

EXPERIENCING POLITICS, POLITICIZING EXPERIENCE:
THE SOUTHERN SUMMER SCHOOL
FOR WOMEN WORKERS

by
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As industrial capitalism developed in the post-slavery South, a new industrial working class emerged in that region. The politics of the new economy -- politics of class, race, and gender -- shaped the everyday lives of industrial laborers in their communities, homes, and on the factory floor. These unorganized workers had little power in the face of Southern factory owners' attempts to increase profits. Louise Leonard, Lois MacDonald, and other middle-class women reformers wanted to help build the Southern labor movement by giving women industrial workers a place to develop an awareness of themselves as members of the working class. With the support of leftists, liberals, organized labor, and proponents of workers' education, they founded the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry in 1927.

At the Southern School, white women industrial workers examined the politics of their own experiences in factories and mill towns. In the process, they questioned class, race, and gender inequalities. In particular, they saw their own power, through collective working-class action, to challenge the economic inequalities produced by capitalism. The challenges they posed to the Southern industrial capitalist order arose from their examination of the politics of their own lives at the Southern School.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of consciousness [in feminist consciousness raising] becomes a form of political practice. Consciousness raising has revealed gender relations to be a collective fact, no more simply personal than class relations. This implies that class relations may also be personal, no less so for being at the same time collective.¹

Catharine MacKinnon's statement brings questions to the mind of the student of working-class women's history: Have people historically experienced class relations as "personally" as they have gender? Why wouldn't they? What makes the discussion of women's experience that MacKinnon labels the "pursuit of consciousness" also "political practice"? What does this tell us about the relationship between ideas and "consciousness," and the political challenges people pose to social structures like sexism, racism, and capitalism? These were the questions I wanted to examine when I started researching a thesis topic. In my research, I came upon the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry -- an independent school that, between 1927 and 1940, brought together white women industrial workers from across the Southern United States to learn about the economic and historical context of their lives. The Southern School seemed a good place to begin investigating these questions.

The historical situation of the women who attended the school made questions of the relationship between consciousness and political action particularly relevant. These women were part of a new industrial working class that had emerged with the post-slavery development of industrial capitalism in the South. As they moved from small farms to mill towns and factory work, they moved into a new relationship with wealthy Southerners. When the sale of their labor became these farmers' only means of survival, Southern

¹Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 7 (1982): 515.

factory owners gained a great deal of power over them. This new working class' ability to defend their interests and satisfy their basic needs depended on their ability to organize collectively along class lines; and in 1927, to the outside observer, there was little organizing going on in Southern factories. In addition, Southern industrialists profited from traditional gender hierarchies by hiring women and paying them a lower wage. This meant that in many Southern factories, particularly in textile mills, the majority of workers on the factory floor were women. What it might have meant for these women, in terms of their own political activity, to discuss at the Southern School the class relations and gender relations that constituted their everyday lives was the question that guided my research.

The middle-class founders of the Southern School were motivated by similar questions. They saw a need for the development of labor unions in the South, to counter the "acute social problems" (poverty, child labor, and the extreme exploitation of workers) that industrial capitalism had brought to the region.² They hoped to help Southern women industrial workers develop the "group consciousness" they perceived necessary for them to organize their fellow (sister) workers, by providing a place for these workers to examine the class politics of their lives.³

At the Southern School, cotton, silk, and rayon workers, garment workers and tobacco workers, and white women laborers from other Southern industries studied the economic system under which they worked and lived. They examined this system through the "lens" of their own and other workers' experiences of factory work, mill village life, work in the home, and family relations. As their stories showed them the class, race, and gender politics of their everyday lives, they questioned the inequalities they experienced. In particular, they saw their own power, as a class, to challenge the economic inequality

²"Memorandum on the SSSWWI," n.d., Southern Summer School Papers, American Labor Education Service Records 1927-1962. Labor-Management Documentation Center, Martin P. Catherwood Library, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Hereafter cited as SSS Papers.

³Louise Leonard, letter to [?], 1926, SSS Papers.

produced by capitalism. To some students, this meant organizing labor unions to improve wages, hours, and working conditions. To others, it meant a working-class challenge to the capitalist system itself. Both were products of these workers' examination of the politics of their own lives.

For the women of the Southern Summer School, seeing the politics of their lives -- of their everyday, "personal" as well as public experiences -- spurred them to political action in their factories, communities, and homes. In this historical context, the experience of the Southern School women supports MacKinnon's suggestion that class relations are "personal, no less so for being at the same time collective." This implies that recognizing the politics that take place in people's "personal," everyday lives is important, at least, and perhaps necessary, for democratic and effective movements for political change.

II. THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE FOR A NEW WORKING CLASS

The women workers who arrived at the first session of the Southern Summer School in 1927 belonged to a relatively new Southern economic class -- an industrial working class that emerged with the postbellum development of industrial capitalism in the region. With the end of slavery in 1865, Southern planters and merchants looked for sources of profit other than slave labor. Agriculture was still the South's economic foundation, with planters now relying on sharecroppers to bring in their cotton and tobacco crops. But at the same time, wealthy Southerners began to develop local economies and exploit natural resources like coal and timber. This development dispossessed Piedmont and Appalachian small farmers of their land, and pushed them into wage labor in the factories and mills being built across the South.

Life in this new industrial economic order was characterized by, on the one hand, employers' attempts to maximize profit by maintaining control over workers, and on the other, workers' attempts to meet their own needs. On the farm, on the factory floor, and in mill villages and cities, workers' everyday lives were the sites where this new economic order was both reinforced and undermined. The politics of Southern industrial capitalism are reflected in the narratives that Southern Summer School students wrote about their lives.

The roots of the South's "industrial revolution" lie in the antebellum years. Agriculture was profitable enough for slaveholders that they had little incentive to develop manufacturing. The foundation of slaveholders' wealth had been their slaves, writes economic historian Gavin Wright. But with the abolition of slavery, their landholdings became their main source of wealth. As this class of "laborlords" became "landlords," they

sought to increase the value of their land by developing the local economy that surrounded it.⁴ In the 1870s and 1880s, this meant railroad construction and "town-building" -- the development of local commerce, with a growing merchant class.⁵ New railroad lines opened up previously isolated Southern hills to capitalists looking for timber and coal, further building the value of landholdings. The new wealthy class of landlords and merchants also saw manufacturing as a way to increase their wealth, and in the 1880s began building textile mills and garment and tobacco factories in towns.⁶

The changes that this wealthy class made to the Southern economy transformed the lives of small farmers in the Piedmont and Appalachia. Small farmers, both white and black, relied on "a system of general farming and local exchange" to support themselves.⁷ They raised their own food, hunted and grazed livestock in the unfenced hills, and grew cotton and other cash crops for surplus only.⁸ All family members contributed to production on the farm. Women and children did so both in the house and in the field, as this Southern Summer School student describes: "I was born on a farm in western North Carolina.... My mother's health failed her and so my sister and I had most of the housework to do and to help father on the outside. We got up at three-thirty or four o'clock every morning to get the house work done, the cows milked, the chickens fed to get to the field early. We would hoe corn all day long, come home at night and help mother get supper."⁹ Farmers sometimes hired themselves out to bring in extra income, working

⁴Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986), 34. According to Wright, slaves made up two-thirds of the average slaveholder's wealth, while land was a "distinctly secondary" form of their wealth (19-20).

⁵Wright, 23-24.

⁶Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly. Like A Family: the Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987), 24-25.

⁷Before emancipation, of course, these small farmers were white. But by 1900, twenty percent of black farm workers in the South owned the land they worked (Wright, 119).

⁸Hall, et. al., 3; Wright, 107-108.

⁹Student autobiography, 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers. Many of the narratives written by students at the Southern School do not indicate author or date written. When they do, this will be noted.

in others' fields or, in the case of women, taking in laundry.¹⁰ One student described the living her family members made for themselves on their farm as adequate, though by no means luxurious: "We always had something to eat if no more than bread and water, a place to sleep, and at least one pair of shoes during the winter."¹¹

The development that provided the necessary capital for factory-building also created the labor supply for these factories, by disrupting small farmers' traditional methods of survival and pushing them off their land. Local governments joined capitalists in building the "New South," transforming the Southern economy in ways that disadvantaged small farmers. In the 1860s, Southern state legislatures passed crop lien laws, which allowed merchants to extend loans to small farmers in exchange for a share of their future crop. Crop liens forced farmers to plant cash crops rather than food crops, undermining their traditional means of survival while giving merchants new power.¹² Local governments imposed new taxes to pay for railroad-building, which was crucial to the development of industry and local commerce. These taxes put further pressure on farmers to grow crops they could sell for cash, or face losing their farms for not paying.¹³ And in Appalachia, timber and coal companies closed off land that farmers had used in common for grazing and hunting, while local governments did the same with fence laws in the Piedmont.¹⁴ As these developments boosted capitalists' wealth, they undermined farmers' subsistence economy, and drew them into a riskier cash-based economy, in which their small landholdings left them ill-equipped to function.

As small farmers racked up debt and their traditional means of support eroded, they entered the realm of wage labor to make their living. Some, usually men, held on to their farms by working seasonally in industry. One Southern School student wrote, "Father

¹⁰Hall, et. al., 15.

¹¹Student autobiography, 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹²Hall, et. al., 5; Dolores E. Janiewski, Sisterhood Denied: Race, Class, and Gender in a New South Community (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 11.

¹³Hall, et. al., 6.

¹⁴Ibid., 6-9.

lived on a small part of my grandfather's farm and when he would have the crop in shape to work out some, he would work at sawmills and other things."¹⁵ When men "worked out," women and children picked up the slack on the farm: "After we got our crop planted father would get a job somewhere and he would tell us what he wanted done. So mother, sister, and I could do the work."¹⁶ Thus women paid a high price for the shift to wage labor, as their traditional household work came to include the bulk of the field work as well. Daughters were left with many of the household duties, as this student was: "My earliest remembrances bring sorrow to my heart as I look back upon them for I was reared in a very poor home.... My father worked at a saw mill and my mother toiled hard raising little truck patches around our log cabin back in the mountains of western North Carolina.... I had lots of work to do at the age of five, for mother was out toiling most all the time and I had the babies to care for. I never had any chance to play."¹⁷ "Working out" usually provided only a temporary way to survive. Eventually, most farm families found themselves so poor and deeply indebted that they had little choice but to sell their farms. Some then became tenant farmers; many others moved to town to work in the new factories.

Capitalists who built factories in the South between 1880 to 1930 were able to profit particularly well from the labor of the workers they hired. Compared to workers in the rest of the country, Southern laborers earned a far lower wage. For example, Southern textile workers' wages in 1900 were half of what their counterparts in New England earned, a condition that Gavin Wright attributes to the isolated Southern labor market.¹⁸ Southern entrepreneurs were also starting manufacturing ventures at a time when technological developments, particularly in textiles, meant that unskilled laborers could produce as much as quickly on new machines as skilled labor had been able to produce on

¹⁵Student autobiography, 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Wright, 130; 52.

old ones. The "deskilling" of the textile industry and the low Southern wage level allowed capitalists to make profitable use of the "raw labor" that was moving from farm to factory, working in industry for the first time.¹⁹

Households headed by women were among the first to migrate. While men traditionally "linked the family to the marketplace," conducting economic transactions like rental agreements and selling crops, women had less clout in this sphere, and hence less access to the resources they needed to keep their small farms afloat.²⁰ Thus, stories like these students' were common: "mother decided she would sell the farm for she was in debt and the farm was poor and small.... I went to work in the cotton mill making \$4.50 to \$7 a week." "Mother was thirteen years old...when her father was killed....Grandmother tried to make a living in the country but the work was too hard for such small children. She moved to town and put all the children over eight years old in the textile plant making fifty cents per day."²¹

Factory owners used the initially large numbers of women and children in the migrant population to their advantage, employing both in tobacco and textile mills for lower wages than they paid to men. The textile industry, in particular, used a "family labor system" to fill its mills, hiring whole families, housing them in company houses, and expecting three or more family members to work.²² As children had contributed to the farm family economy by working in the field and in the house, they helped support their families in cities and mill towns by earning a wage in the factory. This was especially possible in the textile industry, where new technology created simple jobs that children could perform as well as adults. Many children first entered industrial work by assisting adult workers, which increased adults' productivity without costing employers the wages

¹⁹David L. Carlton, "Paternalism and Southern Textile Labor: A Historiographical Review." In Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History, ed. Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reed (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 25; Wright, 68.

²⁰Hall, et. al., 18.

²¹Autobiography by Anna Appel, 1928 Scrapbook; student autobiography, SSS Papers.

²²Janiewski, 74.

of additional adult workers. These children then took on factory positions of their own, as did Southern School student Nora McMannes, for whom changing child labor regulations made the path to the factory rather circuitous:

The day we moved into the mill village one of the women who worked in the mill came over to visit us, and she asked my mother to let me help her in the mill. She said she would give me a dollar a week to stick on bobbins for her. I didn't get to work but about four weeks before a rule was made that wouldn't allow children in the mill who were not large enough to be employed by the employer. When I was fourteen and a half years old I went to work in the cotton mill. I learned how to spool.... I worked eleven hours a day until I was fifteen years old. Then a law was passed forbidding children under sixteen working over eight hours a day.²³

Southern states passed legislation in the first two decades of this century that raised the minimum age for industrial workers. By 1913, Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas had laws that prohibited mills from hiring children under twelve, and restricted the working hours of those younger than fourteen.²⁴ But child labor was important, both to families' survival and employers' profits, through the 1920s.

One Southern school student described her response to entering the factory at thirteen: "At first I thought work in the mill a great experience but I soon grew tired of working in such a close place and I would often long to be out in the open again."²⁵ But once children began working in the mill, they usually didn't have the chance to be "out in the open again." For employers, child labor not only cost less in wages, but also provided an opportunity to train a lifelong industrial workforce. To William Gregg, founder of the Old South's first cotton mill, industrial work placed poor white children "in a situation in which they would be educated and reared in industrious habits," a goal that New South industrialists held and expressed publicly into the twentieth century.²⁶ Indeed, factory

²³Nora McMannes, "My Experience as a Child Laborer," 1928 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

²⁴Hall, et. al., 58.

