

# An Uneasy Union: Women Teachers, Organized Labor, and the Contested Ideology of Profession during the Progressive Era

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In 1907, Grace Strachan, a school principal and leader of New York's Interborough Association of Women Teachers (IAWT), explained the significance of the organized teachers' campaign. "I don't think any of us are working simply for our own interests," she offered. Instead, "The movement has come to be something much larger than that. Every wage earning woman, not only in New York, but all over the country, is interested in the success of our fight."<sup>1</sup> For Strachan and other organized women teachers in the nation's urban centers, the fight for equal pay, pensions, and voice within the schools was inextricably fused with their broader social and political activism. Motivating all of this was an image of the professional woman: independent and autonomous, in and outside the schools.

Since the rise of publicly supported education in the mid-nineteenth century, many school leaders—a male-dominated group encompassing education reformers, policy makers, and administrators of various levels—valued women teachers and perceived them as well suited for school work because of their inherent maternalism.<sup>2</sup> Assumptions of female docility, subservience, and inferiority were central to the ideal of the woman teacher and shaped everything from salary to supervision. Reflecting this framework, many school leaders often discussed education policy from the vantage point of the welfare of the child. Early organized teachers like Margaret Haley of the Chicago Teachers Federation (CTF), however, subverted that message and the larger ideology it stemmed from by instead framing school issues in terms of the welfare of the teacher.<sup>3</sup>

1. "Ten Thousand Women Fight for Equal Pay," *New York Tribune*, March 3, 1907.

2. Preston, "Gender and the Formation of a Women's Profession."

3. Though Haley often used this term to describe her work and that of the CTF, she articulated this project most forcefully in her memorial to close friend and fellow unionist Catherine Goggin in her trade periodical, *Margaret Haley's Bulletin*, January 27, 1916, Chicago Historical Museum (hereafter CHM).

Women like Strachan, in New York City, and Haley, in Chicago, led the fight for teachers' rights.<sup>4</sup> Contemporaries with much in common, both women were born of Irish immigrants, made their way to normal schools, and began teaching at the age of sixteen. Active in campaigns for teacher pay and pensions as well as in broader fights to limit the role of business in public schools, Haley remained in Chicago's classrooms for sixteen years and left with the formation of the Chicago Federation of Teachers when she became a vice president of the organization and, eventually, a paid organizer.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Strachan stayed in the classroom for just one year and then quickly climbed the administrative ranks from the school to the district level, becoming the first woman to serve as associate superintendent in New York City. Known as an "idol of the teachers," over her long career Strachan served as president of the IAWT and chairwoman of the Women's Civic Committee, fighting for women teachers' rights in and outside the schools.<sup>6</sup>

By the early twentieth century, more than 90 percent of teachers were single and, as a group, they ranked third on a list of female breadwinners.<sup>7</sup> More women teachers lived outside the family home than any other group of women wage earners, and by 1900 teaching was "first in numerical importance among the professional occupations open to adult women and fifth among all occupations in which they enter."<sup>8</sup> In urban centers across the nation, teachers fused their fight for equal rights outside of the schools with their fight for better working conditions. Citizenship and salary were entwined for working women; as Alice Kessler-Harris has argued, the struggle for wages "anchored" working women's "claims to political participation."<sup>9</sup> In Cleveland, organized teachers asserted, "We are for the suffrage party and believe we can aid it and it can aid us."<sup>10</sup> In Boston, organized women teachers explained, "If teachers want justice on all occasions[,] if they want better salaries, tenure of office, a safe pension system, proper working conditions, they must secure them by the only certain method known to modern civilization—the ballot."<sup>11</sup> In New York City and Chicago, organized women teachers and their leaders were active and visible in the suffrage movement and the broader fight for women's rights as well. The *New York Times* reported that Strachan "pointed out that 11,000 of the 20,000 women teachers of New York had already enrolled themselves as favoring the ballot for women" and that "she would be one of the leaders" of the upcoming suffrage parade.<sup>12</sup> In 1913, the

4. Chicago and New York City are significant both in the history of working women and in the history of teachers. Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*; Vapnek, *Breadwinners*; Murphy, *Black-board Unions*.

5. For more on Haley, refer to Rousmaniere, *Citizen Teacher*; and Haley and Reid, *Battleground*.

6. For more on Strachan, refer to her *Equal Pay for Equal Work*; Strachan, "Is Idol of the Teachers"; and "Grace S. Forsythe, Long Ill, Dies at 59," *New York Times*, July 22, 1922

7. Hill, *Statistics of Women at Work*, 36.

8. *Ibid.*, 109.

9. Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*, 4. Vapnek has made a similar point in *Breadwinners*, arguing that pay was a pathway to economic independence.

10. "Teachers for Suffrage," *New York Times*, January 25, 1914.

11. "Boston Teachers Are Urged to Help in Suffrage Work," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 16, 1915.

12. "Teachers against New Constitution: Miss Strachan Tells Them to Ask Their Friends to Oppose It," *New York Times*, October 2, 1915.

*Chicago Record Herald* printed a front-page photograph of the governor as he signed the state suffrage bill; standing beside him was Margaret Haley.<sup>13</sup> For many early women teachers, the fight for salary equalization was inseparable from the fight for women's rights, and they turned cautiously toward organized labor to achieve both.<sup>14</sup> The union between labor associations and organized teachers, however, was troubled from the start and complicated by gender and class. Affiliation with labor brought increased power and visibility to the profession as a whole. However, that affiliation also stymied the very objective that motivated female teachers to turn toward labor in the first place: a vision of the autonomous and independent woman, in the workplace and in society.

