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The East London Women Ropemakers' Union: 1888-1898.

A Case Study in Victorian Female Unionisation:

'Desperate Women' and 'Irresponsible Advisers'?

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ABSTRACT

The East London Ropemakers' Union came into being in November 1889, a month after the creation of the Women's Trade Union Association (WTUA). A year later women workers at one of the largest companies, Frost Brothers, went on strike over low pay. They remained on strike for eleven weeks until January 1891 when their demands were met in full. The Union continued for a decade until its disbandment in 1898. This study examines the forces behind the emergence of the Union, the conduct of the strike itself and the reasons for and timing of the Union's expiry. It contextualises the agency of these 'factory girls' and challenges the model of manipulation of naive workers by Socialist ideologues. The model is tested against primary evidence that, in fact, many of the women were enthusiasts for industrial action who were initially constrained by the moderation of the activists whose preferred strategy was not disruption but recruitment and organisation as the better means of negotiation with employers from a position of strength. The attempt to construct and maintain women-only unions such as the ropemakers was short-lived and arguably a failure. The study argues that there are two complementary explanations for this. Firstly, activists such as the WTUA were forced to acknowledge the overwhelming structural difficulties in the way of organising transient bodies of young workers in small individual factories faced not only with the hostility of employers but ultimately with a lack of support from male unionists . Secondly, those same activists had come to regard the alternatives of full integration of women into the labour movement and the pursuit of legislative protection as more productive routes to the amelioration of working conditions.

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DECLARATION

Some material from the first year of the Master's End of Module Assessment, part II, (A825) has been used and referenced. No part of this dissertation has previously been submitted for a degree or other qualification of any other university or institution.

I confirm that this dissertation is entirely my own work.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
SDF	The Social Democratic Federation
WIC	Women's Industrial Council
WPPLA	Women's Protective and Provident League
WTUA	Women's Trade Union Association
WTUL	Women's Trade Union League
WUMRC	Warwick University Modern Records Centre

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Themes

The East London Ropemakers' Union was founded in November 1889 a month after the political activist organisers of the Union had founded the Women's Trade Union Association (WTUA).¹ A year later women workers at one of the largest companies, Frost Brothers, went on strike over low pay. They remained on strike for eleven weeks until January 1891 when their demands were met in full. The Union continued for a decade until its disbandment in 1898.

There has been little, if any, scholarly analysis of this historically significant episode. Interest has instead tended to focus on the better-known male manifestations of 'New Unionisation' such as the Dockworkers' Strike of 1889. The organisation of unskilled female workers has been largely overlooked. Accordingly, this case study may represent a singular investigation into gendered unionisation in London at the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, the study examines the forces behind the emergence of the Union, the conduct of the strike and the reasons for and timing of the Union's expiry.

It contextualises the agency of these 'factory girls' within their symbiotic relationship with the activist organisers and challenges the model of manipulation of naive workers by Socialist ideologues. That model is tested against primary evidence that, in fact, many of the women were enthusiasts for industrial action who were initially constrained by the moderation of the activists whose preferred strategy was not disruption but recruitment and organisation as better means of negotiation with employers from a position of strength.

¹ *Minute Book*, East London Ropemakers' Union Archives, Warwick University Modern Records Centre (WUMRC), 627/2/1; *WTUA 1st Annual Report (1889-90)*, LSE Women's Library, WIC/B/1, p.3.

It will further argue that the motivation of the activists and of the WTUA was not the promise of revolutionary societal change, as advocated by the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF), nor the building of a national political movement, such as the women's suffrage campaign but was, instead, a manifestation of the WTUA's self-contained commitment to the practical improvement of women's working conditions. The ironic postscript is that the attempt to construct and maintain women-only unions such as the ropemakers was short-lived and arguably a failure. The study argues that there are two complementary explanations for this. Firstly, activists such as the WTUA were forced to acknowledge the overwhelming structural difficulties in the way of organising transient bodies of young workers in small individual factories faced not only with the hostility of employers but ultimately with a lack of support from male unionists. Secondly, those same activists had come to regard the alternatives of full integration of women into the labour movement and the pursuit of legislative protection as more productive routes to the amelioration of working conditions.

Structure

Chapter Two, 'The Industry', contains brief descriptions of Frost Brothers and the nature of the ropemaking industry and concludes with an examination of working conditions and wages. Chapter Three, 'The Actors', consists of two parts. The first part is an attempt to define a very specific and localised Victorian identity, namely that of the East End 'factory girl', by drawing on contemporary portrayals of their social conditions, attributes and attitudes. The second part analyses the allegiances and objectives of the WTUA activists in order to explain both the political context and the timing of the Union's creation. It is hoped that, by putting the two parts of the chapter together, an understanding of the dynamics of the resulting combination will emerge. Brief reference is made to the circumstances of the matchworkers' and the chocolate-makers' strikes as a device for testing the typicality of the

ropemakers' behaviour. Chapter Four, 'The Union', is structurally a chronological narrative of the development of the Union, of the strike and of its postscript. The purpose, however, is to go beyond a straightforward archaeology in order to construct a 'usable past' from the detail which, when read alongside Chapter Three, results in an historically meaningful depiction of the transactional role played in the process by the women workers. The chapter concludes with analysis of the simultaneous degeneration of this and other unskilled women's unions and of the WTUA itself.

Primary Sources

The research starting point was the Union archive at Warwick University.² The secretary, Amie Hicks and her fellow committee member, Clara James, also gave lengthy evidence to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1891 on factory conditions, on the need for women's unions in general and on the formation of the Ropemakers' Union.³

Contemporaneous treatments of the beginnings of the Union, its progress and demise are contained in the annual reports of the WTUA.⁴ A companion to the WTUA reports is coverage of the Union in *Labour Elector*, the newspaper produced by the Union's President, H.H. Champion.⁵ *Justice, The Organ of the Social Democracy* was the newspaper of the rival Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF).⁶ *The Link: A Journal for the Servants of Man* was another campaigning journal of the day which supported female unionisation.⁷ The Annual Reports and Minutes of the London Trades Council contain

² WUMRC, Items 627/1 to 627/6.

³ Evidence of Amie Hicks, *Royal Commission on Labour* (1891), 'Appendices of Evidence', Vol 1, Group C, pp. 330-342; Evidence of Clara James, pp.342-358.

⁴ WTUA Annual Reports, 1889-90 to 1893-4.

⁵ British Library.

⁶ British Library.

⁷ Tower Hamlets Archives, LCP00028.

material on the negotiations which concluded the strike.⁸ Contemporary descriptions of ropemaking, ropemakers and East London female factory workers appear in Charles Booth's *Notebooks* and in his *Life and Labour of the People of London*.⁹ In 1894 Hicks' daughter, Frances, wrote a description of the lives of 'Factory Girls' based on first-hand knowledge.¹⁰

Secondary Materials

The Ropemakers' Union does feature in two early works by women writers - Hutchins' *Women in Trade Unions*, (1915) and Drake's *Women in Modern Industry* (1920)). Hutchins includes an account of its formation taken personally from Hicks herself. Both authors reflect upon the difficulty of organising unskilled young women. Even so, neither distinguishes problems of gender from issues of class in the workplace, Hutchins arguing that 'the labour woman's movement is a class movement' and Drake that the problems 'do not refer primarily to sex' but existed because the women were part of a class of semi-qualified and badly-paid workers.¹¹

Apart from these works, and despite the abundance of academic work on so-called 'New Unionism' generally, the principal obstacle in the way of engagement with the scholarly discourse is that there is, in fact, very little relevant material to review. In those circumstances, consideration has been given to the treatment of related themes in the wider

⁸ London Trades Council, *32nd Annual Report (1891)*, Acc/3287/01/067, p.5; London Trades Council *Minutes*, 5 February, 1891, Acc/3287/01/070, London Metropolitan Archives.

⁹ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour Survey Notebooks*, LSE Booth Collection Archives, A/18; Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, Second Series, Vol II (London: Macmillan, 1902-3).

¹⁰ Frances Hicks, 'Factory Girls', in *The New Party*, (Andrew Reid ed.) (London: Hodder, 1895), 221-6.

¹¹ B.L.Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry* (London: Bell and Sons, 1915), p.207; Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (London: Labour Research Dept., 1920), p.199.

historiography. For example, the classic texts on the growth of Trade Unionism have tended to downplay the agency of the workers while upgrading the role of the organisers. In his *History of Trade Unionism*, also published in 1920, Sydney Webb did acknowledge the work of Emma Paterson and the Womens' Trade Union League (WTUL), a forerunner of the WTUA, and he too noted the ephemerality of women-only unions.¹² There was, however, no thematic analysis or explanation and he expressly omitted women unionists from his 'estimate of the place occupied by Trade Unionism in working-class life' in the 1890s. Much later, Clegg (1964) noted an increase of women's membership of unions between 1901 and 1910 but does not mention women's unions of the previous decade. Thompson (1967) and Pelling (1972) refer to the success of the matchworkers in 1888 but credit their limited success to the leadership by Annie Besant 'and other Socialists' rather than the workers.¹³ The orthodoxy of the heroic (generally male) model of labour leadership has since been challenged. Thus, Sally Alexander contends that Webb's 'seductive' portrayal of the male unionist was a deliberate construct intended 'to convince the British governing class that representatives of Labour with their long tradition of self-government should be allowed to join them.'¹⁴ Matthews argues, as does the present study, that *ad hoc* strikes tended to be forced upon a usually reluctant leadership by the rank and file and that the claim that 'New

¹² Sidney Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London: Workers' Educational Assoc., 1920), p.336 f.1.

¹³ Henry Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism* 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1972), p.93; Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London, 1885-1914*, (London: Routledge, 1967, p. 45; Hugh Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p.470; Eric Hobsbawm, *Labour's Turning Point, 1880-1900* (London: Harvester Press, 1974), p.212.

¹⁴ Sally Alexander *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*, (London: Virago, 1994), pp.58, 66.

Unionism' was led by revolutionary Marxists in any meaningful sense is difficult to sustain.¹⁵ Raw has developed this further in a detailed treatment of the matchworkers, asserting that there is 'conclusive proof' that the SDF member, Besant, did *not* lead them into their strike. She believes that commentators have generally diminished the agency of women workers as part of an understanding of class 'which is extremely, if inadvertently, gendered' and complains that, despite the fact that the matchworkers occupy a prominent place in popular imagination, there has been little true interest on the part of male academics.¹⁶ However, despite chapter headings such as 'Women and New Unionism' and 'The Victorian Labour Movement and Women Workers' there is surprisingly no mention of the ropemakers and only a passing reference to the WTUA. Olcott, on the other hand, has provided a clear survey of the work of the WTUL and the breakaway WTUA which does include at least a mention of Hicks and the ropemakers. She also addresses the causes of the failure of women-only unions in the 1890s.¹⁷ To take another example which 'self-consciously foregrounds gender', Hunt argues that the SDF's apparent indifference to the organisation of women workers was not rooted in crude misogyny but was rather because the Marxist ideology of the time simply left 'no clear theoretical space to develop an understanding of patriarchy as either a separate or related system to capitalism'.¹⁸ Put shortly, the overall conclusion of the considerable body of modern women's history and gender history of which Hunt and Raw are part is that British

¹⁵ D. Matthews, '1889 and All That: New Views on the New Unionism', *International Review of Social History*, 36(1), (1991), 24-58, (pp.31-2).