²⁵Student autobiography, 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

²⁶William Gregg, "Essays in Domestic Industry," quoted in Hall, et. al., 57.

workers who began working as children overwhelmingly stayed in industry all their adult lives, with some women leaving temporarily when they married or had children.²⁷

Industrial employers used existing sex and race hierarchies to structure their factories for maximum profit and control over workers. Factory owners designed job assignments to correspond to dominant ideas of "men's work" and "women's work," and work appropriate to blacks and whites. Textile and garment factories, in particular, relied on women's labor, employing them for machine-driven versions of tasks they had traditionally performed in the home. Using female labor meant that these employers could take advantage of the predominantly female population of early farm-to-factory migrants, and could pay them a lower wage than men. As a result, one student reported that "five hundred women and forty men" were employed at the overall factory where she worked, while another wrote that she sewed shirts "with ninety other women and ten men."²⁸

Most Southern textile jobs were closed to black workers, with the exception of the "Negro" jobs of sweeping factory floors and moving bales of cotton.²⁹ White women were hired for "light" work in textile factories, like spinning and weaving, while white men performed "heavy" jobs like carding cotton and repairing looms, or held supervisory positions.³⁰ Some men worked as weavers, which was acceptable because it was considered skilled labor, but spinning was exclusively a woman's job. Tobacco factories employed blacks in dirtier, manual prefabrication work -- men drying and packing leaves, women stemming and sorting them -- while white women, and some white men, operated cigarette-making machines, and white men supervised. As this tobacco worker who attended the Southern School described: "Men [i.e., white men] do all the mechanical work and the bossing, women [i.e., white women] run the machines that turn out the

²⁷Wright, 141-146.

²⁸"Work," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

²⁹Hall, et. al., 66.

³⁰Janiowski, 99.

cigars and cigarettes, and negroes do the [tobacco] cleaning and dirty jobs."³¹ Even when workers labored alongside each other, each knew his or her place in the strict ordering of tasks, evident in a meat packing worker's description of the "bacon room" in her plant: "The bacon, after being cured, is brought in by negro men...in trucks and put into the cooler. There are three cutting machines...which are operated by men.... Two girls are at each machine to catch the meat and weigh it, then send it on the belt to the packers.... They send it down to the end of the room where another girl catches it. Then it is sealed with wax paper and put into cartons by a man." Industrialists modeled the occupational segregation in Southern factories on the hierarchies prevalent in Southern society. The organization of work and authority on the factory floor drew on workers' culturally ingrained feelings of race and sex superiority, strengthening the divisions between them, and thereby discouraging the development of collective challenges to employer authority. Factory owners also pocketed the products of race and sex divisions in the form of profit, for they used these divisions to justify paying white women, black men, and black women progressively lower wages.

Working conditions in Southern industry varied from factory to factory. Southern School students wrote of working long hours for low wages, performing "dull, monotonous, and uninteresting" tasks, in poorly-ventilated factories, in extremes of heat and cold.³² One garment worker described how "deskilling" machinery made her work repetitive: "I sit at my machine from seven-thirty until five...I have to use my foot constantly. I have to raise the presser foot with one foot and start the machine with the other. The machine makes the tack, cuts the thread, and stops automatically."³³ Other

³¹Ibid., 100-101; student autobiography, SSS Papers.

³²"Work," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers. Around the turn of the century, Southern states began passing legislation limiting the length of the work week. Hall, et. al., write that by 1903, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia had limited the work week to 66 hours; by 1929, they write, "the workday was still 12 hours with a half-day on Saturday." (77).

³³"Work," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

workers complained about unsanitary conditions in their factories, like this textile worker who tried, with her coworkers, to change them:

Sanitary conditions in the mill are not good. The people spit on the floor.... The upstairs floor is never scrubbed. The employer of this mill was invited to the industrial girls' club one night and the conditions of the mill were discussed. In the discussion the employer said that he would put cuspidors in the mill. He did and kept them there one week. When they were taken out on Friday they didn't put them back any more.³⁴

Other workers seemed more satisfied with their working conditions, listing the benefits their companies provided for them: "Our sanitary conditions are good. In the dressing rooms we have wash basins, palmolive soap, paper towels, and mirrors." "We have a hospital, a trained nurse, and a doctor who comes once a day to examine or prescribe medicine. This is free to employees." "[The company's Mutual Benefit Society] gives dances, boat rides, and picnics. The members can also buy coal, gloves, electric irons and a few other things at cost price through the club."³⁵ In 1916 the trade publication Southern Textile Bulletin wrote that such benefits helped workers "look on the bright side of things and withstand the physical discomforts of standing for long hours by one machine and doing the same thing over and over."³⁶ By offering benefits like these, employers tried to check worker dissatisfaction with repetitive work, low wages, long hours, and unclean workplaces.

Many textile employers followed this strategy outside the walls of their factories, as well, in company-owned mill villages. The mill village was central to the Southern textile industry from its beginnings. The first mills were built alongside streams in the country, where industrialists had to build housing for their workers, as well.³⁷ By 1919, 190,000 Southern workers were employed in textiles, and most of these lived in mill villages.³⁸

³⁴"Conditions of the Mill In Which I Work," 1928 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

³⁵"Scraps from Our Lives," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

³⁶Quoted in Hall, et. al., 136.

³⁷Hall, et. al., 114.

³⁸Wright, 147.

Villages grew to include schools, churches, police, general stores, like any other community. In the mill village, however, community institutions like these belonged to the company. Thus, mill owners structured not only working conditions within the factory, but many aspects of workers' daily lives outside it as well. For instance, when a mill owner felt no need to make improvements, workers lived in poor conditions, as in this student's Marion, North Carolina mill village: "The houses we live in are not nice houses and they all need repairing. There is no water or bath in the houses. The mill village is very unsanitary as they have no sewer line for the waste water to pass out."³⁹ Another student wrote with a sense of humor that in her village, "You can look through the top of the house at night and gaze at the beautiful stars above. Then when there is a hard rain [workers] have to push their beds from corner to corner, trying to keep dry."⁴⁰

At the same time that employers controlled how bad things could get for workers in the mill village, they also had the power to decide how good many things could be. They often used this power to stem worker dissatisfaction. A Georgia cotton mill worker at the Southern School wrote that although the conditions in her factory were poor, and she earned \$12 for a sixty-hour work week, "We have a swimming pool, theater, and two churches.... We have a grammar school. After a child has finished grammar school he can go to high school without paying tuition if he lives in the village."⁴¹ Some employers instituted "welfare work" programs in their villages, which ranged from organizing baseball teams and sewing clubs to building community centers and YMCAs. Besides providing diversion and rest from the "physical discomfort" and "long hours" of work in the mill, welfare work was a way for employers to develop "industrious citizenship" in their workers, according to the trade paper Southern and Western Textile Excelsior.⁴² Mill

³⁹Rosa Holland, "East Marion Mill Village," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

⁴⁰Student autobiography, quoted in The [SSS] News, November 1932, SSS Papers.

⁴¹Student autobiography, SSS Papers.

⁴²"Welfare Work," Southern and Western Textile Excelsior, January 20, 1906, 10. Quoted in Hall, et. al., 133.

owners made improvements and started welfare work in mill villages as a response to industrial labor shortages at the beginning of the century, to discourage workers from migrating to jobs in other communities.⁴³ Just as they provided benefits for workers within their factories, owners instituted these programs and improvements outside the factory in order to retain a contented, productive workforce.

To Southern School student Osceola Gregory, the institutions of her mill village were the tools by which her employer maintained "sole authority over the people who live there."⁴⁴ She described how the company structured institutions like the school and the church so as to orient workers' lives toward the mill and distract them from any dissatisfaction they might feel:

We have a modern school building but the standards are low. It has only to the sixth grade. The employers count on the children going to work after they finish the fourth or fifth grades.

We have a little Baptist Church with a preacher paid by the employer. He preaches about Hell and Heaven. If he is interested in the congregation and their every day problems he never says so.⁴⁵

Southern historian Bryant Simon describes mill owners' paternalism as an attempt "to build an industrial universe by consent, not force."⁴⁶ But the material ways in which employers controlled workers' lives in the mill village sometimes blurred the line between consent and force. In Osceola Gregory's village, the mill was even able to regulate workers' sleeping and waking hours; she wrote that in workers' houses, "the lights are connected with the mill and are turned on at five o'clock in the evening and turned off at ten-thirty at night. Again in the morning at four o'clock they were turned on and stayed on until seven in the

⁴³Ibid., 131.

⁴⁴Osceola Gregory, "The Reason I Do Not Like to Live in a Mill Village." 1929 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Bryant Simon, "Choosing Between the Ham and the Union: Paternalism in the Cone Mills of Greensboro, 1925-1930." In Hanging by a Thread: Social Change in Southern Textiles, ed. Jeffrey Leiter, Michael D. Schulman, and Rhonda Zingraff (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1991).

morning."⁴⁷ Another student wrote that her village was "governed mostly by the superintendent of the mill...we have a sheriff paid by the mill but appointed by the city authorities."⁴⁸ By literally extending the company's authority beyond the walls of the factory, and materially shaping workers' everyday lives in the mill village, employers tried to create a docile, controlled workforce, ultimately in order to maintain production and profits.

Maintaining profits became an especially pressing concern of textile manufacturers immediately after the First World War. The industry boomed as the war created greater demand for textiles, and wages rose as the war intensified the already existing labor shortage. After the war, when textile prices plummeted along with demand, Southern mill owners looked for ways to recover their losses. Some tried to cut wages; in response, workers walked out of mills in North and South Carolina in 1919 and 1921.⁴⁹ But as cotton and tobacco prices fell after the war, forcing small farmers off their land and into the mill towns in greater numbers, the new labor surplus made it easier for employers to maintain their profits at workers' expense.⁵⁰ Southern mill owners' answer to their problem was a combination of closer supervision on the factory floor, management techniques that emphasized "efficiency," the subtle lengthening of the working day, the introduction of faster machinery, wage cuts, and the expansion of workloads.⁵¹ With these changes, mill owners intended to increase production without having to hire more workers and spend more on wages. The "stretch-out system," as dubbed by mill workers, prevailed in Southern mills throughout the 1920s, pushing workers to their limits as it maintained owners' profits.

⁴⁷Gregory, "The Reason....," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

⁴⁸Eunice Ellison, "My Home Village," 1927 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

⁴⁹Hall, et. al., 183-196.

⁵⁰Simon, 89.

⁵¹Hall, et. al., 200-209.

One Southern School student described the workload increase which, more than anything else, characterized the stretch-out: "For the benefit of those who may not know what the stretch-out system is I will explain. In the weaving department of a cotton mill we had been running around the average of twenty-four looms. After the stretch-out system was introduced we were put on from eighty to one hundred looms and were given boys and girls to fill our batteries."⁵² Strict supervision to monitor workers' use of time accompanied the extreme increase in workload. Supervisors watched workers closely and restricted their movements to keep them from wasting valuable work time, as this rayon mill worker experienced: "My work is very tiresome because I have to stand up all the time and have very little time for moving around. We can go to the wash room twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. The forelady quarrels if the girls get sick and have to go to the first aid."⁵³ Making workers work through their lunch break was another common way of speeding up production. And like other American employers in the 1920s, Southern mill owners employed Frederick Winslow Taylor's "scientific management" techniques to make workers more "efficient": "Two men came down from New York to Greensboro last year to make a time study of the workers. For several days they stood over the workers, watches in hand."⁵⁴ The tactics of the stretch-out took their toll on workers. A cotton mill worker from Alabama wrote, "The long hours and nervous state in which I worked had caused me to have much less strength than I would have had otherwise, and it was all I could do to keep the work up."⁵⁵ The exhausting pace of work affected not just their experience in the factory, but their lives outside of work as well. One Marion, North Carolina mill worker explained, "I work twelve hours and twenty minutes per day, and everyone in the plant is completely worn out at stopping time. They go home unable to enjoy supper or anything else...just dragging along half dead and overworked

⁵²Sidney Burgess, "A Strike against the Stretch-out," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

⁵³"Scraps from our Lives," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

⁵⁴"A Conference of Southern Workers," Labor Age, August, 1932.

⁵⁵Student autobiography, SSS Papers.

until they don't know what it is to take a rest and feel good."⁵⁶ The stretch-out robbed workers of control over the pace and process of their work and increased employer control over their lives both inside and outside the mill.

The stretch-out system nursed discontent among the workers in one Southern School student's Virginia cotton mill: "We had borne this abuse, for it was nothing short of that, for quite awhile. But please don't think we were 'contented cows' for we were far from being anything like contented."⁵⁷ Southern mill workers, like North Carolina cotton mill worker James Evans, saw their suffering under the stretch-out as unjust: "Hundreds of folks go to jail every year...for doing things not half so bad or harmful to their fellow man as the stretch-out."⁵⁸ Many refused to accept this injustice quietly. Workers experienced exploitation and employer control in their work in the factory, they accordingly challenged it in their work lives on the factory floor. When her employer announced a cut in wages, one Southern School student wrote, "3 or 4 of us asked all of the employees on our floor not to go to work the next morning until we had seen the foreman and talked matters over with him." When she and her co-workers confronted the foreman, she asserted the injustice of the wage cut in terms of her everyday material needs: "I was paying the same house rent, grocery bill, and the same general expenses as when I was working full time and asked him to explain how he thought I could live any cheaper when I could barely make expenses on full time." The workers walked out, and shortly after received word that the foreman "had thought it over and we would not get a cut in wages." The success of these workers' collective resistance convinced the student that "it pays to stick together for what you know is right!"⁵⁹ Workers resisted exploitation and employer control where they occurred: in their daily work.

⁵⁶Minnie Fisher, "The Cotton Mill Where I Work," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

⁵⁷Sidney Burgess, "A Strike against the Stretch-out," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

⁵⁸Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, Such as Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 178. Quoted in Simon, 90.

⁵⁹"An Experiment at the Shop," 1927 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

It was in their everyday lives that workers experienced not only the stretch-out, but the whole development of Southern industrial capitalism. From farmers' dispossession of their land, and migration into company-owned mill towns, to employers' use of race and gender hierarchies and the stretch-out system, workers lived the rise of the Southern industrialist class, and their own corresponding emergence as a class of industrial workers. The narratives of Southern Summer School worker-students are filled with descriptions of power relations between these two classes. These experiences served as the "lens" through which students examined economics and labor history at the Southern School.

