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Special Issue: Women's labour activism in Central and
Eastern Europe and internationally in the twentieth century

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Special Issue Articles

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Women and the gendered politics of work in Central and Eastern Europe, and internationally, in the twentieth century: activism, governance, and scale

This issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* brings together a set of articles that discuss the history of women's labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe and transnationally. The seven contributions are the result of recent and ongoing primary research within the research project *Women's Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and Transnationally, From the Age of Empires to the Late 20th Century* (ZARAH). In our research we aim to advance approaches to the history of women's labour struggles that are long-term, transregional, integrative, and critical. Our overarching goals are: to contribute to establishing the chronology and cartography of women's labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe and adjacent territories; to explore this activism's cross-border, cross-regional and transnational dimensions; to conceive of its variety in terms of worldview, repertoires, and agendas within a common conceptual framework which contextualizes and examines from a critical perspective all varieties of activism; and to "think into" the global history of labour activism the labour struggles of women from Central and Eastern Europe (Çağatay et al., [forthcoming](#)). We define women's labour activism broadly as action and organizing to improve the labour conditions and life circumstances of lower and working-class women and their communities.

The cluster of articles presents selected elements of our research that revolve around two large, interrelated issues. These, we argue, must be centrally addressed when pursuing the overarching goals defined above. The first issue concerns the relationship between women's labour struggles, on the one hand, and governance, on the other. Governance includes the regulatory frameworks that shape institutions and the practices characterizing the "behaviour" of institutions, ranging from social movement institutions (including, e.g. trade unions, cooperatives, and women's and workers' associations), through institutions of the layered state, to international networks and organizations that involved state and/or social movement actors (Bereni and Revillard [2018](#); Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel [2013](#); Shin [2016](#); Storrs [2000](#); Wilhoit [2017](#)). We pursue, in other words, an integrative approach to the history of women's labour activism, arguing that to capture the full range of such activism, we need to consider three (repeatedly overlapping and entangled) varieties: women's action within or via various "classical" social movements; their "unorganized" or "spontaneous" activism, a focus well established in feminist labour history; and women's involvement – within and beyond the confines of social movement activism – with the various dimensions of how women's work was governed. Such

We provide short biographical notes on the authors of this introduction alongside their individual contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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dimensions include the creation and implementation of international or national policy frameworks and legal scripts, the politics of women's work pursued by state or state-aligned agencies, and the negotiation of power and position on the shop floor.

This brings us to the second concept at the core of the seven articles: the question of how women's labour activism was shaped by scale and scale shifts. Here, we consider the rootedness of such activism in, and its involvement with, local, national, and international arenas of women's labour activism, i.e. the multiple scales on which this activism unfolded. Engaging with the politics of scale as shaping and characterizing women's labour activism, we need to consider the travel, accommodation, and negotiation of activist repertoires and agendas along and between different scales (Bantman et al. 2015, Soule and Roggebrand 2019; Franzaway and Margaret Fonow 2011; Kekk and Sikkink 1998). We practice a critical and integrative approach to the history of women's labour activism by concretely investigating rather than assuming transnational interaction and transfer. We find highly variegated degrees of influence and interaction in terms of multi-scale policy transfers and actor interactions. For the study of labour struggles of women in and from Central and Eastern Europe, an integrative approach to governance and scale, captured in such a manner and combined with a critical perspective on how women engaged with these issues is, we argue, crucial for three reasons.

First, governance and scale are at the core of stereotypical views on Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, such views have constructed and reified this region as marked by authoritarianism and social atomization, corruption, and entrenched underdevelopment. Regarding labour struggles in general and women's labour struggles in particular, these views find expression in several tropes. Examples include, for the pre-1945 period, women's alleged marginal role in labour activism due to "traditional" gender regimes that reified women's distinct backwardness, and, for the post-1945 period, the top-down character of communist-led labour policies which allegedly reduced women functionaries to puppets and women workers to victims of double or triple (labour) burdens – over-exploitation implied to be specific to the gender regimes of state-socialist systems.

Second and conversely, serious engagement with the full history of the Central and Eastern European region and women's labour struggles in and emerging from the region must go beyond challenging or proving such stereotypes wrong. Writing such a full history requires the development of approaches that are both critical and integrative. Examining women's labour struggles within a conceptual framework that is inclusive of all varieties of governance and ambitions to capture the specificities of these struggles at and across various scales helps achieve this goal.

Finally, analysed from such a perspective, the labour struggles of women in and from Central and Eastern Europe can be fully integrated into the global history of labour struggles and studies focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. Such a perspective can contribute to the development of a more integrative global history of labour struggles that gives equal space to the full variety of histories of labour activism.

In the following sections, we situate the seven contributions which span the period from the early twentieth century to the 1980s, in the long-term history, first, of activist engagement and the involvement of women with varieties of governance as described above, and, second, the scales and travels along and across scales of women's activism and political action throughout the twentieth century. Discussing governance, we point to intertwined issues of scale, and while discussing scale, we return to issues of

governance where relevant. In the concluding section we list themes of central importance for the study of women's labour activism within and beyond Central and Eastern Europe, pointing to the questions raised by the seven articles and the contributions they make to some of these larger themes.

Governance

During the twentieth century, Central and Eastern European lands experienced multiple turns and changes in terms of political systems and governance, with an array of repercussions for the fate and fortune of labour activism. We argue that if we are to write a wide-ranging and long-term history of labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, we need to address a set of overarching questions engaging with the relationship between multiple forms of governance as described above and the history of women's labour struggles. How did the varieties of governance, emerging and changing in connection with political and economic development and rupture, impact these struggles? Did changing frameworks of governance generate more room for manoeuvre for such struggles? Which repertoires of action and agendas of labour activism could unfold within such newly generated frameworks? What were the possibilities and limitations of women's labour activism to transform any of these frameworks when trying to advance the labour interests of women and their communities? How and why did women activists align themselves with governance frameworks that contributed to the marginalization of some groups of women and certain types of labour interests? Implicit in these overarching questions are our claims that there is no historically privileged site of labour struggles (e.g. the system of parliamentary democracy combined with a market economy and classical trade unions), that women's labour activism needs to be analysed in a critical manner, and that all labour struggles must be understood and studied as forming part of a variable and dynamic relationship with similarly variable elements of governance. Taken together, the seven contributions unearth a rich variety of ways women's labour activism engaged with weaker and stronger, organized and erratic, and more and less participatory forms of governance.

In many lands related to the large region of Central and Eastern Europe, the state – interrupted by World War One – tended to act in a rather minimalist manner until well into the interwar period with regard to questions concerning the regulation of labour and social policy, or at least the implementation of such regulations in actual labour and social policy practice (e.g. Grama 2020). This was due to the combination of political dedication to economic liberalism and the de facto disintegrative economic development that characterized the era, notwithstanding selective state measures to promote economic development or increase state revenues. This overall pattern resulted in massive social marginalization for large segments of the population, unstable working conditions, and few opportunities to successfully demand the expansion of formal rights or compliance with rights that existed on paper (Bader-Zaar and Zimmermann [forthcoming](#); Berend and Ránki 1974; Grama 2018; Kochanowicz and Bogdan 2017; Müller 2021; Tomka 2013).

Some of the repercussions of these patterns of socioeconomic and political development for the shape of women's labour activism are addressed in the articles. Illustrating women's activism around home front welfare issues in wartime economies, Eszter Varsa places centre stage a series of direct and unmediated confrontations in

Hungary during the second half of World War One, specifically between crowds dominated by women belonging to the agrarian population and local actors held responsible for mostly food- and provision-related matters. Varsa shows precisely at whom, namely local authorities, merchants, well-to-do peasants, “the rich,” and “the rulers” in general, the riots were directed and what concrete issues – including the lack of food, inadequate food distribution efforts, poor quality food, expensive food, or the war as such – were addressed. In response, local authorities, often mobilizing far-reaching powers conferred on them within the strictly centralized wartime regime, displayed a distinct mixture of pacification and repression. Alexandra Ghiț’s contribution on trade unionism in the Bucharest “Belvedere” tobacco factory shows how women’s labour organizing in a state-owned enterprise was strongly shaped by a legal framework developed in the early 1920s in reaction to a short-lived general strike in 1920 that had curtailed labour organizing. Ivelina Masheva’s contribution follows continuities and change in the gendered struggle for shorter working hours in Bulgaria, showcasing the variety of repertoires through which working-time limits were negotiated in specific contexts, such as the social radicalization towards the end of World War One that had enabled the adoption of the eight-hour workday, followed by the conservative backlash in the 1920s, which made its application extremely problematic.

Other countries, especially those that did not enjoy independent statehood or far-reaching state autonomy until the historical turning point of 1918/1919, experienced a strong emphasis on the expansion of labour and social governance as a means of stabilizing and strengthening newly gained state autonomy in the interwar period. This involved both national legislation and the entry into or adaptation to international norms, especially the ratification and implementation of ILO standards and the approximation of national legislation to such norms (Inglot 2008; Stegmann 2017). Women activists with an interest in improving the work and life circumstances of women and their communities aimed to take advantage of this expansion of labour governance to assert these interests. Zhanna Popova’s contribution on women labour inspectors in interwar Poland examines the opportunities this select group of women were afforded through their involvement in the labour governance of the newly independent state and the challenges they faced as a result. In practical terms, these women labour inspectors occupied ambivalent positions as they were both part of the government structures *and* critics of governmental policies and the degree to which labour law was implemented. Their professional activities faced many practical limitations that were common to all labour inspectors – non-compliance of employers and workers, the inability to perform enough factory visits, etc.—as well as specific to those who were focused on the labour of women and minors. Confronted with the subordinate position of women and minors in society and on the labour market, women labour inspectors came to expand their efforts beyond narrowly defined inspectorial work. Popova’s findings are complemented by Ivelina Masheva’s contribution, which shows how, in the vastly different context of interwar Bulgaria, the Labour Inspectorate played a prominent role in managing working hours in the textile industry. Masheva showcases the persistence of retrograde practices of regulating and managing women’s work despite the presence of (relatively) progressive labour laws.

In authoritarian-conservative systems, the rise of which characterized the 1930s (they had begun to emerge in some countries already in the late 1920s), increased state and

corporate interference in regulating and directing the “representation” of workers’ agendas became evident. This occurred, for example, through the creation, expansion, or transformation of institutions over which the state and employers had strong influence. Examples include the new state-bound trade unions or the new political emphasis on such “unions”; the introduction, restructuring, and strengthening of corporatist governance instruments; and new regulations in labour law, including, e.g. the conclusion of nationwide collective agreements or the introduction of minimum wages (Botz 2017; Bódy 2009; Petrungaro 2017; Pinto 2014). In turn, politically leftist organizations faced increasing pressure or were banned altogether. Under the impact of these developments, the repertoires and agendas of labour activists changed in a pronounced manner. In particular, anti-institutional militant and underground activism, often communist in character, gained ground (frequently despite heavy repression), and more moderate left-wing activists developed alternative forms of self-organization and engagement with the new governance structures. These included, as Alexandra Ghiț notes, the election of the protagonist of her article as a workers’ representative in the Bucharest Chamber of Labour, a corporatist-style institution on the social democratic list, in 1933. Or, as discussed in Ivelina Masheva’s contribution, in Bulgaria in the mid and late 1930s, petitions and complaints were used as alternative strategies when strikes and other more militant forms of activism were proscribed.

In hindsight, at least some of the changes in terms of governance experienced in some lands in the region starting in the 1920s and elsewhere in the 1930s can be captured as elements of long-term governance transformation. The state-socialist system that emerged starting in the 1940s in Central and Eastern Europe, with its “developmental state” that aimed to facilitate economic catch-up policies, can be described “as a kind of climax of the Eastern European state” (Brunnbauer 2022; see also Chase-Dunn 1980). Already the transition period in the later 1940s witnessed the adoption of many elements of labour policy from the Soviet Union. Among other things, these were aimed at putting the labour force into the service of the “building of socialism,” including a steadily increasing number and proportion of women. At the same time, the period also saw local policy innovation and more-or-less open integration and curiosity about non-communist labour policy, especially in the mid-1940s. Communist-controlled unions soon acquired the dual role of supporting and enforcing the mobilization of labour for the new system, while at the same time monitoring compliance with labour protection measures and advocating for the specific interests of the labour force. Research on the labour struggles of women involved in various capacities in this new system of governance has only begun. Susan Zimmermann’s contribution – although primarily focused on questions concerning the politics of scale – shows how, in Hungary during the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the very role attributed to unions in the economic “building of socialism” at and through the workplace opened up spaces of opportunity for women trade unionists to work towards the practical implementation of some elements of the socialist program of women’s emancipation to which the new “worker’s state” was committed in principle. The article also shows, however, that within state-socialist governance in Hungary during the transition to and during early state socialism, women trade unionists were and remained actors who could exert little visible influence on top-down decisions by party and trade union leadership. They also faced passive and active resistance from working women, who for various reasons were not at ease with the

confluence of the imposition of some of the economic burdens of “building of socialism” on their shoulders and the promise of (socialist) women’s emancipation, embodied by the politics of women trade unionists.

Veronika Helfert’s contribution shows that the close connection of women trade unionists with state-centred governance was not an isolated specificity of the Central and Eastern European world of state socialism, even when the pronounced differences between the political constitution of Austria and the state-socialist countries are carefully considered. Against the background of the trend towards more inclusive social and economic policies facilitated by a strong state, which could also be observed in Austria between the 1950s and 1980s, Austrian women trade unionists tenaciously defended the model of full-time work for women as the basis of women’s emancipation and tried to counteract any negative repercussions of part-time work for women in the world of work. Helfert discusses how labour women and women bureaucrats acted on various levels of and aimed to impact labour governance. Her article explores how organized trade union activism translated into legislation within the Austrian corporatist state and the institutions of Social Partnership. Additionally, women civil servants within the Ministry of Social Affairs, specifically those who promoted the study of the subject of part-time work and circulated the international expertise acquired through and for participation in inter-state organizational meetings to national lawmakers and labour activists, played a somewhat hidden but nonetheless important role.

Alexandra Ghiț’s contribution, although not addressing the post-1945 period, invites further thinking about long-term trends, as well as continuity and change between social democratic activism within a state-owned factory in interwar Romania and women’s labour activism within the state-owned sector of the national economy in the post-1945 period. This interwar social democratic trade unionism was sometimes well-aligned with government priorities concerning the factory. At times, the women protagonists of such activism could make use of these priorities to advance certain interests of women workers, while other interests simply could not be accommodated.

Scale

During the twentieth century, labour activism and labour politics in Central and Eastern Europe were – to various degrees – embedded in and contributed to transnational and international actions that shaped the politics of women’s work. Women activists, functionaries, and professionals from the region who sought to represent the interests of working women acted at multiple scales. These included the international arena, where social movement and inter-state internationalisms – some global, other regional in scope, and many of them imbued and/or struggling with regional disparities and global inequalities – collaborated and competed; post/imperial frameworks of various scopes, often characterized by similar tensions, and, e.g. legal pluralism, shifting borders, and multiple and overlapping political and cultural belongings; the national level; and the local sphere. From the long-term perspective, the networks of interaction across and along the different scales of action thus captured tended to address an increasing number of issues, and in some cases, they became more densely knit. Women labour activists, functionaries, and professionals from the region repeatedly chose (or hoped) to use activity at international, transnational, and transregional scales to promote their agendas. At the same time, many

remained or became sceptical towards, or entertained a limited interest in, international engagement. Many factors must be considered, which together can explain such hesitation. These included the limited material and cultural (e.g. language) resources to “go transnational” possessed by women from working-class backgrounds; the experience of marginalization on the international stage; the limited use workplace activists could make of international norms in their daily action “back home,” and their pronounced interest, e.g. as trade unionists, in practical and often workplace- and community-related action (i.e. rather than engaging in protracted processes involving multi-level governance).

Still, women labour activists, functionaries, and professionals from the region conceived of their realm of action as open and variably construed, aiming to exploit the opportunities provided by multi-level engagement. When studying the history of their activism, we need to avoid the reification of and an overemphasis on the transnational and international as the focal point of their action (Dietze and Naumann 2018, esp. 419) while, at the same time, unearthing the greatly understudied involvement of (some of) these women in cross- and transregional transnational and international politics and action.

A full and long-term history of labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century must address several overarching key questions regarding the politics of scale. What was the contribution of actors and organizations from the region to the evolving agendas and repertoires of women’s international labour activism and the international politics of women’s work? How were women from the region and their sometimes region-specific concerns positioned in the world of women’s, labour, and inter-state internationalisms involved in the politics of women’s work? How did women actors within the region invent, negotiate, and adapt repertoires of action and political agendas that travelled to and within the region along and across scales?

There is little research addressing the presence and agendas of Central and Eastern European women in international organizations concerned with the politics of women’s work. Still, it might be tentatively claimed that well into the interwar period, women from the region and their region-specific concerns and agendas were represented in Western-leaning labour internationalisms to a limited degree. Austrian women were fully present in the international socialist networks of labour women, and women’s Catholic trade union internationalism stretched more visibly into East-Central and Eastern Europe as compared to these socialist networks (Neunsinger 2007; Zimmermann 2021). Jelena Tešija’s article demonstrates that the same was true for women’s co-operativism. Arguably, as a result of its focus on the practical co-operative rebuilding of society, which was already underway in the young Soviet Union – and a number of other factors – the International Co-operative Women’s Guild’s (ICWG) included a Soviet branch that was closely involved in government policies back home in the Soviet Union. The ICWG systematically collected and presented data on the reality of women’s unpaid labour in the household and community, including in village communities, and the efforts of its national branches to ease the burden. Importantly, the ICWG pursued a deliberate policy of opening space on the international plane for the discussion and presentation of various positions and the solutions advocated and attempted in different places and contexts. Taken together, this strategy offered unique opportunities for Central and Eastern European branches to present region-specific problems and examples.

From the early 1930s onwards, women from the region – and some of their agendas – began to play a more visible role also in other internationalisms concerned with women's work, as has been documented so far for the ILO and socialist women's organizations. These women played an important part in alerting international circles to the dangers of authoritarianism for women's status in the world of work (Ghiț 2021; Zimmermann 2021; see also Kimble 2023, 1941–1947). Discussing Polish labour inspectors' transnational research and publications in multiple languages, as well as their participation in the ILO's initiatives, Zhanna Popova's article contributes to this new scholarship. Women labour inspectors combined their duties and initiatives at the level of the shop floor with national agendas and transnational engagement. Some of these activities revolved around interpretations of the national legislation, which – strongly inspired by the labour standards set by the ILO – regulated the labour relations of women and minors. At the same time, Halina Krahelska, a left-wing activist and labour inspector discussed in Popova's contribution, maintained a strong critique of the limitations of international labour governance as she experienced the massive gap between legal commitments and the reality on the shop floor.

The contribution by Ivelina Masheva similarly brings together the discussion of various scales of activism, in this case through the lens of the struggles around the eight-hour day in Bulgaria from the 1890s to the 1930s. Masheva explores the entanglement of how working time limits were negotiated on the shop floor, in national politics, and with reference to international norms, examining the gendered character of left-wing, expert, and right-wing debate and action related to shorter working hours, overwork, and labour protections. Masheva argues that the struggles around the application of the eight-hour day in the Bulgarian textile industry were significantly shaped by the fact that the industry employed high proportions of women and underage workers, which, together with other characteristics (including migration and factory housing), made workers particularly vulnerable to labour rights violations. The synchronicity of the process leading up to the adoption of the eight-hour workday in national legislation and as an international labour standard has been identified in relation to both Western and Eastern European countries (Cross 1985; Stegmann 2020). Yet Masheva goes further, highlighting the multi-scale and entangled character of the struggles to enforce it. In the early 1930s, an unsuccessful strike in a large hub of the Bulgarian textile industry provoked a trade union survey on working hours in local factories. This triggered nationwide conflict, and, in the end, Bulgarian trade unionists managed to draw international attention to the conflict at the ILO's annual meeting in Geneva. Masheva's contribution thus showcases how working-time regulations and practices were negotiated through a multi-scale social process that can be captured only when considering together social struggle, the adoption of legislation, and the tensions around its enforcement.

Following the political life trajectory of one activist in Romania from 1904 to 1944, Alexandra Ghiț documents a case of multi-scale politics which de facto bypassed the transnational and international realm. At the "Belvedere" cigarette factory in Bucharest, Paraschiva B. Ion was the leader of several iterations of a social democratic trade union who participated in the negotiations over a collective labour contract between 1928 and 1933, building trust but also defusing discontent in the factory. "Local" trade unionism in Bucharest very easily "jumped scales," gaining national importance, especially in a country as centralized and capital-city-driven as Romania was during the period. This was the case

with the struggles against “sacrifice curbs” (wage cuts) in the 1930s, the conflict over which travelled from the Belvedere to other tobacco factories around the country. Whereas there were several other women labour activists involved in trade union politics at the local level, Ion was one of just a handful of women from the manufacturing sector who were highly active and visible on the national level as well, performing several trade union functions and participating in nation-wide actions. Arguably, Ion’s national “career” had to do with the centrality of the state-owned Belvedere factory, where she organized for a successful social-democratic trade union that was attempting to include more women workers in its structures, from the late 1920s onwards. Ion also partook in the more systematized sharing of knowledge across scales – in her case, the local and national scales – about women’s labour relations and conditions, a tendency that could be witnessed all over Europe during the interwar period. Ghiț’s article also discusses the source-related difficulties for creating a full, critical biography of this controversial trade unionist. By contrast, as a trade unionist rather than a party woman, Ion did not participate in the socialist women’s international network, focusing instead on the development of national-level sectoral expertise in tobacco women’s work.

Returning to the international arena, with the advent of the Soviet Union and later on the state-socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe, communist-led activism with a focus on women’s work and labour in the context of “building socialism” had a principal counterpart in relevant communist-led international organizations, i.e. the Comintern and the Profintern in the interwar period, and the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in the post-1945 decades. The connections between women activists and functionaries from the region and these international organizations and their networks, as well as the transnational networks of communist-oriented women from the region, constitute an important, highly region-specific subject in the history of women’s labour activism (e.g. Bosomitu and Luciana 2023; Dyakonova 2023, *forthcoming*; Stanczak-Wislicz 2023). Susan Zimmermann discusses the relationship between Hungarian women trade unionists and the women’s politics of the WFTU, on the one hand, and the role of women from the state-socialist countries in the WFTU, on the other, during the early post-war decades, focusing on the politics of promoting women’s trade unionism. During this period and in the ensuing decades, the WFTU vigorously advocated for an egalitarian agenda related to the politics of women’s (full-time) work in Western-dominated institutions of international governance, i.e. the ILO and the UN (see also Zimmermann 2023). In terms of promoting women’s trade unionism, an international policy the WFTU developed starting from the middle of the 1950s onwards; the organization similarly focused heavily on the Western world and the Global South. On the WFTU’s international stage, state-socialist Eastern Europe served as a role model for what could and should be achieved in other world regions. In turn, women trade unionists from the region, while fully present in the WFTU, experienced limited opportunities to use the international stage provided by the organization to support their daily struggles around the mobilization of women into trade union work. Combining a focus on the Hungarian workplace and national trade union policies within the country with a focus on the WFTU, Zimmermann finds that there was asynchronicity and limited travel across scales of agendas related to the promotion of women’s trade unionism.

Veronika Helfert offers a parallel multi-scale analysis of how part-time work in the neighbouring country of Austria, which was aligned with the Western world, became a standardized and codified employment model. Spanning the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, Helfert shows how developments in Western countries and international policy debates, namely within the ILO and the International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICFTU), triggered policy engagement with the issue on a national level. In Austria, women labour activists from the Christian-social trade union faction used their position within the corporatist Austrian state as well as their labour movement channels to push for legislation on part-time work. Social democratic women, by contrast and in tune with the position of many left-wing women trade unionists across the Cold War divide, took a more cautious stance in national as well as international (i.e. ILO and ICFTU) contexts. Helfert also examines for which strata of women, and under which circumstances, part-time work offered an attractive alternative employment model and how this is reflected in the activities of trade union women representing diverse occupational fields.

Perspectives

Taken together, the articles presented in the following highlight, through their focus on the involvement of women's labour struggles with the politics of scale and with multi-level governance, the co-constitutive role of the local, regional, and transnational politics of labour and gender in shaping women's labour activism in the region. The contributions also highlight the role activists, functionaries, and professionals from the region played in the making and shaping of the gendered politics of women's work, from the local all the way up to the transnational arenas.

In addition, the articles, and the larger research on which they build, alert us to specifically understudied subjects and questions of key importance as we move forward on the path to a long-term, transregional, integrative, and critical history of women's labour activism in Central and Eastern Europe and transnationally. Alongside their focus on issues of governance and scale, the articles also contribute to the study of some of these themes.

Undoubtedly, the involvement of women's labour activism with agrarian worlds of labour, ethnic diversity, and migrant labour constitute particularly understudied subjects. In these and other research fields, it is important to look in tandem at diverse ideological affiliations, including social democratic, communist, and confessional varieties. We are only beginning to understand how the historical competition between these worldviews influenced the long-term development of the agendas pursued by each "camp." Keen attention must be paid to women's multiple engagements not only across but also along scales, including, e.g. the networks of women involved in more than one pillar of the social democratic labour movement or communist internationalism, and the history of individual women's parallel, multiple engagements in several movement pillars. We need more research on the engagement of grassroots activists and networkers, politically committed and organized women, and women experts, professionals, and civil servants with the gendered world of work before we can systematically and comparatively evaluate the changing role and impact of the activism of these highly variegated groups.

More careful examination is necessary to understand whether and how women's more limited (though, from the long-term perspective, increasing) involvement with systems of governance translated into gendered patterns and perhaps specific continuities in women's labour struggles. Such gendered patterns included, e.g. the stigmatization of women's activist behaviour as inappropriate for women or as transgressing gendered respectability norms, and various forms of women's direct engagement with private and state employers, aspects of which are addressed in the contributions by Eszter Varsa and Alexandra Ghiț. The history of the many women involved in rather constraining forms of governance while also pursuing transgressive activist agendas needs to be studied critically and systematically in ways that ask, once again, how women's unequal status within both governance structures and the gendered world of work may have contributed to this phenomenon.

In studying this and other subjects, we need to pay special attention to why and how activist women and professionals developed a strong focus on knowledge production and how they used specialist knowledge and gendered "channels" of knowledge production and dissemination as they aimed to exert influence on women's gendered status in labour governance and work and labour struggles. Susan Zimmermann's contribution points to women trade unionists' effort to educate the communist-led World Federation of Trade Unions on specific measures aimed at overcoming the gender-specific obstacles to women's active contribution to trade union life; this combined with the limited "trade value" of knowledge on old and new measures surveyed in state-socialist Europe. As Zhanna Popova demonstrates in her article, knowledge production could also form part of the activist agenda of state employees. Labour inspectors researched the workplace conditions of women workers and minors and not only exposed the exploitative and marginalizing arrangements in their reports and other publications for professionals but, addressing wider audiences, also sought to build a compelling case for the need to protect these vulnerable workers. Eszter Varsa's article, discussing women's practices of rumour-spreading during spontaneous local labour unrest, directs our attention to a completely different historical setting. Varsa moves beyond culturally essentialising interpretations of this form of women's gendered ways of producing and utilizing knowledge. Rather than conceiving of these practices as misrepresentations of local realities by ignorant, gossipy women, Varsa captures them as a means by which women attempted to take control of the situation and pressure representatives of the state to take their demands in consideration.

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OPEN ACCESS



“An eight-hour day for women workers”: negotiating working time in the Bulgarian textile industry between international labour politics and the shop floor, 1890s to 1930s

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the issue of the eight-hour workday and its application from the early 1890s – when it first appeared on the Bulgarian organized labour movement’s agenda following the decisions of the Second International – to its adoption in national legislation as well as by the International Labour Organization in 1919, and finally, the enforcement of the eight-hour day in the Bulgarian textile industry between the two world wars. This article explores continuities and changes in the struggle to adopt and enforce the eight-hour day, conceptualizing them as parts of a single negotiated social process. The article employs a gendered and multi-scale approach to explore how working time limits were negotiated on and between the shop floor, the national political stage, and in international labour organizations by diverse social groups such as (un)organized (women) workers, trade unions and labour activists with various political affiliations, the state through its labour inspectorate, as well the International Labour Organization. The article goes beyond the gender-neutral language of legal documents, instead arguing that the eight-hour day was conceptualized differently – with some variations depending on women’s life-course stage and social circumstances – and held particular importance for women workers.

KEYWORDS

Eight-hour day; protective legislation; gendered working time; labour inspection; Bulgarian textile industry; ILO

The regulation of hours of work, which is one of the most important points in labour legislation, is certainly of special interest in the case of women workers (ILO 1932, 94).

In the summer of 1931, textile workers in Gabrovo demanded that factories comply with the law on the eight-hour workday. Workers’ unrest prompted a government order for employers to shorten working hours in accordance with the law without cutting wages. As neither the workers’ action nor the state’s response produced the desired effect, a general strike of all textile workers in the city broke out in September 1931 (Vasilev et al. 1970, 247–250). In the autumn of 1931, after the strike’s failure, the Free General Federation of Trade Unions (Svoboden obsht rabotnicheski sindikalen suyuz,

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affiliated with the Social Democratic Party and the International Federation of Trade Unions, IFTU) examined the application of the eight-hour workday in the textile centre of Gabrovo (Krenev 1931). The results were published in the press organ of the social democratic party *Narod* in December 1931, and in February 1932, a summary of the inquiry's results was published in the International Labour Organization's (ILO) periodical *Industrial and Labour Information* (ILI). The investigation found out that "out of 16 textile factories employing 2,800 workers, only one, with 120 workers, was complying with the [Eight-Hour Day] Act. The other 15 were working 10 hours in the day. Out of twelve knitting factories with 700 workers, not one conformed to the Act, and hours of work in these factories were from ten to twelve in the day" (ILI 1932, 104–105). The survey resulted in a follow-up inquiry by social democratic MPs in the National Assembly and in the press, which requested the government's accountability regarding the systemic violation of the eight-hour day in Gabrovo (ILI 1932, 104–105). The issue was also raised during the 1932 International Labour Conference, where the Bulgarian government reported the measures taken to sanction enterprises at fault and communicated steps towards regulatory changes that would give the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour (MCIL) the power to close enterprises that violated labour laws (ILC 1932, 677–678).

As the above-mentioned case illustrates, the issue of the eight-hour day was far from resolved even with its adoption in national and international legislation in 1919. On the contrary, it clearly continued to be of utmost importance to workers, labour activists, the state, and the ILO; moreover, actions pertaining to the issue in these dramatically different arenas were, nevertheless, intrinsically linked. In order to address the issue of the eight-hour day in a comprehensive and integrative manner, this article adopts several methodological and conceptual premises. First, I argue that it is necessary to go beyond the notion of labour laws as normative texts and to conceive of the adoption and enforcement of the labour laws as a single negotiated social process. The article's findings confirm that in the Bulgarian case, the struggle for the eight-hour day continued well beyond its formal adoption in national legislation and lasted throughout the interwar period. Indeed, I show that there was a pronounced continuity between the pre- and post-World War One periods in the case of Bulgaria in terms of the relevance of the issue of the eight-hour day. At the same time, the codification of the norm opened new paths for individual and collective action, particularly by the end of the period, which was marked by the strengthened position of the labour inspectorate and the ILO's increased oversight of the application of the conventions. Thus, the article goes beyond existing scholarship that has explored the labour movement's repertoires of action preceding the adoption of the eight-hour day (Cross 1984, 1985; Mirola 2015), as well as those works that discuss the specific conjunctures at the end of World War One that enabled the passage of international and national regulations (Cross 1985, Stegmann 2020; Rasmussen and Knutsen 2022), offering a study of the law's application, which has been severely under-researched.

Second, the article adopts a multi-scale approach as well as an inclusive understanding of actors and repertoires of action to explore how working time limits were negotiated on and between the shop floor, the national political stage, and international organizations. This article addresses the layered forms of governance produced by the intertwined and entangled interactions between diverse stakeholders: workers, employers, labour experts and/or activists, the state – through its labour inspections, and the ILO. It investigates

a large variety of repertoires, starting with the most militant and highly visible form of labour activism, namely strikes. Strikes have been one of the best-researched forms of labour activism in Bulgaria, and they held a particularly privileged place in scholarship produced during the state-socialist period (Hadzhinikolov et al. 1960; Vasilev et al. 1970). Since labour history has not attracted much scholarly interest since the 1980s, the state-of-the-art is still biased towards militant and communist-led forms of labour activism. The actions of other political groups such as the social democrats or centre-right parties were often misrepresented and/or marginalized, while histories focused on the role of the state or the ILO are still largely unwritten.

Third, the article employs a gender-sensitive perspective in order to provide a glimpse into the specific meanings universal labour standards such as the eight-hour day held for women workers. Using a variety of sources – including leaflets, books, press articles, and archival documents produced by trade unions, left-wing political parties, and social reformers with various ideological leanings; labour inspections' reports; and ILO archival sources – I argue that although the sources often use gender-neutral, formal language, the evidence suggests that the eight-hour day was conceptualized differently and held particular importance when it was linked to women workers. Furthermore, the application of the eight-hour day in the Bulgarian textile industry met with specific problems directly related to the high percentage of women and underage workers employed in it.

In the existing scholarship, the eight-hour day is usually framed as a universal standard that applied equally to men and women, and it is often equated with workers' "quest for leisure" (Cross 1984, 1985; Mirola 2015, 117–154). As such, scholarship has tended to marginalize the specific implications the eight-hour day held for women workers, e.g. within the context of women's double and triple burden of housework and care responsibilities (for an exception, see [Boris 2021]). In contrast, works concerned with earlier periods and the ten-hour movement highlight to a much greater extent the tight connection between campaigns for shorter working hours and shifting concepts of working-class family, child-rearing, and domesticity (Canning 1996; Mirola 2015, 44–45; Creighton 2021). While gendered working time is a central topic in feminist labour history, this body of scholarship tends to focus on gender-specific protective legislation such as the prohibition of night work for women and the contested debates between different currents of the women's movement it provoked (Boris 2019; Natchkova and Schoeni 2008; van Goethem 2011; Zimmermann 2017) rather than on gender-neutral labour standards. Thus, this article makes a significant contribution to this scholarship through its inclusive, gendered, and multi-scale analysis of the struggle to implement a "universal" labour standard.

Bulgarian textile labour between the 1890s and the late 1930s

Several characteristics of the Bulgarian textile industry make it a suitable case study for an exploration not only of the entangled and multi-scale nature of the struggles to adopt and enforce the eight-hour day in Bulgaria but also its gendered meanings and particular importance for women workers. The first – and rather obvious – characteristic is its overwhelmingly female work force. A number of works confirm the large number of (predominantly home-based) women textile workers in the second half of the nineteenth century (Ivanov 2021, 96; Ianeva 2016). In the 1880s and 1890s, the Bulgarian textile

industry underwent a structural change with the percentage of home-based work – which was associated with extremely long working hours (often “from dark to dark”) and low piece-rate remunerations – falling from above 50 percent to under 10 percent in the decade before World War One. This process ran parallel to women’s revolts against mechanization, high unemployment among previously employed home-based workers, and the decrease in the overall number of textile workers: in 1912, the Bulgarian textile industry employed only 58 percent of the number of workers employed in the industry in the early 1870s (Bradinska 1968; Ivanov 2021, 96).

For earlier periods, the exact numbers and gender composition of the workforce are difficult to ascertain, but in the beginning of twentieth century, activists and experts consistently claimed that women and underage workers made up approximately 80 percent of the textile industry workforce. In 1929, there were 16,368 textile factory workers (66.8 percent women, and 33.2 percent men), whereas in 1939, the number had increased to 29,772 (71.1 percent women, and 28.9 percent men) (Vasilev et al. 1970, 356–357). Furthermore, the textile industry employed a large number of underage workers: in 1927, 40 percent of workers were under eighteen years old. Women were disproportionately represented, constituting 91.9 percent of all underage workers (Rafailović 2018, 265).

The co-constituent factors of gender, age, and skill resulted in segregated labour markets that clustered women and underage workers in lower-paid positions such as spinners, contributing to a serious (but decreasing over time) gender- and age-based pay gap. Women industrial workers received 43 percent of men’s wages in 1909; 66 percent in 1922; and 75 percent in 1939. The wage gap between underage and adult workers also decreased, but to a much lesser extent when compared to the gender wage gap. In 1909, underage workers received 42 percent of an adult wage; 47 percent in 1927; and 56 percent in 1941 (Berov 1968, 34).

The textile industry also enjoyed special status on the international level. In connection to the adoption of the C047 Forty-Hour Week Convention (1935), the head of the International Federation of Textile Workers claimed that it was one of the industries most suitable for reducing working hours through international standards due to the high percent of women and children, the high degree of mechanization, and intense international competition (Shaw 1935).

Struggles over the eight-hour day and gendered working time (1890s to 1910s)

Gender and the eight-hour day campaigns (1890s–1910s)

The struggle for shorter working hours and the implementation of the eight-hour day emerged in the early 1890s as central aims of the organized labour movement in Bulgaria following decisions of the Second International, which had singled out the eight-hour day as a central issue during its inaugural Paris Congress in 1889 (Taber 2021). Since the early 1890s, in compliance with the decisions of the Second International, the demand for the eight-hour day took centre stage at May Day demonstrations in Bulgaria (Anev et al. 1976, 23, 34–35). The travel and translation of repertoires and agendas is evident in articles in favour of the eight-hour day published in the Bulgarian trade-union and left-wing press, which outlined the advantages of this policy in terms of society (the reduction of

unemployment, increasing consumption, limiting child labour), class (strengthening labour's bargaining power vis-à-vis employers, providing additional time for organizing and trade union work), and the individual (the improvement of workers' physical and mental well-being through leisure, time for intellectual development, and civic engagement) (Vesti 1900).

Analysing discourse on the eight-hour day in fin-de-siecle Europe from a gendered perspective, it is evident that arguments in favour of its implementation, particularly those highlighting the benefits of shorter working hours for the individual worker mentioned above, were constructed by envisioning a gender-neutral, yet ontologically male working class. Similar to debates that took place in other countries and in international settings (Cross 1984, 265; Boris 2021, 94–95), when the debate in Bulgaria centred on women workers, it shifted from economic, social, and personal benefits to women's family responsibilities and the gendered division of household work. In Bulgarian socialist publications from the early 1910s, arguments were made that long working hours put a particular strain on women workers because they were expected to perform the lion's share of domestic and care work, in addition to the time they spent in gainful employment:

The eight-hour day is the greatest boon for women workers. Working women are factory but also household slaves, whose condition is worse than that of the slaves of old. After finishing an eleven-hour day in the factory, another three to five hours of housework awaits them. They have to cook, wash, iron, and mend. But for lack of time and strength, this work is either not done or poorly done and, thus, family life suffers.

We want the eight-hour day for the uplift of family life, and, above all, we want it for women workers (8-chasov raboten den 1911, 22–23).

The discourse on the eight-hour day in the Bulgarian left-wing press at the turn of the century was tightly intertwined with socialist views (because the socialists were the only political group promoting the issue at the time) for family relations, domesticity, and children's rights. Shortening working hours was promoted as a measure that supported the family and helped refute bourgeois critics that claimed that socialism sought the destruction of the family unit. The eight-hour workday was presented not only as a solution to the tensions between women's wage work and domestic labour but also as a measure to support and strengthen the working-class family, with its widespread dual-earner model. Moreover, the introduction of the eight-hour day was expected to curb, if not eliminate, child labour and mitigate its detrimental effects on children's physical and intellectual development (Kodzeikov and Lambrev 1953, 50).

Gender- and age-specific labour protection: the 1905 Law on Women's and Children's Labour in Industrial Enterprises and its application

Parallel to the campaign for the eight-hour day as a universal standard, separate but connected campaigns were launched for gender- and age-differentiated standards. In its 1892 programme, the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (Bulgarska rabotnicheska sotsial-demokraticheska partiya, BRSDP) set the eight-hour day as the desirable working time only for women and girls above sixteen years, as well as for boys between the ages of fourteen and twenty. While the BRSDP reverted back to its earlier

goal of a universal eight-hour workday at the next 1893 congress, the idea of gender- and age-specific standards persisted (Yochev 2004). Concurrent visions of universal standards *and* special protections for women workers was by no means a distinctive characteristic of Bulgarian labour politics, and eventually the idea of special protective legislation prevailed, as was the case in many other countries and internationally (Wikander, Kessler-Harris, and Lewis 1995). Thus, when in 1905 the first Bulgarian labour law – The Law on the Protection of Women and Children’s Labour in Industrial Enterprises – was passed, it set limits on working time for industrial employment according to gender and age: ten hours per day for women above the age of sixteen, eight hours for children between the ages of twelve to fifteen, and six hours for children aged ten to twelve (Zlatinchev 1945, 6–7).

The 1905 law was passed by the centre-right Popular Liberal Party (Narodno-liberalna partiya), a rather surprising feat given that labour legislation did not feature in its programme or political goals beforehand (Yochev 2004, 93). Regarding the motivations behind the law, the need for special gender- and age-specific legislation was rationalized with an underlying understanding that gainful employment and breadwinning ideally should be preserved for “strong male working hands.” But, lawmakers claimed, because technical progress made physical strength less relevant, employers increasingly substituted men with cheaper women and children’s labour. Consequently, the law aimed to protect women, the family, and society from “moral ruin,” which inevitably followed the “unrestricted and limitless use of the labour of women – the mothers of future generations.” Thus, the path to gender- and age-specific labour protections in the early 1900s was determined by essentialist visions of womanhood and manhood and the desire to preserve traditional family models and protect the male breadwinner wage from the competition posed by cheaper women’s and children’s labour (Stenografski dnevnik 1905, 1997).