¹⁶ Louise Raw, *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and Their Place in History* (London: Continuum Books, 2009), p.7; See also, Ann Stafford, *A Match to Fire the Thames* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961).

¹⁷ Teresa, Olcott, 'Dead Centre: The Women's Trade Union Movement in London, 1874-1914', *The London Journal*, 2:1, (1976), 33-50, (pp.41-45).

¹⁸ Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists, The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.15.

labour historians have been reluctant ‘to integrate gender into their practices and concerns in any systematic fashion’.¹⁹

2. THE INDUSTRY

Frost Brothers

No trace now remains but there had been a ropewalk on the site between St. Dunstan’s Church in Stepney and the Commercial Road since at least 1703. Frosts Brothers was founded by John James Frost in 1790 and at the time of the Ropemakers’ strike was a large and prestigious company, the chairman then being James John Frost. By 1874, for example, it had set a world record in supplying 11 miles of rope to the German company, Siemens Brothers.²⁰ Two years later in his survey of industry in East London, W. Glenny Crory was particularly admiring of this ‘largest rope manufactory in the United Kingdom’. To his mind, the company was ‘the best ordered and most efficiently conducted in the world [...] Anyone who knows an old-fashioned rope-walk [...] and who notices how much toil attends some processes for want of machinery to mitigate and raise human labour, will be pleased to know that in the making of ropes from Manilla hemp this firm has a system at work which meets every requirement.’²¹

Plate 1 IMAGE REDACTED

Plate 1: Frost Brothers Factory, 1906, *The Old Industry of Rope Making with Modern Plant*

¹⁹Hunt, p.3.

²⁰ Frost Brothers Ltd., *The Old Industry of Rope Making with Modern Plant* (n.p., 1906), p.4.

²¹ W. Glenny Crory, *East London Industries* (London: Longmans, 1876), p.174.

The Processes

Crucial to their ability to keep female wages low was the fact that Frosts were leaders in the use of machinery. By 1892 they were producing 40 tonnes of rope per week.²² Crory's laudation singled out their embrace of modernity and, by implication, their employ of female workers:

To invention we owe much in our industrial movements, but in ropemaking particularly we seem to owe most of all.

Anyone who knows an old-fashioned ropewalk [...] and who notices how much toil attends some processes for want of machinery to mitigate and raise human labour, will be pleased to know that in the making of ropes from Manilla hemp this firm has a system at work which meets every requirement [...].The machines are easily attended to. Any person of either sex can look after one, and in this respect the use of such machinery becomes an occasion of giving employment to persons who would in their absence find no work at a rope-walk.²³

Charles Booth's researchers, Ernest Aves and Stephen Frost, were less enthusiastic as to the benefits:

The tendency of the day is to use machinery for nearly every process of rope-making as purchasers refuse to give an adequate price for hand-made work, which is really better and stronger [...] The prevalence of improved mechanical

²² William Tyson, *Rope, A History of the Hard Fibre Cordage Industry in the United Kingdom* (London: Wheatland Journals, 1966), p.90.

²³ Crory, pp.174-5.

contrivance has had the result of diminishing the number of those employed and of dispensing with special skill in the workman. The rope-maker has become more and more a machine-minder, and one more typical artisan is lost. [...] The machine tender requires but little skill; the technical knowledge needed is supplied by the foreman, who issues all the orders as to number of yarns, etc. and then the machines work as they are set. [...] Shoddy articles are not uncommon, and ropes are known to have been fabricated from sacking, gunny bags, and any sort of fibrous rubbish that can be tortured and twisted into a yarn'.²⁴

The process involved a number of distinct sequences. Firstly, 'heckling' – when the raw material arrived, the bales of Russian hemp or Manilla from the Philippines were ripped open by women workers on piece rates, then it was soaked, dried and 'heckled' until sufficiently soft and pliable for spinning by drawing it through iron plates with large upward facing steel pins, 'the spreader', giving off much dust from the removal of refuse and short fibres. Next came 'spinning a yarn' when the fibre was taken by girls to the spinning floor to be spun into 'yarns' of various sizes and quality. Manilla continued to be spun by hand until the 1880s by the worker tying lengths around the body, hooking it to a mechanically twisting plate and walking backwards as the fibre paid out – hence 'ropewalks'. If tarring was required, the yarn was passed through a kettle of 'best Archangel Tar' and then wound around a capstan to dry. A number of yarns would then be 'registered', that is twisted mechanically into a single 'strand'. Lastly, the strands were 'laid' into ropes by mechanically

²⁴ Charles Booth, 'Hemp, Jute and Fibre', in *Life and Labour of the People in London*, Second Series, Vol II, (London: Macmillan, 1895), p.337.

twisting them together in the opposite direction from which each strand had itself been twisted.²⁵

PLATE 2: IMAGE REDACTED

Plate 2: Spinning Manila, *The Old Industry of Rope Making with Modern Plant*

Working Conditions

The principal cause of the strike had been Frosts' refusal to raise wages. In part, low female wages exemplified the residual influence of rules regarding franchise, inheritance, guardianship and marriage which continued to imbue Late-Victorian women with a 'mute

²⁵ Robert Chapman, *A Treatise on Ropemaking*, (London: E. Spon, 1868), pp.7-9; Booth, 'Hemp, Jute and Fibre', p.338; John Hawkins, *Notes from a Ropemaker: History, Uses and Specifications*, (Ipswich: Footrope Knots, 2012), p.18; Tyson, , Preface p.viii, p.11.

sense of industrial inferiority' and, consequently, lower expectations and aspirations.²⁶

However, the widespread use of machinery in ropemaking in particular also meant that, apart from needing small nuclei of permanent workers, companies could draw upon a pool of cheap unskilled labour in the shape of unmarried daughters of local casual labourers.

Moreover, there had been a general decline in shipbuilding in London between 1861 and 1881 because the process transferred to the North of England resulting in a precipitous fall in the numbers of workers required by ancillary trades such as sail-making, rigging and ropemaking.²⁷ By 1891 Booth's survey identified 'less than a dozen rope and twine factories of any importance and the number of firms who execute high class work may be counted on five fingers'. His analysis of the 1891 London census returned 'a very limited number' of people employed in the industry. The figures for East London were 655 males and 261 females. Booth was convinced, however, that the number of females was considerably understated and he suggested a workplace census during working hours.²⁸ The figures may reflect the fact that married women frequently had multiple casual occupations or were simply entered as 'spouse'. According to the census, 16.3 per cent of girls aged between ten and fourteen were 'occupied' in England and Wales; for girls between fifteen and twenty, the national average was 68.6 per cent with London slightly higher at 69.4 per cent.²⁹ According to Hicks, 'an employer simply has to say he wants some work done, and in the East End, mostly, he can fix his own rate and he will find women glad to take it'. She complained that,

²⁶ Sallie Hogg, *The Employment of Women in Britain, 1891-1921*, Thesis (Oxford University, 1967), p.103.

²⁷ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society*, (London: Verso, 2013), pp.85, 340.

²⁸ Charles Booth, 'Hemp, Jute and Fibre' in *Life and Labour Survey Notebooks*, Vol. II, Part IV, Ch. III, LSE Booth Collection, A/18, pp.16-17.

²⁹ *The Labour Gazette, the Journal of the Labour Department of the Board of Trade*, (London: HMSO, 1894), October 1894, p. 308.

notwithstanding 'a time of prosperity generally', there had been a decrease in wages in the previous four years, citing the fact that jute-workers' weekly wages had gone down from 12s 3d to 10s in that period: 'The only way the workers can account for it is that the employers demand an unreasonable amount of profit.' She suggested that examination of a company's books would show some individual wages to be artificially high because money paid to family members who worked alongside, such as children, would be entered as payment to a single person. According to her, an 'ordinary' woman worker 'that had not been long in the trade' earned 7s 6d per week and a 'skilled worker' earned 10s 6d.³⁰ These figures were borne out by a questionnaire survey conducted in January 1893 by Booth's researcher, Clara Collet, on the 'sum actually earned for the week's work'. She reported that Frost Brothers employed 67 men, 92 females and 61 'lads, boys and apprentices'. Of the men, four earned between 60s and 47s 6d per week; the majority, forty two, earned between 34s and 23s; twenty one earned between 22s and 17s. By contrast, the great majority of women, seventy four, received between 10 and 9s. None of them earned over 22s and only three earned above the lowest male rate of 17s. The lads, boys and apprentices were paid between 16s and 6s, 'mostly between 10s and 8s', putting them on a comparable rate to the women.³¹

Mistakes or misdemeanours resulted in salutary punitive measures, common in all East End factories, which further reduced take-home pay. 'Drilling' was a practice whereby a worker would be suspended without pay for a fortnight or so for 'misbehaviour'.³² A common practice was the imposition of 'fines' for minor error or misconduct. For example,

³⁰Evidence of Amie Hicks, *Royal Commission on Labour* (1891), 'Appendices of Evidence', Vol 1, Group C, pp. 330-342, (p.332).

³¹ Charles Booth, 'Replies to Questionnaires: Hemp, Jute and Fibre', in *Life and Labour Survey Notebooks*, Vol. II, Part IV, Ch. III, p.2.

³² Evidence of Clara James, *Royal Commission on Labour*, Appendices Vol 1, Group C, pp.342-358, (p.348).

Bryant and May, the matchmakers, imposed fines for offences such as talking, dropping matches or going to the toilet without permission.³³ In March 1890, Champion complained in

Labour Elector:

[...Ropemaking...] gives an instance of outrageous injustice which is inflicted on women, and for which no redress can be got save through a trade organisation. Some girls employed on piece work have recently been compelled to do the firm's work in their own time without any pay. Their own work has been rendered more difficult by the use of worse material. Consequently mistakes have been more frequent. For these mistakes they have been fined sometimes to the extent of 1s 6d out of a week's earnings of 10s to 11s and in addition they have been compelled to rectify the mistakes (for which they have already been fined) in their own time without payment.³⁴

Booth's reporters revealed that sanitary arrangements were 'very inadequate from an hygienic point of view. One large firm, in particular, having a workshop with no lavatory accommodation whatever whilst in other cases the provision is most meagre'.³⁵ Conditions were characterised by crude sanitation, a shortage of drinking water, and poor gaslight. Work started at six a.m. and finished at half past five or one p.m. on Saturdays with the workers standing throughout the day. There would be two breaks for breakfast and dinner of three quarters of an hour each. There was no canteen and food was eaten in conditions of

³³ *The Link*, 23 June, 1888.

³⁴ *Labour Elector*, 1 March 1890, p.133.

³⁵ Booth, *Notebooks*, Vol. II, Part IV, p.23

considerable discomfort.³⁶ Hicks' own daughter, Frances, who was herself secretary of the London Tailoresses' Society and later a member of the London Trades Council, wrote a contemporary account of women factory workers bringing 'bread and dripping or something prepared the night before to be eaten with weak tea at eight clock. Perhaps four girls will club together for twopence worth of cheese, a pennyworth of pickle and half a loaf' for dinner. A favourite meal was 'a pennyworth of fried fish and a ha'porth of potatoes'.³⁷

When the first women Factory Inspectors were appointed in 1893 the 'dusty processes' of hemp-rope works were an early focus of attention.³⁸ Glenn Crory had a different perspective: 'It need hardly be said that working in such places is healthy. The fact is, handling hemp is very wholesome'.³⁹ Similarly, Booth's reporters, Stephen Fox and Jesse Argyle, had found that the work 'does not seem to be unhealthy. In spite of the fluff and dust raised by hackling the material, the lungs of the workers do not appear to suffer. Perhaps the smell of the tar is a counter agent?'.⁴⁰ Clara Collet found that the women were 'in many cases, of strong build and capable of heavy work such as lifting large coils of yarn and rope. They also need considerable powers of endurance in order to keep pace with the machines'.⁴¹ Hicks on the other hand told the Royal Commission that, while the women appeared 'fresh' and 'robust', their voices were 'hoarse and deep' from chest infections which caused frequent hospital visits. She complained that they had no opportunity to communicate with the then

³⁶ William Tyson, *Rope: A History of the Hard Fibre Cordage Industry in the United Kingdom*, London: Wheatland Journals, 1966), p.38.