III. WORKERS' EDUCATION FOR A "BETTER SOCIAL ORDER"

The Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry was one of many schools for wage workers started in the United States in the first part of the twentieth century. The roots of this workers' education movement lay in the previous century. Richard Altenbaugh describes early industrial schools in England and the U.S. in the early 1800s that trained workers in trades and the "mechanical arts." With the development of industrial capitalism, "the advent of national trade unions and the emergence of a more class-conscious working class" in the 1870s and 1880s and later, leftists and organized labor founded workers' schools, not to train workers to perform their jobs, but to help them examine and challenge capitalism and its effects on their lives.⁶⁰ Directly following the First World War, organized labor was heartened by wartime gains in legislation, leftists were encouraged by the success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and working-class consciousness was heightened by American companies' anti-union, open shop movement. This climate gave rise to a network of workers' schools in the United States in the 1920s.⁶¹

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Progressive-era attempts to soften industrial capitalism's impact on society led middle-class reformers to become involved in working-class issues, like wage and hour legislation and the regulation of working conditions. The idea of education as a tool for social reform fit well within the bounds of Progressive thought and action, and some reformers combined this tool with their interest

⁶⁰Richard J. Altenbaugh, Education for Struggle: the American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 22-23.

⁶¹Gloria Garrett Samson, "'Education for a New Social Order': The Ideological Struggle over American Workers' Education in the 1920s." In Culture, Gender, Race, and U.S. Labor History, ed. Ronald C. Kent, et. al. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 152.

in labor to engage in workers' education, establishing and teaching at schools for wage laborers.⁶² The middle-class women who founded the Southern School in 1927 were influenced by Progressive ideas, and began their labor education work in the Young Women's Christian Association, a Progressive institution. But they encountered this institution's limits when their designs for workers' education conflicted with the class interests of the factory owners' wives who sat on the Executive Board of the Y. These labor educators wanted to form a school that would help develop the Southern labor movement by building the "group consciousness" of women industrial workers in that region, and encouraging them to see the differences between their class interests and their employers'.⁶³ The educators' focus on organizing compelled them to look outside the YWCA, to the larger workers' education network, for support -- a network comprised of leftists and organized labor, as well as Progressive liberals.

The aims of workers' schools established in the first quarter of the twentieth century stretched fairly broadly across the left side of the American political spectrum. Many leftists and organized labor officials wanted to combat the ideological content of a public education system whose school boards were dominated by middle-class and business interests. Many also saw the need to counter corporate-sponsored classes for workers in English and "industrial discipline," such as those run by the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company and the Ford Motor Company after the First World War. These courses, claimed the director of the National Association of Corporate Schools, "[decreased] the chances of an invasion of Bolshevik doctrines" onto the shop floor "by about ninety per cent."⁶⁴ The proponents of workers' education wanted to create educational institutions that were free from corporate control and in the interest of labor. As Alexander Fichlander,

⁶²Richard H. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973), 4.

⁶³Louise Leonard, letter to [?], 1926, SSS Papers.

⁶⁴Samson, "Education for a New Social Order", 155.

director of the Workers' University, of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), wrote in 1921,

[Workers] feel that they cannot obtain in non-workers' educational institutions correct information on subjects affecting their own interests. They feel that they are frequently deceived and are furnished with interpretations of life which are intended to keep them docile and submissive.⁶⁵

In contrast, most schools for workers aimed to help them gain some of the power they lacked under capitalism. Interpretations of what this power consisted of, and how it was to be gained -- from cultural enrichment, to union organizing, to revolution -- varied from school to school. Some workers' schools were founded by political parties, like the Socialists' Rand School of Social Science in New York City, founded in 1906, and the Communist Workers' School. Others trained workers to be union organizers, like the Training School for Women Organizers of the National Women's Trade Union League (NWTUL), founded in Chicago in 1914. Some were connected with institutions of higher education, such as the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, started in 1921. Some offered evening and weekend classes, like the ILGWU's Workers' University, begun in New York City in 1916, while others were residential programs, like Brookwood Labor College, formed in Katonah, New York in 1921.⁶⁶ Brookwood, directed by former minister and Amalgamated Textile Workers of America organizer A.J. Muste, attracted labor activists from across the country as teachers, students, and speakers, and declared itself to be working "for a new and better order, motivated by social values rather than pecuniary ones."⁶⁷

⁶⁵Alexander Fichlander, "Workers' Education: Why and What?", *Labor Age* 10 (1921), 49-50.

⁶⁶Altenbaugh, 26; Samson, "Education for a New Social Order," 154; Susan Stone Wong, "From Soul to Strawberries: The International Ladies' Garment Worker's Union and Workers' Education, 1914-1950." In *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Workers' Education for Women, 1914-1984*, ed. Joyce Kornbluh and Mary Frederickson (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 41.

⁶⁷Jon Bloom, "A.J. Muste." In *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 500; Samson, "'Education for a New Social Order,'" 153.

In this pre- and post-war period, several education programs (of the NWTUL, ILGWU, Bryn Mawr Summer School, Barnard Summer School, and YWCA, as well as the Southern School) were established specifically for women workers. The women-only status of some schools was due to the strict sex-segregation of particular trades, especially those in the textile and garment industries. Thus when a union like the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union started an education program for its members, it was a women's program by definition. Sometimes, education programs attempted to address unorganized women workers' needs for community and solidarity, needs that often went unfulfilled due to the male-dominated, trade-unionist American Federation of Labor's failure to organize unskilled women workers.

Women's schools also provided a way for middle-class women to become involved in the labor movement, and to express concern for the welfare of their working-class sisters. The president of Bryn Mawr College and founder of the Bryn Mawr Summer School, M. Carey Thomas, envisioned bridging the gap that divided working-class and leisure-class women, and using their feelings of "deep sex sympathy" to help them "agree to work together for common ends."⁶⁸ For some middle-class women, a reform impulse informed by feminism motivated them to establish schools for women workers. But even when middle-class women were not directly motivated by feminism or "sex sympathy" to become educators of working women, they were inheritors of a feminist tradition that had begun in the previous century. Suffragists, Progressive reformers, and other women who broke through the walls of "women's sphere" to do "public work" created a social space for the activity of women like M. Carey Thomas and the founders of the Southern School in the 1920s and 1930s.

The idea of helping workers create (as worded in the Brookwood statement) a "new" socio-economic "order" was central to the philosophies of the more left-leaning

⁶⁸Ibid., 58-59.

workers' schools, like the IWW-influenced Commonwealth College in Arkansas and Work People's College in Minnesota. The American Fund for Public Service (also known as the Garland Fund) made financial grants to several workers' schools, including Brookwood, Commonwealth, and the Southern School, to help workers "build up a new political and economic power to replace capitalism" with an economic system that they controlled.⁶⁹ This was the ultimate goal of many programs, attested to by Clinton Golden, board member of the Garland Fund, who observed and evaluated workers' schools for the Fund. He wrote that "if many of the high officials of the American Labor Movement really were in personal contact with most of the classes and realized just how much potential dynamite there is in them, they would drop the [workers' education] movement like a hot potato."⁷⁰

But some workers' educators were influenced more by their middle-class background and the more moderate ideas of the Progressive era than by notions of revolution. Women like Hilda Worthington Smith of the Bryn Mawr Summer School and Florence Simms of the YWCA's Industrial Department were well-schooled in concepts of progressive reform, especially reform through education.⁷¹ A middle-class background could give those (of both sexes) who founded and ran labor schools a limited, class-blind, and even patronizing view of the function of workers' education in the lives of the worker-students themselves. M. Carey Thomas' 1922 statement to Bryn Mawr Summer School

⁶⁹From an unpublished manuscript by Roger Baldwin, director of the board of the American Fund, quoted in Gloria Garrett Samson and Richard Magat, "Grants for Labor: The Record of the Garland Fund and the Ford Foundation," *Labor's Heritage*, Spring 1997. The Garland Fund was a great resource for leftist-oriented workers' activities in the 1920s and 1930s. When Harvard dropout Charles Garland refused an inheritance in 1919 as a "repudiation of the 'system' that produced it," progressive Roger Baldwin persuaded him to donate the money to create a fund to support workers' projects. Baldwin assembled a board for the Fund that included communist William Z. Foster, IWW organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, James Weldon Johnson of the NAACP, and Morris Ernst of the ACLU. The Fund made grants to labor organizing drives, strikes, and radical publishing projects, as well as workers' schools (Samson and Magat, 58-61).

⁷⁰From Clinton Golden Report to the American Fund; quoted in Samson. "Education for a New Social Order," 157. See chapter 4 for further discussion of organized labor's involvement in and attitudes toward workers' education.

⁷¹Mary Evans Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds: The Southern School for Women Workers." (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1981), 24, 58; Rita Heller, "Blue Collars and Bluestockings: The Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, 1921-1938." In Kornbluh and Frederickson, 114.

students is an extreme example of the apolitical bent of some reformers' ideas about workers' education:

Education, even a little of it, will make you more competent to do whatever you want to do, and the more education you have, the more generally competent you will be. The more you know, the more you wish to know, the more interested you will be in everything and the happier you will be, and consequently the happier you will be able to make everyone around you.⁷²

Thomas' vision of workers' education contained none of the "potential dynamite" to which Clinton Golden referred; indeed, the Garland Fund rejected grant applications from Bryn Mawr because the summer school was both politically moderate and dependent on capitalist support.⁷³ The school's statement of purpose was a bit more politically focused, stating the importance of giving workers the opportunity to study "the problems of our economic order."⁷⁴ But even in programs in which workers examined their place in the prevailing "economic order," middle-class reformers and educators treated workers' education as a means to "uplift" workers or to "humanize" this order.⁷⁵ These reformers rarely intended their worker-students to challenge the order itself.

The workers' education programs conducted by the YWCA demonstrate the limits of workers' education conducted by a middle-class reformist organization. Evangelical church women founded the YWCA in Boston in 1866, to provide social services to young women migrating from the New England countryside to work in urban industry.⁷⁶ In 1904, a midwesterner named Florence Simms took charge of the YWCA's newly-created Industrial Department. The Industrial Department directly involved women workers in clubs and classes, and pushed for legislation regulating women workers' wages, hours,

⁷²Quoted in Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 60.

⁷³Samson, "Education for A New Social Order," 157.

⁷⁴Altenbaugh, 47.

⁷⁵Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 24.

⁷⁶Ibid., 17-18.

and working conditions.⁷⁷ To her job as National Industrial Secretary, Simms brought a conviction in the Christian "social gospel" ideas articulated by theologian Walter Rauschenbusch in 1907. The social gospel called upon Christians to extend their religious morals into a larger social sphere by working to reform industrial capitalism's unjust effects. To Simms, the YWCA's classes for women workers were part of a "widespread Christian intervention" in the socio-economic order.⁷⁸ This "intervention" was intended to advance gradual reform; indeed, to Simms, one of the negative aspects of unregulated capitalist power was that it "fueled the fire of socialists and communists and the possibility of revolution."⁷⁹

At times, the "intervention" envisioned by Simms and other Industrial Department women conflicted with the ideas of the more conservative National Board of the YWCA. In 1919, a YWCA conference of women workers endorsed a platform of minimum industrial standards that included a minimum wage, an eight-hour day, the abolition of child labor, and the right to collective bargaining. Simms lobbied the National Board to adopt this as the YWCA's industrial platform, and came up against "fierce opposition" from wealthy board women to the collective bargaining clause. It took the Industrial Department's threat to withdraw from the national organization for the Board to accept collective bargaining, along with the other standards, to the national platform.⁸⁰ Though Simms and the women of the Industrial Department won the collective bargaining battle, the interests of the YWCA's bourgeois leadership continued to circumscribe the Industrial Department's programs for working-class women.

For some middle-class Industrial Department women, their work with women workers pushed them to challenge the limits of the YWCA's conservative executive

⁷⁷Mary Frederickson, "Citizens for Democracy: The Industrial Programs of the YWCA." In Kornbluh and Frederickson, 77.

⁷⁸Frederickson, "A Place To Speak Our Minds," 21, 24.

⁷⁹Ibid., 30.

⁸⁰Ibid., 28; Frederickson, "Citizens for Democracy," 81-2.

board and its reformist orientation. One of these women was Louise Leonard, daughter of a Pennsylvania lawyer and a schoolteacher. Born in 1885, Leonard graduated from Vassar College and taught school before, like many other young college-educated women, she attended the YWCA's National Training School to become a YWCA industrial secretary in 1914.⁸¹ In her capacity as an industrial secretary, Leonard worked with women textile workers in the coal-mining region around Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Then in 1920, Florence Simms asked Leonard to take a position as the YWCA's first National Industrial Secretary for the South. While the Industrial Department had established a whole network of classes and programs for women workers in the Northeast and Midwest, in 1920 the YWCA had barely reached the legions of largely unorganized women who worked in Southern textile mills, and garment and tobacco factories. Leonard's task as Southern secretary was to establish and build Industrial Department programs, including local education classes, for these women workers across the South.⁸²

Louise Leonard set up a network across the South of middle-class support for her Industrial Department programs. At times, however, the class basis of this support network limited the scope of those programs. Mary Frederickson writes that, as in other regions, most of the women on local YWCA boards were "married to industrialists," and others were "wives of managers"; in Roanoke, Virginia, "YWCA board women were called 'the ladies with the hats.'"⁸³ Leonard recommended to the "ladies with the hats" that they establish Industrial Departments in their local YWCAs. She also built relationships with middle-class women across the South who were concerned with the effects of industrialization on the lives of working women. These women provided important local organizational and financial support for YWCA classes and industrial women's clubs. Leonard also tried to locate and work with cooperative employers in the South, who would

⁸¹Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 191-193.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 36.

be "willing to rectify 'specific evils' in southern industry and to initiate employee representation programs" in their factories.⁸⁴ Leonard succeeded in establishing programs for women workers across the South; after a few years, women workers were helping to teach workers' classes in their communities and factories, were attending regional YWCA Industrial Conferences, and attending Brookwood, Bryn Mawr, and other workers' schools. But by 1925, the limits of dependence on the cooperation of factory owners and their spouses had become clear to her. In her report to the National Industrial Department, Leonard described the difficult task of the industrial secretary, who had to try to "cooperate with management without compromising her ideals."⁸⁵

Leonard's work in the South convinced her that more was needed to ensure decent living and working conditions for Southern women workers than these YWCA programs. Her studies in economic history would further corroborate her views. In 1926 and 1927 she wrote a thesis at Columbia University comparing the development of industrial capitalism in England and the southeastern United States. Around this time Leonard wrote,

During the past few years the southeastern states have been passing through a stage of industrial revolution similar to that in England, one hundred years ago, and New England, fifty years ago. Owing to technological improvements, and other economic factors, the transition from agriculture to industry in the South has been more rapid and has resulted in more acute social problems than have been recorded in connection with similar changes in other sections and countries.⁸⁶

To Leonard, these were differences of degree only -- in her thesis, she warned against ignoring the fundamental similarities between the historical situations and identified a way to address the "social problems" they created: labor organization.

