

Cathy Hunt, *The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. vi+240. ISBN 9781137033536 Hbk. £60)

Cathy Hunt's research into the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) brings to light a remarkable effort to integrate women into trade unionism in the early twentieth century. The lives of working women have too often been overlooked in accounts of the labour movement and Hunt's work provides an original angle on this turbulent period of industrial relations. As a general union for women, the Federation recruited working women from a wide range of industries, often from those where wages were low and trade unionism uncommon. Although the Federation's activity only spanned 15 years - from 1906 until its merger with the mixed-sex National Union of General Workers (NUGW) in 1921 - Hunt argues that the organization introduced thousands of women to trade unionism and forced the organized male workforce to consider the issue of female labour. Despite its small membership, the organization 'punched well above its weight', (p.2) and some male trade unions began to open their doors to female members, arguably due to the competitive presence of the NFWW.

Notably, Hunt's work is the first full-length account of the Federation and makes a valuable contribution to the history of trade unionism, labour and women's history. In addition, this research reveals the overlap between members of the labour and women's movements. For example, members of the suffrage movement and the Women's Labour League, like Margaret Bondfield, Marion Phillips and Susan Lawrence also participated in the NFWW. Although a pioneering all-female trade union, as Hunt highlights, the Federation was not explicitly feminist as they did not challenge the concept of a "family wage", they failed to capitalize on the expansion of women's employment during the First World War and they did not resist the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act, which reduced women's employment in the aftermath of the war. Also, the Federation argued that women's raised industrial status would protect male jobs and wages from a cheap female workforce. However, Hunt argues that during its short history the Federation made the first steps to integrate women into trade unions and represented a brand of 'industrial feminism'(p.11) that sought to educate and empower women workers, by providing an alternative to marriage 'as a way of escape from the drudgery of existence'. (p. 3)

The book introduces the context of women's work, wages and unionism before dividing the history of the Federation into three distinct chronological periods. Chapter two considers the years 1906 – 1914, including the formation of the organization and male resentment towards a female labour force during mass industrial unrest. Chapter three addresses women's employment during the First World War including shifting attitudes towards female workers. Whereas, chapter four describes the reaction against women workers as they returned to their pre-war positions. This chapter concludes with the amalgamation of the NFWW and NUGW, which marks the success of one of the Federation's original aims, to fully integrate women into existing industrial organizations. The real strength of Hunt's work, however, comes in the final chapters, which focus on the organizers, activists and provides a case study

of the Coventry NFWW branch to consider the issues of women's work and union membership at a local level.

Hunt seeks to investigate the politics of the union's national leadership in addition to its grassroots activism. In so doing, Hunt recognizes that sources have limited her work on the Federation, especially the lack of NFWW executive or branch records, making it difficult to identify the union's rank-and-file membership. As a result, Hunt's work often relies on the collection of the Federation's monthly newspaper, *Woman Worker*, the records of the Women's Trade Union League and the papers of Federation leaders, including the iconic Mary Macarthur, who formed the organisation in 1906, and Gertrude Tuckwell, President of the NFWW. She does try to overcome this top-down, centralized approach through the case study of the Coventry branch. However, it is difficult to generalize from the conclusions made about a single branch, especially as union membership varied greatly in different regions and industries.

Nonetheless, Hunt makes a significant contribution to the historiography of women's work whilst highlighting the necessity for further research to understand women's trade union membership. This innovative account of the Federation includes appendices that list the officials and local branches of the NFWW, to facilitate additional study. This well-written book provides an original account of women's trade unionism and joins the growing historiography that links labour and women's history to illuminate the hidden lives of working women in twentieth century Britain.

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