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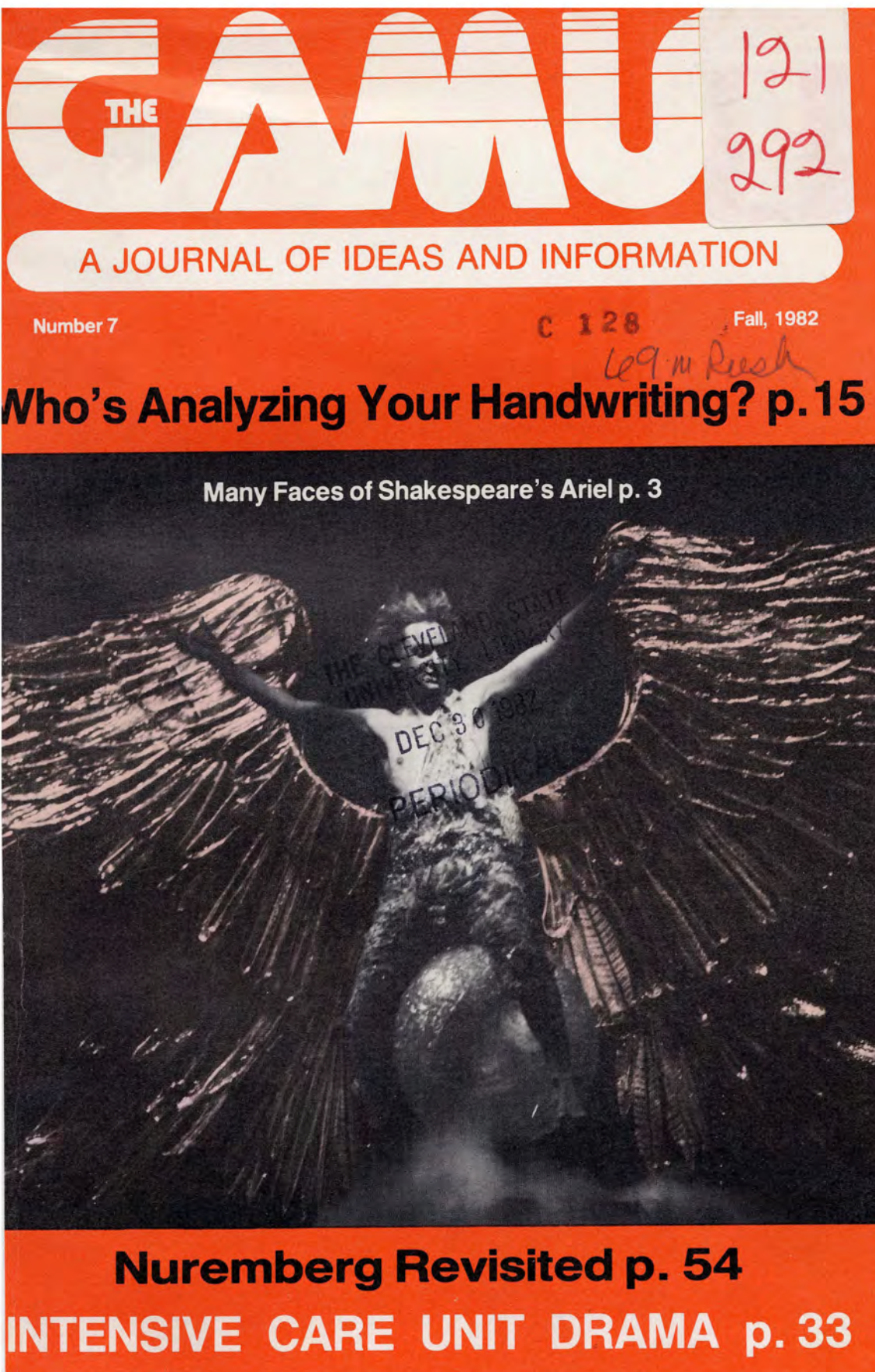
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Leah Beth Ward

The Consumers League of Ohio — Early Champion of Working Women

The recent battle over the Equal Rights Amendment, the rededication of the National Organization for Women to political involvement, and the activities of other women's organizations such as Cleveland Women Working, all evidence a widespread conviction that women continue to be the victims of discrimination. In 1981 the median weekly income of all full-time male wage- and salary-earners was \$347 a week compared to \$224 for women. Skilled trades workers, mostly male, earned an average of \$328 a week compared to \$220 for clerical workers, of whom 80 percent were female.¹ These are not just women earning pin money; many have no resources but their own salaries to pay for food, clothes, and housing — often for children and other dependents as well as for themselves.

That such economic injustice has long existed is a commonplace. But it is less well known that efforts to remedy it were being made at the beginning of this century, and that many of these efforts centered in Cleveland in the work of the Consumers League of Ohio. The early efforts of this organization provide some useful lessons for anyone interested in combating the discrimination still suffered by most working women.

Despite the neglect of women's labor history in history books, there is evidence of what life was like for women who worked in shops and factories during the birth of indus-

trial America. Much can be learned from the records of service organizations in Cleveland like the YWCA, the Consumers League, and the Cooperative Employment Bureau for Girls. During the early part of this century these groups raised public consciousness about the particular problems of women and children in industry through a variety of educational, political, and information-gathering activities.

