HOUSEWIVES, SOCIALISTS, AND THE POLITICS OF FOOD: THE 1917 NEW YORK COST-OF-LIVING PROTESTS

DANA FRANK

In mid-February 1917, an independent working-class housewives' movement erupted right in the heart of the Socialist party of America's great stronghold, New York City. Thousands of immigrant Jewish women burst into violent street protests against the high cost of living; they instituted a boycott on chickens, fish, and vegetables which shut down much of the city's foodstuffs marketing for two weeks, riveting public attention on the food price issue and sending public officials scurrying to and fro in panic.

Yet this uprising of working-class housewives fits neatly into neither of the Socialist party's customary spheres of struggle, electoral work and trade union organizing. These were the two strategic rocks on which the Socialists had established themselves by early 1917 as a major political presence in New York City, claiming two New York State assemblymen and a U.S. congressman, as well as a major role in building many of the strongest unions of the decade, including the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union.[1]

New York Socialists seized the opportunity for agitational work presented by this women's uprising. They jumped quickly into the food protest fray of February 1917 and themselves organized an extensive series of cost-of-living protests designed to direct the movement toward Socialist goals. Forming a new consumer organization, the Mothers' Anti-High Price League, Socialists undertook daily visits to city officials to call for food relief measures, pressured Albany and Washington, D.C., for action on the issue, and staged a series of neighborhood-level protest meetings. Their activities climaxed in a Madison Square demonstration of over 5,000 women, which spilled over into an attack on the Waldorf-

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Astoria hotel. Socialist-organized protest continued for over a month and a half, eclipsed finally by the entrance of the country into World War One and the imposition of federal food controls.

This wave of cost-of-living protests offers us first of all a wonderful example of working-class housewives' political activism. In protesting high food prices, through their own traditional modes of organizing, New York's Jewish housewives took up political action on their own terms. For them, consumer issues were paramount: married women, charged with converting wages into food and shelter by expending rather than earning wages, experienced their primary contact with the capitalist economy in the neighborhood marketplace, where from 40 to 60 percent of the family's income was spent on food.[2] When they protested against rising food prices, New York's immigrant Jewish women demonstrated their own perceptions of political economy: who they believed was in power; what they thought should be done to alleviate their distress, and, most importantly, how they believed they as women could affect the economic system in which they were enmeshed. Through their boycott, demonstrations, and neighborhood solidarity, the city's Jewish women acted upon their own model for political action.

These cost-of-living protests also give us a new angle from which to view the question of women and the Socialist party.[3] Presented with a mass uprising of politicized housewives, on their own doorstep, how did the New York City Socialists respond? To what extent was the party flexible enough to expand its definition of socialist organizing to embrace these women's concerns? To what extent did gender dynamics within the party limit that flexibility? New York's cost-of-living uprising offered the Socialists a prime opportunity not only to reach huge numbers of potential members, but also a classic opportunity to link bread-and-butter issues – quite literally – to a long-term socialist vision.

U.S. food prices began to rise rapidly in late 1915, after creeping up very gradually since the 1890s. The causes were complex: as World War One progressed, increasing food exports to Europe decreased the overall supply available in the United States, just as high domestic employment rates simultaneously increased demand; food brokers, meanwhile, took advantage of these new

market conditions and manipulated the price and availability of key commodities. Poor grain crops in 1916 and an anticipated poor crop for 1917 further exacerbated the situation. Over the course of 1916 prices rose still more sharply than they had the previous year.[4] Although average wages also rose (under pressure from the greatest waves of strikes the country had yet seen), the benefits of unionization were by no means evenly distributed across all workers; and even in relatively highly unionized industries such as the garment trade, prices consistently outstripped wages.[5]

In February 1917 retail food costs in New York City, after rising inexorably for months, leapt dramatically to new heights. Basic commodities increased 20 or 30 percent in price over the course of a few days; many individual foods reached prices two and three times those of the year before. Eggs, for example, rose from $0.32 a dozen in 1916, to $0.80 a year later; beets from $0.02 to $0.05 a pound; and cabbages from $0.02 a pound to $0.12.[6] Making matters worse, noncash food sources—with which the poor traditionally compensated for too-low wages—dried up. In an interview with Dorothy Day for the socialist daily *New York Call* in late 1916, an Irish woman with three children bemoaned, "Before, when I was short, I used to go around to the bakeries in the good neighborhoods, and they'd give me the bread two for five when it was one day old, and sometimes for nothing. But I can't get a roll, even. . .because flour has gone up from $3.50 to $11.00 a barrel."[7]

The price crunch brought disaster to many of New York's Jewish immigrants. Almost overnight the rising food costs depleted savings families might have accumulated over the course of decades. To avert starvation, the city's immigrant Jewish families adopted two basic strategies: on the one hand, increasing the aggregate amount of money available to the family for expenditure on food, by selling the family's possessions or adding to the number of wage earners in the family—or both.[8] One "East Side Mother" told of how, as prices rose and her husband, who worked only seasonably as a presser, took ill, she herself, then her daughter and son, successively took jobs.[9] On the other hand, families attempted to reduce food expenditures, by purchasing foods of increasingly inferior quality in smaller and smaller quantities, and by changing their menus drastically, replacing food to which they had become accustomed with cheaper items. One of

Day's interviewees gave up flour for very cheap grade cornmeal; investigators for the city's charity department found poor people eating "decayed" onions and potatoes. Ultimately, the hardest-hit families found themselves simply eating less food. Several sources reported mothers placating their children with water colored with milk.[10]

But for these women a third strategy for dealing with the high cost of living was to protest. In the third week of February when prices began their steepest climb yet, and Jewish women's "last resort," potatoes and onions, leapt from $0.05 to $0.10 and $0.14 to $0.18 a pound, respectively, New York's Jewish women responded by calling for a citywide boycott of the two vegetables. Violent street protests enforcing their boycott broke out in Jewish neighborhoods throughout the city, beginning in the Williamsburg district of Brooklyn and spreading by 19 and 20 February throughout greater New York. Although sources are sketchy, it appears that the boycott movement had gathered momentum over the course of the two weeks prior to 20 February. One source reported protests beginning on the East Side "several days" before the twenty-first; another reported a boycott in the Claremont district of the Bronx beginning on the eighteenth. New York City Commissioner of Weights and Measures Joseph Hartigan admitted on the twenty-first that what he termed "incipient riots" had been reported by grocers in the Bronx, Brownsville, the East Side, and at 102nd Street and Second Avenue, for fifteen days previous.[11]

