

"Rights, Not Roses": Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945–1980, by Dennis A. Deslippe. Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000. x, 259 pp. Illustrations, graphs, tables, notes, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

Reviewer Lynn Y. Weiner is professor of history at Roosevelt University. She is the author of *From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820–1980* (1985).

Although many studies of twentieth-century feminism center solely on middle-class professional women, some scholars, including Alice Kessler-Harris, Elizabeth Faue, Nancy Gabin, and Roger Horowitz have also focused on the role of working-class women in struggles for gender equality. *"Rights, Not Roses,"* by Dennis A. Deslippe, adds to the understanding of the complex path of gender politics and class over the past decades.

A particularly interesting tension arose between those favoring equal pay laws and those instead supporting protective labor legislation for women. Deslippe's thoughtful and thorough study particularly highlights this debate, and demonstrates how some working-class women pushed their unions away from the more conservative position favoring protective laws and toward support for equal rights by the later 1960s. In addition, women unionists successfully used new federal legislation, such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which banned sex discrimination in employment) to challenge discriminatory practices as technological innovations reshaped industrial jobs and older notions of sex segregation in the workplace crumbled.

Deslippe uses legislative records, union papers, and oral histories—including some from the Iowa Labor History Oral Project. He relies on case studies of two unions to examine more closely the trajectory of the debate over gender rights during the past half-century. In doing so, his reading of local union records gives voice to working women from big cities and small towns in the Midwest, including Iowans.

The heart of the book rests on the transformation of gender politics in unions representing packinghouse and electrical workers. Deslippe demonstrates how union women brought a concern for such concrete employment issues as seniority, job classifications, and wage equity to a feminist movement that often found itself pondering more abstract issues of equality and justice. He begins by considering the state of unions and women's issues in the postwar era. Often women trade unionists found themselves regulated by outdated laws. But eventually some unions and federal agencies (such as the U.S. Women's Bureau, under the leadership of Esther Peterson) strongly advocated equal pay legislation.

The United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) represented workers in a male-dominated industry with an entrenched sexual division of labor. Commonly, men worked in slaughtering, dressing, and cutting up cattle, hogs, and sheep, while women toiled in canning, trimming, and slicing. At some firms such as Cudahy during the 1950s, 82 percent of "women's jobs" fell into the lowest three of 22 wage brackets. The UPWA, long male-dominated, was slow to abandon protectionism. Deslippe found that hundreds of UPWA locals were charged with violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, in general displaying a confrontational approach to women members' demands for legal redress. Most of the sex discrimination complaints, he writes, came from Iowa locals with around 12 percent female members. Through the early 1970s, UPWA locals resisted remedies for sex discrimination; and the larger labor movement, including the Iowa Federation of Labor, was also slow to address concerns of union women.

In contrast, the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) was relatively active during the postwar period in fighting sex discrimination, displaying what Deslippe calls an "accommodationist" approach. With a higher proportion of women workers and a stronger and more centralized institutional structure, the IUE was more supportive of federal equal rights laws, creating a Title VII compliance program by the early 1970s. By the mid-1970s, women from these and other unions formed interunion coalitions, such as the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW).

Engaging photographs supplement the text. They depict such images as Iowa women meatcutters and the first CLUW meetings. Although the argument remains clear throughout, the narrative seesaws between the two case studies in different time periods, and so can get somewhat confusing. Moreover, the radical activism of some trade union women seems minimized; the Communist Party is mentioned only in passing. Even as union activists some women found it necessary to use pseudonyms to circumvent industry blacklisting. In this regard, historical film documentaries such as *Seeing Red* and *Union Maids* would be useful companions to this study.

"Rights, Not Roses" is an important addition to the labor historian's bookshelf, and it will also be of use to students of twentieth-century social and political history. Women trade unionists influenced gender relations during the last century, as their unions—some more than others—participated in the growing support of gender equity legislation. At the same time, these rank-and-file workers brought workplace concerns of women to the forefront of the national debate on feminism and equal rights during the 1960s and 1970s.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.