated the workplace, and the indignities of nineteenth and twentieth-century racism and xenophobia.¹⁴ In 1900, 91 percent of

¹⁰ Dorothy Schneider and Carl Schneider, *American Women in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920*, (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 49.

¹¹ Schneider & Schneider, *American Women*, 49.

¹² Schneider & Schneider, *American Women*, 49.

¹³ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 40-41.

¹⁴ Christine E. Bose, *Women in 1900: Gateway to the Political Economy of the 20th Century*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 86-89.

working women were employed in just 12 percent of the occupations listed on the census.¹⁵ By 1920, there were 900,000 working women from very diverse ethnic backgrounds working in farms, factories, and a variety of other roles.¹⁶ An estimated 23 percent of working women worked in domestic service, though it is difficult to get an exact number pinned down.¹⁷ In 1900, 25 percent of female workers were employed in factories.¹⁸ Of particular interest when examining women in factory work, is the garment industry. In the United States, during the period this essay examines, 70 percent of garment workers were female, having displaced many of their male counterparts.¹⁹ In this era women emerged on the cutting edge of women's militancy in the labor movement because the work they performed was thankless and grueling.²⁰

By the 1900s, the clothing industry was divided into two major forms of work. Some employees worked directly in the towering, multistory factories that churned out finished pieces, but others known as subcontractors, or "sweaters" in the vernacular of the time, brought the work home with them and were typically paid by the piece.²¹ The sweaters were not hired directly by manufacturers, instead the manufacturers would contract with a middle-man, that would in turn dole out work to women for menial wages.²² Frequently these sweaters would set up in homes together that were known as "sweatshops."²³ The workers within the factories tended to be younger, single women, while wives and mothers tended to subcontract so they could earn

¹⁵ Schneider and Schneider, *American Women*, 50; Bose, *Women in 1900*, 86.

¹⁶ Schneider and Schneider, *American Women*, 54-55.

¹⁷ Bose, *Women in 1900*, 100.

¹⁸ Schneider and Schneider, *American Women*, 56.

¹⁹ Joan M. Jensen, "The Great Uprisings: 1900-1920" in *A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike: Women Needleworkers in America*, ed. Joan M. Jensen and Sue Davidson, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 83.

²⁰ Jensen, "The Great Uprisings," 83.

²¹ Jensen, "The Great Uprisings," 84-85.

²² Ann Schofield, "The Uprising of the 20,000: The Making of a Labor Legend" in *A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike: Women Needleworkers in America*, ed. Joan M. Jensen and Sue Davidson, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 168.

²³ Jensen, "The Great Uprisings," 85.

money around the rhythms of domestic life.²⁴ Neither option was pleasant, and both presented problems that will be explored later.

Garment workers were one of the most active groups of laborers that organized during the decades surrounding the turn of the century. Yet like the *New York Times* blatantly overlooking the women in Rochester mentioned at the beginning of this essay, historians have largely neglected the needle trades, despite them representing the third most strike-prone industry in the United States, after building and mining.²⁵ According to Joan Jensen, “there are no systematic statistics for the years 1905 to 1914, but the unrest of the industry can be seen in the overall figures.”²⁶ Between the 1880s and 1920, conflict between workers and employers was continual. Collective bargaining eventually became the accepted method by which labor disputes were resolved in the clothing industry, but it was a long road.²⁷

For a long time, women were “peripheral to the work process,” but they emerged as a vocal and active part of the proletariat in the labor movement during the years between 1905 and 1914.²⁸ During this time women moved to the left of “bread-and-butter” unionists, like Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), because they “wanted to build unions that would also offer workers educational and cultural activities, health care, and maybe even a chance to leave the city and enjoy the open countryside,” in addition to negotiating wages and hours.²⁹ Because of these desires, working women in the garment industry began forming

²⁴ Jensen, “The Great Uprisings,” 85.

²⁵ Jensen, “The Great Uprisings,” 86.

²⁶ Jensen, “The Great Uprisings,” 86.

²⁷ Jensen, “The Great Uprisings,” 86-87.

²⁸ Jensen, “The Great Uprisings,” 86-87.