The YWCA was often used as an employment agency by local businesses and industries, and it did what it could to help working women; but it had little effect on wages or working conditions. A similar service was performed by the Cooperative Employment Bureau for Girls, founded in Cleveland in 1909. The Bureau's mostly church-affiliated membership charged itself with obtaining "firsthand knowledge of the moral, physical and economic conditions in establishments furnishing employment, and to make such information available to prospective workers . . . for the prevention of wasted lives."² In seeking to protect the moral integrity of young girls making the transition from school to the working world, the Bureau made it a point to place applicants in clean work, which it defined for the most part as bookkeeping, bookbinding, and house cleaning. Girls were helped to explore other vocations, however, and with the financial support of the



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A cutting room in Joseph and Feiss Company, one of Cleveland's largest garment manufacturers, about 1921.

Consumers League of Ohio, the Bureau published a series of handbooks called "How to Judge a Trade."

While companies were listed as the Bureau's source of funding, its placement contacts were developed through churches, the juvenile court, settlement houses, city government, and the board of education. In 1912 the Bureau had 1,500 applicants on file and managed to place 870 in jobs.³

Another socially conscious organization was the Women's City Club of Cleveland, founded by a group of suffragettes in 1916 (five years after the organization of the all-male City Club of Cleveland) "to promote a broad acquaintance among women." Although primarily a neutral forum for the airing of public interest issues, the Women's City Club did promote better working conditions, as well as crusade for smoke abatement, sell war bonds, and work to further education and the arts.⁴

But perhaps the most ambitious and determined reform organization to take up the cause of working women was the Consumers League of Ohio, founded in 1900 in Cleveland. Over its long history the Consumers League has devoted most of its attention to the plight of women workers, though it has also studied the problems of children and

migrant workers. Originally its chosen weapons were investigation and publicizing of abuses and sponsoring consumer boycotts. But soon the League turned to lobbying efforts as the most effective way to improve conditions. After World War I it began to exert pressure on state and national legislators, and in the 1930's it campaigned successfully for unemployment and disability insurance, which of course benefited both sexes. Through the efforts of its long-time executive secretary Elizabeth S. Magee (1882-1972), the League produced the basis for what became known as the Ohio Plan of unemployment insurance, which was a model for similar programs in many other states.⁵

Before examining the history of the League, it will be useful to take a broader look at the situation of the women workers in this area over the past century.

A century of exploitation

In 1900, one fifth of the 25 million women in the United States worked. In textile mills and tobacco factories they equalled the number of men and in the garment industry they outnumbered them. Women worked in the canning, food processing, shoe and steel industries and the hotel and restaurant business, holding the unskilled jobs with little

hope of learning a trade and moving up the pay ladder. Government studies of the years between 1907 and 1932 show that tens of thousands of self-supporting women worked for less than the estimated cost of living. Most of them earned less than 70 percent of the amount paid to men doing the same or comparable work.⁶

Such conditions had prevailed for years in Cleveland as in the rest of the country. In April of 1876, when one hundred women walked off the job at Union Screw Works on the corner of Payne and Case Avenues, no one paid much attention. It was the nation's Centennial and Clevelanders were busy planning the coming summer festivities. The labor unrest most would remember — the Lake Shore Railroad strike — was still a year away. Though no one was hurt during this strike, it involved about 500 railroad workers and lasted two weeks. More important, it was part of a nationwide wave of railroad strikes marked elsewhere by violence and destruction of property, which signaled the beginning of a new and more turbulent era in the nation's labor relations.

Lacking leadership and support from the all-male unions, the women at Union Screw Works were not able to sustain their walkout for more than a day. Their demands reflected the cruel irony of a factory woman's economic position in society at the time and for many years to come. They walked out not only for higher wages but for longer hours. Eight cents an hour for nine hours a day, six days a week, was all these women could count on. The *Cleveland Leader* reported on April 20 that the employer offered only longer hours. Fearful of losing their jobs to an eager and cheap supply of immigrant laborers, the women returned to work. This incident was typical and all too prophetic of the situation of women workers for many decades to come.

The largest employers of women in Cleveland were the garment manufacturers. Printz-Biederman, Joseph and Feiss, and the Kaynne Blouse Co. operated the biggest factories, but some 62 smaller businesses also competed for a share of the clothing market. In 1919 about 2,650 women or 61 percent of the garment industry work force in Cleveland worked in clothing manufacturing, compared to 1,700 men.⁷ Even after the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU)

and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union (ACWU, now the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union) had become fairly strong organizations in the later 1920s, many garment workers were still hidden away in the marginal, unmarked warehouses and backlot factories known as outside shops, or, more commonly, sweatshops.

