

MORE THAN LABOR'S ABLE ASSISTANT:  
REDISCOVERING ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

by

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## Table of Contents

Title page	i
Approval Page	ii
Permission for Duplication Page	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	v
Abstract	vi
<i>Introduction: The World of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn</i> .....	1
<i>Chapter One: Labor's Lost Radical</i> .....	7
<i>Chapter Two: Organic Intellectual and the Socialist Ideology</i> .....	25
<i>Chapter Three: Rediscovering Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's Role in the Industrial Workers of the World</i> .....	57
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	85

## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on the early life and activism of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a leading female orator and activist for the syndicalism movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Emerging as a popular oratorical figure in New York in 1905, Flynn became what theorist Antonio Gramsci would describe as an organic intellectual, emerging from within the working class itself to speak to its grievances and articulate a vision of social justice. This thesis seeks to foreground the hybridity of Flynn's involvement in Progressive Era social activism by highlighting her connection to both the world of radical labor unionism and the sphere of socialist and progressive American thought. As a writer, orator, and thinker, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn worked to bridge the internal divisions of the working-class and build unions predicated on class-based solidarity that would lead to fundamental social and economic change. In addition, Flynn was a labor feminist who believed that women's economic independence could not be separated from the movement for her political and social equality. As a representative figure and a singularly significant working-class intellectual, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn warrants the attention of those who seek to better understand how women, labor, and dissident thought intersected in the democratic challenge to industrial capitalism.

## *Introduction: The World of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn*

Defined as an era of unprecedented wealth and luxury, the American Gilded Age appeared to be the pinnacle of industrialism, but as historian Steve Fraser notes, Gilded Ages are often hiding something.<sup>1</sup> During the Progressive Era, which spanned from 1890 to 1920, the underlying tensions of the Gilded Age rose to the surface of American society through movements for social, political, and economic change. By the dawn of the twentieth century, American society had been transformed from a rural, agriculturally based nation to an urban industrial powerhouse. Agriculture had been supplanted by industry as the driving force of the American economy and the mass migration of workers into urban industrial towns altered the social structure of society.<sup>2</sup> The urbanization of American society produced new social relations which were organized according to principles of uniformity, hierarchy, and class stratification that ultimately alienated workers from one another as they were placed in competition for work.

The industrial division of labor intensified pre-existing divisions within the working-class, deepening divides based on socialized ideas of gender, race, ethnicity and nationality. Industrial capitalists utilised these socialized divisions to create competition amongst workers, who were pitted against one another for low-paying and often degrading jobs. The competitive and divisive nature of the industrial capitalist ideology contributed to a growing sense of social isolation, which was reinforced by the inherent individualist ethos of the American psyche. The combination of the industrial capitalism,

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power*, (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2015), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams: Greenwich Village, the America Bohemia, 1910-1960*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 11.

liberal individualism, and the contractual nature of industrial work, fashioned a worldview that legitimized the exploitation of the masses.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of the industrial capitalist ideology as the organizing principle for American society had altered the social, political, and economic structure of the country. The conditions of this new world were thoroughly documented in a report by the 1915 Commission on Industrial Labor, which was formed with the intent of discovering the root cause of social unrest among the working-class. The commission established that working-class resistance to industrial society was spurred by a common rejection of the “industrial feudalism” practiced by American industry. The maldistribution of wealth, continually rising rates of unemployment, routine denial of justice, and the denial of the workers right to organize were representative of the common complaints of workers across the country.<sup>4</sup> The commission’s findings documented the lived experience of the industrial working-class and reinforced labor activists’ claim that a society based on the principles of industrial capitalism could not be reconciled with the Republican ideals of American society.

For many, industrial capitalism did not mean the accumulation of private wealth, but economic hardship and the steady erosion of personal autonomy. However, the primitive accumulation of wealth and the growth of the middle-class painted American society as a place of economic and technological progress, while minimizing the destitute reality of the workers whose labor made such wealth possible. Moreover, the nature of

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur F. McEvory, “The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911: Social Change, Industrial Accidents, and the Evolution of Common-sense Causality,” *Law and Social Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 637, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/828955>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S Commission on Industrial Relations, *Final Report on the Commission of Industrial Relations*, (Washington D.C: Barnard & Miller Print.,1915), 23.

work itself changed as principles of scientific management, commonly referred to as Taylorism, were introduced to increase economic and labor productivity. By dividing the production process into a series of simple repetitive tasks to be performed by an individual worker whom was no longer considered to be an individual of independent skill, but rather an extension of the machine he operated.

However, in the midst of the American speed-up voices of dissent and resistance could be heard beneath the rhythmic drumming of industrial production. Dissenting voices and discontent workers had formed labor unions in the mid-nineteenth century in resistance to industrial capitalism's particular vision of "progress". Rooted in the ideological roots of emancipation and the free labor ideology, the American labor movement was born out of the resistance of nineteenth century industrial workers intent on safeguarding and ensuring the inherent value and autonomy of the worker. The American labor movement worked to disrupt the lock-step progression of industrialism, pushing back against the exploitative practices of the new capitalist masters of industry. The early resistance movement peaked in the drive for an eight hour work day which culminated in the events of the infamous Haymarket Square Riot of 1886. Organised as a show of industrial solidarity with striking miners from the McCormick Harvesting Machine Corporation, the Haymarket Rally was catapulted into labor history when a bomb exploded killing six officers, four workers, and injuring hundreds more. Attributing the explosion to the area's anarchist movement, the subsequent execution of four anarchist leaders became a rallying point for labor activists.<sup>5</sup> In an unprecedented display of working-class solidarity, mass sympathy strikes and boycotts erupted across the

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<sup>5</sup>Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence*, 117.

country and introduced the concept of a class-conscious general strike into the American labor movement.

The labor movement grew alongside industry in a continuous fight to protect and establish rights for the working-class. Labor unions and movement organizers drew from the professionalism and bureaucratic nature of industrial society, transforming the reformer from a philanthropist to a professional activist.<sup>6</sup> Labor leaders reached a level of recognition akin to political figures and indeed many would become political leaders themselves. Those such as Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs and labor organizer Mary Harris Jones attracted crowds of listeners curious about the appealing ideas of American socialism and labor reform. Unions such as the Knights of Labor, with their particular brand of industrial unionism, had succeeded in fashioning a culture of opposition by organizing labor along industry lines regardless of sex or race and promoting bonds of working-class solidarity. The Knights of Labor sought to establish a Cooperative Commonwealth under which the autonomy of the worker would be restored and economic and political power would be shared across all members of society. The industrial unionism of the Knights was radically different from other unions of its time. Organizing on industrial lines- regardless of sex, race, or nationality – made the union a place of social equality.<sup>7</sup>

The introduction of industrial capitalism fundamentally altered the lives of American workers, but it also established a new class of wealthy elite who challenged the dominant social and cultural ideals of society. Increased access to wealth and power

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<sup>6</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker: 1865- 1920*, (Illinois: Harlon Davidson Inc., 1985), 79.

<sup>7</sup> Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence*, 122.

opened new avenues for middle-class Americans, particularly middle-class women, to advocate for social and political change. The darlings of the Progressive Era, the New Women were educated, athletic, and driven to lead a life of purpose. Fondly remembered as the frontrunners of Feminism and champions of social reform, the New Women used their social status to agitate for women's suffrage and increased access to professional forms of work that fit their educated status.<sup>8</sup> However, although the New Women represented a departure from the Victorian ideals of femininity, her demands for education and entrance into the professional sphere offered an opportunity to support the cause of women without altering the basic view of the woman as the moral centre of society.<sup>9</sup> The New Women were not alone in establishing a movement for women's emancipation, yet they continue to dominate the historical record in this respect. Working women and reformers such as Mary Harris Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn led a generation of working-class women who demonstrated strength and militancy through the American labor movement in an attempt to assert their status as both women and workers in the industrial world.<sup>10</sup>

The Progressive Era marks a pivotal moment in American history, capturing a time when the future was not yet certain. Ideas of social and political revolution infused the daily life of American society as people from all classes engaged in debates centred on issues of political economy. Socialism and industrial capitalism competed for ideological influence; tensions between nativist and immigrant thinkers were explored,

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<sup>8</sup> Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Domain in American Reform 1890-1935*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 48.

<sup>9</sup> Muncy, "Creating a Female Domain," 3.

<sup>10</sup> Elliot J. Gorn, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 5.

and debates about gender and class polarized social movements. Between 1890 and 1920, American society was imagining a way to live differently and navigating the complex world of ideas that polarized society. It is within this context that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's early activism must be studied. Flynn was part of a generation of women who emerged to challenge the dominant social and cultural ideas of American society, and herself became one of the most influential working-class women on the radical left during the Progressive Era.

## *Chapter One:*

### *Labor's Lost Radical: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in History and Historiography*

Born in 1890 in Concord, New Hampshire, to an Irish-American family, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was the product of the combined struggle of her working-class parents, whose total combined income was often just enough to keep the family from falling into a permanent state of poverty.<sup>11</sup> Flynn's parents, Thomas and Annie (Gurley) Flynn, found solace in their deep connection to the nationalist traditions of their ancestral homeland, and instilled their four children with a deep sense of pride in their Irish identity. The Flynn children were taught to take pride in their Irish working-class identity through the retelling of the heroic myths of Ireland and histories of American labor struggles which thematically focused on stories of struggle and resistance in the face of oppression.<sup>12</sup> In the Flynn home, rebels and martyrs were idealised for their resistance to oppressive rule and willingness to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs and held up as an example to the Flynn children. Having been raised to feel a deep connection with her revolutionary heritage, to Flynn rebellion was more than just an idea; it was her history.

Flynn's early life, however, was not simply spent listening to the stories of past struggles; she observed the active engagement of both her parents in forms of social, political, and ideological resistance. Both Flynn parents had been actively involved in nineteenth century working-class resistance as members of the Knights of Labor and continued to practice the union's ideas of inclusivity and egalitarianism.<sup>13</sup> Her father, Thomas Flynn, worked sporadically as a quarry worker and civil engineer, but was

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: My First Life 1905-1926*, rev. ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1994), 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 29.

frequently unemployed due to his activities with the Anti-Imperial League, Socialist Labor Party, and subsequent Socialist Party.<sup>14</sup> Flynn's mother, Annie Gurley, was radical in her own right. An ardent suffragist and advocate for women's rights, Annie Gurley frequently brought her children to meetings at which leading female figures spoke and instilled her daughters with a belief that their gender placed no limits on what they could accomplish. An exceptionally bright child, Flynn eagerly accompanied her mother to meetings to hear women social reformers and intellectuals tackle issues of women's emancipation.<sup>15</sup> Her early exposure to feminist thought developed an intrinsic respect for the cause of women's emancipation that was strengthened by Flynn's intense respect for her mother whose admiration for "women of intelligence who did worthwhile things in the world" drove Flynn to lead a life worthy of her mother's admiration.<sup>16</sup>

As a child, much of Flynn's life was spent in transition from one factory town to the next as her father tried to find work.<sup>17</sup> Settling for the longest duration in the Bronx of New York City, the Flynn household became actively involved with the local socialist community. Their home became the meeting place for the Irish Socialist Club, and became a hub of ideas and debate that fed the curiosity of the young Flynn.<sup>18</sup> While her siblings slept, Flynn would listen to the speakers with a reverence that can only be understood as a sort of religious devotion. By exposing their children to a world of critical social thought, the Flynn parents created an atmosphere that taught their children respect for those who fought against oppression and to seek out ways in which they too

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<sup>14</sup> Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, "Elizabeth Gurley Flynn" in *American Radical*, eds., Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Harvey J. Kaye, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 129.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Lara Vapnek. *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: Modern American Revolutionary*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 2015), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 73.

could affect the world around them. Such an atmosphere instilled Flynn with a confidence and belief that to stand firmly behind one's convictions, even if at times that meant standing alone, was not only honourable but necessary.

Flynn's direct experience with the appalling conditions of working-class life motivated Flynn to understand the system responsible for it, and find ways she could change it. Flynn used her experience as a member of the working class to inform her arguments as a member of her high school debate team through which she developed her oratorical and debating skills. Her fiery style and sharp logical arguments captured the attention of the audience who heard her speak. As reported by labor journalist, Mary Heaton Vorse, "when Elizabeth Gurley Flynn spoke the excitement of the crowd became a visible thing."<sup>19</sup>

It was her oratorical style that first drew attention to the young Flynn. Describing her presence during a free-speech campaign in Spokane, Washington, Harvey O'Connor remembered a young girl who was "a hellion that breathed reddish flame; fairly sober reporters affirmed that a flash from the girl's blue-grey eyes would serve to light a sweet caporal."<sup>20</sup> Even as a new figure in the world of public debate, the teenage Flynn had a magnetic presence.

Part of this magnetism was her ability to comprehend and articulate the socialist ideology in a manner that exceeded the expectations of those she encountered. Flynn delivered her first public speech on socialism on January 31, 1906 at the Harlem Socialist Club and quickly became a popular soapbox speaker on the streets of New York. Flynn's

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Heaton Vorse, qtd. In Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of WWI, Vol I*, (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 434.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle: A Memoir*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 35.

speech entitled, “What is Socialism,” reflected her understanding of the ideology and the ways in which her own understanding had been informed through years of reading reformist literature and attending meeting with her parents. Flynn’s socialist rhetoric closely resembled a form of the ideology popularized by Eugene Debs, which appealed to the production ethos of American society.<sup>21</sup> American socialism, commonly referred to as Debsian socialism, advocated for a complete rejection of the profit motive of industrial society and articulated a desire to establish a society run by the producers of wealth.<sup>22</sup>

The central themes of American Socialism reflected the emancipatory idealism of the American past, an idealism that would later be reflected in Flynn’s own concept of the socialist ideology. Through an amalgam of personal experience and literary influence, Flynn’s early socialist understanding was anchored in a central belief in the necessity of economic emancipation. While economic freedom represents a constant theme in Elizabeth’s speeches and writing, her socialist understanding evolved over time to incorporate a variety of ideas she absorbed from influential literary works and individuals.

Flynn was introduced to the world of radical social thought through her first boyfriend, Fred Robinson, who was the son of early birth control advocate Dr. William S. Robinson. Through Fred, she was introduced to the legendary anarchist Emma Goldman and began directly interacting with the radicals of American society<sup>23</sup> Flynn’s socialist

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<sup>21</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Burwood, “Debsian Socialism through a Transnational Lens,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2, no.3 (2003): 257. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25144335>.

<sup>23</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 49.

understanding developed organically through her exposure to literary and public sources and a fierce commitment to maintaining her own independence of thought.

A headstrong and independent youth, Flynn resented the influence of those who sought to impose their own ideological conception of socialism without allowing her the freedom to form her own opinion.<sup>24</sup> Flynn's determination to maintain intellectual independence was manifested in her desire to write her initial speeches without the assistance of the older male figures in her life. By independently crafting her speeches Flynn was able to demonstrate her ability to comprehend and articulate the nuances of socialism, which attracted the interest of local Socialist clubs. At sixteen, Flynn was invited to speak in Newark at a meeting of the Socialist Labor Party, an appearance that altered the trajectory of Flynn's life.<sup>25</sup>

Before her trip to Newark, Flynn believed her contribution to the world of labor would be as a constitutional lawyer defending the rights of the working-class. However, in Newark, Flynn was introduced to Irish socialist and labor activist James Connolly who introduced her to a world where her impact could be much more immediate. Connolly was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical syndicalist industrial union intent on the formation of "One Big Union" and the establishment of an industrial democracy. The radical union appealed to the youthful militancy of Flynn who quickly became a member upon her return to New York City.