²⁹ Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 55.

coalitions with union men and middle and upper-class women of progressive leanings to try to create a broad based, national movement.³⁰

Susan Goodier and Karen Pastorello argue that women involved in the garment workers' labor unions began to see suffrage and an end to urban poverty as inextricably linked, though this inseparability was not widely agreed on until the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911 laid bare the horrific working conditions that garment workers endured.³¹ The coalition of working women and middle-class and wealthy reformers, according to Eileen Boris and Annelise Orleck, began in 1903 with the formation of the Women's Trade Union League that brought together predominantly white, native-born, Protestant women of means with young women workers, who were predominantly Jewish, Italian, and Irish immigrants in an effort to improve wages, working conditions, and hours.³² Despite having some conflicting interests and the occasional outright hostility, both groups knew that if they wanted to improve working conditions and gain political rights, they needed one another.³³

The Uprising of the 20,000, the "first great strike of women" in the United States, began in late November 1909 within this context of coalition building.³⁴ Prior to the strike breaking out, there were signs of discontent among the workers since August, when Clara Lemlich, a Jewish emigrant from Russia, had begun staging a series of walkouts.³⁵ There were numerous issues in the industry in New York City that needed redress, not the least of which was pay. But,

³⁰ Orleck, *Common Sense*, 55-56.

³¹ Susan Goodier and Karen Pastorello, *Women Will Vote*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 59-61.

³² Eileen Boris and Annelise Orleck, "Feminism and the Labor Movement: A Century of Collaboration and Conflict," *New Labor Forum*, vol. 20, no 1 (2011), 34.

³³ Boris and Orleck, "Feminism and the Labor Movement," 34.

³⁴ Schofield, "The Uprising of the 20,000," 168.

³⁵ Schneider and Schneider, *American Women*, 67.

as Ann Schofield notes, “the uprising was more than the sum of shop floor grievances and trade-union politics... it also included the cultural environment of the immigrant workers.”³⁶

It is hard to overstate how wrapped up in the grievances of the shop women workers were. Subcontracting was an industrywide problem that was also acutely felt in the shops in New York City, but it was hardly the only place where preferential job placement and pay were given to men. On the shop floor, workers were “sharply divided by skill, sex, and ethnicity” and men received the highest paying, more skilled jobs.³⁷ These problems led directly to a movement among the working women for a general strike in the garment trade, which at first was resisted by prominent men in the labor movement, like Samuel Gompers of the AFL and John Dyche of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, because of concerns about cost and the ability of “inexperienced teenage girls” to sustain a general strike.³⁸

Eventually the leadership relented and allowed a mass meeting to occur on November 22, 1909 at which Clara Lemlich, disgusted by the tepid inaction of the male leaders, took to the stage and gave a fiery speech.³⁹ She concluded her remarks with a Jewish oath that three thousand attendees followed her in, “if I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge may this hand wither from the arm I now raise.”⁴⁰ The next day, the *Elmira Star-Gazette* reported a near total shutdown of the city’s garment industry began when “men, women, girls and boys to the number of several thousand obeyed the strike summons.”⁴¹ The condescension in the press was quick to follow.

³⁶ Schofield, “The Uprising of the 20,000,” 176.

³⁷ Schofield, “The Uprising of 20,000,” 168.

³⁸ Orleck, *Common Sense*, 59.

³⁹ Orleck, *Common Sense*, 59-60.

⁴⁰ Schofield, “The Uprising of the 20,000” 167.

⁴¹ *Elmira Star-Gazette*, “Big Strike Begun Today,” November 23, 1909, n.p.

The *New York Times*, a frequent culprit of the misogyny that is explored in this paper, published a piece that explored the scene at the striker's headquarters. The dismissive tone of the article begins in its title, "Humorous Scenes at 'Headquarters' During Girls Strike."⁴² The women, the *Times* claimed, "don't go home to their mothers until their employers come to terms. The society of a tired, tired mother and a house full of children always tearing their clothes or wanting something to eat is not apt to make a girl see the bright side of losing a weekly salary."⁴³ In the *Times*' analysis, these women were not merely at headquarters trying to be of use to their leadership, or trying to be at the center of the action in a monumental moment in the labor and women's movements, they were at headquarters because they needed to resist their womanly impulses to care for their poor, bereaved mothers, and siblings. They were weak willed and weak kneed to the writers at the *New York Times*, not courageous fighters.

Of course, this very same article continues to explore the scene at the headquarters by demeaning the intelligence of the women who were there. The headquarters is, understandably, a crowded place, and the reporter notes that the women who were present were a "black mass" of "excited young women who are very sure that they want to win the strike, but who aren't quite sure how to go about it."⁴⁴ The author drives the point of these women being intellectually inferior by choosing to mention that, other than several officers who were interspersed, the women were being directed by men in their own languages, and even going so far as to quote a striker as saying "of course we don't just need a man, but it would make us feel real good to have him."⁴⁵ The condescension is clear: the women in this strike desperately need male leadership to

⁴² *New York Times*, "Humorous Scenes at 'Headquarters' During Girls Strike," (New York, NY), December 5, 1909, 4.