By Wednesday, 21 February, women in these neighborhoods banned the sale not only of onions and potatoes but also of vegetables altogether. The next day – Thursday the twenty-second – they angrily added chicken to the list, when they set out to buy their weekly sabbath chickens and found that the price had risen from the previous week's $0.20 a pound to $0.32. And, because they believed that its preparation required purchase of boycotted onions, that same day the women also banned the sale of fish.[12] Marie Ganz, an anarchist who played a briefly prominent role in the demonstrations which grew out of the boycott, claimed in her 1920 autobiography that women were allowed to buy "only certain foods in which there seemed to be the least profiteering. They could buy bread, butter, milk and cereals. . .and any person caught buying anything else was mobbed."[13]

The boycott succeeded almost immediately in halting sales of

chickens, fish, and many vegetables in Jewish neighborhoods. By Thursday the twenty-second, newspapers reported "no customers" even for those vendors who slashed prices to save their stocks from spoilage. Peddlers deserted their pushcarts or removed them from the streets altogether. Onion shipments accumulated unsold at wholesalers' wharves. In general, food prices held stable for a few days, although retail chicken prices did fall that same Thursday. But by Monday the twenty-sixth, wholesalers cut their rates sharply, and retail prices on a wide range of foods plummeted for the next two weeks, as the boycott remained in effect. By 11 March, potato prices, for example, had fallen from their preboycott high of $0.10 or $0.11 a pound to $0.06.[14]

During the last week of February and the first week of March, while this boycott was so successfully maintained, New York's Jewish women's struggle rapidly escalated; it became a broad movement including demonstrations, marches, pleas before the governor and mayor, and even an outright "riot." But before we examine those expanded forms of protest, the boycott movement itself calls for more detailed scrutiny.

For the women involved, the mild-sounding phrase "establishing a boycott" meant both violence and great vigilance. It meant forcing members of their neighborhood community to publicly demonstrate their observance of the collective ban. The protesting women primarily concentrated their violence and crowd persuasion on convincing peddlers, butchers, and grocers not to sell the boycotted foods. One hundred women gathered on the East Side's Rivington Street, for example, overturned pushcarts, scattered their goods, and threatened to light the kerosene which they poured over other peddlers' vegetables. In many cases infuriated women did totally demolish pushcarts along with their contents. Women surrounded grocers', butcher shops, or fish sellers', and "dared the owners to come out"; on East Fourth Street, forty women poured into a butcher shop and threatened the butcher with his own cleavers.[15] Ganz recalled that "the women used their black shopping bags as clubs, striking at the men. . . . Onions, potatoes and cabbages flew through the air."[16]

Structurally, the boycott movement entailed three key elements: (1) mass meetings, such as that in Williamsburg on 19 February at which 2,000 women collectively pledged to enforce their boycott the next morning; (2) roving inspections, ensuring the advertise-

ment and thoroughness of the movement; and (3) permanently posted pickets at key marketing sites. Several hundred women on the East Side, for example, "surged" through their local shopping districts, "waving the head and wings and mutilated bodies of chickens," "passing from one shop to another, but always leaving a sufficient number of pickets at each poultry market to prevent business."[17]

When the city's police attempted to restrain and arrest protesters, they quickly became a second object of the women's wrath.[18] In the Bronx, for example, after a patrolman "remonstrated" a woman on picket duty who had snatched a bag of just-purchased onions from an old man,

> the policeman was set upon by the infuriated women, and so was Patrolman Rehn, who responded to the whistle's call for aid. When Mrs. Kiffel was finally put under arrest, volunteers from half a score of houses ran to her assistance and the two policemen were in the centre of a screaming mob of women when Captain Kinsler with the reserves rushed upon the mob.
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> Caps were smashed, buttons and insignia torn from uniforms, hair was pulled, and it was 15 minutes before Mrs. Kiffel and six of her attendants had been put under arrest.[19]

As this example illustrates, women were quick to act in solidarity when one of their number was set upon by the police. Repeatedly, crowds of women attempted rescue operations, first as their fellow protester was being arrested, and then at the police station.[20] Citywide arrests mounted nonetheless—to sixty on the twenty-third—although Police Inspector Sweeney issued instructions dictating gentle treatment. Despite his order that "no women be arrested except those whose conduct could not be overlooked," arrests increased to 100 on 1 March.[21]

Finally, the protesters reacted equally furiously to shoppers, female and male, who did not observe their boycott. Pickets approached shoppers and informed them of the boycott, cautioning them against purchase of forbidden goods. If they persisted in buying, the women seized and destroyed the shoppers' purchases. On 23 February, for example, an Orchard Street picket guard of "two hundred irate women" stood guard all day, and when a woman bought fish against their will, wrested it from her and threw it into the street.[22] These acts often involved pulling hair, tearing clothes, and scratching faces. "A man who bought a chicken at Waalch's poultry in Wales avenue was pursued by 200 women into a saloon two blocks away. After the crowd had

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threatened to wreck the place, the proprietor induced the man to throw his purchase to the mob, who destroyed it."[23]

Aside from the obvious reason that prices were skyrocketing, why exactly did these women choose to rebel, and so fiercely? A closer look at individual protesters and the characteristics they shared suggests a partial explanation. With few exceptions, the women on whom information is available—through newspaper interviews and statistics reported on those arrested—were married and in their mid- or late thirties. Each was the mother of several children, usually four or five, and so had reached the point in women's life cycle at which responsibilities for food were greatest. Their husbands were living, but were frequently described as ill or only seasonably employed. East Side protester Minnie Benjamine, for example, explained: "I have a family of five. My man makes $18 a week if he feels well. Often he does not feel well because he is not strong."[24] Although growing children had become a maximum financial burden, the husbands of these middle-aged working-class women had passed their period of peak earning power.