Such shops at this period have been described as dark, frequently lit by gas jets even during the day; they were rarely insulated, and in the winter the usual source of heat was a stove in the middle of the factory. Summer days could be unbearably hot because the ventilation system consisted of an open window or two. Wages hovered around \$6 a week, and a work week consisted of twelve hours a day for six, even seven days straight during the busy season.⁸

One bright spot in the generally dismal history of Cleveland's working women during the early part of this century occurred in 1918, when some 4,500 male and female employees of Cleveland garment manufacturers became parties to a landmark, nationally recognized agreement between the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cleveland. The agreement won recognition for the local union, at least 40 weeks of guaranteed work a year, the right to bargain for wages, immunity from strikes, and mutually agreed-upon production standards. Although the numerous sweatshops were not included in the agreement, and it took many years of struggle, including strikes, to make the agreement stick, garment workers showed that in the absence of labor legislation workers could take steps to protect themselves.

In spite of this hopeful omen, the typical work experience of a young woman between 1900 and 1933, when Ohio legislators first passed a minimum wage law, was grim. Elizabeth Herman, who lived at 2645 East 122nd St. in Cleveland, was thirteen when she went to work in the woolen industry in 1907 for \$2.75 a week. Over the next eighteen years, she held a series of unskilled jobs, doing piece work and earning an average weekly wage of \$6. She finally settled into a job helping to run a printing press and earning \$14 a week.⁹ At this time, in the mid 1920s, the Consumers League estimated the weekly cost of living for a single woman at \$19.47.¹⁰

Some young women did manage to learn a skill and escape the treadmill. Ruth Mitchell, a Russian immigrant, told a story with a happy ending:

I was placed on piece work. The situation was rather unpleasant. The girls had no time to stop and help their neighbor. But I made up my mind to stick to it until I was an expert. I was rewarded for my hard work. A year ago in January, I became assistant designer in the same millinery house—where I started as an apprentice!¹¹

But for the most part, working women had little opportunity to improve the conditions under which they labored. By 1919, there were 409,833 gainfully employed women in Ohio.¹² World War I had made women a larger and more visible part of the work force, although the role for many was only temporary because they would have to give up their jobs upon the return of the troops. The assumption was that women work only to earn a little extra "pin money" to supplement the family income. In 1920 the Consumers League disproved this myth when it interviewed 118 working women in Cleveland and found that 54 were self-supporting while only 17 were dependent on a husband or parent. Forty-seven said they contributed vital financial support to their families.¹³

For the same survey, the League collected information on job conditions from the YWCA and several settlement houses. It found no consistent minimum level of wages for women either within an industry or across industries. It did find that one employer was willing to pay more to young women who were "easy to look at." When she applied for a job, a woman was asked to name her own wage. In order to secure the job, she named a low wage and the employer subsequently had his pick of the cheapest applicants.¹⁴ The pamphlet in which the League published these findings made little impact. The press, which is something of a gauge of public awareness, was not attentive to working women's problems. In 1913, when Rose Charvat launched her ill-fated Housemaids Union and Rose Pastor Stokes, a cigar factory worker, delivered impassioned speeches in Public Square on the evils of capitalism, the *Plain Dealer's* women's page debated the assets and liabilities of being beautiful. The same paper did print a daily column for several weeks that year called "Diary of a Plain Girl." The writer was presumably an office worker, but, aside from one

melodramatic episode in which she stands up to the evil landlord, she was more interested in telling about her favorite "gentleman caller" than about her job or finances.¹⁵

The general neglect by the press of significant labor problems ended with the Great Depression. The *Press* and the *Plain Dealer* in the early 1930's competed to expose sweatshop conditions. *Press* editor Louis Seltzer and *Plain Dealer* editor Paul Bellamy both supported the League's efforts for a minimum wage law in Ohio.

The Depression had an even more devastating effect on women workers than on men. An example can be seen in the Ohio canning industry. In 1928, women inspectors, peelers, cutters, labelers and fillers earned an average of \$15.33 a week. After the crash, the wage sank to \$12.20. Men's wages, however, rose slightly over the same two-year period from \$18.85 a week to \$20.45. Women, who made up 50 to 97 percent of the employees in the different canneries, were laid off during the Depression. Some of the money saved from their wages went to the men, who had to work harder to keep productivity and profits up. But even as the crisis eased and women were rehired, wages did not rebound. Men's earnings dropped to \$17.40 in 1936. Women's rose only to \$12.44.¹⁶

Men were paid a higher wage presumably because they did heavier, more dangerous work. They were cooks or operated cranes, husking machines, or conveyor belts. But even when the work was equal, as it was in many shops, men were routinely paid more than women. A forewoman earned 30 cents an hour to a foreman's 50 cents. A woman who peeled vegetables earned 20 to 30 cents an hour compared to 25 to 35 cents an hour for a man.¹⁷

Wages such as those in the canning industry were low partly because of a slow-to-act Minimum Wage Division of the Ohio Department of Industrial Relations. Although a minimum wage law for women was passed in 1933 which called for the setting up of wage boards to investigate conditions in Ohio industries, only one order to pay a set minimum wage had been adopted by 1939. Seven more industries dominated by women workers had yet to be investigated and hence remained unregulated. Besides canneries, they included bakeries, confectioneries, retail stores, eleva-

tor operation, theaters and beauty salons.¹⁸

Upon finding that a minimum wage was needed in a certain industry, the State asked businesses concerned to comply voluntarily. If they did not do so in three months, a mandatory order could be issued. In practice, the law was never effective. It was excessively complex and never received the necessary administrative support. Even where wage boards existed, the minimum wage consistently fell behind the cost of living.