⁴³ *New York Times*, "Humorous Scenes."

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, "Humorous Scenes."

⁴⁵ *New York Times*, "Humorous Scenes."

help them succeed and be anything more than listless, lazy ladies that hardly know what they want. Of course, the events leading up to the strike showed that it was the other way around—male leadership was hesitant and the women were the decisive voice in organizing and bringing the strike to bear.

This is hardly the only time that the *New York Times* published a sexist account of the strikes. Another glaring example came in the form of a letter to the editor that was published in mid-December. The letter opined that it is unfortunate for the cause that “individuals heretofore not concerned fling themselves into the conflict with the fictitious energy of an interest solely assumed for the purpose of getting themselves quoted.”⁴⁶ The dismissive attitude in this statement is merely the beginning. The author then leans into assertions about the women’s intelligence that are not nearly as charitable as the article about the strike’s headquarters. “To those well acquainted with the heart of the question,” the author pontificated, “the appalling lack of knowledge on the part of such meddlers is intensely irritating and their prominent [sic] in other fields adds to the offense.”⁴⁷ He went on to describe these “meddlers” as “women of wealth but unknown mental capability, suffragettes of means but of unknown capability.”⁴⁸ The author of this piece sought to induce doubt into the public consciousness about the demands of the women involved by demeaning their intelligence.

Even publications that were friendly to the striking women were mired in the patriarchal tone of the period. Rochester, New York’s *Democrat and Chronicle* elicited a tone of surprise that women could have the nerve to stand their ground like men. The striking women were

⁴⁶ Irving E. Doob, “The Shirtwaist Strike: Its Merits Are Obscured by the Notoriety Seekers,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), December 16, 1909, 8.

⁴⁷ Doob, “The Shirtwaist Strike,” 8.

⁴⁸ Doob, “The Shirtwaist Strike,” 8.

standing their ground and “proving more persistent if not so violent as male labor leaders.”⁴⁹ The women were finally learning that being passive was a “foolish notion.”⁵⁰ The *Democrat and Chronicle* published another article that, while favorable to the strikers, put the relationship between business management and the gender of the strikers in terms of public relations concerns. Men could be handed over for the police to deal with and “public opinion aligned as it generally is against disorder.”⁵¹ A female striker, on the other hand, “protected both by her sex and her youth... finds it no troublesome matter to get the sympathy of the community.”⁵²

In February, business magnate J.P. Morgan’s daughter, Anna Morgan, joined the cause of the strikers. *The Pittsburg Press* welcomed this addition to the panoply of women-of-status that backed the strikers. The *Press*, however, was less impressed by the money and power that she and her status brought to the aid of the strikers but were more concerned about the impact her presence had on the wives of the business magnates.⁵³ The *Press* outright said that the desire to help the strikers was “a social fad, in which, of course, the wives of the rich manufacturers could have no part.”⁵⁴ The sexism knew no class bounds. Women of high society were every bit as susceptible to having their agency reduced to a fad or attention seeking as the most ragged of strikers

This selection of articles provides strong examples of the sexism, both explicit and latent, embedded in the press’ coverage of the Uprising of the 20,000. Favorable articles leaned heavily into ‘positive’ stereotypes of women, that were still problematic, while articles that were hostile

⁴⁹ *Democrat and Chronicle*, “Sister Strikers,” December 14, 1909, 11.

⁵⁰ *Democrat and Chronicle*, “Sister Strikers,” 11.

⁵¹ *Democrat and Chronicle*, “The New Kind of Striker Who Wears a Big Pompadour,” (Rochester, NY), January 16, 1910, 18.

⁵² *Democrat and Chronicle*, “The New Kind of Striker,” 18.

⁵³ *The Pittsburg Press*, “While Steel Strikers Curse J.P. Morgan Shirtwaist Strikers are Blessing His Daughter,” (Pittsburg, PA), February 2, 1910.

⁵⁴ *The Pittsburg Press*, “While Steel Strikers Curse.”

to the cause leaned on negative tropes and outright sexism to sell their points. This is assuredly not a trend that is limited to the Uprising of the 20,000.