³⁷ Frances Hicks, 'Factory Girls', in *The New Party*, ed. by Andrew Reid (London: Hodder, 1895), pp.221-6, (p.223).

³⁸ Adelaide Anderson, *Women in the Factory: An Administrative Adventure, 1893-1921*, (New York: Dutton, 1922), p.110.

³⁹ Crory, p.175.

⁴⁰ Booth, 'Hemp, Jute and Fibre', in *Life and Labour*, p.339.

⁴¹ Booth, *Notebooks*, Vol. II, Part IV, p.22.

entirely male Factory Inspectorate citing one firm in which an inspector had not been seen for two years. When the men took over the women's work during the strike, they were 'laid up in the same way'.⁴² In addition, the machinery was dangerous. On her first acquaintance with Frosts' women ropemakers, Hicks noticed that many had bandaged hands and injuries from unfenced machinery. In more than one case a death had occurred.⁴³ Doors were kept locked. Hicks cited an incident when a machine accident had caused an engine to shake the building. However, the women were not let out and some were found 'lying on the floor fainting from fright.' Employers notoriously abused company insurance schemes under which a penny was deducted from wages which was meant to pay for letters entitling the workers to hospital admission when needed but 'we seldom get them' and 'not one per cent' ever receive statutory compensation.⁴⁴

3: THE ACTORS

The notion that East End factory women, generally perceived as feckless and inadequate, could organise themselves properly without manipulation by extrinsic agitators was incomprehensible to most middle-class sensibilities. Crory had forecast that 'were hard-working employees to be misled by demagogues, they would, if left unwarned, unremonstrated with, or to their own fate as to popular fallacies, very soon find themselves in a condition the most deplorable the moment they succeeded in rebelling against capital.'⁴⁵

Referring to the Matchworkers Strike, *The Times* was in no doubt:

The pity is that the match girls have not been suffered to take their own course, but have been egged on to strike by irresponsible

⁴² Hicks, *Royal Commission*, p.332.

⁴³ B.L.Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry*, (London: Bell and Sons, 1915), p.128.

⁴⁴ Hicks *Royal Commission*, pp.332, 334.

⁴⁵ W. Glenny Crory, *East London Industries* (London: Longmans, 1876), p.177.

advisers. No effort has been spared by these pests of the modern industrial world, the Social Democrats, to bring the quarrel to a head.⁴⁶

This chapter argues that a similar portrayal of the ropemaker unionists as naive, regimented handmaidens of Socialist ideologues is not supportable on the primary evidence. Moreover, the actual allegiances and activities of the ‘advisers’ at time suggest instead that they were influenced by a model not then readily found within Marxist theory but which was nevertheless the underpinning of the WTUA, namely the improvement of women’s industrial conditions and rights through focused organisation. It will be further argued later in this study that, having regard to the evidence of the behaviour of the Union organisers in the twelve months between the formation of the Union and the strike itself, they were, in fact, a force for tactical moderation rather than militant ‘pests’.

The Women Workers

Valenze makes the point that the nineteenth century ‘lacked a vocabulary with which to praise its female workers’. Victorians were ashamed of the perceived moral failings of ‘the factory girl’ who was, at best, an object of pity as ‘a fallen creature disposed to indecency’.⁴⁷ This part of this chapter considers the social conditions, personal attributes and lifestyle of the young female East End factory worker and finds an amalgam of more complex characteristics. Despite the fact that we nowhere hear the voices of the women workers themselves, the circumstantial evidence suggests an inherent capacity for resistance and mutuality underlying their social shortcomings.

Spontaneous industrial action by women throughout East End industries was not uncommon. Drake noted ‘women have never been backward in strikes. They are, on the

⁴⁶ *The Times*, 14 July 1888.

⁴⁷ Deborah, Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman*, (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp.3, 95.

contrary, more often accused by their officials of being too forward, so that they “down tools” for frivolous reasons and drag out the men after them’.⁴⁸ However, strikes tended to be under-organised and, consequently, short-lived and ineffectual.⁴⁹ Hicks gave an example of women ropeworkers in Millwall who had come out on strike in 1889 against a ten per cent wages reduction: ‘But they were not organised at all. After being out [...] a day or two, they being unorganised, some went in, and they went in really on worse terms.’⁵⁰ Frances Hicks essay on ‘The Factory Girl’ between the ages of ten and twenty is worth citing in a little detail given its contemporaneity and closeness to its subject matter.⁵¹ She described the usual outcome of their strikes as follows:

Sometimes only a few are affected and sometimes the whole of the workers in a factory will make a stand. These are never heard of outside the immediate district, being over in two or three days at most, and always resulting in failure. It is impossible to get a permanent trade organisation among such a shifting mass of workers. There is no lack of intelligence to see the necessity of it when occasion arises, but the various attempts have at present resulted in a few spirited ones being victimised, and shortly after becoming workers in some other factory of another trade.

⁴⁸ Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (London: Labour Research Dept., 1920), p.199.

⁴⁹ B.L. Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry* (London: Bell and Sons, 1915), p.129.

⁵⁰ Evidence of Amie Hicks, *Royal Commission on Labour*, 1st December 1891, Appendices, Vol.1, Group C, pp. 330-342, (p.335).

⁵¹ Frances Hicks, ‘Factory Girls’, in *The New Party*, ed. by Andrew Reid (London: Hodder, 1895), pp.221-6.

To illustrate the pattern of employment, she took as typical the example of a girl who started work at ten years of age making mouse-traps in a small workshop. ‘As soon as she looked old enough’ she was taken on at a biscuit factory then as a confectionary packer, then sewing fur for three shillings a week for a season. Out of season, she made tin match-boxes, then tin toys and then returned to the confectionary factory. A strike ended that job following which she could not ‘get the price she asked for her work’ and thereafter she could only obtain irregular work as she was by then ‘too old to learn a trade’ and fatally disadvantaged in the competition with plentiful younger and cheaper girls: ‘‘A woman stands no chance in a factory against young workers who do not require so much money’.⁵² Many were the daughters of dock labourers or other irregular workmen, ‘frequently of drunkards’:

Brought up in stifling rooms, in the midst of births and deaths,
year after year. ... They have learnt to hate monotony, to love
drink, to use bad language as their mother tongue, and to be true
to a friend in distress. They care nothing for appearances and
have no desire to mix with any but their equals. ... They are
rough, boisterous, outspoken, warm-hearted working girls ...
drink is the curse they have inherited.

In her judgement ‘much in their conditions of life [...] roughens the surface of the diamond beneath’ and a ‘genuine good-heartedness’ lay beneath an appearance of callousness. Accordingly, illness or ‘trouble’ brought support in the shape of ‘gatherings’ when a worker would stand at the factory gate at pay-time ‘with her apron held out’ for pennies which would be handed to the person in need. This theme of mutuality appears also in the contemporary depiction of female matchworkers written by Booth’s researcher, Clara Collett, : ‘The grievance of one would become the grievance of every girl in the same room.

⁵² Frances Hicks, pp. 221-222.

They were fond of each others' company and generally withdraw themselves from that of others whom they consider too aristocratic to associate with on equal terms'. When they fought, they did so with their fists like men: 'A ring is formed [...] and they are not interfered with by the police'.⁵³

Collet noted 'the 8s to 10s girls' who were frequently absent from work because their wages, although low, 'give these girls as much as they care to work for, and after that they like holidays best'. Before marriage, many seem to have been determined to enjoy a literally colourful social life, 'generally' expecting to meet someone who would treat them to a drink or music hall once a week. The 'factory girl' was recognisable 'on ordinary days by the freedom of her walk, the numbers of her friends and the shrillness of her laugh'; on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons she 'will be found promenading up and down the Bow Road' adorned with a 'gorgeous plush hat with as many large ostrich feathers to match as her funds will run to – bright ruby or scarlet preferred'.⁵⁴ Reporting on the first May Day demonstration of 4th May 1890 at Hyde Park, the London evening paper, *The Star*, described 'a large contingent of women – ropemakers, matchmakers and others. Looked at from above they advanced like a moving rainbow for they all wore the huge feathers of many colours which the East End lass loves to sport when she is out for the day'.⁵⁵ However, gaudy finery came at a cost. 'Tallymen or canvassers' knew the busy times of trades when cash might be more available. Hats, feathers, boots, calico and brightly coloured material of 'doubtful quality' sufficient to make a dress could be paid for at sixpence per week. Recourse was often had to loan sharks: 'the boot man'.⁵⁶

⁵³ Charles Booth, 'Women's Work' in *Life and Labour of the People of London.*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, pp. 287-8.

⁵⁴ Booth, 'Women's Work', pp.322-3; Frances Hicks, p.224.

⁵⁵ *The Star*, 5 May, 1890.

⁵⁶ Frances Hicks, p.225.

Many soon found themselves mothers: ‘Legal marriage is a matter of form that some are tempted to dispense with, believing for a few years that the men mean to be true to them. The men of their class, who are labouring men getting a job here and there, take the opportunity sometimes of going to another town for work, and the girl-mothers frequently do not hear from them again.’⁵⁷ Collet believed that those who did marry frequently then became the most industrious, perhaps because they needed the money more, ‘but they generally exert a most mischievous influence on their companions. Those who go out to work have generally had a marital experience which seems in most cases to have brutalized and degraded them [...] if employers only knew or cared to know the coarseness of many of these women they would think twice before exposing respectable girls to daily contact with them’.⁵⁸

When Amie Hicks first decided to organise the ropemakers, she was warned that she would find them ‘a rough, wild and even desperate class of women’.⁵⁹ Looking back at their behaviour throughout the strike, she concluded, however, that they were ‘very capable, independent sort of women, [...] prepared to stand up for their own, [...] ‘determined, self-respecting, and self-denying’.⁶⁰ The WTUA similarly ‘found’ that, despite their reputation of ‘being among the roughest among the East End workers’ they displayed ‘the most encouraging power of discipline, self-control and quiet determination’ adding, ‘in the East End at least there is no lack of ability, but only of training’. There are parallels with the ropemakers’ neighbours, the Bryant and May matchworkers and the Chocolate-Makers, whose strikes also succeeded. Drake believed the success of the former was due to ‘the

⁵⁷ Frances Hicks, pp.223.

⁵⁸ Booth, ‘Women’s Work’, p.313.

⁵⁹ Hutchins, p.128.

⁶⁰ Hicks, Evidence, *Royal Commission*, p.335.

unusual steadiness and unity of the girls themselves' and Clementina Black described the latter as 'an orderly, capable and self-respecting little community.'⁶¹

Putting this first-hand evidence of their characteristics and general behaviour alongside the fact that the ropemakers remained on strike for eleven weeks, it is a reasonable inference is that these women were unlikely to have been passive actors in their own organisation but were instead active agents whose disinclination to conform was a significant factor in their success.