The popular idea that the South is 'different' and the failure to recognize the same factors in industrial change which have characterized the industrial revolution elsewhere, handicaps the workers and retards the growth of the labor movement

⁸⁴Ibid., 34.

⁸⁵Ibid., 45.

⁸⁶"Memorandum on the SSSWWI," SSS Papers.

in the southern states.⁸⁷

Leonard saw workers' education as a way of laying the groundwork and developing the leadership that was necessary for workers to organize labor unions in their factories and shops. Through their unions, in Leonard's view, workers could have a voice in industry, and prevent the "acute social problems" produced by industrial capitalism. Leonard wrote of the "need for education of southern workers, in order that they may understand the changes taking place in industry of which they are now a part, and that intelligent leadership may be developed among them." She hoped that organized labor or a university would "provide a school for workers, which would begin to meet their need for group consciousness and recognition of the peculiar problems of workers in the South."⁸⁸

Already in 1925, however, Leonard had understood that the establishment of a Southern workers' school depended on the network of women workers and middle-class "friends of labor" that she had developed as Industrial Secretary. She also saw the organization of women, who made up a large portion of the workforce in many Southern industries, as central to the success of labor organizing in the South. In July of 1925 Leonard wrote to A. J. Muste, whom she had helped to recruit students for Brookwood Labor College, about the Southern situation:

As you probably know there are very few women organized in the South.... From time to time I have tried to discover indications that the organization of women in the South is to be pushed by the A.F. of L.; but I can discover nothing hopeful in this line.... I have finally concluded that it would be reasonable for the YWCA to take the lead in some effort at a summer school for the education of women workers with the general purpose of developing southern leadership and sense of the need of group solidarity among workers.... It is not a case of our doing anything remarkable but that there is no other agency in the field which is bringing together numbers of industrial women.⁸⁹

⁸⁷Quoted in Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 194.

⁸⁸"Memorandum on the SSSWWI." n.d.; Louise Leonard, letter to [?], 1926. SSS Papers.

⁸⁹Louise Leonard to A.J. Muste, July 31, 1925, SSS Papers.

At this point, Leonard set out to fill the workers' education vacuum she perceived in the South. She introduced the idea of a YWCA-sponsored summer school for women workers at a YWCA industrial secretaries' conference in the summer of 1925, and again, in the fall, at a joint conference between Southern industrial secretaries and Southern alumnae of the Bryn Mawr Summer School.⁹⁰ From these meetings, Leonard gathered a group of women who were as interested in the organizing potential of a Southern school for women workers as she was. Lois MacDonald, a student industrial secretary and former tutor at Bryn Mawr; Margaret Wall, a garment worker from Danville, Virginia and a Brookwood and Bryn Mawr alumna; Ruby Clodfelter, a North Carolina textile worker who attended Bryn Mawr; and Matilda Lindsay, NWTUL organizer and assistant director of Bryn Mawr, worked with Leonard that fall to develop a proposal for a school to submit to YWCA leadership.⁹¹

The proposal they drew up was for a six-week session to be held "in the North Carolina mountains" for "twenty industrial girls, eighteen to thirty-five, working with tools of trade, to be drawn from industries such as cotton spinning and weaving, hosiery, tobacco, overalls, knitting." They were to come from communities in North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, and Georgia, where "recruiting [was] to be done through YWCA clubs or through union in these cities." The proposed school was to include a course "in economics of labor problems," a course in English, and "recreation, nature study, music, and so forth." The \$150 cost of each students' room and board was to be paid for by the organization that recruited them (YWCA club or labor union, usually), and the group proposed applying to a fund like the American Fund for Public Service (the Garland Fund) or the Carnegie Corporation for a grant to cover the remaining \$3000 in teachers' salaries, materials, and administrative costs.⁹² The directing committee of

⁹⁰Leonard, letter to [?], 1926, SSS Papers; Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 72.

⁹¹Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 64-5.

⁹²"Proposed Plan of Summer School for Industrial Women in the South - 1927." SSS Papers. The Carnegie Corporation had "recently contributed to adult education projects," including the Bryn Mawr school ("Minutes of Meeting on Proposed Plan," January 19, 1926, SSS Papers). But politically, there was a 180-degree difference between it and the Garland Fund. Samson writes that its "policy asserted that

"workers and educators" reflected the breadth of the network that Leonard had established as Southern Industrial Secretary, with representatives from organized labor, a state Department of Labor, and academia, along with women workers and YWCA secretaries involved in workers' education.⁹³

Leonard presented the proposal to the National Industrial Committee of the YWCA in October 1925, where it received the support of Director Lucy Carner, and the official approval of the committee.⁹⁴ But late in 1925, when Leonard brought her proposal to the YWCA National Executive Board, the Board voted "to refuse the request of the Industrial Department for permission to approach the American Fund for Public Service or the Carnegie Corporation for funds for a small workers' education project in the South next summer."⁹⁵ As Leonard reported later to the Industrial Committee,

the Executive Committee had felt it would be impossible to allow any department to ask for funds [from sources outside the YWCA] for this sort of thing. However, the committee told us that...it would be perfectly legitimate for the Industrial Department to be represented on an outside committee which would ask for funds....We cannot sponsor the project officially.⁹⁶

Though the YWCA was now conducting workers' classes all over the country, and the Southern school proposal had been built upon a network Leonard had developed through

American workers' education should differ from that in Europe, because 'there are no economic classes in the United States'" ("Education for a New Social Order," 157).

⁹³The proposed committee, which ended up being the Southern Summer School's first coordinating committee, consisted of: Mary C. Barker, President of American Federation of Teachers, Atlanta, GA; C.P. Barringer, President of North Carolina Federation of Labor; Ruby Clodfelter; Decie Dowdy, worker from Durham, NC and Bryn Mawr Summer School alumna; Frank Graham, history professor at University of NC, Chapel Hill; Matilda Lindsay; Louise Leonard; Lois MacDonald; Elizabeth Otey, Bryn Mawr College graduate and former tutor at the Summer School; Mary Scrogam, United Garment Workers member, alumna of Bryn Mawr Summer School and NWTUL Training School, and of the Women and Children's Bureau of the VA Dept. of Labor; and Margaret Wall ("Proposed Plan," SSS Papers). Also on the committee by the first session was Mary Anderson, former member of the Boot and Shoe Workers' Union, and director of the Women's Bureau of the federal Department of Labor (Robin Miller Jacoby, "The Women's Trade Union League Training School for Women Organizers, 1914-1926." In Kornbluh and Frederickson, 7.).

⁹⁴Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 73; "Southern Summer School Project," November 11, 1926, SSS Papers.

⁹⁵"From minutes of special meeting of Executive Committee," in "Southern Summer School Project," SSS Papers.

⁹⁶"Southern Summer School Project," SSS Papers.

YWCA channels, the national leadership of the YWCA was ultimately too conservative to take on officially a project with the aim of encouraging union organization and preparing women to be labor unionists. The Board's refusal to sponsor the school paralleled its resistance to including collective bargaining in its platform six years earlier. It was the last time that the YWCA's bourgeois leadership and reformist orientation limited Leonard in her workers' education work, even as she continued to use Southern YWCA clubs to recruit students for her school. In 1926, Leonard and the committee she had assembled applied for the Garland Fund grant, and received it.⁹⁷ The committee planned to hold the first session of the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry in 1927 at Sweet Briar College, a women's school in Virginia.

In pamphlets and press releases, the coordinating committee advertised the Southern School's purpose to be "to give women in industry an opportunity through study and discussion to develop a deeper appreciation of life; and a clearer understanding of their part and responsibility as industrial workers."⁹⁸ In their own writings, however, Louise Leonard, Lois MacDonald, and others who planned the Southern School and its curriculum were more explicit about their guiding goals. MacDonald described the situation the school was to address: "The South is undergoing a very rapid transformation, from agricultural interest to manufacturing....[southern workers] are not very conscious of any division of interest with their employers. They are beginning, however, to resent their low industrial standards -- their long hours, their low wages, their lack of status."⁹⁹ MacDonald and Leonard wanted to encourage workers to become aware of the differences between their

⁹⁷"Report of Committee Meeting of SSSWWI, Richmond, VA. November 13-14, 1926." SSS Papers.

⁹⁸The committee originally stated the school's purpose to be "to promote the study of industrial problems and movements, with emphasis upon the place of workers in modern society and their responsibility for the solution of industrial problems." But textile worker Ruby Clodfelter suggested that "such a purpose which left out any reference to the individual development would not make an appeal to the average girl who might be approached as a possible student." The committee then changed the statement to read as quoted above (Minutes of SSS Committee Meeting, November 13-14, 1926, SSS Papers). Through its history, the administration of the Southern School worded the school's publicity not only to attract students, but also to maintain its broad base of support, and to avoid attack by conservatives in Southern society and in the labor movement. This will be addressed in the concluding chapter.

⁹⁹Lois MacDonald, "A New School in the Old South." The Survey, October 15, 1927, 96-7.

interests and those of their employers. They wanted the school's worker-students to develop an awareness of themselves as members of a class of workers, able to improve their lives by collectively resisting their employers' exploitation. In an article for the labor publication The Survey, MacDonald wrote that while the Southern School was certainly intended "to give the individual student resources for a greater enjoyment of life," it went beyond this by recognizing that "means of enjoying personal life are directly affected by the kind of economic advantage or disadvantage which industrial workers as a group are able to secure for themselves." Thus, she wrote, "the school encourages students to forge for themselves, by means of study and discussion of their common problems, actual tools by which, after they 'recognize their part and responsibility as industrial workers,' they may be able to meet these problems intelligently and fearlessly."¹⁰⁰

The study of their "common problems," in MacDonald and Leonard's view, was to lead workers to collective action through labor organization. Economics and labor history, the study of these "common problems," were to form the foundation of the school's curriculum, while English and public speaking courses were planned to help students develop the communication "tools" they would need to be effective organizers. The school's goal was to help build a regionwide labor movement out of the resentment that MacDonald described -- a movement in which women workers, as a central part of the southern workforce, would play a central role. As Leonard wrote in 1928, "workers who now have an opportunity for study and discussion in workers' classes and schools may play a great part as pioneers in organizing and then in shaping the policies of the growing labor movement in the South."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 97.

¹⁰¹Louise Leonard, "The South Begins Workers' Education." American Federationist, November 1928, 1381.

In a speech Leonard gave to a conference on workers' education in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1928, she quoted James Maurer of Brookwood Labor College on the ultimate result of the movement:

Underlying the purpose of Workers' Education is the desire for a better social order. It is this desire on the part of the working man for a richer and fuller life individually and collectively that gave the movement its birth and at all times must remain its treasured inheritance. Labor education aims at ultimate liberation of the working masses.¹⁰²

But in her writings, Leonard defined this "better social order" no further. Neither Leonard nor MacDonald specified the aims of workers' education beyond the development of the labor movement and the establishment of unions. But they clearly saw unions as an important means for workers' protection of their own interests in the context of industrial capitalism.

Leonard and the founders of the Southern Summer School established the school using the network of progressive, middle-class support Leonard had built through the YWCA. Leonard and MacDonald themselves came from a middle-class background and a reformist tradition. But in creating the Southern Summer School, they drew on the support and ideas of more radical elements of the workers' education movement, like A. J. Muste, Brookwood Labor College, and the Garland Fund. Influenced by their work with Southern women workers, their observations of the development of industrial capitalism in the South, and their connections to these supporters and theorists of workers' education, they created a school that went beyond the limits of the YWCA's capitalist foundations and reformist methods. The Southern Summer School was to be an "experiment," an attempt

¹⁰²Louise Leonard, speech to Lynchburg Joint Conference, 1928, SSS Papers. In their own writings, both Leonard and MacDonald often used the gender-neutral word "worker" when referring to workers of both sexes (here Leonard uses Maurer's phrase "working man"). However, teachers and students at the Southern School usually followed the custom of the day, using the masculine pronoun to refer to workers, even in a women-only classroom. When they did specify gender, students and teachers both usually referred to working women as "girls." The use of this expression may have been due to the commonly held belief that young women worked only until marriage, which did not hold true for the majority of working-class women in Southern mill towns and across the country.

to build the Southern labor movement by giving women industrial workers a place to examine the politics of their experiences of the South's industrial revolution.¹⁰³

¹⁰³Louise Leonard to Elizabeth Otey, April 10, 1926, SSS Papers.

IV. POLITICIZING LIVES: THE SOUTHERN SUMMER SCHOOL

The Economics class taught how industry originated and developed.... It showed how most of our conflicts are the result of an economic condition. For this reason changes come about when our economic environment makes it necessary. Therefore all should be prepared for these changes when they come.¹⁰⁴

The school is an indication of a stirring and an awakening, and that is its real significance.¹⁰⁵

The Southern Summer School opened its first session in July 1927 to women industrial laborers from across the South. At that time, no labor union was making a significant effort to organize Southern workers in any industry, not even the textile workers being pushed to their limits by the stretch-out system. As an "independent" institution not officially sponsored by any labor union, the Southern School did not directly organize union locals in Southern factories. Yet its founders and teachers were organizing workers in a broader sense. They tried to motivate the School's worker-students to organize unions by helping them develop an awareness of themselves as members of an exploited class. In the classroom, teachers illustrated lessons about labor history and capitalist economics with student narratives of their experiences in factory and mill town. Students, in turn, placed their experiences of work, protest, and mill village life within a larger socio-economic context. At the Southern School, women workers examined the politics of their everyday lives, viewing them in terms of race and gender, as well as class. And as they "politicized" their personal experiences, many went on to take an active role in Southern labor struggles, and questioned the justice of the economic system under which they labored.

¹⁰⁴Mary Jordan, "Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry." 1927 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

¹⁰⁵Lois MacDonald, "A New School in the Old South." The Survey, October 15, 1927, 97.

1.