Despite their husbands' decreasing earnings, many of the women who engaged in the protests were not the poorest of the poor. They did have husbands still living, and their husbands were employed, albeit seasonably, earning from $10.00 to $15.00 a week, on the average—one as a cigarmaker, another as a shoemaker, many in the garment industry. Although such wages were not high, it appears that until the most recent price leaps, families could live on these wages reasonably comfortably, and in a few cases even save.[25]

Rather than absolute poverty, a shared experience of swiftly declining living standards, caused by rising prices, drove these women to protest. The women's own words expressed this experience. Mrs. Ida Markowitz, for example, an East Side protester who supported her five children on the $10.00 a week her husband brought in as a cloakmaker, voiced her refusal to lower her standard of living: "We don't want their oleomargarine. I could buy butter once on my husband's wages—I don't see why I shouldn't have the same to-day."[26] Mrs. Yetta Stillman, whose husband

earned $10.00 as a shoemaker, complained to a reporter who wrote "two years ago this income was enough to feed their six children and buy them shoes and clothing. But to-day – not even potatoes." "Even two months ago it wasn't as hard as it is today." By protesting, these women expressed a limit to redefining their lives beyond which they would not be pushed. As one woman explained in the middle of a demonstration, "With $14 a week we used to just make a living. With prices as they are now, we could not even live on $2 a day. We would just exist."[27] In that distinction between existing and living lay the women's motivation to protest.

A number of the protesters on whom information is available, however, had truly hit rock bottom. For example, when Florence Rosenberg, age thirty-seven, was arrested for beating up a woman who bought oranges, she "said she eked out a livelihood for herself, her invalid husband and four children by selling tea and coffee from house to house. She said the family had lived on half a loaf of bread since last Monday [three days previous]."[28]

In protesting so vehemently, many of New York's Jewish women may also have been motivated by their knowledge that the end of the garment trade's winter season rapidly approached. The New York City clothing industry employed workers in two seasons, shutting down from April to July and again in the late fall. The protesters certainly knew that their budgetary situation would only worsen as the spring progressed.[29]

When the women spoke in their own words of their reasons for protesting, they presented very simple arguments. Almost always, they simply described the sheer enormity of the task of feeding their families under such conditions, and above all, their frustration with the impossibility of performing that task. "I keep my house clean, I keep my windows open, I keep my children clean," one woman declared. "But I can't get the things they must have to eat. I can do nothing more." Another protester voiced identical exasperation: "What am I going to do today? I have my man; he's a tailor, out of work, and two children to feed."[30] Often, protesting women simply pointed to price changes of different foods to explain their acts, or just described their worsening situation. One protester's response epitomized the women's arguments. "Today I went to buy a quart of milk. I paid ten cents for it. The woman who followed me had to pay twelve cents for the same thing. . . . Lima beans have gone up eight cents in four days. And yesterday I

found out I couldn't buy a penny's worth of salt any more. No wonder we started rioting. We can't starve without a protest of some kind."[31]

But clearly these women, in choosing their "protest of some kind," also acted out of a Jewish tradition of women's activism, and consumer activism in particular, transplanted from Europe. Jewish women in the New World protested unacceptable prices in almost precisely the same manner on several previous occasions. Toronto's Jewish women boycotted their city's kosher butchers in 1908 and again in 1914, for example.[32] Paula E. Hyman has investigated one particular earlier outbreak in detail, a New York City kosher meat boycott in 1902. In May of that year, when meat prices jumped 50 percent, middle-aged Jewish women (Hyman found that the medium age of boycott leaders was thirty-nine), averaging 4.3 children each, formed neighborhood bands to enforce a boycott of kosher butchers. Mass meetings complemented a door-to-door canvass informing women of the movement and collecting funds. The women invaded offending butchers shops and seized and destroyed the purchases of shoppers who violated their pact. Meticulously organized, their movement succeeded at least temporarily in bringing the price of meat down from $0.18 to $0.14 a pound.[33] Although the precise ways in which New York's Jewish women remembered and learned from this protest fifteen years earlier remain obscure, we can at least imagine that the 1902 boycott, along with other similar boycotts known to the women of New York, suggested the tactical form which their 1917 protest would take. This protest tradition clearly deserves further attention – for food protests identical in basic form to New York's broke out in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and many other cities during early 1917.

But to the working-class Jewish women who protested in New York, the idea of a neighborhood-based, consumer-enforced boycott must also have quite simply made sense. The women boycotters designed their movement around pressuring the marketplace at the point at which they were accustomed to encountering it. They knew from experience in haggling with local grocers that prices were not absolute; they knew that purchasing power could affect prices, if applied craftily; and they knew that grocers' stocks were extremely perishable.[34] The neighborhood market, moreover, was familiar to them. Produce and poultry

dealers were known at least by face, if not by name and family ties. The familiarity which nurtured New York's Jewish boycott movement grew out of the neighborhood setting itself: women could join with their neighbors in militant protest without even leaving the streets that were well-known to them. They could act in close proximity to their homes and to their children – recall the incident above when "volunteers from half a dozen houses" ran to a sister's assistance in her battle with police.[35]

Equally important, women engaged in a local consumer boycott movement could carve out an activist place for themselves within their roles as wives and mothers outside of the paid labor force. They could act out of what Temma Kaplan identifies as "female consciousness" shared by many women who accept the sexual division of labor and the responsibilities it assigns to women, but who take those responsibilities seriously enough to rebel, if necessary, to fulfill them. "Women with female consciousness demand the rights that their obligations entail," Kaplan argues. "The collective drive to serve those rights has revolutionary consequences insofar as it politicizes the networks of everyday life."[36] Kaplan's model suggests that the sexual division of labor, as New York's Jewish women experienced it in 1917, both motivated them to rise up in protest, and set the framework within which their uprising would fit. Thus the protesting women demanded their rights to feed their children, demanded that the market yield up a "living" to their families, and also protested in ways that enabled them to continue to fulfill childcare responsibilities, staying close to home or bringing children along to demonstrations.

In voicing their demands as consumers, New York's immigrant Jewish mothers displayed no complex theory of the political economy of food. Although they did say prices were too high and set about lowering them, the women's analysis was neither abstract nor structural. Yet with their actions they expressed a belief that, through carefully orchestrated solidarity, ordinary people *could* affect the market from below. They believed in this enough to beat up their neighbors, go without the cheapest and most desirable foods for over two weeks, and risk arrest involving fines they couldn't pay, or even jail. At home in their neighborhoods, together and assertive, they felt powerful.

Comfortable as they were with protesting in their own front yards, New York's Jewish women also proved willing to venture into unfamiliar areas of the city to pursue their demands. As they did so, their movement rapidly escalated into a citywide struggle against the high cost of living, involving anarchists, Socialists, Progressives, and city officials, each offering their own solution to the crisis. New York's Socialists moved quickly to the forefront of this organizing drive, although other independent activists did play key roles, especially during a brief transitional period between boycott-related protests and citywide organizing.