Part 2: The Activists and the W.T.U.A.

The second part of this chapter considers why the ropemakers proved to be an exception, albeit short-lived, to the traditional model of poor organisation. The short answer is that the catalyst which distinguished the ropemakers was the intervention of the activist organisers full of confidence engendered by the successful models of the dockworkers and matchworkers. The Union came into being in November 1889 and it cannot have been a coincidence that the principal organisers - Amie Hicks (Secretary), Henry Champion (President), Clementina Black (Committee member and later President), Clara James (Committee member), Florence Balgarnie (Trustee) and Stephen Frost (Treasurer) – had all founded the WTUA in the previous month.⁶² It appears, coincidentally, that Fox was also to be one of Charles Booth's researchers responsible for 'Hemp, Jute and Fibre' in *The Life and Labour in London*.

⁶¹ Drake, p.128; Clementina Black, 'The Chocolate-Makers' Strike', *The Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 48 (NS), 1890, p.314.

⁶² *Minute Book*, 627/2/1 and *Membership Card*, 627/51, East London Ropemakers' Union Archives, Warwick University Modern Records Centre (WUMRC); *WTUA 1st Annual Report (1889-90)*, LSE Women's Library, WIC/B/1, p.3.

The most immediate concern was falling wage levels - a phenomenon which the activists were able to explain as a consequence of organisational weakness. In the circumstances, Union subscription rates were kept low so as not to act as a deterrent to membership. A number of the ropemakers had supported the striking dockers, some of whom were their fathers and brothers, and the dockers' example, following on from that of the matchworkers in 1888 with which Black and Champion had also been involved, made the value of organisation self-evident. Champion chaired a Union General Meeting on 18th January 1890 at which the Reverend Hare congratulated the women for having supported the dockers and claimed that 'nothing but good had come out of the strike'. Tom Mann, the dockers' leader spoke at the meeting in place of his fellow-leader, John Burns.⁶³ The ropemakers must have been aware of the significance of the fact that the men who had famously led the dockers were now prepared to take up their cause as well. The connection between the dockers and female unionisation was formalised by the presence of Mann, Burns and Ben Tillett on the WTUA executive committee.

The opening statement of the WTUA's first Annual Report explained the reasons for its foundation with a clearly implied reference to the success of the dockers:

It was thought that the time was a particularly favourable one for some effort to improve the condition of working women, especially in the East-end. It was clear to those who wished to make this effort that the only real hope lay in combination among the workers themselves, and it was, therefore, resolved to form a Committee which should devote itself to founding and promoting trade unions for women [...] The co-operation of experienced

⁶³ *Labour Elector*, 23 November, 1889, pp.333, 326; 30 November 1889, p.346

Trade Union men was especially sought. The aim of the Association has, from the first, been to establish self-managed and self-supporting Trade Unions, over which no person outside the Union should have any control whatever.⁶⁴

The Ropemakers Union was, therefore, a paradigm for the WTUA's aspirations and the manifestation of a new, proactive attitude to the improvement of female working conditions. Ironically, one driver for the formation of the WTUA was the SDF's own conceptual shortcomings. The party was never large, numbering 2-3,000 at any one time, with a high turnover of membership.⁶⁵ At this point in its history it viewed trade unions as representative of only a fraction of the working-class, preferring a more iconoclastic societal transformation. Its autocratic leader, H.M. Hyndman had written: 'Nothing short of a revolution which shall place the producers of wealth in control of their own country can possibly change matters for the better. .. peaceful or violent, the great social revolution of the nineteenth century is at hand'.⁶⁶ He had initially condemned trade unionism as a palliative measure which perpetuated capitalism rather than undermined it and had characterised the Dock Strike as 'guerrilla warfare for small results'.⁶⁷ The creation of women's unions had never occupied a place in Hyndman's millenarian vision. As noted in the Introduction to this

⁶⁴ WTUA, *1st Report*, p.3.

⁶⁵ Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists, The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.9 citing P.A. Whatmough, 'The Membership of the Social Democratic Federation, 1885-1902', *Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin*, 34, (1977), pp.35-40.

⁶⁶ *Justice* July 18, 1885.

⁶⁷ Deborah Mutch, *English Socialist Periodicals, 1880-1900: A Reference Source*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), p.ix; Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London, 1885-1914* (London: Routledge, 1967), p.112; *Justice*, 7 September 1889.

study, Hunt argues that, in any event, contemporary Marxism left ‘no clear theoretical space to develop an understanding of patriarchy as either a separate or related system to capitalism’.⁶⁸ Moreover, the party leadership was overwhelmingly male and subscribed to typically ambiguous Victorian attitudes to women in the workplace as embodied in the male-provider system: ‘the Woman Question’. For their part, the more established trade unions also continued to deploy the language of the bourgeois family model to maintain ‘family’ (in other words, male) wage levels.⁶⁹ The ‘cultural weight’ of this model humiliated the unemployed man dependent on his wife's earnings and angered the artisan displaced by female labour.⁷⁰ Accordingly, general ambivalence towards employed women in principle, together with a particular lack of confidence in the potential of working-class women for political activism meant that many SDFers did not view women as capable of sustained organisation.⁷¹ The ropemakers’ ‘advisers’, on the other hand, were all bound together by the contrary view that workplace self-organisation of working-class women was not only achievable but a necessity. In other respects, however, they were an informal coalition of differing political perspectives rather than a regimented body of ideologues. This is not to say that many of them did not consider themselves to be Socialists but their operational touchstone was a clearly-defined female perspective.

Clementina Black, for example, was not ideological and was never an SDF member. She has instead been characterised as ‘entirely middle class and anti-revolutionary in her

⁶⁸ Hunt, p.15.

⁶⁹ Sarah Richardson, ‘Politics and Gender’, in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Chris Williams, Part II Ch.10 (Malden, Blackwell, 2004), p.177.

⁷⁰ John Tosh, ‘What Should Historians Do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *History Workshop*, No. 38 (1994), pp 179-202, (p.185).

⁷¹ Hunt, p.132.

values and outlook, she was pro-Labour in a Lib-Lab sense rather than a Socialist one. [...] It is probably safest to say that she was bourgeois and pro-Labour.⁷² Her lifelong political commitments tend to support a judgment that she was principally motivated by a regard for women's rights in general. To take two examples from many, she was later to become a vice-president of the London Society for Women's Suffrage and acting editor of *Common Cause*, the organ of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.⁷³ Her involvement with the unionisation of women workers had begun in 1887 when she became secretary of the Women's Protective and Provident League, the pioneering but conservative organisation founded by Emma Paterson in 1876 which was to become the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) in 1891.⁷⁴ Together with Champion, she famously addressed a Fabian meeting exposing the conditions and pay rates at the Bryant and May match factories which is said to have inspired Annie Besant's polemic, 'White Slavery in London'. Ultimately convinced that the WTUL was neither strong nor united enough to take advantage of the 'New Unionism' boom in London nor to play a more dynamic role in female unionisation, she resigned and, following a public meeting in October 1889, became secretary of the newly-formed WTUA⁷⁵ Florence Balgarnie was a trustee of the Ropemakers' Union and WTUA Committee member but again no revolutionary. She was instead a 'progressive' Liberal who had been secretary of the central committee of the National Society for Women's Suffrage since 1885 and who

⁷² Liselotte Glage, *Clementina Black: A Study in Social History and Literature* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1981), pp.16-17, 24;

⁷³ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928*, (London: UCL Press, 1999), p.59; Janet Grenier, 'Black, Clementina Maria (1853–1922)', Article 37196, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*.

⁷⁴ Drake, pp. 11, 24; Norbert Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions, 1874-1976* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978), pp. 29, 33

⁷⁵ Teresa, Olcott, 'Dead Centre: The Women's Trade Union Movement in London, 1874-1914', *The London Journal*, 2:1, (1976), 33-50, (p.40); *The Times*, 9 Oct 1889, p.6..

served on the executive of the Women's Liberal Federation.⁷⁶

PLATE 3. IMAGE REDACTED

Plate 3: Clementina Black, Unknown photographer, pubd 1912, The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University

The person for whom the label 'Socialist' is most appropriate was Amie Hicks. One gets a flavour of the constancy of her beliefs from a letter she wrote to the SDF organ, *Justice*, as late as 1895:

Let not those in power think that [... starvation wages...] will last, it requires but little more oppression of the workers to goad women as well as men to rise from the depths of their poverty and degradation, and by a mighty combination sweep away their wrongs.⁷⁷

Loosely enclosed in the Ropemakers Union Minute Book is a rough draft of an undated letter which appears to be in her handwriting. It is quoted as written. The last sentence may possibly refer to William Booth:

⁷⁶ Lilian Shiman, 'Balgarnie, Florence (1856–1928)' (Article 55095) in *ODNB*.

⁷⁷ *Justice*, 25 April, 1895, p.4.

Justice not charity – right to live – hope for their children 80,000 who are the daughters and sisters of working men – only by combi can workers help themselves.- We know for fact under existing circums. – London 1 in every 9 will die in workhouse, over 30,000 have no home but doddhouse or casual ward. We want a living rate of wage for a fair day work and there will be no need for his rescue homes.⁷⁸

She saw her own role and that of her fellow-activists as follows:

A working woman of the East End has to get up in the morning and go to work, and she works till she goes to bed at night; she has no time to think at all, and it is only by those who can do as I do, and as some friends of mine do, in going about amongst them, and gaining their confidence, letting them feel that they have in us someone that they can entirely depend on, that any information can be really acquired.⁷⁹

Unlike Black, Hicks had not descended in any sense of that word from the middle-class. She had even worked as a ropemaker herself in New Zealand. Ramsay MacDonald wrote that she had ‘a strong motherly face, a firm independent character, [...and ...] a great store of good simple common sense’.⁸⁰ Her obituary in the *Women’s Industrial News*, in April 1917 recorded her ‘personal note of sympathy for the particular case ... her passionate sense of justice and ... her eager, youthful spirit’.⁸¹ Along with her husband and daughter,

⁷⁸ *Minutes*, WUMRC, 627/2/1.

⁷⁹ Hicks, *Royal Commission*, p.334.

⁸⁰ J.Ramsay Macdonald, *Margaret Ethel Macdonald*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913) p.137.

⁸¹ Cited by June Hannam, ‘Hicks, Amelia Jane (1839–1917)’ (Article 47365), *ODNB*.

Margaretta, she had joined the fledgling SDF (then the Democratic Federation) and was elected to the executive committee in 1884⁸² During the 'Free Speech Campaign' of 1885 she was convicted of highway 'obstruction by preaching in the public streets' in Limehouse and bound over for six months.⁸³ She later said that she volunteered to speak 'feeling that a woman's arrest would make the matter still more notable and freely discussed'.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, as with Black, her activities taken as a whole suggest that her lasting priority was the attainment of women's rights. She had, for example, always maintained from within the SDF that women's suffrage was an implicit component of adult suffrage.⁸⁵ She and James persuaded the Royal Commission on Labour to receive their oral evidence of factory conditions for women workers in 1891 calling for women factory inspectors. In 1899, by then sixty years of age, she read a paper on 'child-bearing women' at the International Conference of Women.⁸⁶

PLATE 4. IMAGE REDACTED

⁸²Joyce Bellamy and John Saville, (eds), 'Amie Hicks', *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, (London: Macmillan, 1972), p.89.