History of the Cleveland League

The National Consumers' League was founded in 1899 in New York City. Notable national presidents have included Newton D. Baker of Cleveland, Jane Addams, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Cleveland followed closely behind New York, organizing a chapter in 1900, although its official incorporation as the Consumers League of Ohio did not take place until 1911.¹⁹ Its purpose, as stated in the Articles of Incorporation, was "to further the welfare of those who make and distribute commodities by investigation, legislation and an appeal to public sentiment."²⁰

The Ohio League originated in a small literary group called the Book and Thimble Club, which also did some public charity work and which was limited by its constitution to a membership of 25. Some of its members decided to form a branch of the National Consumers' League and become more actively involved in the social problems of the day. As the League's name suggests, its members originally were well-to-do ladies interested in improving the lot of the poor workers who produced the goods they consumed. Of the thirteen original founding officers and board members, twelve were listed in Cleveland's *Blue Book*.

The interest of such women in joining social reform organizations was one element of a wave of reform that first appeared in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 1893, the nation's first modern industrial depression. Distressed by the economic and social chaos they witnessed around them and frightened by increased labor violence, middle- and upper-class Americans sought ways to control change and restore stability. While the men attempted rational improvements in business and government, the women tried to help the poor and abused and to rescue

America from chaos through social justice. They thought of themselves as progressive, and indeed they lived in a period dubbed the Progressive Era. For many "progressive" women this commitment to social justice outlasted America's period of progressive reform and carried them through the 1920s to the New Deal. This was especially true for the members of the Consumers League.²¹

The Cooperative Employment Bureau, the YWCA, and the Consumers League of Ohio had interlocking leaderships. The president of the Cooperative Employment Bureau was Mary E. Rathbun, who was also a leading YWCA figure. Myrta Jones, the Consumers League's first president, sat on the Bureau's executive board, as did Mrs. John Lotz, recording secretary of the Consumers League and a volunteer at Alta House on Mayfield Road, one of Cleveland's settlement houses. Belle Sherwin and Mrs. Charles F. Thwing, Consumers League members, were among the founders of the Women's City Club of Cleveland in 1916.

Initially, membership in the League grew rapidly. By 1910, 807 members met annually at various hotels around the city. The twenty-member executive committee met monthly at the Prospect Avenue home of Myrta Jones, who served as president from 1908 to 1923. Honorary vice-presidents during the early years included Cleveland industrialists Samuel Mather and William G. Mather, and Newton D. Baker, Cleveland mayor and Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of War (Mrs. Baker served on the executive committee).

In 1913 membership dropped to 673, and Miss Jones instructed executive committee members to obtain speaking engagements before church and social groups to recruit new members. The admission of merchants was considered one way to boost the membership rolls as well as the treasury, but the idea was dropped because of the potential embarrassment involved: abuses by business concerns were the main targets of the League.²²

At the 1921 meeting only 200 luncheons were served, evidence of the declining role played by the general membership. As time went on, the League placed less emphasis on committees of volunteers and concentrated its efforts on developing a paid, professional staff. In these years men first came to play a

role in the League. Previously, as honorary vice-presidents, their functions were primarily decorative. By 1930 such men as Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, attorney Marvin C. Harrison, and Antioch College professor William M. Leiserson were actively involved in the League and worked closely with Elizabeth Magee.

The League stopped meeting in Miss Jones's living room in 1925 and rented office space in the Bank of Lake Erie building for \$50 a month. There Elizabeth S. Magee, a graduate of Oberlin College with a master's degree in economics from Columbia University, began her 41-year term of service as Executive Director of the League.²³ Her background as the Industrial Secretary of the YWCA in Detroit and in New York City prepared her well for her new position. Under her leadership the League built upon its past accomplishments to become a catalyst for social change in Ohio and the nation.

The League soon moved its offices to the Engineers Building at 1365 Ontario, where they are still located. Since World War II the League has concerned itself with a broad range of social reforms, including disability insurance, supplementary unemployment benefits, conditions for migrant workers, and national health insurance. Most recently the League has espoused the interests of consumers, working for stricter garnishment procedures and a revised utility rate structure in Ohio.²⁴

Early achievements of the League

Originally the League sought to improve salaries and working conditions by investigating factories and compiling a "White List" of companies that treated workers well. The list was published in newspapers and pamphlets and displayed on placards in the hope that consumers would patronize the approved companies and boycott those with whom the League had found fault. As early as 1909 the League also became interested in the possibilities of labor legislation and formed a legislative committee. In its earlier years the League was still to some extent a study group, whose members were educating themselves about the nature of business and industry as they educated the public.