On 20 February, as boycott-enforcing street actions spread across New York's Jewish section, a crowd of over 1,000 women gathered in the East Side's Rutgers Square. They had been drawn by an announcement in the morning's *Forward* placed by five women the night before. When after speeches and much shouting someone in the crowd suggested a march on City Hall, two women, Ida Harris and Marie Ganz, led the crowd to City Hall Park, where the women demanded to see the mayor, John Purroy Mitchel. In Yiddish and English, many of them in tears, the protesters held their babies up as testimony and demanded food, screaming, "You see them – they are starving. We want bread"; "Feed our children." Police officers closed the building's gates and announced that the mayor was out, but the women persisted with their demands. Protester Ida Harris spoke to the mayor's police representative on the women's behalf, combining her expressions of the women's frustrations with a broad appeal for action by "city officials." "We simply want the Mayor to make prices go down. If there is a law fixing prices, we want him to enforce it, and if there isn't, we appeal to him to get one. . . . We are not an organization. We haven't got any politics. We are just mothers and we want food for our children. Won't you give us food?" Police promised a committee of five an audience with Mitchel the next day, and then renewed their efforts to disperse the crowd, this time using clubs. Several speakers urged the women to return home peacefully and the women began to leave, until the anarchist Ganz shouted defiantly in Yiddish, "Stay here till you're heard! . . . The Mayor isn't here, because he's at a luncheon at a big hotel. You have a right to be heard. Stay here till you are!" The women renewed their shouting, and the protest was shattered only when police rode through the crowd on horseback, scattering the women and their

children and arresting Ganz. Undaunted, two hundred of the women stormed the police station and secured her release.[37]

This City Hall demonstration marked a transition in the Jewish women's protest movement: the women left their traditional neighborhood realm of protest and expanded their demands to call for direct grants of food. Moreover, in marching to the mayor's seat of power they now held city officials as well as grocers and peddlers responsible for the crisis. Their movement, however, in its tactics, remained largely spontaneously organized and characterized by highly emotional crowd actions.

The night of this City Hall demonstration, between 2,000 and 5,000 people, mostly female, crowded into the East Side's Forward Hall to continue protesting at a meeting called by the Socialist party. By 7:00 P.M. the room was packed; two hours passed before the scene calmed down enough for individual speeches to be heard. One by one, Socialists attempted to gain the attention of the crowd. Two partially successful speakers "urged the people to organize and begged them to do no violence," initiating the socialist response to the boycott movement; William Karlin, a Socialist labor lawyer, argued for "immediate organization" to advance socialism. "You should have known this would happen," he berated his listeners. But others yelled from the audience "throw kerosene!" to suggest burning grocers' stocks. Between Socialists on-stage and the crowd below—which contained an array of Socialists, non-Socialist women of the East Side, reporters, and assorted radicals—something of a battle ensued for the leadership of the movement, both figuratively and literally. Ida Harris, who apparently received much support from the women in the audience, attempted to speak but was held back physically by a group of Socialists on the stage. She continued her attempts until Jacob Panken, a Socialist lawyer who would be elected to the bench the next fall, triumphed over her in the battle for listeners, capturing the audience's attention. (Harris's leadership was so objectionable, one reporter explained, because her husband, a watchmaker, was a member of "the Downtown Tammany club" and therefore the Socialists' bitter electoral foe.)[38]

Panken joined his fellow Socialists in cautioning protesters against violence. His advice was to "fight, but to fight in an orderly manner." Specifically, he opposed the destruction of food because to do so would mean the diminution of already low supplies. He

called instead for a mass demonstration of half a million women and children the following Saturday. He argued that capitalists had caused the crisis by holding up food for shipment to Europe, and suggested that the municipal government could alleviate the city's distress by appropriating a million dollars to buy and distribute food at cost. He closed his speech by reading an appeal to President Wilson for congressional measures, "which was carried with a shout."[39]

When Panken finished, an unidentified speaker announced that he would name a committee to organize the proposed demonstration. Although Harris nominated herself, the man pointedly passed her by and named seven other women. A second committee, headed by Socialist Anna Pastor, was named to interview Mayor Mitchel, and a third to open offices upstairs in the Forward Building. Out of these committees grew a new Socialist party suborganization named the Mothers' Anti-High Price League (MAHPL), which formed the core of Socialist cost-of-living organizing over the next three weeks.[40]

The Socialist party of New York City was not without experience in agitating around the cost-of-living issue. Consumer issues had moved briefly to the forefront of the city's socialist organizing before, in the late fall of 1916, when party members had formed two women's consumer groups, the Socialist Housewives League in Brooklyn and the Socialist Consumers' League of the Bronx. These groups had joined with more traditional Progressive consumer organizations, regular Socialist party locals, Jewish trade unions, and the Workmen's Circle, to form a short-lived coalition against the high cost of living. During this same period, the New York State Socialist party had also laid plans for a huge demonstration on 9 December 1916. However, that demonstration, despite exhortations in the Yiddish press, a mass leafletting campaign, and a daily buildup in the English language *New York Call,* drew only 300 party stalwarts. The New York City party's interest in consumer issues disappeared soon after. Its spin-off group, the Socialist Consumers League of the Bronx, did continue organizing efforts into January, but with little evident support from either the grassroots or the party.[41]

The fall's socialist consumer agitation was characterized, as the February drive would be, by the perseverance of women party members in its rank-and-file activities. Socialist women, working

through the city's Socialist Suffrage Campaign Committee in particular, as well as through the socialist consumer groups, both preceded the overall party in their interest in the issue, and persisted much longer in grassroots organizing work when the commitment of their brothers in the party waned.