⁸³ *The Times*, 1 September 1885.

⁸⁴ *Woman Worker*, 30 June 1909.

⁸⁵ *Justice*, 24 September 1887.

⁸⁶ Hannam, *ODNB*.

Plate 4: Amie Hicks, *Women's Signal*, 29 March 1894, p.212.

Her protegee, James, was twenty three when the Ropemakers' Union came into being. Orphaned as a child and having 'passed through the iron mill of the late-Victorian Poor Law [...] this small eager searcher after righteousness', came under Hicks' influence and lived with her as a family member.⁸⁷ Not an SDF member, she was however another woman with factory experience - in her case in confectionary manufacture. She and 'Miss Black' had held a meeting of twelve women from her factory but 'the foreman came to spy' and they were all dismissed including herself.⁸⁸ She went on to become secretary of the East London Confectioners' Union and later Assistant-Secretary of the WTUA. Again there is clear evidence of a lifelong personal commitment to the empowerment young working-class women – in her case principally through education and physical fitness classes. She set up her first WTUA working girls' club featuring extremely popular musical drills.⁸⁹ By the early 1900's she had set up her own organisation, *Working Girls at Play*, later opening her own home on Canvey to East End working girls.

The evidence that the Ropemakers' Union's first President, Champion, was not a Marxist fellow-traveller comes directly from his vocal antipathy to the SDF and Hyndman. In many ways Champion was the most surprising and enigmatic figure to be found at the head of an organisation of East End factory women. He was the son of a British army

⁸⁷ Lilian Gilchrist Thompson, *Sidney Gilchrist Thompson: An Invention and its Consequences*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1940), pp.304-9; Gerry Holloway, 'James, Clara Grace (1866–1954)' (Article 60161), ODNB.

⁸⁸ Evidence of Clara James, *Royal Commission on Labour*, Appendices Vol 1, Group C, pp.342-358, (pp.348, 354).

⁸⁹ Gerry Holloway, 'James, Clara Grace (1866–1954)' (Article 60161), ODNB.

Major-General and an aristocratic mother. One of his biographers, John Barnes, has him ‘cast in the mould of an officer and a gentleman, and so he remained all his life’.⁹⁰ Pelling has labelled him a ‘Tory at heart and a Socialist by conviction’.⁹¹ Although largely forgotten now, he was evidently a major political figure by the time of his Union Presidency. He too had joined the then Democratic Federation at its formation in 1883 to become its first secretary and the editor of *Justice*, which he initially funded.⁹² However, he rapidly came to develop a much wider strategic position than that of Hyndman, contending that the SDF’s abstractions had converted few workers to the cause. By 1888 Champion felt strong enough to lead his supporters away from the SDF which then expelled him. He attempted to build up a party which would appeal to the ‘labour interest’ and attract the support of a greatly-extended parliamentary electorate.⁹³ In June 1888, Champion and the dockers leaders, Mann and Burns, launched *Labour Elector* as a monthly paper, addressing a working-class readership and openly campaigning for an Independent Labour Party.⁹⁴ This was when he additionally and specifically threw himself into the organisation of women workers. Meanwhile, by the time of the Dock Strike, *Labour Elector* had effectively become the dockers’ paper, selling up to 20,000 copies and officially designated ‘The Organ of the Gas Stokers’ and Dockers’ Union’. Capitalising on his Fleet Street contacts and journalistic ability and ‘cooler than a cucumber’, he now emerged centre-stage as one of the leaders of the strike

⁹⁰ John Barnes, ‘Gentleman Crusader: Henry Hyde Champion in the Early Socialist Movement’, *History Workshop Journal*, 60 (Autumn 2005), pp.116-138 (p.120).

⁹¹ Henry Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party: 1880-1900*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 57.

⁹² Chris Waters, ‘Champion, Henry Hyde (1859–1928)’ (Article 45907), *ODNB*.

⁹³ Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London, 1885-1914*, (London: Routledge, 1967), p.117.

⁹⁴ Waters, *ODNB*.

reportedly conducting the face-to-face negotiations with the employers deploying a ‘moderate, measured presentation of the dockers’ case’.⁹⁵ His political stock was now at its highest and the fact that a figure of his standing (and, alongside him on the WTUA executive, Mann and Burns, who had also parted from the SDF in 1887 and 1889 respectively) is an indication of the importance they attached to the nascent Ropemakers’ Union.

Champion’s part in the creation and activities of the Union was neither nominal nor distant. On the contrary, he frequently spoke at public meetings alongside Hicks and Black and persistently promoted the Union through the pages of *Labour Elector*. Most issues reported on women’s trade union affairs. In its first such report under the heading of ‘Women’s Trade Union Association’ in October 1889 it covered not only a meeting of the WTUA which was addressed by Hicks and by Champion himself but also a formation meeting of the Confectioners’ Union at which he also spoke.⁹⁶ This choice of Champion for the Presidency more than suggests that the Ropemakers’ Union could not have been the creature of the SDF. Notwithstanding the fact that Hicks herself retained her party membership, it seems inconceivable that she could simultaneously support someone with Champion’s animosity to the party and remain committed to Hyndman. After his expulsion, Champion remained vociferously hostile and sarcastic. In January 1890, for example, he wrote of Hyndman and another member, Quelch: ‘Having themselves failed to obtain acceptance as leaders of the working-class, they are now trying their little best to pull down the men who succeeded’.⁹⁷ Two months later he was sneering at the SDF’s attempt to contest general election seats in London remarking that it was ‘amusing to note the desperate efforts

⁹⁵ Tom Mann, *Tom Mann’s Memoirs* (London: Labour Publishing, 1923), p.87; *The Times*, 1 September 1889; Barnes, p.131.

⁹⁶ *Labour Elector*, 26 October 1889, p.261.

⁹⁷ *Labour Elector*, 18 January 1890, p. 41.

made by Hyndman to show the world in general that somebody still believes in him'.⁹⁸ More specifically for present purposes, there were public differences over their respective attitudes to female unionisation. Thus, at the very time of the formalisation of the Ropemakers' Union, Champion rounded upon Hyndman's vague and belated alternative proposal for a single union 'to forward the interests of women in all industries'. Referring to the WTUA and the WTUL, he wrote:

Two societies whose object is to promote trade unions among women [...] hail [...] any serious effort, by whomsoever made, at genuine trade organisation. In this circular, however, we see very little prospect of any such organisation in an association of miscellaneous workers.⁹⁹

Hyndman's *Justice*, for its part, referred to Champion as a 'detected traitor' and 'enemy of the workers'.¹⁰⁰

PLATE 5. IMAGE REDACTED

⁹⁸ *Labour Elector*, 23 March 1890, p.200.

⁹⁹ *Labour Elector*, 5 April 1890, p.21.

¹⁰⁰ *Justice*, 22 November 1890, pp. 1,4.

Plate 5, H.H. Champion: Henry Pelling ‘H.H. Champion: Pioneer of Labour Representation’, *Cambridge Journal* 6:4 (January 2005).

Unfortunately for the aristocratic Champion, continuing suspicions of his Conservative leanings fuelled by his own misjudgements led to his final self-destruction as a credible political figure and the end of his involvement with the Union. The seeds of his political demise lay in the so-called ‘Tory Gold Scandal’ of 1885 in which he had accepted £340 from a Conservative Party agent to fund two SDF parliamentary candidates. After the Dock Strike, the management committee of *Labour Elector*, largely made up of ‘New Unionist’ leaders, also detected an editorial line which they believed more favourable to the Conservatives than to the Liberals. A rapid decline in influence and circulation caused publication to suddenly cease on 19th April 1890 and Champion decided to leave for Australia returning in 1891.¹⁰¹ In 1893 he was heavily criticised at a TUC conference for having appointed a Conservative election candidate to the editorship of *Labour Elector* and the ‘Tory Gold Scandal’ was resurrected.¹⁰² His reputation was so tarnished that he decided to emigrate finally to Australia ‘leaving behind few admirers’.¹⁰³ In October 1894, the Union Minutes merely noted: ‘Miss C Black elected President in place of H.H. Champion’.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party*, p.91.

¹⁰² Barnes, p.135.

¹⁰³ Waters, *ODNB*.

¹⁰⁴ *Minutes*, WUMRC, 627/2/1.

4. THE UNION

The Beginnings

In November 1889, Hicks, now almost fifty years of age, ‘determined to open her campaign’ for unionisation with the women ropemakers.¹⁰⁵ A number of women had attended an early general meeting of the WTUA and ‘expressed a wish to have meetings held for them’.¹⁰⁶ She had come to know some of the women from her parochial work for St. Augustine’s Church, Highbury and she believed that she ‘connected’ with the women because ‘of my work in the East End [...] They, knowing that I knew something of the trade, elected me as their secretary’.¹⁰⁷ In her own account she and Black distributed an invitation to a meeting on the 1st November at a Mission Hall lent by a sympathetic clergyman, the Rev. Marmaduke Hare. At the meeting Champion himself ‘explained the meaning and object of a Union’. Thirty five ropemakers attended and agreed to a further meeting for the election of a committee.¹⁰⁸ Accordingly, on the 13th November 1889, Hicks, James and Black approached the workers as they left Frosts. ‘Almost, if not quite all followed’ to the meeting. Hicks, Black and the Rev. Hare all spoke, the latter ‘pointing out that a Union was not formed in any spirit of hostility to particular employers but in order to better conditions for the workers’. The women had by then decided upon the constitution of a committee with two representatives from each of Frosts’ three departments. They were asked whether they were willing for Hicks to act as secretary ‘for the first few weeks or months, as she had offered to do’. According *Labour*

¹⁰⁵ Joyce Bellamy and John Saville, (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, (London: Macmillan, 1972), p.89; B.L.Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry*, (London: Bell and Sons, 1915), p.128.

¹⁰⁶ WTUA, *1st Annual Report, 1889/90*, LSE Women’s Library, WIC/B/1, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ Evidence of Amie Hicks, *Royal Commission on Labour*, 1st December 1891, Appendices, Vol.1, Group C, pp. 330-342, p.332.

¹⁰⁸ *Labour Elector*, 9 November 1889, p.295.

Elector, the newly elected committee showed ‘a most encouraging degree of business capacity’.¹⁰⁹

Throughout that November *Labour Elector* continued to report on every development in recruitment, remarking that women from ropewalks in Bow and other ‘remote Eastern factories’ were successfully approached showing ‘the same practical intelligence that had been found in the other ropemakers’. By the end of the year, the paper was claiming that ‘this Union now includes *all* (original emphasis) the women in three of the factories and in some factories all the men have either have joined or have promised to do so.’ It was hoped to recruit all London workers of both sexes and to extend nationally. The WTUA pronounced the Union ‘the most encouraging of all that we have founded’.¹¹⁰ Champion chaired a general meeting on 18th January 1890 at which a new banner was unfurled, red with white letters made of rope bearing the motto chosen by Hicks: ‘Our Time is One that Calls for Earnest Deeds’.¹¹¹

The Development of the Union

By the time of its first quarterly meeting on 22nd February, the Union had enlisted 690 members (410 women and 280 men).¹¹² The Executive Committee included workers from a number of prominent companies - six from Frosts, two from J.T.Davis in Bow, two from Wright Brothers in Millwall; two from Hawkins and Timpson also in Millwall, and two from a company that the writer has been unable to trace named Goodes.¹¹³ *Labour Elector* reported that ‘the proceedings throughout were full of serious enthusiasm’ on the part of ‘close on’

¹⁰⁹ *Labour Elector*, 16 November 1889, p.318.