A complaint lodged at the city Board of Health in October of 1912 illustrates the kind

of problem that such civic-minded women were beginning to notice and investigate. In response to a chambermaid's complaint of overcrowded conditions filed on October 12, a team led by the chief inspector of the Bureau of Sanitation visited the Hotel Statler on November 1. The inspectors found four to ten bunk beds in each single hotel room on the thirteenth floor of the building. The ventilation system stopped at the twelfth floor. A tubercular, pregnant immigrant woman had been housed in one room shared by a number of other employees. The plumbing and lighting systems were found to be faulty.²⁵

Chief inspector Mildred Chadsey, in relaying the results of the inspection to the League, blamed the overcrowding not on the hotel manager, who she said was only employing an unusually large number of women during a brisk start-up period, but on the architect for not designing livable quarters for the hired help. Nevertheless, Miss Chadsey enforced city health code regulations and notified state officials of infractions of their regulations. She asked the League to look into the wages and hours complaint which the chambermaid had also lodged. She reported the pay at \$15 a month for 17 1/2 hour workdays: 7 a.m. to 12:30 a.m.²⁶

The League did not take up such reported complaints of poor working conditions as individual charity cases. Its strategy was to investigate abuses and publicize them on the assumption that the public, once presented with the facts, would exert enough moral pressure in the right places to solve social problems.

While the League was not always repaid with action, it did command respect from government officials and progressive leaders. In 1918 it managed to become a quasi-governmental body when the Industrial Commission of Ohio gave its members the authority to investigate complaints from women working in shops and factories. The League could not issue orders, but any employer was subject to an impromptu visit by a cadre of well-informed women. League inspectors preferred to notify employers first of their visits, however; hard-nosed though women with the law on their side could be, they were members of the middle and upper classes. Confrontation was not one of the socially acceptable behaviors open to them. Moreover,



Ironing department at L.N. Gross, a large Cleveland garment manufacturer, about 1932.

some of the businesses they inspected were owned or run by men whom they knew socially or who were associates of their husbands.

There is evidence that the League's inspections were only marginally effective. In 1919, for example, the League joined with the management arm of the ladies' garment industry to inspect both factory and "outside" shops, or sweatshops, in Cleveland. The inspection report, written by the woman who had been appointed to the team by the Ladies Garment Manufacturers Association, recommended that manufacturers make their shops more cheerful and keep plenty of soap and clean towels on hand. There was no mention of wages, and the report saved its harshest words for the dirty cuspidors which lined factory walls. Much of the unpleasantness of factory life, the report said, could be traced to "this pernicious habit" of tobacco chewing.²⁷

According to the author of the report, Miss Charlotte Trainer, the inspection process limited its visits to 32 businesses, but "once the ideals of this inspection permeate the industry, this number will be constantly increased."²⁸ It can be questioned whether these findings reflected the actual harsh conditions that existed and continued to exist for

years. In fairness it must be added that the League did work seriously during this period to uncover abuses, and that this was one of its least effective inspections.

Disappointed, however, by lack of impact of its investigations, the League in 1920 began to consider a minimum wage for women. In 1921 and 1923 it mounted unprecedented campaigns for a minimum wage law in Ohio, but these efforts were frustrated when the Supreme Court declared a compulsory minimum wage law for women in Washington, D.C. to be unconstitutional. The court decision reflected the position of business, which had called the law a price-fixing mechanism giving a special advantage to women, who were "legally as capable of contracting for themselves as men."²⁹

Though the Ohio League by the early 1920s had found its own White List to be ineffective, in 1928 the National Consumers' League tried a new version of this tactic. It joined with the National Women's Trade Union League to investigate conditions in candy factories and to compile a nationwide White List. (The Women's Trade Union League was an association of women union and settlement house leaders, founded in Chicago in 1903 by Jane Addams and Mary

O'Sullivan. Addams founded Hull House and O'Sullivan was the first woman organizer of the American Federation of Labor.)

The joint effort earned considerably more publicity than individual League efforts in single cities could have. The criteria for earning a spot on the Candy Factories White List were payment of a \$14 weekly wage for beginning workers and a nine-hour day.³⁰ It is difficult to determine how many factories raised wages because of this White List; the Consumers League of Ohio did not perform a follow-up study. The public conscience had been pricked, and in the absence of a minimum wage law, that was about all the League could hope for. With the onset of the Depression, fewer and fewer were able to meet the wage standard; in 1932 the Ohio League abandoned the White List altogether as a means of improving wages, and concentrated on legislative activity. It did not, however, stop its investigations of working conditions.

Elizabeth Magee versus the garment industry

In 1929 the League's indefatigable executive secretary personally visited over eighteen sweatshops scattered about Cleveland, and she generated a good deal of publicity with her findings. Garment manufacturers wrote her letters expressing surprise and regret for the filth she found and vowing to conduct their own investigations. The Federated Press news service requested a copy of her report, as she was far ahead of the local papers in exposing a condition which many thought had been done away with.

Conducting her investigation on foot, Miss Magee found three kinds of sweatshops: those which occupied one room in a warehouse; those occupying the back rooms of houses in residential areas, which could be found only because of the wires reaching back from the street; and those in the upper floors of respectable-looking downtown buildings, which were hidden and unmarked. State inspectors who tried to ferret them out found that they only reappeared in some other part of the city. Stoves provided the only heat in many shops, indoor plumbing was rare, and half of the power machinery lacked required safety guards. State law required one toilet for every 25 persons, but Miss Magee found an average of one for every 35.³¹

Miss Magee did not gather information on wages and hours for her report, writing that it was "difficult to be sure of accurate information." Almost certainly sweatshops paid even less than the larger companies, since they existed solely because they were able to produce work cheaply. Generally their wages as well as their position in the industry were marginal.