As an orator for the IWW, Flynn organized men and women of all nationalities across the country. Attracted to the democratic ethos of the union whom she believed

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

“inspires workers through its unity of the practical everyday needs with the ultimate revolutionary ideal of emancipation,” Flynn found a vehicle through which she could directly affect the lives of those around her.<sup>26</sup> She remained active within the IWW and American labor for over two decades until suffering a physical and psychological break in 1927 after a series of labor defeats and personal blows. Flynn entered into a decade long period of seclusion before re-emerging as a member of the American Communist Party in 1937, which she would remain a committed member of until her death in the Soviet Union in 1964.

As the leading female orator of the IWW, Flynn rose to a place of prominence during a period when women remained unrepresented in labor unions despite being the most “portentously growing factor in the labor force.”<sup>27</sup> Flynn’s position in the IWW placed her in a uniquely influential role within the working-class and allowed her to break down gendered barriers to women’s unionism. Born into a time of social, political and cultural transition, Flynn navigated the waters of American resistance in an effort to overcome divisive boundaries and unite the working-class through bonds of class solidarity. It is in this context that Flynn can be conceptualized as an organic intellectual, a theoretical concept developed by Marxian theorist Antonio Gramsci to denote a working-class intellectual who directly affected social change.<sup>28</sup>

As an orator and organizer, Flynn believed that a true labor victory was achieved through two elements, an economic advancement and the acquiring of a revolutionary

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Women in Industry Should Organize,” in *Words on Fire: The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn*, ed. Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 92.

<sup>27</sup> U.S Commission on Industrial Relations, *Final Report*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Antonio Gramsci, “Prison Notebooks: the Intellectuals.” in *An Anthology of Western Marxism: From Lukács ad Gramsci to Socialist-Feminism.*, ed., Roger S. Gottlieb, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 113.

spirit.<sup>29</sup> In Flynn's mind, the acquisition of a revolutionary spirit meant a revolution in social and class consciousness that transcended the internal divisions of the industrial working-class. Advocating for a revolution in both the ideological and physical world, Flynn worked to transcend class and gender barriers to build a class-conscious movement towards the emancipation of American society.

While Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's life is a fascinating example of American radicalism and ideological advancement worthy of full length study, but the purpose of this thesis is to pull Flynn from the shadows of Progressive Era labor history where she has been relegated to a marginal and often devalued position. Flynn has proved a difficult topic for students of labor and women's history as she does not neatly fit within the bounds of either. Flynn exists largely in the background of radical America, supporting a diverse range of causes that span from birth control to labor, free speech to sexual modernism. However, despite the wide net cast by Flynn's vision, her socialist conception centred on the revolutionary spirit of social emancipation.

### *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in Historiography*

Flynn's historical narrative is still in the process of being crafted. Her death in the early 1960s makes her a relatively new subject for historical analysis and the end of Cold War anti-communist ideologies allows for a greater freedom in exploring the life of a former leader of the American Communist Party. It was her prominent position within the Communist Party that contributed to her marginalization in Progressive Era labor

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "The Truth about the Paterson Strike," in *Words on Fire*, 111.

history as she fell subject to the academic censorship of the Cold War Era that in many ways lingers in today's popular historical imagination.

Historians often choose to study Flynn in the context of how she was depicted by journalists of her time, as the “beauteous, black-haired firebrand” of the IWW.<sup>30</sup> As written by Mary Heaton Vorse, Flynn was “the picture of a youthful revolutionary girl,” but her contribution to American labor history transcends the bounds of a merely physical presence.<sup>31</sup> Flynn used her public position to attract media attention and publicity to the strikes and battles waged by the IWW, drawing attention to the plight of the working class in the process. However, despite her reputation as “Miss IWW”, Flynn remains a neglected figure in the history of American labor and has been placed in a marginal position within the historiography of the Industrial Workers of the World.

Flynn's appearance in the historiography of the IWW is rare and often done in a manner that undermines her contribution to the revolutionary union. Given the lack of attention paid by historians, it is safe to suggest that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn quite literally wrote herself into history. Flynn's autobiography, *The Rebel Girl: My First Life*, is a first-hand account of IWW activities and the first to truly incorporate Flynn into the movements and actions of the IWW. Originally published in 1955, the work fell victim to prior censorship as its author was imprisoned under the Smith Act and strong feelings of anti-communism effectively silencing many Marxist historians who may have likely taken up the study of Flynn. *The Rebel Girl* was republished in 1973 during the rise of

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<sup>30</sup> Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol IV: The Industrial Workers of the World 1905-1917*, (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 182.

<sup>31</sup> Vapnek, *Modern American Revolutionary*, 40.

radical feminism and the advent of the study of women's history, which in turn introduced a new set of biases concerning the role of the woman and women's activism.

The intellectual and social atmosphere of the 1960s broke down many of the social barriers to the study of the American labor movement and offered new avenues of historical study. The advent of social history and the development of women's history, attempted to counter-act the tokenism of previous historical accounts by focusing on the lesser known figures of America's past. The growth of the women's movement during the 1970s further developed the field of women's history and set the stage for Flynn's re-introduction into the historical world. Historians of gender and women's history were interested in discovering the more "masculine" women of American history, that is, women who did not strictly conform to historical ideas of femininity, to diversify a field that was increasingly dominated by "great women".<sup>32</sup> The history of the Progressive Era has been dominated by the image of the New Women, but during the 1970s an interest in moving beyond the idealised "lady" of the Progressive Era emerged amongst radical feminist historians. Those who encountered Flynn were eager to make her fit the mold of the radical feminist, but in doing so, have produced a fragmented picture of Flynn's early life.

Philip S. Foner's lengthy 1979 study entitled, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I*, represents the first critical attempt at historicizing the role of women in organized labor and the first to incorporate

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<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth J. Clapp. "The Women's Suffrage Movement: 1848- 1920" in *The Practice of U.S. Women's History: Narratives, Intersections, and Dialogues*, eds., S.J. Kleinberg, E. Boris and V.L. Ruiz, (Rutgers University Press, 2007), 238-257.

Flynn into the broader context of Progressive labor history<sup>33</sup> Foner uses Flynn to interrogate the contradictory nature of the IWW's stance on female unionism while subsequently depicting Flynn as the spearhead for women's rights within the union.<sup>34</sup> However, by focusing solely on Flynn in her capacity as a female organizer, Foner neglects to critically examine her broader involvement with the cultural and social movements of the era that incorporated both cross-cultural and cross-class activities.

A critical feminist interpretation of Flynn was written by Ann Schofield in her article "Rebel Girls and Union Maids: The Woman Question in the Journals of the AFL and IWW, 1905-1920."<sup>35</sup> Schofield's critical study of the language used in the journals and publications of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and IWW examines the place of women within each union and uses Flynn's persona as the "Rebel Girl" to demonstrate that as much as the Rebel Girl of the labor departed from conventional standards, she was still not released from traditional forms of domesticity.<sup>36</sup>

Further feminist study of Flynn was undertaken by Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall in her 1980 publication, *Words on Fire: The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn*, a landmark in the historiography of Flynn. Baxandall's work paired a historical analysis of Flynn with a collection of documents authored by Flynn from various periods of her life. However, Baxandall's active involvement in the radical feminist movement heavily influenced her study of Flynn upon discovering her papers at the American Institute of

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<sup>33</sup> Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of WWI. Vol I*, (New York: The Free Press, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 406.

<sup>35</sup> Ann Schofield, "Rebel Girls and Union Maids: The Woman Question in the Journals of the AFL and IWW, 1905-1920," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 2, (Summer 1983): 335-358  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177496>.

<sup>36</sup> Schofield, "Rebel Girls," 336.

Marxist Studies.<sup>37</sup> Baxandall was eager to present Flynn as a radical feminist and as such fell into the pattern of other radical feminists of the period who often overlooked issues concerning class solidarity in favour of identifying themes of “sisterhood” which united women against oppressive societal structures.

Helen C. Camp’s, *Iron in Her Soul: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and the American Left*, published in 1995, was the first full length study of Flynn’s life.<sup>38</sup> This source situates Flynn in her historical context, integrating her into the broader movements for social and personal emancipation of the period. Camp uses documents produced by Flynn as well as secondary documentation to examine her influential role in infamous labor battles such as the free speech fights and the “Bread and Roses” strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Arguably, Lara Vapnek’s, *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: Modern American Revolutionary*, represents the most value historical account of Flynn as Vapnek uses her life to trace the rise and fall of American radicalism.<sup>39</sup> Vapnek’s interdisciplinary approach to Flynn, as a gender and labor historian, creates a more accurate rendering of Flynn in both a historical, social, and political context. Vapnek’s work incorporates every source mentioned in this historiography as well as a broad range of secondary sources and makes extensive use of Flynn’s own papers. Vapnek’s meticulously researched and critically analysed approach makes this work the best in the historical study of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

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<sup>37</sup> Baxandall, *Words on Fire*, vii.

<sup>38</sup> Helen C. Camp, *Iron in Her Soul: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and the American Left*, (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> Lara Vapnek. *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: Modern American Revolutionary*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 2015).

In the case of Flynn, history has a habit of making her into something she is not. For many, she has been the token woman of the IWW, representative of the working woman's potential within the union, yet rarely is she examined in a manner that situates her into the broader historical context of the era. Through an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating both social and intellectual perspectives, this thesis seeks to foreground the contributions of Flynn and recognize her broader significance as an influential figure of the Progressive Era. Focusing primarily on Flynn as an orator and organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World between the years 1905 and 1914, this thesis will be divided into two sections; the first focusing on Flynn as an organic intellectual of the working-class and the second focusing on rediscovering Flynn's influential role in the IWW.

This thesis will be attempting to pull Flynn from her marginalized position as labor's able assistant, the token woman who "smiled and waved" beside her male counterpart.<sup>40</sup> Often marginalized by union leaders because of her youth, Flynn actively worked to compensate for her lack of experience by learning about the conditions and cultures of the people she organized. In her autobiography, Flynn recalls "I was a listener, anxious to overcome the handicap of youth and inexperience" and it was this that made Flynn wise beyond her years.<sup>41</sup> Although a retrospective statement, Flynn's words are validated in the study of her early activism. Flynn could be found in the factories, the mines, and the homes of workers; she was eager to experience the life of those she fought for and because of this brought an element of sincerity to her speeches that drew the

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<sup>40</sup> Bruce Watson, *Bread and Rose: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream*, (New York: Viking, 2005), 210.

<sup>41</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 83.

attention of the worker. Flynn is a complex figure whose ideas appealed to many throughout American society, but before attempting to examine Flynn's activism, it is necessary to become familiarized with the union to which she dedicated her youth.

### *The Industrial Workers of the World in Historiography*

Formed in 1905 by experienced labor organizers and militant socialists, the IWW combined principles of direct action with socialism to form the syndicalist union. By incorporating the socialist rejection of the wage system and a philosophy of economic determinism with anarchist tactics of direct action, the IWW both inherited the egalitarian vision of the Knights of Labor and envisioned a new way to establish an industrial democracy.<sup>42</sup> In its determined to build a class-conscious, working-class movement towards social revolution, the IWW did not refuse members based on trade, craft, gender, race, or nationality preferring to organize along class-lines to build "One Big Union" predicated on class-solidarity.<sup>43</sup> This radically democratic approach to unionism harkened back to the days of the Knights of Labor and sought to continue the legacy that had been left after the collapse of the Knights after the Haymarket Rebellion of 1886.

The collapse of the Knights of Labor had left only the "pure and simple" craft unionism of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) at the forefront of the American labor movement. The AFL's practice of craft unionism excluded a vast majority of the working-class – namely migrant workers, immigrants, and women – who were deemed unskilled and thus did not qualify for membership in AFL organized unions. Craft

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<sup>42</sup> Paul F. Brissenden, "The Launching of the Industrial Workers of the World," *University of California Publications in Economics* 4, no. 1 (November 1913): 1-82.

<sup>43</sup> Vincent St John, "The IWW: its history, structure, and methods," last modified 2005, University of Arizona, [Online Exhibit], <http://www.library.arizona.edu/exhibits/bisbee/docs/019.html> in University of Arizona Special Collections.

unionism, while benefiting those who could gain access, served to strengthen the divisions of working-class life; infusing the labor movement with a sense of loyalty to craft over class systematically divided workers into craft based movements for individual reform.

During a period of social ferment, labor organizers who were excluded from the AFL saw unions becoming powerless in their push for industrial democracy and decided to build a union capable of reasserting labor's influence. In this spirit, a secret meeting of the nation's progressively minded labor leaders was arranged for January 2, 1905, at which the leaders could debate the merits of possibly creating a new class-based union. The meeting was attended by twenty-two delegates, with Mary Harris Jones being the only female in a position of influence.<sup>44</sup> Known to history as the January Conference, this meeting consisted of three days of intense discussion between all parties as to what was needed to bring the American Labor movement into the twentieth century. The leaders were in agreement that the movement was in desperate need of a union which would practice the principles of industrial unionism, as opposed to the divisive craft unionism utilised by the AFL. The conference produced a manifesto which was then presented to all "true believers" at a June 27th conference in which the Industrial Workers of the World was formed.

The newly formed IWW was intent to organize those who "possess nothing, only their labor power which they are compelled to sell in hard toil merely to live and to

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<sup>44</sup>Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: the story of Syndicalism in the United States*, (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc.,1967), 37.

dwelling<sup>45</sup> and faced exclusion from the unions of the American Federation of Labor based on craft, skill, race, and gender. However, this radically democratic union suffered from its own internal divisions. After its inception, there emerged an idea of two separate IWW's within the union, one in the West and one in the East. The western IWW consisted of largely native born single men while the eastern IWW was a racially and ethnically diverse group of industrial workers with a large number of women.<sup>46</sup> This coastal division highlighted the complexity and diversity of working-class life and the challenge inherent in attempting to provide a singular theory of working-class emancipation. Activists, like Flynn, who practiced an adaptive approach to labor organization became human links between industry, ethnicity and gender and served as integral points of connection to connect the struggles of the individual worker to a larger concept of class struggle.

It was during its initial years that the IWW pioneered new strike tactics and used civil disobedience as a form of organized resistance in labor conflicts. Credited with the first recorded sit-down strike in American labor history, the IWW asserted new forms of non-violent resistance that targeted company profits in order to assert working-class power over industry.<sup>47</sup> Between 1905 and 1927, the IWW was the most radical industrial union in America, fearlessly fighting for workers' rights and waging free speech fights to protect the constitutional rights of the working-class. The IWW organized and led numerous Free Speech fights and bloody labor confrontations including the 1912

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<sup>45</sup> William. E. Trautman, "Structure of Industrial Unionism," *The Industrial Bulletin*, January 4, 1908, ( 3. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/industrialworker/iub/v1n45-jan-04-1908-iub.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 398.

<sup>47</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, (Chicago: Quardrangle Books, 1969), 126.

Lawrence, Massachusetts “Bread and Roses” strike and the 1913 Paterson, New Jersey silk strike. The rapid spread of the IWW and its socialist inspired ideas of industrial democracy instilled a fear in those who benefited from systems built on the foundations of industrial capitalism. Confronted with a system that “could be put into operation if it got enough of the working-class to stand with it,”<sup>48</sup> employers organized campaigns against the IWW were used to systematically undermine the union’s credibility.

