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“Rights, not Roses”: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945-80

by Dennis A. DESLIPPE, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000, 259 pp., ISBN: 0-252-02519-9 (hardbound) or 0-252-06834-3 (paperback).

Dennis Deslippe's *Rights, not Roses* is part social history, part institutional history and part legal history. The book is a 7-chapter play that chronicles the complex and often contradictory relationship women workers had with the unions they were members of in the United States between 1945 and 1980. The play is all about structure. Deslippe divides the play into two periods: pre-1964 Civil Rights legislation prohibiting sex discrimination in employment and post-1964.

In Chapter 1, Deslippe sets the post-World War II labour scene, in which he describes women's forced expulsion from the war-making factory machine to lesser-paying jobs and unemployment lines. He then deconstructs the untenable myth that the late 1940s and 1950s were a mild period when happy homemakers

gladly set aside rivet guns and work boots for Sunbeam toasters and fuzzy slippers. In this deconstruction, he is flanked by Lynne Olson, who in her 2001 *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* recounts how black and white women courageously laid the foundation in the 1940s and 1950s for the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. While laying this background, Deslippe introduces, or reacquaints, his readers to one of the many layers of complexity and conflict he tackles in the book: women's, men's and society's views of "protective legislation," namely state laws that, depending on one's point of view, kept women's hours short and their work safe or kept women out of higher-paying jobs reserved for men who didn't require "special protection."

Chapter 2, along with the parts of Chapter 1 that talk about changes in technology and increase in factory automation, does the hard work of linking the overall labour context with the particular issues that arise for women unionists. It is enough to juggle conflicting views women workers had on protective legislation, juxtaposed with Betty Friedan's middle-class homemaker feminism, men's views, as well as the mostly negative responses of male unionists and union bureaucracies—but Deslippe does all of this while talking about increased automation in factories, the McCarthy crackdown on “communist” unions, the takeover of the CIO by the AFL, and the slow weakening of the labour union movement.

In the course of juggling what appears to be about 27 different tensions and complexities, Deslippe debunks the myth that the National Organization for Women (NOW)—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for women—was solely a middle-class venture. Women unionists were right there at the start.

In Chapters 3 and 4, the tumultuous torrent splits into two branches: women workers in the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) and the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA). The IUE had 35% female membership, the UPWA 20%. The IUE had a more centralized structure, the UPWA decentralized. The IUE had to compete with the United Electrical Workers (UE) for members (thanks to McCarthy and the split-up of unions over communist ideology), so it worked harder to keep its women members than the UPWA did.

Within the institutional comparison, Deslippe shows how hard women fought for their interests in both unions, and how IUE turned out to be more hospitable to their issues than was UPWA.

The two branches of the torrent reunite in Chapter 5, where Deslippe veers

into an institutional and legal history section, in which he describes the passage of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the insertion of “sex” as a prohibited ground of discrimination, the labour movement's switch from opposing to supporting the Equal Rights Amendment, and the relationship between black and white women in the labour and women's movements. Deslippe's prose is usually crisp and his facts well documented by primary and secondary sources. The only exception is the short passage on the birth and early toddler-hood of Title VII, which is better-handled by Olson, above, and Carl Brauer in “Women Activists, Southern Conservatives and the Prohibition of Sex Discrimination in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act” (*Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 1983, 37-56, 1983).

The torrent splits again for Chapters 6 and 7, where Deslippe compares how the UPWA and the IUE—the women, the men and the unions themselves—handle life after Title VII prohibited sex discrimination by employers and unions. Women unionists filed actions against both unions as well as employers. The UPWA fought women unionists bitterly, and locals continued discriminatory practices despite judgment after judgment. In fact, an early Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC – the institution empowered to enforce Title VII) colluded with the UPWA and employers to keep a labour contract that institutionalized gender segregation in everything but name. The IUE, on the other hand, started filing Title VII suits on behalf of women workers against employers and instituted union-wide reforms to prevent sex and other kinds of discrimination in its locals.

A short review of *Rights, not Roses* cannot do the book justice. The story is too complex. You simply have to read the book yourself. Deslippe builds on the work of Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the*

United Auto Workers, 1935-1975 (1990) and Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (1992) and other labour historians who uncover and tell the story of women unionists. It's a complex story, but a necessary one.

The biggest contribution this book makes to the literature is "mainstreaming" the women's story with the stories of the men and the history of the unions themselves, and showing how the structure of a union can hinder or foster gender and other kinds of equality. In 1945, the labour movement did not support the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1980, the labour movement advocated on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment. Before, during and after World War II, unions often supported segregated seniority lists and contracts that paid women less than men. By 1980, the

labour movement recognized that women should be treated equally and should have access to higher-paid jobs in factories. Nowadays, the AFL-CIO website has a section devoted entirely to women's issues. These changes did not occur magically or through the goodwill of the leaders of the labour movement. They occurred slowly and only after battles hard-fought by determined women unionists. Deslippe's book chronicles these battles and the unions' response. It is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand late twentieth century unionism and civil rights in the United States.

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