From the very beginning, the 1905 law proved difficult to enforce. Control over the law’s application was granted to the newly established labour inspectorate, which, according to Article 16 of the 1905 law, would appoint “the necessary number” of inspectors. In 1907, a Law on the Labour Inspection was passed, but due to insufficient funding, the new labour inspections were not fully functional until 1915. In the interim period, control over labour law was assigned to “labour committees,” collective bodies that included a number of civil servants, as well as a workers’ representative with a three-year mandate. All committee members had full rights as labour inspectors to ascertain labour law violations and impose sanctions. In 1915, the figure of the workers’ representative ceased to exist as the number of salaried professional labour inspectors (in this period, they were exclusively men) was deemed sufficient (Filipov 1966a, 1966b; Zlatinchev 1961, 63). Yet, by their own admission, labour inspectors were unable to ensure sufficient compliance with the existing labour laws. According to a report of chief labour inspector Kutinchev, of the 1,159 factories he inspected between 1910 and 1914, 93.5 percent violated working time limits for women and children, and 91.8 percent failed to provide the minimum amount of mid-work breaks. Moreover, the fact that the law was gender- and age-specific turned out to be another obstacle for its application as employers claimed that interrelated production processes made differentiating women’s and children’s working time practically impossible without stopping production altogether (Kutinchev 1915).

Overwork as a gender-specific problem: labour militancy, expertise, and civil service as forms of activism

Strikes and other militant forms of labour protests were an indispensable part of efforts to lower working hours in the Bulgarian textile industry in the early twentieth century. The issue of shorter working hours was routinely pressed during textile strikes, but concrete demands varied depending on the context: in 1902, workers in the Knyaz Boris textile factory in Varna demanded a ten-hour day during which machines would be cleaned; in 1906, silk workers in Asenovgrad struck for an eight-hour day; and in 1904, textile workers in Sliven demanded a twenty-four-hour break during the work week and the elimination of unpaid overtime work. In some cases, as in the 1902 Knyaz Boris strike, the issue of working hours was linked to wage issues such as the replacement of piece-rate remuneration with a set daily wage (Hadzhinikolov et al. 1960, 99; Kodzeikov and Lambrev 1954, 458; Hristov, Karutsin, and Tsanev 1955, 186–192).

Coordinated left-wing and trade union petitions calling for the adoption of the eight-hour day as part of a broader labour programme were also frequently used by the labour movement as an organizing tactic. Thus, in 1895, a petition by workers from Sofia (later joined by other local workers' organizations) was submitted to the National Assembly communicating a broad labour protection agenda, with the eight-hour day listed as the first demand (Sharova 1956, 9–10). The early 1910s witnessed a notable upsurge in socialist and trade union organizing in favour of the eight-hour day as part of a wider labour agenda. In 1910, the radical wing of the socialist movement organized a series of demonstrations in which more than 110,000 workers took part. Some of these actions – such as the May Day demonstration in Stara Zagora – specifically demanded an eight-hour day, whereas others demanded stricter enforcement of existing labour laws, additional protective legislation, and the improvement of hygiene and safety standards (Andonov 1967, 27). In 1911–1912, labour unions associated both with the social democrats and the communist wing of the labour movement organized a series of local workers' assemblies, each of which produced a list of demands for legislative changes addressed to the National Assembly. While some of the petitions and resolutions were quite general, others – like that of the Haskovo workers from 16 (29) October 1911 – contained a detailed and fairly sophisticated agenda: an eight-hour day, a minimum wage, labour inspectors elected by the workers, comprehensive social security and health insurance, as well as the prohibition of indirect taxation on “basic necessities” (Protest telegrams 1911, esp. 204).

Medical professionals also brought attention to the problem of overwork and the health-related problems it posed to textile workers. In a detailed survey of the industry made shortly after the passage of the 1905 law, Petur Tsonchev, a long-time factory physician in the textile centre of Gabrovo, estimated that people worked a daily average of around fourteen hours on the day shift and nine hours during night shifts. However, these estimates were, as Tsonchev highlighted, only the length of the factory workday, whereas “the actual workday of our workers is much greater (lengthier), because of their own work, done alongside factory labour, especially for women-workers.” Tsonchev claimed that the workday of an average woman worker could reach a total of seventeen to eighteen hours when wage and non-wage labour was combined, which posed serious health risks to women workers. “Their own work,”

Tsonchev explained, varied depending on women's particular social circumstances and life-course stage: unmarried girls making their trousseau, married women performing domestic and care work, and women who were the sole or primary family breadwinner supplementing their low factory wages with additional paid work such as lace making, knitting, or needlework. He also claimed that women's "extraordinarily strenuous workload, which sharply separates them from men workers" could not be solely attributed to material need but was also shaped by gender-specific cultural patterns of overwork which encouraged women to eschew rest and leisure to the point of "disregard for ... their own physical health" (Tsonchev [1929] 1996, 548–550). Furthermore, in both left-wing and right-wing discourse, medical problems associated with long working hours and poor labour conditions were linked to a gendered vision of the nation-building project: overwork would make it impossible for women and girls to bear healthy children, and young boys would be unfit for military service, thus "threatening the future of the nation" (Kodzeikov and Lambrev 1953, 321–326).

Struggles over the eight-hour day in Bulgaria between the 1890s and 1910s took place during shop floor protests, local actions, and on the national political stage. Pressure was exerted primarily by left-wing parties, trade unions, and unorganized workers through strikes, demonstrations, printed publications, and coordinated campaigns, but with limited success. While they managed to give the issue some visibility, the adoption of an eight-hour workday remained a distant, almost utopian dream in the pre-World War One period.

At the same time, the increasing (but still modest) number of women workers turned the attention of medical professionals, labour activists, and politicians across the political spectrum to the gendered implications of overwork. While experts, trade unionists, and politicians alike accepted that the negative consequences of long working hours affected women disproportionately due to the additional paid and unpaid labour women performed, solutions to the health- and social- problems overwork caused varied. Ultimately, gender- and age-specific labour protections began to enjoy wider social support, including by right-wing political parties in the years preceding the outbreak of the Great War. The establishment of the labour inspection service (1907), despite its somewhat slow and challenging launch, was another important milestone, as the institution gradually became a crucial stakeholder in the process of negotiating limits on labour hours in Bulgarian industry.

1919: The eight-hour day is adopted in national and international labour law

At the end of World War One – during the Paris Peace Conference and the Washington Labour Conference – the issue of the eight-hour day resurfaced with unprecedented vigour. The death, deprivation, destruction, and disillusionment caused by the war was followed by revolutions, protests, and hunger riots in its aftermath. The shock of the Bolshevik revolution, revolutionary upheavals in a number of European countries, and the general social radicalization in Europe spurred important concessions in social policy development (Rasmussen and Knutsen 2022). Setting a global standard for maximum working hours per day and per week began to be considered an indispensable part of post-war efforts to forge a sustainable peace based on social justice (Hutchison and McLennan 2021). Consequently, the ten-hour workday, previously entertained as an

international labour standard, was discarded in favour of the eight-hour workday and the forty-eight-hour work week in the ILO's landmark Convention no. 1—Hours of Work (Industry) in 1919. The resulting changes in the regulation of work hours worldwide were, in the words of the ILO's first director Albert Tomas, "of a truly revolutionary character:" during the years 1918–1919, the eight-hour day had, either through collective agreement or by law, become a reality in the majority of industrial countries (Report of the Director 1921, 81–82).

Taking part in the Commission on International Labour Legislation during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, women activists such as French labour feminists Jeanne Bouvier, Gabrielle Bouillot, and Gabrielle Duchêne spoke passionately in favour of shorter working hours for men and women, social wages for pregnant and nursing women, and a minimum wage (Cobble 2018). During the 1919 International Labour Conference, British trade unionist Mary MacArthur argued that unlike men, whose right to leisure was insured by the introduction of the eight-hour day, women workers required further protections because of their reproductive labour at home. She claimed, "When the man comes home at night his day's work is done, he can sit down by the fire and read his newspaper, or dig in his garden . . . but a woman's work is never done, and when she leaves the factory she usually goes home to begin a new day's work at home" (Boris 2021, 94–95).

In Bulgaria, due to its status as a defeated state in World War One, international developments, especially the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920), were closely followed, including its proceedings regarding labour. The country's decision to pre-emptively initiate preparations for the adoption of the eight-hour day was undoubtedly influenced by international developments, i.e. the adoption of the eight-hour workday by the newly founded ILO. The ratification of nearly all ILO conventions continued throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, and this was part of a consistent Bulgarian foreign policy that was "dominated by the spirit of an active revisionism" and "done exclusively for the purpose of manifesting outwardly to the victors the desire for a loyal co-operation with the ILO" (Oshanov 1943, 287).

Internal social developments that contributed to the adoption of the standard of the eight-hour day in national legislation were largely synchronous and intertwined with those leading to its establishment as an international labour standard. During the last years of the war, there were women-led hunger riots in a number of towns across the country. Women's riots were followed by a 1918 soldiers uprising that was suppressed only with considerable violence. The old political parties that led the country into the Balkan wars (1912–1913) and World War One were losing popular support at the expense of various left-wing movements. Seeking a broad political consensus in a period of national crisis, in 1918, Prime Minister Teodor Teodorov offered the majority of ministerial posts to agrarians (three out of eight ministries) and social democrats (two ministries, including MCIL, which was headed by the leader of the social democrats and a long-time activist for the introduction of the eight-hour workday, Yanko Sakuzov).

The labour movement also experienced a marked upsurge in support: in 1919, there were 135 strikes throughout the country, in which 76,310 workers took part, including 16,682 women workers. The textile sector was among the most militant segments of the economy, boasting at least eleven successful strikes in several different cities (Karlovo, Troyan, Gabrovo, Kotel, Samokov, Kazanluk, Varna, Pazardzhik) that had broken out between March and June 1919. Immediately introducing the eight-hour workday featured

prominently in (textile) workers' demands, alongside wage increases, the decent treatment of workers by foremen and management, and union recognition (Hadzhinikolov et al. 1960, 197).

In this context, the newly established Supreme Labour Council (*Vurhoven suvet na truda*) – a consultative body composed of representatives of the state, employers' organizations, trade unions, and renown experts – convened its first session on 10 June 1919; the eight-hour day was the first item on the agenda. The arguments made in favour of the eight-hour workday centred primarily on workers' health, the need for social peace and healing, as well as the general "spirit of the time." While these accounts were gender-neutral and presumably referred to the working-class as a whole, a careful reading of the sources in connection with the above-mentioned discussions on overwork reveal some gender-specific dimensions. Several experts, including the aforementioned Petur Tsonchev, argued in favour of the new labour standard (eight or nine hours), linking long working hours with health-related problems. However, Tsonchev also expressed doubts about whether the eight-hour day bill would actually shorten overall working hours as a decrease in factory working hours might be compensated with an increased level of "side work." As was previously discussed, he associated both poor health due to excessive overwork and the tendency to perform "their own work" in addition to factory labour almost exclusively with women workers (*Vurhoven suvet* 1919, 20–23; Tsonchev [1929] 1996, 548–550).

Reservations aside, the eight-hour day did not meet with serious opposition and was quickly approved by the Supreme Labour Council. It was subsequently confirmed by Decree No. 24 issued on 24 June 1919. Given the radicalism of the eight-hour day standard, the lack of serious opposition during this debate tells us a great deal about the historical moment that permitted its adoption. It is even more striking when we take into account that it was only two years before, in 1917, that the country had taken the ground-breaking step to limit adult men's working hours, capping them at eleven hours per day (Yanulov 1941, 232).

Employers' organizations – rather predictably – were strongly opposed to the adoption of the 1919 decree, but they failed to mount a substantial challenge during the preliminary tri-partite discussions. In defense of their position, they pointed out the swiftness of the legislative process as well as the government's biased selection of members of the Supreme Labour Council, the majority of whom were known for their socialist leanings and support for the eight-hour day. Industrialist organizations were apportioned only three out of twenty-one representatives (and as one 1920 booklet attacking the eight-hour day claimed, one of employers' representatives was a social democrat) (Klutschorski 1920). However, just a few weeks after the 1919 decree was issued, employers' organizations vigorously protested the introduction of the eight-hour day, addressing the government as well as the general public in their calls for the revision of the decree, the postponement of its implementation, and/or the narrowing of its scope. They disputed the inevitability of its introduction and pressed the government to take advantage of clauses allowing for flexibility, exemptions, and derogations against the policy contained in both the peace treaty and the Washington Convention.

Across their arguments against the eight-hour day – which included the need for post-war reconstruction, the low labour productivity that characterized the Bulgarian industrial sector, the cultural specificity of Bulgaria's predominantly agrarian society, and intense

international competition – a distinct anti-colonial discourse can be detected. The main argument against the introduction of the eight-hour day was rooted in a developmentalist discourse and stressed Bulgaria's economic backwardness in comparison to the West. Bulgarian industry, employers' organizations claimed, especially in internationally competitive branches such as the textile sector, required protectionist laws and special exemptions from international labour standards similar to those offered to East Asian countries at the time. From the industrialists' perspective, the eight-hour day was a way to facilitate Western economic expansion by destroying competition in underdeveloped East European countries that used longer working hours to compensate for the low degree of mechanization and consequent low labour productivity (Narodno stopanstvo 1919, 1–4; Klutsohorski 1920; Otchet [1922]).

Employers' opposition notwithstanding, the Bulgarian government moved forward with the cap on work hours and passed a law accepting the decisions of the Washington conference in November 1921. The formal ratification of Convention no. 1 was filed with the ILO in February 1922, but Bulgaria had until 1 July 1924 to make the necessary amendments to the country's existing labour laws (Sbornik 1939).

Enforcing the eight-hour day: an inclusive, multi-scale approach to labour struggles

Negotiating working time on the shop floor: strikes, petitions, complaints

From the very beginning, the eight-hour day was a legal achievement under constant threat of remaining "just a written [text], rolling in dust around the ministry" (Bakalov 1928, 45–47). The issue of the (non-)application of the eight-hour day featured prominently in the workers' agenda during the strike wave of the immediate post-war years. In July 1919, just weeks after the decree on the eight-hour day was issued, several strikes broke out in the textile industry among workers demanding the decree's immediate application. In 1920, successful general strikes broke out in two of the major centres of the textile industry – Sliven and Gabrovo – against attempts to reintroduce the ten-hour workday (Hadzhinikolov et al. 1960, 216, 260; Vasilev et al. 1970, 148–155). Yet, crisis in the industry and increased unemployment weakened workers' bargaining position in 1921, and after an unsuccessful thirty-five-day strike, the ten-hour day was reintroduced in Sliven and, later on, also in Gabrovo (Vasilev et al. 1970, 148–155).

Despite frequent complaints about the ubiquity of violations of the law, its adoption had a significant impact on industrial working hours in Bulgaria in the early 1920s. While data on real working hours is extremely scarce, the available information confirms a significant drop after the adoption the eight-hour day. In the decade preceding World War One, the duration of the workday in the Bulgarian industrial sector averaged around 10.7 hours, whereas in 1922, it fell to 8.5 hours (Berov 1968, 74).

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the next wave of labour militancy hit the Bulgarian textile industry, the eight-hour day was again a central demand on the textile workers' agenda. This time, the issue of working time was tightly linked to the consequences of the global economic crisis, mass unemployment, and rationalization processes, which generated a wave of labour unrest among textile workers across the world (Silver 2003, 89). In Bulgaria, the drive towards rationalization coincided with the

start of the worldwide economic depression. In addition to mechanization (which was not always a feasible solution due to the lack of available investment capital), cutting production costs was achieved through the mandatory extension of labour hours or the introduction of new methods of labour organization (such as piece-work payments and minimum daily productions quotas) that achieved the same effect but did not openly violate working time regulations. Thus, in 1930, employers attempted to increase the working hours in the Tundzha textile factory in Yambol to nine hours, but under the threat of a strike, they abandoned this plan and retained the eight-hour workday (Vasilev et al. 1970, 255). The next year, the factory management altered its strategy to decrease production costs: instead of openly increasing working hours, they installed new measurement devices on each working station and introduced a new wage system that was based on workers' productivity. The factory's predominantly female workforce strongly opposed the new management techniques, and a strike broke out on 29 June 1931 (Vasilev 1981). Similar practices were introduced in the textile factories of Sliven, where in order to receive their full wage, workers were required to reach a minimum daily quota, e.g. twelve metres of woven cloth. Workers protested, pointing out that receiving a higher wage (40 to 50 leva) necessitated approximately thirteen to fourteen hours of work. Consequently, they threatened to strike if this system, which forced them to choose between a significant wage cut or a significant increase in working hours went into force (Chervendineva 1964; Eho 1930a).

Throughout the interwar period, the eight-hour workday was featuring prominently in the radical Left's actions targeting women workers. In a 1922 campaign to unionize women workers initiated by the communist-affiliated General Trade Union Federation (*Obsht rabotnicheski sindikalen suyuz*), the eight-hour day was listed as a "women-specific" demand alongside equal pay for equal work, maternity protections, and socialized childcare (Ravestvo 1922). The application of the eight-hour day (together with the six-hour day for underage workers and a ban on women's night work) remained at the centre of the women-related agenda of the communist movement in the 1930s, which was popularized through the communist press, leaflets, and events organized for 8th March (International Women's Day) (Apel 1930).

Complaints and petitions were other popular tactics in textile workers' repertoire of actions that were used to negotiate for shorter working hours. In 1930, five workers (whose names were unfortunately not recorded) complained to the local labour inspection office about the ten-hour day in the textile factory of Nedev-Saruivanov in Sliven, and they requested state intervention to ensure the application of the eight-hour day. The labour inspector investigated the case but also shared the names of the workers with the factory management, which resulted in their dismissal. Following the inspectors' visit, however, the workday was shortened to eight hours (Eho 1930b).

Sending complaints and petitions to the labour inspectorate, the National Assembly, and other government institutions, as well as to the press became a particularly popular form of labour protest in the mid- to late 1930s. This was due to a regime change following the 1934 coup d'état as well as the 1936 Law-Ordinance on Collective Agreements and the Settling of Labour Conflicts, which made strikes illegal. The petition of the Sofia textile workers addressed to the minister of commerce, industry, and labour and to the head of the Labour Department in the same ministry is particularly insightful. The petition emerged out of a general meeting of the city's textile workers that was held

in the cultural centre (*chitalishte*) of a working-class neighbourhood on 2 December 1935. The petition, which was addressed to the government, detailed the pressing problems of textile workers and their demands. It enumerated a long list of problems: the use of coercion and deception to extort unpaid overtime work from employees, the violation of the eight-hour day, the violation of the six-hour night-work limit, the violation of the half-hour mid-day break, employers' disregard for the special legal protections afforded to underage workers, pregnant women, and working mothers, unhygienic and unsafe working conditions, and widespread workplace violence. The petition stressed the ubiquity of labour law violations, claiming that the eight-hour day was exceeded in every factory in the city, but nowhere was coerced overwork as big a problem as in cases where workers lived in factory housing. To solve these problems, women workers demanded a state inspection of all the textile factories in the city. The solution, workers claimed, was increased control over the application of labour laws, which would greatly benefit from workers' participation in labour inspectors' investigations (Karutsin and Tsanev 1954, 294–297). Workers' participation in factory inspections, a practice that existed in the pre-World War One period, continued to be a popular demand throughout the interwar period as it was adopted by vastly different groups within the labour movement, from communists to the state-backed corporatist Bulgarian Labour Union (Bulgarski rabotnicheski suyuz).

Working hours and labour conditions in the textile industry as a national political issue

In 1928–1929, a major scandal regarding the labour conditions in the “Tekstil” factory unfolded, prompted by the high number young women workers in the factory who died of tuberculosis. The “Tekstil” factory, which was located in Varna, employed 1,073 workers in 1928, the majority of whom were young peasant girls living on the factory's premises (Nikolov and Verbev 1928). In May, and again in September 1928, social democratic MPs Iliya Yanulov and Petur Zlatev brought a series of allegations regarding working conditions in the factory to the floor of the National Assembly: the violation of the eight-hour workday and the prohibition of night work for women, unhygienic working conditions, the employment of workers below the minimum age, and the violation of workers' social security rights. Yanulov and Zlatev placed the blame for the lamentable situation of the young girls entirely on the state, which prided itself on its progressive labour laws but lacked the capacity to enforce them: “... In Geneva, our country presents itself as a paradise of social legislation, while here the [lack of] care for the workers and the disregard for the law are as if they belong to the barbaric mores of centuries ago. Such bigotry must be brought to an end as soon as possible” (Dimitrova 2018, 672; Yanulov 1928). The background of the factory's workforce – their female gender, their youth (they were fourteen to twenty years old according to the labour inspection report, but critics claimed their ages were, in fact, much lower: eleven to seventeen years old), and their status as migrants from (relatively) distant rural areas – made these workers particularly vulnerable to violations of their labour rights. Extremely restrictive living arrangements also curbed workers' ability to organize and protest because they were not allowed to leave the factory premises, meet people, or have access to books and newspapers (Rabotnichka 1929; Revolutionäre Arbeiterin 1929). Such a factory regime was made socially acceptable by traditional cultural norms that placed a premium on girls' “virtue,”

which was a pre-requisite for employment in the factory and was confirmed through a virginity test upon arrival (Nikolov and Verbev 1928, 49). Unsurprisingly, the first item on the women workers' list of demands was "freedom and the abolition of the monstrous regime," directly followed by a demand to observe the eight-hour workday (Rabotnichka 1929). These accusations prompted a labour inspection, which was personally supervised by the head of the Labour Department of the MCIL Dimitur Nikolov. The report was extremely favourable to the factory management and promptly provoked allegations of corruption from the left-wing press (Nikolov 1932).

The labour inspection continued to be closed to women inspectors in the post-World War One era, despite art. 427 of the 1919 Neilly-sur-Seine Peace Treaty, which stipulated that Bulgaria "should make provision for a system of inspection in which women should take part, in order to ensure the enforcement of the laws and regulations." It was only in 1929, following a recommendation by the ILO, that Bulgaria reported compliance with this condition (Kodzabasheva 1930, 16). The appointment of the first women inspectors was followed by further reforms in the early 1930s, such as widening the institutional network of inspectors and entrusting labour inspections with additional responsibilities related to workers' safety and job placement. Labour inspection reports were, however, criticized by the head of the Labour Department Georgi Vulev for their lack of information on certain important topics including the application of the eight-hour day and the observance of the ban on women's night work (Vulev 1932). It would take another few years – and, as we will see, also pressure from the ILO – but in the mid-1930s, labour inspection reports started to provide this kind of information. In 1936, labour inspectors made 7,582 factory visits, substantiating 2,395 violations of the working time regulations (266 in industrial enterprises, 1,383 in craft workshops, 673 in commercial enterprises, and 73 in other types of workplaces). In 1937, there were 12,482 factory visits, resulting in 2,778 fines (330 in industrial enterprises, 1,894 in craft workshops, 475 in commercial enterprises, and 79 in other types of workplaces) (MTPT 1939, 126–127).

International oversight: the ILO's monitoring of the application of international labour standards

The ILO played an important role in the long struggle for the implementation of the eight-hour day as it was embodied in the landmark Convention no. 1 Hours of Work (Industry), ratified by Bulgaria on 14 February 1922. As a tripartite organization, the ILO was open to trade unions who used it to bring their grievances to the attention of national governments. Nevertheless, trade unions' inclination to turn to the ILO greatly depended on their political affiliation. While the radical Left generally denounced the ILO, labelling it "a traitor to the working class's interests," and the radical Right rejected it as part of the Versailles system, social democrats and moderate right parties had no qualms about collaborating with the ILO. Furthermore, in cases of flagrant violations of the eight-hour day, trade unions employed a variety of strategies, of which appeals to the ILO was just one among many others. When in 1923 the Supreme Labour Council passed a resolution that reduced the scope of application of the decree establishing the eight-hour day, the initial reactions were local workers' demonstrations and a nationwide campaign of written protests addressed to the National Assembly (Leaflet 1923; Levi 1965; Telegrams, resolutions 1923). However, the ongoing activism around the issue

and the eventual passage of amendments narrowing the scope of industries subject to the eight-hour workday was followed closely in Geneva, as evidenced by a number of articles that appeared in the press (ILI 1923a, 1923b, 1924), official trade union protests (Dimitrov 1924), as well as in the personal correspondence of the ILO president Albert Tomas (Yanulov 1926).

The ILO's main mechanism to enforce the application of conventions were the annual reports sent by national governments that were to provide information concerning the application of all the ILO conventions a country had ratified. These reports were subsequently evaluated by a Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations. When combing through the Bulgarian government's reports and the Committee of Experts' evaluations of them, it is clear that Bulgaria's relationship with the ILO underwent an evolution during the interwar period. Throughout the 1920s, the Bulgarian government supplied rather legalistic and repetitive reports focused primarily on the character of its laws and regulations. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the ILO Committee of Experts occasionally remarked that Bulgaria had sent "very summary reports" and made repeated recommendations for more detailed information. During international labour conferences, governments' reports and their general compliance with ratified conventions was discussed, and workers' representatives could and did point out discrepancies. Thus, in June 1929, M. Kupers, a workers' representative from the Netherlands, observed that "with regard to Bulgaria, official reports on the application of the Conventions do not exist. It is, however, an undoubted fact that the Hours Convention is very widely disregarded." Following up these criticisms made by labour representatives and the Committee of Experts, in the mid-1930s, pressure from the ILO regarding Bulgaria's application of conventions intensified. The Committee of Experts began to persistently demand concrete data on the application and enforcement process: information on the number of workers to which the eight-hour workday standard was applied, the number of infractions, the fines imposed on employers who violated the standards, etc (Annual reports 1936–1939).

In 1935, after repeated requests by the ILO's Committee of Experts to supply detailed information on the number of workers covered by the eight-hour convention and the number of infractions recorded by the labour inspections, the Bulgarian government charged the MCIL with changing the nature of statistical surveys in order to comply with the ILO's request (Table 1).

The increased number of infractions recorded by the labour inspections do not seem to indicate a worsening in labour conditions. Extremely scarce as it is, data on real working hours in Bulgarian industry show a slight decrease in the average working hours in the late 1930s and early 1940s: from 9.1 hours in 1937 to 8.7 hours in 1941 (Berov 1968, 74). However, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent this decrease was due to labour

Table 1. Application of Convention no. 1 Hours of Work (Industry) in Bulgaria, 1935–1939.

Period	Number of workers covered by the Convention no. 1 Hours of Work (Industry)	Number of infractions, related to the Convention's provisions
01.1.1935–3.09.1936	approx. 200,000	963
01.1.1936–3.09.1937	approx. 200,000	1,123
1.1.1937–3.09.1938	209,641	1,507
01.1.1938–3.09.1939	238,850	3,808

Source: Annual reports 1936–1939.

inspections' tighter control, and to what extent it may be attributed to other factors such as disruptions caused by the war.

Furthermore, in the mid-1930s, the ILO's Committee of Experts started to scrutinize national legislation in greater detail and urged for the amendment of some of Bulgaria's labour regulations in order to bring them into full compliance with Convention no. 1's provisions. Thus, in its annual report for 1936, the Bulgarian government stated that it had complied with the Committee of Experts' observation that national legislation did not contain the provisions under art. 8 of the convention, namely that the Department of Labour and Social Security in the MCIL should require all industrial and commercial enterprises to notify their workers about the precise time work begins and ends, as well as the precise time and duration of work breaks. In 1937, the Committee of Experts welcomed the government's assurances that such a regulation had been issued, but it asked to see a copy of the document and insisted on further information concerning how Article 8c on keeping a record of extra hours worked was applied in national legislation (Annual reports 1936–1939).

Conclusion

The issue of the eight-hour day was consistently present in Bulgarian labour politics from the 1890s until World War Two. Investigating the eight-hour workday from a long-term perspective and as the outcome of a negotiated social process that extended beyond the official adoption of it as legal norm in 1919 reveals a much more complex (and messier) picture than does the neat recounting of a series of (ever-more progressive) legislative acts found in histories of labour law. The struggles over the adoption and application of the eight-hour day could also be conceptualized within the larger process of the expanding state in twentieth-century Eastern Europe (Brunnbauer 2022; Grama 2020), exemplified in this case by increased state intervention in the field of labour relations. Pressure for increased labour protections and more rigorous control over the application of existing labour laws came simultaneously from several directions and unfolded on various scales – on the shop floor through workers' actions (strikes, demonstrations, petitions and complaints); in public debates involving labour experts; in political parties across the political spectrum; trade unions (balanced by and in opposition to employers' organizations) – as well as in conjunction with international developments such as the establishment the Versailles order and the passage of the ILO's international labour standards. Finally, the adoption of the eight-hour day was a dynamic process shaped by changing patterns of industrial relations, economic cycles, and political regimes.

A focus on women workers and the textile industry, furthermore, reveals how the adoption of a technically gender-neutral standard in Bulgaria nevertheless held gender-specific meanings for women workers. At the same time, these meanings varied depending on women's life-course stage and social circumstances (e.g. women workers' roles as mothers and homemakers, the specific vulnerability of underage and migrant workers, women workers living in factory housing, etc.). Yet time and again, experts and labour activists argued that the health and social problems associated with overwork affected women workers to a much greater extent than their male counterparts, with radical-left women even framing the eight-hour workday as "a

women-specific issue,” along with equal pay for equal work, maternity protections, and socialized childcare.

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OPEN ACCESS



The treacherous trade unionist: Paraschiva B. Ion and labour activism in the Romanian tobacco sector, 1920s to 1940s

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ABSTRACT

What did it mean to be a woman labour activist in a state-owned industry in Romania before 1945? In this article, I construct a political biography of Paraschiva B. Ion, a worker and trade unionist in the “Belvedere” tobacco factory in Bucharest during the interwar period. P. B. Ion led factory- and national-level social democratic trade unions and served as an elected delegate to factory-level and municipal-level workers’ representative bodies. At the same time, she participated in labour control practices, including during the Second World War. I argue that P. B. Ion’s career illustrates how, in the interwar period, women labour activists in social democratic trade unions in Romania could become more prominent participants in labour governance on the shop floor, municipal, and national levels while not being involved in labour governance at the international scale. Like other trade unionists in Europe, at times, P.B. Ion supported certain claims made by women workers (including through expert knowledge production) and at other times restrained them. I position P. B. Ion’s activism in a domestic context marked by competing labour agitation and organizing in the tobacco sector, activities shaped by a legal framework that hindered labour organizing.

KEYWORDS

women’s labour activism;
interwar; Romania; trade
unions; tobacco

This article constructs a “union work” biography of Paraschiva B. Ion, a controversial labour activist in the state-owned “Belvedere” Tobacco Factory (Belvedere) in Bucharest and in the reformist Union of Workers from Match and Tobacco Factories in Romania (UWMTR) during the interwar period. I argue that P. B. Ion’s career illustrates how, in the interwar period, women labour activists in social democratic trade unions in Romania could become more prominent participants in labour governance on the shop floor, municipal, and national levels while not being involved directly in the internationalization of labour governance (unlike male colleagues of similar national prominence). Also, this biography shows how women’s labour activism in reformist trade union structures could help co-produce forms of labour governance that did not always lead to better outcomes for workers. I suggest that P. B. Ion’s trajectory illustrates that although the interwar period has been characterized heretofore as an era defined by increased political polarization,

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a seasoned activist's choices and tactics could be shaped by pragmatism and ideological drift as much as her allegiance to a specific trade union organization and its internationally shaped agendas. In constructing my argument, I uncover the specifics of women's trade union work in interwar Romania.

Admittedly, interpretative challenges are posed by the combination of many easily accessible press sources with the limited number of archival sources about this activist, the latter of which makes it difficult to reconstruct how P. B. Ion's specific life experiences shaped her political choices. To overcome these challenges, this article homes in on Paraschiva B. Ion's professional trajectory to identify the gendering of interwar trade unionism in Romania and beyond; it does not seek to reconstruct personal motivations.

Recent research on interwar Romanian labour history reveals that labour organizing in industry was difficult because of political divisions and distrust among workers within the context of both trade union competition and state repression. Adrian Grama's monograph on post-war labour regimes emphasizes that industrial work in interwar Romania was marked by low salaries, paternalist managerial practices, physical violence deployed by foremen, the sexual harassment of women workers, and distrust of labour organizers (Grama 2018, 39–55). Dan Alexandru Săvoaia's work shows that the revolutionary General Union of Revolutionary Trade Unions (UGSR) competed with the reformist General Confederation of Labour (CGM) in the 1920s. These trade unions engaged in tense and mutually suspicious cooperation during the "popular front" era of the 1930s (Săvoaia 2022, 138–140). Additionally, in 1919 and 1920, the government (especially through the Ministry of Internal Affairs) encouraged the creation of "national trade unions," pejoratively termed "yellow" unions by radicalized workers. "National trade unions" were meant to channel workers away from revolutionary organizations and towards acceptable goals (Dragne 1977, 77). Violent exploitation, trade union competition, and employer-controlled trade unions were not unusual at the time in Eastern as well as Western Europe (Millan et al. 2021). However, in Romania, state-of-siege measures, in force throughout the country or in certain areas for shorter or longer stretches of time between 1916 and 1928 and again from 1933 to 1938, further increased distrust and divisions in labour activism (Săvoaia 2022, 72).

Discussing the 1950s "politics of productivity" in Romania, Grama argues that the (by-then communist-dominated, state-integrated) General Confederation of Labour was primarily interested in defusing labour conflict to shore up productivity (Grama 2018, 106). According to Grama, post-war labour conflict was also neutralized through labour law, thus prolonging the pacification function that collective bargaining mechanisms had had during the interwar period and into the period after 1945 (Grama 2020). In part, by prioritizing legalistic trade union practices, interwar social democratic trade unionism had similar pacification effects, especially in state-owned industries. Some of Paraschiva B. Ion's actions and stances in the Belvedere factory in Bucharest and on the national political stage illuminate the complex and seemingly contradictory politics of CGM trade unionists in the interwar period. At least some workers at Belvedere perceived Ion's actions as driven by narrow self-interest.

The post-World War One internationalization of labour governance created new political arenas for some trade unionists from and in Romania. The CGM was affiliated with the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU, "the Amsterdam International") and interacted with International Labour Organisation (ILO) specialists and representatives

(Săvoaia 2022, 72). Throughout the interwar period (as after), the ILO was a key technical and norm-producing body and forum for negotiations on labour issues between employers, government representatives, and workers (Plata-Stenger 2020). Through participation in the ILO's annual International Labour Conferences (ILC), social democratic workers' representatives from Romania, always men, shaped policy but especially spoke out about the obstacles to labour organizing in the country. By participating in ILO fora, delegates from Romania gained informal access to key actors and information they could use when strategising at home (Mirescu Ion 1933–1969, 588).

One the national level, CGM trade unionists were often as much pacifiers, diffusing workers' discontent, as they were representatives of their interests. The CGM was committed to legalistic, procedural trade unionism. For instance, the Confederation welcomed the 1927 modernization of laws on collective bargaining even as it decried the general delay in the actual implementation of labour laws, particularly those relating to ratified ILO Conventions (CGM 1931, 29). However, as Ralph Darlington points out for the British case before the First World War, the development of complex bargaining mechanisms, decodable by trained and "responsible" officials reluctant to strike, brought unions closer to government interests and increased the distance between unions and (especially) unskilled workers (Darlington 2023, 18–21). In a 1924 telegram, communist trade unionists from Romania complained that social democratic trade unionists speaking at the 1924 ILC did not represent revolutionary unions and were only present in Geneva on account of their "friendship" with the Romanian government (Radu 2012, 162).

In the wider European context of the 1920s and 1930s, small but growing numbers of women labour activists from social democratic unions were playing similarly complex, scale-dependent roles as their male comrades. The period saw the emergence of a thin layer of ILO and IFTU women experts on gendered labour issues, who had been drawn from the ranks of trade union educators and organizers from Central and Western Europe (Scheiwe and Artner 2018; Zimmermann 2021). While fully committed to gender justice, some labour activists-turned-international-experts nevertheless fell in line with the gendered labour politics of their national organizations. For instance, Jeanne Chevenard (1876–1944), from the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), supported women's access to the professions and promoted wage equality for women and men in France and in the (international) IFTU Women's Committee. Yet in the mid-1930s, she repeatedly acquiesced to the CGT's collective bargaining agreements, which enshrined gendered wages – lower for women (Zimmermann 2021, 48). In doing so, she contributed to "co-producing unequal pay" for women workers despite her open commitment to them (Zimmermann 2021, 45–46).

Integration in expert and activist labour networks posed challenges for women from Eastern European countries. Poorer labour movements in the region trained fewer cadres and produced less independent research than their counterparts elsewhere. Arguably, unless they came from the lands of the former Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, working-class women in the region were unlikely to speak German or any other "international" language. In the 1930s, women in the Social Democratic Party and middle-class women experts from Romania were increasingly linked to women from the Labour and Socialist International and those who worked at the ILO (Botez [1937] 2006; Ghiț 2021). But Bucharest-based CGM trade union women do not seem to have been part of these networks. As shown here, their politics tended to be local and, at most, national.

Perhaps more than activists with international networks, women labour activists in Romania were more strongly dependent on local and national goodwill and on local level actors other than the workers they represented.

The stability of the Belvedere factory was essential for state revenues and for managing the Romanian kingdom's image abroad. Founded in 1864, the Belvedere Tobacco Manufactory produced cut tobacco packages and hand-rolled thin cigars (*țigări de foi*) and cigarettes in a dedicated building starting in 1888. The Belvedere was controlled by the *Regie* (Directorate) of State Monopolies (RMS), which was itself subordinate to the Ministry of Finances; indeed, the press often referred to the Belvedere factory as "the Regie." It employed around 2,000 workers, mostly women (Duțu and Duțu 2000, 40–43). In state-socialist historiography, Belvedere appears as an important site of women's labour activism starting in the early 1900s (e.g. Marian 1965). In a volume on the General Strike in late October 1920, the women workers from Belvedere are mentioned as key revolutionary participants in the events. The volume records the layoff of five hundred women, multiple evictions from company housing, and the military trials of strike leaders (Goldberger 1970, 150, 346). In 1924, when ILO president Albert Thomas visited Romania, he was taken on an official tour of the factory so he could witness the "order that reigns in this state enterprise"—the only tour of an enterprise Thomas took during his stay in the country (Universul 1924a). From 1929 on, the Belvedere and other tobacco manufactories in Romania were controlled by the Autonomous House of the Monopolies (CAM); all profits were directed towards the payment of a sovereign loan (Enciclopedia României 1938, 630).

The state-owned tobacco industry, and especially the flagship Belvedere factory in Bucharest, were at the centre of CGM unionization efforts from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. Arguably, this focus was because a state employer could more easily be made to live up to its own legal commitments. At the same time, state authorities may have preferred social democratic CGM organizing to defuse women workers' communist or radical left sympathies. After all, the factory's workforce had been linked to the local socialist movement since 1906 (România Muncitoare 1906; Socialismul 1920).

Paraschiva B. Ion was one of the main trade union workers' representatives at Belvedere throughout the interwar period. She became the most nationally prominent woman CGM trade unionist, with an activist career that spanned from the mid-1920s to the early 1940s. However, she has so far been missing from both the state-socialist and the post-socialist historiography of labour in Romania. Ion's ambition and her ability to navigate changing political circumstances while engaging in labour activism in interwar Romania might explain, in part, her neglect in post-1945 historical research by researchers and erstwhile participants alike.

In 1944, Paraschiva B. Ion was denounced as an "axe handle" (*"coadă de topor"*), a collaborator with management, by communist workers at Belvedere (Scînteia 1944). Subsequently, a 1955 booklet on labour struggles at the Regie neither mentions P. B. Ion nor discusses the factory trade unions she led (Teodorescu 1955). In the three volumes of astonishingly detailed memoirs and supporting documents recorded and transcribed in 1968 by the "Collective for Memoirs and Memories" of the Institute for Historical Studies of the Romanian Communist Party, Ion Mirescu, the interwar Secretary of the General Confederation of Labour (CGM) and social democratic MP, mentions P. B. Ion's name only once – as a co-speaker

at a 1931 protest meeting against the government's economic policies (Mirescu Ion, 1933–1969, 519). This oversight seems intentional given that the two had shared the podium on many occasions before the Second World War, as press sources attest.

An almost illegible, damaged document microfilmed from a file of the court martial trials of the 1920 strike leaders provides one clue for the reason there is such silence surrounding P. B. Ion during the state-socialist period: she was proposed (but eventually, not heard) as a witness for the prosecution in the trial of one of the leaders of what the existing historiography considered a “red” (revolutionary) strike (Proces Verbal 1921). From the 1930s to 1941, Ion and her trade union colleague Sultana Călin are recorded as representing workers during nationwide “cultural propaganda” activities organized in other tobacco factories across Romania that had begun in 1927. They were led by a priest tasked and subsidized by the management to create or run paternalistic institutions (a neighbourhood church, the management of the factory creche) and plan cultural events (Șarpe 2018, 135–147; Curentul 1932; Universul 1941). Additionally, P. B. Ion may have been perceived by colleagues as an enthusiastic participant in extremely harsh labour control practices, especially if she helped enforce the militarization of Belvedere in February 1941 (Săvoaia 2022, 188). Perceived acts of treason and complicity might further account for P. B. Ion's invisibility in post-1945 published accounts discussing workers' memories of Belvedere (Moraru 1976; Teodorescu 1955).

At this point it is impossible to know whether Ion's name was obscured in state-socialist memory because she was considered a traitor or because she was seen as someone who collaborated eagerly with fascist or fascist-allied management, going above and beyond the attitude of accommodation to the Hitler-allied Marshal Antonescu regime adopted by some other reformist trade unionists between 1941 and 1942 (Săvoaia 2022, 189; Radu 2012, 228). Notably, the above-mentioned Jeanne Chevenard was recruited into the administration of Vichy France because she had enthusiastically led anticommunist purges in the CGT; considered a main collaborationist figure in Lyon, Chevenard was killed by the French Resistance in June 1944 (Moissonnier and Davranche 2022). In P. B. Ion's case, evidence about her exact wartime activities is limited; a similar depth of collaboration can neither be ruled out nor implied based on the sources available.