Through the first decades of the twentieth century, male and female teachers were paid according to separate salary schedules. In New York City, women elementary school teachers earned a base pay of \$600 and could earn \$40 yearly increases. It would take these teachers sixteen years to earn the maximum pay of \$1,240. Meanwhile, male elementary school teachers in the city earned a base pay of \$900 with yearly increases of \$105; they could earn the maximum \$2,400 salary in six years. In Chicago, female elementary school teachers earned a base pay of \$500 and would need six years to reach the maximum \$875 salary. Their male counterparts earned a base pay of \$925 and needed just two years to earn the maximum \$1,000 salary.<sup>15</sup>

The salary discrepancies amplified gendered hierarchies within the school system. In the nation's three largest cities, for example, 45.7 percent of high school teachers were men, but only 4.3 percent of elementary schools teachers were men.<sup>16</sup> Further, the greatest number of teachers and students resided in the elementary schools; in spite of the male presence in the high schools, only 6.7 percent of the entire teaching population was composed of men. Replicating the divide between elementary and high school levels, leadership ranks were similarly male-dominated, with men representing 92 percent of high school principals and 44 percent of elementary school principals.<sup>17</sup> In 1915, thirty-three of the thirty-five superintendents in New York City were men, as were all twenty-two high school principals.<sup>18</sup>

In 1910, Strachan penned *Equal Pay for Equal Work*. Making the case for salary equalization, she argued for women's distinct strengths and forged a unique

13. *Chicago Record Herald*, June 27, 1913, Haley Photo Collections, CHM.

14. Some historians have presented teachers of this time period as solely interested in bread-and-butter concerns. Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*; Urban, *Why Teachers Organized*; Leroux, "Money Is the Only Advantage." However, such assessments neglect female teachers' broader social activism. Carter, "Everybody's Paid but the Teacher."

15. National Educational Association, *Report of the Committee on Salaries, Tenure, and Pensions*, 73–75.

16. Figures based on New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia from National Educational Association, *Report of the Committee on Salaries, Tenure, and Pensions*, 24.

17. National Education Association of the United States, *Report of the Committee on Salaries, Tenure, and Pensions*, 52.

18. William Maxwell, *Seventeenth Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools for the Year Ending July 31, 1915*, Municipal Archives, New York City Department of Records, New York City Board of Education Collection (hereafter Municipal Archives), table 5. For more on the gendered divisions of the school hierarchy, refer to Strober and Tyack, "Why Do Women Teach and Men Manage?"; and Blount, *Fit to Teach*.

feminist dialectic. “Paying a man more money for teaching a class than is paid a woman for teaching the same class,” she argued, “breeds serious evils for men teachers.”<sup>19</sup> Continuing this line of reasoning, she offered, “A man who thinks he is serious when he is only trite, becomes a joke.”<sup>20</sup> Calling into question male teachers’ ability in the classroom, she concluded, “In nine cases out of ten, [the male teacher] knows in his heart that the children in the woman’s class are deriving greater benefit.”<sup>21</sup> Even as Strachan highlighted women’s strengths as teachers, she distanced herself from the domestic discourse that defined other women activists during these years and instead focused on female independence.<sup>22</sup> The women who fought for salary equalization, many of them elementary school teachers, were a “beacon of encouragement to other women to show them one who wanted clothes to wear, and food to eat, and a place to live, and who obtained them by honorable labor.”<sup>23</sup> For Strachan, Haley, and other organized women teachers, the fight for pay was also about disrupting the perceptions that “placed woman on a lower plane than a man.”<sup>24</sup> Certainly, women teachers wanted and needed more money, particularly as they were responsible for providing for other family members; but their economic self-interest—and therefore their labor activism writ large—was politically and socially motivated.<sup>25</sup>

The premises that undergirded women teachers’ calls for salary equalization sparked quick rebuke.<sup>26</sup> New York City’s school superintendent, William Maxwell, corrected female teachers’ perception of themselves as professionals. “Teacher’s duties,” he explained in 1902, were “the incarnation of high morality.” “The low regard of teachers,” he continued, “was due to their own estimate of themselves and their calling.”<sup>27</sup> Both school leaders and male teachers maintained that the differential salaries were essential for two interconnected reasons centered on recruitment and quality. Though teaching was long a male-dominated occupation, this changed rapidly with the rise of the common schools.<sup>28</sup> The “feminization” of the public schools unfolded unevenly according to geographic and market forces, but by the twentieth century it was all but complete.<sup>29</sup> Worried that female teachers would “make the boys effeminate,” school districts around the nation fruitlessly searched for men willing to teach.<sup>30</sup> New York City’s school superintendent reported, “We have experienced . . .

19. Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 8.

20. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

21. *Ibid.*, 9.

22. Baker, “Domestication of Politics”; Flanagan, “Gender and Urban Political Reform.”

23. Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 118.

24. *Ibid.*, 119.

25. For more on the connections between salary and citizenship, refer to Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*; and Vapnek, *Breadwinners*.

26. For more on the social salience of gender ideologies, refer to Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity*.

27. “Dr. Maxwell on the American Teacher,” *Outlook*, December 27, 1902, 968.

28. Mattingly, *Classless Profession*.

29. Perlmann and Margo, *Women’s Work?*; Alibisetti, “Feminization of Teaching in the Nineteenth Century”; Strober and Lanford, “Feminization of Public School Teaching.”

30. “Appeal for Men Teachers,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1911.

difficulty securing men teachers” because they “cannot live on the salaries.”<sup>31</sup> A higher pay for male teachers could serve as financial and psychological inducement for recruits by separating them from the stigma of school teaching as women’s work. In 1912, New York City high school teacher and future union leader Charles Linville wrote to a friend about his depressing working conditions. “As things are now,” he explained, “there is small chance for a man of ability and independence” to “come into [the] system.”<sup>32</sup>

Just as Strachan argued that women were better teachers than men, male teachers offered their own accounts of superiority in the classroom. According to one male teacher speaking at the mayor’s hearing for salary equalization in 1909, students taught by a man knew “how to do a thousand and one things that a man can teach that a woman cannot.”<sup>33</sup> Another group of men teachers argued that salary differentials upheld the natural order and that equalizing pay would make “men women and women men.”<sup>34</sup> As one Chicago school board member explained, “the public is paying teachers their full market worth.”<sup>35</sup> Any unfairness, one editorialist reasoned, ought not lead school leaders to “go back upon the primary facts of human nature in order to redress it.”<sup>36</sup> When salary equalization measures failed to pass in New York City in 1910, one board member explained, “I would like to have it understood that the schools are conducted for the children, not for the benefit of teachers.”<sup>37</sup> Pointing to the fact that male and female teachers were not equal and to recruitment concerns, around the nation school systems maintained differentiated pay scales well into the 1920s.<sup>38</sup>