The Socialists who recommitted themselves to cost-of-living organizing on 20 February 1917 organized a full-fledged campaign to pressure government officials through their new organization, MAHPL. One of their first acts was to form an executive committee, chaired by Rachel Panken, wife of Jacob Panken and a veteran of union organizing in the waist and dress industries. On the twenty-first, Mrs. Panken headed a MAHPL committee that met with the mayor; Abraham Plotkin, as the MAHPL spokesperson, demanded that the mayor call an immediate meeting of the city's Board of Estimate to appropriate $1,000,000 for the purchase and sale of food by the city. Two days later, at the Board of Estimate meeting, the Socialists added a demand for a second million for school lunches, but the board, like the mayor, passed responsibility for the crisis on to the state legislature, and recommended a congressional investigation into the food situation. Thus frustrated with the city's response, MAHPL members themselves turned to the state and federal governments, telegraphing President Wilson on the twenty-first to demand a $40,000 appropriation for investigation of the food crisis and for a commission to create at-cost food distribution centers. The MAHPL conveyed simular demands to New York Governor Whitman.[42]

The MAHPL's agitational efforts climaxed on Saturday the twenty-fourth with a massive price protest demonstration in Madison Square. Because both Socialists and women street protesters joined in this demonstration, it gives us a closer look at the confluence of the two, as well as at the evolving views of each group. MAHPL committees began to plan this mass demonstration the night of the Forward Hall meeting, advertising it with handbills throughout the city and with announcements in the city's Yiddish newspapers, as well as in the Socialists' *New York Call*. According to the MAHPL's design, women were to congregate at fourteen advertised subpoints in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, and march with their neighbors to Madison Square. Although it is unclear whether the demonstrators in fact followed this scheme, by midafternoon on the twenty-fourth approximately 5,000 pro-

testers had amassed in the square. Observers estimated the crowd at 90 percent foreign-born and 80 percent female, with many of the women accompanied by children or baby carriages. Overall, "The whole affair. . .was powerful in its chaos, its disorganization, its freedom from personal dominance," one observer reported. "Anybody who had anything to say mounted a soap box or a curb and said it. There were as many as 15 speakers. . .at any one time."[43]

The demonstration's speeches, most of them in Yiddish or English, did, however, represent more underlying order than might have been immediately apparent. MAHPL set up three main speaking platforms with a Socialist woman in charge of each, all three veterans of the fall's consumer organizing drive. Speakers from an approved MAHPL list circulated between these three meetings. Their speeches evidenced an effort on the part of New York's Socialists to combine the self-assertiveness of the women's street actions with a call to socialist action. Bella Zilberman, for example, called upon city, state, and national governments for action, but also appealed to the instincts that had spurred the original boycott movement: "We are being robbed by food pirates who are murdering our babies. These heartless robbers have so aroused the mother spirit that we recognize no other law than the law of self-preservation." Similarly, Jacob Panken referred to the cost of living as a particularly female concern before calling on the federal government to fund nationwide food purchasing centers, and proclaimed that "the trusts are sucking the very vitals and life blood from the people."[44]

Several of the signs carried by demonstrators displayed a similar blend of socialist analysis of the cost-of-living issue with demands growing out of the boycott movement. Slogans like "Uncle Sam, Why Feed Murderers? Feed Your Children," and "Feed America first! Our children are starving. Come down with prices," for example, incorporated the socialist critique that war profiteering and exports had caused the crisis. Other banners and signs displayed a rough class-consciousness of more ambiguous origin: "Protest. The East New York and Brounsville [*sic*] Organisation of Working people. We want cheaper the high cost of food," and, "Mr. Mayor, never mind Riverside Drive. We want onions, potatoes, chickens too!" A third group of signs simply asked for food – though they did also implicitly hold government officials responsible: "Open the

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warehouses. We demand food for our children." "Bread! Bread! Give us enough bread to eat."[45]

It appears that for the Jewish women who constituted the bulk of the demonstrators, the more direct and simple the demand, the more they felt their own wishes expressed. A reporter for the Hearst *New York American,* who no doubt brought her or his own political views to the event, wrote that the audience applauded speeches on "Socialism and anarchy and direct action and syndicalism and communism." "But those speakers who talked plain potatoes, onions, milk, bread, eggs and butter were wildly applauded. It was for that they had come, and not, as one woman screamed: 'To ____ with politics; give us enough to eat.'"[46] The *New York World*'s reporter described the demonstrators as "weary and expressionless." "There was no joy of rebellion in the women. Some of them had walked 4 and 5 miles to come, and would have to walk home again." She reported that "The speeches. . .seemed to produce no ripple of response."[47] Leaving their neighborhood setting meant not only a long and exhausting day for these women, who also had to bring along their equally tired children or find childcare, and who had not eaten well for quite some time, but also a foray into probably unfamiliar areas of the city. Moreover, the demonstration itself, unlike their own boycott movement, gave the women little to actually *do* except listen passively and express agreement or disagreement with the speaker.

Later in the day, however, the protesters found something more active to do. And their actions diverged sharply from the Socialists' plan for the afternoon. When Socialist speaker Bella Zilberman asked only rhetorically how many of her listeners would march to the Waldorf-Astoria where Governor Whitman was rumored to be stopping, and "show him that you are hungry," more than a thousand women and children surged to the hotel and tried desperately to get in. A scene ensued which in its chaos and violence approached the classic meaning of "riot." Crying and screaming women beat upon the quickly barricaded doors of the hotel for two hours. One group of protesters stopped a passing car and dragged out its drivers, shouting "Yah! Yah! You ride in comfort while we walk and starve." The women's cries in this protest reiterated their desperation, their confusion, and their desire for help. "Give us bread." "We are starving." "Why can't we see the Governor?" When mounted police arrived and began to club the

women, they fought back fiercely but also expressed a wish to avoid confrontation. "Don't touch us!" they cried. "Don't kill us. We are hungry. We came here to get help, not to fight the police." As the evening progressed, many of the women began to realize that they had become separated from their children and began a loud "wailing" of distress. "The policemen seemed to be at a loss how to handle them. They declared they could have cleared the streets in a quarter of an hour had there been men to deal with. But the harder they pushed and the louder they bellowed the wilder the women became." Ultimately the women retreated to their neighborhoods, many of them by way of the police station either under arrest or in search of lost children.[48]

Meanwhile, a committee of MAHPL Socialists, evidently unaware of this scene at the Waldorf-Astoria, called upon the governor at the hotel where he was actually staying, the St. Regis. Reiterating the MAHPL demands for a bill empowering the city to act, they asked Whitman to send an emergency message to the legislature outlining immediate action. While the afternoon's earlier demonstration in Madison Square had represented the converging movements of both street boycotters and Socialists, these two hotel scenes in many ways symbolized the divergence of the two, in terms of both goals and tactics: the women at the Waldorf-Astoria acted in large part spontaneously, expressing their emotions freely and simply demanding immediate relief while the Socialists paid a prearranged formal call on the state's executive, demanding specific and complex legislation.[49]