Information about Paraschiva B. Ion and labour activism at Belvedere included in this article comes from archived trade union publications and police records, oral history interviews with trade unionist and social democratic MP Ion Mirescu, and from recently digitized newspaper articles. Each of these types of sources has major limitations. Among others, the archived documents of the UWMTR consist of only a handful of files, including a microfilmed issue of the *Muncitorul RMS* gazette – briefly printed by the union – in which Paraschiva B. Ion is mis-named as the masculine Paraschiv B. Ion (*Muncitorul RMS* 1929). Detailed oral histories of leading (especially male) interwar labour activists collected by Romanian historians starting in the 1950s include little information about women other than partners and relatives. As feminist historians have pointed out, leading male activists – the preferred interlocutors for most social movement history projects until recently – tended to misremember women comrades or failed to mention them at all in oral histories (see Guglielmo 2010, 134). This omission seems to be the case in Mirescu's interview as well. Finally,

newspaper articles, a type of source I draw on extensively for this article, are intrinsically unreliable sources as they are products of a “vast, complex machinery of literary production and layered social networks” (Vella 2008, 218).

The quickly expanding availability of digitalized collections of Eastern European newspapers are enabling research into hitherto obscured topics. Using the keyword search (especially proper nouns), it is increasingly possible to retrieve articles and stray mentions of a specific person across a wide array of publications along the political spectrum. The depth of this digital landscape opens new possibilities for gathering information about people and institutions who were mentioned in newspaper articles but rarely, if ever, made the front page or were the main subjects of articles, i.e. information that might escape the attention of even the most systematic non-digital research into periodicals. Yet digitized newspaper collections can create a false sense of completeness and a loss of context, with keyword search results best used as starting points for “where to look” further rather than as the main method for constructing a corpus of sources (Ehrmann, Bunout, and Clavert 2023). In seeking to reconstruct P. B. Ion’s activities, I draw on digitized newspapers as key sources and as starting points for archival research from scattered fonds. The resulting combination of unreliable but diverse and polyphonic sources enable the construction of a preliminary portrait, one that might be starkly revised as more sources become available and especially once the archives of the Autonomous House of the Monopolies and the Belvedere factory become accessible to researchers.

Despite these source- and interpretation-related challenges, P. B. Ion’s trade union career helps illuminate how women labour activists were included (or included themselves) in the reformist, procedural, institution-building trade unionism of the CGM in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Romania. Furthermore, Ion’s career reveals how trade unionists shaped interwar labour governance in the state-owned tobacco sector as mediators between workers and management.

In the next section of this article, I discuss P. B. Ion’s transition from the 1924 workers’ delegate in labour arbitrations to a key member of the CGM-affiliated Belvedere factory trade union in 1928–1931. I argue that through her labour activism, Ion helped to construct a national-level framework for labour governance in which social democratic trade unions could do more sophisticated trade union work even if only minimal concessions were demanded and/or obtained. I place her evolution in the context of a growing number of adherents to the CGM and an increased interest in bringing women workers into trade unions, but also in a setting in which women workers were marginalized or (mis)represented as politically unsophisticated. I show how, as a member of the executive committee of the Union of Workers in Matches and Tobacco Factories in Romania, P. B. Ion co-coordinated a national-level campaign against the 1931 so-called “sacrifice curbs”—drastic wage and public spending cuts – and lobbied politicians for concessions for workers in various state enterprises. Ion considered the campaign and concessions achieved as both a practical and symbolic victory for women unionized within the CGM. Then, in the third section, I discuss P. B. Ion’s identifiable activities in the years after the campaign against the 1931 “sacrifice curbs,” charting her growing involvement in labour activism as a specialist on labour issues and a shop floor organizer in the context of deteriorating labour conditions, increasing communist agitation around the factory, and a mid-1930 slander campaign linked to the rivalry between Ion’s trade union and a new union initiated by her former ally at the Belvedere factory.

A woman trade unionist rising through the ranks

Paraschiva B. Ion spent over a decade of her lifelong employment at Belvedere as a leading member of a CGM-affiliated trade union. In this position, especially between the late 1920s and early 1930s, she helped define what successful reformist trade unionism looked like in a state industry in Romania. In the process, she sought to forge a different symbolic position for women tobacco workers within the local labour movement. At the same time, together with other social democratic trade unionists, she worked to associate the Belvedere factory with legalistic, procedure-oriented trade unionism.

Ion was first an executive committee member (in 1929) and became the president (by 1935) of the Union of Workers from Match and Tobacco Factories in Romania (UWMTR), the trade union for the industry. The UWMTR was a sectoral union federation, itself part of the General Confederation of Labour (CGM). In the late 1920s, the CGM was a labour body bruised by both its ongoing clashes with the communists since the 1920 strike as well as by the surveillance of the political police. When the UWMTR was created, the confederation was in the process of reconstructing itself, emboldened by the small but encouraging inroads made by social democrats in the 1927 parliamentary elections (Radu 2012, 166–195). As discussed earlier, Ion was a workers' representative in the mandatory arbitration process that in 1920 replaced the right to strike in state enterprises (Monitorul Oficial 1921).

Labour conditions in the tobacco and matches sector had steadily declined since the defeat of the 1920 strike. At Belvedere, men with skilled jobs and supervisory positions were frequently violent towards their women colleagues and/or subordinates. In 1928, a centre-left newspaper reported how, at the Bucharest tobacco factory, a "machine supervisor had beaten a pregnant woman so badly that the factory doctors prescribed her a twenty-five-day leave. The kind-hearted factory director laid off the woman for good. The unfortunate [woman] miscarried" (Dimineața 1928). This report shows how deeply gendered shop-floor violence was. Although physical violence was not uncommon on interwar shopfloors elsewhere (see Koenker 1995), the intensity of the violence coupled with the lack of repercussions for the aggressor at the Belvedere factory give pause. Further, the pace of work intensified in the 1930s as well, and with that came greater shop-floor level pressure on workers. In 1932, the Filaret match factory – a monopoly like tobacco, its sister industry – was undergoing a brutal rationalization process (Dimineața 1932b) after it had been concessioned off to the Swedish trust Svenska Tandsticks AB Group in exchange for a large state loan (see Partnoy 2010). Like match production, tobacco production was embroiled in the repayment of sovereign debt by the Romanian government. The Autonomous House of the Monopolies (CAM) became the entity that issued bonds, negotiated external market loans, and repaid loans from House proceeds on behalf of the Romanian government (Enciclopedia României 1938, 1:630).

Like most women workers in the factory, Ion would have joined Belvedere around the age of 18 (possibly earlier) as an unskilled, piece-rate worker. As mentioned earlier, Ion was linked to the trial of the leaders of the 1920 Belvedere strike. However, she remained sufficiently popular to be repeatedly elected a workers' delegate in negotiations and a factory trade union leader, especially when social democratic unions were organizing the factory. She would have been in her late thirties or early forties during

her most active period as a trade unionist if we consider that she was at least 25 years old, as legally required, when first serving as a workers' delegate in arbitration proceedings in 1924 and had not yet retired in 1944. A short report about a blackmail attempt by a journalist reveals that by 1933, Ion, like many of her factory colleagues, lived in company housing in the Grant-Belvedere neighbourhood that surrounded the factory (Curentul 1933a). By that point, she was reportedly a "supervisor," a (semi-)skilled position that was paid somewhat better than the typical piece-rate worker in RMS factories (Adevărul 1933).

In her capacity as workers' delegate in 1924, P. B. Ion signed an arbitration agreement to settle a labour conflict between the Ministry of Finance (head of the Regie Belvedere factory) and Belvedere workers (Universul 1924b). As a result of the arbitration, which was presided over by the Ilfov County Court of Justice, both skilled and piece-rate workers received a 25 percent salary increase along with guarantees concerning paid holiday leave, medical leave, and maternity leave. However, the piece-rate system, seemingly a point of contention, remained in place (Buletinul Muncii 1924). Ilie Șerbănescu, the confirmed head of a "national" ("yellow") trade union of skilled workers and clerks, is also listed as a workers' representative for this 1924 arbitration. Although Ion's trade union colour is not clear at this point, her subsequent affiliations suggest that she was already connected to social democratic organizations supporting Belvedere workers.

Between 1924 and 1928, coverage of the Belvedere factory in newspapers consulted for this article declined sharply. The factory and P. B. Ion's name reappear in press reports in 1928. This was the same year the previously "yellow" trade union at RMS Belvedere asked to be reaffiliated to the CGM. The reaffiliation meeting was described by CGM Secretary General Mirescu as boisterous for the almost two thousand workers present, but especially for the around 130 workers who had refused to join the yellow trade union (Mirescu Ion 1933–1969, 388).

By 1929, Ion was elected one of the secretaries of the UWMTR. The UWMTR was a branch trade union for all employees of tobacco and match factories; it was affiliated to the CGM, with ties to the small Social Democratic Party in Romania. Whereas Ion's leadership and visibility as a woman trade unionist was unusual, the social democratic drive to unionize women tobacco workers at the time was not. As discussed elsewhere, social democratic trade unionists had begun organizing women in the Cluj Tobacco Manufactory already in 1928 (Ghiț 2020), albeit in the context of less intense trade union competition in that factory.

Appearing alongside social democratic leaders, Ion spoke as the representative of workers employed by the Regie of State Monopolies at the 1929 May Day rally in Bucharest. She argued that all women (around two thousand workers) at the Regie tobacco factory were trade union members affiliated with the General Confederation of Labour and represented in Parliament by several social democratic MPs. "This is how we women from the Regie went about it, and we did well," she declaimed. "Through this, we gave you men an example. We are ahead of you! Follow our same path!" (Dimineața 1929). This early statement, which she made as a nationally visible trade unionist in a confederation decidedly dominated by men, suggests that Paraschiva B. Ion displayed a certain willingness to challenge hierarchies – or was perceived to by certain journalists. By 1931, the union's headquarters were housed in the factory where Ion and an increasingly vocal male colleague named Eftimie Patraulea worked.

Ion's claims that Belvedere women had taken the lead in unionizing workers in Romania can be considered an attempt to represent women positively and to associate them with "responsible" trade unionism. In contrast, male colleagues and sometimes other trade unionists represented women tobacco workers as politically volatile. In August 1922, a worker wrote to a major Bucharest newspaper to protest long working hours, arguing that women employees made angry by the overwhelming heat and overwork were liable to declare "a general strike" just as they had done in 1920 (Lupta 1922). Writing as a (self-appointed) workers' representative, he called for shorter working hours, warning that if these demands were not met, a new strike could not be held at bay. Ion's 1929 May Day portrayal of women as advanced workers challenged the association of Belvedere workers with volatility, but it also distanced them from their history of labour radicalism.

P. B. Ion's work in the UWMTR was quickly scaled up, moving from shop-floor to national-level organizing and to government-oriented advocacy. In 1930, Ion and other representatives of the RMS Belvedere Workers' Union made a crucial and timely intervention, challenging the inclusion of tobacco workers' salaries in the "sacrifice curbs"—major wage cuts applied to all public sector employees. That same year, the government planned to cut wages by 10 to 20 percent (Bucur 2011).

On 1 March 1930, while the curbs were being discussed by the Council of Ministers, a "large delegation of working men and working women from Regie Belvedere arrived, composed of Mrs. Paraschiva B. Ion, Tinca Badea, Sultana Călin, Mr. Eftimie Patraulea, and others, headed by Mr. Ion Mirescu, secretary of the General Labour Confederation" (Dimineața 1931a). Whereas one newspaper report portrays the government as attentive to the situation of CAM workers, the "ample discussions" about the status of CAM workers were the result of a month of pressure and organizing by the UWMTR. On 31 January 1930, the executive committee of the UWMTR examined a memorandum on sacrifice curbs freshly issued by the CAM and decided to send a circular to all affiliated organizations "with the necessary guidance to protest as energetically as possible against these [CAM] intentions" (Dimineața 1931b).

At the headquarters of the Council of Ministers, the delegation requested that the sacrifice curb not be applied to employees of tobacco factories and salt mines. The state undersecretary who received the delegation communicated that only the base (guaranteed) salary of piece-rate workers could be cut according to sacrifice curb demands, and the cut would be applied only to base wages higher than 3,000 lei. The undersecretary explained that since such high salaries were rarely achieved by workers at the CAM, 85 percent of the workers in CAM enterprises would not be affected by the wage cuts (Dimineața 1931a). This was a rather small assurance.

For her part, Paraschiva B. Ion considered the concession made by the government to CAM workers during sacrifice curb discussions in 1931 a victory for the trade union she represented. She also saw it as a victory for the type of reformist trade union organizing she supported. In a speech she gave at a meeting for the social democratic party's unionization drive, which took place in the hall of the Railway Trade Union (CFR), Ion reportedly spoke about the "sacrifices made by the railway workers because of lack of solidarity. They had the sacrifice curb applied, there were layoffs, etc" (Universul 1931). By "lack of solidarity," Ion meant the tensions between reformist and revolutionary organizing in the Romanian railways. In CFR workshops, the communist-influenced General

Council of the Unitary Trade Unions (CGSU) still had many sympathizers (Kovács 1977, 11, 16).

By arguing that the cuts were applied because of the lack of solidarity, Ion conveyed the same message as she had during the May Day gathering two years before. She was claiming that women workers from a union willing to work within the existing legal framework, such as it was, set an example for men workers. In reality, the railway men enjoyed higher wages and more benefits that could be legally cut in the sacrifice curbs. That organizing skill had been necessary to protect women workers' much lower wages from the cuts is clear; however, what is less clear is whether the CFR could have negotiated a better outcome for their better-paid industry. White-collar workers with similar earnings were seeing their wages cut, and unlike tobacco manufacturing, the railway industry was less important for debt repayment.

In a 1933 action organized by the communists, the railway men occupied their workshops. This was a reaction to a second, even more stringent round of "sacrifice curbs." The soldiers surrounding the workshop shot at the workers, killing 20. Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, the communist leader of the strike, spent the next decade in prison, later becoming head of state in the Popular Republic of Romania.

Trade union practices and contested expertise in the context of trade union competition

Knowledge production and a self-fashioned, tobacco-industry-specific kind of expertise were increasingly important elements of Paraschiva B. Ion's repertoires as a labour activist on the national level. Yet in the 1930s, as the economic situation worsened in Romania, Ion found herself increasingly on the defensive about the effectiveness of CGM practices specifically, and moderate trade unionism in general. This was because social democratic trade unions could no longer obtain even minimal concessions.

Several months after her 1931 Grivița union hall speech, P. B. Ion was part of a two-person delegation the UWMTR appointed to investigate labour conditions at the Regie of State Monopolies tobacco factory in Chișinău, a city located in what was then north-eastern Romania (currently the capital of the Republic of Moldova). The two UWMTR delegates drew up a report about the "horrifying" labour conditions in the factory, where workers were required to produce as much as their colleagues in Bucharest or Cluj – without the same machinery and the trademark protective white coats and kerchiefs tobacco workers wore in the other tobacco manufactories in Romania – yet for much lower pay (Adevărul 1931). A lengthy memorandum based on the report was forwarded to the CAM.

Ion's work as an organizer and, increasingly, an expert on labour issues in the tobacco industry made her a suitable candidate for the Labour Chambers (Adevărul 1933), consultative bodies on labour issues in interwar Romania. In April 1933, after almost a decade of failed attempts, the existence of the Labour Chambers was finally authorized (Țuțuianu 2012; Săvoia 2022, 150–166). In 1933, Ion was one of the 27 candidates on the national list proposed by the social democratic trade unions affiliated to the General Confederation of Labour. She was the only woman on the CGM list and was one of only a handful of women candidates on the lists of the other professional organizations eligible to propose candidates. In the election, the social democratic list won 16 mandates,

a result that qualified Ion (fifteenth on the list) for a seat in the Bucharest Chamber dedicated to industrial workers' interests (Curentul 1933b).

Whereas in the 1930s Ion seems to have been increasingly trusted within the CGM, her trade union work met with increasing opposition from colleagues at Belvedere during the same period. As the trade union president at Belvedere, Ion steered the preparatory work and negotiations for collective labour contracts and the annual "price pact" beginning in 1929. The role required meeting with and persuading colleagues about the kinds of demands to submit to management, for instance when it came to the so-called "price book" (*caietul de preturi*) – the rates that would be paid to piece-rate workers for various tasks (Dimineața 1930). She repeatedly advocated for "responsible" demands.

As a union leader, Ion also spent a good deal of time reminding and trying to convince colleagues of the value of union membership. In 1931, MP Mirescu, Ion's frequent collaborator, attended one of the Belvedere workers' meetings and advised those present "to carry on with their claims peacefully, and once their claims were won to not cease being part of the union" (Cuvântul 1931). Trade unions, Mirescu argued, had both a material and moral purpose. During the same meeting, Ion herself talked to colleagues about the low-quality of medical care in the factory as well as the brutality of several foremen. But she shared Mirescu's moderate, reformist views. At the time, she was probably struggling with conveying the utility of a reformist, so-called "slow train," union in a factory and city where crises abounded.

During a meeting with colleagues in September 1932, Ion argued that "In the Bucharest factory, it was not as bad as in other factories in the country; still it is worse than in the past – 'a worsening of the regime, the lack of consumption [of tobacco products] gets worse every day, but the salaries are nevertheless not so low" (Universul 1932). Ion claimed the comparatively better situation was because of the care shown by the trade union committee when drawing up the contract and the price book.

By February 1932, however, the situation had worsened considerably at RMS Belvedere as well. By that point, it was increasingly difficult to negotiate collective labour contracts. On 22 February 1932, 2,100 workers gathered in the meeting room of the trade union to protest the recent decision by the management of the CAM to include the salaries of Regie employees in the second, harsher, "sacrifice curbs." This time, it does not seem to have been possible to agitate against the curb through the CGM.

In a union meeting held at Belvedere on a bitterly cold winter's day, P. B. Ion reported that discussions with management had been stalled for two months; the director intended to cut salaries by 15 percent and apply other taxes, which would result in a 30 to 40 percent decrease in net wages; and that money provided by management to subsidize the meals of 250 workers could be better used to help sick workers. Finally, notably, she condemned the unwillingness of the head of the factory's storehouse to allow to work several workers who had been arrested for spreading communist manifestos and then released due lack of evidence. Even in this demoralizing meeting, her speech still was met with "unanimous applause" (Dimineața 1932a).

By this point, as the large number of participants in trade union meetings show, workers at Belvedere were very interested in what their trade union did and what their trade union representatives had to say. Certainly, the situation changed often enough that workers felt compelled to attend meetings to stay informed. But as one mention in a report about such a meeting suggests, trade union gatherings were dialogic, involving

more than Ion's grave announcements about new and worse changes to the labour regime. Thus, a report on a 1932 meeting explained that "pensioner Maria S. associates herself with what Mrs. Paraschiva B. Ion had just said" (Universul 1932).

Meanwhile, communist publications and ideas continued to circulate among the workers at Belvedere despite a ban on communist agitation that had been in force since 1924. In 1932, clandestine manifestos were spread several times in the factory yard, but not by people employed there (Siguranța Section IV - Notă 1932). That same year, Siguranța officers (the interwar political police) monitoring the Belvedere factory underscored to their superiors that the trade union and trade unionists Paraschiva B. Ion and Sultana Călin had nothing to do with communist organizations and were "limiting themselves to economic claims" (Referat 1932).

In 1929, a clandestine newspaper called *Femeea Muncitoare* (Working Woman) was circulated among Belvedere workers. The newspaper had been put together once, possibly twice, by an energetic woman activist of the Unitary Trade Unions (Sindicatelor Unitare, otherwise CGSU). The (first) issue contained an intriguing piece about a meeting in a small house in "commune B. that surrounds a tobacco factory"—most likely a veiled reference to the Belvedere neighbourhood (*Femeea Muncitoare* 1929). The piece is written from the perspective of a woman activist. It describes the atmosphere and discussions in a meeting that preceded a speech to be given by the unnamed young and energetic communist activist. In the large but stuffy home where the meeting took place – with "beds and colourful pillows, a stove, a table with the well-known crochet cover" but also with pictures of Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Karl Liebknecht displayed "instead of knick knacks and tasteless seashells"—older workers welcomed the young communist activist who was to speak. Workers introduced the activist to "our Maria," a woman whose speeches, the workers claimed, used to make them cry, "once quite heavily." Maria herself claimed to no longer be able to speak loudly due to her lung condition. But the veteran activist described how salaries of 500 to 600 lei in the cigarette factory were, by then, barely enough for food; how some cigarette makers had begun making cigarettes at home to earn extra money; and how that type of home-based work still paid better than cigarette-making in the factory because there were fewer fines.

This *Femeea Muncitoare* article might be entirely fictional, or it might be only slightly embellished for propaganda purposes. Or, in fact, it might be quite true to events but written in a way that protected everyone involved from legal repercussions. If not a piece of fiction, the piece may be read as a rare, late 1920s portrait of a 1920 Belvedere strike leader (possibly a woman named Maria Popa). It might also be understood as a quiet celebration of the kind of firebrand women's activism that characterized the 1920 strike. Compared to either an existing or even to a fully invented or somewhat idealized person – "our Maria"—presented in the *Femeea Muncitoare* article, Paraschiva B. Ion in the late 1920s and early 1930s appears as a somewhat stodgy orator and activist.

In the mid-1930s, Ion and the effectiveness of the trade union she led were increasingly and directly questioned. Ion became the target of a slanderous press campaign organized by her former trade union colleague in the factory Eftimie Patraulea. Like Ion, Patraulea had been one of the key members of the UWMTR in 1931. Now, in 1934, he was beginning to agitate for the creation of a competing union. This union would eventually call itself "The Union of Craftsmen, Working Men, Working Women, and Pensioners from Belvedere" (UCWP-Belvedere) (Curentul 1935a). In their meetings, the social democratic branch union

UWMTR referred to this new Belvedere union as a “yellow nationalist” union. This term was applied even though in its press releases, the UCWP-Belvedere tended to stress its attachment to law and order but not to patriotism – unlike the yellow trade union functioning at Belvedere in the mid-1920s that had called itself “national” (GPDB 1935).

In a series of newspaper articles that appeared in the right-wing daily *Curentul* (see Clark 2015, 159–163) between 1935 and 1936, Ion and the Belvedere director Ion Râpeanu, an alleged protector of Ion, were repeatedly accused of incompetence. Ion was accused of nepotism, embezzlement, fraud, trading influence, and of having betrayed the interests of her colleagues. But the insults became increasingly gendered. In the first article, Ion was termed an “amateur worker” (*muncitoarea-amatoare*), an “undignified agitator who betrays her colleagues,” and a “professional agitator” (Curentul 1935c). In a second article published that same month, she was called Mr. Râpeanu’s “fatal inspirer” (a derogatory play on *femme fatale*) or his “muse” (Curentul 1935d). By contrast, Mr. Patraulea was praised in these and similar articles for his upstanding character and the union’s utmost commitment to legal and orderly activism. For his part, director Râpeanu sent a press release to multiple papers in which he argued that management had nothing to do with the press campaign, and that the spate of recent press articles was linked to “the competition between the two workers’ trade unions at Belvedere, that are, in this way, trying to win new members” (Curentul 1935a). The two trade unions in question were the UWMTR- and CGM-affiliated trade union led by P. B. Ion, whereas the competing union was the newly established UCWP-Belvedere led by Patraulea.

The clash between the two trade unions was taking place within a European and domestic political landscape that had shifted decidedly to the right, and one in which tobacco workers had fewer and fewer avenues for negotiating with factory management. Still, the 1920 general strike and its utopian left-wing threat continued to cast a long shadow over the unions’ conflict even 15 years later. Certainly, the main point of contention between what the press called “Trade Union No. 1” (affiliated to the UWMTR) and “Trade Union No. 2” (UCWP-Belvedere) was whether tobacco workers ought to try to have the 1934 collective labour contract extended to prevent the further loss of rights (P. B. Ion and her union’s stance), or whether they were to proceed with negotiating a new collective contract (Patraulea and his union’s stance). But the second most contentious issue was that of CAM pensions and pensioners, in particular the status of pensions of the 1920 strikers who had been dismissed.

In 1935, when workers were switched from the CAM’s dedicated pension fund to the general state-budget Insurance House, Ion filed a formal complaint against a clerk named Marinescu. She accused Marinescu of having forged pension certificates to show inaccurately high contributions for certain persons. *Curentul* retaliated by arguing that Ion had launched a formal inquiry against an upstanding clerk simply because Marinescu had strongly opposed the granting of pension rights to women involved in the 1920 general strike (Curentul 1935b). The paper accused *her* of having tried to sneak in among legitimate pensioners the women strikers from 1920. It is unclear whether Ion did indeed seek to help those workers excluded in 1920 regain their pension rights or whether this remained merely an accusation.

In February 1935, P. B. Ion reached a new level in her career as a trade unionist. In a general extraordinary congress of the UWMTR branch trade union, she was appointed president of this national organization (Dimineăța 1935). But in her own

factory in the spring of that year, P.B. Ion's union lost majority, with many workers switching to Patraulea's union (Curentul 1935c). In 1936, P. B. Ion was the trade union leader of the less popular union. In September and October 1936, Ion criticized newly introduced regulations for workers at Belvedere and then in CAM establishments throughout the country (Dimineața 1936a, 1936b). Ion pleaded to have the regulation applied only starting in 1937, as the 1936 collective labour contract (technically) still applied. Members of "Trade Union No. 2" considered such stances evidence of P. B. Ion's willingness to compromise with management (Curentul 1936). For her part, P. B. Ion argued that the new rules were the result of the "exaggerated demands" of Trade Union No. 2, which had provoked the CAM's ruthless reaction (Dimineața 1936a). After a failed arbitration procedure in which Ion was not involved, throughout 1937, CAM workers in Bucharest and the rest of the country were governed neither by collective contracts nor the new regulation (Lumea Nouă 1938b). The new rules, considered by social democratic newspapers as a dangerous suspension of labour law (because they permitted a 60-hour work week, made it very easy to dismiss workers, and suspended labour contracts), were applied from 1938 onwards (Lumea Nouă 1937, 1938a).

Paraschiva B. Ion remained in the factory after her union lost most of its members; her activities between 1937 and 1940 could not be established at this point. In 1941, she was again speaking on behalf of men and women workers at Belvedere during a "cultural sitting" organized by a certain priest called Șerpe (Universul 1941). In 1942, she was promoted to the position of production head in the factory, which gave her a leadership function in the factory. In October 1944, when the reconstructed CGM came under the direction of the communists, Paraschiva B. Ion was branded an "axe handle," i.e. a tool of management, in the main communist paper. Workers, *Scinteia* reported, had called for her to be dismissed (Scinteia 1944). P. B. Ion's existence after the war is not revealed in any of the available sources.

Conclusion

This article has focused on reconstructing the biography of Paraschiva B. Ion, a trade union activist for the Union of Workers from Tobacco and Match Factories at the CAM Belvedere factory in Romania and in Labour Chambers. I argued that her trade union career illustrates how social democratic labour activism contributed to the co-construction of a fragile labour governance framework in which moderate claims could be advanced but radical claims were kept at bay in a domestic context in which even modest gains could be easily overturned. I showed that P. B. Ion's activism occurred in the long shadow of the 1920 General Strike and in the broader context of competition between various kinds of trade unions and the professionalization of trade union work in Europe. The fact-finding mission to Chișinău in which P. B. Ion participated as the delegate of the UWMTR exemplifies the avenues for professionalization available to trade union women who could not engage in extensive international travel. At the same time, the negative press campaign that targeted Ion between 1934 and 1935 illustrates the challenging environment in which she operated as a woman in a male-dominated political environment.

P. B. Ion's involvement in repressive actions and in labour control practices deserves a fuller account, one that fully contextualizes her political and personal alignments and collaborations. However, this biography of P. B. Ion offers an entry point for understanding the various repertoires of action woman trade unionists engaged in at the factory and the national levels in interwar Romania. I showed how, until 1936, P. B. Ion negotiated the setting of piece rates in arbitrations and collective agreements, and how she coaxed and hounded colleagues to accept the results of negotiations, persuaded them to remain loyal to their CGM union, and helped advance labour discipline, even by participating in cultural propaganda activities. Within the national branch union UWMTR and as a member of the Bucharest Chamber of Labour, P. B. Ion sought to decrease the negative effects of damaging labour and welfare policies on tobacco workers and used her expertise to shape the pension scheme of the CAM. In addition to revealing Ion's contributions to the development of labour governance and organizing and labour control practices in the Eastern and Central European context, this article also serves as a critical exploration of newer and older types of sources available to labour historians in post-socialist spaces.

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OPEN ACCESS



“The rulers are the causes of the war [...] They are the reason there is no bread in our town:” women’s food riots in the Hungarian countryside, 1917–1918

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ABSTRACT



The essay discusses women’s food riots in the Hungarian territories of the Habsburg Empire during World War I between spring 1917 and summer 1918. While the existing literature has primarily focused on urban contexts in a variety of European countries, this essay analyses the Hungarian countryside with a focus on small towns and villages where and around which inhabitants were mostly agrarian workers. The agrarian population was especially hard hit by the increasingly coercive wartime economic measures, and especially by the high cost of living and the break-down in food supply. Using archival sources and news reports, the article approaches food riots as a form of labour activism signalling (agrarian) women’s efforts to improve their desperate living and working conditions and, thus, as a local political response to the international and national political and economic crisis that unfolded in the Dual Monarchy shortly before its disintegration during the second phase of the Great War. It pays particular attention to participants’ social/ethnic background, agendas, and repertoires of action, including the antisemitic character of some of the riots and authorities’ reaction to these uprisings. The essay, thus, also examines the interactions between members of local-level (un)organized activism and regional and national governance.

KEYWORDS

agrarian women’s food riots; Hungary; First World War; antisemitism

In a short report to the lord lieutenant of Pest County dated 19 July 1918, the notary of Lajosmizse, a small town in central Hungary, described the situation caused by poor wartime food supply in the following words:

The unprovisioned segment of the population of Lajosmizse has been without bread for over two weeks and has been besieging our office for flour and food every hour of the day. Today hunger has tortured the mothers of five to six children to such an extent that they created an actual revolution at the town hall and attacked the public notary’s office so heavily that he could leave his office for the midday break only with the support of the gendarme. Since the population of our town cannot further endure the hunger, we kindly ask you to arrange the immediate distribution of food tickets so that the unprovisioned part of the population could

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receive from the local representative of the [National] Office for Public Food Supply the portion of wheat that would be due on 30 September at once; otherwise, there is fear that the situation will escalate into an uprising or bloodshed within hours. (Report by the notary of Lajosmizse 1918)

The notary of Lajosmizse was alarmed by the openly expressed anger and violent protest regarding the unavailability of basic food items he daily faced from mothers who had been unable to provide for their children for several weeks. By the fourth year of the war, the country's population and especially working-class families with lesser means found it exceedingly difficult to make a living, even finding it challenging to purchase food. High inflation, the constantly increasing cost of living, families' lack of income due to the conscription of men into the army and low war relief payments, the uneven distribution of and limited access to food and other products of subsistence, and food tickets that failed to secure access to foodstuffs due to constant breaks in the supply chain were only some of the troubles people on the home front experienced (Bihari 2005, 2008a; Egry 2017). Fearing a likely riot and bloodshed, the notary demanded that higher authorities provide immediate food aid to families in need. While no further information is available concerning whether the women received the bread and flour in question, this occurrence signals that if they wanted to prevent an outbreak of violence, authorities had few other means to resolve such conflicts than to try to secure and distribute foodstuffs to the population. It also testifies to women's persistence and radical public action as they demanded that representatives of the state address their grievances.

Based on recent scholarship in feminist labour history and the history of women's grassroots activism, this essay addresses women's food riots that took place in the Hungarian countryside during World War One as a form of labour activism and, thus, as political in nature (Betti et al. 2022; Çağatay et al. forthcoming). Using an inclusive approach to labour activism, this article characterises the food riots that unfolded at the local level between spring 1917 and summer 1918, paying particular attention to the social and ethnic background of the mostly agrarian women participants, their agendas and repertoires of action, and state authorities' reactions to their demands.

This article tackles the interaction that took place between participants in local-level unorganised/spontaneous activism and regional and national structures of governance. Concerning this interaction, historian Veronika Helfert understands women's spontaneous bread riots in wartime Vienna as "ritualized practices," drawing attention to the performative aspect of citizenship in political collectives characterised by an unequal distribution of political rights (Helfert 2021, 92). This article argues that women's food riots in rural Hungary in the eastern half of the Habsburg Empire were political acts that demonstrated agrarian women's conscious action to draw authorities' attention to and increase the public's awareness of pressing conditions in their communities that were the consequences of the war and the government's mismanagement of the home front economy. It also shows that participants in the riots systematically identified local and national representatives of government institutions as responsible for the wartime public food supply and called on these politicians to take action to improve their (the rioters') situation. Through acts of violence and destruction, women threatened not only various authorities but also better-off members of society and the ruling elite,

whom they regarded as liable for their misery. These acts and activism included an important element that has barely been addressed in the existing scholarship, namely, antisemitism, which was expressed in the plundering of Jewish-owned stores for food, the destruction of both the food and the physical interior of shops, and in violent threats addressed to Jewish shop owners. Besides repressive measures, in numerous cases, women achieved partial success as some of their demands were met and they received immediate food aid. Peasant women's political action that was critical of wartime conditions points to their ability to shape their life circumstances.

The article analyses women's food riots in the Hungarian countryside with a focus on small towns and villages, where and around which the population mostly consisted of agrarian workers. In Hungary, two-thirds of the agrarian population were landless or small-holder peasants who made a living by working for better-off peasants or the owners of large estates. Regardless of the social strata to which they belonged, in this essay, the terms "peasants" or "agrarian workers" refer to all persons who carried out agrarian work to earn a livelihood. Relying on a close reading of state authorities' reports and the representation of women's food riots in the local and national press, this article analyses the following cases, which are randomly selected from the sources: A women's demonstration due to poor quality food held in Kecskemét on 15 May 1917; a riot over small daily food rations and bad quality bread in Mindszent on 20 May 1917 in which more than four hundred women participated; riots in the small towns and villages of Temes County (Timiș, Tamiš) due to the lack of and poor quality of flour that took place between May 29 and 6 June 1917; two women's riots driven by the demand to increase war relief payments and the daily ration of bread and flour in Hódmezővásárhely on January 18–19 and on 21 June 1918, respectively; large women's demonstrations due to the lack of lard in Kiskunfélegyháza between February 24th and 26th, 1918 in which four to five thousand people participated; a women's riot due to the lack of bread and flour in Lajosmizse on 19 July 1918; and the demonstration of two hundred women to protest the deterioration of the food supply held in Cegléd on 6 August 1918. Following a short, more general discussion of the existing scholarship on women's food riots in Europe and the situation of the agrarian population in Hungary during the First World War, this article first addresses representations of the social and ethnic background of the rioting women in rural Hungary. Subsequent sections explore demonstrators' agendas and repertoires of action, as well as how local authorities, in negotiation with regional and national-level officials, reacted to the demands of the protesting population.

Food riots and hunger strikes, among other forms of antiwar protest actions in which women took the lead, were widespread in Europe during World War One. Existing research on women's movements and (labour) activism related to the war has, to-date, concentrated primarily on urban contexts. It has described the changes in gender roles that accompanied both middle-class and working-class women's entrance into areas of wage labour previously dominated by men and its gendered consequences for the organisation of labour as well as workers' movements. Regarding women's wartime activism, gender historians have devoted considerable attention to the participation of middle-class and working-class women in national and international peace activism. In establishing the influence this activism had on wartime economic and social politics and the post-war political order, scholarship has also underlined the significance of food riots

and hunger strikes in which women publicly demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the scarcity of food and the state's inability to provide adequately for the population (Davis 2002; Dimitrova 2018; Heely 2004; Heumos 1999).

Research on Vienna has shown that women's hunger riots and demonstrations, a recurring phenomenon in the city since the summer of 1916, were seen as a potential threat to the stability of the home front even though they were presented as non-political by the authorities and the media (Helfert 2014, 2021). They highlighted the state's inability to satisfy the material needs of its population, which led to the undermining of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Heely 2004). This harmonizes with the sentiments in censored letters that reflected everyday people's – among them village inhabitants'—dissatisfaction with the Habsburg state due to the desperate wartime socio-economic conditions, especially those related to the scarcity of food and other basic supplies (Hanák 1988). Reports of women's demonstrations and food riots in localities in the eastern territories of the empire, such as the Czech and Slovakian lands, also warned about the possibility of unified demonstrations, strikes, and uncontrollable mass actions already in 1916 (Heumos 1999, 83).

Police and other state officials' reports about food riots and public dissatisfaction among the working classes due to the cost and lack of food in wartime Berlin pointed to the fact that as early as 1915, authorities were concerned with the economic war and Germany's possible defeat through economic means. Central to authorities' fears was the measurable discontent of the population with how the state managed prices and the food supply (Davis 2000, 2002). Similarly in Russia, the numerous subsistence riots that took place during the war and were led by and included mainly working-class women gained openly political dimensions by the second half of 1916. Rioters not only showed a lack of respect to authorities in general; they also turned against the war and the tsar. These events eventually contributed to the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. Wartime shortages had additional, specific meanings for members of the lower classes who largely came from rural milieus. Through bread riots, people expressed their "hostility to market forces that placed profit above the popular right to subsistence" (Engel 1997, 714). The working-class participants of food riots came from mixed backgrounds. Some were agrarian whereas others were factory workers (Dimitrova 2018; Engel 1997); further, as research concerning the situation in Sofia has shown, the riots mobilized women from different ethnic backgrounds, including Roma (Dimitrova 2018).

Whether addressing Western or Eastern European contexts, scholarship on hunger strikes and food riots during World War One has argued that in both their spontaneous and organised forms, these women's demonstrations need to be considered political in nature (Davis 2000, 2002; Dimitrova 2018; Engel 1997; Grayzel 2002; Helfert 2014, 2021; Heumos 1999). The dominant paradigm in Hungarian historiography concerning women's food riots on the other hand, however, conflicts with this interpretation. Labour historians writing between the 1950s and the 1980s adopted an approach that reflected the established vision of the history of the socialist and communist workers' movement which held that male-organised activism constituted labour activism. These scholars juxtaposed this male-dominated activism with women's actions, highlighting the spontaneous and "instinctive" nature of the latter. For example, historian Endre Gaál, the editor of a document collection on the history of the workers' movement in Csongrád

County published in 1969, created a section on women's food riots entitled "The Instinctive Revolts of the Relatives of the Conscripted Due to Wartime Deprivation" (Gaál 1969, 48). He used this categorization in a variety of his earlier publications on the subject as well (Gaál 1961, 1964). In his work on rural discontent in 1917 and the spring and summer of 1918 published in the 1980s, historian Ignác Romsics pointed out that riots mostly took place when the previous crop had been consumed but the new crop had not yet been distributed. He argued that such spontaneous food riots had "hardly ever [...] any direct political element in them"; they rather "served to fulfil instinctive and temporary [/seasonal] social demands" (Romsics 1989, 121; 2016, 51). Concerning the history of World War One in Hódmezővásárhely, historian Imre Makó has emphasised the distance between spontaneous women's riots and the organised workers' movement, claiming that "antiwar actions did not move beyond the level of the instinctive and did not meet with the support of the organised workers' movement" (Makó 1993, 929).

Most recently, a similar approach has supported the depoliticisation of the series of protests leading up to the Revolution of 1918 and the 1919 Republic of Councils in Hungary in a move to counter the position of historians who wrote about these events during the state-socialist period. Historian Attila Marosvári, for example, has stated that in the wave of violence that broke out in Csanád County in the autumn of 1918, which included women's food riots, "organised and conscious" forms of activism could not be detected "as would be expected in case of a revolution," and the events were not driven by "the open class struggle of peasants" (2022, 101). Despite identifying social inequality, repressed discontent, and indignation among the motivations behind violent actions, Marosvári has maintained that among other events, women's food riots were driven by "(crowd) instincts" (2022, 102, 112). Historian Károly Ignácz has, on the other hand, shown that wartime food riots signalling problems in public food supply that took place on the "outskirts of Budapest" were taken seriously by authorities; they led to administrative reorganisation and "significantly affected the administrative setup of post-First World War Hungary" (2020, 95).

This article builds on what historian Temma Kaplan has termed "female consciousness," that is, women's reproductive labour and responsibility for sustaining life, as the motivation for women of the lower classes "to act collectively in pursuit of goals they could not attain as individuals" (Kaplan 1982, 547). As Kaplan has pointed out, due to a lack of sources on such women's reasons for action, the focus of analyses often has fallen on their acts rather than their thoughts, which has led scholars "to associate irrationality and spontaneity with collective action" (548). Rather than branding women's motivation to participate in food riots as instinctive and, thus, apolitical, this essay approaches food riots as the means through which women communicated their and their families desperate living and working conditions to representatives of the state. Such actions were a local-level political response to the international and national political and economic crisis that unfolded in the Monarchy shortly before its disintegration during the second phase of the Great War. In their effort to prevent the destabilisation of the state during the war, authorities paid special attention to the situation on the home front. This created a context in which the riots did not simply

provoke repressive measures; rather, authorities tried to address the strikers' demands at least partially.

The situation of the agrarian population in Hungary during World War One

On the eve of World War One, the situation of agrarian workers, who constituted the majority of the Hungarian working population, was characterised by depressed economic and social conditions. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the uneven distribution of land, which the development of capitalism in the agricultural sphere had only intensified, led to an increasing number of pauperised small landowners and landless peasants who could not make a living from their own plots. For example, in 1910, 4,816 large landowners owned more than 1,000 cadastral yokes of land, while 2,437,190 peasants owned 0 to 5 cadastral yokes (Gunst 1998).

