

Ruptures in Consensus? An Entangled History of Women's Labour Activism in Austria and Transnationally, 1945 to the 1980s

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Short Description

This Component Study explores working women's activism in the Second Austrian Republic between the end of World War II and the 1980s. It combines an inclusive understanding of repertoires and agendas of activism with multi-level analysis. After World War II, working women began to move away from domestic services and agriculture to retail and commerce, services, the public sector, the textile, and metal industries. Their activism was shaped by the complex socio-economic and political context of the postwar period (characterized by rebuilding and renewal of the organizations and traditions of the international and Austrian labour movement, the legacies of the National Socialist past and the early Cold War), the building of the "corporate" Austrian welfare state, and the beginning of the liberalization of labour law and labour relations as well as deindustrialization. Focusing on the textile and metal industries (with women forming the majority vs. a minor proportion of the workforce respectively) and selected networks of female labour activists, the study addresses different scales of activism, ranging from grassroot and shop floor activism to women's organizing and action in local, national, and international contexts and within the "corporate" Austrian state. Working women were organized in trade unions aligned with social democracy, in communist, and Christian social associations and unions as well as in single-sex or mixed-sex issue-based groups. The matters they raised ranged from questions of food supply and job opportunities, equal pay, discrimination in the workplace and beyond, to politics concerned with care responsibilities, to name but a few important issues.

The study centers upon four case studies that are based on a multi-scale analysis, an inclusive understanding of activism, an attentiveness to the entanglements of different categories of social inequality, and a focus on women activists in their different networks. These conceptually interrelated case studies explore: various forms of collective activism of (communist) working women inside and outside the shop floor in the aftermath of World War II, connecting their activism with transnational trends and policies discussed in international organizations and in state-socialist countries (in the following Case Study 1); strategies of women migrant workers to improve their living and working conditions, their specific gendered and classed interests, and the positioning of their activities vis-à-vis women trade unionists (Case Study 2); the co-constitutive development of vocational training for women workers between the local, the national and the international level showcasing the labour-related activism of women within and beyond the state (Case Study 3); and the networks between women trade unionists, feminists, and other activists on the left who engaged with agendas at the intersection of class and gender (Case Study 4).

With its inclusive understanding of women's labour activism, the Component Study makes a fourfold conceptual and historical-empirical contribution:

First, the study addresses women labour activists at the margins of the existing historiography. In 1950, approximately one fifth of the Austrian overall population was organized in trade unions, among them 26%, or 335,000, women. By 1990 the proportion had risen to 31%. In contrast, the percentage of female functionaries in the trade unions remained low. Since the

foundation of the Austrian Federation of Trade Unions (ÖGB) in 1945, women labour activists responded to this underrepresentation with women-specific organizing within the ÖGB and, over the years, its branch trade unions. With its inclusive understanding of women's labour activism, the study brings a new perspective to the relatively well-researched history of social democratic female trade unionists and their activities. It also expands the scope of the historiography by including Christian social and communist women (Case Studies 1 & 3) and taking into consideration migrant women workers (Case Study 2), as well as activists organized in trade unions associated with new social movements, like the environmental movement (Case Study 4). In addition, the study complements existing research on activities in the women's departments of specific trade unions with activism in mixed-sex organizations (Case Studies 1 & 4).

Secondly, the study discusses the history of women's trade unionism and labour activism within a transnational framework, exploring both the changing role of Austrian trade unionists in international organizations and the share of international trends and interaction in shaping women's labour activism in Austria. It explores the connections between women's labour activism in Austria and communist international organizations, such as the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) as well as between Austrian women's activism and activists and developments in the neighboring state-socialist countries (Case Studies 1 & 4). Finally, the study examines the role of Austrian women labour activists in the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the impact of the politics of these organizations on Austrian activism (Case Studies 2 & 3).

As a third contribution, the study recovers workplace-related activism outside or at the margins of the trade union movement, rethinking its contribution to the history of women's labour activism and labour activism as such. The first decade after World War II was marked by strikes, such as the 1948 strike in the shoe industry, or other collective forms, like eviction protests. Apart from the large metalworkers' strike in 1960, no pronounced wave of labour disputes occurred until the 1970s. The study does not only explore strikes, but also other forms of collective protests and militancy by which women challenged injustice related to gender, class, and other categories of social inequality (Case Studies 1, 2 & 4). The focus on initiatives within state institutions concerned with vocational training and job opportunities complements this focus, and similarly broadens our understanding of labour-related activism (Case Study 3).

Fourth, the entangled history of the labour movement and other social movements is of interest to the study. As it explores the networks between women trade unionists, feminists, and other left-wing activists occupied with agendas at the intersection of class and gender, the study aims to reevaluate main narratives that have characterized the public discourse and historiography on (so-called) second-wave feminism in Austria. It contributes to recent scholarship reexamining the history of feminism in the second half of the 20th century (Case Studies 1 to 4).

Consensual social partnership has long been the backbone of the narrative of Austrian history from the post-World War II period to the 1980s, describing the country as a capitalist society void of large-scale political conflict and characterized by strong corporate social politics. As it brings to light conflicting histories of multiple negotiations of gendered socio-economic rights,

female labour activists at the margins of the workers' and women's movements, and the transnational negotiation of working women's rights, this ZARAH Component Study disrupts and goes beyond this narrative. It shows that women workers and those claiming to represent them have campaigned within a multitude of available socio-political frameworks. The history of women's labour activism in Austria was a history of interaction between labour and feminist activists, including women on the radical left, and transgressing national borders and the boundaries of the Cold War. Finally, the study contributes to ZARAH's overall aim of rethinking the cycles of European history by connecting the history of women labour activists in the Second Austrian Republic, their networks, repertoires and agendas to the pre-World War II international and national labour movement as well as to Austria's National Socialist legacies.