For the most part, the demographic makeup of Southern School students reflected that of Southern women industrial workers. From the School's first residential session in 1927 to its last in 1940, most students came from the more industrialized Southern states: North and South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and Georgia.¹⁰⁶ The majority worked in the region's largest industries -- textiles and garment-making -- with the next largest group employed in tobacco. Their ages illustrated the early age at which women started factory work: at the first session, half of the students were between 18 and 21 years of age. All students had already worked in industry for at least two years; this was a requirement for attendance at the school.¹⁰⁷ For the first several years, students were recruited and funded by local "workers' education committees" made up of middle-class supporters of workers' education, some of whom were also affiliated with the YWCA's education programs. In these early years, some students were sponsored by their labor unions, but not until the Southern organizing drives of the later 1930s did union members make up the majority of Southern School students.

In its racial makeup, however, the Southern School student body did not accurately represent the Southern population of women industrial workers. The Southern School excluded black women from its program. To some degree, this exclusion reflected the segregation of Southern industry (in particular the textile industry), which hired relatively few black women. In addition, the workers' education committees and labor unions that were the school's recruiting-ground were all-white. These facts were reflections of the rigidly white supremacist organization of Southern society at the time, and while teachers and students at the Southern School discussed the politics of race and racial segregation in

¹⁰⁶Each year the Southern School rented a different Southern school or camp. The first session was held at Sweet Briar College, a women's school in Virginia. Each year after that, the School rented a different facility in North Carolina.

¹⁰⁷"Statistics of Students of the Southern Summer School, 1927." SSS Papers.

the classroom, the school did not venture to challenge this racist order by admitting the black women who stemmed tobacco leaves and swept cotton mill floors.

The Southern School offered white women workers an educational opportunity that many of them had missed, having quit school at age 14 or earlier to start work in factories. Louise Leonard wrote that the 1927 class of 24 students, of whom 7 had completed at least one year of high school, "represents more schooling than is generally obtained among women in industry."¹⁰⁸ The core of the school's curriculum was the economics course, where students studied the economic system they lived in, and its history, with an emphasis on labor. In the English class, instructors helped students develop speaking and writing skills, using topics from the economics course. The health and physical education class was devoted to helping students combat the effects of factory work and poverty on their bodies. A 1927 newspaper article described health instructor Ontee Bell's "emphasis upon exercise, diet and other factors which would help to prevent physical defects likely to result from conditions of industrial employment."¹⁰⁹ Of her stay at the school, one student wrote, "Due to the milk I drink in the afternoons and the afternoon naps I take, I feel that I am in a more healthy condition than I was when I came here. I have gained three pounds in five weeks, so I think it has done me a lot of good."¹¹⁰ Students also produced plays depicting factory work and mill village life, and filled their time with other "cultural" activities, as Leonard wrote: "Need for pleasure and relaxation was met by athletics and recreation, by a course in appreciation of music and by informal poetry hours Sunday evenings. The music included learning songs of workers' solidarity and the poetry programs were often from the labor poetry of Sandburg or other moderns..."¹¹¹ The school provided a respite from physically exhausting and mind-numbing factory work, and

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹"Sweet Briar College Scene Summer Industrial School." Lynchburg News, July 31, 1927.

¹¹⁰Student narrative printed in the Southern School newsletter The News, November 1932.

¹¹¹Louise Leonard, typescript of 1928 speech to [?], SSS Papers.

from housework and caretaking of family members, which normally filled these women's time.

The very work that students were escaping formed the basis of their studies at the Southern School. In 1927 Lois MacDonald taught English at the school, and then from 1928 to 1936 she taught the economics course. MacDonald's economics course focused on the material organization of society under capitalism, and on Southern School students' place as wage workers within that system. In one of her course outlines, MacDonald wrote, "In our Economics class...we study the ways in which men [sic] work together to make a living, particularly the part which the wage earner plays in the business of supplying the needs of the world. On the one hand we study our work, because there we spend most of our energy and out of that we get our own living; on the other hand we study the system in which we work."¹¹² MacDonald outlined the fundamental workings of this "system" that shaped students' work experiences. She described profit as the driving force behind business and industry, and "private property" as the guiding principle "on which the goods of the world are distributed to the various groups who must live."¹¹³ Students examined their own function as workers within the economic system, and how it differed from that of other classes. Through their labor, workers produced goods; yet, MacDonald emphasized, "in the process of distribution labor is at a disadvantage, since labor-power is not a commodity which can be saved. A worker must sell her labor for the best price she can, but if she is not pleased with the price she cannot save it until later."¹¹⁴

MacDonald and other teachers at the Southern School used students' own experiences to illustrate the economic concepts they studied. MacDonald began her 1931 course with "A Picture of Ourselves," a session in which students shared information about their working conditions, hours, and wages.¹¹⁵ Students' familiarity with the workings of

¹¹²"Economics Outlines Compiled from Class Discussion, 1928" SSS Papers.

¹¹³Lois MacDonald, "Labor Economics: A Course for Workers," 1931, SSS Papers.

¹¹⁴"Economics Outlines, 1928," SSS Papers.

¹¹⁵MacDonald, "Labor Economics, 1931," SSS Papers.

economics on the level of their own "experience and knowledge" formed the "basis" of the economics class, according to MacDonald.¹¹⁶ Caroline Ware, a former instructor at Bryn Mawr Summer School who taught the Southern School's economics course in 1937,

described how students' experiences were part of the lessons:

From the first day, the class did the talking. I furnished material from time to time to build out their personal examples to a national scale, as a step in teaching them to think beyond the personal narrative....By the 7th lesson I thought that they were ready to begin to work abstractly as well as descriptively and I started on the idea of the economic system as a system. This was a hard bump to get over...because the discussion seemed more remote and less relevant to them....[This difficulty] was eliminated the following day by a discussion of the need of being able to outsmart the boss as well as to fight him, and there was no further difficulty growing out of a feeling of remoteness.¹¹⁷

Both Ware and MacDonald introduced the politics of "the economic system as a system" in the classroom through the politics of students' work experiences. They used students' shop floor conflicts with "the boss" to explain class relations in a production system driven, as MacDonald described, by profit.

Students looked at this system, and their experiences within it, in a historical context. MacDonald introduced students to the historical "evolution" of economic systems, from "primitive economics," the "manorial system," craft guilds and the "handicraft system," through the development of industrial capitalism.¹¹⁸ They studied Southern economic history, comparing the development of industry in the South --and the accompanying effects on workers' lives -- to the same process in other regions: "This was an industrial revolution....The same conditions prevailed in the South that we studied in connection with the Industrial Revolution in England. Long hours, low wages, poor sanitary conditions, working very small children were some of the evils."¹¹⁹ MacDonald

¹¹⁶"Economics Outlines, 1928," SSS Papers.

¹¹⁷Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 137; Caroline F. Ware, "Report on Economics Class, July 9-31 [1937]," SSS Papers.

¹¹⁸"Economics Outlines, 1928," SSS Papers.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

made historical comparisons in terms that students knew from their own work lives:

"There were people on the [feudal] manor who managed it and who had authority. These were the 'bosses.' The workers on the manor were the tenants. There are within our own economic organization some institutions which are in some respects like the manor....

Those mentioned by the class were: 1) large plantations, especially the plantations in the South before the Civil War; 2) the tenant farmer; 3) the company owned industrial town."¹²⁰ With historical comparisons, instructors demonstrated how class relations shaped students' own lives, just as they had shaped the lives of working people in other periods.

The Southern School provided a group setting for students to examine their class experiences. In the classroom, Louise Leonard wrote, students shared their stories with each other: "Starting with the common interest of all members of the class -- their own jobs in factories -- they discuss [these jobs]....From others, in the class, a weaver in a textile mill -- cotton, silk, or rayon -- learns something of the processes of the work of fellow students who may roll cigars, operate a machine in a cigarette factory, make overalls, or make candy."¹²¹ In English class, students developed speaking and writing skills by telling each other not only about their work processes, but also about wage cuts and work hours, speed-ups, and relations with foremen and family members. In this context they could learn about living and working conditions beyond their own factories and villages, and could see similarities between their experiences and those of other workers. Students at the 1930 session shared common experiences of being their families' sole breadwinners amidst the high unemployment of the Depression: "The married women who have to support several children and in some cases, husbands who cannot get work heard many who are not married tell of their support of grandparents or parents, of younger sisters and

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹Louise Leonard, "School for Workers Who Have Moved from Mountain to Mill," Mountain Life and Work, January 1931.

brothers, or of older ones who could not get work."¹²² After a wave of labor unrest and union activity in the region's textile mills in 1929, students found their employers used similar anti-union tactics: "A weaver in a cotton mill said she was unemployed because she had joined a union....Another cotton mill weaver said because of her activities in a strike she had been out of work for over a year. A warper in a Virginia mill said she had worked twenty-one years in one factory but that because she joined the union she was told her services were no longer needed."¹²³

Students' descriptions of their common experiences were informed by the economic concepts that they learned in class. One Alabama garment worker attributed unemployment in her industry to the same profit motive that students discussed in Lois MacDonald's class:

Spring and summer garments are light weight, while the fall and winter garments are heavy. When the season changes, the rush orders begin to come in.. The one idea of management is to get garments, and as many of them as possible, on the market. Inexperienced workers are placed, and skilled ones rushed. Soon the orders are filled, work begins to slacken, and we find ourselves working short time with additional workers to share our work.¹²⁴

In the classroom, students linked the inequalities they experienced in their everyday lives to the profit-driven economic system. In the 1931 Scrapbook, one student asked, "what price tobacco profits?":

In the tobacco plant where I am employed...in the past two years new machines have been introduced....Each of these new machines eliminates about five girls....With the introduction of new machinery comes huge dividends for the manufacturer. In the year 1930 the American Tobacco Company declared \$43,000,000 profits, \$13,000,000 increase over the preceding year....The average wage in my department is twelve dollars a week. Because the people are in such dire need they work for almost nothing while the employer is getting greater and greater profits.¹²⁵

Repeatedly, their narratives described the contradictions this system produced.

¹²²"Talking It Over," 1930 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴"Unemployment in an Alabama City," 1930 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹²⁵"What Price Tobacco Profits?", 1931 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

Seasonal unemployment can be avoided by careful planning of productions and also by using some workers for all seasons. If this can't be done the worker should be paid enough to live on during the dull seasons....Every machine is provided for when dull seasons come but the human machine.¹²⁶

In the mill where I work, which is a cotton mill, I don't think that the waste from the machines which is gathered at the end of the day would be much. You would only find a few yards of bad cloth....The company would look at this as a terrible waste and often have the overseers go around once and twice a week and ask the workers to be more careful to not make so much. On the other hand, we find the company paying one hundred and sixty dollars for decorations for a float to parade on the Fourth of July. We also find them spending thousands of dollars to build a YMCA in a dirty filthy mill village.¹²⁷

In their own lives, Southern School students saw clear differences between the class interests of workers and factory owners. They described these differences as results of the economic system they studied at the school, a system in which owners "hold the money and the mill worker doesn't get enough to make life any better for himself."¹²⁸

At the 1929 session, students produced a play illustrating class inequalities. In Work and Wealth -- A Modern Morality Play, "Work" and "Wealth" were two characters who led very different lives: "WORK is a slim girl in a worn gingham dress. Her face is white with dark lines of weariness on it. Her shoulders droop. She walks slowly with bent head. WEALTH wears an evening gown and jewels. She is confident, complacent and bored."¹²⁹ Work and Wealth's differences become clear from the moment they first encounter one another:

WORK enters slowly from the rear right, walking slowly
up the path....
WORK: I'm so tired! (Sighs, draws her arm across her
forehead)....
WEALTH: Tired? Why are you tired?
WORK: (In surprise) Why from work, of course!

¹²⁶Pearl Young, "What Can Be Done to Help Unemployment." 1928 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹²⁷"Waste," 1930 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹²⁸"A Mill Village," 1931 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹²⁹Playscript, "Work and Wealth -- A Modern Morality Play [1929]." SSS Papers.

WEALTH: Does that make you tired? Tell me how to do it.
 WORK: (Amazed) Don't you know? Who are you?
 WEALTH: (Proudly) My name is Wealth.
 WORK: Oh! (They eye each other) How lucky you are!
 WEALTH: Lucky? I'm not lucky. I'm bored.¹³⁰

The other characters in the play show the economic reasons for the gulf between Work and Wealth:

PROFITS comes swaggering in. His hands are full of bills; so are his pockets. He goes servilely up to Wealth and gives her great handfuls of money. Wealth takes them carelessly paying no attention to him....
 WORK: (watching Profits as he strolls carelessly around behind Wealth) Who is that finely dressed gentleman?
 WEALTH: ...(absent-mindedly) Who? What gentleman? (Work nods toward Profits) Oh! That's only Profits. He is useful but an awful bore. Hasn't an idea in his head.
 WORK: I thought he was the president of the mill where I work.
 WEALTH: He is. He runs all the mills.¹³¹

While Work is constantly shadowed by Overwork, Disease, Ignorance, Poverty, and Machinery, Wealth is waited on hand and foot by Leisure, Book-learning, Pleasure, Health, and Luxury. The play's end reflects students' experience of the stretch-out system in textile mills:

Poverty, Ignorance, Overwork, Disease, Unemployment and Accident fall into line behind Machinery pushing Work on. They put their hands on one another's shoulders, and fall into a chain gang step. Overwork cracks a whip and keeps crying: 'Faster, faster.' The line goes around in a circle, passing before Wealth who sits propped on pillows reading lazily, now and then opening her vanity case and powdering her nose. She pays no attention as the line passes before her and slowly leaves the stage.¹³²

Drama instructor Hollace Ransdell "wrote out the lines" of Work and Wealth "as the students spoke them."¹³³ The play depicted the politics of class that students knew from their own lives.

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹Ibid.

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds." 167.