During World War One, the situation of the agrarian population deteriorated. War-related emergency legislation that was activated across the empire gave the civilian government in Hungary new powers, which led to a more centralised form of governance than what had existed before (Deak and Gumz 2017, 1115). The strengthening of the statutory rights and executive power of the Hungarian government, however, was a process that had begun already in the 1910s (Bader-Zaar and Zimmermann [accepted for publication](#)). In certain rural regions following the waves of harvester strikes, a state of emergency was introduced as early as in the late 1890s, which put a high degree of executive power in the hands of local authorities (Pölöskei and Szakács 1962). New war-related legislation brought workers engaged in a variety of production areas under martial law.

Like elsewhere in belligerent Europe, women entered jobs previously dominated by men. In Hungary, the employment of women, also in the agricultural sector, increased starting in 1915. Peasant women, young girls, and children took over men's roles in ploughing, sowing, and harvesting. Act 1 of 1914 and Act 13 of 1915 introduced compulsory wartime work in agriculture. The former obliged not only women – including recipients of war relief – but also children and the elderly to perform agricultural labour (Pastor 1985). The government authorised local municipalities to draw on the labour power of the population on the home front for a pre-set payment. Consequently, women and children could be forced to carry out day-labour almost for free due to their newly defined obligations to the wartime economy (Zalai 2017a, 234).

While some wealthy peasants could profit from the war by accumulating surplus income from selling food (lard, flour, grain) at higher prices, the majority of agricultural labourers suffered from the loss of working hands and requisitions of their animals and produce starting in early 1915. The conscription of animals and agrarian workers into the army caused a decline in agrarian production. By 1918, for example, the wheat harvest had declined by 37 percent, potatoes by 40 percent, and sugar by 55 percent (Pastor 1985, 129). Between June 1914 and October 1918, the price of food and other basic products increased by between 200 to 1026 percent due to wartime inflation (Egry 2017, 294). Food stamps were introduced, but food shortages appeared already in the autumn of 1914, and by 1916 they became acute. The situation deteriorated even further by the late autumn of

1914, when Great Britain introduced a blockade on the import of goods to Germany (Davis 2000; Helfert 2021).

Act 45 of 1914 introduced war relief to families who, due to male conscription, had no wage-earning members present on the home front. However, payments were so low that they did not cover daily subsistence. Such payment schemes included children born out of wedlock, but they excluded unmarried partners until 1917–1918 (Zalai 2017b, 353). The first food riots broke out in the vicinity of Budapest already in the summer of 1915 (Ignácz 2020). By 1917, many poor peasant families could no longer purchase clothes or fuel (Romsics 1989, 120–121). As in belligerent Germany and Cisleithania, increasing problems with food supply and high subsistence costs led to the regular eruption of hunger riots across Hungary from 1917 onwards (Pastor 1985).

“A large group of women waiting at the town hall:” Agrarian workers from the countryside in the town centre

Authorities and journalists’ accounts of the food riots in the Hungarian countryside reveal that participants in these actions were predominantly women who belonged to “the unprovisioned” segment of the population. Concerning events that took place in villages and small towns, the rioters were referred to as poor agrarian women, for example, day-labourers and agrarian servants from the nearby homesteads. In the existing scholarship, their presence and protests at rural town halls represent an as-yet unaccounted for side of travel related to inadequate food distribution that took place between rural and more urbanised contexts in wartime Hungary. Historian Péter Bihari (2005) has drawn attention to both the phenomenon of middle-class households in the capital city hosting students from the countryside in exchange for in-kind payments of food (81) and the urban middle-classes travelling to the countryside to obtain food unavailable in the cities from peasants. Bihari cited the Hungarian author Gyula Illyés, who became famous for recording the misery of agrarian life in interwar Hungary, to illustrate the latter shocking phenomenon: “[...] city dwellers [were] standing in front of village door gates, like dogs waiting for a piece of bacon. They were begging for bacon, eggs, a little bag of flour, carrying the tailcoat of the head of the family, or a Persian carpet, a kitchen chair – everything they could move from home” (105).¹

The break-down of the public food supply in the second half of the war, however, also caused movement in the opposite direction. The agrarian population on the home front, who were predominantly women, adolescents, children, the elderly, and soldiers on leave, appeared at the administrative centre of their villages and small towns. Most often, it was women from villages and the nearby homesteads who went to the local Office for Public Food Supply to receive their food rations or to the town hall to receive their war relief payments, and it was they who protested against their desperate situation. For example, in a report to the Minister of Interior dated 21 May 1917, the mayor of Kecskemét described the women’s demonstration that took place six days earlier at his office at the town hall:

We were able to give no more than a 180-gram daily food portion per person to the unprovisioned population of our town since early December 1916. Exceptions could only

be made for workers in heavy industry producing for the war effort, who receive a 300-gram portion. The food supply we received did not allow for providing larger food portions to the agrarian workers, who are mostly women. [...] On 15 May at eight o'clock in the morning, a large group of women were already waiting at the town hall, demanding flour. Although I stated that their food tickets for flour were first due on 17 May, I ordered the distribution of the available [flour and bread] supply to prevent a more serious disturbance. [The women] stated that they had already run out of flour and bread due to the lack of potatoes and vegetables [i.e., other consumables], and since most of them were from homesteads, they would need to skip work to come back again on the 17th, and they and their children would be starving until then. (Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917)

When faced with the repeated and long-term fall out of the rationing of basic products, such as flour, bread, and lard, and the low and belated payment of relief, women expressed their discontent at or in front of the offices of local authorities. At Kiskunfélegyháza, a protest broke out on Sunday, 24 February 1918 due the insufficient provision of lard. The chief police officer of the town reported to the county lieutenant that the crowd in front of the town hall quickly grew to four to five thousand persons, "which also had to do with the fact that on a Sunday, a greater number of the inhabitants of the town and the surrounding homesteads gathered [there] to listen to the announcement of the latest pieces of official information." He identified the rioters as mostly agrarian and market-women joined by young boys (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918).

Sources also identified women protesters as poor peasant women, wives of day-labourers, and war relief recipients. In an open letter published by the Budapest daily *Nap* (*The Day*) on 18 May 1917, the deacon of Mindszent revealed the miserable working and living conditions of agrarian workers who, from early spring to late autumn, needed to earn their living far away from their home because they could not lease land from the large estates surrounding their home village. In this text, which ultimately resulted in the deacon's removal from his position, he criticised the local authorities of the village, describing how the suffering of "earthbound poor peasant wom[e]n with nine or ten family members" not only increased during the war due to the bad food supply but the "mothers of nine to ten children of Mindszent" were also treated disrespectfully by the district chief magistrate when they were "begging for bread" (Páhi 1967). The notary of Lajosmizse cited at the beginning of this article also wrote about the misery of peasant mothers with many children (Report by the notary of Lajosmizse 1918). In another action that took place in June 1918 in Hódmezővásárhely, a town in southeast Hungary that had a long tradition of (women's) agrarian socialist organising and activism (Varsa [under review](#)), the documents of the ensuing court case identified 150 women – "mostly the wives and family members of day-labourers" demanding an increase in their daily bread rations (Gaál 1964, 63) – who were joined in their attack on the local authorities by soldiers on leave (Report by the Hódmezővásárhely Office for Public Food Supply 1918). The court documents recorded the names of three women identified as agricultural day-labourers (Gaál 1964).

A series of reports about a women's demonstration that took place in Cegléd in August 1918 and local authorities' hard-nosed response that appeared in various local and national papers demonstrate that the question of who exactly the participants of these women's food riots were was a hotly debated issue. The case affected one of the

largest food riot-related scandals at that national level, which led to a parliamentary discussion about the inadequate system of food supply throughout the country. The socialist daily *Népszava* (The Voice of the People) (1918b) gave a detailed presentation of the events, including the lengthy debate between two MPs from opposing political sides and Prime Minister Sándor Wekerle's response. Whereas leftist MP László Fényes, who introduced the case, was critical of the break-down in the food supply and supported the cause of the rioting women, Kálmán Kovácsy, a priest and MP, and Wekerle went on the defensive and emphasised the crimes committed by the perpetrators of violence. As opposed to Fényes, who spoke about war relief recipients, Kovácsy and Wekerle opined that the rioters were a mob. These contradictory positions signal that war relief recipients were a respected category of women who could not be associated with unlawful behaviour. Historian Barbara Alpern Engel has drawn attention to the respected status of war relief recipients, who were mostly peasant women, in the context of wartime Russia. She has described how their husbands' military service gave these women a sense of entitlement and also provided them with a socially accepted basis for making demands of the authorities and requesting that their grievances be addressed (Engel 1997, 710). The governing elite in Hungary did not refer to the poor agrarian workers – such as the rioters in the cases discussed above, and the participants of the women's riot at Cegléd – as war relief recipients even if they may have been receiving this meagre support.

Some of the surviving documents and news reports indicate that participants in the women's food riots in the countryside had ethnically diverse backgrounds. Unlike in the coverage of hunger riots in Vienna (Helfert 2021, 116), the authors of the documents analysed here did not negatively or otherwise differentiate the participants of the riots according to their sense of ethnic belonging. For example, when the women rioters of Hódmezővásárhely were put on trial in Szeged in 1918, the court records named Mrs. István Reinhardt, whose surname hints at a German family background, as the main instigator of the riot (Gaál 1964) without connecting her central role in the events to her ethnicity. Similarly, in its report about the women's riot at Cegléd in August 1918, the national tabloid *Az Est* (The Evening) mentioned a woman named Rózsi Fehér, a "Gypsy girl," among the several women identified by name who had been arrested by the police (*Az Est* 1918). This was a brief reference without further details beyond the fact that, like the other women, she was arrested at night and was "pulled out of her bed" by the police. Importantly, this mention in the paper suggests that contrary to existing scholarship in Hungary, which has largely neglected the presence of Roma as agrarian labourers and members of agrarian communities, and in line with what historian Snezhana Dimitrova has emphasised concerning women's food riots in Bulgaria, Roma joined spontaneous protests in those localities where there were Romani neighbourhoods (Dimitrova 2018, 148).

"They would not leave until they received a definite promise about the issue of peace [and] the payment of increased war relief:" the agendas of women rioters

Women expressed their dissatisfaction with the management of the home front through their anger about the inadequate supply of food and its poor quality. They blamed local political representatives and lodged their grievances with them: They

called out the lord lieutenant, the district chief magistrate, the notary, and various members of the public administration, including the leaders of the local branch of the Office for Public Food Supply. A case in point are the riots that took place across the villages of Temes County (Timiș, Tamiš) in the late spring and early summer of 1917, during which the population demanded an increase in their daily flour rations and attacked the town halls and notaries (Report by the lieutenant of Temes County 1917).

Whereas riots had to do with repeated breakdowns in and the inadequacy of the food supply, the resulting lack, bad quality, and high cost of food and other basic necessities, and a call for increased war relief payments, women's demands pointed to issues that went beyond their immediate subsistence needs. They expressed their discontent with the difficulty of managing their reproductive work and demanded, for example, the return of their relatives from the frontlines and an end to the war. They also identified social inequalities as the root cause of their miserable condition and directed their anger especially at the ruling elite, whom they perceived as neglecting the plight of the poor.

Women's demands during the Hódmezővásárhely riot of January 1918 demonstrate that a single event could bring together several of these concerns. *Népszava* reported that women requested the lord lieutenant to arrange the immediate provision of firewood, which they had lacked for weeks, as well as the immediate payment of the increased amount of war relief – which had been approved by the government a few months earlier – and the improvement of the entire food supply system. Furthermore, according to the paper, the women also called for peace and displayed solidarity with their fellow rioters: “The demonstrators stated that they would not be leaving until they received a definite promise about the issue of peace, the payment of the increased war relief as soon as possible, the improvement of public provisions, and the immediate release of the four women demonstrators who had been arrested [during the riot]” (*Népszava* 1918a). Similarly, in Mindszent in May 1917, the approximately four hundred women about whom the lord lieutenant reported to the Minister of Interior initially turned against the representatives of the Office for Public Food Supply and members of the municipal assembly. They demanded an increase of the two-hundred-gram daily flour ration and complained about the poor quality of the bread that contained 60 percent corn flour. Then the crowd attacked “public buildings and private homes” (Report by the lord lieutenant of Csongrád County 1917).

Women involved in the Hódmezővásárhely riots in June 1918 coupled an attack on the police and representatives of the Office for Public Food Supply with a more general social critique directed at the ruling elite as the cause of the inadequate food supply and the war (Gaál 1964; Report by the lord lieutenant of Hódmezővásárhely 1918). The surviving documents of the ensuing court case² mentioned above testify to women's expressions of discontent about the reduction of the daily rations of bread as well as speaking out against “the rulers” in general (Gaál 1964). The police arrested the fourteen-year-old daughter of a day-labourer because she was “inciting the crowd” by shouting: “Give me bread!” (Gaál 1964, 63). The crowd attacked the head of the Office for Public Food Supply when he tried to calm the women by distributing food tickets for egg barley instead of bread. The police also arrested two other women day-labourers who were scolding both

them and the town leadership while queuing up for bacon in front of a butcher shop. Among the demonstrators in front of the town hall was the above-mentioned Mrs. István Reinhardt, a day-labourer who was reported to be heckling the “the rulers” and accusing them of being “the causes of the war” and “for having no bread in [the] town” (Gaál 1964, 63).

“The simple-minded women” as highly receptive to agitation: antisemitic attacks against Jewish merchants

Part of the rioters’ agenda was to protest price gouging and profiteering at the expense of the poor, issues that had been repeatedly associated with Jewish merchants as well as peasants and market-sellers since the beginning of the war. Antisemitism increased during World War One throughout Europe including the Hungarian territories of the Dual Monarchy. As historian Péter Bihari has shown, from the summer of 1916 onwards, there were repeated accusations associating “Jewish capital”—i.e. bankers and merchants – with price usury and profiteering in the Hungarian parliament as well as in the written media, including daily papers starting in 1917. Catholic weeklies and monthlies picked up on the “Jewish Question,” relating it to scandals around poor-quality military supplies as early as 1915 (Bihari 2008a, 2008b).

Labour historiography on the workers’ movement written during the state-socialist period in Hungary attempted to represent such riots as having purely socio-economic motivations. The multi-volume document collection on the history of the Hungarian workers’ movement compiled during the 1950s and the 1960s reproduced a report about the women’s riots at Kiskunfélegyháza between February 24 and 26, 1918, but the editors of the document collection removed all references to the fact that the specific merchants attacked by the rioters were of Jewish origin (Summary report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). The full version of the same document can be found, however, in a document collection edited in the 1980s, by which time research had already thematized the antisemitism that characterized these attacks (Romsics 1982).

Participants in the women’s riots at Kiskunfélegyháza accused merchants of cheating the people by withholding their products or selling them elsewhere to obtain higher profits. As the surviving documents show, state authorities were aware of the fact that complaints about the lack of access to food and the high prices implied antisemitism. In his report to the lieutenant of Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County, the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza described in detail the damage to Jewish-owned stores caused by the rioters. In fact, he identified an “attack against the Jews” and “related to that, an attack against and the destruction of the property of the well-to-do and especially the authorities” as the main driving force behind the riots. He wrote that the violent events started when a shop manager named Izsák Schwéd, whose name suggests he was of Jewish origin, could not maintain order among those queuing up for lard “that had not been distributed for over a week even though the people had food tickets for lard.” The crowd stormed the shop, shouting: “‘Last week too we got neither meat nor lard’ and ‘The Jews and the rulers receive both meat and lard.’” When Schwéd escaped to a café near the town hall, the crowd began to smash in the windows of the building while scolding the rulers and the Jews” (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). The

rioters stole food and money as well as destroyed food and other products and the inner furnishing of several Jewish-owned groceries and other stores in the town centre.

The available sources concerning the events at Kiskunfélegyháza suggest that authorities and the local elite were critical of antisemitism and blamed it on particular types of political actors and forms of agitation. The chief police officer explained that the inequality between having a price cap on the produce of “the productive population” and market products while there was “no price cap on industrial products and merchandise” exposed the population to price gouging even though, as he added, “the merchants did not abuse [this situation]” (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). His report devoted a longer paragraph to clarifying that the antisemitic interpretation of price gouging and the inequalities in access to food which had led to the attack on Jewish-owned stores was partly provoked by a right-wing politician: “On an agitation tour for the founding of a Christian newspaper and the Christian media movement, Béla Bangha³ gave an inciting speech.”

The newspaper of the leading political party’s local organisation (The Party of National Work of Kiskunfélegyháza) published a lengthy article analysing the discussion about the reasons for the riots that took place in the municipal general assembly. It reveals that antisemitism was present among assembly members but was not accepted by the mayor. When, according to the paper, one of the assembly members questioned why the right to sell lard and schnapps was given to certain merchants, claiming that “the population [was] unhappy about that,” the mayor retorted: “Your problem is actually why these [rights] were given to Jewish merchants. Be assured that none of them cheated the population. There are good and bad persons among the members of all denominations.” The mayor’s liberal attitude towards Jews reverberates with what historian Robert Nemes has found concerning a controversy around Galician Jewish refugees in wartime Nagyvárad (Oradea), a city in eastern Hungary (2014). The fact that the local elite, among them the mayor, had patriotic values that extended to “Nagyvárad’s many religious and ethnic groups” and held that they “had always lived in peace and come together in moments of crisis” (Nemes 2014, 240) prevented the eviction of the refugees, which had been called for by a minority of the city’s councillors.

The chief police officer’s report also reveals the entanglement of the categories of gender and race in the interpretation of the causes of the riot. It highlights that the rioters were mostly women, more specifically local market-women selling their products in the capital city, and young boys, as well as agrarian workers from the nearby homesteads. In analysing the representation of women’s hunger riots in wartime Vienna, Veronika Helfert has underlined that references to the dominance of women and young boys in these crowds was a strategy police and news reports used to depoliticise the meaning of such events (Helfert 2021). In the context of Kiskunfélegyháza, the officer’s report included references to agrarian women and market-women to downplay the political weight of Bangha’s antisemitic agitation and incitement of hatred against the Jews, who he had identified as the main reason for the riots. Indeed, the report depicted the women as especially receptive to antisemitic agitation: “The speech [by Bangha], which had not given the police a reason to interfere at the time, nevertheless instilled strong antipathy against those not belonging to the Catholic faith in the souls, behaviour, and feelings of

the simple-minded women present at the meeting in great numbers" (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). This sentence contrasts the judgement of the police, who opted to take no action against Bangha during his tour stop in Kiskunfélegyháza, and the "souls" and "feelings" of the "simple-minded women." Attributing the antisemitic character of the riots to the emotional (over)reaction of women makes the events sound harmless.

Violating gendered norms of behaviour: women rioters' repertoires of action and authorities' reactions

Women were often described as being very loud, impulsive, and emotional in the events leading up to and during the riots. Such a description of women participants in riots was already quite typical in Hungary by the end of the nineteenth century (Varsa [under review](#)) as well as for food riots in other European contexts, such as Vienna or Berlin, during the First World War (Davis 2000; Helfert 2021). As Veronika Helfert has pointed out concerning women's food riots in the capital city of the Habsburg Empire, political action was associated with men's institutionalised forms of (labour) organising. Women's behaviour in these spontaneous riots was seen as violating middle-class gender norms, and it was categorised as an irrational expression of feelings rather than a form of legitimate political agitation (2014). For example, the mayor of Kecskemét explained that despite his attempts to calm the women, who were complaining about a lack of flour and bread, they gathered in front of the town hall and "were very loud. A group of women ran inside and gathered in front of [his] office [...]" (Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917). Similarly, women in Kiskunfélegyháza were reported to be "loudly demanding relief from the councillor of the Office for Public Food Supply" (Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). News and authorities' reports about the women's riot at Hódmezővásárhely in June 1918 emphasised that a woman day-labourer was the fiercest participant, shouting: "We should beat all rulers and all police to death. [...] They should be taken to the front. (Gaál 1964, 63).

Authorities also emphasised that women were cursing at public officials, the police, merchants, and the wealthy (Gaál 1964; Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918). They detailed women's violence: attacks on and the injuring of public officials and the police; throwing stones at the town hall and smashing its windows (Gaál 1964; Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918; Report by the lord lieutenant of Csongrád County 1917); attacking the buildings and homes of the well-to-do and ruling elites in the town centre (Gaál 1964; Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918; Report by the lord lieutenant of Csongrád County 1917) and the private homes of state authorities (Népszava 1918b; Report by the chief police officer of Kiskunfélegyháza 1918; Report by the lord lieutenant of Csongrád County 1917; Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917). The documents of the aforementioned Szeged court case referenced the violent phrasing two women arrested during the Hódmezővásárhely riots in June 1918 used as they walked alongside the crowd of demonstrators in front of the town hall. They were reported to have shouted: "Damn you for arresting us! We should beat you to death together with all the rulers" (Gaál 1964, 63).

On the Hungarian countryside, it was precisely the identification of women with non-political spheres of life and their violation of gendered behavioural norms that gave food

demonstrations their political meaning. Some journalists, for example, used the trope of women's non-political nature as a silent reference to the political seriousness of the issues addressed by the women demonstrators. Describing the food riot that broke out at Erzsébetfalva, a small town close to the Hungarian capital of Budapest in early August 1917, the national daily *Világ* (The World) reported: "It is scandalous that so near to the capital, the food supply is bad even though there is food [available]. It is an even greater scandal that it took four thousand women demonstrators to provide flour rations that could have been made available in five minutes" (Világ 1917).

Politicising the act of rumourmongering in the context of the great peasant riots of 1907 in Romania, historian Irina Marin has argued that "in making things up, the peasants postulated a source of authority and then acted on it" (Marin 2018, 42). Based on rumour theory, Marin has claimed that rumour mills were not "signs of [peasants'] miscomprehension" but their means to exercise agency and take control over the events (Marin 2018, 14). Historian Attila Marosvári has reported about the "significant role" of various rumours in provoking violent action in Csanád County in 1918. A widespread rumour during the war that continued to circulate in the months leading to the Revolution of 1918 and had resulted in attacks against notaries and other authorities was that these officials had told the women asking for relief payments "to go grazing" (Marosvári 2022, 27–28, 140, 180).

In describing the places peasants exchanged ideas, Marin has emphasised locations like the village pub, the railways, gatherings on occasions when literate persons read and interpreted the newspapers to peasants, as well as the figure of the peddler who moved from village to village selling household items to peasants. She has not addressed, however, the gendered division of these spaces and the possible effects this gendering could have on men and women's participation in spreading rumours. Scholarship on



Figure 1. People queuing for potatoes in front of the Market Hall in Rákóczi square in Budapest in 1915. Photograph by: János Müllner, Fortepan/National Széchényi Library [Országos Széchényi Könyvtár], Budapest, Hungary.

women's labour activism has discussed the spreading of rumours as one of the repertoires of action women successfully employed to intimidate authorities. Gyöngyi Farkas, writing about agrarian women's opposition to collectivisation in state-socialist Hungary, described how authorities recorded women's production and dissemination of "terrible-rumours" as one of the most frequent "hostile activities" Women often referred to information "from other villages," only some of which was true (Farkas 2016, 50). As opposed to a culturally essentialising interpretation of rumour dissemination, according to which women were gossipy by nature, Farkas called attention to the multiple and diverse forms of relationships women had with each other. As they were women who sold agrarian products at markets, they had the opportunity to exchange information and rumours as friends, neighbours, and businesswomen.

In World War One-era Hungary, these women bore the brunt of providing for their children, and they were especially burdened by the consequences of the wartime breakdown in the food supply. As Figure 1 illustrates in the context of the Hungarian capital city, the queues in front of butchers and greengrocers and at the market were populated by women. They had first-hand experience of the hardships associated with obtaining food as well as the lack of respect they received from authorities when they complained to officials about their situation. These spaces were, thus, sites where women exchanged information about the causes of these problems.

Existing research on the historical role of rumours has called attention to the intersection of gender and race in their use, referring to notions of family and other gendered narratives that sparked outbreaks of violence during racial disturbances (Johnson 1998). Examining race riots in the twentieth-century United States, historian Marilyn S. Johnson has argued that understanding how race and gender are in a "mutually constitutive relationship" in rumours helps us understand "why riots occurred the way they did" and what the difference was between men and women's participation in such violent actions (Johnson 1998, 253, 272). In the context of antisemitic violence in rural Hungary during World War One, the widespread stereotype about Jews murdering Christian children resulted in violent attacks against Jewish merchants. Marosvári has described a case at Makó in August 1918 when some women accused an orthodox Jewish merchant of having coaxed a twelve-year-old servant girl to come in his house in order to take and use her blood for ritual purposes. The windows of and fence around his house were already smashed by the time it became clear that the girl in question was safely at home (Marosvári 2022, 168–169). This account reflects the key role the gendered notion of the family – as represented by the child in this case – played in antisemitic prejudice and the violent action in which women participated.

Existing sources concerning rural discontent about food supply in Hungary during the Great War suggest that in the wartime context, local mayors and notaries and other public officials tended to at least partially address rioters' grievances. While the gendarmerie, police, and occasionally soldiers were mobilised to disperse demonstrators and prevent further rioting, authorities were more willing to negotiate with these rioters than in the cases of riots that were sparked by agrarian workers' discontent with their living and working conditions in the prewar era (Varsa, *under review*). They tried to calm the angry crowd by offering immediate one-time food aid and distributing available food resources. Local authorities, furthermore, often referred to circumstances beyond their control, such as the nationwide breakdown of the food supply chain and failures at the higher levels of

decision-making. For example, in Hódmezővásárhely, the lord lieutenant blamed the enemy for the war: “He expressed his great desire for peace but stated that the reason for the continuation of the war was to be found on the side of the enemy” (Vásárhelyi Reggeli Újság 1918). Shining a positive light on local politicians, the government-friendly paper of the town also added that “Lord Lieutenant János Justh addressed the very embittered crowd from the balcony, informing them that the government decree on the increase of war relief has arrived, but that it takes a while before authorities can process the cases of the nine thousand six hundred [entitled] families.” He “assured [the crowd] that he would urge the swift execution of this task” (Vásárhelyi Reggeli Újság 1918).

Justifying their local-level action and demanding support from higher state representatives, local authorities referred to the explosive atmosphere and the danger of the population’s escalating aggression. In a report to the Minister of Interior on 21 May 1917, the mayor of Kecskemét described the women’s demonstration that had taken place six days earlier at his office at the town hall with reference to earlier rumours that turned out to be true: “[...] women were complaining at my office once again, and rumours were spreading that something would happen on 15 May. On 15 May at eight o’clock in the morning, a large group of women were already waiting at the town hall, demanding flour” (Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917). Calling on the Minister of Interior for an improvement in the food supply and the strengthening of the local police force, the mayor added that “reliable sources have reported that unknown women, who in the absence of a police force could not be arrested, have claimed that they were going to set the town and the town hall on fire, and that these plans needed to be carried out at night when the rulers were not present” (Report by the mayor of Kecskemét 1917).

Conclusions

This article has focused on the representation of women’s food riots that took place in the Hungarian countryside during World War One, paying special attention to the role of agrarian women in these events. The protest actions of the agrarian population in which women played a prominent role enhances our understanding of the population and the management of the home front in wartime Europe as existing scholarship has, so far, mainly focused on urban contexts such as Paris, Berlin, or Vienna.

By the second half of the war, the high cost of living, breakdowns in food supply, and the burdens placed on agrarian workers in the wartime economy mobilised peasant women to act in order to secure their and their families’ subsistence. Agrarian women appeared regularly and in great numbers at public offices, and they formed a visible and, for authorities and the ruling elite, a disturbing presence in the centre of villages and small towns. Reports about women’s riots suggest that participants used different means to call authorities’ attention to their concerns and to express their anger. In all the examined cases, rioters addressed their demands and complaints to various representatives of public offices.

In their reports, authorities and journalists described women as loud and violent and accused them of storming the town hall, attacking public officials and the police, damaging public buildings and even the private homes of the ruling elite out of desperation. Local notaries, mayors, and representatives of the Office for Public Food Supply, as well as

authorities at the regional level – such the chief police officer, the lieutenant, and the lord lieutenant – used the gendered silent reference to women’s non-political nature as a way to secure support from their superiors. News reports emphasizing the dire situation, which required an urgent response by the state, whether published by the leftist *Népszava* or the press organs supporting the (local) government, differed only in their evaluation of the role played by politicians in managing the crises on the home front.

The food strikes during World War I were the first time that authorities did not react heavily towards the agrarian population following a strike or riot; rather they addressed, at least partially, their demands. This could be chalked up to wartime concerns about possible sources of state destabilization and the situation on the home front. The sources examined have thus shown that through vulnerable public officials and the media, local agrarian women were able to make themselves heard and provoke a response from various levels of state governance. Authorities described women’s violence as supported by other groups on the home front – e.g. soldiers on leave and youth – in order to increase the number of gendarmes and police officers stationed locally and to put pressure on officials at the regional and national level to improve the public food supply. In the wartime context, revolts of the agrarian working classes and what the ruling elite perceived as the mob frequently guaranteed an effort by local authorities to immediately alleviate their grievances.

Riots had been a part of the agrarian working classes’ repertoire of labour activism since the late nineteenth century in Hungary. While existing scholarship points to the long-term presence of certain gendered elements in labour protests such as women’s role in spreading “terrible rumours,” further research is needed to elaborate the ways that gender and race intersected in women’s and men’s labour activism. Moreover, a further examination of the connection between riots in the countryside and other mass demonstrations and actions of the organised labour movement could contribute to a better understanding of agrarian women’s political activism.

Importantly, agrarian protesters were not a homogenous mass. Besides the gendered character of the riots, the sources also provide information about the ethnically mixed composition of their participants as well as their antisemitic agendas. Local studies that focus on so far marginalised contexts outside the capitals and large cities, which have received the most scholarly attention thus far, can help us better understand the causes and the meanings of antisemitism and its intensification during the First World War. The sporadic references in documents concerning Roma are significant for addressing their absence in scholarship concerning agrarian life and altering the perception that they were passive victims of administrative harassment and persecution.

Notes

1. The English translation is by Péter Bihari.
2. In the 1960s, historian Endre Gaál located the documents entitled “Mrs. István Reinhardt and Companions’ Incitement to Class Hatred” among the surviving material of the public prosecution of Szeged from 1918 at the National Archives at Szeged (today Csongrád County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives at Szeged) under the call number IV. 1918–2596 (Gaál 1964, 60). Unfortunately, these documents have disappeared since then.
3. Béla Bangha (Nyitra [Nitra], Slovakia, 1880–Újpest [Budapest], Hungary, 1940) was a Jesuit friar who devoted much of his career to the establishment of a strong Catholic public life, with an emphasis on the Catholic media in interwar Hungary as well as internationally. He was

well-known among his contemporaries for his militancy and outspoken antisemitism (Bihari 2008a, 2008b).

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Polish women labour inspectors between the world wars: scrutinizing the workplace and mobilizing public opinion

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the history of women's activism within the state apparatus, focusing on women labour inspectors in interwar Poland. Part of the State Labour Inspectorate since its creation in 1919, women inspectors often combined their professional duties with a distinctly activist stance. Like their male colleagues, they ensured compliance with labour legislation by performing factory visits and collecting information on the conditions of workers' lives and labour. But they also led campaigns in the press, published books and brochures intended to mobilize public opinion around issues related to the labour of women and minors, and sought to build activist networks aimed at the improvement of women workers' conditions. They exposed particularly exploitative labour arrangements, such as the labour of underage apprentices, and conceptualized them as urgent social problems. These multiple engagements meant that women labour inspectors moved between different scales of action including direct intervention on the shop floor, research and publications aimed at a national audience, and transnational contacts with the International Labour Organization, which had been committed to improving women workers' conditions since its inception.

KEYWORDS

Labour inspection; women's labour activism; Second Polish Republic; labour history

In her 1936 memoirs, former deputy labour inspector Maria Kirstowa offered a nuanced analysis of the subordinate position of women workers in the labour market. She argued that the "industrial labour of women is not correctly valued or respected by employers or by workers in general" (Kirstowa 1936b, 280). In terms of both pay and meaning, she argued, the labour of women was rendered inferior to that of men: women's participation in the labour force was considered temporary rather than permanent, their experiences were disregarded, and their opportunities for training and professional development were virtually non-existent.

Kirstowa supported her overarching argument by citing concrete examples from her work as a labour inspector in Warsaw between 1921 and 1928. She systematically studied the wages, skills, and productivity levels across different industries (armaments, food, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, paper, textiles, lightbulb production, among others) and

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found that women were commonly deprived of any possibility of either accessing higher-level positions or receiving wage increases regardless of their years of experience. Typically, she emphasized, the most qualified women were paid less than the least qualified men. Offering a counter-narrative to the general perception of women as weaker, unskilled, and less committed workers, Kirstowa highlighted rare examples from Warsaw factories in which men and women were paid the same wages and argued that employers had economic reasons to do so: because women and men performed work of equal value (Kirstowa 1936b, 282).

Stressing the underrepresentation of women in the organized labour movement, Maria Kirstowa openly criticized male workers and male-dominated trade unions as contributing to the unequal treatment of women in the labour market. She remarked that women were rarely eager to take part in labour organizing not only because of their socialization (*uspołecznienie*) but also because of their treatment by male trade unions members. In her own work, Kirstowa had encountered many cases where the collective and individual activism of women workers was undermined by their male colleagues and trade union representatives. In one case, women bobbin fillers (*szpularki*) at a textile factory went on strike because their demand for a wage increase was refused. Male weavers could not work without bobbin fillers, and the operations of the whole factory ground to a halt. However, when the factory management brought in strike-breakers to fill bobbins, the men resumed their work. This was just one example among several that Kirstowa evoked to denounce the lack of cross-gender solidarity (Kirstowa 1936b, 290).

Maria Kirstowa's career in the Labour Inspectorate ended in 1928, which, along with the polarization of the political climate in the second half of the 1930s, likely prompted her to write so openly, radically, and critically in her 1936 memoirs. Her experiences and expertise as a labour inspector directly informed her critiques. She was part of a small body of Polish women labour inspectors who, between 1919 and 1939, struggled to improve the working conditions of urban industrial women and underage workers. They did so on the shop floor, visiting factories and identifying cases of non-compliance with labour legislation. At the same time, as constant mediators between the state, workers, and employers, and as officials embodying and shaping state interventions in the workplace, women labour inspectors were generally far from being narrowly focused bureaucrats. Instead, many took a distinctly activist stance that led them far beyond their main professional focus on the industrial workplace. Indeed, building on their position as state employees, their knowledge of working conditions, and, in some cases, their previous histories of political activism, they managed to access diverse arenas in which policies regarding women workers were directly and indirectly shaped, including the local and national press, the state apparatus, and international organizations.

In this article, I approach interwar Polish labour inspection as a site of contact between social movements and the state.¹ Zooming in on the activities and writings of women in the Labour Inspectorate, I argue that they expanded their immediate duties as inspectors by taking up a broad range of labour-related activism at the local, national, and transnational levels. In their work, activism within the state apparatus intertwined with other activist practices that involved civil society associations, political parties, and the press. Specifically, I trace their efforts to conceptualize a set of distinct and pressing social problems caused by women's and children's involvement in industrial labour, to mobilize public opinion around them, and to build wider networks with the goal of partially

alleviating these problems. Women inspectors elaborated, shaped, adopted, and pursued a range of agendas aimed at the improvement of the labour and living conditions of women and minors – agendas they shared and negotiated with other actors: party activists, parliamentarians, trade unionists, and medical professionals.

Through inspectors' publications, the aggregated yearly reports of the Inspectorate, and other sources such as the memoirs quoted above, I engage with both the inspectors' concrete actions in the sphere of labour protection and the far-reaching critiques they voiced. The register of the inspectors' writings differed depending on the publication. In official state-sponsored publications, they were limited in terms of how radical their critiques could be and against whom they could be directed. Publications appearing in the local press, books, and brochures directed at the general public offered women labour inspectors greater opportunities to voice their profound gender-sensitive critiques of the Polish and global socio-economic order.

Scholarship has investigated how the cross-class character of inspectors' activities impacted their work and the knowledge they produced about the working class. Jean Quataert, discussing the reports of Prussian labour inspectors at the end of the nineteenth century, highlighted that middle-class women labour inspector assistants tended to more openly support women workers' interests in conflicts between male and female workers than did their male colleagues, suggesting a degree of gender solidarity (Quataert 1983, 118). Analysing the Greek case in the 1910s to 1930s, Efi Avdela has emphasized that many aspects of workers' lives and their non-compliance with existing regulations remained unintelligible to middle-class inspectors despite their direct observation of working environments (Avdela 1997). Sylvie Schweitzer has approached the role of women in the French Inspectorate from a different angle, using it as a springboard for writing a gendered history of the French civil service (Schweitzer 2017). In this article, I analyse the case of interwar women labour inspectors in Poland to elucidate the potential for women's labour activism within the state apparatus, and to examine how with their activist agendas interpreted and transcended the letter of law, and how their repertoires of action collated with their official duties as inspectors.

The socio-economic context

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the main industrial centres in partitioned Polish lands were geographically dispersed. They were located in the urban areas around Katowice and Poznań in the German partition, Cracow in Austrian-governed Galicia, and in and around Warsaw and Łódź—where women were particularly numerous in the textile, garment, and food processing industries—in the Congress Kingdom (the Russian partition). The most important challenges that arose in independent Poland following its re-establishment in 1918 were related to the economic, political, and social integration of the formerly partitioned lands (Davies 2005, 398; Porter-Szücs 2014, 105–125). In the domain of labour law and social welfare, this implied the creation of a uniform legal and institutional framework (Ingłot 2008, 78–83). Throughout the 1920s, the Labour Inspectorate served as a tool of integration on the national level in terms of the implementation of labour legislation. Its efforts initially had a special focus on the lands of the former Russian partition, which lagged behind the former Prussian and Austrian territories in terms of workers' rights and

welfare provisions. In the Russian partition already in the 1880s, male imperial inspectors identified the labour conditions of women and children as particularly dire. Factory inspector Vladimir Sviatlovskii, who was responsible for the Warsaw factory district between 1886 and 1888, underlined the close connection between child labour and women's factory employment. According to him, up to 80 percent of all child workers (according to the standards of the time, this meant workers under fifteen) in the Warsaw factory district were employed in textile enterprises (Sviatlovskii 1889, 17, 20). He dedicated substantial portions of his report to condemn the extreme insalubrity of factories and the proliferation of occupational and infectious diseases among women and children (Sviatlovskii 1889, 9–26). This initial preoccupation with child labour was in no way unique: when the factory inspection was first created in Great Britain in 1833, it focused on the implementation of child labour regulations (Blelloch 1938; Kirby 2003). Similarly, child labour was an early target of inspectors' interventions in Prussia (Karl 1993).

In addition to the heritage of partition, the transnational dimension, which in the domain of labour took shape most clearly in cooperation with the International Labour Organization, also left a mark on Polish labour policies in the interwar period. The ILO saw efficiently functioning national labour inspectorates as important tools of labour regulation and enforcement, and it encouraged their development from the very beginning, enshrining these hopes in its original 1919 constitution (International Labour Office 1923). The same document stipulated the necessity of women's participation in inspectorates, which reflected the ILO's efforts to define women as a special category of workers requiring sex-specific labour protections (for more on these efforts, see Zimmermann 2018). Polish officials, including women inspectors, not only took part in the ILO conferences but also closely collaborated with the International Labour Office through regular correspondence. Natali Stegmann has argued that consistent engagement with the emergent internationalism of the post-World War One era offered newly established Central European states opportunities to challenge their imperial institutional and legal heritage and legitimize their state-building efforts (Stegmann 2020a; Stegmann 2020b, 15).

Women within the inspectorate

Between 1919 and 1928, the activities of the Labour Inspectorate of the Second Polish Republic were regulated, on the one hand, by the laws of the former partitions, and, on the other, by the new republic's legislation. Organisationally, the Inspectorate was part of the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance (in 1933 renamed the Ministry of Social Assistance), and the Chief Labour Inspector reported directly to the minister. The purview of inspectors, according to the 1919 provisional law, was extremely vast (Dekret 1919). Their main task was the implementation of labour legislation, which they performed by visiting and inspecting enterprises and ensuring employers' and workers' adherence to legal norms and compliance with the instructions of the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance. Their jurisdiction extended to all workers, although their interventions in the domain of agricultural labour remained extremely limited until the end of the 1930s. They could fine enterprise owners and, in the case of particularly severe abuses or persistent non-compliance, launch court cases and serve as prosecutors. They were also responsible

for collecting statistics and information regarding the labour and living conditions of workers, also with the view of further developing labour law, that is, identifying areas of industrial life in need of updated regulations. In the case of women labour inspectors, this final point resulted in a multi-year research program aimed at identifying and combatting the most urgent issues related to the wage labour of women and children.

According to the 1919 provisional decree, both men and women holding a degree from an institution of higher education (university) could become inspectors. The 1927 law on the Labour Inspectorate, which overruled both the provisional decree and the older regulations of the former partitions, also changed the requirements to join the staff of the Inspectorate (*Rozporządzenie ... o inspekcji pracy* 1927a). It stipulated that either a lower-level technical education or relevant professional experience were sufficient in combination with one year of experience within the Inspectorate and a successful qualification from a special committee within the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance.

Throughout the entire interwar period, it was legally possible for the ministry to appoint assistants to inspectors recruited from workers themselves, but the first such assistants were hired in Łódź only at the end of 1935 (Gadomski 1935). Women, on the other hand, were continuously present within the Inspectorate since its inception, typically employed as deputy inspectors. The position of deputy inspector was not gendered per se, and it was held both by men and women. In 1926, there were one hundred men inspectors and seven women—five in Warsaw and two in Łódź (*Inspekcja Pracy* 1927, vi – xv). Despite the official legal equality of men and women, achieving the status of a full-on inspector was extremely rare for women in the Inspectorate. Between 1919 and 1921, before her election to the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish Parliament), socialist Zofia Praussowa (1878–1945) was responsible for overseeing two districts in Warsaw (Kirstowa 1936b, 225). Between 1927 and 1931, Halina Krahelska (1886 or 1892–1945), the first head of the Women's Inspectorate, also reported directly to the Chief Labour Inspector. She was succeeded by Janina Miedzińska (1891–1976), who continued to occupy this position when the Second World War broke out. In 1936, Emilia Frelkowa served as an acting inspector and was the superior of two deputy inspectors, a woman and a man (*Inspekcja Pracy* 1937, 73–74). Apart from these four women, I was unable to find other such cases of women in the top ranks of the Labour Inspectorate.