¹¹⁰ WTUA, *1st Annual Report*, p. 5.

¹¹¹ *Labour Elector*, 23 November, 1889, pp.333, 326; 30 November 1889, p.346

¹¹² Minutes, 627/2/1.

¹¹³ Minutes, 627/2/1.

800 members who showed ‘a real interest in labour matters and have decided to make the 1st May a holiday for the purpose of holding a demonstration in favour of the Eight Hour Day’. There was a £35 bank balance.¹¹⁴

Hicks approved of mixed unions: ‘where men and women are engaged in the same trade they ought to have the same union demanding the same wages for the same work’ albeit with separate but associated branches.¹¹⁵ James, on the other hand, did not agree because, as she told the Royal Commission, ‘the men are rather harder to manage’. Apparently, the male ropemakers had wanted a male secretary ‘and then it was rather too much trouble for them to appoint a collector to collect their money.’¹¹⁶ Charles Booth (in the shape of Stephen Fox) opined that the women ropemakers ‘adhered with tenacity to their organisation [...] in strong contrast to the apathy of the men’.¹¹⁷ By October 1890, the union had split into separate men's and women's branches. Two months later the men's branch was dissolved.¹¹⁸ The men took out their contributions and did not form any other organisation.¹¹⁹ According to Hicks, none of the original women members were lost to the Union, ‘other than by death’, and none of them ever ‘said a rough word’ to her.¹²⁰

The Union rules were as follows:

1. The Union is to be named, ‘The East London Ropemakers’ Union;

¹¹⁴ *Labour Elector*, 1 March 1890, pp.133, 142.

¹¹⁵ *Women’s Signal*, 29 March 1894, p.212.

¹¹⁶ Evidence of Clara James, *Evidence to the Royal Commission on Labour*, Vol 1 Group C, p.356.

¹¹⁷ Charles Booth, ‘Hemp, Jute and Fibre’, in *Industry, Life and Labour of the People in London*, Second Series, Vol II, (London: Macmillan, 1895), p.339.

¹¹⁸ Minutes, 627/2/1.

¹¹⁹ Booth, Charles, ‘Industry’, in *Life and Labour Survey Notebooks*, Vol. II, Part IV, Ch. III, LSE Booth Collection Archives, A/18, p.22.

¹²⁰ **B.L.** Hutchins, *Women in Modern Industry* (London: Bell and Sons, 1915), p.129.

- 2: The Objects of the Union are ‘to maintain and protect the rights and privileges of the Trade, and to grant relief to such members as may be out of work’;
3. Membership is open to every person of either sex of 16 and over ‘working at any branch of the Ropemaking Trade’;
5. The Entrance Fee is 1s payable in 2d per week instalments.
6. Benefits are receivable ‘after 6 months membership’;
8. Every free member out of work is to receive 5s per week for no more than 8 weeks per year.¹²¹

The Strike

Hicks appears initially to have been a restraining influence on strike action. This would have been entirely consistent with the ‘New Unionist’ approach which valued arbitration with ‘respectfully worded requests’ above strike action.¹²² However, a couple of months before she organised them, Frost’s workers were already displaying their militant inclinations in what would now be described as a ‘sympathy strike’ in support of the dockers.

According to *The Times*:

Workpeople connected to firms having no direct bearing with the dock labourers who went out on strike have in many cases returned to their employment, or will do this morning, including all the work girls employed at Messrs Davis’s rope works. Some

¹²¹ Union Rulebook, WUMRC, 627/1/1.

¹²² D. Matthews, ‘1889 And All That: New Views on the New Unionism’, *International Review of Social History*, 36(1), (1991), 24-58, (p.29).

200 females, however, who have been working for Messrs Frost
Brothers remain out on strike.¹²³

The particular grievances which led to their own strike concerned wage levels and ‘fines’. The second Annual Report of the WTUA (1890-1891) noted that at the time of the Union’s formation, Frost’s women workers ‘whose wages were by a little the lowest in the district’ were ‘much discontented with their conditions, and inclined to strike’ until Hicks counselled them that ‘this would be a rash proceeding, since they had no funds of their own on which to fall back on. They resolved to remain in the Union for one twelvemonth before asking for any advance’.¹²⁴ By February 1890 Frosts were still refusing to discontinue the practice of fining for knots in the rope. The meeting resolved to send ‘another letter’ asking for the fines to be lifted and also for an hourly rate of 3d for all time worked over 54 hours in a week. Even eight months later by 13th October 1890 the Minutes were still recording merely that the ‘advisability of asking for a rise in the wages of the women timeworkers at Frosts was discussed with much earnestness’.¹²⁵ On the 27th October, Hicks again wrote to the owners asking them to meet a workers’ deputation ‘as it is our desire it may be settled with as little friction as possible’.¹²⁶ However, notwithstanding her emollience, Tom Mann, President of the Dockers’ Union and member of the WTUA executive committee, had already chaired and addressed a ‘crowded’ public meeting the previous month which plainly contemplated a strike:

The women in the East End had stuck well to their union and they
would not be forgotten. They were not only going to strike for
higher wages and shorter hours but for the betterment of their

¹²³ *The Times*, 2 September 1889.

¹²⁴ WTUA 2nd Annual Report (1890-91), p.5.

¹²⁵ Minutes, 627/2/1.

¹²⁶ Minutes, 627/2/1.

conditions. The dispute that was to come would be a long and terrible one – which might last days, weeks, months or years but nevertheless, whatever were the consequences the labourers were determined they would win.¹²⁷

The WTUA reported that, ‘after nearly a year’s steady work and careful inquiry into prices’, a final demand was made for an advance that would bring hourly wages up by a farthing for each grade. This would involve about £7 a week increased expenditure by the company.¹²⁸ On 6th November the request was refused, ‘upon which every woman declined to work, and after giving due legal notice, came out’.¹²⁹

What Booth later described as ‘a little friction between the Society and a prominent employer’ turned into an eleven week stoppage which lasted until 24th January 1891.¹³⁰ *Labour Elector’s* support had ceased by now with its closure following Champion’s departure for Australia and, tellingly, the SDF’s *Justice* took no interest. The factory was picketed ‘in a perfectly orderly manner every day from 6 a.m. and not one woman offered to fill the strikers’ places’.¹³¹ James told the Royal Commission that only two women potential strikebreakers came in ‘and went away as soon as they heard of the strike’. She spoke of a woman of over 70 years of age who joined the picket at 6 o’ clock every morning: ‘through the depth of last winter she took her place there and stood her four hours with the other pickets’.¹³² It was apparently a severe winter. *The Evening News* reported that ice in the

¹²⁷ Minutes, 627/2/1; *The Times*, 25 September 1890, p.6.

¹²⁸ WTUA 1st Annual Report, p.5.

¹²⁹ WTUA 2nd Annual Report, p.5.

¹³⁰ Charles Booth, ‘Industry’, in *Life and Labour Survey Notebooks*, Vol. II, Part IV, Ch. III, LSE Booth Collection Archives, A/18, p.22.

¹³¹ WTUA 2nd Report, p.6.

¹³² James, *Royal Commission*, p. 356.

London parks was 'thick and good'.¹³³ In January 1891, Hicks wrote to an unknown recipient:

These women have for 10 weeks been bravely fighting for the right to live. The employer is still firm in his refusal to grant the farthing an hour more, which is all they ask. ... The cold, hunger and suffering which must attend such a struggle in such inclement weather is bravely endured without a murmur, or disloyal word, to the Union, of which most of them are very proud... so unequal a fight as Hunger v. Capital'.¹³⁴

However, in another private letter, Hicks had expressed concerns, referring, it is thought, to a lack of strike pay and the resulting deprivations:

If any number had succeeded in the temper they were in, the whole strike would have broken up. They look upon the decision of this morning as a sign of weakness, and as throwing doubt on our ability to keep our promise to stand by them. And when I asked them if it meant anything of importance to them the not going out, they told me it meant food for most of the week. ... As they said this morning, they are not children [...] they want to earn a living.

¹³³ *The Evening News*, 15 December 1890.

¹³⁴ Letter, 15 January, 1890, WUMRC, 627/4/1/10,

The Union provided coffee and biscuits ‘as some would have had no food today.’¹³⁵ On the other hand, the WTUA subsequently noted that the strike committee was able to make ‘a weekly payment, which in many cases was as high as the wages ordinarily received’.¹³⁶ The Union accounts themselves attest to ‘strike pay’ of £295 4s 6d out of receipts of £381 17s 4d made up of donations, collections and union funds.¹³⁷ James told the Chairman of the Royal Commission that male workers had contributed ‘a good deal [...] nearly all the money we got was from working men and from the Docks. Girls went round with their boxes to the factories and gasworks [...] boxes were filled with coppers covered with coal dirt’.¹³⁸ There was also more formal support from male trade unions.¹³⁹

The strike concluded with the mediation of the London Trades Council. Pausing there, the Council’s decision to involve itself may be seen as another indication of the changing political climate. The Council had consisted of the leaders of the conservative craft unions and, cultivating respectability, it had exclusively represented the skilled tradesmen of the capital.¹⁴⁰ As late as June 1890 its Secretary, George Shipton, had written an article highly critical of ‘New Unionism’.¹⁴¹ By the time of the ropemakers’ strike it had, however, become vulnerable to press hostility to its conservatism. *Labour Elector*, for example, urged the new unions to infiltrate the Council with their delegates and, more importantly perhaps, the newly published popular London evening paper, *The Star*, representing progressive Liberal opinion

¹³⁵ Amie Hicks, draft letter to ‘Mr Day’ (n.d.), WUMRC, 627/4/1/1.

¹³⁶ WTUA, *2nd Report*, p.6.

¹³⁷ *Strike Accounts*, WUMRC, 627/3/2.

¹³⁸ James, *Royal Commission*, p.356.

¹³⁹ WUMRC, 627/4/1/3, 627/4/1/7, 627/4/1/11.

¹⁴⁰ William Fishman, *East End 1888*, (London: Hanbury, 2001), p.285.