Women teachers and their critics agreed: the salary issue was not *just* about pay. Instead, at the core, remuneration debates were about the social order and whether it ought to be conserved or disrupted. To bolster their fight, women teachers looked to labor. Chicago women teachers led by Margaret Haley were the first to formally affiliate with organized labor in 1902. Members of the CTF, an all-women group composed mostly of elementary school teachers, were hardly unanimous in their support of unionization. Among the objections registered in meeting minutes were fears that affiliation with the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) “might argue a lack of confidence in our position.” In addition, one member wondered if it was appropriate for teachers to ally themselves with “a class in the community rather

31. William Maxwell, *Nineteenth Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools for the Year Ending July 31, 1917*, NYC Municipal Archives.

32. Henry Linville, Letter to Sullivan, April 10, 1912, Henry Linville Collection, box 2, folder 1912, Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University (hereafter Reuther Library).

33. Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 359.

34. “Oppose Women Teachers,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1907.

35. “Margaret Haley Is School ‘Boss’: Dr. Chvatal, Board Member, Exposes Plot against Supt. Cooley,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 23, 1906.

36. “Is It ‘Equal Work?’” *New York Times*, February 17, 1907.

37. “Equal Pay Defeated; Teachers’ Hope Gone,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1910.

38. “The Week: Equal Pay for Equal Work,” *Outlook*, April 1910.

than trusting the whole people to right the evils which affect the schools.”<sup>39</sup> The news media echoed similar concerns, noting, “The Federation of Labor has its own special sphere; the teachers have theirs . . . [T]eachers have not sufficiently considered the moral and practical effects of the proposed measure.”<sup>40</sup>

Advocating for affiliation with the CFL, Catherine Goggin “dwelt upon the increased effectiveness of an organization composed mostly of women, should they ally themselves with an organization of 20,000 voters.”<sup>41</sup> Another teacher quoted in the newspaper echoed that perspective: “Affiliation with a large body of voters” will “place the teachers on a better footing.”<sup>42</sup> For female teachers across the United States, the fundamental motivation to organize centered on voice, in and outside the schools. In her book, Strachan explained that policy makers in New York “degrade and belittle women teachers.” According to Strachan, though teachers long accepted this treatment, “afraid to voice their resentment alone,” in the early years of the twentieth century they “formed themselves into a great united body whose voice is being heard ’round the world.”<sup>43</sup> Haley assured Chicago teachers that the “Federation of Labor has no authority to order or to terminate a strike, sympathetic or otherwise.”<sup>44</sup> In the following meeting, Jane Addams, a member of the Chicago Woman’s Club, advocated unionization. During that meeting, the members of the CTF voted to formally affiliate with the CFL. For them, the merger would support their economic and social activism, all of which centered on a vision of female independence; affiliation with labor was about power and strength for women workers.

However, the CFL understood the affiliation in different terms. Whereas teachers viewed affiliation through the lens of autonomy, CFL leaders adopted a paternalistic language rooted in chivalrous protection.<sup>45</sup> According to John Fitzpatrick, president of the CFL, “The time has come for the working men of Chicago to take a stand for their children’s sake, and demand justice for the teachers and the children so that both may not be crushed by the power of corporate greed.”<sup>46</sup> For CFL members, allowing teachers to affiliate with them was a sign of labor’s benevolent power: “It is our duty to support and defend those educators.”<sup>47</sup> CFL leaders explained, “We should cherish and guard [the public schools] as we would our homes.”<sup>48</sup> In spite of the discrete ways these two groups understood the purpose

39. CTF meeting minutes, October 18, 1902, CTF Collection, box 93, CHM.

40. “Chicago Teachers and the Federation of Labor,” 666.

41. CTF meeting minutes, October 18, 1902.

42. “Chicago Teachers and the Federation of Labor,” 666.

43. Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 11.

44. CTF meeting minutes, October 18, 1902.

45. For more on organized labor and conventional social attitudes, refer to Schofield, “Rebel Girls and Union Maids”; and Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*.

46. John Fitzpatrick, Letter to CTF, October 16, 1902, CTF Collection, box 46, folder April/June, 1917, CHM.

47. Chicago Federation of Labor, “A Report: Public School Fads,” 1902, CHM.

48. *Ibid.*

of teacher organization, for nearly thirteen years the two federations coexisted, and women teachers earned posts on finance and legislative labor committees, among others, through citywide elections.<sup>49</sup>

The thought of female teachers organizing with labor was troubling for many local school leaders. In addition to constituting an immodest space for respectable women, critics contended that the presence of labor made the schools unwieldy and difficult to run. In 1906, James Chvatal, a Chicago school board member, resigned because of the Teachers Federation and made his case publicly in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. "They want to run the schools for themselves," he told readers. Though many teachers were "worth their weight in gold," he explained, "there is an element that always will be a cause of annoyance to the Board of Education." Casting unionized teachers as greedy and self-interested, he explained, "It makes no difference what rules are made, the more they get the more they want."<sup>50</sup> Even as school board members continued to condemn teacher unionization over the ensuing decade, there was little power behind the barbs.