After the First World War, the IWW was effectively dismantled by the first Red Scare out of a belief that they represented a type of Americanised bolshevism. Indeed the union’s refusal to distance itself from the Soviet Union and the later flow of members into the Communist Party did little to dispel this image. For decades after the Second World War, the IWW survived in the memories of those who experienced it. The conservatism of the 1950s and Red Scare that accompanied the Cold War made the IWW a subversive topic for historical inquiry.

Historical scholarship on the IWW was reinvigorated during the rise of the New Left and Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s. During a period when Americans were once again questioning the foundations of American society, the IWW offered a memory of America’s dissident past and the nonviolent tactics used by 1960’s activist and Civil Rights movement.

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Willis Thompson "THE NEW SOCIALISM THAT THREATENS THE SOCIAL SYSTEM." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Mar 17, 1912, SM1, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/97317485?accountid=8172>.

Paul F. Brissenden's 1913 work entitled, *The Launching of the Industrial Workers of the World*, is regarded as the first official historical study of the IWW.<sup>49</sup> Brissenden's work documents the founding of the IWW, placing particular emphasis on the unions and radicalism of American society that led to its creation. Brissenden's original work served as the touchstone for those wishing to study the Industrial Workers of the World, as it was the first account not to be written by a member of the IWW. Brissenden incorporated much of his initial work into his 1919 publication, *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism*.<sup>50</sup> Brissenden's 1919 publication was written during the height of the first Red Scare in the United States and coincided with the Palmer Raids of 1919-1920, which were intended to capture and arrest radical idealists and activists in American society with a specific focus on the IWW.

John S. Gambs wrote, *The Decline of the IWW*, in 1932 to supplement Brissenden's initial work.<sup>51</sup> Gambs emphasized the romanticised historical depiction of the IWW and insisted that this romantic history was now inseparable from the union's past. Gambs' work continued the work of Brissenden, which examined the IWW up until 1917, and thus offered new information on the industrial union after its decline in popularity.

The most significant text in the historiographical narrative of the Industrial Workers of the World is Melvyn Dubofsky's 1969 work, *We Shall Be All: A History of*

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<sup>49</sup> Paul F. Brissenden, "The Launching of the Industrial Workers of the World," *University of California Publications in Economics*. 4, no. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press.,1913): 1-82.

<sup>50</sup> Paul F. Brissenden. *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism*. (New York: Columbia University. 1919).

<sup>51</sup> John S. Gambs, *The Decline of the IWW*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1932).

*the Industrial Workers of the World*.<sup>52</sup> Dubofsky's analysis remains the definitive text on the subject and has been noted as revolutionizing not only the study of the IWW, but contributing to the legitimacy and change in American labor history. Dubofsky's refusal to romanticise the industrial union, or its leaders, led to an objective, archives- based study of the IWW. Dubofsky offers a well-rounded view of both the attributes and flaws that shaped the organization and its leading figures, and presents the IWW as an organization firmly rooted in American history and the tradition of resistance to centralized authority.

Like the union she belonged to, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn is remembered by American history as a Communist, a subversive, and has labeled her beliefs as "un-American." However, yet it was her commitment to the betterment of American society that spurred her to pursue a life of activism on behalf of societies forgotten and marginalized. As it is the job of the historian to recover ideas that have been denigrated, marginalized, and removed from popular history, this thesis will seek to do exactly that. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn is a figure that has been relegated to the ranks of labor's "able assistant," but her central role within the IWW and significance to the world of Progressive Era social thought will be recovered and remembered within this thesis.

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<sup>52</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969).

## *Chapter Two:*

### *Organic Intellectual and the Socialist Ideology*

In 1906, American novelist and journalist, Theodore Dreiser, published an article entitled “An East Side Joan of Arc” in *Broadway Magazine* where he profiled a young socialist speaker he had encountered in New York City. Dreiser praised the young speaker who was “only a pupil in her second year at the Morris High School, but she [had] the mental maturity, the habit of thought and finished expression of a woman of twenty-five.”<sup>53</sup>

A combination of youth, beauty, and intelligence made Flynn one of the most intriguing young speakers in New York City in the early twentieth century. Upon joining the ranks of the IWW, Flynn’s public persona became an identifiable figure within the working-class and attracted attention from the public and media alike. As a public figure and representative of the IWW, Flynn became a conduit of ideas that influenced the minds of those she spoke to. Given her influential role within the working-class, Flynn may best be described as an organic intellectual, a term used by Marxian theorist, Antonio Gramsci, to describe intellectuals who held an organizational or educative role in a larger group, thus becoming an “expert” of legitimation and mediator between hegemonic structures.<sup>54</sup>

According to Gramsci, each social group generates its own group of intellectuals who emerge to mediate between the masses and the dominant ideological forces of society. Despite their elevated positions, these intellectuals would remain connected to

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<sup>53</sup> Theodore Dreiser, “An East Side Joan of Arc,” *Broadway Magazine* September 1906. in Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 65.

<sup>54</sup> John Merringtonm “Theory and Practice in Gramsci’s Marxism” *The Socialist Registrar* 5, no. 5 (1986): 154, <http://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/viewFile/5273/2174>.

their social group based on shared experiences of, in the case of the working-class, marginalization, exploitation, and oppression. The organic intellectual would represent and articulate the problems and principles of their social group and encourage unity of thought and cultural solidarity in the aims of achieving social revolution.<sup>55</sup>

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's role within a revolutionary union was predicated on navigating the murky waters of Progressive Era ideological structures and is indicative of her status as an organic intellectual of the working-class. From the moment Flynn mounted her first soapbox, she intended to provide an educational experience designed to give the working-class the tools necessary to establish a functioning industrial democracy.

In what historian Meredith Tax refers to as period of "fragmentation,"<sup>56</sup> Flynn provided a unifying message of class-solidarity while simultaneously pushing the bounds of progressive social thought. With a worldview built upon the idea of class-struggle, Flynn articulated a social vision that transcended divisions of race, sex, and ethnicity to overcome the continued exploitation and division of the laboring masses. She criticized socially constructed ideas of gender and sexuality, the exploitative realities of capitalism, and social institutions that promoted business values through a critique rooted in the socialist ideology.

*Setting the Stage for Socialism: The Conditions that Spurred an Ideological Movement*

Although the wealth of the country had increased roughly 188 percent, skyrocketing from approximately \$65 billion to \$187 billion, the maldistribution of

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<sup>55</sup> Merrington, "Theory and Practice in Gramsci's Marxism," 165.

<sup>56</sup> Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict 1880-1917*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 93.

wealth polarized class relations.<sup>57</sup> Despite the increase in wealth, “65% of the people” owned a mere “5% of the wealth”<sup>58</sup> yet performed many of the tasks necessary for its accumulation. Workers were increasingly isolated from not only the products they produced, but from the profits their labor produced.

However, the image and promise of wealth attracted individuals from across the world who sought a better life than what could be achieved in their homelands. Seeking freedom and opportunity, approximately 14.5 million people immigrated to the United States between 1901 and 1920, altering the racial and ethnic portrait of American society.<sup>59</sup> Far from discovering a land of freedom and independence, the immigrant worker encountered a land where “industrial relations determine everyday what he and his family shall eat, what they shall wear, [and] how many hours of his life he shall labor.”<sup>60</sup>

Horatio Winslow captured the sentiment of the early twentieth century when he wrote that “the unrest of the 80’s and the panic of the 90’s had awakened them [the workers] to the fact that life was not, in all phases, one grand sweet song.”<sup>61</sup> The conditions of intensifying production, growing class inequalities, and anti-labor court injunctions had renewed the desire for industrial democracy. This resurgence was powerfully stimulated by the energies of immigrant workers that brought with them traditions of resistance and labor activism. Imbedded in many of these traditions was a

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<sup>57</sup> U.S Commission on Industrial Relations, *Final Report*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Tax, *The Rising of the Women*, 27.

<sup>60</sup> U.S Commission on Industrial Relations, *Final Report*, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Horatio Winslow. “Kind of Socialism that Counts; A Little Story of Things Accomplished” *The Masses* August 1911, (The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagener Archives) 5.  
<http://dlib.nyu.edu/themasses/books/masses008>.

shared belief in the socialist ideology that became an attractive ideological and economic alternative to the exploitative practices of industrial capitalism.

### *Socialism in America*

Socialism was introduced to American society through Eastern European immigrant workers who joined the ranks of the American working-class. Along with experiences of collective organization, immigrant workers brought with them a social, economic, and political ideology radically different from the capitalist ethos of industrial America. Socialism, as Flynn understood it, meant the complete “abolition of the capitalist system and organization of a new social society.”<sup>62</sup> This compact understanding of such an expansive ideology resembles the particular American conception of socialism popularized through the figure of Eugene V. Debs in the late nineteenth century.

Socialism as it developed in the American context largely followed the intellectual leadership of Eugene V. Debs while incorporating a distinctly American vernacular.<sup>63</sup> Debsian socialism built itself upon the foundational roots of transnational socialism as it appeared in the twentieth century that was predicated on the idea that workers held more in common with each other than their own individual employers. Transnational and Debsian socialism acknowledged the diverse experiences of individuals and thus sought to understand how the same phenomenon was manifested and experienced in different contexts, but remained linked to a larger class-struggle.

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<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Horizons for a Socialist America*, (New York: Communist Party of the United States of America, 1959), 9.

<sup>63</sup> Burwood, “Debsian Socialism,” 255.

Debsian socialism was a direct response to the intellectual and political climate of the era, a period when corporate capital seemed to have triumphed, industry dominated political interests, and social Darwinism was the ideological approach to managerial relations.<sup>64</sup> The American conception of socialism challenged ideas of industrial capitalism and, as a result, became uniquely concerned with the economic inequalities and social dislocations produced by industrial capitalism. Central to a Debsian socialist analysis was an economic analysis of societal relations.<sup>65</sup> However, despite its concern with the social and economic realism of the day, Debsian socialism remained a largely politically minded ideology focused on the gradual political reform of industrial society. It is its political nature that prompted ideological divisions amongst American socialists, including those who would gather to create the Industrial Workers of the World.

Despite quarrels over political and non-political elements, those who converted to the socialist ideology in the Progressive Era could often be found at the forefront of movements challenging the dominate ideas of society. Their connection with an ideology rooted in transnationalism connected American socialists to a broader movement for social emancipation that was felt around the western world. Like many others, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn arrived at a socialist understanding gradually, absorbing the literary and vocalised ideas of American and European socialists.<sup>66</sup> As she progressed and grew in prominence within the labor movement, her speeches, writing, and physical presence became conduits of ideas that would influence the socialist development of other member of the working-class.

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

*Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's Literary Influences*

“Reared in the shadow of the red flag of the proletariat” Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was predisposed to socialist thought before she encountered it as an organized ideological movement.<sup>67</sup> For the Flynn family, socialism was an escape, a light in the darkness that gave a vision of hope for a better future. As “the daughter of a socialist and a suffragist,”<sup>68</sup> Flynn was encouraged to explore the anti-capitalist ideology and question the world she encountered. This freedom to explore differentiating streams of thought afforded Flynn the opportunity to formulate her own conception of what socialism could mean for America.

By her early teenage years, Flynn had grown skeptical of social institutions that appeared to perpetuate and encourage the internalization of divisive gender and socio-economic norms. By the age of fifteen, she had concluded that the current system of education operated as little more than an institution of hegemonic reproduction instilling norms, values, and ideas deemed socially acceptable to the ruling elite. Children received an education provided by those who no longer knew “anything about their subject” and failed to “cultivate the spirit of independence” which would allow them to become free thinking individuals in the modern world.<sup>69</sup> Formalized education, as Flynn encountered it, was the “root-evil” of societal understandings of gender and womanhood as it continued to instill “perverted notions of conventionality and morality” that socialized

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<sup>67</sup> Dreiser, “East Side Joan of Arc” in *The Rebel Girl*, 65.

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Women's Place in the Fight for a Better World*, (New York: New Century Publishers, 1947), 13.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Education and the School System,” in *Words on Fire*, 79.

women to become submissive, fragile beings dependant on man for her very means of survival.<sup>70</sup>

Flynn's criticism echoes the ideas of eighteenth century British woman's rights activist Mary Wollstonecraft, whose work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was one of the earliest feminist works to affect Flynn's ideological development. In her writing, Wollstonecraft identified formalized education as a means of systematically educating and legitimizing gender norms and values that formed the core of women's misery and servility.<sup>71</sup> The importance of education was reflected publically by the "New Women" whose increased access to education motivated movements for expanded professional opportunities and individual rights.

Noting the class and gender based disparities in education, this fifteen-year old socialist orator observed that "the new women are in the minority still, the backboneless women are still in the large majority and they are seldom sensible, educated, and strong."<sup>72</sup> Flynn observed the benefits that expanded access to education had for women who themselves became integral to the expansion of women's rights during the Progressive Era. In the case of Flynn, she credited her own intellectual development and social-consciousness to her "literary teachers,"<sup>73</sup> who had exposed her to the radical ideas she then incorporated into her own personal understanding of social conditions.

Chief amongst these "literary teachers" was American author and socialist Edward Bellamy. In his ground-breaking 1887 novel, *Looking Backwards*, Bellamy

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>71</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women, with strictures on political and moral subjects*, (New York: Norton, 1967), 7.

<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. "Essay on Women" in *Words on Fire*, 76.

<sup>73</sup> Flynn, "Education and the School System," in *Words on Fire*, 82.

envisioned a socialist Utopia in the year 2000 in which banks, capitalists, and landlords had been abolished and all natural resources were collectively owned. The novel foregrounds the radical economic egalitarianism of Bellamy's thought as he depicts a world where "the title of every man, woman, and child to the means of existence rests on no basis less plain, broad, and simple than that they are fellows of one race – members of one human family."<sup>74</sup>

The novel played a central role in popularizing socialism within the United States and spawned the creation of hundreds of Bellamy Clubs, of which Annie Flynn was a member.<sup>75</sup> In reflecting on the novel's influence, Flynn wrote that the idealized world seemed "practical and feasible," in its ambitions and appealed to the humanistic side of Flynn's thought. The sentiments expressed by Bellamy – his belief in a united human family and centrality of economic egalitarianism – reflect Flynn's own belief in the unity of the working-class in a movement of solidarity that would transcend racial, ethnic, and gender barriers. *Looking Backwards* exposed the ugly irrationality of capitalism and presented Flynn with an idealised image of a society where want, misery, unemployment and insecurity had been banished.

In addition to Bellamy, Flynn absorbed the ideas of Russian prince and anarchist revolutionist Peter Kropotkin, eagerly reading his works *Conquest of Bread*, *Mutual Aid*, *The Great French Revolution*, and a pamphlet specifically targeting young idealists entitled, "Appeal to the Young." Flynn amassed a collection of socialist literature independent from her father including Upton Sinclair's, *The Jungle*, which exposed the

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<sup>74</sup> Daphne Patai, "Edward Bellamy" in *The American Radical*, eds., Mari Jo Bugle, Paul Buhle, and Harvey J. Kaye, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 69.