Of the Southern School, one student wrote, "We come together to study each others' experiences, to obtain a working knowledge of the economic structure of the world: in order that we may have an intelligent understanding of our position as the working class and what course it is best for us to pursue to better our conditions."¹³⁴ As women at the Southern School examined the class politics of their lives, the course they settled upon was collective working-class action through labor unions. One garment worker learned the importance of solidarity on the factory floor, when her employer introduced new machinery:

The boss wanted to see how many dozens the girls could produce in a day [on the new machines] so they could set the piece wage....We had one girl who hadn't been on the operation long. She thought that here was a good chance to get on the good side of the boss so she worked hard and produced more than the others. Well, our rate was set by her production. She didn't have the other girls' interests at heart....This is what happens when workers are not organized and do not stand by one another.¹³⁵

Many workers at the Southern School saw "sticking together" as the only possible way for workers to challenge their employers' power, in factories and in society as a whole. Often, their goal was equalizing the wealth imbalance between the classes. Student Olive Pippin described how the Depression intensified this imbalance for workers in Alabama:

The honest men of toil have worked...but their wages were so miserably poor that they were unable to save anything and when this depression came about and so many were thrown out of work they and their families must suffer...while the bosses, these men of wealth, enjoy more luxuries each year.... The people should study the situation and devise some plan of distributing the wealth more evenly through control of wages and prices. The workers...must organize, and contend for their rights."¹³⁶

Lucile Reynolds defined the goal more broadly: "The hours are far too long and the wages too small. The workers must have more time to themselves and more comforts. The workers want freedom from fear of unemployment, disease, and sickness. If workers

¹³⁴Introduction, 1932 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹³⁵"New Machines and How They Set Wages," 1927 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹³⁶Olive Pippin, "Job Hunters and Job Owners," 1931 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

would only realize that this could be gotten by solidarity they would get together and organize a union and work toward that purpose."¹³⁷

Some students saw labor unions as workers' only source of strength in the shop floor struggle with the boss, a way of equalizing power, not just wealth:

One day in the cigarette factory word was passed around that the president of the company was coming to pay a visit. ...There were a lot of men with him looking very important with their silk shirts and diamond studs and stick pins. One of these smart men picked up a handful of cigarettes and found just one of them bad....This man showed the cigarettes to the president, [who] called the foreman and had the girl [who made the cigarette] fired....This girl would have her job now if this had been a union shop, because in a union shop the worker has to go before a committee which decides whether she is to be fired or not.¹³⁸

Union members at the school compared their own experiences with the stories of unorganized workers, and found they fared better, in terms of power on the shop floor as well as money: "I make fronts for overalls. I get three dollars a bundle while in a non-union shop you just get \$1.87....If you belong to a union you don't have to fight for yourself all the time. You have someone else to help you. In union there is strength, and when we stick together we can accomplish so much more."¹³⁹

At the Southern School, students examined the economic system through the lens of their own and other workers' experiences. As they heard their classmates' similar stories about working conditions, low wages, and powerlessness in the factory, they turned the lens around, to examine -- and criticize -- how the economic system shaped their own lives as members of the working class. Mary Jordan, a silk weaver at the school's first session, wrote later, "While at the school I looked at the industrial system from a different angle than before I went. I had felt like the Industrial Order was really a nice thing -- it supplied the wants of people and tended to make them happier; but the people who

¹³⁷Lucile Reynolds, "Candy Wrapping," 1931 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹³⁸"The President Visits the Factory," 1931 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹³⁹Alice Carmichael, "The Difference Between Non-Union and Union Shops," 1928 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

work in industry should have a chance at happiness too."¹⁴⁰ A box maker from the 1928 session wrote, "I consider the discussions of the working conditions with the other students a great value, as it made me realize how we need a change in our industrial world."¹⁴¹ The "change" that they hoped to bring about was an equalization of wealth and power between the owning class and the producing class, and they sought to effect this change through working-class solidarity in labor unions: "why should we not have a fuller realization of our position in industry, and organize real trade unions through which we may know and possess greater freedom and more effective protection?"¹⁴² Despite the economic poverty in which many Southern School students lived, and the overwhelming control that many of their employers exerted in factories and mill towns, students like Ruth Caully were optimistic about labor organizing's potential for changing the "industrial order." She wrote a song for the 1927 student Scrapbook, to be sung to the tune of "Jingle Bells:"

Southern girls awake, Southern girls arise,
Better conditions make, get your share of the prize
Although there's work it's true, if we will dare and do
We'll get a decent living wage, and a little surplus too.

Agitate, Educate, Organize today
If we all together stay success will come our way
Agitate, Educate, Organize today
Oh what fun when we get more time to live and play.¹⁴³

2.

The 1931 session of the Southern Summer School was attended by a British textile worker named Millie Sample, who had previously attended the Bryn Mawr and Vineyard Shore workers' schools. At these other schools, she wrote,

¹⁴⁰"What Students Have Said," Southern Summer School brochure, 1930. SSS Papers.

¹⁴¹Ibid.

¹⁴²Elbe Robertson, "Why Workers Should Form Real Labor Unions." 1927 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

¹⁴³1927 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

I had seen the clash of Latin, Nordic, and Slavic temperaments. I had heard heated discussions between Catholics, Protestants, Jews and atheists....I had taken part in discussions...of Latin girls who did not think the working women of the world needed to believe anything about economic or social problems, but should leave all those things to the men, of young Russian communists who were convinced that the future of the race depended on their efficient propaganda....Slowly I had waded my way through a mass of organizations until now I could talk about the A.F.of L., the C.P.L.A., the I.L.D., the L.I.D., the C.P. of A., and the ABCDEF with anybody."¹⁴⁴

Upon her arrival at the Southern School, Sample wrote, "I thought at last I had found peace....Here the girls had the same background; most of them were the first or second generation of industrial workers, practically all were of Anglo-Saxon stock and Protestant in their religion....There did not seem to be any question on which there was a difference of opinion and I settled down with a sigh of relief."¹⁴⁵ The students of the Southern School were indeed racially homogeneous, and all were women. But their lives were shaped by the politics of race and gender, and these politics emerged in classroom discussion as they examined the role of class in their lives. Once Sample had taken part in one of these discussions, she wrote that she "had a slight misgiving as to whether it was going to be as peaceful as I had thought when I first arrived there."¹⁴⁶

Every year, the Southern School invited speakers from organized labor and liberal organizations to address students about labor and other "social problems." One of these "problems" was the racial segregation of the South. In 1928, at a regional Labor Conference held at the school, "A.F. of L. representatives reported from Georgia and North Carolina especially that the organization of colored workers is being encouraged by white workers," and a student wrote in the Scrapbook that "the students agreed that white and colored workers would have to be treated on an equal basis."¹⁴⁷ But most of the students did not escape so easily from the white supremacist values that they, as white

¹⁴⁴Millie Sample, "Impressions," 1931, SSS Papers.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷1928 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

Southerners, had learned from birth. Millie Sample wrote that "many of the girls had long cherished hopes of going to Bryn Mawr Summer School, but when they were told that colored girls were admitted to Bryn Mawr they looked pained and distressed, and didn't know just what to make of this state of affairs."¹⁴⁸ The previous year, when students discussed "attitudes towards the Negro race" in class, "four girls refused to take part in the discussion, saying, 'I haven't got anything to say,' or 'I don't know anything about it.'" When the possibility of "social equality of the races" came up in the discussion. "One girl said, 'I don't want any associations whatsoever with Negroes.'"¹⁴⁹

While tasks in Southern factories were segregated by race, blacks and whites did work in the same industries and factories. For some students, this common status as workers brought them to question racial discrimination. In class discussion, "one woman said that she had watched a Negro woman in her mill down on the floor scrubbing, that she had a large family to support, that the Negro woman's work was more unhealthy than hers, and she couldn't see why the woman should not make as much as she did."¹⁵⁰ Students discovered that the powerlessness they experienced as workers was compounded by racism for black workers: "One girl said the Negro man who hands the girls the fillers for their machines was almost crying one day because of an insult of one of the white girls. She said he would have lost his job if he had complained."¹⁵¹ Recognizing the working-class experiences they shared with black workers brought some students to question racial hierarchies, if in a limited fashion: "after all we ought to consider they have to live just as we do....Negroes are human beings even if they are black and I think when they do the same work they should receive the same wages as whites."¹⁵² As they examined their own experiences of class and economic inequality, students saw the injustice inherent in their

¹⁴⁸Sample, "Impressions," SSS Papers.

¹⁴⁹"Talking It Over," SSS Papers.

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Bilcilyar Rook, "Wages of the Negro Laborer," 1927 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

own white privilege: "it was pointed out to them that the ruling class treated them in exactly the same way as they treated the Negroes, and if they resented the way they were treated then certainly the Negroes resented their conditions also."¹⁵³

In the class discussion of "racial attitudes," Millie Sample wrote, "the fact stood out that Negro or white they were all workers and should be fighting a common enemy."¹⁵⁴ Some Southern School students saw solidarity between white and black workers as crucial to the success of labor unions: "Without organizing workers of all races, creeds, and nationalities we [will] never solve the workers' problems of today....My plea is to forget the color of people and organize all workers for the working class of people are all struggling for the same purpose: better conditions."¹⁵⁵

But to many students, the importance of cross-racial organizing seemed to have more to do with protecting the status of white workers than with principles of racial equality. Students called for organizing black workers because, "if we look things in the face we see that paying negroes low wages keeps our wages low," "if we don't organize the negro he will take our jobs away from us because he will work a lower wage," and "until the worker of the South comes forward and tries to help the Negro laborer understand his problems, the white laborer will be handicapped by the Negro's undercutting and lowering standards for workers."¹⁵⁶ For these students, viewing racism in terms of their own class position allowed them to phrase their "pleas" for cross-racial organizing in terms of protecting white workers. One student said that "the white people in her shop had been undercut by the Negroes but that they did not want Negroes in their union or to join with them in a strike. She ended with, 'It is necessary to protect our rights.'"¹⁵⁷ Southern School students recognized that the politics of class shaped black

¹⁵³Sample, "Impressions," SSS Papers.

¹⁵⁴Ibid.

¹⁵⁵"My Attitude Toward the Colored Race," 1930 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁵⁶Ibid.; Rook, "Wages of the Negro Laborer;" Ruth Shackelford, "The Negro," 1932 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁵⁷"Talking It Over," SSS Papers.

workers' lives as much as their own, and this recognition led them to question racism in an industrial setting. But many students' questions had little to do with challenging white privilege or creating racial equality. Southern School students' race privilege allowed them to examine the economic inequality they felt in their own lives, without challenging racial inequality.

Student Elbe Robertson's song "The Awakening" exemplified this, comparing the slavery of the Old South with the "modern slavery" of industrial wage labor, but failing to mention blacks who labored both as slaves and wage workers, and were excluded from the Southern School:

It was 'way back in the eighteen-sixties
That we had a bloody fight
Now the breach is closed that was caused by slavery
But it's never made all things right.

Though we each one boast of the glorious Southland
That to us now seems so dear
Yet in our hearts we are very certain
That the bond-man still is here.

For we pay high rents and work long hours
While our wages are very small
But if we howl about these conditions
Then we have no job at all....

Should we tarry on in this modern slavery
Where our cries are never heard
Should we spend our lives making others richer
While our own wants are deferred?

No, the Summer School has brought a dawning
Of a bright and glorious day
For it's here we've learned how to solve our problems
In the "Organization" way.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸Elbe Robertson, "The Awakening" [to the tune of "Old Ninety-Seven"]. 1927 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

3.

The Southern School did not invite outside speakers to talk about gender inequality and the specific position of women workers in industry. But as students examined the economic realities of their lives in the classroom, gender politics emerged. Class discussion contrasted the material facts of women's lives with their inferior status and lower wages as workers: "On the whole the wages of women are smaller than those of men, often for the same work," they found, and outlined the standard explanations for the wage gap: women's physical weakness, status as "secondary" income earners, and their tendency to quit work when they married. But "the class found that there was not much truth in the claims. One half of them pay board and contribute more in some way or other to the family budget. Many women who marry must go back to work to support families."¹⁵⁹ Students used their own experiences to disprove prevalent myths that allowed employers to treat women as second-class workers: "Apparently we like to deceive ourselves....the girls in industry only enter as they think for a very short time. Very soon, they keep thinking, 'I shall marry, then I shall not work any more.' But aren't we mistaken about this?...do the women who marry leave industry? We all know as a general thing this is not true."¹⁶⁰ This student, like others, saw the gender-specific exploitation of women workers as further reason for them to organize: "we should be more interested in our own conditions and this means that we must thoroughly realize our place in industry in order that we may protect ourselves."¹⁶¹

Students examined not only the work they performed in the factory, but also the housework and other gendered labor that they, as women, performed at home. In economics class, they gained a sense of women's central economic role as workers throughout history: "Among the working class, women have always helped to make the

¹⁵⁹"Economic Outlines from Class Discussion," 1928, SSS Papers.

¹⁶⁰Elbe Robertson, "Why Workers Should Form Real Labor Unions," 1927 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁶¹Ibid.

living. We have studied of the periods before the factory system when women helped with agriculture, weaving, shoe making....With the changes that resulted in the factory system, women left their homes and went to the factories to work."¹⁶² Students also described the importance of women's labor at home: "nearly two-thirds of the married women working are mothers who have children less than five years old. About half of these take in boarders, do laundry, or some other form of work to help support their children."¹⁶³

In their frequent assertions that "women have always worked" and descriptions of women's work at home, students at the Southern School challenged prevailing Depression-era gender ideology that declared women's place to be "in the home" and not competing with men for scarce wage-paying jobs.¹⁶⁴ The Southern School classroom became the site of heated discussions about married women's wage work, as Millie Sample described:

In class two of the girls made speeches on the problem of the married woman in industry. There was no disaster which had affected the working class from the time of the flood down to the present which had not had its roots in the fact that married women worked. Two of the married women replied and showed the group that married women had always been an economic unit, even before the days of the industrial revolution, now their place of work had moved from the home to the factory....The war was on and the dormitory, cottage, campus, gym, tennis court, dining room and the path down to the swimming pool resounded to the sounds of the battle as each one insisted on putting their case as to why they did or did not believe in married women working.¹⁶⁵

The idea that "women have always worked," in the home if not in the factory, was central to the arguments of the defenders of married women workers: "Some girls think that as long as mother takes in washings, keeps ten or twelve boarders or perhaps takes in sewing, she isn't working. But I say that either one of the three is as hard work as women could do. So if they do that at home and don't get any wages for it, why would it not be all right

¹⁶²Helen Gregory, "Women in Industry." 1927 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

¹⁶³Alfarata LeTeour, "Women in Industry," 1932 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

¹⁶⁴Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 256.

¹⁶⁵Sample, "Impressions."

for them to go to a factory and receive pay for what they do?"¹⁶⁶ The economic realities of working women's lives -- of students' own lives, the subject of their studies at the Southern School -- formed the basis of their criticism of gender ideology.