Circumstances surrounding teacher unionization transformed significantly in the fall of 1915 as rhetorical taunts morphed into substantial threats when Jacob M. Loeb, a member of the Chicago Board of Education, assumed the post of Chairman of the Rules Committee. Loeb, a real estate developer with the mayor's support and an outspoken opponent of teachers' unions, proposed a rule that would prohibit teachers from joining organizations. Haley and the President of the Illinois Federation of Labor, John Walker, personally appealed to the acting governor, Stephen Canaday, who called the board's actions "unfair" and "unjust."<sup>51</sup> Disregarding the governor's sentiments, the very next day board members convened to vote on the rule. In less than two hours before a room packed with teachers and labor supporters, members voted eleven to nine in favor of the Loeb Rule. Haley and the nearly thirty-five hundred members of the CTF turned to the courts, filing an injunction against the board and casting the rule as a threat to all teachers' associations, not just those affiliated with labor. Loeb's supporters blasted that any claim that the rule applied to organizations like the National Education Association was "ridiculous" and instead clarified that the only target was "detrimental organizations."<sup>52</sup>

In response, Chicago's school leaders set about differentiating "harmful" organizations from "harmless" ones.<sup>53</sup> For them, labor affiliation was a critical characteristic of dangerous associations, but what made them particularly distasteful and threatening was when they were populated by women. As Loeb clarified early on, "I'm not against the Federation because it is a labor organization. The Federation of Men

49. "Women Elected Labor Chiefs," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 21, 1914; "Labor Poll Is Love Feast," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 16, 1907; "It's Now up to the Men," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 20, 1902.

50. "Margaret Haley is School 'Boss.'"

51. "Teachers Seek Delay on Loeb's Ouster Motion," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 1, 1915.

52. "School Board Vote Ousts Teachers," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 2, 1915.

53. "Board Amends Loeb Rule to Aid Fight in Court," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 30, 1915.



teachers has acted gentlemanly and squarely.”<sup>54</sup> The notion of female labor unionists, however, was a separate issue altogether. In July of 1915, the State Senate called Loeb to testify. “All labor sluggers are bad,” he reported, “but I maintain that the female of the species is more deadly than the male.” Continuing, he explained, “The male hits you over the head with a club or a pipe, and you have a good chance for recovery, but the lady labor slugger fights with a poisoned tongue and assassinates reputations.”<sup>55</sup> Faced with the court injunction, board members led by Loeb revised the phrasing of the rule, altering the original text, which stated that “membership or affiliation is hereby prohibited,” to “membership in *some* teacher’s organizations” is prohibited.<sup>56</sup> Even as Haley and the CTF filed one injunction after another, with this change the rule remained in place, and teachers were mandated to sign a pledge:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, a member of the education department of the City of Chicago, do hereby state without qualification, equivocation, or mental reservation of any kind, that I am not and that I will not become while a member of such education department, a member of any one of the prohibited organizations named and described in paragraph 1 of section 03–A of the rules of the education department of said board.<sup>57</sup>

With court approval, members of the Chicago Board of Education maintained that “membership by teachers in labor unions . . . is inimical to proper discipline, prejudicial to the efficiency of the teaching force and detrimental to the welfare of the public school system.”<sup>58</sup> Around the nation, school leaders disagreed with Loeb’s tactics but agreed with his core sentiments. New York City’s school superintendent blasted the Loeb Rule as “stupid and cruel.” “The act,” he reportedly said, “will do more than anything else to drive teachers into all sorts of unions.”<sup>59</sup>

The rule sparked debate across the city, and in a speech delivered to the Cook County League of Women’s Clubs, an organization that “bound together” the women’s clubs of the Chicago area, school board member William Rothman looked for a sympathetic ear.<sup>60</sup> Replicating the same historical reasoning that extended the right

54. “Loeb Lays Woes of School Board to Miss Haley,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 9, 1915.

55. “Union Teachers Scored as ‘Lady Labor Sluggers,’” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 22, 1915.

56. “Board Amends Loeb Rule.”

57. “‘Tribune’ Polls Seven Thousand Teachers on Loeb Rule,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 10, 1915.

58. “Anti-organization Loeb Rule No. 1 as amended Sept. 29, 1915,” Chicago Teachers Federation Collection, box 43, folder July/September 1915, CHM.

59. “Teachers Union Stirs up Friction,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1916.

60. An organization comprising smaller clubs, the League advocated for suffrage, first at the municipal level and later at the national level, and fought for the rights of “unprotected women who . . . are compelled to venture alone in the public streets.” In addition, League members opposed the sale of liquor to minors, called for the shuttering of “disorderly dance clubs,” and campaigned for a “clean Chicago.” By 1924, the League comprised more than one hundred women’s clubs and counted a membership of more than twenty-five thousand women. “Roused to Curb Crime Carnival: League of Women’s Clubs of Cook County Decides to Call Mass Meeting to Take Action,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 25, 1906; “Women Plan to Invade House: Chicago Would Awe Congress with Easter Hats,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 1909; Webber, “Women’s Club Page.”



to vote to men only, Rothman suggested that political affiliation of any kind was inappropriate for teachers and for women. Continuing, he told his audience that “she [the teacher] ought not allow herself to engage in those political activities which cause dissention or division among a body of our citizenship. They ought to keep out of them.” Rothman argued that teachers could not act on their own political ideas—and indeed, ought not have those ideas in the first place—and simultaneously care for the children in their charge. The public called upon teachers to be like mothers, self-sacrificing, and put the needs of children ahead of their own. Teachers concerned about their pay and working conditions “grudgingly” offered only a “half-hearted service” when instead they should “manifest a disinterested and loyal and wholehearted attachment to the public school system.” Simultaneously casting doubt on the collective femininity of organized teachers and their professionalism, Rothman constructed his opposition upon a domestic ideology rooted in the paternalistic home. Organized teachers, he told his audience, were guilty of “low standards of womanhood.”<sup>61</sup> Offering a counterpoint, later in that same meeting the president of a local Parent-Teacher Association lent her support to teachers. “These women are working when you are at home,” she told members of the League, “because they have this great unit back of them.”<sup>62</sup>

Across the city and state, club women responded to the Loeb Rule and the plight of teachers differently. The Women’s Party of Cook County stood among the few who supported Loeb, as the Women’s City Club, Women’s Fellowship Club, and the Illinois Congress of Mothers all criticized him and his actions for different reasons.<sup>63</sup> Mrs. Roth Porter, a member of the board of directors of the Chicago Woman’s Club, scolded Loeb as “brutal, ruthless, and arrogant.”<sup>64</sup> Club women, in short, did not speak with one voice. That Rothman identified them as his own allies, however, is nevertheless significant, for it reveals the extent to which club women and organized female teachers were perceived to be different, even as they sought similar ends.