¹⁴¹ George Shipton, *Trade Unionism: the Old and the New*, Murray’s Magazine, (June 1890), cited by Tom Mann in *Tom Mann’s Memoirs*, (London: Labour Publishing, 1923), p.72.

had been subjecting the Council to sustained criticism.¹⁴² Under this sort of pressure, the Council had to respond. Two months into the strike, the ropemakers approached the Council for them to open negotiations with the firm on their behalf. There followed discussions between Alfred Frost and the Council in ‘a very courteous and conciliatory spirit’. On the 5th January 1891, Joseph Campbell of Frost Brothers stated the company was ‘willing to abide by the offer we made to the deputation’. This appears to have included the re-employment of striking workers: ‘We cannot of course make way for all of them but we shall be glad to find work for as many as we can on them presenting themselves at the gate’.¹⁴³ A wages increase was agreed and the strike settled. Hicks ‘left the decision to the women themselves., who heartily adopted a resolution thanking the Council for being the means of bringing the strike to an honourable conclusion,’¹⁴⁴ Hicks was able to claim that ‘the conduct of these 98 women proves beyond question that women can, under trusted leadership, combine with a steadfastness and courage and act in the determined, self-respecting and self-denying manner that they have done’.¹⁴⁵

It may be convenient at this point to consider briefly the typicality of the behaviour of the ropemakers against what is known of other women-only strikes. A comparison with the matchmakers, for example, reveals differences and similarities. Their organisation took place a year before the formation of the WTUA and was not the outcome of a conscious programme of women’s unionisation as advocated by the WTUA. On the contrary, Raw argues that Besant’s own words written two weeks before their strike prove

¹⁴² Paul Thompson, *Socialists, Liberals and Labour: The Struggle for London, 1885-1914* (London: Routledge, 1967), p.97

¹⁴³ WUMRC, 627/4/1/6

¹⁴⁴ London Trades Council, *32nd Annual Report (1891)*, Acc/3287/01/067, p.5; London Trades Council *Minutes*, 5 February, 1891, Acc/3287/01/070, London Metropolitan Archives; WUMRC, Minute Book, 627/4/1/5; 627/4/1/8; 627/4/1/9.

¹⁴⁵Hicks, *Royal Commission*, p.335.

that she had never wished even to unionise the matchworkers, let alone lead them into a strike:

How could a trade union be formed among the girls of Bryant and May [...]

Let us suppose it formed, and the girls strike. The foreman notify the neighbourhood that they want so many hands at the old wages and their doors will be besieged by applicants eager to work 10 ½ hours a day for 8d.¹⁴⁶

Their strike was forced upon the activists following a sequence of spontaneous events. Besant's intention in writing 'White Slavery in London' had been to stimulate a public boycott of Bryant and May's matches; there was no mention in it of a strike.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the company demanded a statement from their workers that they were happy with their working conditions. When they refused to sign, the organisers within the workforce were dismissed causing an immediate walkout. It was only at that point that the Union came into being. Raw has suggested that the subsequent portrayal of the strikers as helpless waifs rather than militant workers was a deliberately distorted idealisation by their propagandists for tactical reasons.¹⁴⁸ The Chocolate-Makers Union strike in July 1890, also successful, provides further evidence of independent-mindedness. When James went on behalf of the WTUA to a factory hoping to recruit for a union, she was met by a crowd of workers who had already taken matters into their own hands. Faced with the refusal of an order to one girl to pay an unmerited fine or be dismissed, her co-workers refused to work unless she was reinstated. The employer told them 'to put on their hats and go home', which they duly

¹⁴⁶ *The Link*, 23 June 1888, p.2.

¹⁴⁷ *The Link*, 23 June 1888, p.2.

¹⁴⁸ Louise Raw, *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and Their Place in History* (London: Continuum Books, 2009), pp.9, 51, 109.

did. The WTUA had supported and directed their successful action but had not instigated it.¹⁴⁹

Twelve years earlier, Emma Paterson, Black's predecessor as Secretary of the WTUL (then the Women's Protective and Provident League) addressing a conference on 'The Organisation of Women's Industry' had said that she had 'not infrequently' heard of strikes 'in the factory districts' in London. Her conclusion was that:

Probably if the factory women had Unions their strikes would be less frequent. When people have a common fund they take time to think before risking their money in a trade dispute; women in the factory districts often rush into strikes because they have little to lose by doing so; ... such women greatly need the moderating influence of trade organisation.¹⁵⁰

These sentiments anticipated Black's own 'word or two of warning' following the chocolate-makers' strike:

We would rather have seen strong a union which could make application to the employer in the first instance through the properly-elected representatives of the girls themselves. If the union had been strong, there need probably have been no leaving off work.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Clementina Black, 'The Chocolate-Makers' Strike', *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 48, no. 284, (1890), 305-314.

¹⁵⁰ *Women's Union Journal*, April 1879, p.27.

¹⁵¹ Black, p.314.

Despite the circumstantial differences between these three successful strikes, there were unifying components. Firstly, the proactive agency of the workers themselves was common to each – in the case of the ropemakers, pressing the Union for a withdrawal of labour and, in the case of the matchworkers and chocolate-makers, reacting unilaterally and rapidly to employers' behaviour. In other words, they were not merely executing a pre-determined strategy of disruption planned by others. The second feature which made for their success, is that, once the women were competently organised by activists, the traditional pattern of precipitous action followed by failure was broken.

The Immediate Aftermath

In February 1891 a tea was arranged 'to celebrate the strike'.¹⁵² The strike had cost the company 'about £382'.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, the WTUA subsequently reported that 'the friendliest possible relations now exist'.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Booth felt able to conclude that 'the storm has long since blown over and the greatest harmony prevails amongst the parties that were formerly belligerents'.¹⁵⁵ Accordingly, the regime at Frosts was being held up by the WTUA, as 'the relation which the Association would like to see existing in every factory where women are employed – the Union serving as a medium for reasonable negotiation between employer and employed and, while resisting all oppression on the one hand, removing on the other all unnecessary friction and misunderstanding'.¹⁵⁶ Frequently, Hicks was even brought in by the company itself to act as a mediator. One commentator described an example from 1893 when the women had refused to save and sort waste fibre, a task which they considered beneath their dignity. Frost 'bethought him of sending for the

¹⁵² Minutes, 627/2/1.

¹⁵³ Hicks, *Royal Commission*, p.335.

¹⁵⁴ WTUA 2nd Report, p.6.

¹⁵⁵ Booth, 'Industry', in *Life and Labour Survey Notebooks*, p.22.

¹⁵⁶ WTUA 3rd Annual Report, p.6.

secretary. She was convinced, called a meeting and the demand was conceded without more ado'.¹⁵⁷ The same year he attended a meeting in person at which he agreed to withdraw an order to 'do extra work in the manner detrimental to the general understanding come to after the strike... on the understanding that the women would do the best they could to see that work was well and quickly done'. He left the meeting 'amidst the cheers of the women'.¹⁵⁸ The company now employed only Union members among the women.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, according to Hicks, after the strike sackings for union membership were 'not frequent' in other factories. She reiterated her theme that this was 'because [...], although we are not many in numbers we are very strong [...] the women are very capable, independent sort of women, those that are in the union, and they are prepared to stand up for their own'. Nevertheless, many women were still deterred from joining and she knew that the second largest firm had 'distinctly' said it would sack every one of them. There continued to be frequent disputes in the trade at large. The causes were mostly 'low wages, or a reduction of wage; and sometimes the employer will want them to do more work, will put an increased amount of work on without an increased amount of pay- that very often is the cause; but, primarily it is low wages.'¹⁶⁰ The Union was, however, able to intervene successfully in at least one other strike in Millwall in 1891 where strike-breakers were brought in. Hicks, James and Black persuaded the employer 'to put matters right'.¹⁶¹ The pattern at Frosts was repeated: all the women joined the Union and amicable relations with maintained with management.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Evelyn March-Phillipps, 'The Progress of Women's Trade Unions', *Fortnightly Review*, LIV (1893), 92-104, (p.100).

¹⁵⁸ Minutes, 627/2/1.

¹⁵⁹ WTUA 2nd Report, p.6.

¹⁶⁰ Hicks, *Royal Commission*, pp.331, 332, 334.

¹⁶¹ Hicks, *Royal Commission*, p.333

¹⁶² WTUA 2nd Report, pp.6-7.

The ropemakers stand out in successive WTUA annual reports as the most successful of the contemporary women's unions. By 1892 membership had on the whole increased. A 'large new branch' existed in Canning Town which had held 'a good many meetings', two of which had been addressed by Keir Hardie.¹⁶³ There had been a day's excursion to Epping Forest and, on Friday evenings a club devoted to physical drill, needlework, singing, dancing and Trade Union work. The Union continued to engage with wider political issues. In November 1893, it gave a donation to the striking miners fund and in March 1894 members agreed to attend a demonstration at Hyde Park in favour of the Employers Liability Bill.¹⁶⁴

The Demise of the Ropemakers and the WTUA

Despite the early optimism, by the time of its final report in 1894 the WTUA was forced to conclude that 'trade unions for women cannot, at present, be formed and maintained effectively among the poorer classes of women workers in London.'¹⁶⁵ This part of the Chapter considers the reasons for that conclusion and the consequent ending of the WTUA and, shortly afterwards, of the Ropemakers' Union. That year Hicks told the *Women's Signal* that the Association was 'almost at a standstill for want of funds'. There were only four women's unions left in the WTUA: the Ropemakers, Tailoresses and Box-makers with the bookfolders being 'more of a benefit society than a union'.¹⁶⁶ The Chocolate-Makers and Confectioners Unions had failed in 1892 and 1893 respectively; the Umbrella-Makers and Brush-Makers 'quickly followed'.¹⁶⁷ By 1903 even the well-supported Matchmakers' Union,

¹⁶³ WTUA 3rd Report, p.6.

¹⁶⁴ Minutes, 627/2/1.

¹⁶⁵ WTUA 5th Report, 1893-4, p. 14.

¹⁶⁶ *Women's Signal*, 29 March 1894, p.212.

¹⁶⁷ Teresa Olcott, 'Dead Centre: The Women's Trade Union Movement in London, 1874-1914', *The London Journal*, 2:1, (1976), 33-50, (p.43).

appears to have come to an end.¹⁶⁸ By 1896 the Board of Trade returns recorded fewer than 1500 women unionists in London.¹⁶⁹ As for the Ropemakers, while the 1894 WTUA report still described the Union as ‘absolutely stable’, there were signs of difficulty when a ‘great falling off of the subscription and the difficulty of getting a meeting of the members together’ were noted. Some of the Millwall women had lapsed and ‘efforts in Stratford’ had not proved successful.¹⁷⁰ They too had become inactive by 1898.¹⁷¹ It was not only unskilled women’s unions which were floundering in London. Faced with the collapse of the Laundresses’, East London Tailoresses’ and Uphosteresses’ Societies between 1893 and 1895, the WTUL had become disinclined to support small London Unions: ‘the poorest results [...are...] shown when we come to look at the list of unions managed entirely by women’.¹⁷²

The realities of failure convinced the WTUA activists that new directions were required and that ‘organisation and educational efforts, and in some cases the intervention also of legislation, appear to be necessary preliminaries to any really effective and far-reaching trade union movement among a large part of women workers in London’. Accordingly, the Association was wound up at a conference on the 20th November 1894 at which its prominent members re-organised as the Women’s Industrial Council (WIC) with Black said to be the driving force.¹⁷³ This was a transformative change of strategy away from special female union representation towards full integration of women into the wider labour movement. Earlier hopes for progress through the agency of small-scale organisation were put aside. The

¹⁶⁸ Soldon, p.31; Holloway, ‘Clara James’, Article 60161 in *Oxford Dictionary*.

¹⁶⁹ Olcott, p.43.

¹⁷⁰ WTUA, 4th Annual Report, p.5.

¹⁷¹ Minutes, 26 May 1892, 627/2/1

¹⁷² Olcott, p.45.