Some students challenged prevailing gender roles even more directly. Bessie Edens asserted women's right to economic independence: "sometimes a woman that is married does not have to work, but she has a feeling she would like to earn some money and be independent, would like to know that she could spend her money as she wished."¹⁶⁷ Another student described her desire for her own job, and her husband's response: "As the years went by, I realized more and more how narrow and close my life had been....One morning I had a great surprise for my husband. When he got ready for work I was ready to go to work too. He was wroth and insisted that I stay at home....I couldn't see why it wouldn't be all right for me to work."¹⁶⁸ Bessie Edens clearly identified the contradictions inherent in gender roles that privileged men and denied married women an autonomous existence: "Why should not a married woman work, if a single one does? What would men think if they were told that a married man should not work? And if a married man works, why should not a married woman work if she wants to?"¹⁶⁹ Edens phrased her challenge to gender inequality in much the same way that her classmates criticized economic inequality and called on workers to organize:

Before the machine age, the women had to spin and weave the cloth for all the garments used by the entire family.... Women have always worked harder than men and always had to look up to the man and feel that they were weaker and inferior. Nearly all men want us to feel that way.

If we women would not be so submissive and take every thing for granted, if we would awake and stand up for our rights, this world would be a better place to live in, at least it would be better for the women.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶Bessie Edens, "Why A Married Woman Should Work," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁶⁷Ibid.

¹⁶⁸"Plans and Work," 1930 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁶⁹Edens, "Why A Married Woman Should Work," SSS Papers.

¹⁷⁰Ibid.

Edens and other Southern School students derived their criticisms of male privilege from their working-class experiences -- as wage workers, expected to vacate their jobs for men, and as workers in the home, expected to perform the bulk of household work. They also examined the politics of race in terms of economic class, questioning the racist privileging of white workers over black workers, and the divisive effects of racism on the working class. Their criticisms of gender hierarchy were more extensive than their criticisms of racism -- perhaps because of the white privilege they themselves enjoyed. But in both cases, students derived their criticism from the politics they experienced in their own lives, and examined at the Southern School.

4.

The year 1929 saw the explosion of the powder-keg that the stretch-out system had created in Southern textile mills. In March, workers in the rayon mills of Elizabethton, Tennessee walked out in protest of low wages, working conditions, and the firing of a worker who had asked for a raise. Over the rest of the year, close to ten thousand workers spontaneously went on strike in 350 mills in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.¹⁷¹ Workers came from strikes in Elizabethton and Marion, North Carolina to the 1929 session of the Southern School, bringing their first-hand experiences of worker solidarity and employer repression. The Marion strike became part of the Southern School "classroom" that summer, and workers carried what they had learned at the school with them into organizing and workers' education activities in Marion and other communities. Sometimes the ideas that Southern School students carried back to their towns and factories were more radical than the Elizabethton workers' demands for "higher wages and better treatment," however.¹⁷² For some students, examining the class politics of their lives

¹⁷¹ Philip S. Foner, Women and the American Labor Movement: From World War I to the Present (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 228.

¹⁷² 1930 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

brought them to question not just their treatment by employers, but the entire economic system under which they worked. Some students emerged from the school with the goal of replacing capitalism with a system run by workers.

By the time the 1929 session of the Southern School started, the strike at the Marion Manufacturing Company was in full swing. Louise Leonard told the school's central committee that the "industrial struggles" in places like Marion and Elizabethton "have made the approach to the study of economics more realistic....The discussion of trade unionism has been precipitated by the participation of the students in recent strikes."¹⁷³

The hours that the employees work at this mill are ten, eleven and twelve hours and twenty minutes.... The weave room is very hot, has bad lights, has bad ventilation, and is very noisy....There are but few seats provided for the workers and no wash room at all. All these conditions could be made better if the company could be forced to look after this like it ought to be or if the owners of the mill thought enough of their help to have these conditions made better....

The employees of the mill walked out on a strike on the 11th of July, for shorter hours and for the same pay they were already getting for longer hours. This is the 9th day of August and we are still on strike. Do you blame us for striking.¹⁷⁴

Marion was forty miles from Burnsville, where the school was held that year. When an injunction was issued against the strikers, "the forty-two members of the school, students and faculty," attended the hearings "in a body, note books in hand, and thus acquired more vivid knowledge of this method of opposition which...they had been studying in class."¹⁷⁵ When the injunction was upheld, with a statement allowing "peaceful picketing and striking," students discussed the outcome: "Some felt it was at least a half victory for the

¹⁷³Minutes, Southern Summer School Central Committee Meeting, Burnsville, NC, August 2-4, 1929, SSS Papers.

¹⁷⁴"The Marion Manufacturing Company," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁷⁵Louise Leonard, "A Worker's School and Organized Labor," American Teacher, 1929.

union. Others...concluded that it was a complete victory, while still others could not see where anything had been changed at all."¹⁷⁶ That day, students attended a strike meeting in Marion, which one student listed as one of the "high spots" of the session: "Miss Leonard, Catherine Howard, Evelyn Hardin, and Bessie Edens spoke. We all sang."¹⁷⁷ The labor struggle going on in Marion became part of the Southern School's lessons that summer.

Students at the school brought their own experiences in the strikes into the Southern School classroom as well. Their stories gave concrete examples of the importance of working-class solidarity, and the difficulty of strikes for workers whose paycheck was their only source of income. The summer after the Elizabethton strike, a student told of the hardships she and her family suffered: "I went hungry part of the time, and took food from my children and gave it to [other strikers]. I gave them money when I had it, and I have sent to the store and bought groceries on credit to give them. All that I could do was not much, because my husband and I were both out of work."¹⁷⁸ The same student, who was blacklisted, expressed a sense of the importance of her role in the strike: "I have not worked since April 1929. My husband has worked six months since April 1929. We are both out of work and owe five hundred dollars; but we feel like there will be some way out, and I do not regret doing what I did in the...strike in Elizabethton. All that are working in the mills now are getting better wages and they only work eight hours a day now....We feel like, though we have suffered more than any one will ever know, we want to help other workers to better their conditions."¹⁷⁹

Other Southern School students went on to become involved in strikes after they left the school. Grace Elliott led workers' education classes in Marion after she attended the 1930 session: "we have open discussions of any labor question or problem that might

¹⁷⁶News Release, August 17, 1929, Southern Summer School. SSS Papers.

¹⁷⁷"High Spots of the Southern Summer School," 1929 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

¹⁷⁸"Hard Times in Elizabethton," 1930 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

¹⁷⁹Ibid.

arise, also keep up with all strikes possible. Tho we had a long hard strike here and have suffered an awful lot from it we still have a keen interest in all labor problems and in these classes is the place to educate and acquaint ourselves to these things."¹⁸⁰ When cotton mill workers in Danville, Virginia went on strike just after the 1930 session, returning students "were pressed into service...The officials in charge of organization looked to them for definite help....[They are] translating their school experience into service for their fellow workers."¹⁸¹ In many ways the school did become the training ground for workers' involvement in the labor movement that its founders envisioned. Every year it sent students back into communities to teach workers' education classes, and become involved in organizing drives. The school published a newsletter in 1930 detailing the activities of former students: "Rosa Holland, Class of 1929, of East Marion, North Carolina, has been working at Relief Headquarters in Marion....Dossie Witt, 1929, has been made chairman of the Workers' Education committee in Lynchburg....Vesta Finley and Ola Akins both spoke several times before labor groups in their communities."¹⁸² Other students expressed interests like Mattie May Hayes: "I would like to introduce the idea of a study class in Economics or some subject that would get the workers dissatisfied with their working conditions....If I can get the people dissatisfied with their working conditions, their hours and wages, etc., there is the possibility of organizing a textile workers' union."¹⁸³ At the 1929 session, Dossie Witt wrote of the importance of the Southern School as preparation for participation in the labor movement: "The school this year is interesting and important because of the many strikes we have had in the rayon and cotton mills this spring. We people of the South are waking up to the fact that our conditions are

¹⁸⁰Grace Elliott to Louise Leonard, January [?], 1931, SSS Papers.

¹⁸¹Lillian Herstein, "The Significance of the Southern School for Women Workers in the Workers' Education Movement," American Teacher, 1930.

¹⁸²The [SSS] News, February 1930, SSS Papers.

¹⁸³Mattie May Hayes, "What I Would Like to Do When I Go Home," 1927 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

bad. We are finding that we must cooperate and demand what we want and really need, so we came to this school to learn how to do these things."¹⁸⁴

The politics that students saw in their lives at the Southern School motivated many to play an active part in the labor movement. A telephone operator at the 1928 session wrote that the school "gives us a better understanding of right and wrong conditions under which people work, and how we as workers can help better these conditions through co-operation."¹⁸⁵ Students developed a strong concept of "right and wrong conditions" as they studied the economic system's creation of two classes of people, and this concept of "right and wrong" compelled them to action:

Before I went [to the Southern School] I was only
interested in myself. My ambition was that someday
I might command a large salary and have some leisure.
...This alone can not content me any more. As long as
the wages of some people are so small that a mere existence
is all they get, as long as they work such long hours that
they have no time for study or play I can never be satisfied.
...I know it takes time for changes to come, but I hope I
may be able to do something to hasten them.¹⁸⁶

The notion of "right and wrong conditions" motivated some students to look for larger solutions to the inequality they saw: "The cotton mill companies may give one hundred dollars each to the [community] chest and then pay wages as low as ten dollars per week, not enough to take care of one person, not to mention a family of four and maybe two of them small children....There is certainly something wrong somewhere that should be put right in some way."¹⁸⁷ Other students were more specific about what needed to be "put right," as in this song, written for a "labor pageant" at the 1928 session: "Now machinery swift and new/ Has changed the whole world thro and thro/ By workers' hands the world is fed/ Will capital always be the head?"¹⁸⁸ Some students wanted to right the

¹⁸⁴Dossie Witt, "Why We Came to the Southern Summer School," 1929 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁸⁵"What Students Have Said," SSS Papers.

¹⁸⁶Mary Jordan, "At the Southern Summer School," American National Red Cross High School Service, May 1928.

¹⁸⁷"Something's Wrong," 1930 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁸⁸"Song for the Labor Pageant," 1928 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

wrongs of capitalism by replacing it with an economic system in which workers owned the means of production.

Southern School instructors encouraged students to think about the possibility of radical change, in their emphasis on students' own experiences, and their specificity to a capitalist system. Lois MacDonald's history lessons depicted capitalism as a historically specific economic system, rather than a "natural" or unchangeable way of life. The course treated "machinery, profit making, [and] the legal framework of the modern system" as "evolving techniques -- based on habit, on trial and error rather than rational conduct."¹⁸⁹ MacDonald told students, "our habit is to take our economic system and conditions for granted, just as we do the fact that we breathe....Unless we have trouble we think that it had gone on forever as it is and that it will continue to operate in the same way. We shall find that our system is the product of past ways which men followed to make their living."¹⁹⁰ By teaching about "past ways" of economic organization, MacDonald opened up the possibility that other economic systems could exist. Even a simple explanation of "factors of production" demonstrated this possibility. "Land," "capital," "managing ability," and "labor" were listed as factors "considered necessary usually in the productive process;" however, MacDonald pointed out, "there are some workers...who think that the manager is not a necessity, but that those who actually work in industry can undertake the management as well."¹⁹¹

Caroline Ware introduced radical political ideas like this into the economics course by focusing on students' own working-class experiences.

I did not bring up the question of social philosophies because I thought that it was much more effective if [students] arrived at their own ideas about the economic system for themselves....they have bugaboo feelings about 'communism' etc. that have to be undercut. I think the chances of undercutting the bugaboo are much better

¹⁸⁹MacDonald, "Labor Economics, 1931," SSS Papers.

¹⁹⁰"Economics Outlines, 1928," SSS Papers.

¹⁹¹Ibid.

if they discover that the communists are advocating the very things that they themselves have figured out make sense.

After the class had discussed the problem of machines putting workers out of work, and we had considered the cotton picker 'if there weren't any planter, only the tenant families on a plantation,' and a specific example of machinery in a garment shop 'if the union were running the shop instead of the boss,' it was perfectly natural to turn to the [New Russia's] Primer again and read the paragraphs about making mechanical slaves work for the workers so that life might be better for all."¹⁹²

Ware and MacDonald used students' own experiences to suggest the possibility of radical transformation of the economic system. They tried, as Ware put it, "to get the girls where they could think about their problems...in terms of the whole economic system of which they are a part;...where they would have a sense of the possibilities of a better life and a better society; and where they would envisage a wide role for their unions and other forms of collective activity."¹⁹³

To some students, this "better society" was a socialist one. Eula Mae McGowan's answer to the question, "what do you expect from workers' education?" was: "I expect the workers through education to work out their own economic system and by their greater number to put it into practice." She saw mill owners' use of the stretch-out system as a sign that this day was approaching: "Capitalists know they are losing control of the workers or they would not be striving to fasten their chains tighter. There is going to be a change, whether the workers are educated or not. If they are educated they can handle the situation intelligently. If they are not then there is bound to be a nasty upheaval."¹⁹⁴ In 1932 Vivian Moreland wrote that the Depression showed "that the whole rotten system of capitalism is on the verge of collapse; banks failing, industries and stores closing down, rich men becoming poor, capitalists preparing the way for revolution by the intolerable conditions they force upon workers, and by the attacks on their unions." The role of

¹⁹²Ware, "Report on Economics Class, 1937." SSS Papers.

¹⁹³Ibid.

¹⁹⁴Eula Mae McGowan, "What I Expect from Workers' Education." 1928 Scrapbook. SSS Papers.

workers was to replace this system: "when capitalism goes over the brink into chaos, there must be some other system to take its place. We must be ready to meet the crisis."¹⁹⁵

Moreland titled her essay, "Signs of Better Times."

Workers at the Southern School examined how their everyday experiences in their factories, homes, and communities resulted from the larger organization of their society along class, race, and gender lines. Seeing their own lives as political brought them to question the structures that produced the inequalities they experienced. In particular, they saw their capacity, through collective working-class action, to change the system that produced economic inequality. For some, this meant organizing labor unions to obtain "higher wages and better treatment."¹⁹⁶ It led others to propose a more fundamental challenge to capitalism. For students in both groups, their political education at the Southern School brought them to political action in their factories and towns, as they participated in worker protest, and organized labor unions and workers' education classes. Vivian Moreland described the process: "Here we come together in a group where we learn each other's problems and are a strength to one another while we study the things we need to know....After thought and study, we wish to act. This action, which usually begins at home in the form of talking and writing to our friends and neighbors...results in labor organizations and strikes."¹⁹⁷ Because the women workers at the Southern School connected their own lives to the political structures that shaped them, the school became, in the words of a labor reporter, "the classroom of the southern labor movement," preparing its students to organize in their communities and factories.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵Vivian Moreland, "Signs of Better Times," 1932, SSS Papers.