The next night, 25 February, the MAHPL held another mass coalition meeting on the East Side, in P.S. 62 off Rutgers Square. The meeting's main act of business was to form a new MAHPL "permanent committee" from the 392 organizational delegates present – now representing not only Jewish and socialist labor organizations, but also the Central Federated Union of New York City, the Progressive Consumer's League, and the birth control movement, a total of 158 groups in all. The new committee retained Rachel Panken as chair, with William Karlin as vice-chair and four additional men as secretary, treasurer, and "supervisors"; Anna Pastor was also named supervisor. The MAHPL named an additional subcommittee of twenty-five, headed by Karlin, the labor forum's Carl Beck, and Edward Cassidy of the Typographical Union, to journey to Albany.[50]

As the MAHPL affiliates adopted these measures Sunday night, much of the movement's tension between Socialists and street protesters persisted. First of all, "no person who did not pass the inspection of William Karlin and the police" was allowed into the hall. "The delegates were requested to keep order and even to assist the police in preserving peace. Not a word about the Waldorf-Astoria food riot Saturday night was spoken." More violent opposition strains did, however, nonetheless assert themselves at the meeting. One person shouted from the gallery in Yiddish, "To hell with all this palaver. . . . Let us go forth and show them while we yet have strength. Tomorrow we shall be weak, because we starve. Let us have action, now." The *New York Call* reported that "this exhortation was frowned upon by the platform leaders, but the crowd in the school auditorium went wild. They applauded for two minutes."[51] Although rank and file protesters evidently sought Socialist support here for continued mass street action, the Socialists, on the other hand, sought to disassociate themselves from such tactics – and from tacticians as well, by controlling the meeting's constituency.

The MAHPL continued its own program of pressuring the government over the next three weeks. On 27 February and 13 March delegates to Albany called upon legislators and the governor to demand relief measures; MAHPL members bombarded officials with letters demanding state-managed food sales. On the twenty-seventh, they took their demands to New York City's aldermen. With the aid of Socialist party locals, they organized an agitational campaign of local "mass meetings" on the food price issue, featuring the city's most prominent Socialists, most of them men, including Morris Hillquit, Assemblymen Joseph Whitehorn and Abraham Shiplacoff, and Theresa Malkiel. MAHPL also moved one step further in its internal consolidation on 3 March, reconstituting itself as an executive committee of representatives from thirty consumer organizations.[52]

The MAHPL's exact attitude toward the continuing boycott movement was ambivalent. The league at least implicitly endorsed the boycotters' actions by issuing MAHPL buttons to protesters, bailing out and providing legal counsel to arrested women, and, as the weeks progressed, officially announcing the boycott's continuation. But league members also repeatedly preached against the violence through which the women maintained the boycott.[53]

In all their cost-of-living agitational work, New York's Socialist party sought to define appropriate socialist solutions to the crisis. The party's primary demand, as enumerated in *New York Call* editorials, speeches by party members, and measures introduced by Socialist officeholders, was that the city, state, and federal governments should reconstruct the country's food distribution systems by creating food-buying centers, which would eliminate private intermediaries and thus profits on food. Later, the Socialists added a second demand in response to the Jewish women's militancy and their demand for short-term relief: immediate purchase and sale of food by the government at cost.[54]

A number of Socialists, most of them male, stressed the supremacy of wage struggles over consumer ones. Union organizing, they argued, was the best method through which to combat the high cost of living. An official Socialist party statement printed in the *New York Call* on 21 February, for example, demanded that "the government assume direct supervision and control of the production and supply of necessities" and appealed to the workers to support Congressman Meyer London's bill proposing concrete measures, concluding: "But above all the Socialist party calls upon the workers to force a steady raise of their wages. . .and to rally to the support of the Socialist party."[55] Similarly, a long article by Industrial Workers of the World supporter Leslie Marcy in the *International Socialist Review* celebrating the cost-of-living protests concluded, *"What are we going to do about it?* We are going to organize and *strike* and *secure* higher wages. . . . We will have to remember that we cannot reach the Big Fellows by destroying the carts of fruit peddlers. But we can *always get them if we fight on the job."*[56]

In participating in MAHPL's demontrations, in small "mass meetings" organized by independent consumer groups, and in more informal small-scale demonstrations, the boycotting women added to their protest design a new tactic. They expanded both their modes of protest and the spatial dimension of their movement. Simultaneously, they expanded their demands beyond those of lowered retail prices: they cried "give us food," demanding outright grants of food from the city. In so doing, however, they diverged once again from the Socialists, who on no occasion called

for direct distribution of free food, preferring, rather, to demand the purchase and sale of food at cost.

Nor did the protesting women heed the Socialists' admonitions against violence. They continued unabated to enforce their boycott using traditional coercive methods. The women's acts of violence in fact reached their greatest intensity after the Socialists had been preaching against violence for several days. Using boycott-related arrests as a very crude measure, in combination with press assessments of the relative extent of each day's street activities, it appears that protests reached their greatest ferocity on 1 March, when 100 people were arrested.[57] Overall, in the two weeks between 19 February and 5 March, street protests followed a weekly cycle, reaching their greatest intensity on Thursday (Jewish women's traditional marketing day for the sabbath), subsiding somewhat on Friday, ceasing altogether for the sabbath and the next day because of newly strict police enforcement of a law closing grocers' on Sundays, and breaking out with renewed vigor upon the women's return to the market on Monday.

The women who participated in this cycle of protests did prove willing to make use of the added legitimacy MAHPL's activities brought to their movement. Many of the women picketing grocers' and butchers' shops on 1 March wore "Anti-High price league buttons as a sign of authority." Mrs. Becky Singer, arrested and taken to court in the Bronx for street protesting that day, "showed an Anti-High price league button and said her children were starving."[58] While protesting women earlier in the movement had merely pointed to their starving children and to rising prices, Mrs. Singer now felt her actions carried an official sanction. The boycotters were thus willing to appropriate an element of the Socialist movement which added strength to their own design for protest.