The Rochester, New York strike in January through March of 1913, was a slightly different case than the Uprising of the 20,000, not just in scale, but in the composition of workers as well. In New York City, the unions certainly led the charge, however in Rochester “few of the women who spontaneously walked off their jobs in January of 1913 were union members.”⁵⁵ The New York City garment district was vast and sprawling compared to Rochester, the fifth largest garment manufacturing city in the nation, but Rochester had the greatest percentage of female workers in the industry at 61 percent.⁵⁶ While New York City had a mix of small manufacturers and goliaths by 1913, large manufacturers had taken over the market in Rochester, leaving little room for women working independently at home or in the small shops.⁵⁷ Subcontracting, however, still existed because contractors were hired by large firms to complete the work on garments that had already been machined, and they in turn hired women to do the work.⁵⁸ When the strikers took to the streets in 1913, they would deal the death blow to subcontracting in the city.⁵⁹

Objections to subcontracting were not the only thing on the strikers’ minds. When they spoke of their demands-- pay, reduced hours, and a host of other bread-and-butter issues were listed-- but one stands out from the rest: an end to workplace sexual harassment.⁶⁰ The leaders of the strike did try to suppress the harassment claims but airing them helped expose the injustices

⁵⁵ Joan M. Jensen, “The Great Uprising in Rochester,” in *A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike: Women Needleworkers in America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 94.

⁵⁶ Jensen, “The Great Uprising in Rochester,” 95.

⁵⁷ Jensen, “The Great Uprising in Rochester,” 97.

⁵⁸ Jensen, “The Great Uprising in Rochester,” 97.

⁵⁹ Jensen, “The Great Uprising in Rochester,” 97-98.

⁶⁰ Jensen, “The Great Uprising in Rochester,” 101.

specific to women in the workplace.⁶¹ There is a notable absence in the coverage of striking women's complaints about sexual harassment. That is not to say that newspapers did not cover it at all. Joan Jensen encountered a pair of *Democrat and Chronicle* articles that discussed the "lack of decency" and inappropriate suggestions and actions that bosses made toward their female employees, however, it appears to have been an afterthought to the local media.⁶² It is difficult to assign outright malice in this particular case because strike leaders were willing to brush it under the table, but it is something that a more expansive study of the newspaper coverage of Rochester's strike should attempt to examine. For the purposes of this paper, however, it shows that coverage *was* biased against women, whether that bias was deliberate or not.

This problem does shine a light on another, more broad problem in the media coverage when examining the Rochester strike. As has been mentioned before, the workers on strike were predominantly women, however, their voices are completely absent in a way that was not evident in the coverage of the Uprising of 20,000. The perspectives of business leaders are given readily, and a male union leader was quoted in an article about New York State getting involved in arbitration between the strikers and the employers, but women's perspectives are virtually nonexistent.⁶³ The article did see fit to mention women in passing, because one was arrested, and groups of women were marching and asking others to join them.⁶⁴ Another article, from the beginning of the strike accounted the arrest of five female garment workers, but none were interviewed in the article. Instead, their employer was cited in the article as having told police that "the girls had almost caused a panic in his shop by crying fire."⁶⁵

⁶¹ Goodier and Pastorello, *Women Will Vote*, 62-63.

⁶² Jensen, "The Great Uprising in Rochester," 101.

⁶³ *Democrat and Chronicle*, "State's Bureau of Arbitration May Take Hand: That Next Move, Probably in Rochester Strike," (Rochester, NY), January 29, 1913, 14.

⁶⁴ *Democrat and Chronicle*, "State's Bureau of Arbitration," 14.

⁶⁵ *Democrat and Chronicle*, "Garment Strikers Pledge Never to Appeal for Work," (New York, NY), January 14, 1913, 4.

The coverage of the strike in Rochester is less overt in its sexism than the coverage of the strike in New York City. However, it is still problematic because women's insights were virtually excluded from coverage of the strike, despite them forming the core of the rank and file on the picket line. From coverage of their concerns about their safety and bodily autonomy in the workplace to their very existence, time and time again the media ignored them when it easily could have included their voices to create a more accurate accounting of events.