The League attempted to cut through public ignorance about the persistent nature of sweatshop conditions with Miss Magee's report, but despite the concern it aroused, the report could not have come at a worse time. In October of 1929, the economy collapsed and the particular problems of women workers blurred against the background of a national depression. But undaunted, the League, led by Miss Magee, proceeded to tackle one of Cleveland's largest textile manufacturers, the Industrial Rayon Corporation.

The campaign to improve life for women workers at Industrial Rayon began in February of 1929 when the League received complaints from the women of "bad attitudes" displayed toward them by their employer. After a series of wage cuts, petty fines, and short weighting, and the sudden implementation of a rule to keep machines running during the lunch hour, the women walked out. But their job action failed because it did not have strong union backing. The walkout leaders were fired, and it is reasonable to conclude that fear kept the women from taking further steps in their own behalf.

The League did not play a role in the walkout. Rather, it took the more polite route of trying to discuss conditions at the plant with the president, Hiran Rivitz. This tack had its limits, as Miss Magee discovered. Letters show that Mr. Rivitz repeatedly broke their appointments on account of "out of town business."

In order to get an accurate description of working conditions at the plant, the League asked for a report from a woman named Victoria Enos, who had recently begun to work there as a "coner."³²

According to her report, from 4:30 p.m. to 2 a.m. each day, Miss Enos ran half a dozen spindles that transferred oily strands of rayon from bobbins onto cones. The cones were fastened to the spindles so that the more spindles one operated, the more cones one wound and

the more money one took home. Experienced coners ran 14 to 18 spindles at once.³³

Wages started at 27 cents an hour for the first week; 12 cents plus 9 cents a cone the second; 10 cents plus 9 cents a cone the third, and thereafter 9 cents a cone. If, in a week, a worker wound 10 "bad" cones — ones that were uneven, loose, full of lint or otherwise dirty — she was warned that her job was in jeopardy.³⁴

Such a system of piece work was common in industries that employed nonunion workers, because without a high base rate, employers could maximize the amount of labor they obtained without losing very much in wages. But by putting workers in competition with each other and with themselves in this way, piece work had a demoralizing and dehumanizing effect. "Their eyes were like hungry people's," Miss Enos wrote; "They were after something with a terrible determination."³⁵

The League made no progress in its effort to improve conditions at Industrial Rayon. Three years after Miss Enos described production-line conditions, it heard complaints of speed-ups from office workers. They were reportedly working seven days a week, which violated a state law requiring at least one day of rest in most heavy industrial occupations. Alice P. Gannett, League president at the time, wrote to the company president Mr. Rivitz asking, "in a spirit of cooperation," that the work be spread around to alleviate both joblessness and worker fatigue.³⁶ Mr. Rivitz replied that the suggested allegations were "untimely and uncalled for" because his company had been running at a hundred percent capacity throughout the Depression, "enabling at least a small portion of the community to earn a living."³⁷ The company comptroller wasn't in any mood to cooperate either. He called Mrs. Gannett's request to hire more workers "asinine."³⁸

It was not a battle of equals. The League simply could not wield any clout during a depression. Yet, the next year, 1933, Miss Magee saw an opportunity to apply pressure and took another swipe at Industrial Rayon.

In early December of that year, the company applied to the Cuyahoga County and Ohio State Relief Association for public works assistance money. It wanted to build a new sewer system. The application for funds was



Elizabeth S. Magee, executive secretary of the Consumers League of Ohio from 1925 to 1966, and nemesis of unscrupulous employers.

approved at the state level, but before it was processed, Miss Magee wrote letters of protest to Stephen M. Young, former member of the Ohio Commission on Unemployment Insurance, and to Cleveland lawyer Edgar Byers and several left-leaning local Democrats. She urged them to use their power to stop the flow of public funds to an anti-union company. Mr. Young subsequently wrote to the Secretary of the Interior, Harold L. Ickes, to point out not so much the company's anti-union attitude as the impropriety of using public funds for a private business.³⁹

The final word rested with Harry Hopkins, the Cleveland banker whom Franklin Roosevelt appointed to head the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) during the Hundred Days of 1933. At FERA, Mr. Hopkins was responsible for allocating grants to state and local governments for public projects. He stopped the grant to Industrial Rayon on the grounds that it would have violated the federal government's responsibility to the public. To deliver such a blow to the company, even though workers at Industrial Rayon did not benefit directly, was a measure of the League's increasing influence at the time.

The League's stature was greatly enhanced by the pioneering research it con-

ducted on unemployment insurance under the direction of Miss Magee. In 1928, the League began to study the issue in a small committee formed expressly for this purpose. By 1930, it was prepared to submit an unemployment insurance bill, drafted by Marvin C. Harrison, to the state legislature. Although the bill did not pass, the League was able to secure the governor's support for a state committee to study unemployment insurance. As a result of the support of State Senator James A. Reynolds, the committee was made up of knowledgeable experts favorable to social insurance programs. The commission appointed Elizabeth Magee as its secretary and issued a two-volume brief on behalf of the Ohio plan of unemployment insurance. In the words of U.S. Senator Paul Douglas, this report "turned the tide of American thinking" on this issue. As a result of these efforts, the unemployment insurance laws of every state in the union share major features of the unemployment insurance law enacted in Ohio in 1936.⁴⁰

Hope for the future: taking women workers seriously

Reform organizations like the Consumers League, the League of Women Voters, and the Women's Council of Federated Churches did not take it upon themselves to help openly in the organization of women into unions. Although they would not have considered themselves maternalistic or condescending, their often elite social origins kept members a certain distance from union leaders. The labor movement, for its part, saw little need to ally with the reformers.