<sup>75</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 47.

harshness of the meatpacking industry as well as the exploitative lives of immigrant workers and affected her to the extent that she adopted a vegetarian diet.<sup>76</sup>

Through her early reading, Flynn had encountered Marxist ideas of class struggle, but it was not until 1906 that she formally came into contact with the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as part of the Charles H. Kerr Company of Chicago's "Standard Socialist Series." Included in this series were Engel's *Socialism- Utopian and Scientific, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, and Marx's *Value, Price and Profit*, and *Wage-Labor and Capital*.<sup>77</sup> Flynn found the ideas of Marx intriguing, but was not drawn to the scientific socialism of a Marxian analysis that had so profoundly influenced her father. Thomas' obsession with scientific socialism allowed him to escape to a world in which his economic and social burdens were alleviated and placed on the shoulders of the looming capitalist absolving him of complete responsibility for his family's poverty. Flynn herself tended to avoid a theoretical approach to socialism that she came to see as dangerous as she watched her "long suffering" mother struggle to support the family as a seamstress while her father attended meetings and street corner speeches.

Flynn's admiration and respect for her mother strongly affected the personal and intellectual development of Flynn. Immigrating to America from Galway, Ireland in 1877, Annie Gurley became the head of her household and provided for her younger brothers by finding work as a skilled seamstress. After facilitating her brothers' trades training, Annie encouraged their membership in the Knights of Labor while she herself

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

became a radical in her own way. An early supporter of women's rights and the extension of the franchise to women, Annie was also involved with the radical side of Irish politics as a member of Sinn Fein, the nationalist party of Ireland. Upon entering motherhood, the Flynn matriarch defied social conventions by having women doctors deliver her children, including Dr. Elizabeth Kent for whom Flynn was named.<sup>78</sup>

By 1905, personal experience, literature, and public debate coalesced to form Flynn's expansive understanding of the socialist ideology that incorporated elements of social reform, labor, feminism, and the progressive attitude of the early twentieth century. By synthesizing a Marxist class-based analysis with the economism of Debsian socialism, Flynn's conception of the socialist ideology synthesized her own personal views of freedom and women's emancipation with ideas of inclusivity and radical egalitarianism.

#### *Flynn's Synthesis of Feminist and Socialist Thought*

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's socialism was a democratic, American interpretation of the ideology that drew inextricable links between the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of women. Flynn's exposure to the socialist ideology through a broad array of media convinced Flynn that the world was organized around wealth, and structured to benefit those who sought to maximize profit. In a world driven by profit and predicated on social division James Robinson observed that society had developed a "categorical language"<sup>79</sup> that subsequently produced a categorical way of thinking. Individuals were categorized based on their wealth, employment, trade, sex, ethnicity, race, and political

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>79</sup> "Intellectual Radicalism; an interview with James Harvey Robinson" *The Masses*, June 1916, (The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University digitized collections.) 21.

beliefs, creating a fragmented societal structure predicated on competition and individual advancement.

As noted by Floyd Dell in an issue of *The Masses* magazine, a beacon of cultural and intellectual radicalism, “sectarian socialism won’t sweep the world, only a democratic socialism that speaks to the common sense of the worker”<sup>80</sup> had the potential to build social solidarity. In an attempt to transcend categorical boundaries, intellectuals turned to the common economic thread that had been woven into American life.

Although introduced to the concept of economic egalitarianism through the writing of Edward Bellamy, it was its use as a central pillar in the writing of American author and social theorist Charlotte Perkins Gilman that affected Flynn. Gilman used the concept of economic egalitarianism in her discussion of women’s emancipation and social reform. Arguing that women’s subjugation was reinforced by her economic dependency on her male relatives or husband, Gilman maintained that without a shift in women’s economic status, there could be no shift towards gender equality.

Flynn integrated much of Gilman’s thought into her own socialist understanding, but remained critical of her total social critique and its ability to articulate a vision for working-class emancipation. Flynn’s criticism was grounded in her life experiences that bred skepticism towards those who claimed to speak for the common goals of the workers, yet did so from an economically advantageous position. Additionally, the maternal feminism exhibited in Gilman’s writing, often fixated on ideas of racial purity, was problematic for Flynn who had been raised in an ethnically and racially diverse

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<sup>80</sup> Floyd Dell, “The Nag-iterator,” *The Masses*, November 1914, (The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University, digitized collections.) 19. <http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/t76hdshf>

community and taught to value each individual regardless of racial or ethnic differences. However, Gilman's economism is heavily reflected in Flynn's own attitude towards social conditions and thus exhibits the strength of the impact Gilman had on Flynn's development.<sup>81</sup>

Gilman's influence is clearly reflected in Flynn's approach to the question of women's unionism. Re-enforced by her own experiences, Flynn found women's need to rely on men for economic security inextricable from the problems of the wage worker who struggled to provide for their family. Women's continued state of subjugation resulted from "either wage slavery directly or personal dependence upon a wage worker."<sup>82</sup> Even the working woman was forced to rely on her husband or father for survival, as she worked for wages meant to serve as pin money while it was expected that her male counterpart would support her economically. Out of the need for survival, women married quickly and traded her sexuality for support. Marriage, according to Flynn, was a thus form of "sexual enslavement" that was followed by "economic enslavement" through a woman's dependence on a man tied to wage labor.<sup>83</sup>

Flynn's synthesis of labor and women's emancipation demonstrates an understanding of the dialectical relationship inherent in both causes during this period. Flynn's recognition of this relationship places her amongst a group of radical women who effectively became human links that bridged the gender divide of the working-class and articulated a unifying idea of social revolution that transcended gender.<sup>84</sup> By

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<sup>81</sup> Vapnek, *Modern American Revolutionary*, 18.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "Women in Industry should Organize," in *Words on Fire*, 92.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>84</sup> Tax, *The Rising of the Women*, 14.

centralizing her socialism around the issue of economic emancipation, Flynn demonstrated an understanding of social systems that saw beyond the categorical arrangement of society. Flynn worked to educate a class-conscious working-class movement that thought in terms of class over individual identity.

However, gendered divisions on issues of reform were exacerbated during this period as the women's suffrage movement worked to unite women along gender lines to achieve individual liberties. Flynn, however, did not see women's suffrage as the route to women's emancipation or the establishment of a working-class democracy. Seeing a movement dominated by middle-class white women, Flynn intentionally separated herself from the women's suffrage movement.<sup>85</sup> Believing that "political emancipation" was "impossible as long as there [was] economic enslavement," Flynn viewed political power as another form of subjugation that removed power from the hands of the working-class and placed it in the care of middle-class politicians.<sup>86</sup> Inclusion in this hegemonic system without achieving economic emancipation would require women to further sacrificed power when matters of "economic necessity would make her have no opinion but some man's opinion."<sup>87</sup> As long as women remained economically dependent on men they would be forced to cast their ballot in favour of policies that would protect the wage-earning potential of her husband as opposed to forcing reform for women's labor.

Flynn believed that ultimate change would only be achieved through the efforts of a unified working-class who did not appeal simply for sympathy or abstract rights but real, tangible social change. To base the future of one's class, on achieving abstract

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>86</sup> Flynn, "Women in Industry Should Organize" in *Words on Fire*, 103.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 103

rights to be dictated by those in power would be to surrender the power of the working-class to achieve a social revolution in which their needs were actually considered and their lives valued beyond their labor. To Flynn, the labor activist who relied on the benevolence of the ruling class articulated a social vision that would only get the speaker “removed to the nearest lunatic asylum.”<sup>88</sup> However, although Flynn did not actively seek out alliances with suffrage and women’s groups, she recognized that both parties could be valuable allies in IWW campaigns.<sup>89</sup> Recognizing the value of alliances with progressive groups that could financially support striking workers, Flynn pragmatically formed links between labor and women’s groups when doing so would be beneficial to the entirety of the working class.

During a period where divisive radical ideologies emerged from all corners of society, each predicated on achieving liberty for a specific group, the most radical act was not to form an in-depth critique of a problem in isolation, but to break down the ideological barriers that divided social classes.<sup>90</sup> Flynn did precisely this. Radicalised in her youth, Flynn grew to become one of the most well-known figures of Progressive Era labor. Flynn held a reputation as an “orator and a thinker” who was “mentally one of the most remarkable girls the city [New York] had ever seen.”<sup>91</sup> Flynn’s reputation as a radical thinker preceded her membership to the IWW, and in 1906 only served to draw more attention to this young woman who was already considered a leading socialist voice with her own radical critique of industrial capitalism.

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<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage*, (Chicago: IWW Publishing Bureau.,1916), 3.

<sup>89</sup> Helen C. Camp, *Iron in Her Soul: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and the American Left*, (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1995), 64.

<sup>90</sup> Sandra Adickes, *To be Young was Very Heaven: Women in New York before the First World War*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 25.

<sup>91</sup> Dreiser, “An East Side Joan of Arc,” in *The Rebel Girl*,65.

### *The Rebel Girl of the IWW*

One might expect that an individual dedicated to the socialist ideology would find their niche within the Socialist Party; Flynn, however, found the Party to lack the revolutionary militancy she believed to be integral to the ushering in of social revolution.<sup>92</sup> The Socialist Party of 1905 was composed of largely of white, professional men whose attitude towards social reform advocated gradual political change as opposed to immediate action. In a society described by *The Masses* magazine as a one “which rates things at a higher value than the people who make them,”<sup>93</sup> Flynn expressed her discontent with the capitalist order and offered a constructive alternative vision for the working class.

The IWW’s combination of anarchist ideals, union organization, and indictment of industrial capitalism made the syndicalist union appealing to Flynn.<sup>94</sup> As an IWW activist, Flynn’s egalitarian ideals and insistence on the equal intrinsic value of labor with one occupation being “just as honorable as another”<sup>95</sup> appealed to a diverse body of workers, both male and female. Flynn’s class-conscious socialism worked in tandem with the ideology of the IWW whose ultimate goal of building “One Big Union” united in class-solidarity mirrored Flynn’s own vision of the future. As an orator, Flynn became one of many union speakers to diffuse “a spirit and vocabulary” of social revolution that reached an “enormous mass of workers.”<sup>96</sup> She was the living embodiment of Floyd

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<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Memories of the IWW,” (University Lecture, Northern Illinois University, November 8, 1962) [http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/elizabeth\\_flynn\\_memories.html](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/speeches/elizabeth_flynn_memories.html)

<sup>93</sup> “A New kind of Crime” *The Masses*, January 1914, (The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University, digitized collections) 22. <http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/3r2281qr>.

<sup>94</sup> Brissenden, “Launching of the Industrial Workers of the World,” 1.

<sup>95</sup> Flynn, “Education and the School System” in *Words on Fire*, 82.

<sup>96</sup> U.S Commission on Industrial Relations, *Final Report*, 22.

Dell's "real agitator," an agitator who appealed to the masses because they were "one of their own kind, one who talks their own language, shares their own interests, and regards them as friends rather than as mere objects of conversion."<sup>97</sup> Flynn did not envision herself as a tool of socialist conversion; rather it was her responsibility to educate workers in a class-conscious manner that allowed them to come to their own independent understanding of socialism. Flynn and the ideas she carried with her were not confined to a single corner of the country, but rather were disseminated across the broad working-class population through lecture series, union publications, editorials, speeches, and contributions to radical socialist newspapers.

A major concept addressed regularly by Flynn was that of the coercive use of gender by the ruling class to create social divisions amongst the sexes. A gendered division of labor was manifested in every realm of life and continually placed men and women on opposing sides of social movements. Figures such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman espoused ideas of maternal feminism that – especially in the working class – replaced the enlightened idea of "universal brotherhood" with a feminist "universal sisterhood."<sup>98</sup> The creation of a working-class "sisterhood" troubled Flynn as she viewed the concept as just as much of a "hollow sham to labor" as the universal brotherhood that united men but excluded women.<sup>99</sup> In many of her public appearances, Flynn rejected exclusionary ideals that pitted the working class against one another, preferring to view

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<sup>97</sup> Dell, "The Nag-iterator," 19.

<sup>98</sup> Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Writing Feminism Genealogy; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Racial Nationalism, and the Reproduction of Maternal Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 284

<sup>99</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "IWW Call to Women," in *Words on Fire*, 103.

society in the context of a class struggle represented through the “economic power” of the dominant class over the working-class.<sup>100</sup>

In practice, however, Flynn’s ideology was at times contradictory. Although insisting on the need to unify men and women through a common cause, Flynn remained attuned to the fact that women were “the sex that had been denied all social rights,”<sup>101</sup> and thus exposed to a fundamentally different environment than their male comrades. Not only was woman’s social experience different from that of man, but her experience in labor came with its own unique set of issues. Between 1890 and 1900, the number of women factory workers increased from approximately 23 400 to 2 239 000 and continued to grow alongside industry.<sup>102</sup> Women’s workplace inequality stemmed from the perpetuation of gender norms and ideologies that limited the women’s role to the confines of the domestic sphere. Union meetings often took place in local saloons, venues that “nice girls” simply did not go to, thus excluding women from participation in union affairs.<sup>103</sup> In addition, a woman’s role as the keeper of house, home, and family, left working women with little time to work, tend to domestic duties, raise children, and attend union meetings.<sup>104</sup> The complexity of women’s relationship with labor highlights one of the flaws in Flynn’s approach. Although she valued the domestic work of the women, she encouraged women to view themselves primarily as workers in the public sphere, which required that they at times neglect the responsibilities they still held within the home in favour of union activities.

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<sup>100</sup> Flynn, *Sabotage*, 4.

<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Problems Organizing Women,” in *Words on Fire*, 135.

<sup>102</sup> Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker*, 12.

<sup>103</sup> Tax, *The Rising of the Women*, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Mari Boor Tonn, “Radical Labor in Feminine Voice: The Rhetoric of Mary Harris “Mother” Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn,” in *The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Reform*, eds. Martha Watson and Thomas Burkholder, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008), 224.

Despite its theoretical inclusivity, the IWW often proved hostile and indifferent to concerns of women. While organizing amongst the workers of the factory towns, organizers would often call on the women to leave their work if the men were unemployed so that the men could take over their jobs.<sup>105</sup> The conflicting message over the value of women's labor alienated women workers and discouraged them from joining unions of any kind since their complaints so often fell on deaf ears.

For the duration of her membership, Flynn exercised skepticism towards the IWW's approach to female unionism. As her prominence within the IWW grew and Flynn was exposed to a greater number of women activists, she increasingly used her position to combat gender discrimination and advance the interests of working-class women. Flynn was not unique in this regard; she represents but a single voice in a broad movement for working-women's emancipation, often led by the radical and militant women of New York's textile industry. The militancy of New York women had spurred the creation of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) in 1903, which subsequently became the token female union of the AFL.<sup>106</sup>

Despite the militancy exhibited by the textile women of New York, Flynn found it difficult to organize women into a predominantly male union, which itself reflects the pressures Flynn faced to conform to a typically male position within the IWW. Flynn may have integrated women's emancipation with the broader labor movement, but the opinions of her male colleagues did not always display a similar understanding. Remaining largely indifferent to specific needs of female workers, the IWW failed to

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<sup>105</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 398.

<sup>106</sup> Tax, *The Rising of the Women*, 95.

offer women a source of support in achieving workplace equality when not prompted into action by female members.

Flynn encountered the skepticism and distrust amongst female workers wary of the IWW's message of inclusivity. The relationships that developed between women workers were different than the bonds of solidarity formed by male workers within the same industry. At first, it appeared as if the "social and cooperative spirit engendered in the factory" was "usually neutralized by the struggle for husbands..." dissolving any bonds of solidarity that would typically be found in the male industrial workforce.<sup>107</sup> Men viewed themselves as permanent workers, but women were socialized to view their employment as a temporary stop between the homes of their fathers and the homes of their husbands. The socially engrained belief that woman's primary function was as a wife and mother was a powerful ideology to overcome.