For Rothman, Loeb, and many male school leaders around the country, the vision of the professional female teacher departed little from that framed by early common-school reformers in the mid-nineteenth century, and the core elements of that identity—women teachers’ pious, submissive, and self-sacrificing natures—were more than merely rhetorical. Nationally, school districts implemented policies that reinforced these perceptions. As historian Karen Leroux has argued, school leaders “disguised gendered injustices as sacrifices expected of women.”<sup>65</sup> For instance, well into the first decades of the twentieth century, many schools systems, including New York City and Chicago, maintained versions of early pregnancy and marriage bans.

61. William Rothman, address delivered at the meeting of the Cook County League of Women’s Clubs, October 23, 1915, CTF Collection, box 43, folder July/September 1915, CHM.

62. PTA president, response delivered at the meeting of the Cook County League of Women’s Clubs, October 23, 1915, CTF Collection, box 43, folder July/September. 1915, CHM.

63. “Unions Fail to Run Chicago Schools,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1916.

64. “School Board Minority Calls Loeb Arrogant,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 28, 1916.

65. Leroux, “Money Is the Only Advantage,” 186.

Prior to 1915, in most cities marriage was cause for the dismissal of the female teacher; as with many of these policies, there was a stark double standard, as male teachers faced no such penalties. However, in 1915, courts in New York ruled that marriage in and of itself did not render women unfit for service in the schools. In response, the school board implemented two subtle yet important changes. First, “no married woman shall be appointed to any teaching or supervising position in the day schools unless her husband is incapacitated from physical or mental disease to earn a livelihood, or has continuously abandoned her.” And second, “married women teachers could not be promoted in the system.”<sup>66</sup>

These sorts of paternalistic policies stood in contradistinction to how organized women teachers understood themselves as professionals and the financial realities they faced. As discussed above, teachers fought for a vision of professionalism rooted in autonomy in and outside the schools. The persona crafted by school leaders undercut the professional authority women teachers sought. Further, the salary teachers received represented more than the pin money policy makers imagined it to be. Far from funding the frivolous finery stereotypically associated with women’s wages, female teachers depended on their salaries for subsistence. School leaders’ perspectives fueled teachers’ organization and also provided fodder for satirists. In 1915, Alice Duer Miller, writer and suffragist, wrote the satirical play “A Masque of Teachers: The Ideal Candidate.” Poking fun at New York City’s marriage bans, in the play three married “Would-Be Teachers” appealed to the Board of Education for jobs. “My husband is not really bad,” the first teacher said, to which the board replied, “How very sad, how very sad.” But the teacher explained, “Last winter in a railroad wreck, he lost an arm and broke his neck. He’s doomed, but lingers day by day.” Upon hearing the news, the board responded, “Her husband’s doomed! Hurray! Hurray!” After two more teachers explained their similar situations, the board answered,

Now we have found  
Without a doubt,  
By process sound  
And well thought out,  
Each candidate  
Is fit in truth  
To educate  
The mind of youth.  
No teacher need apply to us  
Whose married life is harmonious.<sup>67</sup>

For many male school leaders, however, the situation was no laughing matter. In their social and political activism, organized women teachers threatened both the

66. Maxwell, *Seventeenth Annual Report*.

67. Miller, “A Masque of Teachers,” 90–91.

bureaucratic order of the schools and the “natural” order of society. To garner public support, school leaders mobilized two related and highly gendered critiques targeted at women teachers. First, women who led the union or were active within it surfaced as dangerous and deceptive. Speaking to a crowd of parents in 1917, Loeb argued to the sympathetic audience that these teachers “terrorized and manacled the entire school system.” Loeb presented Haley and her followers as women intent on upending the entire social order and offered excerpts of Haley’s speeches as evidence. When asked if she would advise a boy to join a union or not, Haley (as quoted by Loeb) stated, “You can explain to the children that it is not only their right and privilege but their responsibility and their duty to associate with their fellows and act collectively.” Quoting her further, Loeb relayed her message that “respect for instituted authority may easily become a great danger to democracy.” Derisively calling her the “queen of the lady sluggers,” Loeb drove his point home and thrilled the crowd. Haley “councils that class distinction be brought to the attention of immature minds and . . . preaches anarchy! I have no quarrel with Haley—I like her (crowd laughs)—in her place! (laughter and applause).”<sup>68</sup> For Loeb and other opponents of teacher unionization, Haley and organized women were distinctly *out* of place.

In the second strategy, school leaders in Chicago allowed that some women followed Haley not out of conviction but because of naïveté, crafting an image of the foolish woman. In his speech to club women, Rothman offered that women teachers, as a group, were especially vulnerable and that Haley and her supporters had “influenced the minds of the teachers.”<sup>69</sup> In his presentation, women joined the union because they were impressionable and easily duped. Loeb explained, “The young teacher comes into the service full of enthusiasm for her work. Her thoughts are engrossed with the children. But no sooner is she engaged than the union sets to work poisoning her mind.”<sup>70</sup> Dismissing the CTF’s sizable membership rolls, Loeb cast the teachers who joined as victims who were “bullied” into paying dues “in exchange for not being molested” by union leaders like Haley.<sup>71</sup> Using Haley’s well-known project of teacher welfare as a foil, Loeb issued a news release. The current situation, he explained, “shows how far these teachers have been led already, from a position of single-hearted devotion to the welfare of the children . . . I do not think the parents want women of that sort as examples and instructors for their children.”<sup>72</sup> Unable or unwilling to take the demands of organized women teachers seriously, school leaders presented these women as petulant children. “We want this. We the teachers want

68. Jacob M. Loeb, Address at Mass Meeting of Parents to Protest the Healy-Buck Bill, spring 1917, CTF Collection, box 46, folder March 1917, CHM.

69. William Rothman, Address delivered at the meeting of the Cook County League of Women’s Clubs, October 23, 1915, CTF Collection, box 43, folder July-September 1915, CHM.

70. Jacob M. Loeb, Address at Mass Meeting.

71. “Loeb Denounces Threat of Labor against Schools,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 11, 1916; Loeb, “President Loeb States His Case.”