But reformers and unionists often joined on the legislative front to push for wage and hours legislation. In Cleveland in the 1930s, the Labor Standards Committee brought the American Federation of Labor together with seven predominantly female organizations to monitor working conditions in industries regulated by state and federal laws.

When it came to the difficult task of organizing women to achieve economic power in their places of work, neither the reformers nor the male-dominated AFL made much of an effort.⁴¹ It is instructive to look at some of the reasons for this failure to organize women workers. Social and psychological as well as political and economic conditions discour-

aged the unionization of women. Even space could be an obstacle. Victoria Enos noted that she was not able to make any friends at the factory where she worked because the machinery kept her at least 20 feet away from her neighbor.⁴² Where there was no conversation there was no commiseration and no camaraderie. Male workers, of course, encountered similar difficulties.

Union dues were often too high for women. Meetings were sometimes held in bars and lasted long into the night, when women had to stay home and take care of the children and the household chores that did not get done during the day.

The Cleveland Federation of Labor under Max S. Hayes affirmed the concept of equal pay for equal work in 1908, but, as labor historian Barbara Mayer Wertheimer has pointed out, if the unions had been strong enough to bargain for equal pay, employers would have simply replaced women with men; for they hired women in the first place only to save money.⁴³ Male workers often perceived women workers as a threat to wage rates and job security, especially in times of economic depression. A Federation *Quarterly* editorial in 1932 claimed that women usurped positions from men, "throwing heads of families out of work." Instead of calling for an energetic effort to organize women, the editors lamented the fact that employers would not pay men enough to meet their family obligations. The employment of both husband and wife was an evil which, the editorial continued, "merely goes to prove that the necessity of trade unions is more essential now than ever before."⁴⁴ In other words, the union's job was to protect the men by keeping the women out. With such attitudes prevailing in the Cleveland labor movement, the League's pursuit of other solutions becomes understandable.

Furthermore, the women workers themselves were partly to blame. Men who tried to organize women into unions often complained that their indifference was impossible to overcome, and there was validity in the complaint. In a survey conducted for her master's thesis at the School of Applied Social Sciences, Western Reserve University, Helen Rowe found in 1934 that most women failed to see a connection between their working conditions and a union.⁴⁵ Rowe also concluded that "very few working women in

Cleveland have had a medium for articulation or expression regarding the conditions under which they work."⁴⁶ Eleven years earlier, the Women's City Club of Cleveland had already identified the problem: "Cleveland is known as a city in which this body of [women] workers is not articulate."⁴⁷

Before condemning the women of that era for their inability to organize themselves effectively, we must remember that women of all social classes inherited a set of social values built up for centuries. The family, the church, and the educational system all taught that the proper sphere of activity for women was the home, not the factory, and certainly not the smoke-filled, beer-stained taverns where the comradeship that strengthened union solidarity was forged.

Until recently, the vast majority of Americans were uncomfortable with the idea of women working. It was applauded only during wartime, because then women worked out of the patriotic goodness of their hearts, or so it was thought.

With everything around them idealizing marriage and motherhood, women who entered the work force did so with the assumption or at least the hope that their stay would be temporary. Hence a well-meaning organization like the Cooperative Employment Bureau for Girls, accepting such assumptions, devoted most of its time to placing young single girls in housemaid positions, which would teach them "the kinds of things every girl and woman should know how to do."⁴⁸

The Consumers League differed in this respect from other benevolent associations of relatively wealthy women, whose goal was to get factory women back into the home where what was left of Woman's innate morality could thrive. League members confronted the reality of working conditions for women which, in turn, led them to certain fundamen-

tally feminist conclusions. They were not embarrassed by the fact that other women had to work for a living, often in industry. They didn't disapprove of working women. They accepted work as a necessity, not a necessary evil; and, if not quite an enviable right, it was still a reality deserving to be treated with dignity and humanity.

To be sure, the League might have gone further toward reaching an understanding of the social causes underlying the economic exploitation of women. With such an analysis, the League might have helped women workers understand their own situation, and spurred them on to seek access to economic power more effectively.

But it would be unfair to expect social reformers to rise above the thinking of their day. It is in fact surprising and admirable that the League went as far as it did in transcending the current stereotypes of woman's role, especially since a contributing motive for many of its members was probably middle-class guilt. Had their conclusions been more radical, they would have found themselves cast as part of a lunatic fringe, a distinction they certainly wished to avoid as they sought financial contributions from the well-to-do of the city.