Flynn's understanding of workplace solidarity did not accurately reflect the experiences of all female workers. Immigrant women- notably Jewish and Italian women- often formed quite close bonds of workplace solidarity and emerged as militant voices in struggles for female labor. Their bonds, however, did not resemble the idealised image of workers solidarity held by Flynn because they had developed forms of resistance that, in Flynn's mind, perpetuated patriarchal systems of power.

Despite her fractured understanding of female bonds of workplace solidarity, Flynn sought to educate workers on the "economic and social conditions" that forced women to marry quickly out of a need for economic security.<sup>108</sup> Flynn argued that

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<sup>107</sup> Flynn, "Women in Industry Should Organize," in *Words on Fire*, 92.

<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, "Men and Women," in *Words on Fire*, 101.

women, just like men, had been “forced into the struggle for existence by capitalism” but the labor was not considered equally valuable.<sup>109</sup> This approach to the question of female labor worked to break down the social and ideological barriers that prevented men from acknowledging the legitimacy and value of the woman worker. Flynn emphasised the economic exploitation that the women experienced while simultaneously placing women’s wages “fit for spending money...”<sup>110</sup> in relation to that of the male worker for “while the cost of the regular workingman’s labor in the market [had] still not been reached by the ‘iron law of wages’ ... his wife’s seems to have done so.”<sup>111</sup>

Women such as Flynn proved integral to developing the intrinsic connection between the American labor movement and women’s emancipation. According to Flynn, it would be the economic emancipation of the entirety of the working class that would bring about a “woman who thinks as she pleases, does as she pleases, works as she pleases, and belongs to herself alone.”<sup>112</sup> This humanistic conception of socialism appealed to the needs and interests of all individuals regardless of gender, craft, industry, or race.

Flynn worked to educate workers to see beyond the confines of socially and economically determined categories. This “education [was] not a conversion it [was] a process” that allowed workers their own time to form a conscious understanding of the class struggle that could not be articulated within the bounds of a single speech.<sup>113</sup> By seeking to instill “class-spirit, class-respect, [and] class-consciousness” in the minds of

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>110</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “One Boss Less: The Minersville Strike,” in *Words on Fire*, 97.

<sup>111</sup> Flynn “Men and Women” in *Words on Fire*, 102.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>113</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “the Truth about the Paterson Strike,” in *Words on Fire*, 14.

the worker, Flynn worked to further the mission of the IWW to create “One Big Union” through which the lives of the working-class would be permanently improved.<sup>114</sup>

Flynn articulated a worldview that painted the labor movement as a vehicle for social change that fought to “secure relief for all workers” as opposed to individual reforms.<sup>115</sup> The effects of this approach can be found in the histories of IWW strikes, such as the Silk Strike of Paterson, New Jersey where the transformation of the American working-class became visible. In Paterson, as noted by Jack Reed, the workers appeared “ennobled by something greater than themselves”; they, the workers, had become the strike.<sup>116</sup>

The rapid dissemination of the IWW mentality of class consciousness quickly made the union and all its members “the most serious menace the present system of society has ever been called upon to face.”<sup>117</sup> The IWW did not organize based on dogmatic ideology, but on principles that addressed the immediate needs of the workers. The IWW’s method of organizing and its connection to the radical thought of the period inspired a confidence in workers young and old who came to like the union “better than God” because “he don’t talk for me like IWW.”<sup>118</sup>

Known as “the ablest speaker on the IWW platform,”<sup>119</sup> Flynn contributed to the creation of a labor movement that was inextricably linked to the progressive causes of the

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>115</sup> Flynn, “Problems organizing women,” in *Words on Fire*, 56.

<sup>116</sup> Jack Reed, “War in Paterson,” *The Masses*, June 1918, (The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University, digitized collections) 17. <http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/0zpc87fg>.

<sup>117</sup> Thompson “The New Socialism that threatens the social system” *SM1*

<sup>118</sup> “I Make Cheap Silk: the story of a fifteen year old weaver in the Paterson Silk Mills as told by her to Inis Wood and Louise Carey” *The Masses*, November 1913, (The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University, digitized collections), 7. <http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/c866t2r7>.

<sup>119</sup> Tonn, “Radical Labor in a Feminine Voice, 225.

day. By “appealing to them [the workers] as friends...,”<sup>120</sup> Flynn fostered trust and comradeship with the workers who came to see their own emancipatory desires reflected in the voice of Flynn. In the fight for change, Flynn believed that there “must be something more than the economic issue [;] there must be idealism” that sparked the fire of hope in the minds of the working-class.<sup>121</sup>

This idealism was to be found in the constant evolution of one’s understanding of society and the ways in which it affected one’s daily life. To Flynn, the education of an individual should be a process that

never ends... that never hurries, crowds, or forces, that helps people learn what they like and want to know when they want to know but never forces them...<sup>122</sup>

Rarely giving the same speech twice, Flynn drew on her personal experience to inform her oratory. Living in the homes of the workers she organized allowed Flynn to experience the diversity of life within the working-class and understand the individual needs of the people she organized. Her exposure to the diversity of working-class life meant that her understanding and approach to labor adapted to each unique situation. This adaptive approach marked Flynn as a powerful orator and organizer who lived her belief that those who sought to organize the worker should first “see what the workers are doing and then try to understand why they do it” before developing a “theory for general unity.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> “Let Miss Flynn Speak: New Mayor of Paterson doesn’t interfere with IWW Orator” *New York Times* (Special to The New York Times. “LETS MISS FLYNN SPEAK.” *New York Times* (1857-1922), Jan 21, 1916, 20, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/97828880?accountid=8172>.

<sup>121</sup> Tonn, “Radical Labor in a Feminine Voice,” 227.

<sup>122</sup> Flynn, “Education and the School System,” in *Words on Fire*, 83.

<sup>123</sup> Flynn, *Sabotage*, 25.

Although committed to the principles of socialism, Flynn understood that there is no uniform socialist conception that could encapsulate the entirety of the working-class experience. “Not all human beings are alike” and thus each person’s understanding of the socialist idea would likewise reflect a different experience.<sup>124</sup> However, although Flynn tried to apply the principles of the IWW in “as flexible a manner as the science of pedagogy,” she did maintain the core elements of class-solidarity and class-struggle.<sup>125</sup>

Flynn’s radical thought propelled her into a leadership position within one of the most revolutionary unions of her period. Her election to the General Executive Board of the IWW in 1909 was representative of the changing nature of women’s place in the world of industrial labor. It also reflected the greater degree of gender equality in left-led unions.<sup>126</sup> Flynn grew to become one of the most prominent figures of American labor who attracted the attention of a group of radical intellectuals in Greenwich Village, New York.

### *Flynn and the Bohemians of Greenwich Village*

Isolated from the rest of Manhattan until the building of the Westside subway in 1917, Greenwich Village had long been a refuge for radical intellectuals.<sup>127</sup> From poets to labor leaders, Greenwich Village was a testing ground for radical social and cultural experimentation including the search for sexual emancipation. Ideas of socialism, birth control, and revolution fermented in the Village atmosphere and were publicized through the famed *The Masses* magazine.

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<sup>124</sup> Flynn, “Education and the School System,” in *Words on Fire*, 80.

<sup>125</sup> Flynn, “The Truth about the Paterson,” in *Words on Fire*, 112.

<sup>126</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 395.

<sup>127</sup> Adickes, *To be Young was very Heaven*, 32.

*The Masses* became a vehicle of modernist experimentation and socialist reflection of sexual, social, and political emancipation across the United States. Described by Eugene Debs as a “first class magazine dealing with the vital issues of the day,”<sup>128</sup> the magazine symbolized the vanguard of dissident intellectualism of this period. Defying gender and social norms, the villagers represented the counter-hegemonic cultural front in what Gramsci refers to as a “war of position,” a struggle between opposing ideological worldviews to gain dominance and hegemonic influence over society.<sup>129</sup>

During this period, the Village advanced a vision of feminist liberation and professional self-realization that spread to incorporate all levels of society. The women, usually in possession of higher education or professional training, lent their wealth and voices to the issues of the working class, advocating for social reforms that benefited both the cause of labor and the bohemian idea of modernism. The villagers lived by an ethos of personal emancipation; to live one’s art and politics was the ultimate realisation of emancipation. The villagers promoted birth control, engaged in unconventional sexual liaisons, and generally supported the idea that women could create a new identity based on personal freedom and political commitment.

It was in this group of radical intellectuals and cultural modernists that Flynn often found acceptance and support for her radical ideas marginalized by her male counterparts. A devoted member of the working-class, Flynn entered Greenwich Village

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<sup>128</sup> “What Eugene Debs says about us,” *The Masses*, February 1911, (The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University, digitized collections), 3. <http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/3tx95zc3>

<sup>129</sup> Nathan Godfried, “Fellow traveller, Organic Intellectual: J. Raymond Walsh and Radio News Commentary in the 1940’s,” *Democratic Communiqué* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 19

sure of her resentment towards the “white-gloved aristocracy” who had “nothing else to do but organize” clubs and charitable groups.<sup>130</sup> However, as Flynn became immersed in village life, she discovered that the women she spoke to were not so different from herself.

Flynn’s friendships with middle-class women, including journalist Mary Heaton Vorse, while beneficial for the intellectual development of Flynn, contradicted the IWW conviction that “The Working Class and Middle Class have nothing in common.”<sup>131</sup> Through her involvement with village life, Flynn came to see that the women she had long resented were not only similar to her, but beneficial to the cause of labor. Contradicting her earlier belief in the uselessness of feminist mutual interest, Flynn recognized that the “feminist propaganda [was] helping to destroy the same obstacles the labor movement confronts” and the women proved valuable allies during a strike.<sup>132</sup> But Flynn’s changing attitude towards the middle-class intellectuals was deeply connected to her own belief in the progressive causes championed by Village radicals.

Having married miner and IWW organizer Jack Jones at the age of seventeen, Flynn had quickly found that she did not subscribe to the domestic ideals of marriage. After two years Jones asked Flynn to move with him to Butte, Montana and give up her work as an IWW organizer, but the domestic life and the prospect of a large family held no interest for Flynn.<sup>133</sup> Instead, she was a “high spirited and headstrong” youth that had no interest in adjusting herself for another person and was drawn to the village ethos of

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<sup>130</sup> Flynn, *Sabotage*, 15

<sup>131</sup> Vincent St. John, “The IWW.”

<sup>132</sup> Flynn, “Problems organizing women,” in *Words on Fire*, 136.

<sup>133</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 113.

sexual modernism.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, Flynn's own experiences of motherhood, having given birth to a son, Fred, in 1910, strengthened the appeal to the bohemian lifestyle of the village. After Fred's birth, societal norms dictated that Flynn would stay home to raise her child, but she rebelled against the idea of childrearing as a full-time occupation. Torn between her child and her work, Flynn would leave Fred in the care of her mother and sisters, Bina and Kathie, in New York as she continued to organize.

For a mother to leave her child in the care of family in the pursuit of her own career represented a break from the gendered ideals of society. A woman, regardless of her life outside the home, was expected to be the primary caretaker of her children. Flynn found affirmation of her decision to continue with her activist career in the sexually and ideologically liberated atmosphere of Greenwich Village. The co-operative atmosphere benefited Flynn after the birth of her child. Concerned for her health and mental well-being, Flynn spent the summer of 1910 in the home of Dr. J.G Phelps Stokes on Caritas Island at the invitation of Rose Pastor Stokes.

Flynn adopted the village ethos of living one's politics as she began to openly engage in a romantic relationship with Italian anarchist Carlo Tresca while still married to Jones. When Tresca and Flynn began their relationship in 1913, Flynn remained legally married to Jack Jones and Tresca was separated, but not divorced, from his wife.<sup>135</sup> Flynn and Tresca's relationship lasted for the next thirteen years and was based on their own personal code that echoed the sexual modernism of Greenwich Village, to not "remain with someone you did not love, but to honestly and openly avow real

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<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*, 114.

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*, 152.

attachment.”<sup>136</sup> Flynn believed that she had found a kindred spirit in Tresca, yet she routinely encountered situations where her popularity and career caused tension within her relationship. The liberated nature of their relationship saw Tresca engage in numerous affairs, including one with her sister Bina in 1925 of which Flynn became aware through the announcement that Bina was pregnant with Tresca's child.<sup>137</sup>

Flynn's foray into the Village led her to adopt a more formalized approach to labor. Although Flynn continued to speak to groups of workers, her interest in the legal ramifications of a strike became more pronounced. Drawn into the fight for civil liberties and the individual rights of the worker, Flynn became a pioneer in legal defence, forming the Workers Defence Union and later becoming a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union alongside fellow Villager and radical feminist lawyer, Crystal Eastman. Flynn's revolution in social-consciousness allowed her to expand her criticism past the strict divide of class and form a more complete understanding of the mutual oppression shared by women across economic boundaries. Integral to Flynn's feminist development was her membership in the club Heterodoxy, a feminist salon in Greenwich Village that encouraged critical inquiry, artistic experimentation, and individual non-conformity.

### *Heterodoxy and the Raising of Feminist Consciousness*

When speaking to curious middle-class activists and sympathizers, Flynn believed the “most effective way of reaching the public” was to recount the terrors and tragedies

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>137</sup> Adickes, *To be Young was very Heaven*, 144.

inherent in working-class life.<sup>138</sup> The “dear public are never reached through sympathy,” only unignorably tragic events of industrial accidents or urban slums appeared to sway allies and prompt activism for the cause of labor.<sup>139</sup> Whether it was the Salon of Mable Dodge or a speech at Cooper Union, Flynn did not shy away from the tragic realities of industrial life that she encountered as an IWW organizer.

However, amongst the women of Heterodoxy Flynn found an audience attuned and receptive to the cause of the American worker. Heterodoxy members included the likes of Rose Pastor Stokes, the immigrant woman freed from years of hard labor in cigar factories through her marriage to the wealthy Dr. J.G Stokes. Crystal Eastman, sister of *The Masses* editor Max Eastman and feminist lawyer, was the leading legal voice of industrial accidents whose work centred on the connection between active employer control over the workplace and increased accidents.<sup>140</sup> Other members included anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons, future Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, playwright Susan Glaspell, Ida Rauh, and Flynn’s life-long friend Mary Heaton Vorse. The membership of Heterodoxy, as noted by Mable Dodge herself, consisted of “women who did things and did them openly.”<sup>141</sup> These women represented a diverse body of women actively engaged in efforts of social reform and together formed one of the most significant spaces of critical thought and debate in the period.<sup>142</sup>

Heterodoxy gave Flynn a newfound respect for the work of the women reformers

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<sup>138</sup> Flynn, *Sabotage*, 15.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>140</sup> McEvory, “The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911,” 643.

<sup>141</sup> Mable Dodge qtd. in Adickes, *To Be Young was Very Heaven*, 39.

<sup>142</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 280.

whose motives she had long questioned.<sup>143</sup> In *Heterodoxy* Flynn glimpsed “the women of the future...devoid of the old femininity” that contributed to the servility of the female sex.<sup>144</sup> Prior to her involvement with the feminist club, Flynn’s socialism and vision of female liberation rested primarily on the concept of economic emancipation, but economism represents a narrow view of the Socialist ideology.<sup>145</sup> Through *Heterodoxy*, Flynn began to understand the full range of oppression that women experienced and which could not be reduced to economic powerlessness. Until joining *Heterodoxy*, Flynn had maintained her aversion to women’s groups because of her skepticism about those who often sought to make labor the tail end of a suffrage kite. Instead of being censured as a labor agitator Flynn found the atmosphere of *Heterodoxy* warm and accepting. She discovered likeminded women who saw the connection between class oppression and women’s subordination and encouraged her to see that, regardless of their class position, women suffered similar indignities in a world suffused with sexist assumptions and patriarchal institutions. By allying with the women of *Heterodoxy*, Flynn became a human link between the working class laborer and the middle-class sympathizer who found a common ground in radical idealism.