The women's design for protests, however, continued to follow the dictates of their traditional views about the morality of food. A final development in the boycotters' story indicates that many of them not only refused to pay outrageous prices, but also specifically refused to too radically change their families' diets. As I pointed out above, many women initially joined the movement less out of actual starvation than out of a sense of limits reached, as in the case of the woman who asserted her continuing right to butter. Those limits boiled down to an unwillingness to altogether aban-

don traditional foods. Potatoes, onions, and chickens were dietary staples to which they believed they had a basic right if they were to fulfill their responsibility to truly sustain their families. More importantly, the rituals of preparing kosher foods played a crucial role in the religious and cultural self-definition of New York's immigrant Jewish people. Following the exact rules prescribing the foods to be served on the sabbath or the precise way to butcher a chicken was antithetical to adapting the family diet according to the vagaries of the market. Women bought and served traditional foods not only out of mere habit, but also because those foods expressed their commitment to a religious life.[59]

The women's adamant refusal to totally overhaul their diets was evident when, in the last days of February, the city of New York embarked on a propaganda and sales campaign designed to quell the protests by convincing women to replace traditional foods with alternative, cheaper ones. On 26 February, the mayor's Food Supply Committee, headed by George Perkins, distributed to 800,000 schoolchildren copies of a circular extolling the nutritional virtues of rice. On 1 March, shipments of 20,000 lbs. of Pacific Coast smelts arrived in the city by emergency order, and Perkins began marketing the fish through private grocers at minimal cost. By 8 March, Perkins's committee was selling Brazilian beans and hominy as well as smelts, and distributing pamphlets on the value of all three. If these foods sound obscure, they were deliberately so: the mayor's committee sought intentionally "to introduce provisions which are not usually consumed in any large quantities in this part of the country, so as to avoid as far as possible direct competition with the trade."[60] Yet the more unusual the food, the more drastic the adaptation of food habits necessary if women were to purchase it.

Opposition to the initial rice propaganda appears to have taken racist and nationalist form, as women added anti-rice proclamations to their protest demands. "We American [*sic*] Can Not live on rice," read one sign.[61] Opposition to smelts, which the city itself distributed to grocers and fishmarkets by the truckload on March first and second, took more concrete form: "Large mobs of East Side women. . .mauled the sellers and returned some of the fish to their native element through open manholes."[62] These women not only resented the idea of smelts ("The women discovered it is so named for good and sufficient reasons"), but also viewed their dis-

tribution as an attempt by the city to break their blockade on fish distribution – they still maintained that fish could not be consumed without complementary, forbidden, onions. Eventually, however, the offending but very cheap smelts did sell. By 9 March, grocers were placing orders for more fish than the city could supply.[63]

The women's boycott itself also eventually came to an end. Although Socialist Theresa Malkiel, speaking for the MAHPL, proclaimed the boycott still in effect on 8 March, by Wednesday the seventh potatoes and other vegetables began to reappear on pushcarts. The next day, Thursday, the previous peak day in the protest cycle, no street actions were reported, and Friday purchases were reported back to normal, although one small protest broke out in the Bronx. The situation as a whole suggests that while Socialist organizers sought to continue the boycott, albeit nonviolently, and denied reports that it was over, the Jewish women in the neighborhoods who had successfully initiated and prosecuted it chose to relax their vigilance and resume buying.[64]

Although the exact reasons why the women decided to end their boycott remain unclear, their boycott tactic itself may have been inherently self-limiting. After all, the women who protested had renounced their favorite foods in order, ultimately, to obtain those very same foods. Just as they were unwilling to too drastically change their eating habits under pressure from rising prices, they must also have been unwilling to adapt to the exigencies of a boycott situation too indefinitely.

But the women's decision to resume buying must have also been motivated by the ostensible success of their movement. By the second week in March, prices of boycotted items did drop sharply. Onions plummeted from $0.18 a pound retail to $0.11 and $0.12; potatoes from $0.10 to $0.07 and $0.08; and chickens from $0.32 a pound to around $0.22.[65] However, the protest's long-term effect on prices was only temporary: statistics show that retail food costs in New York City rose continously over the course of 1917, decreasing their rate of rise somewhat during the winter of 1917-18 but resuming their sharp climb in 1918.[66]

Socialist cost-of-living agitation continued well past the boycott movement, into March and early April, though carried out by an increasingly small number of activists. The MAHPL, extending its previous trend of coalition-consolidation, transformed itself into the Anti-High Price Federation of Women (AHPFW) on 22 March,

in a meeting of thirty-two delegates from twenty New York consumer groups. The new federation planned a series of protest meetings over the course of the next three weeks, to be held in each of the city's thirty assembly districts. At these meetings, AHPFW spokespersons reiterated their demand for publicly owned and managed terminal markets, bakeries, and iceplants. Beginning on the twenty-first the AHPFW began to call for the imposition by the federal government of maximum prices on all food articles. And, the *New York Call* noted, "the need of votes for women, to strengthen this new woman's movement, will be emphasized at every anti-high price meeting."[67]

This last statement is particularly telling, for as mass socialist involvement in the consumer movement declined precipitously in mid-March, those activists who remained were increasingly Socialist women who had been involved in the suffrage movement. By the middle of March, the solid core of Socialists who continued their involvement in the MAHPL/AHPFW shared an even longer-term commitment to the Socialist Suffrage Campaign Committee (SSCC). This committee of New York City Socialist women dated from the state's suffrage election in 1915, and had reformed in the fall of 1916 under the direction of Theresa Malkiel. Its members had been among the handful of Socialists who carried over Socialist consumer organizing through January and early February. They joyfully viewed the late February uprising as a long-awaited golden opportunity for Socialist suffrage recruitment. Relegating more purely suffrage organizing to a secondary position, they plunged into MAHPL work and sought to redirect the high-cost-of-living movement toward the goal of women's votes—and thence socialism. Because their preplanned celebration of International Woman's Day fell on Sunday, 25 February, they hurriedly revamped the meeting's program to include the cost-of-living issue. Offering the use of their office to the AHPFW, suffrage committee members formed the backbone of the federation.