Biographical data on most women labour inspectors is scarce. Krahelska and Praussowa serve as two crucial exceptions in this respect: the first was a well-known writer and political activist, and the second built a prominent political career. Both had a long history of underground socialist militancy in the Russian partition (Krahelska 1934a; Próchnik 1948; Müller-Butz 2019, 210–250). Young Janina Miedzińska took part in a Marxist educational circle in Lwów (today Lviv) and was connected to local socialist networks (Semil 1937, 357). In other words, these women shared left-wing convictions and a background in political activism that predated their employment in the Polish state apparatus, both of which shaped their approach to labour inspection.

As discussed above, women labour inspectors implemented national legislation that was strongly aligned with contemporaneous international labour standards. At the same time, throughout the entire period discussed here, they were involved in various ILO initiatives as active participants, both as officials and as independent experts on the labour of women. Already in 1919, Zofia Praussowa took part in the first International

Labour Conference as an adviser to the Polish delegation (League of Nations 1920, 9). After her departure from the Inspectorate in 1931, Halina Krahelska, whose transnational engagements I discuss in greater detail elsewhere, remained an active member of the ILO's Correspondence Committee on Women's Work between 1932 and 1936 (Popova, n. d.). Janina Miedzińska was among the four members of the Polish delegation to the Regional Conference of Labour Inspectors organized by the ILO in Vienna in May 1937 (Gadomski 1937), which also suggests that the Polish Inspectorate sought to highlight women's participation in the inspection at this transnational forum. Although here I explicitly focus on the inspectors' domestic agendas, it is necessary to acknowledge their continuous orientation towards transnational networks.

The labour of women and children was regulated by the law adopted on 2 July 1924. Its implementation faced considerable obstacles, and three years later, in 1927, a dedicated section for women workers was created within the Inspectorate. Although this section did not have an official name, throughout the article I refer to it as "the Women's Inspectorate" to distinguish it both from the Inspectorate at large and those women deputy inspectors in regional branches who did not explicitly specialize in women workers' affairs. In 1933, there were six women inspectors specializing in the issues of working women and children, and among the twenty-five "general" deputy inspectors, there were an additional five women (out of 102 staff members overall) (Inspekcja Pracy 1934, 209–219). In 1936, nine out of fifteen women employed as deputy inspectors were part of this section (Inspekcja Pracy 1937, 6).

The 1924 law regulated the work of minors between fifteen and eighteen years old. It prohibited unpaid labour and banned the labour of children under fifteen; it also limited the number of minors employed at an enterprise, banned their night work, and prescribed regular medical examinations to ensure the health of underage workers. In the domain of women's labour, the law called for the creation of separate washrooms and toilets at all enterprises employing more than five women and the installation of daytime nurseries for infants at factories employing more than one hundred women. It also expanded maternity protections for pregnant women from eight to twelve weeks and prohibited the termination of pregnant women (Ustawa 1924).

Selecting which facets of the 1924 law were to be implemented first was one of the Women's Inspectorate's initial tasks. Based on two guiding principles – the importance of a given issue for society overall, and the relative ease with which it could be implemented – the provision of childcare for women employed at factories was identified as the highest priority (Leśniewska 1929). As will become clear later on, the efforts of women labour inspectors generally followed a maternalistic logic, focusing as they did on improving the conditions of babies (and, consequently, their working mothers) and underage workers.

Practical limitations

Both the 1919 provisional law and the 1928 decree on labour inspection generated an image of labour inspectors as powerful figures with expansive authority. In practice, however, they confronted numerous challenges that limited the impact of their efforts. Colleagues from the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance and other observers criticized the Labour Inspectorate as inadequate given the scope of its duties (Modliński 1932,

116; Ryngmanowa 1935). Despite the fact that inspectors were independent from local authorities, which enabled them to enjoy substantial autonomy, their interventions remained limited due to serious financial constraints, the Inspectorate's small number of personnel, and an extremely wide array of tasks they were required to perform. A particularly time-consuming task was the mediation of individual and collective labour conflicts, a function also performed by labour inspectors in the Russian partition. For instance, in the early years of Halina Krahelska's career at the Warsaw Labour Inspectorate (1919–1921), she exclusively moderated disputes and did not perform a single factory visit (Krahelska 1936a, 103). This part of their workload was gradually alleviated after 1928, when a law introducing labour courts was implemented (Rozporządzenie 1928).

Throughout the second half of the 1920s and the 1930s, the number of inspectors and deputy inspectors – taken together – held relatively steady at around one hundred, reaching 116 in 1936; but the number of enterprises they had to visit continuously grew during the same period. Dr. Melania Bornstein-Łychowska, a researcher for the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance, estimated that the number of enterprises each inspector would need to visit per year grew from roughly thirty-five in 1919 to more than 180 in 1927 (Bornstein-Łychowska 1928, 70). This situation became even more acute in the 1930s due to the 1930–1935 economic crisis, which led to the break-up of larger enterprises (Jończyk 1961, 15–26). Insufficient funds for factory visits, especially when it came to enterprises outside of the main cities, was a related problem. The lack of travel funds was so severe that some inspectors in the provinces spent their entire quarterly budget on one field trip (Krahelska 1928a, 375). This state of affairs led inspectors to prioritize larger urban enterprises because visits to these sites formally allowed them to regulate the labour conditions of more workers.

Throughout the whole period discussed here, women inspectors were consistently present only in Warsaw and Łódź, which impacted the Women's Inspectorate's realm of action. It remained highly focused on the labour conditions of women industrial workers, ignoring the two largest groups of female labourers, namely agricultural and domestic workers. In 1931, there were 415,000 women in Poland employed as domestic workers, and 515,000 worked in agriculture; only 325,000 women total were employed in all branches of industry (Jończyk 1961, 16).

These practical limitations, I argue, partially shaped women inspectors' activist stance. Faced with the daunting task of improving the condition of working women and minors and possessing only limited resources to pursue it, they turned to research and publishing as a way to communicate to the general public the exploitative and dangerous conditions in which these workers laboured. They saw themselves not merely as executors of the state's will but as political actors: with their publications, they sought to win in the court of public opinion and thereby influence political decisions.

Childcare as a cause

The Women's Inspectorate identified the organization of day care for the infant children of mothers employed in factories as the most pressing issue to tackle. High infant mortality rates among the children of factory-employed mothers stood at the centre of social reform and medical circles in Poland and internationally already by the late nineteenth century. This issue was particularly dire in the textile

manufacturing centres of the Russian partition. In 1904, a group of Polish doctors organized the association *Kropla mleka* ("A drop of milk"), which distributed sterilized milk to infants in the industrial towns of Congress Poland, most notably in Łódź (Labbé 2018). In the decades that followed, staggering infant mortality rates continued to attract the attention of medical professionals and social reformers alike.

In a brochure published in 1927, Dr. Zofia (Zofja) Garlicka, a former factory doctor and activist affiliated with *Kropla mleka*, argued that the problem of infant mortality remained acute. She suggested two possible solutions: ensuring the care of the mother by securing her income or providing childcare at the factory. The latter, she argued, was more realistic. Nurseries could both adequately care for infants while their mothers were at work and encourage mothers to breastfeed longer, as the 1924 law granted two thirty-minute breaks to working mothers still breastfeeding (Garlicka 1927, 11). Garlicka directly relied on the information collected by women labour inspectors and supported their efforts to create on-site childcare facilities.

A Polish innovation, establishment of day care facilities at factories employing more than one hundred women was prescribed by the 1924 law on the labour of women and minors (Ustawa 1924, art. 15, p. 2). The implementation of this particular point, however, was immediately postponed because of a large-scale lobbying and press campaign initiated by factory owners who claimed that the installation of nurseries was financially unfeasible. In an attempt to undermine workers' support, employers spread rumours that a share of their wages would be deducted in order to create such facilities even though the cost was supposed to be covered by industrialists themselves (Leśniewska 1929). In 1926, this provision was postponed for a second time, and it was not until 1927 that the situation began to change. In March that year, a decree of the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance again stated that the creation of nurseries was obligatory. The Women's Inspectorate was charged with the implementation of this measure, which it continued to do until 1939. Between 1927 and 1929, Halina Krahelska and Maria (Marja) Leśniewska spearheaded the promotion of nurseries among workers through general publications and the workers' press, and through public lectures held at companies, trade unions, workers' clubs, and on the radio (Leśniewska 1929, 73). They also lobbied state-owned enterprises to instal nurseries. This démarche proved successful, and state companies established fifteen of the first twenty-one nurseries. The State Tobacco Monopoly, which at the time employed 8,853 women, was the first to establish creches, followed by the State Alcohol and Matches Monopolies (Leśniewska 1931, 24; Aperçu 1929, 7). To document these initial successes, Leśniewska wrote a book that was released as an official publication of the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance (Leśniewska 1931). Large portions of it were translated into French (76–108) and English (111–120), demonstrating a clear orientation towards the international social reform community. The volume explicitly referred to the 1919 ILO Maternity Protection Convention and described the efforts to create nurseries as an important and innovative expansion of the Convention – despite the fact that Poland had not ratified it.

Conversely, the creation of nurseries at privately owned factories remained challenging. Large textile entrepreneurs proved particularly resistant. Well-informed about the required conditions for the nurseries, they used the size of their enterprises as an argument to claim the financial impossibility of constructing childcare

facilities: some of the larger factories, such as “Scheibler and Grohmann,” employed thousands of women, which meant there would be hundreds of infants in need of care. Because prevailing hygienic and sanitary standards limited the number of children in one nursery to between seventy and one hundred children, factory owners claimed that the establishment of several on-site nurseries was unaffordable (Krahelska 1928b, 179).

The Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance rejected these excuses, expanding the possible forms child care facilities could take. Stationery day nurseries remained the prerogative of large state enterprises, but inspectors were willing to consider alternative care facilities in compliance with the law. One of the early adopters of the policy of diversification was the State Alcohol Monopoly, which offered home-based nursing assistance to mothers in their employ (Krahelska 1928c, 299).

By 1931, there were 101 care facilities in Poland offering childcare services to around 25 percent of women legally entitled to it. The onset of an economic crisis that resulted in mass lay-offs of women workers, however, also halted the development of these facilities for several years; only in 1936 did their overall number surpass that of 1931 (Pawelska 1939, 166–167). The textile industry continued to be exceptionally deficient in terms of providing childcare to working mothers: in 1936, there were 37,690 women workers in Łódź alone who were entitled to this support, but only 1,118 children were actually in some form of day care. Only two stationery nurseries were created in Łódź; the rest of children were cared for in alternative facilities (Inspekcja Pracy 1937, 13). These facilities were not provided by employers; instead, associations like *Kropla mleka* in Łódź or the Society for Infant Care (*Towarzystwo Opieki nad Niemowlętami*) in Warsaw ran them, and labour inspectors ensured that their care met the prescribed standards (Pawelska 1939, 168). This intensified collaboration between the Women’s Inspectorate and independent associations was ostensibly an attempt to mitigate the effects of the prolonged economic crisis: these care stations first opened in 1935 (Miedzińska 1935a).

Providing childcare also hinged on the availability of qualified care workers. The education of nurses for the factory day nurseries and care stations, a task at the intersection of maternity protection and professional training, could not be realized with only the limited resources of the Women’s Inspectorate. In Warsaw, at two of the first nurseries to be established, the Inspectorate set up two facilities for the practical training of new personnel to be employed across the country. Experienced nurses oversaw the work and professional training of new recruits, which closely followed the guidelines set out by the Inspectorate. According to Leśniewska, by 1929, around forty women had successfully completed this program (Leśniewska 1929, 74). However, by 1 January 1929, the number of nurseries and care stations reached sixty-five, and the need for new personnel could barely be met by the graduates of the Inspectorate’s training program alone (Leśniewska 1931, Table C). A parallel three-month program was established by Dr Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka, a physician, women’s rights activist, and the deputy president of the Central Women’s Section of the Polish Socialist Party (*Centralny Wydział Kobiety PPS*). Like Halina Krahelska, Budzińska-Tylicka was a member of the Political Club of Progressive Women (*Klub Polityczny Kobiet Postępowych*), a prominent political alliance of well-to-do women fighting for women’s rights (Dufrat 2013, 106). The first group to attend the program included twenty-six women who had travelled from various regions of the country to pursue their training in Warsaw. These women worked in orphanages, hospitals, and

other childcare institutions and were instructed on matters of infant health and wellbeing (Budzińska-Tylicka 1927). It is unclear where the funding for these two programs came from and what their budget was, but their structure suggests they were extremely limited in terms of finances: both programs were short and designed in a way that combined training with work and, thus, minimized the resources needed to operate the program.

Between 1935 and 1939, the number of various types of care facilities and infants in care tripled – from 81 to 244 facilities, and from 3,900 to 10,227 children. But the number of factory nurseries hovered slightly above thirty throughout the 1930s (Pawelska 1939, 166). Most of these nurseries belonged to state-owned enterprises and were established during the initial push for maternity protections between 1927 and 1929. Despite the financial crisis and private entrepreneurs' reluctance to invest in permanent infant day care, a growing number of children entered care facilities thanks to the ministry's inclusive interpretation of the law, women labour inspectors' persistent focus on the issue, and the Inspectorate's cooperation with other activists and public associations.

Ensuring the fair employment of minors

Along with overseeing and promoting the creation of childcare facilities for the infant children of working mothers, women labour inspectors implemented the second central tenet of the 1924 law, the regulation of the labour of minors. Despite the fact that the labour of children under fifteen years old was prohibited with the adoption of the 1921 (March) Constitution and then again by the implementation of the 1924 law, at the end of 1920s, there still were some 2,500 children between the ages of nine and fourteen employed, typically at small enterprises as attested to by the records of the health insurance fund (*kasy chorych*) (Kirstowa 1928). Enforcing the ban on child labour, although an important target of the inspectors' interventions, was overshadowed by a host of problems related to the employment of young people *above* fifteen. According to the decree on industrial law, workers between fifteen and eighteen years old could be employed either with a regular work contract or a special apprenticeship contract (Rozporządzenie ... o prawie przemysłowem 1927b, art. 111–125). This law legalized earlier "apprenticeship" arrangements but did little to standardize vocational training and ensure the labour rights of apprentices. Janina Miedzińska, the Inspectorate's leading expert on the labour of minors, criticized the law mercilessly: "the Polish decree departs significantly from the fundamental essence of modern industrial life [and] introduces the harmful appearance of learning a trade on the premises of a workplace and thus obscures the actual relationship of the employer to the employee, to the detriment of the latter" (Miedzińska 1931, 128).

Labour inspectors identified two interrelated problems: the over-exploitation of (under)paid minors and youngsters under the guise of "apprenticeships," and the lack of actual vocational training and adequate general education for labouring youth. Although the 1924 law banned the unpaid labour of minors, an "apprentice" status effectively provided a legal loophole that allowed employers to underpay youngsters—or not pay them at all. In some cases, apprentices were even forced to pay tuition fees. According to Halina Krahelska, along with the lack of coherent regulations regarding apprenticeships, a high level of youth unemployment during the economic crisis exacerbated the situation (Krahelska 1934).

The conflation of the unregulated labour of minors with the promise of education stood at the core of the very issue inspectors were fighting against. Intended as training programs for underage workers, apprenticeships were also common among the older youth. Up to 47 percent of workers between eighteen and twenty-one years old in Warsaw were classified as apprentices at the end of the 1920s; in Łódź, it was as high as 40 percent of workers in this age group (Jończyk 1961, 283). At the same time, the issue was heavily gendered: in the case of the printing industry, inspector Emilia Frelkowa stressed that apprentices were exclusively boys as girls had no opportunities to receive training and were indefinitely relegated to the lowest-paid menial jobs like cleaning or arranging fonts (Frelkowa 1929, 39). At the end of the 1920s, small numbers of girls laboured as apprentices in the garment industry, where they often worked extremely long hours for meagre wages (Kirstowa 1936a).

Employers frequently only had oral contracts with apprentices, which further facilitated abuses, allowing them to fire youngsters at will (despite the fact that an apprenticeship was typically intended to last four years), push them towards menial tasks instead of teaching various skills related to a trade, and alter or reduce their pay. Inspecting contracts fell within the immediate scope of the Women's Inspectorate, but the regularization of apprentices' status was a persistent challenge for the inspectors.

Ensuring the fair employment of minors also became grounds for cooperation between trade unions and the Labour Inspectorate, as discussed in the book by deputy labour inspector Emilia Frelkowa about the labour conditions of minors in the printing industry. This short volume was based on materials collected during two surveys conducted in cooperation with two trade unions. Paying attention to the distinct status of apprentices and the degree of worker-led labour organizing across the former partitions, the book painted a grim portrait of apprentices' working conditions at the end of the 1920s. Frelkowa described the existing system as an extremely exploitative arrangement that left young people inexperienced, underpaid, and exhausted, if not permanently disabled. Regardless of size and location, printing enterprises disproportionately relied on the underpaid—or altogether unpaid—labour of “apprentices.” Two-thirds of enterprises surveyed employed underage workers, and their proportion of the workforce ranged from 30 percent to 100 percent (Frelkowa 1929, 14). They often remained, Frelkowa lamented, underqualified “helpers” in perpetuity (Frelkowa 1929, 21). The survey revealed that 80.8 percent of all apprentices performed the same tasks during the entire duration of the apprenticeship, which made it impossible for them to acquire the skills necessary to advance in the printing trade. While 49.5 percent of apprentices who completed the survey had a qualified worker assigned to them as an instructor, another 42.5 percent did not (Frelkowa 1929, 24). In the book, trade union representatives and the labour inspectors unanimously identified the overexploitation of underpaid adolescent workers—along with growing mechanization—as the root cause of growing unemployment among adult printers. With this book, Frelkowa entered into discussions going on in the public sphere, that is, beyond her strictly professional circles, with the goal of exposing pervasive, systemic labour law violations in the printing industry.

To mobilize public opinion around the issue of apprenticeships, women labour inspectors used the discursive framework of the *Sanacja* regime, established by Jozef Piłsudski after the May 1926 coup. The *Sanacja* called for the “healing” of Polish political and social life through the “moral revival” of the Polish nation. This patriotic narrative shaped the

agendas of various social and political activists and movements, including activists in the women's movement (Plach 2014). Labour inspectors used *Sanacja* rhetoric to achieve their own goals: Emilia Frelkowa argued that the existing system of apprenticeships destroyed adolescents not only physically due to dangerous working conditions, but also morally, as young people failed to develop a proper work ethic and appropriate expectations of fair remuneration for honest work (Frelkowa 1929, 16). Halina Krahelska continued to support the Women's Inspectorate's struggles well after she left the office in 1931. Although she explicitly distanced herself from Piłsudski and the *Sanacja* camp, she masterfully used similar discursive framing when she spoke about the labour of minors at the Congress of Moral Education held in Cracow in 1934. She argued that the wage labour of minors had to be adequately paid to instil good work ethics in youngsters (Krahelska 1934). To achieve this, she argued, vocational training had to be closely supervised by the Labour Inspectorate.

More generally, labour inspectors recommended a wide range of measures to improve the status of underage workers, especially apprentices, and ensure their education. Unsurprisingly, they typically advocated for stronger interventions by the state. In one early recommendation, Maria Kirstowa highlighted the dangers of teenagers' premature entry into the workforce and argued for the expansion of their educational opportunities. She proposed the creation of vocational schools for those who had successfully completed their compulsory education and argued that weaker students who initially failed to finish should be given the means and opportunity to prolong their education for another year (Kirstowa 1928). Janina Miedzińska argued that apprenticeships that took place in the workplace had to be abolished altogether, but she admitted that it was unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, she underscored, apprenticeship contracts had to become standardized and written to prevent abuses (Miedzińska 1931, 134). Nevertheless, in 1936, the official report of the Labour Inspectorate stated that improvements in this respect were minor, and the number of written contracts did not reflect the real number of apprentices (Inspekcja pracy 1937, 17).

These controversies and the limited achievements concerning the regularization of the labour of minors were reflected in the repeated legislative actions taken to confirm the prohibition of unpaid labour for workers between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. This ban was reaffirmed by the 1931 amendment to the 1924 law on the labour of women and children and the 1934 amendment to the decree on industrial law which specified that apprentices also had to be paid and which banned fees for apprenticeships (Ustawa 1931; Ustawa 1934b).

Beyond the 1924 law: silences and ambiguities

In this final section, I discuss several initiatives introduced by labour inspectors that went beyond the tenets of the 1924 law as they allow me to home in on the specificities of inspectors' activism and its limits. The cases discussed below demonstrate that inspectors' publications were shaped by but also attempted to transcend the conventions of the time.

The official publications of the Women's Inspectorate, which were sponsored by the state, remained constrained by the nationalist agenda of leading political circles (Davies 2005, 298–303). While the category of class was frequently visible in their writings, the

category of ethnicity remained conspicuously absent. Jewish labourers were numerous yet marginalized in the labour market, and typically, they could find work only in the smallest workshops that rarely observed any labour norms (Garncarska-Kadary 1994, 241–242). Memoirs confirm that in Warsaw, inspectors routinely performed their duties at enterprises and workshops that employed significant numbers of Jewish workers (Kirstowa 1936b, 222). In official publications, however, the distinct problems faced by Jewish workers or workers from other minority groups were not mentioned. An example of this silence is Frelkowa's book, discussed above. This volume was the result of a collaborative effort between the Women's Inspectorate, which prepared questionnaires, and two trade unions, which distributed them, gathered responses, and provided comments on and explanations of the survey data. The two unions involved in this initiative were the Polish Trade Union of Printers and Related Professions (*Związek Zawodowy Drukarzy i Pokrewnych Zawodów*) and the Jewish Trade Union of Printing Workers (*Związek Zawodowy Robotników Drukarskich*). While in the text of the book both trade unions were mentioned and lauded for their efforts, only the Polish trade union was featured on the cover (Frelkowa 1929).

Ethnic discrimination was not the only matter on which women labour inspectors remained largely silent in their mainstream publications. The ministry's official journal *Labour and Social Assistance* (*Praca i Opieka Społeczna*) and other similar outlets focused heavily on successes and challenges related to the implementation of the 1924 law; it otherwise avoided taboo issues such as sexual violence against women workers. In her memoirs, Halina Krahelska stated that in 1930, pursuing a hypothesis that the number of cases of abuse and harassment of women workers had increased during the economic crisis, she attempted to collect information on the subject and sent requests to other women inspectors, but she mostly received cursory responses (Krahelska 1936b, 31–32). The only exception was Maria (Marja) Przedborska, an inspector from Łódź, who not only researched the scope and forms of workplace abuse but disseminated her results to the public. In 1932, Przedborska published eight anonymized testimonies of women workers abused at their workplace in a local newspaper (Przedborska 1932). The oldest of these women was thirty-nine, while the youngest was twenty. In these testimonies, the women reported being continuously harassed and eventually dismissed for "low morals" if or when they dared resist the abusers' sexual advances. In her introduction to the testimonies, Przedborska lamented that the economic crisis significantly limited workers' ability to resist or change jobs: with rampant unemployment, women workers feared countering harassment as this typically entailed their termination. She also added that as a deputy inspector for the labour of women and children, there was relatively little she could do to help these women take action against their abusers: once fired, these workers, with the support of Przedborska, were able to obtain the two-week pay to which they were legally entitled. She had no other means at her disposal to improve their situation, especially because many of them wanted her to remain discreet and not pursue any legal action. Drawing public attention to such abuses, thus, became a challenging but potentially powerful way of allowing women workers to speak openly about harassment and seek legal redress.

Although perceptive and transgressive in her explicit discussion of the gendered dimension of workplace sexual violence, Przedborska identified class oppression as its root cause. According to her, the unchecked power of executives, managers, and foremen

meant that women workers were under constant threat of abuse. She mentioned an instance of class solidarity, when the harassment of a woman worker by a superior provoked her male colleagues on the shop floor to strike. But Przedborska remained completely silent about another likely dimension of workplace violence: abuse perpetrated male workers against their female colleagues. In her seminal article on class and gender in the workplace, Diane Koenker has elucidated these problematic aspects of working-class culture in the early Soviet Union, but comparable research for other Central and Eastern European contexts remains necessary (Koenker 1995).

As mediators between the state, workers, and employers, labour inspectors had to craft their narratives and tailor their attempts to improve women workers' labour and living conditions carefully in order to prevent antagonizing one or all of these groups. The methods they used to deal with the tangle of issues related to workplace accidents, labour-related exhaustion, and occupational diseases helps us better understand the challenges and ambiguities they confronted. Combatting work accidents was one of the core tasks of all inspectors; narrowly defined, it implied ensuring both compliance with workplace security and hygiene standards and the adequate training of workers. The need to reduce the number of work accidents was uncontroversial, but the measures to achieve this goal, as well as employers' and workers' responses to them, differed: the removal of women workers from occupations deemed too arduous for them (as women) or attempts to significantly transform the workflow at factories could elicit outrage.

As the first head of the Women's Inspectorate, Halina Krahelska pushed for early intervention on these issues. Similar to the issue of on-site childcare facilities, she focused on state companies to ensure swift and concrete changes in women workers' labour conditions. She successfully argued for the need to introduce seated work for women in the various factories of the State Tobacco and Alcohol Monopolies as means to reduce exhaustion and prevent the long-term deleterious effects of prolonged standing on women's health (Krahelska 1932, 131–132).

In the years that followed, women inspectors sought to understand women workers' issues more holistically. A deputy labour inspector from Cracow named Irena Zimmerspitzówna proposed an expansive research program as she explicitly connected the prevalence of workplace accidents with the overwhelming amount of household labour and care work women performed in addition to their paid work. Declaring that inspectors' efforts in this domain were unsystematic and limited due to the lack of information, she argued there was a need to conduct surveys among women workers and research their lives beyond the factory gates – their marital status and number of children – in order to fully grasp the entangled issues of workplace accidents and physical and psychological exhaustion as a gendered phenomenon. According to Zimmerspitzówna, indiscriminate changes to an isolated aspect of the workplace, such as the introduction of a seated instead of standing physical position for a particular task, did not necessarily result in positive changes for women workers. Instead, inspectors could cooperate with workers to learn which changes were most urgent (Zimmerspitzówna 1932).

While Zimmerspitzówna's article primarily outlined a research agenda, Janina Miedzińska advocated for practical measures that went beyond the workplace. Rest and leisure, she argued, were important parts of the labouring lives of women workers, and the state needed to ensure that the free time of workers was spent in a manner that

benefitted them. As head of the Women's Inspectorate, she contributed to the development of a physical education program and coordinated holiday camps for women workers. The physical education program, which the Ministry of Labour and Social Assistance organized in cooperation with the State Agency for Physical Education and Military Training (*Państwowy Urząd Wychowania Fizycznego i Przysposobienia Wojskowego*), had two main modalities: in Warsaw, it generally implied ten-minute exercise sessions held in the workplace, while in Poznań and Cracow, district community centres were used to provide women workers with opportunities to exercise outside of working hours. Once again, state enterprises were the privileged terrain for the Inspectorate's initiatives; the State Alcohol Monopoly introduced ten-minute exercise breaks in all its factories (Miedzińska 1935).

Both Zimmerzpitzówna and Miedzińska carefully avoided criticizing the controversial rationalization of production as a possible reason for labour-related exhaustion. According to Zimmerzpitzówna, it was the task of inspectors to reduce workers' physical efforts without sacrificing their productivity. Similarly, to make the measures she championed more palatable to employers, Miedzińska, along with documenting the lowering of workers' blood pressure and other positive physical effects of exercise, stressed that reinvigorated workers were able maintain their productivity levels despite prolonged breaks for exercise.

Conclusion

Writing after her departure from the Inspectorate, Halina Krahelska offered a radical vision of the future of labour inspection in Poland. To substantially improve the conditions of all women workers, she argued, it was necessary for trade unionists to become assistants to labour inspectors. She criticized the prevailing legislation on worker-assistants (*Rozporządzenie . . . o inspekcji pracy* 1927a) for putting them in an extremely subordinate position. Drawing on examples from Austria, Germany, and England, she proposed establishing a system of voluntary assistants which would allow trade union activists of both genders to cooperate with the Inspectorate as active citizens and not as bureaucrats; she also called for expanding the corps of women inspectors (Krahelska 1932, 122–125, 129–131). On another occasion, she insisted that a labour inspector's proactive stance during factory visits could be decisive for producing tangible improvements to workers' conditions in a given enterprise (Krahelska 1936a, 121).

While such an inspectorate—cross-class, balanced in terms of gender, and activist in its orientation—failed to materialize, I argue that women labour inspectors in interwar Poland took an activist stance when interpreting and implementing legislation regarding the labour of women and minors. The ambitious yet vague law of 2 July 1924 created a roadmap that guided their activities, both in terms of their practical interventions and research topics, until 1939. Their precise research questions and areas of concern were not limited to those expressly defined in the 1924 law, and they changed and expanded over fifteen years. Women labour inspectors were involved not only in the creation of material infrastructure for working women, such as childcare facilities and summer camps, but also endeavoured to educate the public on the problems women and minors faced as marginalized workers in the Polish economy. The arenas in which women inspectors were active extended far beyond the shop floor and the court room, the latter of which they used to

ensure enterprises' compliance with labour legislation. They sought to expand the inevitably limited impact of their interventions in the workplace by adhering to the strategy of using the press and other publications to expose particularly exploitative labour arrangements to gain the support of (transnational) labour rights and social welfare activists and the wider Polish public.

Note

1. Although the terms "labour inspection," "labour inspectorate," and "factory inspection" are commonly used interchangeably to denote the agencies responsible for the implementation of labour legislation, throughout the text, for the sake of consistency, I refer to the agency as the Labour Inspectorate (*Inspekcja Pracy*), while "labour inspection" denotes the process itself.

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OPEN ACCESS



“Millions of working housewives”: the International Co-operative Women’s Guild and household labour in the interwar period

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on household labour as one of the key agendas of the International Co-operative Women’s Guild (ICWG) and on the contributions Central and Eastern European countries made to this agenda in the interwar period. I argue that ICWG women made household labour a policy issue in its own right and provided space for debates between women of diverse ideological positions coming from different political and economic systems and national contexts. Zooming in on key publications and paying attention to the organizational dynamics and complex relationship between communists and social democrats in the ICWG, I first explore how the ICWG discussed household labour and the solutions it offered to reduce the burden of such work. In the second part of the analysis, I argue that because it was crucial to their work, ICWG women inserted aspects of household labour into international discussions on women’s and/or labour-related issues. By doing so, they tried to 1) establish themselves as experts on household labour-based issues and 2) advance how topics such as popular nutrition and maternal deaths were approached in international settings.

KEYWORDS

International Co-operative Women’s Guild; cooperatives; household labour; women’s activism

All the many housewives who work in the cells, so to speak, of our economic organism – the homes – must be united and educated by our Guild. That is to say that we want to unite and educate half mankind and train them for common work inside and outside the house [...] it is a question also of freeing the housewives from all prejudices, of protecting them against all prejudices which hinder their public work and of securing them that recognition from the community which today is wanting, for the housewife’s work is still always regarded as an inferior economic service in the life of nations. (Freundlich 1927, 1)

This is how Emmy Freundlich, a president of the International Co-operative Women’s Guild (ICWG) and one of the leading Austrian social democrats in the interwar period, greeted her fellow cooperative women at the international conference held in Stockholm in 1927. The quote (and its authorship) touches upon two issues I address as relevant for this article. Out of the many angles, perspectives, and valuable research topics on the International Guild and its activism, I pull out and search for links between 1) the

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contributions of Central and Eastern European countries to the international women's cooperative movement, and 2) the centrality of household labour in the ICWG's work during the interwar period.

The international cooperative movement was the only interwar pillar of the international social democratic movement that had a women's organization (ICWG) with a strong Soviet branch. Emmy Freundlich, the ICWG's long-time president and one of the most influential cooperative women at the international level, came from the Austrian cooperative movement. Other Central and Eastern European countries also joined the ICWG and brought the particularities of their respective national political and economic contexts to the organizational agenda of the ICWG in the interwar period. Therefore, I analyse the work of the ICWG, but I am not looking *only* at contributions by women from Central and Eastern Europe. However, I do pay special attention to the presence of Central and Eastern European countries in the movement, as well as the dynamics between communist and non-communist women in the ICWG because these were important factors in shaping the organization's work.

Second, I analyse household labour as a crucial theme in the International Guild's work. I argue that the ICWG made household labour a policy issue in its own right and transgressed the boundaries of consumer cooperation at the international level in the way it approached the issue during the interwar period. By focusing on key ICWG publications, I first address how household labour was discussed in meetings of the ICWG and which solutions were offered by whom. In the second part of the analysis, I situate the International Guild's work in the context of the lively universe of interwar international organizing. I argue that because it was crucial to their work, ICWG women inserted aspects of household labour into international discussions on women's and/or labour-related issues, especially in the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization. By doing so, they tried to 1) establish themselves as experts in household labour-based problems and solutions; and 2) advance how topics such as popular nutrition and maternal mortality were approached in international settings during the interwar period.

The International Guild and its Central and Eastern European affiliations

The following section provides a brief history of the International Guild and Central and Eastern Europe's affiliations and connections with it. Diversity both in terms of organizational models and ideologies has been one of the historical hallmarks of the cooperative movement. There are different approaches to categorizing types of cooperatives, and the distinction between them is not always clear. This article focuses on the international women's cooperative organization that brought together mainly women from consumer cooperatives during the interwar period. In his essays on global labour history, Marcel van der Linden defines "mutualism" and explains that it encompasses "all voluntary arrangements, in which people make contributions to a collective fund, which is given, in whole or in part, to one or more of the contributors according to specific rules of allocation" (Van der Linden 2008, 81). Consumer cooperatives, as a form of mutualism, are considered one of the strategies "for individuals and households to cope with conditions of scarcity, especially as regards basic foodstuffs and other essential supplies," but in many cases, the cooperatives also

met other consumer needs and went beyond them by focusing on education, connection with local communities, and other activities (Hilson, Neunsinger, and Patmore 2017, 8). The consumer cooperative movement began growing in Europe starting around 1860. By the end of World War One, it had spread across Europe, and in the interwar period, the movement was strong in parts of Central and Eastern Europe (Hilson 2017; Hilson, Neunsinger, and Patmore 2017, Hilson et al., 2018).

Historically, the consumer cooperative movement depended to a great extent on women because due to the gender division of labour, it was they who did the purchasing in cooperative stores. This argument about women's crucial role in the consumer cooperative movement, sometimes supported by numbers, was repeatedly trotted out by women advocating for the international organization of cooperative women in the interwar period. For example, in the same 1927 speech quoted above, Emmy Freundlich stated that statistics from some larger shops in Vienna showed that women were responsible for 80 percent of all purchases (Freundlich 1927, 1). However, although women were an important part of and played a major role in the consumer cooperative movement, historical scholarship on cooperative women has remained scarce. One of the most researched cooperative women's organizations has been the English Women's Co-operative Guild, founded in 1883 (Blaszak 1986, 2000; Cohen 2020; Gaffin 1977; Gurney 2020; Scott 1994, 1998, 2007). Because the English Guild has received the most scholarly attention and was also unquestionably influential at the international level, it is not surprising that what we know about the history of the ICWG is often filtered through the lens of the English presence and work in the ICWG (Black 1984; Hellawell 2021). Scholarship that has not focused on the experience of English women in the ICWG is quite limited. Two notable exceptions are a piece that focuses more generally on women in international cooperative organizing (Gómez Urquijo 1998) and one that sheds light on the Central and Eastern European and communist presence in the ICWG (Zemzyulina 2017).

Long before their organization into a separate women's branch, women were active in and contributed to the cooperative movement at the international level. But these contributions have not been extensively addressed in the scholarship on the men-dominated international cooperative organization, the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA). Women, specifically women in the British movement, participated in discussions and meetings dedicated to the idea of international cooperative organizing, and they attended the first ICA congress in London in 1895 (Gómez Urquijo 1998, 36; Rhodes 1995, 20; Watkins 1970, 32). The first step towards establishing an international women's cooperative organization was taken when women representatives from the cooperative movements of Austria and England met at the ICA Congress in Glasgow in 1913 (Freundlich 1936a, 12; Webb 1927, 169). However, these early efforts were stymied by the First World War. Consequently, the first international meeting took place at the ICA Congress in Basel in 1921; Austrian and English organizations had organized the event. Invitation letters were sent to twenty-nine countries, and in the end, forty women from seven countries (Austria, Czechoslovakia, England, Holland, the Soviet Union, Switzerland, and the United States) attended the conference and formed a preparatory committee that was supposed to lay the foundations for the women's international organization. Emmy Freundlich was elected president, and A. Honora Enfield from the English Guild was chosen to be the secretary of the new committee (Cohen 2020, 213–215; Enfield 1921,

1932; Preparatory Committee 1921). From 1921 to 1924, the committee took preparatory steps, and the International Co-operative Women's Guild was founded at a conference held in Ghent in 1924.

The International Guild was an organization with its own rules, governing bodies, and subscription fees, but it still maintained close financial ties to the ICA. The International Conference (held at the same time as the ICA's Congress) was the "highest governing authority," and the Central Committee administrated the ICWG's affairs (ICWG 1924a). Conferences took place in Basel (1921), Ghent (1924), Stockholm (1927), Vienna (1930), and London (1934). The 1937 conference in Paris was the last interwar conference, and the first conference after the conclusion of the Second World War took place in Zurich in 1946. For the national organizations to be fully accepted as members of the International Guild, they had to either be completely autonomous organizations with their own subscriptions and memberships or organizations of women already holding positions within mix-gender cooperative societies. The ICWG accepted both options under the condition that organizations had their own rules and governing bodies (Freundlich 1924, 6–7; ICWG 1924a). Many countries could not meet this requirement and, therefore, could not join the ICWG in the 1920s. However, one of the ICWG's main activities in the 1920s was advocating for the establishment of national women's guilds that could, later on, join the international organization.

Except for Austria, Central and Eastern European countries did not have fully affiliated representatives in the International Guild until 1927, when the Czechoslovakian branch was fully accepted as the eleventh member. The Soviet branch became a member in 1929, the German organization in Czechoslovakia joined in 1930, and Bulgaria joined in 1931. The Ukrainian guild of Poland, which was unique in that it was formed as a section within the bigger women's organization and represented women mostly from rural producer cooperatives, became an affiliate of the ICWG in 1933. Finally, Poland joined in 1936 (Committee 1930, 1934, 1937; GEC-Verband 1937; Freundlich 1936a; ICWG 1928). However, this does not mean that these guilds had no say in the ICWG prior to their formal affiliation with it. Delegations from Central and Eastern European countries that were not fully affiliated (they lacked voting rights) attended the ICWG's conferences. Also, some of them were first co-opted members, i.e. their representatives attended Central Committee meetings before being accepted to full membership.

To get a full picture of the International Guild's outreach, it is useful to look outside the official body and membership. The ICWG made a significant effort to correspond with cooperative women all over the world that were still unaffiliated with the international organization. Although it was often the case that many countries would not respond to the questionnaires sent by the ICWG, the ICWG did include progress in other countries in its reports on certain topics. For example, a report discussing the issue of low prices versus high dividends included information collected from the cooperative association of Yugoslavia, although Yugoslavia joined the ICWG only after World War Two, in 1951 (ICWG n.d.-a, 2). The president and secretary of the ICWG also took trips to countries that were not (fully) affiliated in order to connect with cooperative women. Emmy Freundlich visited Germany and Czechoslovakia and held a series of lectures there (Committee 1924, 2). In 1925, A. Honora Enfield travelled to the Soviet Union as a part of a delegation of the British section of Workers' International Relief (ICWG 1926, 4), and in 1928, she took an extended trip to Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Poland, and the Soviet

Union (Enfield 1928). Critical engagement with these trips and a decolonial analysis of other possible problematic zones in the International Co-operative Women's Guild's work is outside the scope of this article, but they are, in any case, important topics for further research.

Household labour—How to ease the burden

From the very beginning, the aims of the International Guild were to “unite the co-operative women of all lands a) for the development of the spirit of Co-operation, b) for the furtherance of the principles and practice of Co-operation, c) for the raising of the conditions of home life, d) for International Peace” (Freundlich 1936a, 14–15). So, the ICWG's agenda revolved around the economy and ideology of cooperation, improvements in the sphere of household labour, and peace. ICWG women also dealt with women's political and civil rights. On top of these goals, the ICWG vigorously advocated for more women to be appointed to administrative and decision-making positions within the cooperative movement. It also used its international platform to ask all affiliated organizations to send help in crises such as the Russian famine, the invasion of the Ruhr, or the struggles in the mining industry in England in 1926 (Committee 1927, 8–9).

The International Guild also extensively promoted and engaged in educational activities. It advocated for the inclusion of women's pages in the cooperative press and the organization of schools and seminars, exhibitions, and demonstrations (ICWG 1924b). At the same time, the ICWG participated in knowledge production for these events through its reports, pamphlets, and booklets. Typically, it would disseminate questionnaires on certain topics, collect and publish the responses it received from national guilds, advocate for the campaigns based on those findings, and then report on these campaigns and activities conducted at the national level.