### *The Disappearing Act*

After returning from the Village to the male dominated IWW, Flynn began to grow uncomfortable with the increasingly violent and masculine ethos of the union. The IWW’s fractured message towards women workers had created a “one-legged, freakish

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<sup>143</sup> Camp, *Iron in her Soul*, 64.

<sup>144</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn qtd. in Steve Golin, “The IWW and the Bohemians: The Case of the Paterson Pageant,” *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, (September 2005): 567.

<sup>145</sup> Flynn, “Men and Women,” in *Words on Fire*, 103.

animal of a union...lacking the life and inspiration which the woman alone can produce.”<sup>146</sup> IWW troubadour and martyr Joe Hill believed that correcting the gender imbalance could be achieved by using organizers like Flynn “exclusively for the building up of a strong organization among the female workers,” which would create “a kind of social feeling of good fellowship between the male and female workers.”<sup>147</sup> In 1911, Hill wrote “The Rebel Girl” in honour of Flynn, the working-class’s “precious pearl” who brought “courage, pride and joy to the fighting rebel boy.”<sup>148</sup> Through Hill’s lyrics, Flynn became immortalized as the Rebel Girl of the IWW, but inherent in her new found title was a problem; at some point the rebel girl would grow up.

Flynn’s growth was unnerving to those she had long counted as friends in the IWW. By 1916 Flynn had become estranged from many of her former friendships, including her Lawrence Strike ally Big Bill Haywood. Flynn’s increasing skepticism over the tactic of direct action and sabotage are noted through her request to stop the circulation of her pamphlet entitled “Sabotage” that defended the disruption and interference with factory machinery. “What’s the matter Gurley? Lost your nerve!” became an increasingly invoked sentiment amongst the centralizing leadership of the IWW.<sup>149</sup>

The social and political climate of the United States also experienced a shift during this period. The coming of American involvement in the First World War led to a

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<sup>146</sup> Letter from Joe Hill to the Editor of *Solidarity Magazine*, November 29 1914, reproduced in *Jacobin Magazine: Online*. (November 19 2015) Accessible at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/11/joe-hill-songs-utah-iww-union-labor-haywood/> Hill letter in *Jacobin*

<sup>147</sup> Letter from Joe Hill to the editor of *Solidarity Magazine*.

<sup>148</sup> Joe Hill, “The Rebel Girl: Sheet music and Lyrics,” as reprinted in *The Rebel Girl*.

<sup>149</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 227.

resurgence of aggressive patriotism that demonized “un-American” thought.<sup>150</sup> The advent of “100% Americanism” led to a distinct reinvigoration of racial and ethnic tensions and awakening of the Nativist sentiments of American society that had persisted throughout the early twentieth century. The “brotherhood of labor” that had begun to take hold during the 1910s was shattered by the “fear of the foreigner” in conjunction with the persecution of labor by the American government. The Palmer Raids of 1919 and 1920 specifically targeted the membership of the IWW and effectively destroyed the industrial union.

Flynn, like many socialists of her time, opposed American involvement in the largely European war being fought through the guise of imperialism and capitalist interests. “The majority of our workers are foreigners, one or two generations removed, and with their European home-times and American environment, internationalism becomes the logical patriotism of a heterogeneous population.”<sup>151</sup> For this opposition she was targeted as a subversive during the First Red Scare, but her experience in legal defence allowed her to avoid severe punishment.

Flynn’s tireless efforts to organize workers never ceased as she continued to organize a class-conscious labor movement. In 1927 the strain of years of organizing, labor conflicts, defence work, and personal heartbreak coalesced and led to a mental and physical break in the thirty-seven year old Flynn. Unable to recover from the emotional, physical, and psychological strain, Flynn retreated from the public eye under the care of

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<sup>150</sup> Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams*, 238.

<sup>151</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Do You Believe in Patriotism?,” *The Masses*, March 1916, (The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Archives, New York University, digitized collections), 12.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/w3r2298s>

IWW member and feminist Dr. Mari Equi in Oregon, Illinois where she remained for a ten year period until emerging as a member of the American Communist Party in 1937.

Flynn quickly regained her notoriety amongst the public, and once again emerged as a radical voice of feminism and American labor. Flynn continued to defend labor from persecution, particularly as a proponent of unionism after the Second World War. She spoke of unions as a “part of democracy” that had often “defended democracy” against plutocratic control.<sup>152</sup>

While it has been said that the IWW never produced any “intellectual giants,” journalist Margaret Anderson did not come to the same conclusions. After hearing Flynn speak in 1915, Anderson reflected that Flynn “was so informing that the place ought to have been crowded with all the good people who think the IWW is an organization of unintelligent outcasts...”<sup>153</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn is the forgotten working-class intellectual whose impact can be found in each radical realm of Progressive Era history. Flynn represented the ideological synthesis of Progressive era ideals while simultaneously challenging Progressive’s unwillingness to take the ideas of class seriously.

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<sup>152</sup> Flynn, *Women’s Place*, 10.

<sup>153</sup> Margaret Anderson. “Mother Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn” *The Little Review: Literature, Drama, Music, Art* 2. Ed., Margaret Anderson, (Chicago: Margaret C. Anderson Publisher, 1915-1916): 18.

### Chapter Three:

#### Rediscovering the role of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in the Industrial Workers of the World

In its short lifespan the IWW had grown to become one of the most notable unions of its period, impressing critics such as James Larkin who conceded that they “displayed more revolutionary spirit and greater self-sacrifice than any other movement in the world of labor.”<sup>154</sup> This revolutionary spirit propelled it into the vanguard of the class-war, organizing industrial and immigrant workers beyond the cause of labor. Between 1908 and 1912, the IWW led a total of twenty-six free-speech fights, facing violence and persecution in their attempt to ensure their First Amendment right to freedom of speech. Free-speech fights erupted in towns such as Missoula, Montana and Spokane, Washington where ordinances were passed to prevent IWW organizers from holding meetings and making speeches within city limits. Common to both fights was the IWW organizing efforts against exploitative employment agencies and the underlying leadership of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn who, although usually depicted as a figure of support, was in fact integral to IWW victory.

In popular history, the legacy of the IWW is remembered through the legendary strikes of Lawrence, Massachusetts and Paterson, New Jersey. In Lawrence and Paterson, the IWW provided a supportive network and organizational structure for striking textile workers that flourished into a class-conscious movement that challenged the dominant ideals of power and business in American society. Notably, in both Lawrence and Paterson gendered stereotypes of women’s work and societal role were

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<sup>154</sup> Jim Larkin. “A Murder Most Foul” *The International Socialist Review*, (Chicago: C.H Kerr & Co. July 1915- June 1916), reproduced in *Radical Periodical in the United States, 1890-1960*. (New York: Greenwood Reprint Corp. 1968), 330.

broken down as the immigrant women of the town emerged as the most militant element of each strike.

The IWW message of class-consciousness was spread by the organizers and agitators who travelled from town to town carrying a message of working-class emancipation and democratic syndicalism. Led largely by men who without exception had “won their spurs in labor wars, who have suffered imprisonment and often braved death for their cause,” the IWW exuded masculinity and strength, attracting workers who felt dispossessed and emasculated by industrial society.<sup>155</sup> However, within this predominantly male union was the influence of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn; reputed as the “Joan of Arc of labor wars,”<sup>156</sup> she faced no less persecution and demonstrated no less revolutionary fervour than her male counterparts. To Andre Tridon, Flynn was destined to “succeed Mother Jones as the foremost woman agitator.”<sup>157</sup> As an agitator and organizer, Flynn played an integral role in the most famous of IWW victories, yet is often depicted as a complementary figure to the male organizer. However, Flynn’s presence during a strike often overpowered the male leadership, and at times became integral to the strikes survival. Flynn consistently challenged societal notions of femininity and the accepted image of the female worker.

Flynn’s commitment to the immediate improvement of working-class conditions attracted the attention of the workers. Her lingering feeling of resentment towards her father, whose attraction to socialism was often used to excuse his lack of employment, continually reminded Flynn that while utopian dreams of the future provided incentive,

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<sup>155</sup> Andre Tridon, *The New Unionism*, (New York: B.W Huebsch, 1913), 107.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

“it is with what is, not with what ought to be that we must deal with.”<sup>158</sup> It was this realism that made Flynn an attractive figure in the American labor movement.

Flynn was actively engaged in the free speech fights, pioneering new IWW tactics of civil disobedience that later became standard procedure. Her presence amongst the male leadership allowed the IWW to portray an image of inclusivity towards the female worker who remained critical of the predominantly male unions of American labor. Flynn was often presented as the token woman of the IWW, but her refusal to adhere to gendered limitations made her a rallying point for female unionism and her skepticism of the hyper-masculine ethos of the IWW prompted her to push her male colleagues in their understanding of women’s labor. In conjunction with the efforts of other radical women labor activists, the female worker began to appear alongside her fellow male workers as militant and powerful actors during IWW strikes, particularly in Lawrence and Paterson. Despite the criticism that could be leveled against them, the Industrial Workers of the World were “neither visionless nor sentimental. They have no interest in being martyrs; they are workers” and “Miss Flynn is of the best of these.”<sup>159</sup>

### *Free Speech in Missoula and Spokane*

After joining the IWW in 1906, Elizabeth spent her first year with the revolutionary union touring nearby industrial towns as a speaker at small strikes across the northeastern United States. There are conflicting accounts of Flynn’s departure from the Morris High School, some insisting that she left of her own accord and others suggesting she was expelled after her first arrest, but what is clear is that her year of

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<sup>158</sup> Flynn, “Men and Women” in *Words on Fire*, 103.

<sup>159</sup> Anderson “Mother Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.” 18.

activity with the IWW left Flynn eager to begin her work in the American labor movement. To Flynn the movement offered freedom, adventure, and the chance to have an impact on a world that offered the working-class little more than a pauper's pay and degradation.

Concluding her first year as an IWW orator, Flynn acted as a delegate to the annual Chicago convention where she met Jack Jones, an organizer from Minnesota. Jones offered Flynn an escape, asking her to accompany him on a speaking trip through the Mesabi Range.<sup>160</sup> Flynn joined Jones in Duluth, Minnesota in December of 1907 and accompanied him on an organizing drive through the ore counties of the Mesabi Range. Her experience in the Mesabi Range was her first exposure to the rugged life of the American miner and appealed to the romantic sensibilities of the young Flynn. As IWW secretary Vincent St. John reportedly remarked "Elizabeth fell in love with the West and the miners and she married the first one she met."<sup>161</sup> An ore miner himself and a former organizer for the Western Federation of Miners, Jack Jones epitomized Flynn's romantic conception of the rugged miners who toiled below the earth's surface and was the embodiment of the American worker in Flynn's mind. Jones and Flynn were married in January of 1908.

If it were not for Flynn's romanticism, it is possible that she would not have been present in Missoula, Montana where the arrest of Jones and his fellow organizers launched the first Free-Speech fight in IWW history. Shortly after their marriage, Flynn left Jones to fulfill her speaking commitments but eagerly rejoined him in Missoula,

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<sup>160</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 84.

<sup>161</sup> Vincent St. John qtd. in *The Rebel Girl*, 85.

Montana where he and fellow organizers were attempting to organize migratory workers against the exploitative practices of local employment agencies. As a gateway town – not in itself connected to industry, but a necessary point of passage to the mining and lumber camps of the area – Missoula was run by the employment agencies whose approval was necessary for workers to find employment. Local industry worked in tandem with the employment agencies to ensure a high turnover rate of workers which bolstered the profits of both the employer and the agency whose control over an ever growing pool of cheap labor dictate who could find work and who couldn't.<sup>162</sup>

Jones and his fellow organizers had been holding large open air street meetings and drawing an increasingly supportive crowd to the hall rented by the union. The possibility of a united working-class threatened the profitability of the agencies who used their influence to have local government pass street speaking ordinances that would prohibit the IWW's speakers from organizing within the town. Still in its infancy, the IWW relied on open-air meetings and hall gatherings to spread its message of class conscious solidarity and revolutionary syndicalism; any limitation placed on the IWW's public appearances had the potential to cripple organizing efforts.

Flynn's past experiences with her high school debate team, and the influence of her coach James Hamilton, provided Flynn with a clear understanding of American's constitutional rights that proved valuable when limitations were placed on the First Amendment. The speakers continued to hold public meetings, defying the ordinance on the grounds of its unconstitutional restrictions on freedom of speech. Jones and his fellow organizers were arrested, but Flynn, having not yet spoken, remained free and became the

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<sup>162</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 414.

only local IWW organizer free in Missoula.”<sup>163</sup> As the sole IWW organizer not imprisoned, Flynn put out a call for all “foot-loose rebels to come at once- to defend the Bill of Rights” and if need be, be arrested for their cause.<sup>164</sup> Members of the revolutionary union poured into Missoula, each one assuming the role of public speaker until arrested and replaced by the next. Flynn’s objective in calling in workers to defy the ordinance was remarkably simple yet effective; to annoy the local residents to the point of rebellion. It was the tax dollars of local residents that would be used to feed and house the IWW prisoners in the country jail, not to mention the trials that would be demanded on an individual basis. Moreover, the revolutionary spirit continued in the jails where IWW prisoners made speeches and sang throughout the day, at points creating such noise that local residents complained to their town officials.

The greatest impact, however, came when Flynn and another woman – Mrs. Edith Frennette – were both arrested for defying the speaking ordinance. The arrest of the women captured the attention of nearby college professors and women’s clubs who arrived in Missoula to ensure the protection of the women’s civil rights.<sup>165</sup> Flynn’s gender separated her from her male comrades, but it also allowed her to gain public sympathies in ways the men couldn’t. During a period when the New Women were agitating for the expansion of women’s rights, the flagrant disregard for the rights of the young Flynn and the conditions she encountered in the local jail brought the attention of women’s rights advocates, supporters, and sympathizers. Flynn’s tactics of civil disobedience provoked the locals and brought unwanted publicity to the town. The mixture of the two resulted in

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<sup>163</sup>Thomas Flynn qtd. in Perry Stickney Grant. *Fair Play for the Workers; Some sides of the maladjustment and the causes*, (New York: Moffat, yard and Company, 1918), 267.

<sup>164</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 104.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

local authorities neglecting to enforce the speech ordinance and allowed the IWW to continue their speeches. The charges against the IWW prisoners were subsequently dropped to avoid the expense of lengthy trials. Through persistence and a clever manipulation of publicity and public sentiment, the IWW had won its first free speech fight.

Flynn's integral role in the Missoula victory has often been misrepresented as the work of the male organizers of the town. Although achieved through collective effort, it was the clever tactics of Flynn that proved decisive in the fight. In minimizing Flynn's importance during the first IWW free speech fight, historians have effectively marginalized Flynn to a supportive role within the union, a role that does not accurately portray her contribution to both the IWW and in the labor movement more generally. Flynn's keen understanding of the power of public opinion and her training as an effective debater helped her to envision strategies that both benefitted labor and garnered public support. While the courage and persistence of the working-class strikers cannot be undervalued, the maintenance of public support for the actions of the workers often proved decisive in the survival of IWW actions.