Members of the Socialist Suffrage Campaign Committee envisioned the street boycott as an educational experience which could teach New York's working-class women that the vote was superior to the boycott. As Meta Lilienthal, SSCC member and author of the *New York Call*'s "Votes for Women" column, explained, "While they are winning a temporary reduction in the cost of some articles of food by means of the boycott, they are learning that per-

manent relief can only come by means of legislation, and they are learning furthermore that they could obtain such legislation far more readily if they were voters." The consumer movement was valuable because it gave women an easily grasped reason to agitate for suffrage; "Suffrage itself is too vague a concept," wrote a contributor to the *New York Call*'s Sunday section for women. "But, when we tell them that they can do something right now to better their conditions, they grasp it as if we handed them something concrete." As the author concluded, "socialism in connection with onions and potatoes becomes a very real ideal."[68] For these Socialist women, cost-of-living organizing was valuable insofar as it led working-class women into the struggle for suffrage—and similarly, the struggle for women's votes was valuable insofar as it moved American society one step closer toward socialism.

As socialist cost-of-living organizing became increasingly bureaucratized and specialized in its latter days, it also became increasingly female. Men disappeared from reported MAHPL participation as early as March first and second, joining the movement only to give speeches or, in the case of Carl Beck, to help lobby in Albany. By sharp contrast, at the peak of Socialist consumer work, Socialist men occupied major leadership positions in the movement. It appears that, overall, many prominent male New York Socialists jumped onto the bandwagon of cost-of-living agitation as protests took on citywide, militant dimensions, controlled MAHPL in the period of maximum Socialist involvement and public attention, but lacked the commitment to persist longer in the movement than a week, and jumped right back off the bandwagon. Jacob Panken directed the initial 21 February Forward Hall meeting, along with the unidentified man who named the original MAHPL committees. Although these committees were, at this earlier stage, all female, by the 25 February coalition meeting (the day after the Madison Square demonstration) all but one of the organization's officers were male, although Rachel Panken retained MAHPL's chair. Women with babies were excluded from that meeting—one woman who slipped past doorguard Karlin with a baby was forced to leave when it began to cry—in contrast to all previous cost-of-living protest events at which a majority of the protesters had brought children, babies, and even baby carriages along. During this peak period of Socialist involvement, men almost always served as the spokespersons of MAHPL committees—

Plotkin before the mayor, Plotkin and Jacob Panken before the Board of Estimate, and Carl Beck, with Bella Zilberman, before the governor. Yet as Socialist consumer activities decreased during the first week of March, MAHPL once again took on female voice and composition. Evidently, New York's Socialist men were less interested in cost-of-living organizing than were the city's Socialist women – but when they *were* interested, they sought the dominant role to which they were accustomed in the movement as a whole. [69]

In the end, New York Socialists' commitment to the cost-of-living issue per se proved fleeting. The individual members who made individual choices about which meetings to attend and which demonstration to plan were ultimately more enticed by union organizing, socialist electoral and legislative work, the New York Suffrage battle, and above all, the increasingly desperate effort to block U.S. entry into the war. Even more importantly, underneath the Socialists' brief temporal commitment to cost-of-living organizing lay a basic analytical indifference to the issue itself. While some Socialists did view price protests as a direct step toward socialism through demands for a reorganization of the city's food economy, most Socialists – both female and male – ultimately sought to divert the cost-of-living movement into alternative channels of protest – antiwar, suffrage, or wage struggles. Mobilized consumers, they believed, should eventually be directed away from consumer issues.

Ultimately, within the Socialists' two basic tactical approaches to social change, electoral work and trade union organizing, it was far easier for men than for women to become directly involved. Without the vote, women were necessarily once removed from electoral work; for Socialist women, the suffrage battle had to be fought first. Suffrage work, in turn, offered a set of complicated class collaborations and intramovement tensions with the bourgeois suffrage movement. The working-class housewives whom the Socialist party sought to reach were thus twice removed from battles on the electoral front. They could only join in the trade union movement secondhand as well: while they themselves might once have had contact with trade unions through paid labor before marriage, and while their husbands, sons, and

daughters might belong to unions, these middle-aged Jewish housewives could not themselves participate in trade union activism growing out of their own workplace experiences.

Thus the most basic premises of the Socialist party excluded a large potential constituency of women from full participation in the party's ranks. The very *givens* of the party were male-oriented and placed women's concerns on the back burner. Yet the question is, of course, a chicken-and-egg one, for male dominance of party leadership set those goals and strategies in the first place. Sally Miller and Mari Jo Buhle have documented the ways in which male party members discouraged women's full participation in Socialist party affairs at both the local and national levels, as well as the deficiencies of party theorists' commitment to women's concerns. Miller argues that a pattern of institutionalized discrimination prevailed at the national level, in which women and women's issues were relegated to a separate but unequal Women's National Committee. Buhle disagrees with Miller's interpretation somewhat, arguing that the Women's National Committee was, rather, a source of strength for women's interests within the party; so that when the party dissolved it in 1915 women activists lacked unity with which to confront the newly divisive issues raised by World War One. In either case, by early 1917 the Socialist party as a whole was at a particularly inflexible moment in its history, and not in a position to question its basic premises in order to better reach working-class women.[70]

Although, New York's socialists saw the cost-of-living issue as at best secondary or tertiary to the real task at hand, the boycotters, by sharp contrast, joined the price protest movement precisely out of an urgent and deeply felt commitment to the cost-of-living issue. Consumer organizing spoke directly to their daily lives and concerns; they saw cheaper food as a valuable end in itself. Indeed, for these housewives, prices must have taken on a significance equivalent to, or perhaps surpassing, the importance of wages to those who work for pay. Not only did prices translate wages into goods and services, but also price levels determined these women's working conditions. High prices made women's work harder. Scouring the streets for bargains, overhauling menus, satisfying finicky family members, planning to the last penny—all these consequences of rising prices could multiply a housewife's work immensely. Food price protests were these

women's way of organizing at their own workplace, as workers whose occupation was shopping, preparing food, and keeping their families content.

NOTES

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65. *New York American,* 27 Feb. 1917; *New York Call,* 27, 28 Feb., 1, 2, 8, 11 Mar. 1917; "To Control the Cost of Living," *New York World.*
66. National Industrial Conference Board.
67. *New York Call,* 22, 23, 28 Feb. 1917; 8, 12 Apr. 1917.
68. Ibid., 9 Mar. 1917; 3 Oct. 1916; 23, 24, 25, 26, 28 Feb., 1, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 19, 25, 28 Mar. 1917; Buhle, 233. Quote from *New York Call* 25 Mar. 1917.
69. Including *New York Call* 26 Feb. 1917; *New York American,* 26 Feb. 1917.
70. Buhle; Miller, "Women in the Party Bureaucracy: Subservient Functionaries," in *Flawed Liberation,* 13-35.