72. “Statement to Newspapers by Jacob M. Loeb, in Re: Chicago Teachers Federation,” April 10, 1916, CTF Collection, box 45, folder spring 1916, CHM.

this,” Rothman mocked. “Nobody asks whether you, I or anybody else of the 2.5 million people in Chicago want it.”<sup>73</sup>

Faced with these circumstances, Haley and the women of the CTF turned to the city’s organized labor movement. In a speech delivered to the Public Ownership League of the CFL, Haley maintained that the Loeb Rule and the treatment of teachers ought to concern labor writ large. “If you fail to understand today that the movement to drive the Chicago teachers not only out of the labor movement but to destroy their organization and even the labor movement . . . you do not understand it at all,” she blasted.<sup>74</sup> Agreeing with Haley’s assessment, the CFL passed a series of resolutions condemning the Loeb Rule and identifying the policy as an “exceedingly dangerous precedent.”<sup>75</sup> Victor Olander, secretary of the Illinois Federation of Labor, sent letters to locals across the state, warning, “Brothers, the attack is directed against the entire state labor movement.” Calling on every local to send a letter protesting the Loeb Rule to William Hale Thompson, the mayor of Chicago, Olander explained in bold print: “Let us do our full duty, not only on behalf of teachers, but as a matter of self-respect.”<sup>76</sup>

Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL, an organization historically cool to working women, framed the issue in similar terms.<sup>77</sup> “Under the constitution of this Republic free citizens have a right to unite in institutions that have a legal right to exist and which conduct their business legitimately. Under the law a union of workers is a legal institution.”<sup>78</sup> For him, the issue was clear-cut: it was about the union’s right to exist. And on this point he stood with teachers. Addressing teachers in September 1915, he asserted, “The organized labor movement, the American Federation of Labor, in your just rights and your demand for the exercise of those rights, will stand by you.”<sup>79</sup> However, the gendered barbs that suffused the Loeb Rule and the debates that surrounded it as well as women teachers’ fight for an alternate professional persona remained beyond the purview of the AFL and male labor leaders. Instead, Gompers and the AFL moved to grant a national charter to teachers for two reasons, neither of which resonated with organized women who initiated the movement. The first rationale underpinning the formation of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) centered on the protection of labor rights. The second rationale centered on Gompers’s recognition that the schools were powerful social institutions and

73. William Rothman, Address delivered at the meeting of the Cook County League of Women’s Clubs, October 23, 1915, CTF Collection, box 43, folder July/September, CHM.

74. Margaret Haley, speech delivered to the Public Ownership League of the Chicago Federation of Labor, CTF Collection, box 43, folder July/September 1915, CHM.

75. Chicago Federation of Labor, “Anti-Loeb Resolutions,” summer 1915, CTF Collection, box 43, folder July/September 1915, CHM.

76. Victor Olander, “Secretaries Personal Attention,” September 28, 1915, CTF Collection, box 43, folder July/September 1915, CHM.

77. Schofield, “Rebel Girls and Union Maids.”

78. Gompers, “Teachers!,” 477.

79. Samuel Gompers, speech, Chicago Federation of Labor Meeting, September 18, 1915, CTF Collection, box 43, folder July/September 1915, CHM.

that through the AFT, national labor could have a voice in crafting education policy. Having a controlling voice in the schools meant further legitimating and spreading the perspective of labor. "School life must be vivified," he wrote; it must be "made a real force that deals with real facts and conditions of the work-a-day world." The organization of teachers, according to Gompers, would have a "dynamic influence . . . upon education and the spirit of the public schools."<sup>80</sup>

Locally and nationally, male labor leaders understood the issue of teacher unionization differently from the women elementary school teachers who initiated organization at the turn of the century. In large degree, this divide was a product of a long and complex history of the AFL and women workers. As historians have well noted, women assumed a strained position in the AFL, especially during its early history. According to Ileen DeVault, with the changing nature of work during the turn of the century came a redefinition of skill. Unionism, she has argued, became a "constituent element of manly behavior."<sup>81</sup> The AFL's construction of *manhood*, itself fundamental to notions of skill, served as a powerful exclusionary term, alienating both women and ethnic workers from the larger labor movement.<sup>82</sup>

Motivated by the World War I political and economic contexts, by 1916 the AFL and Gompers bent their exclusionary rhetoric around women workers, albeit only slightly. As Gompers noted in an editorial from the spring of 1916, the AFL accepted women as "a part of the industrial world, at least for the time being." But the fact that the AFL now acknowledged the labor of the nation's working women did not mean that male leaders and rank-and-file members accepted them as equal partners in the labor movement. To the contrary, even as Gompers acknowledged the plight of working women in his editorials, he consistently cast them as external to the labor movement and held fundamentally different views of men and women workers. For example, at the 1913 convention of the AFL held in Seattle, delegates approved resolutions regarding newly formed minimum-wage laws. They approved the minimum wage for women and minor workers but contended that "if it were proposed in this country to vest authority in any tribunal to fix wages for men, Labor would protest by every means in its power." "The fact must be recognized," delegates reasoned, "that the organization of women workers constitutes a separate and more difficult problem. Women do not organize as readily or stably as men. They are, therefore, more easily exploited."<sup>83</sup> Gompers reinforced these sentiments the following year. "Women must learn to take their work seriously and to solve their own problems," he stated, clearly indicating that the problems of women workers were distinct from those of working men.<sup>84</sup>

80. Gompers, "Teachers!," 477.

81. DeVault, "To Sit among Men." 272.

82. This tension is embodied in the move to abolish home work in favor of formal shops, which served as a backdoor way to alienate women from the workforce and exclude their labor from that protected by the AFL. See, for example, Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker*.