As the IWW regained their speech making capabilities in Missoula, another free-speech fight erupted in Spokane, Washington. Spokane, like Missoula, was run by employment sharks that profited over the high turn rate of desperate migratory workers. The IWW had been organizing in Spokane prior to Flynn's arrival, calling for the implementation of direct hiring practices. In an effort to minimize the presence of IWW

organizers, Spokane's local government passed a city ordinance in 1908 that prohibited street meetings by all organizations, save those with religious affiliations.<sup>166</sup>

Flynn arrived in Spokane on November 16, 1909, but was not to be allowed to appear as a speaker in open air meetings; upon her arrival Flynn informed local organizers that she was pregnant with her second child. During a period when pregnant women were expected to be removed from the public eye, Flynn's "condition" meant that she could only appear in closed hall meetings. However Flynn, whom Charles Kerr believed had "already proved herself one of the most effective speakers and writers in the American revolutionary movement", drew the attention of reporters eager to report on the young rebel.<sup>167</sup>

Four days after her arrival, Flynn was arrested on the charge of conspiracy to incite men to violate the law and spent a night in the county jail.<sup>168</sup> If Flynn's imprisonment alone did not draw the attention of the public to Spokane, than the editorial she penned after being released did. Flynn recounted her night in the county jail, where she shared a cell with two prostitutes whom the guards regularly retrieved from the cell and the lack of a prison matron meant that adequate care was not afforded to inmates. Flynn's arrest and subsequent article once again drew the support of women's clubs across the country. After her release, Flynn published periodic updates on the events of Spokane. In her writing, Flynn aimed to publicize the brutal treatment of male strikers and the abuse of authority continually exhibited by local police. While her treatment in

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<sup>166</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 415.

<sup>167</sup> "Editor's Chair". *International Socialist Review* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company. July 1909- June 1910) reproduced in *Radical Periodical in the United States, 1890-1960*. (New York: Greenwood Reprint Corp. 1968) 642.

<sup>168</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 109.

the county jail was relatively genteel, Flynn believed that it was the result of ingrained social customs that denote women as fragile beings whereas “a man they would put in a sweatbox and break his physique and spirit...”<sup>169</sup> When arrested, the men would be “herded twenty-eight to thirty at a time in a 6x8 cell known as a sweatbox. The steam has been turned on full blast until the men were ready to drop from exhaustion.”<sup>170</sup> Flynn’s exposure of police brutality and her own arrest brought waves of civil libertarians and suffragists to Spokane that rallied behind the young woman in her defence of the workers’ rights.<sup>171</sup>

In confronting Spokane’s street speaking ordinance, the IWW employed the same tactics used by Flynn in Missoula, Montana. Workers were called to defy the ordinance and pack the jails to the point that continued enforcement became both economically and publically damaging. Such practices of civil disobedience became pillars of IWW strategies and inspired unions songs use by workers to remind both employers and authorities that “as fast as they can pinch us, we can always get some more.”<sup>172</sup>

The IWW free-speech fights culminated in the bloody conflict in San Diego, California. In San Diego, where anti-union sentiments ran deep, IWW workers faced unprecedented levels of violence and public vigilantism which reflected the prejudice and violence that had become the normal experience of an IWW member. Having learned from the events of other IWW actions, San Diego vigilantes kidnapped, tortured, and violently target the IWW members as they arrived. In San Diego, as in the minds of

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<sup>169</sup> Flynn, “Story of my Arrest and Imprisonment,” in *Words on Fire*. 89

<sup>170</sup> Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “The Free Speech Fight at Spokane,” *International Socialist Review (July 1909-June 1910)* Reprinted in *Radical Periodicals in the United States*. 485.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31175013801918>.

<sup>171</sup> Camp, *Iron in her Soul*, 64.

<sup>172</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 414.

many American's, "hanging was none too good for them [IWW]; they would be better dead, for they are absolutely useless in the human economy."<sup>173</sup> With a talent for oratory and writing, Flynn used the violence and persecution experience by the workers to appeal to the emotions of both the workers and her readership. Faced with mass arrests and brutality, the morale of the strike was fragile; Flynn injected a spirit that ensured the continued moral confidence of the workers. As she wrote from Spokane, "They may send us to jail, but that will not stop the agitation for free speech. They may deport the IWW men but the battle will not be crushed."<sup>174</sup>

Having only experienced small scale industrial organization prior to Missoula, the events of Missoula and Spokane made clear the impact she could have as a part of the American labor movement.<sup>175</sup> With her confidence built through successes in landmark labor conflicts for constitutional rights, Flynn proceeded to take on a more active role in the organization of workers and gained the trust and respect of the largely male union.

*Bread, Roses, and Silk; The IWW in Lawrence and Paterson.*

Flynn moved from organizing IWW free-speech fights, to organizing workers during two of the most historically noted IWW strikes; the 1912 Bread and Roses Strike of Lawrence, Massachusetts and the 1913 Paterson Silk Strike. United by their shared experiences of social and economic marginalization, the workers of Lawrence and Paterson epitomized the IWW strike ideal; organizing in individual branches but working collectively for the improvement of the working class.

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<sup>173</sup> Quoted from *The San Diego Tribune* in Harvey O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle*, 34.

<sup>174</sup> Flynn, "The Shame of Spokane," *International Socialist Review*, July 1909-June 1910) Reprinted in *Radical Periodicals in the United States*. 619.

<sup>175</sup> Vapnek, *Modern American Revolutionary*, 34.

The “family town” of Lawrence, Massachusetts was founded largely through the growth of local industry, and attracted immigrant workers who could find work as unskilled laborers in its mills. By 1912 eighty-six percent of the Lawrence population was foreign born,<sup>176</sup> with the majority of its inhabitants working in low-wage, high risk textile mills. The so called family town was devised by the area’s industry as a supposed benefit to the largely immigrant working class families; the family system used by the mills of such towns ensured that all members of the family – men, women and children – labored alongside one another in the mill. Even those who were not employed by the mills contributed to the family system by taking outside work into the home, or women minding the children of other working women.

Although this system was predicated on the exploitation of the largely foreign born and economically marginalized workers, the family system did benefit the workers of Lawrence. The bonds that developed through shared tasks and community employment extended beyond the factory floor and united the workers through a shared experience of exploitation and marginalization. As a result, the workers of Lawrence emerged as a militant and resilient group unafraid to voice “ideals and values radically different” from the native-born Americans.<sup>177</sup> Representing approximately twenty-five different nationalities, the working-class in Lawrence was steeped in traditions of revolutionary socialism brought with them from their countries of origin. The varying traditions of protest contributed to the ignition of the Lawrence strike; these workers had not crossed oceans to live as wage slaves. Moreover, the flagrant disregard by

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<sup>176</sup>John Bruce McPherson., *The Lawrence Strike of 1912*, (Boston: The Rockwell and Churchill Press., 1912),

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<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Lawrence's textile industry to adhere to state laws and regulations – and the failure of the state to enforce said laws – saw not only the men and women enter into the mill, but the children as well. At the time, Massachusetts law dictated that no children under fourteen years of age, or those under sixteen who could not read and write legible English, could be employed by industry.<sup>178</sup> However, the dire economic conditions of the Lawrence working class drove many to pull their children from school and lie about their age, which employers often overlooked, in order to bring in another source of income.

In January of 1912 conditions in Lawrence reached a breaking point. In response to a recently passed hour's law meant to lessen the working hours of women and children, the mills of Lawrence introduced a thirty cent pay cut to the workers. A substantial cut in itself, to the workers of Lawrence it also meant the difference between life and death; to the workers, a thirty cent cut to wages was equivalent to inability to buy five loaves of bread.

Initially the strike lacked organization, with different industries, nationalities, and language groups separating from one another. Moreover, the large number of women workers were left without representation and marginalized by their comrades. Calls for organizational support were sent to both the AFL and the IWW, but because of the large number of unskilled and women workers the AFL refused to assist the vast majority of strikers.

The IWW in its commitment to organizing the unorganized was quick to arrive. Joe Ettor, the IWW's most popular organizer in the east, was the first to arrive in

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<sup>178</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 427.

Lawrence. Ettor organized the workers according the IWW structure that included sub-branches based on industry, nationality, and language which would then elect representatives to the general strike committee. Although Ettor's role in the strike was brief his initial organization of the Lawrence workers laid the groundwork for those who would arrive to fill his slot.<sup>179</sup> The majority of the strike was conducted under the leadership of William "Big Bill" Haywood. It is known through Haywood's account of the strike that Flynn had already arrived in Lawrence, as she chaired the committee in charge of his "homecoming" celebration.<sup>180</sup> In his recollection of Lawrence, Haywood praised the work of Joe Ettor and noted that he had been "aptly assisted" in his early organization by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn who gave "splendid service at Lawrence."<sup>181</sup> Historian Bruce Watson marks Flynn's arrival as the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, but places her in a position of marginal importance prior to the conviction of Joseph Ettor on January 30<sup>th</sup>.<sup>182</sup>

During the Lawrence strike, Flynn was in charge of organizing the women and children, as well as all fundraising efforts; activities integral to the maintenance of worker moral and the life of the strike itself. The IWW had never been strong financially, and thus all funds raised by Flynn allowed the IWW to not only proceed in effectively conducting the strike, but to offer relief to the families of the workers thus minimizing the effects of the wage cut. Flynn's demanding portfolio required that she be both a strong visual presence amongst the workers in Lawrence while simultaneously travelling outside

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<sup>179</sup> Joe Ettor his assistant Arturo Giovannitti were arrested after a police riot during a strikers march that ended with one woman, Anna La Pizza, being shot and killed. Although it is widely believed her death was the result of police action, Ettor and Giovannitti were arrested and charged in connection with her death. For more on this see Flynn's *The Rebel Girl* 127-128.

<sup>180</sup> William D. Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book: The Autobiography of William D. Haywood*, (New York: International Publishers, 1958), 239.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>182</sup> Bruce Watson, *Bread and Roses*, 153.

town limits to raise funds for the strike. As labor writer and fellow Heterodoxy member Mary Heaton Vorse recalled, despite that overwhelming presence of Big Bill Haywood Flynn was the “spirit of that strike.”<sup>183</sup> It was her presence and speeches that instilled confidence in this multiracial, individually powerless working class.

The militancy and role of women during the Lawrence strike will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, but it is important to note their contribution at this point. As women represented a large portion of the Lawrence workers it was necessary that they be involved in the strike. Largely due to their own militant spirit the women moved beyond their traditional supportive roles in IWW strikes and into the vanguard of class activism. In an attempt to deter police violence, women often headed picket lines or led marches that drew great attention. Their impact was such that the authorities paid little attention to their gender when doling out punishment. The notable difference in the treatment of men and women workers in Lawrence was that though the men could be beaten on the head with police clubs authorities ordered officers to confine their blows to a woman’s arms and breasts to avoid fatalities.<sup>184</sup>

The Lawrence Strike lasted until March 12, 1912 when the employers conceded to the demands of the workers. The workers of Lawrence won dramatic increases in wages, improved factory conditions and successfully increased the wages of the lowest paid workers by a total of twenty-five percent.<sup>185</sup> The victory at Lawrence increased the nativist resentment of the middle class in their opinion of immigrants. In his

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<sup>183</sup> Mary Heaton Vorse qtd. Foner, *History of the American Labor Movement*, 307.

<sup>184</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 129.

<sup>185</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 436.

contemporary history on the strike, John Bruce McPherson details the lessons to be learned from the events at Lawrence for American society. He wrote that;

The public, too, must take heed that the gates admitting these foreign million to the privileges of the land are more closely guarded, for with more carefully selected immigrants there would have been no Lawrence upheaval, and there would have been much less social unrest and much less extreme radicalism imported from Europe.<sup>186</sup>

The view that radicalism was the result of foreign influence was a commonly held belief during this period. By marking those who opposed the dominant American social systems and ideologies as “un-American,” critics delegitimized and demonized the cause for which they fought.

On the heels of the IWW victory at Lawrence, a similar strike erupted in the silk town of Paterson, New Jersey. Like Lawrence, Paterson was considered to be a family town and employed a largely immigrant population. Moreover, Paterson had a long history of labor disputes and contained an IWW presence before the Silk Strike of 1913. The Paterson Silk Strike began in response to the implementation of the four-loom system designed to produce a greater quantity of silk at a significantly lower cost. In addition to the lowered production cost, the unskilled nature of the work meant that it could be performed by women and children, thus further lowering the cost of production through lower wages.

The strike at Paterson followed the same organizational structure of the Lawrence Strike, indeed many expected a quick IWW victory upon their arrival. However, the industrial set-up in Paterson was different from that in Lawrence. Whereas in Lawrence the majority of mills were owned by parent companies, the Paterson silk mills were

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<sup>186</sup> McPherson, *The Lawrence Strike of 1912*, 45.

independently owned and operated thus allowed for greater flexibility amongst the employers in negotiating terms for each separate mill.

Given the increased division of Paterson workers, the strike activity in Paterson was conducted at an increased pace. Daily meetings were held in Turn Hall to continually reinforce the importance of class-solidarity in the face of an extended strike.<sup>187</sup> Meetings were held during times of religious observance to avoid the strikers encountering messages of conciliation from the pulpit. Many attempts were made to further alienate the workers from one another, most notably the attempt to employ patriotic guilt to get the workers to return to their posts. The employers of Paterson, whose material was used in the production of the American Flag, decorated the town in the Star - Spangled Banner in the hopes of instilling a patriotic sense of duty in the workers. This however, only fuelled workers in their fight to achieve greater dignity, declaring that “we weave the flag, we live under the flag, we die under the flag, but damn’d if we’ll starve under the flag!”<sup>188</sup>

As the Paterson strike persisted, relief funds were rapidly depleted. Although Flynn had been actively engaged in fundraising activities, the donations could not keep pace with the increasingly dire needs of the workers and their families. An idea to raise funds for the strike came from Mable Dodge during a meeting of her salon where Haywood and Flynn were present. Given Paterson’s proximity to New York and the level of public interest in the strike, Dodge suggested they bring the strike to New York. Jack Reed, then a young and eager journalist, offered to write the script of a play that was to become the Paterson Pageant and the most memorable event of the Paterson Strike.

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<sup>187</sup> Haywood, *Bill Haywood’s Book*, 261.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

Written to depict the daily life of the striking workers, the Paterson Pageant holds the title as the first labor play in American history. On June 7, 1913 “over a thousand strikers from Paterson went to New York and put on this wonderful pageant” that drew crowds of curious observers to Madison Square Gardens which was “packed to capacity.”<sup>189</sup>

Phillips Russell reported that “no spectacle enacted in New York [had] ever made such an impression” on its audience.<sup>190</sup> The play written by Reed was divided into six scenes and used the strikers themselves to re-enact the strike as he saw it. The Pageant opened with the mills and “workers with dead spirits” until a worker yelled strike and the workers came alive. The play then continued to depict the mass pickets of workers who suffered police beatings until one died. The third scene re-enacted the burial of the worker, including the grave side speeches of Flynn, Haywood, and Tresca given by the speakers themselves. The play concluded with a meeting in Turn Hall and speeches made by both workers and organizers alike before erupting into the “International.”<sup>191</sup>

The Pageant was an entertainment success, but financially it was a disaster that the strike could not survive. The cost of production alone drained the strike fund, and the jealousy that arose between workers based on inclusion created rifts within the strike.<sup>192</sup> Flynn recalled the pageant as a failure on both a financial and moral front, noting that it was during the distraction of the pageant that the first scabs entered into the mills of Paterson.