¹⁷³ WTUA 5th Report, p. 14; Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists, The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884-1911*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.134.

imperative had now become the influencing of public and political opinion through the publication of detailed investigations into working conditions which would ultimately provide solid evidence of the necessity for protective legislation.¹⁷⁴

There is no evidence peculiar to the Ropemakers' Union alone which explains their demise. Rosemary Aris has identified a general model for the period which distinguishes between organisations of unskilled workers on the one hand and skilled and semi-skilled workers on the other. The former were usually weak. While they rose rapidly and enrolled many members, they rapidly died.¹⁷⁵ The distinction in the Aris model may be proved by the fact that from 1903 onwards, a revived WTUL, under the secretaryship of Mary Macarthur, massively increased its London membership by focusing on semi-skilled workers in industries such as food-processing and box-making and on better-educated white-collar workers who were keen for organisation. Tellingly, the League also encouraged women to join existing male unions rather than put effort into instigating new all-women unions. As a result Women's membership of the London unions had trebled by 1905.¹⁷⁶

The 1891 Report of the Royal Commission on Labour had summarised the difficulties of organisation as follows:

unmarried women frequently consider their employment as one which will be terminated by marriage and not as a life affair; to social divisions and distinctions existing among them; to hereditary incapacity for transacting

¹⁷⁴ June Hannam, 'Women's Industrial Council (act. 1894–c. 1917)', Article 96080, ODNB.

¹⁷⁵ Rosemary Aris, *Trade Unions and the Management of Industrial Conflict*, (London: Macmillan, 1998), p.42.

¹⁷⁶ Olcott, p. 46.

business in common; to difficulties in the way of meeting; and to a special dislike felt by employers to their organisation.¹⁷⁷

The successes of 'New Unionism' had created a counter-reaction from employers who in turn organised themselves to frustrate unionisation. Unskilled workers did not hold any natural monopoly over their work as in the skilled trades and were easily replaced.¹⁷⁸ According to Hicks, 'employers do all they can to keep the women unorganised. They terrorise them.' She knew of one large employer who 'told his women distinctly that if they joined he would sack every one of them though he had to shut up shop'''.¹⁷⁹ She told the Royal Commission that the Umbrella-Makers' and Box-Makers' Unions were being broken up by employers who made girls work overtime when meetings were called.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, male unionists, faced with an economic slump and rising unemployment which lasted until the second half of the 1890s had become increasingly unsupportive.¹⁸¹ The unskilled male unions were also experiencing a drop in membership and were, consequently, no longer so concerned with any 'duty' to help women workers. Low wages may have reinforced notions of women as vulnerable and exploitable, but their encroachment into traditionally male industries was also dangerous and caused considerable resistance even among the previously helpful dockers' leaders. Will Thorne of the Gasworkers Union decided that 'women do not make good Trade Unionists and for this reason we believe that our energies are better used toward the organisation of male members'. Even John Burns, previously a WTUA Executive member, began a campaign to decrease competition for jobs by banning married women from

¹⁷⁷ *Royal Commission on Labour* (1891), 'General Reports', PP., (H.M.S.O., 1892-1894), p.96

¹⁷⁸ Olcott, p.43.

¹⁷⁹ *Women's Signal*, 29 Mar 1894, p.212.

¹⁸⁰ Hicks, *Royal Commission*, p.356.

¹⁸¹ Aris, p.42.

work and Ben Tillett warned that ‘the day is coming when husband and wife will fight at the same factory door for work’.¹⁸²

The threat came not merely from wives but also from daughters as the ascendancy of machinery meant that unskilled and inexpensive juveniles were increasingly employed. This brought its own obstacles in the way of sustained unionisation. By the time of its Fourth Report and the failure of the Confectioners’ Union, the WTUA was admitting that ‘it will be easily understood that juvenile labour does not lend itself to permanent organisation. Where a succession of young girls is constantly passing through a factory, there can be no real coherence, and only the influence of some strong person can hold them together’.¹⁸³ The divergence between their evident capacity for tenacious commitment to short-term co-operative action and a disinclination or incapacity for organisation in the long term was stark. In some quarters this fed disenchantment with the young working women as a class. Thus, for its part, the WIC, the successor of the WTUA complained that ‘the great difficulty which has to be met by all who endeavour to organise women’s trade unions is the extreme apathy of the women themselves.’¹⁸⁴ One contemporary commentator labelled young women, ‘the sweaters best friend’:

Women will rush to combine, and to strike at the same
moment when exasperated by some sudden reduction or

¹⁸² Olcott, p.43 citing a Letter from Will Thorne to B.L.Hutchins in *The Webb Trade Union Collection*, Sec.A Vol XLVIII, f.8; Cathy Hunt, ‘Sex Versus Class in Two British Trade Unions in the Early Twentieth Century’, *Journal of Women's History*, 24 (1) (2012), 86-110, (pp.86, 87), citing Sally Alexander, ‘Bringing Women into Line with Men: the Women’s Trade Union League 1874-1921’, in Alexander (ed.), *Becoming A Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*, (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 69.

¹⁸³ WTUA 4th Report, p.6.

¹⁸⁴ *Women’s Industrial Council 1st Annual Report*, LSE Women’s Library, WIC/B/2, p.7.

imposition, but their ranks soon thin again when the emergency is past. [...] It cannot be too strongly borne in mind that although thoughtful and earnest women are constantly to be met with in the working classes, the mass of raw material of which the union is bound to be composed consists of women who by education and training are below rather than above the average in clear-sightedness and steadiness of purpose. More often than not they are timid, indifferent, frivolous, excitable, and for a new Sunday hat or a walk with the Tom or Dick who happens to be in the ascendant would sacrifice the best interests of all the women in the world without a pang. The majority are young and look forward to marriage to release them from work. [...] At meetings if the audience is composed of factory girls amusement seems to be their chief object. The jokes and chatter are irrepressible; the most discreet allusion to the topic of marriage is the signal for shrieks of laughter. [...] It is acknowledged that they are good at a strike ; they are loyal, plucky and patient; but when excitement is over, and the long uneventful time of plodding and paying takes its place, the power of perseverance, the cool judgement and the doggedness which often characterise man are indispensable'.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ March-Phillipps, pp.95, 101-102.

Contemporary women labour historians were less critical. Writing in 1915, Hutchins surveyed the organisation of women generally from 1756 onwards which, in her judgement, was perennially weakened by a 'supposed apathy and lack of public spirit'. Pointing to fatigue, the amount of housework and 'the natural desire for a little amusement', her diagnosis was this was largely due to 'the lack of any visible organic connection between their industrial life as earners and their domestic life as spenders and home-makers' for which the cure was 'education and outlook',¹⁸⁶ Five years later, Drake pronounced 'the all-women's society' to be a failure', principally blaming 'the broken term of industrial life' within which few women were employed for the whole of their lives or ever escaped entirely from domestic duties.¹⁸⁷ Hicks own analysis pointed to the effects of under-education and fatalistic low-expectations: 'so many women have got the idea that things have to be put up with and that it is hopeless to resist them, that we find it is the greatest difficulty possible to put some life and hope into the women and to rouse them from the hopelessness and despair of their condition'. When asked by the Royal Commission why women do not combine, she replied: 'For the same reason, I think, that they do not do many other things. The education of women has been very much neglected. I hope the time is not far distant when women will not have that said of them.' By 1894, her proposal for 'the bettering of the condition of the women' was to 'look to legislation. But this is often disheartening work because the women are not awake to their interests.'¹⁸⁸

Perhaps the final consideration in the falling-away of women-only unions like the Ropemakers is the fact that, in subsuming the objectives of the WTUA into those of the WIC, the activists became social investigators and administrators 'whose activities revolved around

¹⁸⁶ Hutchins, pp. 105, 209.

¹⁸⁷ Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (London: Labour Research Dept., 1920), p.199.

¹⁸⁸ *Women's Signal*, 29 March 1894, p.212; Hicks, *Royal Commission*, p.342.

meetings, conferences, letter-writing campaigns and organising deputations' rather than organising and recruiting for individual unions.¹⁸⁹ This is not to say that working-class leaders like Hicks and James were not simultaneously ambivalent about investigative work that risked converting working women into subjects of research rather than independent agents. As mentioned earlier James, in particular, turned increasingly to empowerment and civic awareness among working-class girls through the medium of clubs. In 1913 Hicks herself was elected President of the National Association of Girls' Clubs.¹⁹⁰ However, in 1908, faced with centralising rule changes, Hicks and James left the WIC, but did not revisit the female unionisation that had flourished for a decade under their direction.¹⁹¹

5. CONCLUSION

Summary

This study set out to examine the causes of the emergence and subsequent decline of the East London Ropemakers' Union. Part of that exercise has been an analysis of the respective characteristics of the workers and the activist organisers and of the dynamics of their relationship with each other. It has, in particular, considered the extent of the agency the former and the impact and influence of the latter.

Chapter Two set the industrial background. It consisted of a brief description of the employers, Frost Brothers, of the rope-making process and of wages and conditions in ropemaking and other factory industries. Chapter Three, 'The Actors', consisted of two

¹⁸⁹ Ellen Mappen, *Helping Women at Work: the Women's Industrial Council, 1889–1914*, (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p.19

¹⁹⁰ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928* (London: UCL Press, 1999), p.284.

¹⁹¹ Hannam, ODNB.

parts. The first described the personal characteristics of the East London ‘factory girl’ in general and the ropemaker in particular. The second investigated the role of the activists and the WTUA in the formation of the Union. It addressed the political motivation of the activists and assessed the extent to which they were applying a Socialist agenda. Putting the two parts together provided the evidence upon which this study concluded that the respective characteristics of workers and activists were symbiotic ingredients in the initial success of the Union. Chapter Four describes the formation of the Union and the conduct of the strike. It considered the extent to which the activists were a moderating influence on the militancy of the workforce. It concluded with a reasoned explanation of the demise of women-only unions of unskilled workers, the disbandment of the WTUA and the change of emphasis towards the pursuit of legislation.

Conclusions

The evidence, although necessarily generalised in places and partly anecdotal, supports conclusions about Victorian working-class womanhood in a particular location, the East End of London, and in a particular situation, namely factory work. Looked at as a case study of gendered unionisation at the end of the nineteenth century, it is difficult to identify true themes of historical continuity or of any linear process of change in the events themselves. They may be better understood as a discrete episode or staging post between the position in the late 1880s when unskilled women workers rights were negligible to that of mid 1890s in which legislative safeguards came to be sought after. The episode comprised a single-minded but ultimately unsuccessful attempt over that period by activists, separated by political differences but all wedded to the principles of the WTUA, to ameliorate the conditions of unskilled women factory workers through the vehicle of unionisation.

Accordingly, the study challenges the contemporary mainstream model of cynical manipulation of ignorant workers by Socialist ideologues. On the contrary, an analysis of the

general characteristics of East End ‘factory girls’ and of the ropemakers, in particular, reveals a capacity for resistance and steadfastness when properly organised.

Turning to the qualities of the activists, a number of conclusions emerge. Firstly, they appear, in the main, to have been motivated by a specific desire to improve female working conditions rather than to achieve revolutionary societal upheaval. Secondly, their preferred strategy was negotiation founded on the collective strength of a unionised workforce rather than disruptive strike action. Significantly, in the case of the ropemakers, Hicks had counselled negotiation for twelve months before the strike. It would be misplaced to degrade the efforts of the women unionists and the WTUA as a failed experiment. It was never intended as a mere experiment and the unionised ropemakers had, after all, been successful. However, the final conclusion which the activists themselves reached, and which the evidence in this study supports, was that, despite the steadfastness of the workers during industrial conflict, intrinsic social and economic pressures peculiar to the Victorian working-class woman made sustained organisation of a young, diffuse and impoverished workforce almost impossible.

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