¹⁹⁶1930 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

¹⁹⁷Moreland, "Signs of Better Times," SSS Papers.

¹⁹⁸Jack Herling, "Southern Summer School Real Workers' College," Federated Press, August 24, 1929.

V. CONCLUSION

We workers, here in school, have seen why we should cooperate with other workers in one big union. *We have been shown how the capitalists work to keep the people oppressed and keep them from rebelling against the low wages and long hours which they receive. We realize, after studying the economic system that the best method of relief to be obtained is by overthrowing the capitalist system and setting up a workers' government controlled by the people, with equal rights for all.* We have also learned the causes of various business depressions and their remedies. We are studying now, how we may cooperate with the labor movement in our home town on our return.¹⁹⁹

Beulah Sowards wrote this passage at the 1932 session of the Southern Summer School. Later that year, the passage was reprinted, with the italicized passage omitted, in a newsletter that the Southern School sent to financial donors, alumni, and prospective students. Through the 14 years of its existence as a residential workers' education program, the Southern School depended for financial and organizational support on a network of individuals and groups whose political orientation ranged from conservative to radical. To maintain this support, and to protect the program from public attack by Southern industrialists and anti-communists, the school's administration was mindful of how it portrayed the school in publicity, often concealing the challenges that students wanted to pose to Southern industrial capitalism after attending the school. The school also altered its programs in later years to serve the needs of the new Southern unions whose members were attending in large numbers. Ironically, it was not conservative attack that made the Southern School classroom less concerned with the politics of students' lives, but rather the very development of a Southern labor movement that the school itself had promoted.

¹⁹⁹Beulah Sowards, 1932 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

From its beginnings, the central committee of the Southern School was concerned with using publicity to avoid criticism and maintain its base of support. At an organizational meeting in 1926, eight months before the opening of the school's first session, the committee decided "that it was very important to get the right kind of publicity and to have one person responsible for what was given out. It was felt that the best way to fight criticism of the project was to give very clear and well-guided publicity material to the groups who would be interested in raising money or sending students."²⁰⁰ The school declared its purpose to be "to give women in industry an opportunity through study and discussion to develop a deeper appreciation of life; and a clearer understanding of their part and responsibility as industrial workers." This statement was reprinted in almost every newspaper article and flyer about the school, and gave no hint of the political content of the Southern School classroom. Much of the publicity that the school distributed, in the form of press releases and brochures, indicated nothing about its promotion of union organizing. This careful covering-up of the school's political aspects resulted in rather vague descriptions of the school in more mainstream Southern newspapers. Some were so vague that they sounded almost like coded statements of the school's actual goals: "[The school's] purpose is...better to fit the girls for the positions they now hold -- to make them more influential and more useful to themselves, their fellow workers and their communities, to enable them to appreciate more of the finer things in life and to indicate to them methods by which access to these things may be obtained." The article's headline read, "Twenty-five Southern Girls Work Under Capable Faculty to Better Fit Themselves for Present Occupations," which bears little resemblance to student Mattie May Hayes' intention to "get the workers dissatisfied with their working conditions" upon her return to her factory.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰"Minutes of Committee Meeting, November 13-14, 1926, Richmond, Virginia." SSS Papers.

²⁰¹"Sweet Briar College Scene Summer Industrial School," Lynchburg (VA) News, July 31, 1927; Mattie May Hayes, "What I Would Like to Do When I Go Home," 1927 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

In 1930 Leonard emphasized the importance of the support of Southern liberals for the school in a memo to the central committee: "There is no doubt that we must have the support of liberals in Southern communities....In many places the liberals agree to be members of workers' education committees, believing that a moral principle is involved and that someone must stand back of the right of industrial women to attend summer schools without any censoring of the curricula."²⁰² While the statements the school made to liberals usually acknowledged its goal of promoting the labor movement, they were often worded as apolitically as the publicity given to mainstream media. This passage from a Southern School fundraising pamphlet described the school as an opportunity for recreation and respite for underprivileged workers, mentioning nothing of the political views students might bring back to their communities: "To many of the women who have come to the School, these few weeks have been the one bright ray in a dark life. Whatever else may happen to them, at least they feel they have had six weeks in which to taste some of the good things of life, such as congenial companionship, leisure, long tramps on country roads, rambles through the woods, wholesome food, rest and freedom from financial and family worries."²⁰³ Other statements to liberal benefactors portrayed the school as a benefit to all economic classes, and a way to prevent what Louise Leonard referred to as "revolt of workers...strikes -- use of violence -- industrial warfare." "The South does not want the long bitter struggle between capital and labor that has come with industrialism elsewhere, if it can be avoided....In the name of social betterment for the wide southern community, here is a chance to chip in on a promising project of social understanding."²⁰⁴ In this way, the school ensured the support of middle-class Southerners who might not have contributed to an institution they knew emphasized opposing class interests and encouraged workers' participation in strikes.

²⁰²Louise Leonard, memorandum to central committee, 1930. SSS Papers.

²⁰³"Southern School for Women Workers in Industry [fundraising pamphlet]." 1931. SSS Papers.

²⁰⁴Leonard, "School for Workers Who Have Moved from Mountain to Mill;" Broadus Mitchell, fundraising letter, April 29, 1931, SSS Papers.

The "spin" that the Southern School put on its publicity did not completely shelter it from opposition. In 1929, when students and teachers actively participated in the nearby Marion, North Carolina strike, the town of Burnsville briefly cut off the water supply to the facility the school was renting there:

The action of the board is said to have taken place without warning because of alleged non-payment of the water bill. ...Directors of the school stated today that water supply expenses were included in the rental....[They] charged that the action of the board was prompted by an antagonistic feeling towards the school because of the presence of five girls from Elizabethton, Tennessee, and seven from Marion, and stated that the alleged bitter feeling began several weeks ago when Albert Hoffman, labor organizer in the textile strike area, visited the school for a conference.²⁰⁵

The school received regional as well as local opposition. In 1932 David Clark, editor of the trade paper Southern Textile Bulletin, accused the school of radicalism and stirring up labor unrest: "Every year girls from Southern industries, but especially from the textile industry, are brought to this so-called summer school. They are instructed in socialism, communism, and an effort made to create with them a nuclei [sic] for future labor troubles."²⁰⁶ An editorial in a local newspaper commented on Clark's accusations: "if a case can be made out against the 'Southern Summer School' of the 'red' shade...that institution's career in this section will soon end. The atmosphere of the mountains is not at all favorable to Socialism or Communism."²⁰⁷ The school was allowed to remain in Hendersonville that summer, but it felt longer-term effects of opposition from Southern industrialists and anti-communists. Leonard told the school's central committee that factory owners had taken out their opposition on women workers: "In Knoxville, the girls are afraid. One girl lost her job for going to the YWCA conference and another for attending the Summer School....Girls in Greensboro, in the Atlantic Mill in Macon....and in

²⁰⁵"School Without Water as Board Cuts Off Supply," Burnsville (NC) Citizen, August 16, 1929.

²⁰⁶David Clark, quoted in Hendersonville (NC) Times-News, August 5, 1932.

²⁰⁷Editorial, Hendersonville Times-News, August 5, 1932.

Nashville are afraid of losing their jobs if they come to the SSS."²⁰⁸ The Southern School's careful wording of publicity was a way of staying afloat in the dangerous waters of the pro-industry, anti-left "New South."

The Southern School also had to contend with the conservatism of the American Federation of Labor. Through the mid-1930s, like most workers' schools, the Southern School depended for organized labor support on local unions and state labor federations that belonged to the AFL. But that support was threatened by the school's ties to Brookwood Labor College and its director, A.J. Muste. Muste was openly critical of the craft unionism of the AFL which privileged skilled (usually male) laborers, and isolated union workers in different industries from each other. In the late 1920s he formed a group of dissident unionists, the Conference for Progressive Labor Action (CPLA). At conferences and gatherings at Brookwood, Muste and Brookwood students spoke out in favor of industrial unionism. In response, the AFL disaffiliated Brookwood from its Workers' Education Bureau in 1928, and ordered AFL-affiliated unions to withdraw their support of the school.²⁰⁹

The AFL did not take kindly to the Southern School's maintenance of its connection to Muste. Muste had been instrumental in the original establishment of the Southern School, and traveled to the school almost every year to speak to students. In 1929, AFL President William Green sent a letter to unionists who sat on the school's central committee, bringing to their attention the fact that "Mr. Muste was one of the prime initiators of...a movement hostile to the American Federation of Labor and formed for the avowed purpose of capturing and controlling the [AFL]."²¹⁰ Mary Anderson, Executive Secretary of the federal Department of Labor's Women's Bureau, resigned from the Southern School committee in response, and the other representatives of organized labor on

²⁰⁸Minutes, Central Committee Meeting, Arden, North Carolina, August 15 and 16, 1931, SSS Papers.

²⁰⁹Bloom, "A.J. Muste," 500; Samson, "Education for a New Social Order," 159.

²¹⁰William Green to Mary Barker, June 17, 1929, SSS Papers.

the committee were quick to assure Green that the school presented no challenge to the AFL. W.C. Birthright of the Tennessee Federation of Labor wrote to Green. "if [the school] smacked at anything of a communist nature I would not have any association with it, but I know it has not."²¹¹ American Federation of Teachers President Mary Barker told him, "we are not trying to have the girls adopt any theory....What we are seeking is to have the girls become intelligent about their work as a part of the economic order of things...we want them to see the advantage of collective action to better their condition."²¹² Barker's description of the school was accurate; but, naturally, it did not mention the more radical conclusions at which some of its students arrived as they studied the "economic order of things." The Southern School continued to work with Brookwood, and in 1932 welcomed a CPLA conference to its site in Hendersonville, North Carolina. The school's cooperation with Brookwood earned it the official opposition of the AFL. As a result, the school lost all support from state federations, although local unions continued to make financial contributions and send members to the session.²¹³

In 1935, labor organizing took off in the South. It was spurred by the 1934 nationwide general textile strike (in which many Southern School students took part), the 1935 passage of the federal Wagner Act that gave workers the legal right to organize, and the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a group of unions that supported industrial organization and included the United Textile Workers.²¹⁴ In 1936, the CIO started the Textile Workers Organizing Committee, which initiated a drive to organize Southern workers.²¹⁵ As a result of this organizing activity, the majority of Southern School students who attended the school after 1936 belonged to unions. Whereas union

²¹¹W.C. Birthright to William Green, June 22, 1929, SSS Papers.

²¹²Mary Barker to William Green, June 22, 1929, SSS Papers.

²¹³"Report of the Director," July 1932, SSS Papers.

²¹⁴Foner, 301.

²¹⁵Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 215.

members had made up less than half of the 1930 class, between 75% and 90% of Southern School students were union members after 1936.²¹⁶

In the late 1930s, as the Southern School drew most of its financial support, as well as most of its students, from labor unions, its programs changed to fit these unions' needs. As unions increased their support of the school, they also increasingly pressured the school to admit their male members. In 1938, the Southern School opened its doors to men, and by 1940 over half of the students were male. The first year men attended, Leonard reported that a "heated discussion" on whether married women should work went on for a period of days, until "only statistics could convince differently those who argued that women's place is in the home."²¹⁷

The admission of men was not the only change initiated by the shift in support for the Southern School. With most Southern School students members of unions, Leonard wrote in 1940, "the value of the labor movement has ceased to be debated among the workers attending the school. Instead, members of new unions have come asking for techniques which they as union members need to know."²¹⁸ Courses focused less on the workings of the economic system, and more on the organizational workings of unions, covering procedures such as grievances. In English class, instead of writing personal stories of farm to factory migration or shop floor conditions, students learned how to write minutes at union meetings, and learned basics of parliamentary law. Ironically, as union organizing picked up pace, and the Southern labor movement grew, this movement afforded less of a place for the political and personal education that the Southern School had provided for women workers at its beginnings. It could be said that this was a passing of the union torch from one generation of Southern industrial workers to another, and that

²¹⁶"Statement Concerning the Fourth Session of the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry," 1930, SSS Papers; Louise Leonard, "Summer School Students in Action," 1940 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

²¹⁷Quoted in Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds," 171.

²¹⁸Leonard, "Summer School Students in Action," 1940 Scrapbook, SSS Papers.

as Southern workers became union members, they no longer needed to "politicize" their personal experience to be motivated to join unions. But the fact remains that, when they studied the politics of their lives at the Southern School, women workers not only went on to organize unions, but also to question and challenge the inequalities they found in their lives and, in some cases, the systems that produced these inequalities -- in particular, capitalism. Thus, as the Southern School changed to fit the organizational needs of the new Southern labor unions, it reduced its potential for inspiring radical criticism of capitalism -- a potential that had existed, and that some students had realized, in its original program.

As wartime industry expanded, missing six weeks of work in the summer meant missing high wages and overtime pay, and unions could not afford to compensate workers for the income they lost while attending the Southern School. As a result, the Southern School held its last residence session in 1940. For the following decade, Louise Leonard, Brownie Lee Jones (who directed the school after Leonard's resignation in 1944), and other workers' educators continued the Southern School by organizing conferences for workers and supporting smaller classes on the local level.²¹⁹ By 1950, however, as unions developed courses for their own members, the school found it increasingly difficult to secure financial support, even for smaller programs. As a result, the Southern School ended all of its programs in January 1951.²²⁰

Only about 300 women attended the Southern Summer School in its years as a women's residential school. Though small in number, these women shaped the course of the Southern labor movement in the 1920s and 1930s and beyond, organizing their co-workers and providing a foundation for the unions that were started in the 1930s. Related to their organizing activity -- perhaps a direct cause -- was their examination of the politics of their lives at the Southern School. The school's founders intended worker-students to

²¹⁹Frederickson, "A Place to Speak Our Minds." 219.

²²⁰*Ibid.*, 221.

develop "group consciousness" of the class politics of their experiences in factory and mill town.²²¹ In the process, the students of the Southern School took a conscious role in these political relations, questioning race and gender inequalities, and challenging both the effects and the foundations of capitalism.

²²¹Louise Leonard, letter to [?], 1926, SSS Papers.

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