Editor's preface

Feminists have always been ambivalent about the relationship of women to trade unions. On the one hand, there is abundant evidence of women workers' ill-treatment on the part of organized labor. Many unions have a history of excluding women from membership altogether; virtually all have tended to exclude them from positions of power. And unions have often acted to reinforce rather than to challenge sexual inequality in the labor market. On the other hand, it is indisputable that unionized women are better off than their unorganized sisters. And unionism appears to have tremendous unrealized potential as an instrument for improving the situation of women workers.

The essays in this book seek to come to terms with this contradictory legacy as it has unfolded over the past century of women's labor history in the United States. They take up a wide range of specific subjects. Some are case studies of women's participation in individual unions, organizing efforts, or strikes; others examine broader themes in women's labor history, focusing on a specific period; and still others explore the situation of particular categories of women workers over a longer time-span. Although they are written from a variety of perspectives, all the essays share a preoccupation with the complex relationship between gender, consciousness, and working-class activism, in the context of the labor movement.

The history of women workers' relationship to trade unionism has only recently emerged as an object of serious scholarly inquiry, and the literature is still quite limited. In the past two decades, there has been an enormous outpouring of new research and interpretation in both labor history and women's history, yet the study of women and unions has remained marginal to both these fields. In labor history, despite the strong influence of social history and the movement away from narrow, institutional studies, the tacit presumption that the history of the working class is the history of male workers has been

preserved intact. In this respect, the 'new' labor history has failed to remedy the defects of the old. An adequate historiography of women's relationship to formal working-class institutions like unions and parties is still lacking; nor have the recent efforts to reconstruct the history of working-class culture and consciousness been particularly concerned with women. Within the rapidly proliferating literature in women's history, there has been more attention to women workers and their role in the labor movement, but here the study of women's past experience in relation to family, sexuality and feminism has been pursued far more extensively.

Perhaps it is because the topic has been so neglected that so much of the recent work which has appeared in women's labor history has been essentially descriptive in nature. Interpretative efforts have been largely devoted to questioning the traditional assumptions about women's relationship to the labor movement, rather than to reaching an independent definition of the terrain of debate. Certainly, it was necessary to challenge the total invisibility of women in conventional accounts of labor history, and the initial efforts to unearth the record of women's militancy as workers and labor activists were bound to produce descriptive histories. But this led, implicitly or explicitly, toward an overly simplistic and highly romanticized conception of women's labor history. The old myths of women's lack of interest or involvement in labor struggle were effectively supplanted by new myths, which were equally one-sided and, indeed, the mirror-image of the old. In the new feminist orthodoxy, each discovery of female militancy was taken as evidence of a virtually limitless potential for women's activism in the labor movement – a potential thwarted primarily by the disinterest or active hostility of male-dominated unions. While yielding some valuable insights and motivating a substantial body of important research, this approach could not do justice to the complexity of its subject.

The essays collected in this volume offer more nuanced perspectives on women's labor history, and begin to examine issues which were neglected in the early, essentially compensatory literature. For example, rather than insisting in a general way on the existence of a huge untapped potential for female activism, these studies seek to specify the historical conditions which have encouraged women's militancy and those which have impeded it. And, in reconstructing the history of women workers' protest activities, several of these

essays suggest that the mobilization of women has been especially effective when it has utilized organizational forms and techniques very different from those typically employed by men – forms that are rooted in women's own distinctive culture and life-experience. Also included here are efforts to begin to explain, rather than simply describe, the long history of male unionists' poor treatment of women workers. After all, insofar as men have an interest in promoting working-class unity, they might be expected to encourage women's full participation in unions, rather than to exclude them, and it is hardly self-evident why men's gender interest should prevail over their class interest in this regard. By examining the structural characteristics of unionism, on the one hand, and the impact of broader social ideology about gender on the labor movement, on the other, several of these essays shed new light on this critical problem.

The research collected in this volume also breaks new ground in regard to the period that it covers. The bulk of recent scholarship on women's relationship to unionism in the United States concerns the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even for this earlier period, the literature is sparse; but for the years after World War I, it almost disappears altogether (with the exception of a small group of studies of women and the United Auto Workers in the period immediately after World War II). This book begins to fill in some of the gaps. While the first few essays deal with the period before 1920, all the rest analyze more recent developments.

This emphasis opens up a range of new substantive issues as well, for there were a number of interrelated shifts in women's position, both in the paid workforce and in the labor movement, which began in the interwar years and then culminated in the post-World War II period. First, in the aftermath of the suffrage victory, with the growth of female participation in the labor force, the legitimacy of trade union claims to special protection for women began to wane, paving the way for the development of a labor movement commitment to the pursuit of gender equality in the workplace. At the same time, both in the labor movement and in the larger society, there was a shift away from the 'family wage' ideal – according to which male wages should be sufficient for family support, so that married women have no need to work outside the home – and women were increasingly regarded as individuals with the same

rights to work as men. These changes, of course, coincided with the rise of industrial unionism, which greatly expanded the space available to women and women's concerns within the mainstream labor movement. The new constraints and possibilities shaping women's relationship to trade unions in the past half-century, then, were quite different from those operating in earlier years, and more directly relevant to the dilemmas facing women in the unions today.

The contributions in this volume extend the scope of the literature in women's labor history, both conceptually and in terms of historical periods covered. Nevertheless, there are many serious omissions as well. In particular, the one essay included here on African–American women and the labor movement does not compensate for the severe underrepresentation of women of color in this field. But if this book generates more research and rethinking about women's relationship to trade unionism, historically and in the present, its purpose will have been amply fulfilled.

New York City R.M.
January 1984