

Competing for and marginalizing women workers: Trade unionism, syndicalism and corporatism in Bulgaria and internationally, 1920s-1940s

ZARAH Component Study Ivelina Masheva

Short Description

The Component Study examines the relationship between women workers in industry and services and trade unions representing the whole political spectrum in interwar Bulgaria. It pursues a multi-scale approach which takes account of the travelling and translation of organizational forms, repertoires, and agenda-setting from the local to the transnational and vice versa. Although Bulgaria remained an agrarian country throughout the period, the industrialization process of the interwar period created an ever-increasing number of gainfully employed women. While in 1905 only 13,512 women were working in industrial establishments, their number had grown to 29,017 by 1920, to 46,495 by 1934 and to around 100,000 in the early 1940s. The distribution according to industrial branches was not even as some industries concentrated a significant proportion of the female workforce: In 1941, about one in four women in industrial employment worked in the tobacco warehouses and (manu)factories and one in five in the textile industry. Tendencies of increased participation in the labour force were also visible in the service sector. In 1937, 20,541 women were working in public service, a majority of them (13,204) employed as teachers. The number of women in gainful employment in interwar Bulgaria did not only lead to an increased visibility of women labour activism, but also resulted in issues of women's labour taking a more prominent place in trade unions' agendas, in government policies as well as in public discourse.

The study is guided by the following research questions: How did different types of trade union organizations address gender issues? How did their agendas and repertoires concerning women's labour evolve over the course of the period, and what were the reasons for these developments? How did competing gendered visions of trade union organizing relate, influence, interact with and/or counteract one another? What was the relationship between trade unions and "unorganized" women labour activism? How were issues of women's labour negotiated within the tripartite relationship between trade unions, employers and the state?

The study examines three main clusters of trade union organizations, covering their umbrella organizations on the national level, their local and branch trade unions and their international connections. The first group encompassed trade unions affiliated with the Communist Party. Their national umbrella organizations were Obsht rabotnicheski sindikalen suiuz [General Workers' Trade Union] (1904-1924) and Nezavisimi rabotnicheski profesionalni suiuzi [Independent Labour Trade Unions] (1925-1934). Internationally, these unions were affiliated with the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU/Profintern). The second group, Svoboden obsht rabotnicheski sindikalen suiuz [Free General Workers' Trade Union] was affiliated with the Social-Democratic Party and on the international level with the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). Since 1921, the Free General Workers' Trade Union formed a loose coalition Konfederatsia na truda [Labour Confederation] with the independent union of employees and civil servants Suiuz na suizite [Union of the Unions]. As the communist and social-democratic trade unions influence varied from sector to sector, the study aims to cover a sample of branch organizations with a varying proportion of female workers in both the industrial and service sectors. Following a coup d'état in 1934 a third type of union, namely a corporatist trade union, Bulgarski rabotnicheski suiuz [Bulgarian Labour Union], was established. Statute, structure, and objectives of the Bulgarian Labour Union were inspired and

deeply influenced by similar organizations already in existence in fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany. All other trade union organizations were banded and strikes were illegalized. However, in practice some trade unions continued to exist in the underground; together with grassroot and shop floor organizing, they continued to employ a variety of activist repertoires, including strikes and other militant forms of labour activism.

Apart from these three large clusters of trade union organizations, unions and activists which acted independently and/or moved between camps such as anarchists and independent syndicalists will also be studied.

While characterized by features specific for Bulgaria, all three clusters of trade unions were also deeply influenced and inspired by distinct international models, movements and ideologies of workplace-related organizing and activism, i.e. communism, anarcho-syndicalism, socialism (social-democracy), and corporatism. The Component Study investigates women's labour activism identified with each of the clusters as operating on and between various, i.e. local, national, and international, scales of activism. Regarding the international level, the research addresses the two major international labour organizations in the interwar period, the Profintern and, as far as applicable, the social democratic International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). On the local level, the study also includes the interconnections between the organized labour movement and grassroot women's activism, protests organized on the shop floor and individual women workers' actions such as filing complaints in arbitration courts or with the labour inspections.

In terms of agendas, the study focuses on several cluster of issues. First, it investigates the demands for wage justice and equal pay that took a most prominent place in (women's) labour activism in the interwar period. Together with the demands for higher wages and a living wage, the study also investigates the demands addressing gender pay discrimination. The slogan "Equal pay for equal work" featured frequently in left-wing and particularly communist women's demands. The study aims to explore how gendered wage differentials were addressed in collective bargaining agreements, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s when these became a wide-spread phenomenon. Secondly, the study addresses the restructuring of production processes and labour relations, at the time discussed as "rationalization", and how it affected women workers in industrial employment. While the drive towards rationalization started in the 1920s, the process was significantly intensified by the world economic crisis. As consequence of the intensification and precarization of labour, as well as of the processes of deskilling and redefining skill, Bulgaria witnessed a wave of labour conflicts in the 1930s and early 1940s. Since the rationalization, especially in the tobacco industry, disproportionately harmed skilled male workers, the efforts to mitigate its effects took a distinctly gendered course with measures such as putting a cap to the percentage of women workers in the industry, prioritizing the hiring of heads of households etc. Third, the Component Study investigates the demands for observing and enforcing labour laws as well as hygiene and safety standards. The 8-hour working day and 48-hour working week constitutes a key example of progressive legislation, passed in connection to an International Labour Convention (ILO C001 – Hours of Work (Industry) Convention), whose enforcement turned out to be long, difficult and complicated process. As it investigates the gendered process of implementing labour law in practice and enforcing compliance, the study highlights the connections between trade union activism and other actors such as non-unionized women activists, social reformers of various political and social affiliations as well as the labour inspections.

Researching the topic of women and trade unions in interwar Bulgaria is particularly challenging due to the quantity and quality of secondary literature available. While the interwar labour movement was a popular research topic during the state-socialist period, the scholarship produced was not only gender-biased but also heavily ideologized. While communist trade unions were overrepresented in state-socialist labour histories, all other forms of labour organizing such as social-democratic, anarchist and corporatist trade unions were marginalized. Moreover, labour activism of all kinds including communist was represented in a highly particular, limiting and ideologically biased way. As a result, the state-of-the-art of research into labour activism in the interwar period is gender-biased, methodologically outdated and whole research areas constitute blank spots. Therefore, the Component Study has to rely heavily on primary materials, such as trade union archives, ego documents, periodicals, police records, labour inspections documents and printed materials.

Like the ZARAH project in general, the Component Study's combined interest in gender and class addresses the gender bias in the history of labour activism. Gendering the history of the multiple and rival visions and practices of labour organizing highlights their entangled history on local, national and international levels. In the 1920s-1940s, trade unions' complicated relationship with the unionized and non-unionized female workforce was characterized by a vacillation between a desire to unite all workers on one hand and conservative visions of domesticity associated with the single male breadwinner model on the other hand. Studying Bulgarian trade unions gender politics reveals the evolving patterns of inclusion, exclusion, suppression, promotion and/or marginalization of women's labour activism and women workers' interests.