The fact that women today are still plagued by unequal pay for equal work, fewer promotions than men, and sexual harassment on the job, does not mean that the efforts of reformers sixty and eighty years ago were futile. Their long campaigns have indeed at last raised public consciousness and contributed to an improved understanding of the economic problems faced by women. Limited though it was in some ways during its early decades, the Consumers League of Ohio provides an encouraging example of the contribution that a few dedicated people can make toward realizing our society's ideals of equality and justice.

Most of the research for this article was done using the Records of the Consumers League of Ohio and other collections at the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland. The author is grateful for the help provided by the Society, and in particular would like to express thanks to Dr. Dennis Irvan Harrison, Curator of Manuscripts, for his many valuable suggestions.

The photographs accompanying the text are reproduced courtesy of the Western Reserve Historical Society.

NOTES

¹Figures supplied by the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, D.C.

²Third Annual Report of the Cooperative Employment Bureau for Girls, Cleveland, Ohio, 1912. In the collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS).

³Ibid.

⁴Introduction, Register to the Manuscripts of the Women's City Club of Cleveland, 1916-1965, WRHS, 1971.

⁵Introduction, Register of the Consumers League of Ohio Records 1900-1976, ed. Dennis Irven Harrison, WRHS, 1981.

⁶The Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, Bulletin #115, 1933, p.9.

⁷"Investigation of Factories and Outside Shops," Report by the Ladies Garment Manufacturers Association and the Consumers League, 1919. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

⁸This description is drawn from Barbara Wertheimer, *We Were There, the Story of Working Women in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), pp. 294-295.

⁹Elizabeth Herman, "My Industrial Experience," essay written on application to the Cleveland YWCA for summer camp for working girls, 1935. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ruth Mitchell, "My Industrial Experience," essay written on application to the YWCA for summer camp for working girls, 1935. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

¹²*Report of the Committee on Women and Children in Industry*, State of Ohio, 1919.

¹³"Wages for Women in Cleveland," Report of the Consumers League of Ohio, 1920. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 13, 1913.

¹⁶*The Canning Industry in Ohio*, Occupational Study #4, National Youth Administration in Ohio, May, 1939, p. 40. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

¹⁷*The Canning Industry in Ohio*, p. 42.

¹⁸Memo on minimum wage prepared by Elizabeth Magee, January, 1939. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

¹⁹An orthographical note: the Consumers League of Ohio dropped the apostrophe from its name, though it remained part of the name of the National Consumers' League.

²⁰Articles of Incorporation of the Consumers League of Ohio, November 23, 1911. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

²¹For a discussion of the role of women in Progressive and New Deal reform movements see Otis Graham, *An Encore for Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

²²Minutes of the meeting of the executive committee of the Consumers League of Ohio, January 14, 1913. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

²³Though Miss Magee did not retire until 1966, her activity was curtailed by illness for several years before that date.

²⁴Perhaps surprisingly (since most early League members were active supporters of women's suffrage and other women's causes), the Consumers League of Ohio opposed the Equal Rights Amendment, from its first introduction by the National Women's Party in 1923. The League maintained that the ERA would undermine special protective measures that had been gained for women.

²⁵Letter from Mildred Chadsey, chief inspector, Bureau of Sanitation, City of Cleveland, to the Consumers League of Ohio, November 12, 1912. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷"Investigation of Factories and Outside Shops," Report of the Ladies Garment Manufacturers Association and the Consumers League of Ohio, 1919. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Undated letter to Samuel I. Lipp, Secretary of the Legislative Committee on the Minimum Wage, from the Ohio Hotels Association. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

³⁰Consumers' Conscience Alert Pamphlet, *Report on the Candy Industry*, National Consumers' League and Women's Trade Union League of America, Spring, 1928.

³¹Elizabeth Magee, "Report of Investigation of Outside Shops," Consumers League of Ohio, 1929.

³²It is not clear whether Miss Enos was a League member on a mission or simply a worker who agreed to participate in an investigation. The articulate nature of her written report, however, suggests she was indeed performing an investigative task, whether she was a League member or not.

³³Victoria Enos, "Two Weeks at the Industrial Rayon Corp.," February, 1930. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Letter of October 5, 1932. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

³⁷Letter of October 7, 1932. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Letter of December 18, 1933. Consumers League Records, WRHS.

⁴⁰*Report of the Ohio Commission on Unemployment Insurance*, Columbus, Ohio, 1932, p. 7; letter of Elizabeth Magee to Rabbi Silver, October 5, 1932, "Unemployment Insurance, 1931-32," in the Abba Hillel Silver papers at the Temple, Cleveland, Ohio; Douglas to Magee, April 13, 1936; see also Roy Lubove, *The Struggle for Social Security, 1900-1935* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 63.

⁴¹Wertheimer gives an account of the AFL's discriminatory practices, of Gompers' lip service to equality, and of his basic suspicion of women workers.

⁴²Enos.

⁴³Wertheimer, p. 199.

⁴⁴August, 1932, p. 8.

⁴⁵Helen Rowe, "The Ohio Minimum Wage Law and Women Workers in Cleveland," master's thesis for the School of Applied Social Sciences, Western Reserve University, May 1, 1934.

⁴⁶Rowe, p. 70.

⁴⁷Records of the Women's City Club of Cleveland, WRHS.

⁴⁸Third Annual Report, p. 12.