The Paterson silk strike in 1913 was unique among the strikes covered in this paper. Silk work is a different industry altogether than manufacturing finished clothes and is one that requires more in terms of skill than machining a garment.⁶⁶ It was also not affiliated with the AFL, instead, the strike was headed by the more radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Unlike the other strikes, which achieved at least some of their goals and resulted in coalition building between middle-class women and working-class women, the Paterson strike was defeated, and represents a fatal blow for the IWW in the eastern United States.⁶⁷ However, despite these differences, there are similarities. Much like the strikes of the garment workers, this strike represented women and men coming together in solidarity to work for mutual gain.⁶⁸ There is some disagreement among historians about the exact nature of the cause of the strike, but it involves the incorporation of a new loom system that either caused the workers to feel that they would have to work harder and produce more, or the new loom would cause unemployment in their sector.⁶⁹

There is no question that, like New York City and Rochester, women emerged on the cutting edge of the movement against these new machines. On the first day of the strike, three of

⁶⁶ Steve Golin, *The Fragile Bridge: Paterson Silk Strike, 1913*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 2.

⁶⁷ Golin, *The Fragile Bridge*, 220

⁶⁸ Golin, *The Fragile Bridge*, 2.

⁶⁹ Golin, *The Fragile Bridge*, 34-35.

the principal leaders, among them a woman named Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, were arrested.⁷⁰ When the *New York Times* began covering the strike on February 26, it rightfully announced the arrest of the three leaders. However, only Gurley-Flynn and Carlo Tresca were named in the article.⁷¹ The *New York Times* made no effort to profile Tresca or his reactions to being arrested, but it did go out of its way to show Gurley-Flynn as disinterested in her arrest at first, reporting that she said “she would be glad of a chance to rest,” but then reported that she “begged the authorities not to tell her mother” because it would worry her.⁷² The *New York Times* deliberately made an editorial choice to go out of its way to avoid recording the reactions of the men who were arrested, and then to portray Gurley-Flynn as petulant, while also weak and timid.

Like some of the coverage of the Uprising of the 20,000, there is a hint of disbelief in some of the articles that women could be genuinely interested in the social movement they were a part of. The *Allentown Morning Call*, in an article on a mass meeting of the strikers, mentions that there was about “a score of girls and women” who “seemed just as enthusiastic and interested as the men.”⁷³ Of course the women were just as invested in the strike as the men. They had every bit as much on the line as their male counterparts and were just as active.

In May, following a clash between the police and a crowd that was nearly half Italian women, the *Asbury Park Evening Press* reported that “infuriated women brandishing clubs and stones were in the vanguard of the attack on the police.”⁷⁴ Multiple women were arrested, according to the article. The article is clearly focused on the actions of women, but only allows men to speak for them. This, like the reporting on the Rochester strike, is an erasure of the voices

⁷⁰ Golin, *The Fragile Bridge*, 12.

⁷¹ *New York Times*, “6,000 Weavers Quit, I.W.W. Leaders Held: Paterson Police Break Up Mass Meeting and Arrest Elizabeth Flynn and Carlo Tresca,” (New York, NY), February 26, 1913, 22.

⁷² *New York Times*, “6,000 Weavers Quit,” 22.

⁷³ *Allentown Morning Call*, “Efforts to Organize Local Silk Workers,” (Allentown, PA), March 14, 1913, 5.

⁷⁴ *Asbury Park Evening Press*, “Strikers Threaten Tie Up of Paterson,” (Asbury Park, NJ), May 16, 1913, 2.

of the women who were on the ground doing the leg work of the protest. By the end of June, over 900 women were arrested in the Paterson strike.⁷⁵ It is absurd that these women were largely passed over and dismissed by the press.

More thorough research is necessary on this topic, since it is a wide-open gap in the historiography of the women's labor movement, ripe with interesting details about the gender dynamics of the early twentieth century. During this period women were viewed as subordinate partners at best. Studying the newspaper coverage of striking women carves out nuance that may be missed by other analyses of gender roles. It also may serve to help understand why garment worker strikes are frequently overlooked in the historiography of the labor movement, despite them representing such a large proportion of strikes during the decades surrounding the turn of the century.

This paper has demonstrated that there was a clear bias against women seeking better lives in their industries within the context of newspaper reporting during this era. It was not a bias that was uniform in shape or scope, but it was clearly present. Hostile papers painted women as meek and ignorant, listless, and confused, while friendly papers were pleasantly surprised by the backbone, grit, and manliness of the women that they profiled. The one consistency across papers, however, was their reluctance to let women speak with their own voices, choosing instead to make them background characters on their own stage while the men around them were allowed to monologue.

⁷⁵ *New York Times*, "2,837 Arrests. What Paterson Police Did in Five Months of Strikes," (New York, NY) July 27, 1913, 5.

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