Household labour was central to the International Guild throughout its existence, not only in terms of its activism – which will be thoroughly discussed in the rest of this article – but also in terms of its identity and positioning. ICWG women undoubtedly considered household labour as *work* and as one of the core problems of working-class housewives' lives. However, sources reveal some ambiguities in how the ICWG women conceptualized and represented themselves and “the housewife.” They claimed they represented “millions of working housewives and mothers” (ICWG 1927c). From conference files, reports, and publications, it is often very unclear whether they addressed mainly working-class non-employed homemakers or working-class wage-earning women who also performed household labour. Sometimes these ICWG materials were very explicit in claiming that they represented non-employed married homemakers, but then they had entire discussions in which they elaborated on the problems of wage-earning women with regard to household labour. Finally, sometimes they would simply use the term: “the housewife” and remained ambiguous about its precise meaning. The analysis of these ambiguities and the many ways “the housewife” was conceptualized is outside the scope of this article, but I find these issues indicative of the ICWG's multiple approaches to household labour.

In the following subsections, I first analyse the major general debates within the International Guild regarding household labour and the ways in which the presence of Central and Eastern European countries and social democratic and communist women

shaped these disputes and their outcomes. Second, I examine how the ICWG used household labour as a foundation to claim expertise in an international setting and as a way to advance international discussions on other women's and labour-related issues.

The ICWG's publications and discussions

Scholars who research the English Guild have explored its focus on the housewife (mainly a non-wage-earning woman) and her rights as a working-class woman both in the domestic and public sphere. But not much has been written about the International Guild's activism around relieving women of the hardships of household labour in the interwar period, although it was indeed an international organization in which household labour was a crucial part of the agenda.

"The raising of the conditions of home life" was among the aims listed in the International Guild's rules, and the issue of household labour was taken up by it from the very beginning. In the interwar period, the ICWG addressed numerous topics belonging or connected to the sphere of household labour, such as price reductions, low prices versus high dividends, health and nutrition, maternal death rates, laundries, labour-saving devices, family allowances, leisure time for women, etc. Thus, the ICWG participated in a much broader interwar debate on women and social reproduction, but it was unique in the variety of answers it gave to some key questions, namely: What are the means to reduce the household labour burden of women? How can this sphere of life be reshaped?

In this subsection, the article zooms in on the ICWG's key publications on household labour and addresses the following questions: How did the ICWG women conceptualize, present, and discuss household labour? What kind of solutions did they offer to lessen the burden, and what roles did different economic and political systems, national contexts, and ideological positions play in formulating those solutions?

The Family Wash and the drudgery of doing laundry

In the period between 1921 and 1924, "the reform of domestic work" was among the subjects the ICWG placed on the agenda for discussion and inquiry by national guilds (Committee 1924, 3–4). The 1924 conference in Ghent did not directly discuss household labour, but an extremely lively conference in Stockholm in 1927 raised a specific issue in the sphere of household labour: laundry. The conference file for Stockholm is richer than other conference files in the U DCX Hull History Centre's collection. It contains more material about discussions and voting than others, which provides a glimpse into both the angles and positions taken on the topics discussed in and the organizational dynamics of the ICWG. In the conference report, the topic of laundry was framed as "the drudgery of the washing-day," and the Stockholm conference was characterized as "probably the first time that working women have met to discuss internationally the problems of their home life" (ICWG 1927a, 2).

The Family Wash—the ICWG's international study on washing clothes presented and discussed in Stockholm – confirmed the ICWG's stance on household labour as hard work that should not be devalued and should be reduced with the goal of women's increased participation in public life. It was a detailed study of doing laundry and the categorization of that work. It brought to light the reality of women's household labour in many

countries (questionnaires were sent to twenty-two countries, but not all replied) during the interwar period. At the very beginning, washing clothes was described as the part of woman's work that was "the most burdensome to herself and the most upsetting to her family." Yet, it was stated that laundry was among those problems that could be easily solved through joint effort, so women could gain the "strength and leisure which she so much needs if she is to take her place in the wider life of the community" (ICWG 1927b, 1). The report distinguished between washing done at home (in the kitchen, outdoors, in special washhouses or wash-kitchens), with the help of labour-saving devices, in public laundries, and in cooperative laundries. It outlined problems concerning all the steps in the process: washing, bleaching, drying, and ironing. In the end, the study came up with a blend of solutions, varying from better equipment to a cautiously framed socialization of laundry – while highlighting advocacy and education as the main methods. It called for:

- (1) The provision in all new housing schemes of electrically equipped wash-houses attached to each block of dwellings for the common use of the tenants.
- (2) Where such houses are not available the establishment of public wash-houses under public or co-operative control.
- (3) The consideration by co-operative societies of the desirability of opening laundries to which members can send their clothes.
- (4) The stocking and hiring out of labour-saving appliances by co-operative societies.
- (5) Extended electrical facilities to make possible the use of up-to-date machinery.

It further urges co-operative women's organisations in all countries to bring these matters to the attention of the appropriate public authorities and of their co-operative movements, and to educate women in the possibilities and advantages of using labour-saving appliances individually or in common. (ICWG 1927b, 16)

The Stockholm conference brought to light the dynamics between communist and non-communist women in the organization. One of the guests at the conference was Hertha Sturm, the representative of the International Women's Secretariat of the Communist International. She wanted to give a speech in which she was critical of the ICWG: "The Guild has not yet broken through the narrow limits of the purely cooperative movement in order to establish jointly with the other workers' organisation a wide front for a fight against the offensive of the world's capital" (Sturm 1927, 2). However, she was not allowed to deliver that speech at the conference. In the correspondence between Sturm and the ICWG following the conference, ICWG secretary Enfield claimed that only representatives of the ICA were allowed to address the conference and reminded Sturm that the invitation she had received made this point clear. Enfield also informed Sturm that the speech could not be included in the protocol of the conference because the protocol contained only speeches that had been delivered at the conference (Enfield 1927). However, a copy of Sturm's speech was preserved in the conference file for Stockholm.

The Soviet Union was very active at the Stockholm Conference, discussing topics, (unsuccessfully) proposing amendments, and voting against almost all resolutions, together with two out of the three delegates from Czechoslovakia's newly accepted branch, Marie Vobecká and Betina Kaninská. In the official conference report, the delegations from Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union were described as those who were

singing “the International as a fitting termination to two days of strenuous work” (ICWG 1927a).

The Soviet Union expressed its disagreement with *The Family Wash* study as well. In her speech, Soviet representative Kravtschenko first praised *The Family Wash* for providing a lot of examples and rich evidence of the hardships women suffered from doing laundry. Here and elsewhere, communist women always thought of wage-earning women when talking about household labour: “The washing tub and the cooking pot devour the last bit of the free time that wage labour allows working women. They devour their last strength and rob them of their health” (Kravtschenko 1927, 1). While acknowledging that *The Family Wash* did not completely overlook the economic aspect of household labour, the Soviet Union was critical of the ICWG’s proposed solutions: “The problem of creating social washing facilities accessible to the broad masses cannot be solved by educating women or by appealing to the good will of the authorities. This problem can only be solved through the class struggle, the struggle between capital and labour” (Kravtschenko 1927, 2).

The Soviet Union advocated for more initiative from cooperatives in creating washing facilities and for closer collaboration with trade unions and workers’ parties on this and other issues. The speech emphasized that this collaboration was the only way to overthrow capitalism (Kravtschenko 1927, 2). The Soviet branch, therefore, was a very active part of the ICWG, but it supported the ICWG’s proposed measures only to a certain degree. Although their amendments to the resolutions in 1927 were not accepted, the Soviet women were given an opportunity to present their solutions to the problem(s) of household labour in an essay they submitted to the next conference, which was held in Vienna in 1930.

Are the Mothers of the Future at home or not?

Mothers of the Future was a key publication, consisting of three papers written by authors from Central and Eastern Europe that were submitted to the International Guild’s Vienna Conference in 1930. It helps paint a picture of the debates that were going on in the ICWG at the time about potential solutions to the overwhelming household labour connected to motherhood. The publication indicates the ICWG’s willingness to present and discuss communist positions in the social democratic organization, but it also demonstrates how the much wider international debate on women’s unpaid labour (Keating 2022; Zimmermann 2016) unfolded in one of the women’s organizations that claimed to represent housewives. The first paper “State Allowances for Mothers at Home” was written by Marie Nečásková, a representative of Czechoslovakia. Helen Butuzova from the Soviet Union authored the second paper entitled “Communal Services for Mothers at Work.” The last paper, “State Allowances or Communal Services: Which Do Women Want?” was prepared for the ICWG’s Committee by Emmy Freundlich. In the introduction to the publication, it was stated that the papers by Nečásková and Butuzova expressed the opinions of the writers and not of the ICWG Committee.

It is notable that the author of the first paper in *Mothers of the Future*, social democrat Marie Nečásková, was a part of the Czechoslovakian delegation at the Stockholm conference in 1927, and she did not support the Soviet Union’s ideas at that conference, unlike the other two (communist) delegates from Czechoslovakia. This case is one

example that shows that national delegations consisted of delegates from ideologically diverse backgrounds and reveals that alliances in the ICWG were sometimes built along ideological rather than national lines.

Nečásková addressed several labour-related issues in her 1930 account of the status of women and family allowances, directly referring to women engaged in gainful employment and, at the same time, romanticizing the role of stay-at-home mothers. She started her paper by explaining how proletarianization placed onto women “a three fold burden, to be wage-earners, mothers, and housewives” (Nečásková 1930, 3). She briefly pointed out how women earned less than men in factories as well as in administrative posts, and then turned to the compatibility of wage work and motherhood. She discussed several ways to help wage-earning mothers handle wage labour, households, and children. First, she praised the policy of granting maternity leave for six weeks before and six weeks after giving birth but claimed that even if this policy was adopted, children needed their mothers longer than just the first six weeks. She was sceptical about establishing communal services such as restaurants or common kitchens. Homes for children were unacceptable to Nečásková because they could ruin family life and deny children their right to a mother’s irreplaceable presence (Nečásková 1930, 7). In the end, she advocated for securing state allowances for mothers that should be paid directly to mothers, not fathers. The idea behind this position was that working mothers should be guaranteed economic independence to be able to dedicate parts of their lives to motherhood and not have to engage in wage work (Nečásková 1930, 8). The issue of family allowances that Nečásková brought up here was widely discussed and taken up by many organizations during the interwar period. There was, for example, a very lively debate on the issue in the labour movement in Britain (Thane 1991, 107–114), and the lack of support for such a policy by the international social democratic labour movement was among the reasons the International Labour Organization did not transform it into an international instrument in the interwar period (Zimmermann 2016, 39–43).

In her paper, Soviet representative Helen Butuzova approached the issue from a different perspective than Nečásková, advocating for the socialization of household labour not only through the creation of communal services but also by overthrowing the capitalist system and building a socialist world. She first gave an overview of the progress on women’s political and economic rights in the Soviet Union since the October Revolution and said that “the change from domestic to socialised economy frees the woman and places her on a footing of equality with the man” (Butuzova 1930, 10). She proceeded by listing everything the Soviet Union had done for the protection of mothers and children. However, she emphasized that what distinguished the Soviet Union from other countries was that this system was directed “not only to caring for the health of the women and children (the struggle against infant mortality, medical aid to women at confinement, &c.) but to creating conditions for the participation of women in industry, in the class struggle, in the building up of a new cultural life without any injury to the biological functions of the mother” (Butuzova 1930, 11).

Butuzova considered the consumer cooperative movement, which boasted the involvement of eight million women in the Soviet Union, to be responsible for “the Socialist reorganisation of daily life” through its establishment of laundries, restaurants, creches and kindergartens, etc (Butuzova 1930, 12). Her paper directly criticized what she called the “reformist women’s [organizations]” conceptualization of family allowances. She

claimed that the idea that women should give up paid work and be employed in households “leads to the enslavement of women to domestic drudgery, their isolation from public and political life, their eternal economic dependence upon their husbands, the impossibility of raising their cultural level” (Butuzova 1930, 14). However, Butuzova was also critical of women’s participation in paid labour in capitalist systems and concluded her paper by raising the issue of women’s double exploitation – at home and the workplace – and by advocating for overthrowing capitalism as the only way to secure women’s emancipation (Butuzova 1930, 14–15).

In the final paper, Emmy Freundlich listed various factors to be taken into account on the topic of family allowances versus communal services. She warned that neither of the two papers represented the International Guild’s position, and also explained that the ICWG would try to collect as much data as possible and study the issue further (Freundlich 1930, 16). Although extensive research was a part of the ICWG’s typical repertoires of action, in this case, the decision of postponing the formulation of an organizational position was probably influenced by the wider international debates on the subject. Freundlich’s paper did not discount the idea of family allowances, but it was very cautious about its applicability and tackled the question of to whom the allowances should be paid. Freundlich also introduced a third idea: easing the burden women bear in the household by making “labour-saving devices” more accessible to women and leaving them to decide:

Would they prefer to keep the system where each household does its own housekeeping or would they rather have communal houses where all the families are supplied with meals from one large kitchen and where one central organisation provides for all the family needs? Or, again, would they prefer to keep the small individual houses and make more use of labour-saving devices? Here habit, tradition, and personal inclination count for much. The question of cost, both to the family exchequer and the national exchequer must also be taken into consideration. (Freundlich 1930, 20)

At the beginning of the 1930s – the period when the most intense international debate on women’s unpaid labour took place, and after the Vienna conference – the ICWG continued to work on the issues raised in *Mothers of the Future*. Outlining necessary activities, the organization developed a five-step approach. As was usual for all important topics, the first step was collecting information from the national guilds: on family allowances; different kinds of communal services including childcare facilities, laundries, and public kitchens and restaurants; statistics on the employment of married women; and the effects of household labour and “other employment” on women’s health. The second step was to prepare a survey based on the data collected and points for discussion that could be used by cooperative women in their speeches or published in the press. In the third step, national branches were supposed to organize discussions and send reports to the International Guild; in turn, the ICWG was supposed to, in the fourth step, prepare a report to be presented at the next international conference. The fifth and final step was to promote the issue via the press and other means (ICWG n.d.-b). The ICWG sent the questionnaires to the national guilds to investigate the types of communal services that existed in various contexts as well as people’s experiences with different forms of family allowances. However, the study was not completed, so the idea for the next conference was to look at the issue from a different angle and discuss “the question of what the Co-

operative Movement itself can do through social services and enterprises, protection of the housewife's interests, increase of her purchasing power, &c., to relieve her of needles labour and raise her economic status" (Committee 1934, 17). In her letter read at the ICWG's Central Committee meeting in 1932, the Soviet representative also suggested having a subject connected to everyday life at the subsequent conference (Committee 1932, 7). The next two ICWG conferences, in 1934 and 1937, however, did not pay much attention to household labour, probably because, as Freundlich phrased it, the "PROMOTION OF PEACE has come to be more and more in the forefront of the Guild's activities" (Freundlich 1936a, 24).

As mentioned above, women's household labour was a topic taken up by social democratic organizations in the interwar period, and the International Guild collaborated with them. The issue was brought up at the Fourth International Women's Conference of the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) in Vienna in 1931 at which Emmy Freundlich represented the ICWG. At the beginning of her speech at the LSI conference, Freundlich claimed that "We are discussing to-day for the first time the subject of what attitude we Socialist women are adopting towards the household and the housewife. While at previous conferences we have discussed questions and reached conclusions concerning women in employment, we have never yet dealt with this question" (International Women's Committee of the LSI 1932, IX.48). Similar to what she advocated for in *Mothers of the Future* a year earlier, in her speech she emphasized the necessity of "very earnest, critical and well-considered" preliminary work before drafting a "Socialist programme for the housewife" (International Women's Committee of the LSI 1932, IX.48–49). It was the same conference at which socialist women in the LSI withdrew the idea of family allowances; the same was done by the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) a year later (Zimmermann 2016, 42). The Vienna conference also benefitted from the participation of women from Eastern Europe in terms of how they "brought novel urgency to issues such as the need to create international policies that protected agrarian workers and the struggle against fascism" (Ghit 2021).

The Housewives' Programme

In her 1936 book, Emmy Freundlich emphasized that the ICWG was "the first international women's organisation to draft a Housewives' Programme" (Freundlich 1936a, 23). Although previous subsections on *The Family Wash* and *Mothers of the Future* revealed tensions between different ideological stances and possible solutions to the problems associated with household labour, the *Housewives' Programme* shows that ICWG women managed to come up with an organizational document on this issue. The programme was adopted by the ICWG Committee in 1933 and was later used for international advocacy. It emphasized the twelve most important points for securing housewives' well-being. In the first place, it called for "1. Recognition, both in the family, socially, and at law, of the work of the woman in her home as a valuable social and economic service" (Committee 1933).

It continued with measures such as social insurance for housewives, education in the domestic economy, women's participation in the work concerning housing reform and other cooperative matters, the technical help cooperatives and local authorities could provide in connection to household labour, etc. It ended with calling for the global cooperation of housewives on the issue of peace. Regarding

the sphere of household labour and the position of women in households and their right to vacation, the programme also called for “7. Recognition of the right of mothers and housewives to freedom and holidays, and to all such provisions as may help to preserve their health and lighten their duties” (Committee 1933).

As this subsection shows, the ICWG stood at the core of debates concerning how to unburden working-class women of their household labour and how to address that work. It also provided a platform for the discussion of multiple approaches, from multiple ideological stances, to the issue.

International connections: expertise and the advancement of discussions

This subsection focuses on the ICWG’s role in interwar international organizing. It shows that ICWG women used their close links to the reality of household labour as the basis to claim their expertise on the issue at the international level. They also pushed to include the topic in international discussions on other women’s and/or labour-related issues – such as popular nutrition or maternal death rates – to advance those discussions and achieve results.

The *Housewives’ Programme* was used to advocate on the topic of nutrition at the international level. In 1935, the International Guild tried to get placed on the Committee of Experts established by the League of Nations and International Labour Office, which was charged with studying the issue of improving workers’ nutrition. From the beginning, Emmy Freundlich claimed that the chances of getting onto the Committee were small, but that she was promised that the ICWG women’s voices would be heard (Freundlich 1935). In the memorandum sent to the League of Nations and the International Labour Office, Freundlich presented the ICWG as an organization composed of mainly housewives and advocated for examining the conditions of household labour, promoting rationalization, and ensuring education in rationalization as some of the key steps for improving popular nutrition (Freundlich 1936b, 2). This is where she introduced the *Housewives’ Programme*, which should “be used by the League as the basis for a further inquiry into what women can do in this matter of improving popular nutrition” (Freundlich 1936b, 17). In the memorandum, Freundlich offered the League and the ILO the ICWG’s help with improving nutrition as the ICWG had already done a great deal of important and pioneering work on the issue. The rich data collected from the national guilds by the ICWG proved useful in this endeavour. Since improvement in the sphere of household and women’s education on rationalization were emphasized as crucial for improving nutrition, Freundlich presented some of the national guilds’ successes in dealing with these issues:

The Polish Guild did excellent work for the establishment of mechanised wash-houses in order to save the housewife labour, while the Bulgarian co-operative women arranged special courses that proved most successful in bringing new methods to the notice of women even in the remote villages. The same thing is true of the Guild of Polish Ukraine, where a special campaign has been carried through to bring the women on the land and the towns-women - all members of the Guild - into direct touch with one another in order that they may trade together. (Freundlich 1936b, 14–15)

As expected, Freundlich did not succeed in getting appointed to the committee, but she claimed the ICWG put significant effort into staying in contact with the departments of the League and the ILO working on the issue (ICWG 1939, 2). As this example of the successes of

Central and Eastern European national guilds indicates, approaches to the hardships caused by household labour were influenced by the diversity of economic and political systems as well as the national contexts from which ICWG women came. By collecting data on household labour state by state and presenting national guilds' various efforts to lighten the burden of this labour, including activities carried out in non-urban areas, the ICWG women broadened the scope of consumer cooperation at the international level and advanced a number of international discussions.

The International Guild brought up the topic of household labour in the international discussions on maternal death rates in a highly distinctive way. The goal was to push the League of Nations to conduct thorough worldwide research on maternal mortality; to make sure that women's perspectives were represented; and to ensure that reasons beyond narrowly construed medical causes were included in the inquiry. First, the ICWG women began their investigation and asked the national guilds to answer a list of questions about "home and working conditions" that could have an impact on maternal mortality (ICWG 1931). Among other things, it raised the question of help for pregnant women who performed work in the household: "9. Had she any help in the home during pregnancy, e.g. with washing and ironing? with other housework? was it regular help? from whom? how often?" (ICWG 1931, 1). The inquiry was not particularly successful because the collected data was insufficient, but the ICWG used information from other available studies to draft the *Memorandum on Possible Contributory Causes of Maternal Mortality and Ill Health* (Committee 1934, 21).

In this memorandum, which was sent to the Reporting Committee on Maternal & Infant Welfare of the League of Nations in 1932, the ICWG first established its expertise as an organization that represented working-class mothers and then praised national guilds for bringing attention to this issue (ICWG 1932, 1). It advocated for an investigation into other possible factors that contributed to the maternal mortality rate: the burden of household labour and poor housing, mental health issues, inadequate nutrition, and the lack of sunlight and fresh air (ICWG 1932). It called for an inquiry into all these problems and, at the same time, displayed its knowledge regarding household labour, households, and housing in general:

While household duties necessarily vary with the economic circumstances of the family, they may impose upon the expectant mother tasks which tax her strength as much as many kinds of industrial occupation, as for instance carrying heavy vessels of water from the well of lifting them from the stove, or carrying refuse a long distance to be emptied. A particularly exhausting task for the pregnant woman is the mangling of the clothes, which increases with the family and in some circumstances involves labour that could hardly be called light even for healthy men. Again continual cooking for a large family, especially where it means constant stooping over a hot fire, often deprives the expectant mother of any inclination for food herself, and undermines her health in this way. In this connection too, the house itself is a factor, for a badly planned, and badly equipped house can make the housework so much more laborious that it becomes an injurious influence on that account. The continual running up and down entailed by long flights of stairs, for instance, obviously increases the tendency to bad feet and varicose veins which some mothers never lose in after-life. Moreover, damp, dark and ill-ventilated houses must adversely affect the mother's general health, while lack of sanitation seriously adds to the risk of infection. (ICWG 1932, 2–3)

What is striking in this approach is that the International Guild took into account many aspects of household labour that could have an impact on the maternal death rate. In addition to pointing out the physicality of household labour and the consequences of poor housing, the ICWG elaborated on the "nervous and psychological causes" of the high maternal death rate

connected to women's work in the household and their role as mothers, having in mind different types of both homemakers and wage-earning women:

Household duties often make adequate rest impossible. Mothers of families, who must be the first to get up in the morning and the last to go to bed at night, seldom have a minute to themselves to sit down and rest their overstrained nerves. In many cases too, they have the double burden of housework and industrial or agricultural employment, while the general insecurity of their lives - sudden unemployment, eviction from their homes, accidents to husband or relatives and the constant dread of these things - means a state of nervous tension which must be detrimental to health. (ICWG 1932, 3)

Therefore, the ICWG recognized that the mental burden and emotional aspects of household labour were important topics that should be included in international debates and could advance the discussion on women's health. The ICWG also briefly tackled the issue of reproductive rights and (un)wanted pregnancies. "The question too, of whether a woman wants to become a mother must greatly affect her mental condition during pregnancy" (ICWG 1932, 3). The memorandum was discussed by other actors involved in the discussion, such as the Medical Women's Federation from England. Its Maternal Mortality Committee agreed with the ICWG about the influence of mental stress but disagreed with the ICWG's idea that housework as such, during otherwise normal pregnancies, might be connected to maternal mortality rates (Maternal Mortality Committee n.d.).

Conclusion

Although the interest in the history of consumption, and as a consequence also the history of the consumer cooperative movement, has started to grow since the late 1980s (Hilson 2011, 204), even the most recent studies on the global history of consumer cooperation often overlook gender as a relevant category of analysis. This neglect has been explained by the tendency of sources to favour "institutional histories" over the work of those who were important for the movement in terms of being the key customers of cooperatives and rank-and-file members, but who were nevertheless far from decision-making positions (Hilson, Neunsinger, and Patmore 2017, 10–11).

This article also contributes to institutional (consumer) cooperative history but focuses specifically on women's international organizing. It focuses on household labour as one of the key agendas of the International Co-operative Women's Guild (ICWG) in the interwar period. It explores the ICWG's activism regarding household labour, placing the contributions of Central and Eastern European countries at the forefront of the analysis. I claim that the ICWG made and treated household labour as a policy issue worthy of discussion at the international level and in other international settings beyond the cooperative movement. Although the article does not delve deeply into how the international debate was translated and adopted at the national and local levels, it does reveal the ICWG's role in bringing together women from different political and economic systems and national contexts. The ICWG also provided a platform for debate between communist and social democratic women in the interwar period, which made it a unique social democrat labour organization in that era.

I aimed to decentre the gender and labour history of international cooperation and answer the overall question: What does the history of international organizations look like if we decide to write it as if a focus on Central and Eastern European countries is the most

common way of writing this history? In so doing, this article contributes to overcoming Western biases in knowledge production. Indeed, I consider my analysis an exercise in what we can gain from writing “general” history from the margins from the very start; that is, by not separating out Central and Eastern European countries, treating the region as an appendix to a bigger story, or inserting it as an addendum after the “general” history has already been written. At the same time, decentring this history does not mean that I have ignored the fact that the ICWG, similar to all other international organizations, was a hierarchical organization and, consequently, that world’s unequal political and economic power relations shaped its work.

This article speaks to a much broader history of communist and social democratic women’s often demanding collaboration in the International Co-operative Women’s Guild in the international interwar context. It also provides insight into the complex alliances in the ICWG that followed the communist ideological line and communist contributions to the international cooperative movement. More research is needed on these topics, as is a critical engagement with the unequal power relations present within the organization; the role of Central and Eastern European – and also non-European – countries in broadening the scope of ICWG’s activism; the organizational and other changes in the ICWG in the post-World War Two period; the ICWG’s approaches to gender roles and the gender division of labour; and the effects of ICWG activism and its position in and relationship with the women’s, cooperative, and broader labour movements.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



OPEN ACCESS



Spurring Women to Action? Communist-led Women's Trade Unionism Between the Hungarian Shop Floor and Top-level Internationalism, 1947 to 1959

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory article discusses the politics of promoting women's trade unionism in Hungary and at the World Federation of Trade Unions from the late 1940s to the late 1950s. It examines the factors that propelled and restricted the development of these politics on, and shaped their travel between, the workplace and the national and international scales. In Hungary, a network of women trade unionists combined their alignment with the political and productivist sides of the project of "building socialism" with activities aimed at the cultural and social "elevation" of women workers and the promotion of their trade unionism. On the international plane, the position of the Central and Eastern European politics of women's trade unionism was likewise, though very differently, impacted by the emphasis on "building socialism." Within the women's politics pursued by the WFTU internationally, the distinctions made between socialist, capitalist, and colonial countries translated into rather restrictive roles envisioned for Central European women's trade unionism. For a variety of reasons, which were related to all scales of action, the connection between the WFTU's politics of promoting women's trade unionism and the activities developed by the Hungarian women trade unionists remained rather weak during the period.

KEYWORDS

World Federation of Trade unions (WFTU); Nationwide Council of Trade Unions (Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsa, SZOT); women's trade unionism in the state-socialist world; women's trade union training; Central and Eastern European women trade unionists in the WFTU; WFTU Women's trade union seminar Zlenice Czechoslovakia 1957; workers' education

This article, which is exploratory, discusses the politics of promoting women's communist-aligned trade unionism in Hungary and at the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), one of the three principal communist-aligned international so-called mass organizations (i.e., women's, youth, and trade union organizations), between 1947 and 1959.¹ The period was bookended by two Hungarian women's trade union conferences, the "1st Nationwide Trade Union Women's Conference" in 1947 and the "Nationwide [first] Women's Conference of the Trade Unions" in 1959. In between these two events, in 1956, the Hungarian capital city of Budapest hosted the "[First] World Conference of Women Workers," organized by the WFTU² (Szakszervezeti Tanács 1948; 1955; *Supplement*, November 1955, 1; WFTU

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1957, 43; *Népszabadság* 13 February 1959; *Népszava* 28 February 1949; *Magyar Nemzet* 12 February 1959; *Postás Dolgozó* 1 March 1959). Promoting women's trade unionism was deemed a relevant policy goal for communist-aligned trade unionism during the period, and such efforts included two major elements: winning working women over to trade unionism and converting them into active and politically engaged workers and trade unionists; and training women trade unionists so they could stand their ground as effective and professional union cadres on the shop floor, the national stage, and beyond, as participants in international leadership.

Contrary to what might be assumed at first glance, the three conferences were not indicative of the smooth development of the communist-aligned politics of promoting women's trade unionism. This article examines the development of these politics at the workplace and national levels in Hungary and in the international sphere of the WFTU, discussing the factors that propelled and restricted the development of these politics on, and shaped their travel between, the workplace and the national and international scales. There is a flourishing historiography on both communist-aligned internationalism in the post-1945 period and women's organizing and activism in the state-socialist world, and this research has addressed trade unionism, women's work, and the politics of scale (e.g., Jarska 2018; Grabowska 2017; Fidelis 2010; Nowak 2005). I am not aware of research, however, that has aimed to "think together" the different scales of action of the politics of promoting women's communist-led trade unionism in Central and Eastern Europe and internationally in the period discussed here.

Putting aside simplified ideas about the top-down character of communist-led trade unionism, this article presents three main arguments. First, an activist network of Hungarian women trade unionists engaged with women's trade unionism from the shop floor to national leadership combined their alignment with both the political and productivist sides of the project of "building socialism" with activities and initiatives aimed at promoting women workers' trade unionism, and the cultural, educational, and social "elevation" of women workers. Second, on the international plane, the position of the Central and Eastern European politics of women's trade unionism was likewise, though very differently, impacted by the emphasis on "building socialism." The women's politics pursued by the WFTU were characterized by a triple distinction between socialist, capitalist, and colonial countries, which translated into rather restrictive roles envisioned internationally for Central and Eastern European women's trade unionism. Third, for a variety of reasons related to all scales of action, the connection between the WFTU's politics of promoting women's trade unionism and the activities developed by the Hungarian women trade unionists remained rather weak during the period considered in this article.

The article proceeds chronologically. Foregrounding key events, innovations, and changes as they occurred consecutively on, along, and across the international, national and enterprise scales, I repeatedly briefly juxtapose key changes occurring on one level to the state of the politics of organizing and training women trade unionists on those scales that were less eventful at the given moment. I conclude by situating my findings within the emerging comparative and global history of women's trade unionism in the twentieth century.

In the Service of a New Political Economy: Women's Trade Unionism in Hungary from the Shop Floor to National Leadership, 1947–1954

In the period before the advent of the WFTU's politics of promoting women's trade unionism from 1953 onwards, Hungary witnessed two waves when women's trade unionism was promoted. The first one, spanning the period between late 1947 and summer 1949, was strongly motivated by the combined political goal of transforming women workers into – as prevailing discourse put it – cultivated socialist citizens who would consent to or actively support the emerging political system. The second wave, beginning in 1951 and ending in winter 1953/1954, more visibly foregrounded economic and specifically productivist goals. The ups and downs of women's trade union activism during the period were, in part, a result of repeated shifts of responsibility *at the workplace* for all issues related to working women; these shifts involved, on the one hand, trade unions, and, on the other, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarian Women (Magyar Nők Demokratikus Szövetsége, MNDSz; replaced 1957 by the National Council of Hungarian Women [Magyar Nők Országos Tanácsa]) (Schadt 2007).³ The back and forth⁴ was, as we shall see in the following discussion, related to top-level party decisions and likely changing directions within the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), the communist-led international women's "mass" organization. It undoubtedly speaks to the regime's neglect of the politics of women's work and the women engaged in it, as well as the inefficacy of some of the actions directed at women in the workplace.

The Hungarian development had no straightforward anchor in international communist-led trade unionism as institutionalized in the WFTU. Before 1953, the WFTU did not display a pro-active interest in promoting and building women's trade unionism internationally, i.e., beyond its principal support for the cause. At the same time, both *before* and after 1953, the WFTU pursued an internationally highly visible women's politics that was focused on key international organizations including the ILO and various UN-forums where WFTU representatives pressed for global commitments to labour-related demands and resolute women's equality politics (Wolf *Forthcoming*; Cobble 2021; Boris 2018).

Within Hungary, the emphasis on women's trade unionism signalled that communist-linked actors recognized how proactive trade-unionist women's politics could serve important purposes in and on behalf of the emerging state-socialist state. Self-confident women trade unionists seized the opportunity to expand their own scope of action at their workplaces in particular, and they aimed to promote certain interests of women workers.

The "1st Nationwide Trade Union Women's Conference" in November 1947 signalled that communist-led women's trade unionism and trade union education for women workers were to play prominent roles in the political and economic transition underway in the country. The only agenda item of the conference defined by content was devoted to "education," which was described as the "most important" task of trade union women's work. Both keynote speakers, Matild B. Tóth and Erzsébet Ács, who served as secretary and deputy secretary in the "national leadership of the trade union women's movement," respectively, addressed the education of women. Education served to free women from the "harmful teachings" of the past; it drew them into the service of constructing the country, and it made them aware of their duties, including work discipline. Returning to their duties after the conference, the three hundred participants were called to do their

best to awaken in all fellow women “the love of a strong, united trade union movement” (Szakszervezeti Tanács 1948).

The vision thus publicized assigned to women’s trade unionism a special mission in support of the country’s ongoing political-economic transformation. The Trade Union Women’s Conference took place soon after the first three-year plan went into effect in August 1947, only weeks after the Hungarian Communist Party (Magyar Kommunista Párt) had committed to a politics of marginalizing “right-wing social democrats” in the trade union movement. “Unification” of the social democratic and the communist party under the name the Hungarian Working People’s Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja) would be completed in June 1948. From the summer of 1947, dominant trade unionism began to foreground the role of trade unions in the “support of production.” The workplace committees (*üzemi bizottság*), which increasingly came under trade union – and thus gradually communist – control, engaged with tasks related to production (the implementation and monitoring of the fulfilment of the plan, work competitions, the brigade movement), the education of workers (the improvement of work discipline, political instruction), the promotion of trade unionism (cadre work and training), and workers’ welfare. The transition to the communist-dominated political and economic regime was completed in the first half of 1949 (Lux 2008, 92–103; Kun 2004; Belényi 2000b, esp. 62, 65; Horváth 1949).

Within the Trade Union Council (Szakszervezeti Tanács), which from late 1948 had transformed into the Nationwide Council of Trade Unions (Szakszervezetek Országos Tanácsa, SZOT), the women guiding the Hungarian trade union women’s network had at their disposal a central secretariat populated (in 1949) by the “political staff members” Erzsébet Ács, Ibolya Dankó,⁵ Rózsi Hazai, Blanka Sándor, and Matild Tóth. In spring 1949, two members of this staff were away for full-time training at the SZOT school and the party school, respectively (Szakszervezeti Tanács 1948, 18; “Feljegyzések” 1949; “Jelentés” 1949). Throughout the late 1940s and the early 1950s, (women’s) trade union work in Hungary visibly built on Soviet models and practices as they travelled within the evolving world of communist-led trade unionism across Central and Eastern Europe. This concerned the training of women trade union leaders, the assignment of tasks and the division of labour among them, and the policies of production aimed at “building socialism,” which included the transition to payment-by-results, socialist labour competitions, norm management, and so on.⁶

The Hungarian trade union women’s network, as it engaged with the move towards communist-led (trade union) politics and the transformation of trade union institutions in factories, carried the momentum of late 1947 into 1949. The trade union women persistently aimed to further women’s representation in trade union life in the enterprises and beyond. In the run-up to the elections for the new style of workplace trade unions committees in spring 1949, they made every effort to ensure the representation of committed women trade unionists engaged with enterprise-level women’s work within these new representational bodies in order to spread knowledge about and propagate the ensuing changes, and to enrol women in much greater numbers in SZOT training courses (Bars 1949, “Jegyzőkönyv” 1949b). Later, before the national elections, which took place in the spring of 1949, the trade union women’s network conducted a campaign aimed at the “mobilisation and activation of the more than 400,000 organised working women,” which entailed many types of activities (SZOT NBO 1949).

Workplace-based activities played a key role. This included training women employed in enterprises to do their best as workers to foster the economic element of “building socialism,” support women workers through workplace-based activities in their everyday lives, and to jolt them out of their lack of ambition and ignorance – characteristics identified by seasoned women trade unionists as the main features of a large strata of mostly first-generation women workers – so as to awaken and increase their cultural aspirations and political awareness. Early in 1949, more than six hundred factory-level trade union women committees – installed in enterprises where women composed more than half the workforce – had been established, even if some existed “only on paper” in places outside the greater Budapest region. Factories with less than fifty female personnel had to instal a Representative in Charge of Women’s Issues (*nőfelelős*) (“Jelentés” 1949; “Feljegyzések” 1949).

Education that was tailored to women workers’ special needs, interests, and position served as the guiding star of many activities happening at the workplace or grounded in workplace-based action. Women workers who “did a good job” in the workplace trade union women’s committees were sent to trade union training and then installed as trade union functionaries. The women’s trade union network was involved in standard “general” education, often organized in mixed-gender settings, and it was responsible for the organization of educational activities for those women workers whose training did not reach an “elementary level.” The women made every effort to reach out to “the most backward strata ... in each enterprise of each branch” to address these women via “political education,” with the aim of wresting them from the influence of “pacifism” and “clericalism.” The monthly organization of “workplace women’s days” (*üzemi nőnap*) constituted a key instrument of women’s workplace-based mass education. These were dedicated to “the resolution of local problems and the discussion of the general questions.” One 1949 report claimed that women trade unionists in 1948 organized seven hundred “women’s days.” “Women’s circles” (*asszonykör*) constituted another educational genre considered similarly important, where groups of fifteen to twenty-five women heard a series of six lectures. There were other types of training too, including lecture series labelled “Mothers’ schools” (*anyák iskolája*) and shorthand-writing, tailoring and sewing, cooking, and other “special women’s training courses,” all of which “attracted much (*igen nagy*) interest” (“Üzemi MNDSZ csoportok” [likely 1949]; “Nők”; “1949. február 4”; “Jegyzőkönyv” 1949c; “Jelentés” 1949). Clearly, these hands-on activities were multi-purpose, generating, through a politics of practice, access to women workers, supporting them in some of their most immediate interests, educating them to become more “cultured” citizens, and appealing to them to participate in “building socialism.”

The activities of the trade union women’s network and the women-only trade union structures and initiatives within enterprises encountered manifold challenges. Trade union women steadily criticized the obstructionist attitudes they encountered in the masculinist world of trade unionism and the male-dominated world of work more generally. “In many places, [trade union] women’s work in the workplace, regardless of whether the women’s committee works well or badly, is looked down upon and is belittled” (“Jelentés ” 1949).

In sum, between late 1947 and summer 1949, trade union women, pursuing a complex set of purposes, emphatically made use of the opportunities produced by the imposed “unification” of the political landscape under communist leadership. By contrast, the

WFTU during the period⁷ was characterized by a disconnect between the organization's proactive women's equality politics directed at various international organizations and an obvious indifference regarding the promotion of women's trade unionism. The regionally specific role of women's trade union activism in Central and Eastern Europe, showcased by the first wave of women's trade union activism in Hungary, was visibly irrelevant for shaping the WFTU's policies.

After the completion of the political regime change in Hungary in the summer of 1949, the extended network of women's trade union work, with its focus on workplace organization and action, was "replaced" by MNDSz activism, which was now formally extended to the workplace. The second wave of pronounced trade union activities aimed at women workers and systematically involving women cadres began in late 1951, when MNDSz was asked to withdraw from workplaces ("A SZOT Elnökség" 1952). It was, as compared to the first wave, centred in a more one-dimensional manner on economic and production-oriented goals. In preparation for and during the First Five Year Plan (1950–1954), the trade unions under the leadership of SZOT were forcefully enlisted as key actors who were to assist in realizing the employment of an ever-expanding workforce and achieving the maximum performance of workers. Between late 1949 and into 1951, the production and investment targets to be reached under the Plan, which already originally demanded intense effort from the workforce, were repeatedly increased. A figure equivalent to 26.5 percent of the generated resources dedicated to reinvestment in 1951 (with a strong focus on heavy and military-oriented industries) marked an all-time high (a figure that was high also compared to other Central and Eastern European countries) (Pető and Szakács 1985, 151–178; Politikatörténeti Intézet 1950a; 1950b).

In 1952 these policies linked to a nation-wide campaign, orchestrated by the SZOT-leadership, to again "better mobilise women into the work of the trade unions" (Pellek 1952). A series of top-level decisions made in April and May 1951 stipulated that large numbers and proportions of women be among the future new hires and those to be enrolled in vocational training in 1951, as well as the instalment of "responsible person[s] (*felelős*) ... distinctly concerning themselves with the women employed in production" in many enterprises. These decisions combined the vision that women were to "take part in the building of socialism in a manner identical to men" with plans for the massive expansion and improvement of childcare and other facilities to "ensure the prerequisites" of the new policy ("153/7/1951, N. T. sz."; "1.011/1951, MT 1951"; see also Palasik 2005, 92–96). Between October 1951 (Belényi 2000a) and May 1952, SZOT came up with a new framework for workplace-level trade union women's work. In early 1952, the flagship trade union journal *Munka* (Work) emphasized that in "places where women are still marginalised in production (e.g., they complete various vocational training courses with good results but are still assigned to sweeping or similar work), the [workplace trade union] women's committee has the task of securing, through the [trade union's] workplace committee, that women are assigned to posts commensurate with their skill" (Pellek 1952). The May 1952 SZOT decision decreed that the workplace trade union committees were to elect from their midst a Representative in Charge of Women's Issues who, in turn, was to serve as the head of the women's committee. In many places during the period, this tended to translate to the inclusion of a woman trade unionist dedicated to proactive engagement with the politics of women's work in the workplace trade union committees, which played a key co-managerial role in enterprises. "Particular care" was to be taken to

involve women in “the leading trade union organs,” and systematic attention was to be paid to the newly arrived women workers “so they get acquainted with and become attached to (*megszeret*) factory work” (SZOT Elnökség 1952; “Szakszervezetek” 1952). In retrospect, Mrs. Ernő Déri (Erzsébet Hideg), a long-term key trade unionist engaged with women issues, described the May 1952 SZOT decision as determining, “in essence for the first time” after 1945 and national in its scope, the overall content and structure of trade union women’s work on the enterprise level (Déri 1970).