83. Gompers, *Samuel Gompers Papers*, "Conclusions and Recommendations," 20.

84. Gompers, *Samuel Gompers Papers*, "A Statement by Samuel Gompers," September 11, 1914, 186.

Organized women elementary school teachers, led by Haley and Strachan, and the male membership of the AFL, led by Gompers, stood on conflicting ideological ground strained by gender and class. Long before national organization in 1916, women teachers opposed the unequal distribution of salaries that advocates legitimized through the family wage logic. “The absurdity of the family wage argument is a sad commentary on our profession,” Strachan explained. She argued, “*Salary is for service*, and should be measured by the service rendered, irrespective of the size, weight, color, complexion, [or] race . . . of the person rendering the service.”<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, the notion of the family wage, coupled with endeavors to distance work from the home, proved to be one of the most powerful and effective assertions of higher pay for men within the AFL. The issue of skill created another powerful, though subtle, wedge. *Skill*, a term suffused with gender and class connotations, proved to be a primary mechanism through which male labor leaders in the AFL could “objectively” exclude female wage earners from their purview.<sup>86</sup> However, organized women teachers, like their peers in other feminized fields, understood *skill* through the lens of profession, framing the term through aspirations of middle-class belonging and gender authority.<sup>87</sup> In her now-famous speech to the National Education Association in 1904, Haley contended that the “factoryization” of education reduced “the teacher to an automaton, a mere factory hand.”<sup>88</sup> The tension never addressed, of course, was simply that the labor organizations these teachers turned to comprised such workers.

Gompers, too, revealed that issues of gender and class complicated the AFL’s relationship with teachers. At the 1913 AFL convention, he scolded teachers and undercut their long history of work, offering that “as long as you sit in the cafeteria or sit in the teachers’ lounge and gripe to each other nothing is going to happen.”<sup>89</sup> In Gompers’s 1916 editorial in the *American Teacher*, he further accentuated the divide, dismissing the decade of work invested by organized women teachers: “Teachers have been made to feel that they are working for the very high purpose. . . . Blinded by sentimentalism and conventions they have not concerned themselves with their own material welfare.”<sup>90</sup> Drawn to each other for disparate reasons, the two groups’ collaboration came replete with a series of unintended and damaging consequences. Not only did these early women leaders find themselves at first marginalized and later alienated in the newly formed AFT and in organized labor in general, but upon the formation of the national organization a new articulation of the professional teacher emerged that differed in fundamental ways from the autonomous woman imagined by CTF and IAWT leaders and members.

85. Strachan, *Equal Pay for Equal Work*, 118.

86. Dye, “Feminism or Unionism?”

87. Walkowitz, *Working with Class*.

88. Haley, “Why Teachers Should Organize,” 148.

89. Gompers, *1913 AFL Convention*, quoted in American Federation of Teachers video, “A Proud Tradition,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiZq3l-deUg&feature=youtu.be&list=PL-T5PpTCIN8BbRxbnpMVU-SAPIREBB3tR](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiZq3l-deUg&feature=youtu.be&list=PL-T5PpTCIN8BbRxbnpMVU-SAPIREBB3tR).

90. Gompers, “Teachers!,” 477.

Haley was perhaps the most famous teacher unionist in the nation, but she earned a marginal and unpaid role in the AFT's leadership structure. Instead, Charles Stillman of the newly formed Chicago Men's High School Teachers Association—a group that represented a mere fraction of the city's teachers—won the presidency with Gompers's backing. Even as Haley continued her involvement in both the AFT and the CTF for the next few years, she increasingly found herself pushed to the fringes. A discursive analysis of the correspondence shared by Haley and labor organizers reveals one subtle though powerful way in which she was excluded. Upon affiliation with national labor, members of the AFT began to address and sign their letters in the style typical of the AFL. Salutations began with "Brother," and closings with "Fraternally Yours." Not only did this highly gendered language exclude women, but even when Haley attempted to use it herself the courtesy went unreturned. For example, when writing to both Fitzpatrick and E. N. Nockels of the CFL, Haley signed her letters "Fraternally Yours." Their responses signified the extent to which she was an outsider; on each occasion the closing read, "Very Respectfully."<sup>91</sup>

Haley also found herself excluded in more direct ways as well. In the summer of 1916, the AFT held its first mass meeting in New York City. Speakers included Henry Linville, president of the New York City Local; Stillman, AFT president; famed pedagogue John Dewey; Chicago Superintendent Ella Flagg Young; Ida Fursman, of the CTF; and a number of male school administrators from New York City. Following the convention, Stillman sent Haley a letter regarding which speeches would be published and by which publication. Until the formation of the AFT, *Margaret Haley's Bulletin* was the most widely read and influential teacher union periodical. In his letter, Stillman suggested that Haley print the two speeches by women in her *Bulletin*, with the rest to appear in the AFT's *American Teacher*, edited by Linville. Not inconsequentially, Stillman signed his letter to Haley "Sincerely Yours," despite that when writing to both Gompers and other male leaders of the AFT he consistently signed his correspondence, "Fraternally Yours."<sup>92</sup> With no record of Haley's response, the publications are left to speak for themselves. Without explanation, Haley ceased printing her *Bulletin*, and the September issue of the *American Teacher* reprinted the speeches delivered by the men; the speeches by Fursman and Young appeared in the October issue.

By the spring of 1917, it was clear to Haley and the rank-and-file CTF members that they had lost their battle with Loeb. Not only did school leaders' powerful gendered critiques go unchallenged, but the thirty-eight CTF members, who had been denied reappointment by the board for no apparent reason other than their affiliation with labor, remained dismissed. Reflecting on these teachers, Loeb explained

91. For one example, refer to Letter from John Fitzpatrick to Margaret Haley, October 2, 1916, and Letter from Margaret Haley to E. N. Nockels, September 19, 1916, CTF Collection, box 45, folder July/October 1916, CHM.

92. Charles Stillman, Letter to Margaret Haley, August 3, 1916, CTF Collection, box 45, folder July/October 1916, CHM.



to a reporter that “they either willfully or through a coercive force they could not control, had placed themselves in a position too injurious to the system to permit their retention.” “In a battle,” he continued, “many an individual soldier not responsible for the war is wounded or killed.”<sup>93</sup> As the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) headlined in their *Bulletin*, that year, the state “Supreme Court decision held that Boards of Education in Illinois have the absolute right to refuse employ as teachers to anyone who is or anyone who is not a member of a labor union.”<sup>94</sup> In addition, due to a swell of public support, Loeb was reappointed to the board. Both as a way to get the fired teachers reinstated and as a symbol of their dissatisfaction with the turn the movement had taken, on May 21, 1917, after fifteen years of affiliation with labor (up to that point, the longest of any teachers’ union), the CTF formally withdrew its affiliations with the CFL, the Illinois State Federation of Labor, the AFT, and the WTUL. In New York, Strachan had long been skeptical of formal unionization, and the IAWT resisted affiliation with the AFT.<sup>95</sup> But remaining separate from labor was not enough to safeguard their project of female professional and social authority. Like Haley and the women of the CTF, Strachan was displaced by Linville, president of the New York City local, as the voice of teachers.