The engagement of the trade union women’s network with the task of tying women to their economic role(s) in “building socialism” through educational and other actions centred at the workplace reached back to 1948. As women’s trade unionism – now under closer local trade union supervision but with *de facto* greater local powers – was assigned a key role in workplace action aimed at women workers starting from 1952 onwards, the women at the helm of the trade union women’s network set in motion a whole machinery of actions. Describing 1952 as the “central year of the Plan,” the trade union women’s leadership, working now from the new full-scale Women’s Committees Division (Nőbizottságok Osztálya) of SZOT as its institutional platform,⁸ instantly devised plans for encouraging women’s vocational training; “monitoring” women’s participation in trade union and party training; ensuring that the trade union Representatives in Charge of Women’s Issues were enrolled in such training in the “important larger” enterprises; “promoting women’s increased activity in work competition”; and organizing women’s “reading circles” and “mass lectures” (Veres 1952b). Workers “in plants and plant divisions lagging behind should be dealt with separately by the women’s committee in the form of individual and group meetings” (“T. Szakszervezetek” 1952).⁹

The SZOT women developed detailed instructions regarding the curriculum for the (many) trainings to be held for the Representatives in Charge of Women’s Issues in enterprises and members of the women’s committees. The curriculum of one-day courses, for example, consisted of six units covering many specified topics, and detailed teaching materials were provided. Some units were composed of thirty-five to forty-minute lectures followed by ninety minutes of discussion, whereas others were kept shorter. A two-hour session was foreseen as the “festive closing” of the day (“Vázlat” 1952).

The Representatives in Charge of Women’s Issues in enterprises and other women occupying different positions in the network of trade union institutions were repeatedly brought together in various constellations at nationwide meetings. They reported regularly to the SZOT Women’s Committees Division. SZOT women, in turn, developed lively monitoring and reporting activities down to the enterprise level.¹⁰ They relentlessly identified an array of grave problems relating to, for example, women’s enterprise-based vocational training and explained women’s reluctance to engage in (re-)training programmes, their staggering dropout rates, and so on (see also Schadt 2007). They documented and criticized the attitudes of women workers and proposed realistic explanations for these problems, referring to the life circumstances of certain groups of women workers. In the main, however, their critique focused on the attitudes of skilled men workers, trade union bodies and functionaries, and management as the key reasons for the underdeveloped state of things.

[The trade unions] did not provide the assistance necessary for organising vocational training courses (*szaktanfolyamok*) and conducting them at an appropriate level. The [workplace trade union] committees and the [trade union] women's committees did not take a strong and militant stand against the backwardness, professional chauvinism, underrating of women, and machinations of the enemy that were evident among individual long-standing skilled workers and foremen ... [T]hey told the women not to learn the welding profession because they would not have children and [because] it kills the red blood cells ...

It is common that the devaluation of women is no longer characterised by sending them back to the wooden spoon but by entrusting them with work beyond their physical strength and professional (knowledge) ... [In the Stalin Municipal Waterworks] ... only 5 out of 34 skilled women workers are working in the trade because the old skilled workers did not bring them into the brigade ...

... In some factories ... the women were assigned to afternoon or night shifts also during the [vocational training] course, which, on the one hand, hindered their continuous acquisition of the theoretical (knowledge), and, on the other, again led to dropouts.

This was accompanied by frequent changes of the teaching personnel, the lack of premises ...

Another reason for the shortcomings ... is the lack of a proper link between ... theoretical and practical training. Consequently, the majority of course graduates perform below 100% for several months. (Veres 1952a; see also SZOT NBO 1952)

Another focus of critique concerned the relationship between the trade union apparatus and the trade union women's work more generally. One report gave a sobering evaluation of the reality:

The consolidation of the [trade union] women's committees is hindered by the fact that the [trade union] workplace committees do not make use of [the women's committees'] work, do not entrust them with concrete tasks ... The fact that not the best working women are placed in [the sphere of trade union women's work] contributes to the fluctuation ... those who don't know well enough the problems of the working women ... [or] don't have the appropriate education and experience in the movement work ...

[T]he higher organs also treat [the work related to women] as a compartmentalised task ... The comrades working in the [branch] trade unions also do not call to account the [trade union] workplace committees concerning this work. ("Jelentés" 1953)

By the end of 1953, another party decision was made which was intended to revive the MNDSz workplace committees (Schadt 2007, 181–182); a few months later, in early 1954, the dissolution of the workplace trade union women committees was underway ("Határozat" 1954; Cseterki 1954). This happened in tandem with a sea change on the international level, namely the turn of the WFTU to a proactive politics of promoting women's trade unionism.¹¹

The WFTU Promoting Women's Trade Unionism in Central and Eastern Europe? 1953 to 1957

Central and Eastern European state-socialist countries, or, more precisely, trade unions and women trade unionists in state-socialist countries who engaged with women politics were visibly involved in the developments taking place within the WFTU from 1953 on (Figure 1). However, these actors were neither the key addressees nor (in all likelihood) the

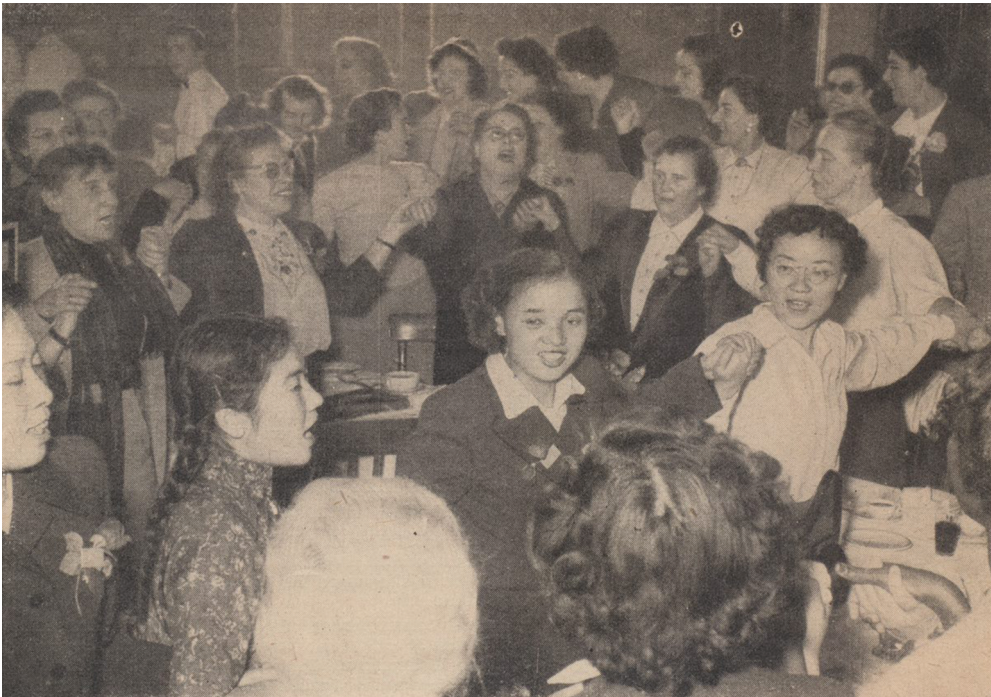


Figure 1. Women's meeting at the WFTU's Third World Trade Union Congress 1953. "During their impressive meeting, the women express their common will in song." In the background, among others, Nina Popova (secretary of the Central Council of the Soviet Trade Unions) and Teresa Noce (secretary general of the Trade Unions International of Textile and Clothing Workers)¹².

key driving forces of the new WFTU politics of promoting women's trade unionism. These global politics, to a large degree, were determined by agendas focused on Western capitalist countries and the Global South. Women trade unionists in Eastern Europe did the best they could to use these changes to advance their cause in both the domestic and international context.

The WFTU's international activities aimed at a communist-led unionization *en masse* of working women and trade union training for women (Harisch 2018; 2023) were informed by the pursuit of the WFTU's principle of the "unity-of-action-from below" as it translated into the international context after the split between the WFTU and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1949. This entailed carefully orchestrated tactics, including a focus on the rank and file within non-communist (dominated) trade unions, calling on them to both adhere to the trade union tradition of unity of action and participate energetically in broader movement actions or initiate such action. One of the important goals was to "undermine rival trade-union leadership" on the national, local, and workplace levels (Lichtblau 1958,¹³ esp. 11–12, 18, 25–28).

The decision to convene a world conference of women trade unionists was made by the WFTU's General Council in December 1954 (Josselson 1956) in tandem with the adoption, "after a long and much publicised campaign" (Facts 1957, 29) of a Charter of Trade Union Rights which was to give "fresh impetus to the participation of women in the struggles for demands and in trade union life" (WFTU 1957, 43).¹⁴ The General Council was

strongly preoccupied with the struggle against a new world war, the outbreak of which it considered imminent. For WFTU General Secretary Louis Saillant, this transformed the pursuance of a proactive “unity of action” politics into the single most important question. The WFTU should not, he noted, try to spell out internationally specific steps and statements “valid” for all times and places. Yet the WFTU was to adhere to and advance one guiding principle, namely the strategy “[t]o unite the largest possible number of workers in trade unions, i.e., to involve the unorganised in active trade union work as often as possible and to receive them into an effective trade union membership” (Saillant 1955).

The proposal to hold a world conference of women trade unionists and the suggestions for its main agenda items were fully informed by this renewed emphasis on “unity-of-action-from-below.” The proposition was advanced by Benoit Frachon, the general secretary of the French General Confederation of Trade Unions (Confédération générale du travail), who, again with a focus on capitalist countries, declared: “I ... believe that the WFTU should pay more attention to the situation of women than it has done so far. It is true that we have the [WIDF]. But there are also women in the ranks of the WFTU. There are many women in the factories, and it is these women in particular who are being exploited by the escalation of war politics”; the conference should “put forward a plan for a major campaign of action throughout the world ... to secure equal pay for women” (Fracon 1955, i.o. partly in bold letters). Nina Popova – the vice-president of the WIDF, president of the Soviet Women’s Committee, and present at the WFTU General Council meeting in her capacity as secretary of the central council of the Soviet trade unions – instantly expressed her gratefulness. “We ... believe that the launch of a major international campaign for the rights enshrined in the [WFTU] Charter [of Trade Union Rights] would develop organised trade union action to defend the rights of women and young people” (Popova 1955).

Women’s trade unionists in the state-socialist countries clearly were not the main addressees of the conference initiative and the new international politics of the WFTU. In Hungary, the SZOT Presidency at the time emphasized in a formal decision that the “desire for unity was first and foremost expressed in the majority of the capitalist and colonial countries through the common struggles and movements for common demands” (“Az SZVSZ” 1956). The WFTU Executive Bureau soon recommended that the women’s conference “be held on a united basis,” meaning that it “has to be open to all wage-earning working women, whatever their trade union affiliation, whether or not members of trade unions and regardless of whether they were leaders or active trade unions members.” The conference was to “encourage” women “to take a more and more active part in the struggles and activities of all the workers.” Accordingly, the Executive Bureau specified that, besides the issue of equal pay, a second major agenda item would address the “more active participation of working women in the life and leadership of the trade unions” and their “wider recruitment to the trade unions” (WFTU 1957, 43–44). In his widely publicized report laid before the WFTU Presidency in May 1955, WFTU Secretary Luigi Grassi pointed to the various functions the conference was to fulfil in terms of promoting women’s trade unionism. Working women from “countries with different social systems” were to meet, compare their life and work circumstances, gain mutual understanding, and develop friendships. In addition, the conference would “provide a further incentive to involve working women in the business (*intézés*) and leadership (*irányítás*) of trade union affairs and ... encourage trade unions to recruit new female members” (Luigi Grassi 1955).

A committee installed to organize the conference met three times: from September 29 to 2 October 1955 (Bucharest), May 10 to 12, 1956 (Budapest), and on the eve of the conference itself. The composition of the Preparation Committee was not entirely stable. Representatives of trade unions belonging to the WFTU and “trade unionist women workers” from a few non-socialist countries took part in the first meeting. From Eastern Europe, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union contributed to the work of the committee at various stages¹⁵ (WFTU 1957, 43–44; *Supplement*, November 1955, 1; May 1956, 2; Madeleine Grassi 1955; “A Dolgozó Nők”).

WFTU activities at the time signalled there were larger motivations and purposes informing the organization of the women’s conference. A WFTU press conference in Vienna in November 1955 connected the intention to promote trade union women’s politics to efforts to temper international political tensions. The WFTU advocated for “limited agreements, at least on certain issues, between the three major international trade union centres,” considering equal pay for women and men “[o]ne such issue.” At the forthcoming international women’s conference, such an agreement could be discussed without stipulating “any preconditions” other than an atmosphere of mutual respect for each other’s commitments and frank and open information and discussion (“Az SZVSZ Titkárság” 1955). The preparation work for the women’s world conference was widely publicized via issuing a *Supplement* to the WFTU’s *World Trade Union News* starting in November 1955; this *Supplement* was dedicated solely to the conference and disseminating information on women trade union issues and activities around the world (WFTU 1961, 21). Focusing strongly on exploitation, struggles, and conference preparations in Western countries and countries in the Global South, the *Supplement* repeatedly contrasted, e.g., “wage discrimination in capitalist countries” with “complete equality in socialist countries” (*Supplement*, January 1956, 8).

The preparations for the women’s world conference in Hungary showcase the status assigned to Central and Eastern European women’s trade unionism in relation to the WFTU world event. SZOT’s international division defined the role of the conference in relation to Hungarian women and the Hungarian delegation: “For the Hungarian working women too, the World Conference of Women Workers is of great importance because here they can become acquainted with the difficult life of struggle of working women living in capitalist and colonial countries, and [the conference] gives [them] the opportunity to make known their own changed lives, which before liberation was similar to the situation of women” living in those other parts of the world (SZOT 1956). Thus, Hungarian representatives to the international gathering were called on to embody Central and Eastern European progress rather than the ongoing women’s trade union struggle in the region. Still, this large international event gave them an opportunity to make their voices heard within the WFTU-led international women’s network and to try to advance their cause in their respective domestic contexts. Moderate critique of the state of things on domestic Hungarian soil even made it into the *Supplement*, narrowing the often extremely wide gap between information about state-socialist countries spread internationally within the WFTU and confrontations that took place on the enterprise and national levels within state-socialist countries. The *Supplement* reported that in Hungary “[m]eetings” were “held at the place of work ... discussing the problems of women workers in different enterprises, and examining the possibilities of further improving the social amenities designed for

the benefit of women at work.” In “interesting meetings in the Houses of Culture belonging to various enterprises,” the “‘old hands’ have been telling the young workers about the difficulties they had before the Liberation ... They are discussing what still needs doing in order to put an end to shortcomings, and to solve the problems that still persist, so as to go on improving the conditions they now enjoy”¹⁶ (*Supplement*, May 1956, 8).

Within the Hungarian trade union women’s network there was a clear understanding and critique of the limitations of the role foreseen for trade unionists from state-socialist Central and Eastern Europe on the international stage. The speech of the Hungarian delegate at the conference (“*Drága Barátnőink*” 1956)¹⁷, given in response to the two main reports presented, used harsh words to criticize the side-lining of their concerns:

I need to note, however, that the reports would have needed to engage more with the position of the working women in the countries that build socialism. Because we, too, have problems—even if they present themselves differently than in the capitalist countries, these are living (*élő*) problems, which our trade union movement needs to resolve. It is for this reason that we Hungarian working women greeted with joy the [WFTU] initiative that those with the biggest interests (*legérdekeltebbek*): the working women, gather together (*összeül*). (“*Drága Barátnőink*” 1956)

After this opening remark and “deviating from the custom,” the speech restricted references to “our results” to less than one manuscript page of the contribution, only to turn to a presentation of “our difficulties, the problems which the Hungarian trade unions must resolve,” which ran for a length of nearly five manuscript pages.

Preceding various contributions to the conference debate, including the above Hungarian contribution, Preparatory Committee member Tsune Deushi from Japan presented the main report on the second agenda item, women’s trade unionism to the conference attendees. The report proposed “ask[ing] the national trade union centres and the international trade union organisations to include women in their leaderships”; that “a greater effort ... be made to let women workers attend trade union schools and even to organise special sessions for militant women trade unionists”; and that trade unions should work towards establishing and expanding social facilities, e.g. nurseries, to allow women “to take a more active part in trade union and social life” (Bell 1956; “World Conference of Women Workers” 1956). The general resolution adopted by the conference referred to the WFTU’s “great recruiting campaign among the women workers” and the “bolder promotion of women cadres to leading positions in the trade union movement at all levels” (“General Resolution” 1956).¹⁸

On the international stage, the World Conference indeed constituted a key event in the WFTU’s turn to a proactive promotion of women’s top-level trade unionism. This included several key innovations. First, the WFTU bade farewell to the men-only composition of its own leadership. From November 1955 at the latest, the Italian Maddalena Grassi (born Secco, first name also given as Madelena and Madeleine, wife of WFTU functionary Luigi Grassi) served as the leader of the division of women’s affairs within the WFTU Secretariat, the administrative head of the organization, taking up a key role in preparations for the conference. In September 1956, Elena Teodorescu, a member of the executive committee of the Romanian trade union federation and a “long-time fighter of the labour movement,” was elected to the WFTU Secretariat, serving as one of six WFTU secretaries, i.e., “full-time

salaried officials” within the executive leadership of the WFTU¹⁹ (*Népszava* 27 September 1956; 2 October 1956; *Előre* 10 September 1957; Bell 1956; *Facts* 1957).

Second, after the World Conference of Women Workers, the WFTU made every effort to exhibit the turn to women’s trade union leadership as it continued to pursue its international politics of promoting women’s equality. Before the conference, a WFTU delegation comprised of the men-only WFTU executive board, at a meeting with the Director-General of the ILO, extended an invitation for an ILO official to attend the World Conference. Louis Saillant, Secretary-General of the WFTU, felt the need to state that next time, the WFTU “hoped to rectify an omission in the present delegation and to have with them a qualified spokesman for women’s interests” (“Minutes” 1956). In November 1956, after the World Conference, leading officers of the International Labour Office indeed received a four-women WFTU delegation to discuss “problems of mutual interest concerning women workers.” Besides Teodorescu and Grassi, the group included the leading French trade unionist Germaine Guillé and Teresa Noce, the secretary of the Trade Unions International of Textile and Clothing Workers, who represented the Trade Department of the WFTU²⁰ (Alvarado 1956).

Third, the WFTU aimed to elevate trade union involvement in the international politics of women’s work to a higher status. The World Conference of Women Workers adopted and presented a memorandum to the ILO Director-General in which it proposed the establishment of a Tripartite Committee for Women’s Work. Tripartite committees constituted the highest-ranking type of expert committee attached to and advising the International Labour Office; with a guaranteed proportion of trade union (and employers’ and state) representatives, their tripartite constitution replicated a fundamental design principle of the ILO. The WFTU women’s delegation to the ILO mentioned above followed up on the memorandum, demanding the inclusion of “an item concerning women’s problems” in one of the sessions of the International Labour Conference. It also inquired about the possibility that the International Labour Office could facilitate the convocation of “a Conference of the different world trade union organisations” to take action in support of the ILO’s equal pay convention adopted in 1951 (Alvarado 1956).

Fourth, at the World Conference of Women Workers, the idea to organize an international training seminar for women trade unionists was proposed (WFTU 1961, 21). A few months later, in February 1957, the WFTU Executive Committee, wishing to “consolidate” the “encouraging” results of the conference and “to contribute towards the training of women trade union cadres and to a more active participation by women workers in the life and leadership of trade unions,” approved the plan for a seminar “for active women trade unionists of different countries”²¹ (WFTU 1957, 47). The two-week event took place in a trade union training centre in Zlenice, not far from Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia, from 15 to 30 September 1957 (WFTU 1957, 104). Among the more than thirty participants, many came from the Global South; participants from Eastern Europe included trade unionists from Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The seven topics discussed there were carefully chosen as an ensemble to be truly global and inclusive in their outlook. Under the heading “equal rights for women workers; the role and responsibilities of the trade unions in the socialist countries” the state-socialist world region was given a visible place. Other agenda points addressed – always in relation to women’s work and trade unionism – the “capitalist, colonial and semicolonial countries,” plantation workers, national independence movements, and the WFTU’s own “campaigns and responsibilities”²² (WFTU 1961, 21, 104).

Fifth, the WFTU, following the World Conference, engaged in a highly publicized campaign (W.F.T.U. 1957) to bring “women ... more into the life and leadership of the unions,” with the aim of stimulating women’s trade unionism on the national and local levels as well. The campaign built and expanded on the insight that there existed “the need not merely for trade union organisation but also for [women’s] own wider share in the life and activities of the trade union movement.” In preparation for the WFTU’s World Trade Union Congress in Leipzig in October 1957, specific problems standing in the way of achieving this goal and the means to resolve them were identified and discussed in a widely circulated brochure (W. F.T.U. 1957). Men, for example, did not yet realize women’s capabilities and thus did not entrust them with relevant tasks, or, they failed to consider women’s “lack of experience,” so women were “given too many duties at a time,” resulting in high drop-out rates. Remedies included a reliance on “active women trade union members who already hold posts of responsibility” to “help trade unions to carry on activities” among the large groups of still unorganized women workers. While foregrounding other world regions, the socialist countries were explicitly included in the global campaign. The conditions of women workers in these countries were “made very much easier by an extensive network of social amenities with the result that they take a more active part in the life and leadership of their trade union organisations than women do elsewhere and are demanding ever greater participation.” In the socialist countries, the “problem of the day” was “to overcome difficulties arising from the building of a new society.”

The WFTU’s World Trade Union Congress, convening only a few days after the closing of the women’s seminar, advocated, in globally unspecified terms, for the spread of specialized measures to promote and develop women’s trade unionism in all countries. The trade unions were asked, e.g., “to pay careful attention to finding appropriate ways to overcome the practical difficulties met by women because of their numerous family duties” (Texts 1957, 44). With a view to guiding national centres accordingly, the WFTU published a “pamphlet” after the Congress which aimed to popularize (together with many other aims and plans) the relevant decisions and recommendations made at the Congress. “Congress stated that ‘the trade unions should see women workers’ problems as an integral part of trade union activities as a whole. Consideration of their aspirations and demands will greatly help ... women to take their rightful place at all levels in the trade unions.’” The pamphlet also informed readers that the “Congress recommended trade unions” train and support “women trade union leaders,” organize “more events such as the First International Seminar for Women Trade Unionists,” and “strengthen educational and propaganda work among women” (Review 1957, esp. 15).

WFTU and SZOT Strangely in Sync: The Hungarian Coda, 1956 to 1959

In Hungary, in the years following the 1956/1957 peak of WFTU action, SZOT activities regarding women’s trade unionism unmistakably resonated with key international activities and credos newly adopted by the WFTU, at least from a formal point of view. SZOT actions produced a national trade union scene that was evidently less dynamic compared to earlier peaks of women’s trade unionism.

Back then, more than a year before the publication of the lively 1957 WFTU pamphlet, the Hungarian speech for the 1956 World Conference of Women Workers spoke in detail about the multiple severe problems working women confronted in Hungary. This was directly related to ongoing changes in Hungarian women’s politics. A series of party

decisions between April and June 1956 – which following the tumultuous Hungarian autumn of 1956 would be reconfirmed in February 1957 – once again gave trade unions responsibility for women’s politics at the workplace (Sipos 1996, 329; Szervezési és Káder Osztály 1956). The emphasis of the speech of the Hungarian representative at the 1956 World Conference of Women Workers on trade unions as *the* key institution to address working women’s problems speaks to the intention to use the international platform to re-build Hungarian women’s trade unionism from the shop floor to the national level.²³

The autumn of 1956 changed the Hungarian context fundamentally. Following friction with the WFTU in late 1956 – when (factions of) SZOT likely had vacillated instead of straightforwardly pursuing Moscow-loyal policies (Berán and Kajári 1989, 356–60) – SZOT aimed to muster women into the overarching political and stabilization goals of the post-1956 years. SZOT’s national congress, which assembled in February 1958, only a few months after the WFTU’s World Trade Union Congress, issued a vehement appeal to all working women to support various society-wide causes and “with all your talent, diligence, and woman’s heart serve the cause of the big family – the working people” (“Dolgozó nők! Asszonyok! Lányok!” 1958).

In March 1958, SZOT issued new Guidelines for trade union women’s work (SZOT NB 1958, 42–49). SZOT acknowledged that the “frequent organisational changes” of the past had produced “impatience” and other difficulties hampering workplace trade unions’ work. The Guidelines were fully in sync with the key formal benchmarks of WFTU policies for promoting women’s trade unionism. This concerned the goal that women’s work must “assert itself (*érvényesül*) in all areas of trade union work,” a focus on “political education” and the “effort (*törekvés*) that skilled woman ... ‘gain positions according to their proportion [in the workforce] in trade union leadership and economic management alike.”

The SZOT Guidelines and other materials produced at the time were devoid of any engagement with practical problems that hindered working women’s full participation and leadership in trade union life, an element fully present in some of the WFTU materials discussed above. SZOT’s women’s committee turned to new popularization strategies, publishing a “booklet” entitled *We Speak About Women – We Address Women* in 1958 (SZOT NB 1958). With a print run of ten thousand copies, the brochure was intended to help trade union Representatives in Charge of Women’s Issues across the country with the “political education” of the working people. Resembling the WFTU’s discourse, which on the international stage mainly assigned representative functions to women trade unionists from state-socialist countries, the booklet embodied this distance from active women’s trade unionism in Hungary. The brochure defined “political education” as “as important” as the representation of interests. But the only reference to actual trade union educational work was contained in the full version of the 1958 SZOT Guidelines, which was included in the booklet. The main content of the brochure was divided into three parts. In a short section entitled “On the Past ...,” the iconic leader of the pre-1918 socialist women’s movement Mária Gárdos (born 1885); Mária Palankai (born 1895), who had served in the metallurgical trade union’s central leadership since 1957 (Garamvölgyi 1968); and Erzsébet Futó, who was elected to SZOT leadership in September 1956 (“Szervezeti kérdések” 1956) discussed their pre-1945 activism exclusively. Next came portrayals of the contemporary struggles of women in the non-state-socialist world, replete with examples from many countries and short quotes from speeches given at the 1956 World Conference

of Women Workers. After these sections about the non-socialist Hungarian past and the non-socialist global present followed the third section, “From Our Laws,” which, representing the Hungarian state-socialist present, simply listed the relevant legal regulations concerning women’s work and its protection.

In sum, making use of WFTU approaches to women’s trade unionism in state-socialist contexts on the national level, SZOT ushered in a phase of sterile formality regarding women’s trade unionism in Hungary by the late 1950s.

Fitting into this pattern – in terms of the character of the overall event – the 1959 Nationwide Women’s Conference of the Trade Unions appears as the coda of women’s trade unionism in Hungary in early state socialism.²⁴ The conference was organized on short notice in the run-up to International Women’s Day; trade union women functionaries belonging to the more activist group that was deeply engaged with the politics of women’s work were not visibly involved. The main speech was given by SZOT secretary Mrs. János Bugár, who was responsible for trade union propaganda and campaign work. In the press, including the main trade union outlets, reporting related to the Nationwide Women’s Conference was scarce. (*Népszava* 28 February 1959; Berán and Kajári 1989, 448). SZOT’s flagship journal *Munka* made a fleeting reference to the Women’s Conference in only one article, a “progress report” from a site visit at Hazai Fésűsfonó, a large textile factory that employed 2,800 women (Pongör 1959). The report revealed the workplace-level implications of SZOT’s politics of women’s trade unionism as “translated” by SZOT from the WFTU global stage into the Hungarian national context of the late 1950s. At its core, the report expanded on the most classical of mainstream trade union discourses, construing the woman worker herself – described as unwilling and unfit to make use of all the opportunities offered to her – as the principal reason trade unionism did not work for her and why she was incapable of benefiting from either education or progress. Following this example, the report explained that women workers in the Hazai Fésűsfonó largely ignored various devices and schemes implemented for them in the factory including a sewing machine, a take-home pre-cooked dinner option, and a cleaners’ shop. This was not the “fault” of the trade union committee and the management; rather, it showed “that women are often backward, unable to take advantage of all the opportunities.” The same was true for the educational openings available to workers. Of the nine hundred to one thousand women who – having grown up before socialism – had no more than four to six years of schooling, “only 15 signed up for evening school!” True, many of them were commuters, and this constituted an objective difficulty; nevertheless, “there are also distance learning courses and educational lectures. Unfortunately, even these are not attended.” A large majority of women workers did not care or had different, dubious, priorities, and as a result, “those come to the fore who practically abuse (*szinte visszaél*) the possibilities offered by the people’s democracy.”

At Hazai Fésűsfonó, the reporter also met the worker Mrs. István Földi, who as a speaker at the Nationwide Women’s Conference had been “very successful” with her “simple, heartfelt words.” Serving as the rare counter example of an aspirational and educated everyday heroine successfully juggling all balls at once, Mrs. Földi was depicted in the illustration of the article as “screening the performance of Mrs. Sándor Magó, spinner.”

Women’s trade unionism in the period strongly surfaced as a top-down activity more exclusively aimed at governing and disciplining women workers and, in all likelihood, remained, a less lively arena of women’s trade union action, at least on the national

level.²⁵ In February 1960, the WFTU published a report by SZOT secretary Mrs. János Bugár, who claimed that “after the counter-revolution” it had taken time for “cultural life” to regain its dynamism, adding that “[i]t is doubtless, however, that women’s participation has advanced though more slowly, and with greater difficulty” (Bugár [Bugár] 1960). The WFTU credo that women’s trade union work was to form an “integral part” of all trade union activities in Hungarian practice brought about the marginalization of women’s trade unionism. Until well into the 1960s there would be few traces (in the multiple archives I have consulted so far) of the activities of SZOT’s women’s committee.

Conclusion

The politics of promoting women’s trade unionism discussed in this article formed part of a cross-Iron Curtain, global, multi-scale history of women’s trade unionism. The WFTU’s emphasis on spurring women to trade union action in the middle of the 1950s was driven, insofar as the men-dominated leadership was concerned, by a combination of motives. Exchange between women from across the globe was aimed not only at promoting communist-aligned activism in capitalist and post/colonial countries. Such exchange was also regarded as a less-politicized programme that lent itself to promoting top-level political collaboration across ideological divides, a key policy goal of the WFTU during the period. The WFTU considered issues regarding women’s work an innocuous platform for their hoped-for politics of collaboration with the ICFTU and the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions, and it intended to lend political weight to this endeavour through a visible upsurge of communist-aligned international women’s trade unionism. Finally, the WFTU, as it advocated women’s full equality, globally sought to showcase the progressive character of the state-socialist project.

WFTU-aligned women trade unionists took the chance, just as their colleagues did in the ICFTU. Here, as Dorothy Sue Cobble (2021, 320–327) has shown, the scope of action for dedicated women widened dramatically in response to WFTU overtures; ICFTU women aimed to actualize and expand, with partial success, the new opportunities opening for them as the ICFTU reacted directly to what it considered “the climax” of an obstinate and mendacious WFTU campaign (“Preparatory Committee” 1956): the WFTU preparations for the World Conference of Women Workers. The international documents produced by the WFTU at the time speak to its serious and informed engagement concerning the real-life obstacles to women’s participation in trade union life and practical measures to overcome them,²⁶ just as was the case at the ICFTU.

Women’s trade unionism stemming from the state-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe confronted difficulties on the growing international stage of women’s WFTU-aligned trade unionism. Central and Eastern European women trade unionists acquired institutional standing and presence on the international stage, in the first place, as representatives of the advanced status of working women in the countries “building socialism.” Within an international policy framework that did not put centre stage their trade unionist practices, the *de facto* struggles of these women in their respective domestic contexts were present only to a limited degree. This concerned the formats and activities of trade union work for women in which they were engaged – especially in enterprises and at their workplaces, and in the variegated domestic contexts in the state-socialist countries, which either could be conducive to or hindered women

trade unionists' position and influence in the management of women's work and their (trade union women's) engagement with women workers' problems.

Still, women trade unionists from the region partook in the new international politics of spurring women into action. They gained international standing and additional experience, and they aimed to make use of the international platform provided by the WFTU to advance their domestic agendas. Hungarian policies for mobilizing women into trade unions and providing trade union training for them were closely intertwined with both economic and political needs and the interests driving the project of "building socialism" while, at the same time, shifting their emphasis and changing formats as they addressed specific tasks. The rapidly growing female labour force played an important role in this project and was subjected to significant burdens as it was put into the service of this project. Women trade unionists, who while dedicated to the project of "building socialism" aimed to alleviate some of these burdens, repeatedly encountered the entrenched disinterest of the main actors and their unwillingness to engage substantively on the issue of improving the position of women at the socialist workplace as compared to men. Regarding the resistance they encountered in their struggle for substantive improvement of the condition of women workers, the experience of Hungarian women trade unionists, again, was rather similar to that of their many trade colleagues around the world.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Selin Cagatay and Olga Gnydiuk, who have made important material related to the WFTU available to the ZARAH team, and also the ZARAH team for their discussion on the long version of the present (abbreviated) text. All translations into English are mine, including (re-)translations of WFTU materials I was able to access in other languages.
2. The formal title of the 1956 conference did not carry the misnomer "first." Yet the WFTU made a great effort to present the conference as no. 1. The various editions of the special supplement to the WFTU journal *World Trade Union News* carried the title "Towards the First World Conference of Women Workers!" in several issues published in the run-up to the conference, and the WFTU similarly used as section title "The 1st World Conference of Women Workers" in its activity report. The formal title of the 1947 conference in Hungary, just like the WFTU's misleading statements, ignored pre-World War II histories of women trade unionists' organizing. In 1959, the leading Hungarian papers refrained from, once again, using the misnomer.
3. Similar shifts happened in other state-socialist countries too, but with different timing. See, e.g., Jarska 2018.
4. Women activists and functionaries were repeatedly advised or directed to follow the changes; for trade union women this meant they were asked to move into MNDSz structures when MNDSz acquired a greater role in the workplace (see, e.g., Berán and Kajári 1989, 110). There is ample documentation that indicates such changes were not easy, were unwelcome, or did not work out at all.
5. Some of the leading trade union women, including Dankó, had participated in the movement already in the interwar period (Anyáink, Asszonyaink, Leányaink 1958; "Piroska Szabó" 2023).
6. In the original material documenting the structure, discourse, and practices shaping the work of the Hungarian women trade unionists, direct reference to the "Soviet connection" is scarce (e.g., "Jegyzőkönyv" 1949a). Further research is needed to establish in a more specific manner the associated travel of organizational principles of communist-led trade union training and trade union work with a focus on women's trade unionism and trade union work within Central and Eastern Europe including, of course, the Soviet Union.
7. After early signs of a rift in late 1947, the de facto split between the (pro)communist and anticommunist camps within the WFTU took place in January 1949. The strongly anticommunist

International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) was founded in December 1949 (Bosch 1983, 60–64; Devinatz 2013, 348–349, 351–354).

8. The proposal to establish a higher-level entity equipped with three rooms, its own telephone, and a division head (Mrs. Pál Bodonyi was suggested) was dated June 1952. According to Schadt, the division head became a member of the SZOT Presidency and Secretariat with consultative status (SZOT Szervezési Osztály 1952; Schadt 2007, 177).
9. I do not discuss women workers' resistance against the strained efforts to increase their productivity, which was encountered and recorded by the trade union women, for which there is ample documentation.
10. SZKL 2. F. 19, 1952, box 1, folders 1 and 2, PIL, contains rich documentation.
11. This is not to say that the WFTU did not support women's trade unionism before 1953. When the – still united – WFTU deeply engaged with the issue of equal pay in 1948, its detailed "Statement of Principle and Survey of the Question of the Remuneration of Female Labour" included a section advocating for women's trade unionism; the "one thing certain" was that women's own initiative, as well as "a great campaign" to be organized to "encourage women to join trade union organisations in large numbers," were key to overcoming the manifold obstacles to wage equality (WFTU 1949, 416–417). When at the height of political tensions around the ongoing split the WFTU's second world congress assembled in summer 1949 in Milan, speeches by women trade unionists from Central and Eastern European countries were enlisted, which pointed, e.g., to key social developments advancing the status of women workers in their countries (WFTU *Proceedings* 1949, 169–172, 353–355). After the split and until 1953, women's trade unionism was much less emphasized.
12. The photograph, published in *Als wenn Ihr dort gewesen wäret* (1953), was kindly provided by the Swedish Labour Movement's Archives and Library, Stockholm.
13. A contemporary propaganda brochure gives 1951 as the year when the WFTU turned to "'smile' tactics" also in its relations with the ICFTU leadership (*Facts* 1957, esp. 27). Lichtblau's article, while heavily driven by anticommunist ideology, gives relevant information about the WFTU during the period, including the varieties of the "unity of action" strategy; the author claims that at the time of writing, the from-above variant again became more important "wherever this is feasible, especially in the Afro-Asian countries."
14. A renewed emphasis on working women's rights is documented in the WFTU monthly *World Trade Union Movement* from the middle of 1953 onwards; this was directly connected to the strong emphasis on this large topic, which characterized the WIDF-led World Congress of Women held in Copenhagen in June that year. The WFTU closely engaged with the event and the Declaration on the Rights of Women adopted by the Copenhagen Congress (*World Trade Union Movement* [8, April 16–30] 1953: 30–32; [14, July 16–31] 1953: 12–15; [1, January 1–15] 1954: 14–15). I have not yet been able to explore this connection further, and the specific reasons for the WIDF's turn to this topic and the related mutual engagement between the WFTU and WIDF.
15. Other committee members included women, and some men, from Western and Eastern Germany, Sweden, Great Britain, Italy, France, Japan, and India. A Hungarian participant is mentioned in an inconsistent manner and was not included in the list contained in the Hungarian archival material which lists names; it lists "TROJANOVA" (secretary, Czechoslovakian trade union federation), "BANU Ileanu" (Romanian trade union federation and health workers' trade union), and "MOTOVA" (secretary, greater Moscow central council of trade unions).
16. Women from Bucharest, Romania likewise reported that they were "taking action ... to improve the arrangements for women to qualify and gain promotion to posts of responsibility in their trades and in the unions." In addition, they "organised an exhibition showing different aspects of the struggle of women workers in our own and other countries, for peace and a better life; and a series of ten films. From May 15 to June 20 there will be a radio programme entitled *Women Worker's Hour*." (*Supplement*, May 1956, 9–10).
17. The document quoted here does not give the name of the speaker. According to one document, Hungary planned for 41 delegates; the delegation was to be led by Gizella Hegyi (Lackó 1956).

18. I have not yet been able to identify the resolution as adopted. It is neither contained in the documents issued by the WFTU (WFTU 1957) nor in Ganguli 2000.
19. For some time, Grassi and the women's division in the WFTU Secretariat were still mentioned after the Women's World Conference. Teodorescu served for many years as one of the WFTU's secretaries, functioning as a full-time employee at the WFTU Secretariat. Here she was responsible for and played a highly visible role in the WFTU's liaison activities with the ILO, the UN, and other international organizations. Teodorescu was replaced by Stana Dragoi in March 1964, only a few weeks before the opening of the 2nd International Trade Union Conference on the Problems of Working Women in Bucharest; Teodorescu had played an important role in the planning of this conference (*Előre*, 22 March 1964; Alvarado 1956; *Facts* 1957, 20–22). In 1960, Irena Brzozowska, secretary of the Polish trade union federation, and Tatjana Nyikolajeva, secretary of the Soviet trade union federation, are mentioned as members of the WFTU General Council and the WFTU Executive Committee, respectively (Nyikolajeva 1960).
20. The delegation also included the Permanent Representative of the WFTU to the ILO and the UN's European Office.
21. With the exception of the term "encouraging," the quotes indicate the precise wording of the Executive Committee's original decision.
22. So far, I have not been able to find a full list of participants.
23. Related SZOT guidelines would indeed be issued in August 1956 (Szervezési és Káder Osztály 1956).
24. I have not been able to establish with certainty the specific context(s) of the organization of the conference. Several speakers' contributions, in part handwritten, are preserved in the SZOT archives.
25. Two brochures, published in 1961 and 1962, respectively, illustrate some of these restrictive tendencies. One gave the curriculum and contents of a one-day training course for "women's committee activists"; the other brochure, published in the series "Handbooks of the Trade Union Activist," summarized the "tasks" of the trade union women's committees (SZOT 1961; Sótér 1962).
26. Further research needs to and can be done to flesh out the interests, interventions, and activities of key women trade unionists from Central and Eastern European countries in the WFTU, the ILO, the UN, and other international arenas. I hope that this article can serve as a springboard for this work.

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Part-time work: the co-production of a contested employment model for women in Austria and internationally, 1950s to 1980s

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ABSTRACT

In 2022, every second employed woman in Austria worked part-time, while only 12.6 percent of men did so. In more affluent countries, part-time work has evolved from a special form of employment to a gendered norm in the past six decades, whereas in state-socialist and post-state-socialist Europe, this model of women's employment played a much less pronounced role historically. Albeit contested, part-time work has been a concern of women trade unionists since the 1950s. This article examines the emergence and evolution of an important trend in the history of women's work from a multi-level perspective. It explores how women activists in the ICFTU, the ILO and in Austria dealt with part-time work as a method of harmonizing women's unpaid and paid work. Collaboration with the ILO played an important role in Austrian developments, and Austrian activists aimed to impact on international decision-making. Furthermore, the article shows the rather hidden role women civil servants played in generating knowledge on the topic. This analysis of the evolution of the gendered norm of part-time work and its contestation contributes to recent research on shifts in reproductive arrangements and gender relations in the second half of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

Labour activism; Austria; part-time work; International Labour Organization (ILO); International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU); double burden

The most recent data on female employment in Austria reveals the existence of a gendered employment model: part-time work. In 2022, half of all employed women worked part-time, compared to only 12.6 percent of men (Statistik Austria 2022). In the 1960s, the percentage of all persons, men and women, engaged in part-time paid work was in the single digits, and the model was even more marginal before then. This article explores how this employment model came about and uses a transnational perspective to trace the development of debates on part-time work from the post-war period to the late 1980s. It was only between the late 1950s and 1970s that part-time work was established as a regular form of employment for women and subsequently gained ground. Consequently, this article focuses on this formative period.

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Analysing the phenomenon of part-time work also proves to be instructive because the topic is directly related to economic conditions and family-political notions. While this topic has received very little attention in historical scholarship to date, the case of part-time work has been addressed in the most recent scholarship on the history of gendered (paid and unpaid) labour relations (Betti et al. 2022; Cobble 2021; Berrebi-Hoffmann et al. 2019). This scholarship has confirmed the continuing dominance of a specific socio-economic gendered arrangement that preserves care work as the exclusive domain of women – despite growing efforts to promote part-time work as a gender-neutral alternative for working parents, which is in line with a similar trend of increased emphasis on equality in gender and labour arrangements rather than protective measures (Ricciardi 2019).

As I will show, from the 1950s onwards, trade union women, together with conservative and progressive parties alike, acknowledged that part-time employment for mothers allowed women to reconcile their paid labour with their unpaid domestic work. Attention to this aspect of the discussion enables us to move beyond the conceptualization of part-time work as an employment model only for middle-class married women who chose it because of their “desire to earn extra money” (von Oertzen 1999). Part-time work was part of a broader debate on household labour and its economic value already well before the 1970s, which are commonly understood as the crucial period when feminist activists were rethinking labour relations (e.g. Boris 2019b).

Using the case of Austria, this multilevel analysis explores not only how international and national developments in industrialized countries were intertwined but also reveals that the activism of some labour women played on multiple scales and, consequently, that they were closely involved in the production of this gendered employment relation. Women trade unionists and civil servants active on both the national and supranational levels played a key role in standardizing legislation and policies. Especially from the 1970s onwards, a decade marked by social democratic reform politics (Mesner 2020), women bureaucrats within the Austrian Ministry of Social Affairs exerted influence through the production of knowledge (e.g. through surveys) and their function as mediators between state institutions, international organizations, and the labour movement.

One result of this multilevel analysis, based on an extensive body of sources,¹ is a three-phase chronology of the development of part-time work, which is used to structure this article. In the first section, which focuses on the period from the end of the Second World War to the beginning of the 1960s, I show how part-time work as a model of employment for women, notably those with family responsibilities, became the subject of policies and sociological research on the international level. In the post-war period, but especially in the 1950s, industrialized countries contemplated adopting part-time work as a strategy to mobilize women to join the labour force. Their deliberations were mirrored in the first debates on part-time work that took place within the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). In the second section, I explore how the preparatory work for the 48th International Labour Conference in 1964 and the ILO Recommendation No. 123 “Employment (Women with Family Responsibilities)” in 1965 initiated an intensive phase of trade union, political, and sociological discussion in Austria, which primarily revolved around questions of standardization and the recognition of part-time work under labour and social security laws. This period was also characterized by the lobbying efforts of ICFTU women from the Joint

ICFTU/ITS (International Trade Secretariats) Consultative Committee on Women Workers' Questions (hereafter: ICFTU/ITS Women's Committee) in the ILO, as well as in-depth knowledge production concerning the issue on the international and national level.² In the final section, I cautiously outline how, beginning with the recession in the mid 1970s, part-time work was discussed primarily in connection with economic and social shifts. Trade union women on the national and international level interpreted the increasing numbers of women working part-time as the result of the economic crisis, which produced unwanted side effects including women's loss of the right to full-time employment – a right trade union women, especially those aligned with the social democratic labour movement, historically had put at the forefront of their agenda. Despite the outspoken opposition of many labour women within the ICFTU and the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB), part-time employment became an integral topic in debates on women's employment and work-life balance during the UN Decade of Women (1975–1985), highlighting its emerging significance on the global scale. Ultimately, the growing importance of women's part-time work triggered a second wave of legal instruments both in Austria and internationally, culminating in the ILO's Part-Time Work Convention No. 175 in 1994.

The invention of part-time work, C.A. 1945–1963

Part-time work as an emerging topic internationally

Women's employment was one of the most pressing concerns of the post-war period. As Wobbe, Höroldt, and Bussmann (2019) have explained, the issue developed within a dramatically transformed global landscape in which women were an essential part of the labour force. For ILO and UN experts, the increasing share of married women in the labour market of Western industrialized countries led to discussions about part-time work as one of the most pressing issues, as illustrated by the UN Resolution "*Accès de la femme à la vie économique: travail à temps partiel pour les femmes*" (1952) (ILO 1956, 8–9). The attention to part-time employment as a new labour market policy instrument, especially in highly industrialized countries in Western Europe (de Groot 2022; von Oertzen 1999), was part of an overall preoccupation with wage-earning mothers (Zimmermann Forthcoming). Furthermore, as German historian Christine von Oertzen has stressed, after its "naturalization" in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it became "a central turning point in the immediate post-war period" (von Oertzen 2000, 82).

There was a tension between the ILO policies on the employment of women, demands for women's equality, and the need for special protections for working women (Boris 2019a, 1–14). For the most part, the position of women in the organization itself was marginal even though a Correspondence Committee on Women's Work had been established already in the 1930s. After World War Two, efforts to establish a panel on women's work in the ILO continued. Experts on women's work met throughout the 1950s (in 1951 and 1956), and the tripartite Panel of Consultants on Problems of Women Workers met for the first time in October 1959 (Neunsinger 2018, 128). The latter was a key player in formulating policies for the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The ICFTU/ITS Women's Committee, in turn, sought to influence votes within the ILO, as I will show regarding the instruments targeting labour

standards for part-time work. The history of the ICFTU/ITS Women's Committee's women's politics within the International Confederation of Trade Unions had a similar trajectory. An International Committee of Trade Union Women was established by the ICFTU's predecessor, the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in 1924, but it was restrained by the IFTU leadership in 1937–1938 (Zimmermann 2021, Chpt. 11). Re-established in 1957, the ICFTU/ITS Women's Committee continued its work proposing policies ICFTU members could put forward in the ILO Workers' Group. It was a "powerfully knit group," according to Richards (2018, 150). One of the key players in this group was Rosa Weber, the head of the ÖGB women's department and a member of parliament. The Austrian trade unionist represented (women) workers' interests within ILO and ICFTU committees, notably in her capacity as Chair of the ILO Workers' Group in 1964.

While the ICFTU Women's Committee became active in tackling the issue of women's part-time work only in response to ILO initiatives (ICFTU 1957), the latter launched several studies on the issue to understand how widespread the phenomenon of women's part-time work was, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of this model of employment. "Combining Work and Home Life," it was noted during the first session of the ILO Panel of Consultants on Problems of Women Workers, and "helping them [women; VH] to make their best contribution to economic and family life, is perhaps the crux of the next phase of social policy related to women workers" (ILO 1959).³ The first step to enact policies in the field was the production of solid and comprehensive knowledge, a position widely shared by many involved in labour politics at the time. The discussion during a meeting of experts on women's work that took place within the ILO in November 1956 provides insight into the main concerns, especially for workers' representatives. Primarily, they argued that it was necessary to explore different interpretations of part-time work to arrive at reliable figures and then be able to formulate a common standard. It was also necessary to understand why and under what conditions women would choose to take up part-time work, which also meant less wages, i.e. the need to explore the different motivations behind the decision to work part-time. The experts of the panel asserted that financial reasoning was behind women's choice to take up part-time work, including raising their family's standard of living (vacations, household items, cars) and providing better educational opportunities for their children. But the panel also noted occupational reasons such as the fear of losing skills and wasting professional qualifications while staying at home; married women's desire to be independent and create a professional life for themselves; or the need to escape from the monotony and isolation of housework (ILO 1956, 11–16). The panel's deliberations indicate that the idea that women's gainful employment generated supplementary or secondary income and the goal of mobilizing women who were not yet – or no longer – in the labour force stood at the core of debates.

The reasons for directing women to part-time jobs advanced by employers and economists included the limited availability of full-time jobs in certain professions, or the need to use part-time workers to cover irregular labour-intensive periods (ILO 1956, 11–16). Part-time work was understood as one way to mobilize the labour reserves booming post-war economies desperately needed; another would be the recruitment of migrant workers (Afonso 2019). This assessment was supported by an investigation the ICFTU/ITS Women's Committee undertook at the request of the ILO. Some organizations, such as the West German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), indeed highlighted the

increased demand for women to be engaged as part-time workers during the economic boom period (ICFTU 1961).

While the report of the 1956 ILO meeting detailed the advantages of part-time work for employees and employers alike, the feared disadvantages outlined by trade union women were numerous: a heightened dependence on part-time jobs brought with it the risk of these workers being the first to be terminated in periods of economic contraction (e.g. general economic downturns or off-season fluctuations); financial disadvantages (i.e. certain expenses such as travel costs are the same for full-time and part-time workers, while the latter's wages are lower; lower social benefits for part-time workers); and the elevated threat of workplace abuse and pressure (ILO 1956, 28–30). However, women trade unionists did not present a united front on the issue. Representatives of the ICFTU were critical of part-time work – they even expressed “violent” opposition (ILO 1956, 36), whereas the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions understood part-time or half-time work as a reasonable strategy to combine work and family, with the stipulation that working conditions should be strictly controlled to prevent full-time workers from having to meet unfair expectations uncritically adopted from the experience of part-time workers. As will be discussed further below, the Austrian case also shows how trade union women aligned with the conservative party in the late 1960s and 1970s supported part-time work as a suitable employment model for women and continuously urged the adoption of labour laws regulating part-time employment especially, but not exclusively, for white-collar jobs.

The meeting of experts concluded that in order to avoid the “creation of a special category of women workers with inferior working conditions,” the disadvantages for women should be reduced through the enactment of various legal measures and demanded that full-time positions should be protected, particularly in times of increased unemployment. Moreover, it was emphasized that a general reduction in working hours; the promotion of social measures to support women with children such as school canteens or state childcare; and the promotion of part-time work for women and men alike would be desirable (ILO 1956, 58–60).⁴

International women's experts and international labour policies as triggers of the Austrian debate

While part-time employment received considerable and increasing attention at the international level – although it was discussed predominantly in the context of Western labour politics, an analysis of debates among Austrian trade unionists reveals that the topic was fairly marginal in the 1950s. This can be explained by three contributing factors: Austrian women trade unionists were part of the decisions within the ICFTU and supported the latter's overall hesitation to treat part-time work as a pressing issue related to women's work; the share of women engaged in gainful employment was higher in Austria than in other West European countries, but their incomes were lower, which leads me to conclude that fewer women could afford to relinquish a part of their salary; and last but not least, the dominance of a specific Catholic-conservative model of family policies was shared by the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Socialist Party (SPÖ) alike, and they aimed to solve the “dilemma of child care and employment” by helping women with small children stay at home (Mesner 2006, 186). Measures such as the

relatively extensive – compared to other industrialized countries – maternity leave (previously employed women were paid a maternity allowance for one year since 1960) and child benefits bolstered these policies.

Very few labour women called for half-day employment for mothers to ease their workload. In this early period, part-time work was primarily discussed as an instrument to create better job opportunities for elderly women, a position possibly adapted from similar discussions at the ILO (e.g. ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1955, motion no. 42). The asynchrony of attention paid to the topic becomes apparent when analysing the discussions at the women's congresses of the Austrian Trade Union Federation. It was mainly the international (West European) experts – but no trade union activists – invited to give keynote lectures who addressed part-time employment as one of the most pressing issues for modern working women. At a congress in 1959, A. J. Schellekens-Ligthart, a Dutch sociologist (University of Utrecht) and expert on women's work, emphasized the topicality of the issue: "Trade unions, for their part, will have to take this into account," she said, stressing that measures such as "half-day work, kindergartens, improved vacation arrangements and the like" would become more important to "married women" than conventional trade union demands such as "a high wage" or "a good pension scheme" (ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1959, 111). Schellekens-Linhart drew on the debate within the Netherlands, a country with a low percentage of women employed and where – although also controversial – part-time work had been promoted among women since the 1950s (de Groot 2022).

In the years that followed, international experts researching women's work continued to initiate discussions on the topic of part-time work at congresses, notably the German educational scientist in 1963 (ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1963); the Vienna-born, British sociologist Viola Klein in 1967 (ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1967); and officer for Women's Affairs in the OECD Denise Lecoultre in 1975 (ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1975). They shared their experiences in countries like Great Britain, Germany, and France and discussed part-time work as an attractive option to ease the challenges of everyday life. By doing so, they referred to their own and current research, most prominently the 1956 study published by Viola Klein and Swedish labour politician and sociologist Alva Myrdal entitled "Women's Two Roles: Home and Work," which became a bestseller and was translated into several languages (Mattes 2008, 217–218). Klein and Myrdal described three phases in the working life of women: a period of wage work was followed by a period of child rearing, and then a return to wage work in the third phase. Part-time employment in the second phase could, thus, not only compensate for financial hardship but also encourage women to choose sustainable vocational training in the first phase to ease problems re-entering the job market in the third (Klein and Myrdal 1956). With this theory, the two presented an alternative to the male employment biography, the latter of which had served as the model for legal frameworks and labour policies. However, this conceptualization of a specifically female employment biography did not fundamentally oppose the norm of the man as family breadwinner and the woman as the primary caregiver, relying on a network of family and friends and/or care facilities to look after the children during their (short) working hours.

The preoccupation with part-time work at the international level and in other countries triggered a more in-depth study of the topic in Austria. In line with the aforementioned need to acquire reliable data, and in preparation for what would be discussed under the

title “Women in a Changing World” at the 1964 International Labour Conference, in 1962 the ILO asked member countries to answer a questionnaire on the subject. The Ministry of Social Affairs in Vienna invited employers’ and employees’ associations to cooperate in responding to the questionnaire. Almost all the letters responding to the ministry’s request from different regional branches of ÖGB and the Chamber of Labour (Arbeiterkammer, AK) bemoaned the lack of statistical data available. Nevertheless, they estimated that service occupations such as hairdressers’ assistants and cleaning personnel working the early or the late shift were particularly affected by the emergence of part-time employment (AK 1962b). The Women’s Department of the Vienna Chamber of Labour rejected part-time work in very strong terms. It stated that women’s part-time work offered neither a genuine nor a sustainable solution to the problem of the double burden as women accepting part-time employment: “Are not interested in regular professional work and, in many cases, discredit women as workers, since they often have little work discipline or sense of solidarity with the rest of their colleagues and, moreover, are completely uninterested in the work itself” (AK 1962a). While such an attitude was also visible in ILO and ICFTU sources, it was more vigorously expressed by Austrian trade unionists.

At a meeting of the Social Policy Committee at the AK Vienna, however, the decision was made to not “take a strictly negative stance on part-time employment, but a more flexible one.” This transpired despite the problems expressed by women members of the committee as for example by textile unionist and Secretary of Women’s Affairs of the Social Democratic Party Gertrude Wondrack. The committee concluded that in some occupational categories especially within the production sector, trade union and Chamber of Labour representatives should insist on banning part-time work completely; in other sectors where it seemed appropriate, it should be regulated by contractual arrangements made in consultation with the relevant union (AK 1962b).

One of the unions that represented such an employment sector was the Union of Private Sector Employees (GPA). In 1962, Maria Gutberger, the head of the GPA women’s department, acknowledged that there was an increasing demand for half-day employment expressed by many women, and even though “opinions on the issue differed in trade union circles,” it needed to be addressed because the lack of any regulation made part-time workers vulnerable (GPA 1962, 4–5). This position was not dominant within the trade union movement, which became especially apparent at the 1963 ÖGB Women’s Congress. Maria Schleger from the Food and Beverage Workers Union warned against the harm done by “women half-day workers” who only work to “satisfy all kinds of personal needs” (ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1963, 106). Herta Winkler, a delegate from the Styrian Women’s Committee, pointed out that part-time workers would drive up the piece rate. But it was not only in relation to industrial work that women trade unionists warned against giving legitimacy to part-time work. Winkler noted additionally, “female civil servants who pursue their profession for reasons of livelihood bear the heaviest concerns, especially with regard to opportunities for advancement” (ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1963, 114). Indeed, the issue was a “hot potato” (*heißes Eisen*), as Rosa Weber had put it in her closing remarks – an issue she would have preferred to avoid had it not been triggered by the keynote lecture of Elfriede Höhn (ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1963, 181). This was a strategy Weber and other trade union women already deployed unsuccessfully within the ICFTU. Nevertheless, the

ÖGB Women's Congress included a paragraph on part-time work in its resolution implicitly amplifying the decision of the Chamber of Labour from the previous year: "Collective agreements would also have to provide that part-time work does not jeopardize the labour law achievements of full-time workers and that part-time workers are assured social protection" (ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1963, 255).

Struggles for and against the standardisation of part-time work, C.A. 1964–1975

Futile resistance on the national and international levels

At the meetings of the ILO's Governing Body in the 1950s and early 1960s, part-time work was discussed as one of the wide range of problems faced by women in the labour market, and further research was encouraged – a conclusion that was drawn throughout the entire period of examination by nearly every organization involved (see, for instance, also ICFTU 1963). In 1964, the 48th Session of the International Labour Conference adopted resolutions that would shape the policies of the ILO and its member states in the years that followed.⁵ This led to the adoption of ILO Recommendation No. 123, "Employment (Women with Family Responsibilities)" in 1965, which aimed to "encourage and facilitate the development of appropriate policies and services directed towards enabling women with family responsibilities who need or choose to work outside their homes to do so without being subject to discrimination" (ILO 1964, 18). Looking back at the 1965 conference in 1968, ILO women's officer Elizabeth Johnstone (1968, 103) came to the understanding that "clearly, the status of women in the economic field is closely related to their status in other fields," and that the political and social conditions of women with family responsibilities directly influenced their economic opportunities. Historians like Cobble (2021) have shown that the relatively prominent treatment of the specific problems of women workers in the ILO was a consequence of pressure and lobbying by women labour activists from both sides of the Iron Curtain. Although part-time work was discussed widely among women representatives at the ILO, Cobble (2021, 376) found that "the Committee on Women Workers bowed to the powerful Workers' Group" and did not include part-time work in Recommendation No. 123. US representative Esther Peterson denounced retaining the norm of full-time employment as a reflection of "old ways of thinking" (as quoted in Cobble 2021, 376). The Workers' Group's resistance to the inclusion of part-time work in a recommendation dealing with women's questions was, in fact, the result of the lobbying of the ICFTU/ITS Women's Committee. It urged ICFTU-affiliated organizations to send women to the ILO Conference in Geneva (ICFTU 1964b) and to support Rosa Weber and others as representatives of their position vis-à-vis part-time work. A memorandum to the Workers Group stated: "The Committee considers that the question of part-time work [...], should not be included in a recommendation on the employment of women with family responsibilities." Instead, it recommended adopting a resolution directed towards both men and women at a later time (ICFTU 1964a, 5).

Nevertheless, even though the ICFTU/ITS Women's Committee "was firmly opposed" to incorporating part-time work into the Recommendation No. 123 (ICFTU 1965, 1), it adopted a more flexible approach in the years to come, "to see if it can really contribute

to solving the problems of women with family responsibilities.” At the same time, the committee continued to draw attention “to the possible long-term consequences of the introduction or encouragement of any part-time work not backed by all the necessary guarantees” (ICFTU 1965, 2).

A similar conflict over the statutory recognition of part-time work played out in Austria, very likely triggered and influenced by the international debate. Leading Austrian trade union women like Rosa Weber were involved in ICFTU policy formulation and were able to wield considerable influence over decisions within the ICFTU/ITS Women’s Committee; moreover, the preparatory work for ILO instruments and their subsequent adoption fuelled activities within Austrian labour and state institutions, although social democratic trade unionists were reluctant to address and, even more so, to promote anything less than full-time employment (with paid maternity leave as an option). Austria had a higher proportion of women engaged in wage work than other industrialized countries. In 1960, for example, the share of employed women among all employed persons was 35.8 percent in Austria, only 33 percent in Western Europe, but 42 percent in Eastern Europe excluding the Soviet Union (as quoted in Zimmermann [Forthcoming](#)). By the 1960s, Austria began recruiting migrant labour and developing policies to draw even more women into the labour force. This was accompanied by a vigorous campaign for the recognition of part-time work and its legal regulation, which was launched by women trade unionists from the conservative trade union faction *Fraktion Christlicher Gewerkschafter* (FCG) and the conservative interest group of workers and employees *Österreichischer Arbeiter- und Angestelltenbund* (ÖAAB). Johanna Jamnegg, a long-standing member of the Styrian parliament for the ÖVP and a member of the FCG, emphasized the desire of many women to reduce the burden caused by gainful employment, declaring that “part-time work” was “a genuine need of women” (ÖGB-Frauenabteilung 1967, 86). This position became a central element of ÖVP politics, which stressed women’s freedom of choice: “This means that, on the one hand, the mother’s child-rearing function must be recognized by society and, on the other hand, appropriate facilities such as kindergartens and part-time employment must be available to a sufficient extent” (Österreichische Volkspartei 1972).

In 1966, Grete Rehor, a distinguished FCG-trade unionist, became the minister of social affairs in the conservative ÖVP government (1966–1970). Among other things, Rehor tackled the passage of a separate act governing part-time employment, an important concern that she understood “in terms of both family and social policy” (AK 1968b). This effort was met with strong opposition from the SPÖ, social democratic trade union women, and the Chamber of Labour. In an internal report concerning a March 1968 meeting hosted by the Ministry of Social Affairs in preparation for the law, Edith Krebs, the long-time women’s officer of the Vienna Chamber of Labour, drew an extremely negative portrait of the proposed law (AK 1968a). AK and ÖGB continued to promote their position – in line with the ICFTU/ITS Women’s Committee – that issues related to part-time work should be regulated primarily through collective bargaining and isolated reforms focused on the implementation of labour and social safeguards recommended by the ILO. How seriously the Chamber of Labour took the issue can also be observed in the fact that the Women’s Department decided to investigate other countries’ experiences with part-time work. In October 1965, a study group, armed with a questionnaire,

travelled to England and the Federal Republic of Germany (Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte Wien 1965, 327–328).

At the same time, individual unions tried to use the courts to take legal action against the practice of part-time contracts; for example, the Trade, Transport, and Traffic Union (HTV) lost a case against the food and coffee retailer Meinel before the Supreme Court in 1963. The court ruled that “no one can be forced to work normal hours” (AK 1964). Overall, by the 1960s it was no longer an outlier that part-time work was in demand among some women and also promoted by regional labour offices (e.g. Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte Wien 1967, 307), which regularly caused problems for the courts. Is a typist who works part-time during the week subject to the Salaried Employees Act and, thus, entitled to the corresponding social benefits? Does the statutory minimum wage also apply to a domestic servant who lives in their employers’ household but performs other activities on the side? Is the cleaning woman who is employed for only a few hours a week entitled to a housing allowance? On what basis is the vacation pay of a textile worker who regularly works less than the normal working hours calculated? (BMfSA n.d.). Even though there was disagreement as to whether these problems had to be solved on a statutory basis or could be resolved through collective agreements, Grete Rehor’s initiative for a stand-alone law failed, and her party soon lost control of the government.

However, the ÖVP and their affiliated trade unionists continued to work on the issue. In 1971, a legislative initiative formulated by ÖVP MPs Marga Hubinek and Walter Schwimmer was introduced in the new SPÖ government. This proposal eventually led to negotiations between the two parties. This controversial debate about the question of the legal regulation of part-time work in Austria was reported back to the ILO, which emphasized the importance of the public’s awareness of the “statutory provision of part-time employment and for the conditions of part-time workers” (International Labour Office 1973, 26).

Despite objections from prominent female trade unionists such as Maria Metzker, the negotiations came to a head in 1974/75. “It is a tremendous imposition on women to say: work part-time, then it will be easier for you to take care of your family duties!” Metzker indignantly asserted in a parliamentary debate (ÖNR 1975, 14661). One of the objections she and her party colleagues expressed was the fear that adopting a stand-alone law would institutionalize the equation of part-time work with women’s work (ÖNR 1974). Part-time work was, as labour women argued, primarily chosen as a strategy to combine unpaid care work and wage labour. The demand for these kind of jobs, therefore, would decline if working women could rely on care facilities. This was the hope of the Chamber of Labour as well (AK 1972a, 6), which stressed that it would not object to any law “as long as part-time work is a form of work for both men and women and remains within certain limits [. . .] since it can often provide career continuity for women with young children” (AK 1972b).

The adoption of a “Law on the Inclusion of Part-Time Employees in the Salaried Employees Act” (Federal Law Gazette No. 418/1975) on 3 July 1975 fell short of what FCG-trade unionists and ÖVP women had hoped for as it was restricted to white collar workers. But it overhauled several regulations that disadvantaged part-time employees. It can be assumed that the SPÖ had given up its opposition in the case of white collar workers due to the position taken by the Union of Private Employees, which had, with reference to the ILO, asked for the inclusion of part-time workers in the Salaried Employees Act since 1966

(GPA 1966, 3): "It's not about whether we like part-time work or not [...] it's about dealing with the issue objectively and dealing with it in a way that is as fair as possible to both full-time workers and part-time workers" (GPA 1966).

Knowledge production on part-time work as a subject related to national administration and governance

One of the characteristics of social democratic reform policies that took shape in many European countries in the 1970s was the goal of pursuing progressive modernization policies from within the state (Fulla 2020). State institutions and governance became part of a social reform movement, thus, moving beyond a conceptualization of activism defined primarily as a movement from below directed against the state. The alliance between activists and "femocrats" was a characteristic of women's politics in many European countries, for example, France and Sweden (Neunsinger 2018; Östberg 2020), and it played an important role in the international arenas of the UN and the European Economic Community (Wobbe and Biermann 2009, Chpt. 4; Wobbe, Höroldt, and Bussmann 2019). The dealings around part-time work in Austria in the second half of the 1960s and the 1970s fit this broader interpretation, with the addendum that they already played an important role under the conservative Minister Grete Rehor, who as a former trade unionist, also gave part-time work and women's work an institutional framework in her ministry. The Ministry of Social Affairs – led by Rehor (1966–1970) and then by the Social Democratic trade unionist Rudolf Häuser (1970–1976) – served as a site where labour-related agendas were negotiated. Founded in 1968, the Committee for Questions of Women's Labour Market Participation (Unterausschuß für arbeitsmarktpolitische Angelegenheiten der Frauen) of the Advisory Council for Labour Market Policy served as a meeting point between civil servants (such as Irmgard Probst), officials in regional labour offices (for example, Ottilie Kritisch), representatives of the Chambers of Labour (Edith Krebs), Agricultural Labour (Ottilie Kreuzer) as well as Commerce, and, of course, trade unionists and members of parliament. Thus, in a meeting of the committee held in October 1969, measures to promote women's employment were negotiated, among them part-time work. To encourage part-time employment, there was a proposal to prepare a list of enterprises that already offered part-time jobs and make this list available to labour offices. Furthermore, some of the committee members reported on "interesting experiments," for example by the UNILEVER company in Lower Austria, which successfully employed "women on a daily and hourly basis according to their individual possibilities." Other companies "set up additional shifts for housewives from 5 to 10 p.m. to cover the labour shortage" (BMFSV 1970).

Another body, the Advisory Council of Economic Affairs, established a Working Group on Part-time Employment. It consisted of members of parliament, external experts unaffiliated with government agencies, and representatives of the labour movement. Among them were labour women active in the field of part-time work nationally and internationally: Chamber of Labour official Edith Krebs, and two social democratic trade unionists and members of parliament, namely Hertha Firnberg and Rosa Weber (Beirat für Wirtschaftsfragen 1968). The Working Group initiated two studies around 1967/68 through the Statistical Office of the Federal Chamber of Commerce and the Institute for Empirical Social Research (ifes, Institut

für empirische Sozialforschung). The study conducted by ifes was based on 1,777 interviews with women and 506 interviews with men. Among the interviewed women, 19 percent of those employed and 44 percent of non-employed women would accept part-time work; 7 percent had already worked part time. The men participating in the study were mostly opposed to the idea of their wives taking a job outside the home, with only 8 percent in favour of part-time work. The negative image of working mothers within society was mirrored in the responses of the men interviewed, but it was also a concern many women expressed. Besides that, respondents indicated that commute times of over half an hour would significantly reduce their willingness to take a part-time job (Beirat für Wirtschaftsfragen 1968; Report on Part-Time Employment 1968).

While the ifes study made valuable insights into the motivations behind and attitudes towards part-time employment (including the views of women related to when part-time employment is worthwhile in terms of practical and financial issues), studies in the late 1960s and 1970s lamented that reliable statistical conclusions were hard to come by. Similarly, the 1973 ILO survey underlined the unreliability of collected data and the blanks that could not be filled. For instance, there was only very limited data available concerning to what extent part-time employment meant double employment (ILO 1973, 6). The 1972 micro-census in Austria allowed for a more precise understanding of the situation (still without filling in all the blanks). Although only a few years had passed between the studies conducted in preparation for Grete Rehor's legislative initiative in 1968 and the micro-census in 1972, the share of part-time workers (especially women) in the economy had increased significantly: from 12.7 percent in 1969 to 15.5 percent in 1972 (AK 1974). This development was in line with overall trends in economically developed countries, as an ILO survey from 1973 revealed (International Labour Office 1973, 4–5).

The Austrian micro-census defined part-time work as an activity that takes place during a freely agreed upon, regular, and weekly working time of between fourteen and thirty-six hours. Additionally, the micro-census provided good insight into occupational groups for which part-time employment played a particularly important role: teachers and educators, administrative auxiliary professions, housekeepers and domestic servants, and retail personnel. The occupational structure of employed women tells a similar story. While 28 percent of women working part time were employed in service professions, only 16 percent of women working full time could be found in the service sector. In contrast, while 24 percent of women who worked full time had a job in a production occupation, the percentage of women working in the sector part time was only 13 percent. Not surprisingly, the micro-census found that it was mostly women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four who worked part time, whereas women under twenty-four worked predominantly in full-time jobs (AK 1974). The age structure in Austria shows that part-time work was indeed a form of employment for women in what Klein and Myrdal (1956) defined as the second phase of women's working lives. But part-time work remained a significant factor for older women as well, which probably hints at the problems women confronted when re-entering the workforce after the phase of child-rearing had ended. This additionally illustrates the lack of good employment options for women above the age of fifty. It is no surprise that part-time employment played a far greater role in some occupational groups than in others. As a result, since the late 1960s, trade unions such as the Union of Private Sector Employees became much more active in

tackling issues related to part-time workers, while others such as the unions of metalworkers or textile workers have tended to emphasize the protection of full-time employment.

Knowledge production was a necessary instrument to prepare legislative innovations and enforce political programs. Enquiries on an international level had the potential to bring attention to the topic on the national level. They also provided insight into the “marked increase” (International Labour Office 1973, 4) of an employment model that trade union women aligned with the social democratic labour movement were quite conflicted about. Although it was still a phenomenon largely relegated to the industrialized countries of the West, the ILO report on part-time employment observed that state-socialist countries such as Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania made an “increased effort to enlarge part-time employment opportunities during the last ten years in order to meet the needs and desires of pensioners, students and women with young children” (International Labour Office 1973, 4).

Part-time work as a new alternative employment model, 1975 to the 1980s

From the mid-1970s on, part-time work became *the* alternative gendered employment model for working mothers with small children in Austria and internationally. The UN Decade of Women gave the issue additional weight. On all scales of activism explored in the preceding pages, part-time work remained an ongoing issue of debate and negotiation, as various motions and reform proposals were repeatedly put forward in trade union meetings and in parliamentary work. Leading civil clerks, such as Dorothea Gaudart from the Women’s Department in the Ministry of Social Affairs, consistently participated as experts on the topic of women’s employment at meetings of the OECD and the International Industrial Relations Associations; they published papers for the Institute of Labour Studies and gave lectures on “Time Management” for the UN Economic Commission (BMFSV 1979; Gaudart and Greve 1980). Three characteristics, which I will discuss briefly, marked the international and national debates on part-time work that took place from the late 1970s to the early 1990s: the reduction of working hours, resistance to the flexibilization of working relations, and the attempt to decouple gender from part-time work.

First, most trade unionists aligned with social democracy and leftist parties discussed part-time work in connection with demands for reductions in working hours. One of the central demands of organized labour has focused on the hours worked during a so-called normal working week, which had been reduced over the decades in Austria and internationally until the 1970s (Hermann 2014). Workers’ representatives at the ILO continuously expressed the expectations that a progressive reduction of standard working hours would also reduce the challenges faced by working women with family responsibilities. During an ILO seminar in Turin, for instance, it was stressed that “the issue of a general reduction in working hours should take precedence over that of part-time work” (Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte Wien 1974, 209). The ICFTU/ITS Women’s Committee (ICFTU 1974) and the International Federation of Commercial, Clerical, Professional and Technical Employees (FIET) Working Group for Women Employees adopted similar positions (FIET 1977). This conflation came to a halt in the 1980s, not at least due to the resistance of industry. Representatives of employers at the ILO rejected the notion that “a general reduction of daily working

hours was a means of enhancing equal full-time employment opportunities for men and women and of reducing the concentration of women in part-time work" (ILO 1981, 3). Time and again, the ICFTU/ITS Women's Committee stressed the importance of asserting their opposition to promoting part-time work "as the only way women can combine work and family responsibilities" within the ILO (ICFTU 1978, 2). Similarly, it was noted that during a preparatory meeting for the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women in Copenhagen in 1980, the ICFTU "representative made a speech calling for the deletion of part-time work from the list of 'desirable' objectives to be reached during the second half of the Decade"; instead it would be "more important to achieve the reduction of daily working hours which would enable parents to harmonize their family and working life" (ICFTU 1979, 3). And indeed, the only objective declared in relation to part-time work at the conference in 1980 was the goal to ensure proportional wages and social security benefits (United Nations 1980, 30).

Second, triggered by economic crises and globalization, social and labour law safeguards were continuously questioned and dismantled in the 1980s. In Austria, too, unemployment increased in the 1980s – albeit at a comparably lower level than in other OECD-countries (Mesner 2020) – but it hit women and migrant workers first (Helfert [forthcoming](#)). Trends such as Job Sharing, *KAPOVAZ*—capacity-oriented variable working hours – flexibilization, and the precarisation of jobs were discussed (FIET 1980a; ICFTU 1985). Trade unionists argued that, especially in times of crisis, part-time work was used to save jobs, but it also passed the costs of this from employers and state institutions to working women (Internationaler Bund Freier Gewerkschaften 1983; FIET 1983; ICFTU 1976, 7). In the 1980s, the Vienna Chamber of Labour, for instance, regularly reported how many women were affected by the transformation of full-time jobs into part-time jobs (e.g. Kammer für Arbeiter und Angestellte Wien 1984, 219). The labour women of the FIET feared that the intensified transition to self-service in food-related retail would result in an increase in part-time jobs and a decrease in full-time positions (FIET 1981, 13–14).

And third, criticism of the view that care work is naturally the task of women and, thus, that part-time work is a form of employment exclusively suitable for women has been increasingly voiced. Far more frequently than in earlier decades, trade union officials in Austria and internationally spoke of the need for part-time work to be open to all since child-rearing and housework were the responsibility of everybody in the household regardless of gender (e.g. AK 1990b). Representatives from Scandinavian countries had already incorporated this framing of the issue into Recommendation No. 123 of the ILO back in 1965 (Cobble 2021). In 1981, the ILO adopted the gender-neutral Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156), and in 1980, the FIET Working Group on Women Employees not only sought to address the "problems of working women" but to reframe them as the "problems of working women and men with family responsibilities" in the FIET Action Program for Women Employees (FIET 1980b). Similarly, the proposed statutory entitlement to part-time employment for parents in Austria was one of several legal instruments introduced in the field of family policies (AK 1990a) advanced mainly by trade unionists aligned with the ÖVP (AK 1989a, 1989b). In general, it seems there was a shared sentiment among many trade union women on the international and national levels that the fact that women held the majority of part-time jobs generated undesirable side effects: "the Worker members felt there was an actual threat that both job opportunities in this sector were tending to be part time so that now and in the long term women

were increasingly offered part-time work” (ILO 1981, 3). Considering that the availability of part-time jobs expanded much more than did full-time jobs in many countries, it is no surprise that the notion of “involuntary part-time work” emerged in the 1970s (for, example OECD 1976).

Conclusion

Reconstruction and economic growth after World War Two was based on, among other things, the increased (part-time) labour of women, who, especially when they had to care for young children, were burdened with the obligation to perform both unpaid and paid work. Nevertheless, economic conditions and governmental responses to the issue of the double burden differed. Zimmermann (Forthcoming), for instance, points out that within the ILO, state childcare – advanced by representatives of state-socialist countries – played less of a role in debates than did an emphasis on the free choice to stay at home with one’s children or to take up part-time employment. This article has shown that part-time work was (and continues to be) promoted as one possible, albeit contested, solution to the dilemma facing working mothers and was also directly linked to the availability of state childcare by (social democratic) trade unionists in Austria, for example.

Not least because of the link between the rising employment of (married) women and the increasing numbers of women working part-time jobs, Austrian representatives from employers’ associations, ÖVP government (1966–1970), and FCG trade unionists interpreted the growth of part-time work as a sign of (belated) progress and the modernization of working relations. Social democratic trade unionists, however, opposed the normalization of poorly paid part-time or short-term work and understood this phenomenon as women’s loss of the right to gainful employment. As Reichel (2014) has shown, women’s employment and related policies like maternity leave played an important role in the social and labour policies of countries in the European Economic Community in the 1960s, although they had the ambivalent effect of stabilizing the male breadwinner model. Part-time work can be understood as part of this trend.

Analysis of the struggle for a part-time work law in Austria, which took place from the late 1960s until the 1980s, also shows that ÖVP and FCG trade unionists such as Grete Rehor, Marga Hubinek, and Johanna Jamnegg successfully fought for years for the legal and trade union recognition of the part-time work model. Like the ban on night work for women, the social democratic-aligned majority in the trade unions and the Chambers of Labour saw the solution in special regulations, company agreements, or the like – that is, solutions that did not alter the status of standard working hours. While research on Great Britain, for example, emphasizes that it was the influence of socialist feminists in the 1970s and 1980s that made it possible for part-time workers to be accepted by trade unions (Heery and Conley 2016), the situation for Austria is certainly much different. Even though social democratic trade unionists and functionaries of the Chamber of Labour were consistently critical of part-time work, the issue nevertheless became a lively arena of trade union activity, especially in the trade unions of private employees (GPA), municipal employees, and the public sector.

The political and trade union clashes over part-time work reveal the international interconnectedness of workers’ and women’s movements in the twentieth century and highlight the importance of considering the scale of labour activism. Not only

were studies and legislative projects initiated by international organizations; terminologies, ideas, and experiences were also shared through networks, congresses, publications, informational discussions, and trade union action in Austria and internationally. Austrian labour activists such as Rosa Weber in the 1950s and 1960s and Edith Krebs in the 1970s and 1980s advanced their ideas on the national and international levels. The same is true for female civil servants like Dorothea Gaudart, who was part of a circle of internationally recognized female bureaucrats advising on and promoting global labour and gender policies during the UN Decade of Women.

Finally, the discussion about part-time work for women was part of a debate about paid and unpaid work that changed during the course of the second half of the twentieth century. Whereas in German-speaking countries attempts were made by women political functionaries (including trade unionists), employers, or the state to relieve the burdens on women by means such as housekeeping days (Sachse 2002), trade unions soon pushed for a general reduction in working hours, paid maternity leave, and state childcare as strategies to address the challenges working women faced. Part-time work as an alternative began to gain acceptance in the 1960s as a means of reconciling work and family life, albeit under protest. The fact that this model was able to prevail instead of a general further reduction in working hours shows not only the changed bargaining power of the labour movement but also the persistence of a specific socio-economic gendered arrangement that preserves care work as the exclusive domain of women.

Notes

1. This study is based on the following groups of sources related to national and international organizations: the minutes of the women's congresses of the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) as well as their reports; archival material from the Institute for Historical Social Research held at the Vienna Chamber of Labour (Arbeiterkammer Wien), which includes minutes of sub-committees including the Social Committee and the Women's Committee, as well as files on different bills seeking to regulate part-time work, and the document collection of the women's department of the Union of Private Sector Employees (GPA) as well as selected minutes of International Federation of Commercial, Clerical, Professional and Technical Employees (FIET); archival material from the Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs including files on bills regulating part-time employment, minutes from the Advisory Board for Labour Market Policy Issues and its subcommittee on women's issues as well as materials on its interactions with several international organizations concerned with women's work such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the UN, and the OECD held at the Austrian State Archive; minutes from the ICFTU/ITS Women's Committee housed at the Institute for Social History in Amsterdam; and reports and minutes from the International Labour Office.
2. Another important scale of activism would be the European Economic Community, which could not be included in the analysis as a point of comparison (Austria did not become a member in the now-European Union until 1995) due to time constraints; the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is also not explored here for the same reasons. Regarding the question of equal pay for equal work, the work of Theresa Wobbe (2014) should be mentioned here as an example.
3. I thank Susan Zimmermann for sharing the archival source material with me.

4. Incidentally, another form of often precarious employment was discussed together with part-time work as a potential solution to ease the double-burden of working women, namely (industrial) work that could be performed in the comfort of one's home during hours when children were asleep or otherwise occupied. Trade union women in the early 1960s were wary of home-based work due to the risk of exploitation; in contrast, part-time work was met with a different set of concerns because it was perceived as a solution only available to some – well-off – women in more economically developed nations (ICFTU 1963).
5. Resolutions adopted were: The Employment and Maternity Protection Resolution, the Resolution Concerning the Economic and Social Advancement of Women in Developing Countries, the Resolution Concerning Part-Time Employment, and the Resolution Concerning Women Workers in a Changing World.

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