The effeminizing forces of modernization were felt across the urban landscape and feared as contemporary observers mocked the “spectacle of men working in tasks which every woman knows she could undertake.”<sup>96</sup> From the start, male teachers found their masculinity doubly challenged. Not only were they a distinct minority in an occupation long understood to be a woman’s domain, but vocal female teachers questioned and derided their presence. The new centralized school system accentuated male teachers’ tenuous position as increasing numbers of managers regulated their work.<sup>97</sup> Propelled at least in part by Gompers’s calls for reform and the AFL’s limited views of women in the workplace, the rise of the AFT and its affiliation with the AFL provided these men with an opportunity to shift that balance of power and to affirm an image of self-made manhood.

Women continued to predominate in teacher workforces nationwide. In New York City, all 936 of the public school’s kindergarten teachers were women; 93 percent of the city’s elementary school teachers and 52 percent of its high school teachers were women. Considered as a whole, of the 19,849 teachers and administrators encompassing the city’s public schools during the 1915 academic year, only 12 percent were men.<sup>98</sup> Though the demographics of the teaching population remained steady in the years before and after teacher unionization, a new professional persona fueled by contemporary notions of progressive virility took hold. For example, in one

93. Loeb, “President Loeb States His Case,” 8.

94. “Chicago Teachers’ Federation Withdraws from All Labor Affiliations,” *Women’s Trade Union League Bulletin*, June 1917, CTF Collection, box 46, folder April/June 1917, CHM.

95. “Teachers against New Constitution.”

96. Ludovici, “Women’s Encroachment,” 84; Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*.

97. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*.

98. Maxwell, *Seventeenth Annual Report*.

*Bulletin*, a teacher-author wrote, "Teachers should not cease to be teachers but they should become social economists and inevitably, as a result, social reformers and fellow workers with socially minded physicians, lawyers and others for better more just community life." Separating themselves from the feminized profession and the feminist agenda of earlier teachers, authors like this one began to orient the teaching profession toward masculinized fields. "The conception of the teacher has changed," the *Bulletin* gladly noted. "*He* no longer teaches in cloistered isolation."<sup>99</sup> The especially ironic element of this shift in tone is that the Women's High School Federation published the article. Haley's vision of autonomous women working alongside other women had all but disappeared, even among women teachers.

Upon the formation of the AFT, its leaders began to reflect on and, as most organizations do, revise its history. William T. McCoy, the president of the Chicago Federation of Men Teachers, for instance, recounted the accomplishments of Chicago's teacher union movement. Though he noted Haley's efforts, he isolated them to her battle against tax evaders. Instead, he traced the roots of the organization to male high school teachers, overlooking the fact that the vast majority of such associations were only formed in the years just before the birth of the AFT. "Chicago men of vision"—"high school teachers"—McCoy editorialized, "realized that union labor was the truest ally the teacher could hope to gain," forgetting that the CTF had initiated affiliation as early as 1902.<sup>100</sup> Within the course of one decade, this sort of revisionism transformed into fact. Announcing their "Old Timers Night," the Chicago Federation of Men Teachers celebrated their past: "As an answer to the 'Loeb Rule' . . . [we] took the lead in organizing the AFT."<sup>101</sup>

At the same moment that the feminist movement gained national visibility and power, teachers, led by the small minority of men in the field, retreated from it.<sup>102</sup> Supplanting earlier economic and political feminist activism was a progressive manhood that emphasized the strength and talent of male teachers. The professional teacher came to embody the union man of the high schools. In New York, where in 1916 only 11 percent of all public school teachers were men, nearly half of the newly formed union's leadership structure was male, with men assuming the highest ranks. Such skewed ratios played out across the nation and especially in the AFT's headquarters. Borrowing the language of the day, an echo of Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders," union leaders cast their work as a manly endeavor. An AFT pamphlet explained that they were "training members for work of national scope. Through trial and sustained effort and risk [locals around the country] are developing a better

99. "Federation of Women High School Teachers: Aims and Activities, 1914–1916," CTF Collection, box 45, 1916, CHM. Emphasis added.

100. William T. McCoy, "Chicago Teachers Unions—Accomplishments," CTF Collection, box 45, folder July/October 1916, CHM.

101. Chicago Federation of Men Teachers, "Announcement," December 6, 1929, AFT Collection, box 1, Series 6, Reuther Library.

102. Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*.

manhood among officers and members."<sup>103</sup> In simultaneously abandoning the female radicalism of the earlier part of this era and replacing it with assertions of manliness, the union sought to situate teachers within the fold of traditional professions.

For a brief time, teachers departed from the domestic rhetoric that defined their work lives and instead fused their labor and social activism to craft a professional persona centered on the independent woman. The professional identity women teachers sought existed in direct conflict with many school leaders' notions of the female professional teacher as maternal and docile, motivating the turn to organized labor. The result, of course, of teachers' affiliation with labor was paradoxical. In one regard, the rise of the AFT represented a victory for early organized women teachers. Particularly as the twentieth century progressed, the AFT embodied teacher power. However, the organization undercut the central goals its progenitors sought to achieve. For the first organized women teachers, the struggles for women's social, political, and economic rights were one and the same. National organization disrupted that feminist activism. Though often cast as an arm of the Left, this history reveals that from the beginning, the teachers' union gained power and credibility by adopting a conservative vision of the professional teacher that masked the actual composition of the workforce. ■

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103. McCoy, "Chicago Teachers Unions—Accomplishments."

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