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<sup>189</sup> General Defence Committee. *Evidence and Cross Examination of William D. Haywood in the case of the ISA vs Wm. D Haywood, et. al.* (Chicago: 1918), 76.

<sup>190</sup> Phillips Russell, “The World’s Greatest Labor Play: The Paterson Strike Pageant,” *International Socialist Review*, (1913-1914), Reprinted in *Radical Periodicals in the United States.*: 8.

<sup>191</sup> Haywood, *Bill Haywood’s Book*, 263.

<sup>192</sup> Flynn, “The truth about Paterson,” in *Words on Fire*. 119

The Paterson strike ultimately ended in defeat, with the workers literally starved into submission by their employers. Workers returned to the mills group by group, negotiating separately for each mill's employees to retain their former positions. Although the strike ended in defeat, Flynn did not consider Paterson to be a complete failure.

Though the workers had lost the strike, they had experienced a brief moment of class-cohesion that remained engrained in their memories. Flynn was critical of those who sought to call Paterson a failure and critique IWW tactics noting that "many of our critics are people who never went to Paterson or who went on a holiday."<sup>193</sup> Many of the most vocal critics of the strike were in fact Greenwich Village sympathizers, which for a period negatively affected Flynn's view of cross-class alliances. Some, however, remained sympathetic to the Paterson cause. Villagers such as Rose Pastor Stokes, whose labor background allowed her to more directly identify with Paterson workers, continued to support the ideas behind the Paterson strike through continued coverage of the conditions in Paterson. In a poem published in *The Masses*, Stokes' directly referenced the continued plight of the Paterson workers as she wrote that "we starved and we lost; but we are weavers still; and hunger is in the mill."<sup>194</sup>

Steeped in traditions of dissent and protest, immigrant women during the early twentieth century emerged as a militant and viable source for social and labor reform. However, their male counterparts had been socialized to view the women as figures needing protection, as fragile and docile women meant to be concerned with the affairs of

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<sup>193</sup> Flynn, "The truth about Paterson," in *Words on Fire*. 111

<sup>194</sup> Rose Pastor Stokes, "Paterson," *The Masses*, November 1913 12.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/c866t2r7>.

the family. Moreover, the closing of the American frontier and the ever increasing division of labor removed vital tokens of expression for male masculinity and dominance.

During the Progressive era, the strike became a vehicle through which men could reclaim and project their masculinity in the public sphere, thus reaffirming their sex status. The men of Lawrence were no different in this manner than their American counterparts. Conditioned into the patriarchal role of provider, the male worker envisioned his life as primarily occurring in the public sphere while the woman remained largely a figure of the private sphere. Out of this divergence grew differential ideas about the role of men and women workers. Although in towns like Lawrence and Paterson the women were accepted into industry out of economic necessity the male was still considered responsible for the primary economic provision of his family. Acceptance, however, differs greatly from comradeship in the class war; men still did not see women workers as equals and thus did not accept them as legitimate agents during a strike.<sup>195</sup>

### *The Women of Lawrence and Paterson*

Although the IWW constitution expressed its desire to organize women workers, the reality was that it remained hostile and indifferent to the needs of women. The egalitarian rhetoric of the IWW stood in contrast to the endemic sexism of the male leadership, which viewed women workers as simply a tool to be used during a strike.

As noted by historian Anne Schofield, the women were not “freed from domesticity by the coming of the One Big Union.” As women entered into the ranks of the IWW they became the “muse and helpmate” of her male counterpart, playing a

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<sup>195</sup> Priscilla Murolo and A.B Chitty, *From the Folks who brought you the weekend: a short, illustrated history of labor in the United States*, (New York: New York Press, 2001), 68.

“domestic role both in the oppressed present and the liberated future.”<sup>196</sup> Schofield’s observations are visible in both the treatment of the rank and file women, as well as Flynn’s position within the IWW. Although Flynn occupied a highly visible role, her responsibilities during organizational efforts were representative of labor’s domestication of the “rebel girl” whose area of concentration remained focused on the organization of women and children, fundraising for strike relief, and travelling on speaking tours in service to the IWW. Even Flynn, the celebrated “Rebel Girl” of the Industrial Workers of the World, was placed in a secondary position to her male comrades. However, her a domestic role, which she often resented, was both liberating and exploitative for Flynn. Although here male comrades often sought to exploit the image of the “Rebel Girl” Flynn’s headstrong resilience motivated her to push beyond gendered understandings of the female organizer. With one foot in the domestic and the other in the public sphere, Flynn occupied a space that does not allow her to be viewed as a purely supportive figure nor a person that had completely overcome the expectations of her sex.

As previously mentioned, the IWW did espouse the principles of equality and general acceptance of female workers. The decision to refer to members as “fellow workers,” not making distinctions based on gender during meetings and describing problems in terms of class, allowed the IWW to transcend sexual boundaries by connecting the problems of the worker to the problems of the community.<sup>197</sup> The women’s need to work in towns such as Lawrence and Paterson was understood given the economic conditions of the families, but understanding and acceptance represent two

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<sup>196</sup> Schofield, “Rebel Girls,” 335.

<sup>197</sup> Anne Mattina, “Yours for Industrial Freedom: Women of the IWW, 1905-1930,” *Women’s Studies* 43, no. 2 (2014): 170. DOI:10.1080/00497878.2014.863105.

very different ideas. Socialized into the role of the paternalistic protector and provider, the inability of the male worker to provide for his family profoundly impacted his masculine identity. In the face of diminished masculinity, the strike became a way to reassert one's identity as the paternal protector.

Moreover, the men themselves did not see women as reliable members of the labor movement. Instead, male labor leaders considered women's paid labor as secondary and transient in comparison to her status as a wife and mother.<sup>198</sup> However, the militant working-class unionism of New York immigrant women challenged society's understanding of the working woman. During the early twentieth century, women workers entered the industrial workforce en masse, having followed their work from the home to the factory floor. While workers and employers alike were growing accustomed to the appearance of the woman industrial worker, the women began to assert themselves as a powerful militant force capable of effecting change.

By the 1912 Lawrence strike, the question of women's unionism had been moved beyond theoretical inquiry to practiced reality through the "Girl Strikes" that swept New York's textile industry between 1909 and 1911.<sup>199</sup> When the IWW arrived in Lawrence, they found a large number of militant women ready and willing to sacrifice for the cause of labor. As the leading woman of the IWW, Flynn's advocacy on behalf of the working woman helped to mitigate the endemic sexism of the IWW leadership and bring women into a more active role within the IWW. She argued that "women can be the most militant or most conservative element in a strike" and that their influence over both her husband

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<sup>198</sup> David von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*, (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>199</sup> Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 190.

and her home could not be undervalued.<sup>200</sup> Although she did not devalue their labor, Flynn did often place the significance of woman's influence in the context of her domestic roles of wife and mother. Flynn believed that women had to be kept informed on strike activities and had to become involved or the desperation and suffering of her children would cause her to doubt the legitimacy of her husband's actions.

In her approach to challenging the social barriers to women's unionism, Flynn worked to overcome both men and women's hesitancy by advocating for increased women's participation in the union itself. Outside of the picket lines, women should be "encouraged wherever possible by granting them equal opportunities, duties and privileges even to the holding of executive office."<sup>201</sup> During the Lawrence strike, women not only took on more responsibilities as active strike participants, but were eligible both to vote in the election of strike representatives and serve as representatives themselves. The ability of women to vote on strike business represents the freedom and status they did hold in the IWW. The Lawrence strike represented the first time the IWW had organized meetings designed to address the specific needs of women. These women's meetings were led by Flynn whose understanding of the "specific needs of women" proved more valuable in gaining support than the presence of male leaders who tended to "underestimate this vital need."<sup>202</sup> At the forefront of these needs were concerns about the unique burden shared by all women, child-care. "The married woman worker has a two-fold burden from which her husband is immune – childbearing and

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<sup>200</sup> Flynn, "The IWW Call to Women," in *Words on Fire*, 108.

<sup>201</sup> Flynn qtd., in Foner, *History of the American Labor Movement*, 128.

<sup>202</sup> Flynn, "Problems Organizing Women" in *Words on Fire*, 134.

housekeeping.”<sup>203</sup> Flynn might have been particularly sensitive on this matter considering that her own difficult relationship with her son Fred provoked criticism from those who held traditional views of childcare. Her decision to leave her son in the care of her family was a radically different approach to the raising of children, who fell under the preview of the mother’s care. Despite this, her ability to empathize with working mothers proved valuable in the appealing to the maternal and laboring elements of women workers.

In Lawrence, Flynn moved beyond the organization of women and included daily meetings for the striker’s children. The children’s meetings served a double purpose of both lessening women’s responsibility to the care of her children and countering the negative messages heard by children during school. The children’s meetings were designed to be informative and to counteract the negative anti-labor messages that were usually encountered during the school day that bred distrust within the family unit.<sup>204</sup> Flynn, having been brought to meetings as a child, saw no value in trying to shield the children from the harsh realities of the world they suffered under. To shield the children from strike meetings and the reality of working class life was to divorce them from the ideas presented by the speakers; to prematurely remove the children from the ideas of American labor was to rob them of the chance to make their own decisions pertaining to the material.<sup>205</sup>

The peak of children’s involvement in Lawrence occurred during the “Children’s Crusade” organized by Flynn and IWW ally Margaret Sanger. The purpose of the

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<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>204</sup> Flynn, *Sabotage*, 26.

<sup>205</sup> Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 60.

children's crusade, like the children's meetings, was to remove the anxiety of striking workers over the safety and well-being of their children. The children of Lawrence were taken into the homes of wealthy New York radicals and sympathizers to alleviate the strain of the workers who watched their children suffer as wages stopped coming in. Apart from removing the anxiety of childcare, the Children's Crusade gained much needed publicity for the events of Lawrence. By bringing the impoverished conditions of the Lawrence youth to the wealthy of New York, Flynn humanized the Lawrence strike and fostered middle-class support for the Lawrence workers.

Through this effort to reach out to women workers female participation in the IWW increased dramatically. They were both the most militant and persistent agents of working-class activism and of the 10,000 members gained during the strike, sixty percent were women. Despite the increased presence of women within the IWW, the chronic sexism of the male leadership was difficult to overcome. Deeply engrained beliefs about a woman's role in comparisons with men continued to seep through in the paternalistic and minimizing speeches made to women by the male organizers.

In response to this persistent sexism, Flynn refocused her efforts on the organization and inclusion of women within the industrial union movement. Having at this point begun to interact with the radical women of Greenwich Village, Flynn began to see that women's labor and social subjugation could not be addressed purely in economic and class terms. She came to see that whenever women strike "more is involved than a question of labor" and economic egalitarianism.<sup>206</sup> When women went on strike they demanded the expansion of rights, the ability to control their own bodies and minds, and

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<sup>206</sup> Flynn, "One Boss Less" in *Words on Fire*, 98.

the right to exercise greater influence in social and political affairs. In Paterson, the women-only meetings hosted by Flynn broke down the resistance of men to women's involvement, but also provided women with the opportunity to develop leadership skills and voice sentiments of political radicalism that had been ignored in other venues.<sup>207</sup>

After the defeat at Paterson, the IWW turned an increasingly self-critical eye on its structures and practices. Internal divisions fractured the already tense relationships as debates surrounding centralisation became a frequent topic of conversation. The 1913 IWW convention itself deteriorated into a prolonged debate on the subject matter.

Remaining dedicated to the IWW cause of agitation and serving a wide base of workers, Flynn focused her attention on the realm of labor defence work. As the leader of the Worker's Defence Union, and executive member of the National Civil Liberties Bureau, which in 1923 became the American Civil Liberties Union, Flynn continued the fight for working-class justice throughout the anti-labor 1920s.

### *Conclusion*

As the "preeminent woman speaker in an organization necessarily almost entirely male"<sup>208</sup> Flynn broke barriers for both the woman worker and women more generally. Militant in her actions, passionate in her speech, and penetrating in her thought, Flynn appealed to a broad spectrum of radicals and contributed to the modernization of the American labor movement.

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<sup>207</sup> Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 198.

<sup>208</sup> O'Conner, *Revolution in Seattle*, 35.

Flynn's power of oratory was her most powerful weapon; emotive and eloquent, Flynn's oratorical appeal transcended class and gender barriers as she synthesised ideas of labor, socialism, and women's emancipation. As *The Little Review's* editor Margaret Anderson remarked, Flynn was "more articulate than any IWW I have heard, and she is freer from the stock phrases that give so many the very earnest young workers in the movement something of a pathos."<sup>209</sup> While Flynn did not shy away from the harshness of working class life, her unrelenting optimism instilled hope and promise in those who heard her speak. Although some may confuse Flynn's pragmatic style for pandering to the audiences she encountered, Flynn based her message firmly in socialism as she perceived it. Typically giving multiple speeches over a short period of time, Flynn maintained a "more consistent point of view" than many of her contemporary orators, such as the famed Mother Jones.<sup>210</sup>

Flynn had "the advantage of being without prejudices" and often celebrated the immigrant worker as having a more immediate grasp on concerns of radical labor during the Progressive Era.<sup>211</sup> Those who listened to her speak internalized her inclusive attitude towards marginalized immigrant workers, whom she believed often "grasp the real facts better than do the Americans, who are apt to feel more the sentiment [and] spirit of the situation than to see its facts."<sup>212</sup> Flynn's appeal to the working class, and the reason she inspired trust in those wary of organized unionism, can be attributed to her unwillingness to engage in condescension or paternalism when addressing working-class audiences. She

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<sup>209</sup> Anderson, "Mother Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn," *The Little Review*, 18.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>212</sup> Archibald McClure, *Leadership of the New America: Racial and Religious*, (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1916), 30.

never wanted to present ideas that mattered so much to her and seemed so relevant to the issues of her era in a manner that would be incomprehensible to the worker. She consistently expressed the democratic conviction that that all workers had “sufficient intelligence to select for [themselves]” the appropriate tactics to be used during a strike; the IWW was merely a conduit for ideas and support.<sup>213</sup>

No less important, Flynn sought to instill confidence within workers, especially women, so that they would become their own leaders and continue the revolutionary spirit after the IWW had gone. Her influence in building workers self-confidence was clearly evident in Paterson, New Jersey where she encouraged a young Italian girl to speak at public meetings.<sup>214</sup> She broadened the appeal of the IWW for the working-class, but her oratory also attracted the attention of middle-class progressives who found in her a “respectable” representative for labor.

Having grown accustomed to the militant rhetoric of organizers such as William Haywood and Mother Jones, whose years of organizing amongst the most rugged of America’s working class had left their marks, potential middle-class allies did not see figures they could relate to. The rise of Flynn as the “girl orator” who offered a modernised message that appealed to a broader audience. Flynn was “the young Diana of the labor movement. Strong, full of hope, and past the fear which accompanies all beginnings facing the future with the courage and confidence of a youth fully launched on its career and enjoying a sense of growing understanding and power.”<sup>215</sup> Many historians, such as Melvyn Dubofsky, have been quick to criticise Flynn, implying that it

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<sup>213</sup> Flynn, *Sabotage*, 23.

<sup>214</sup> Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*, 196.

<sup>215</sup> F. Guy Davis. “Three Women” *The Little Review*. ed. Margaret C. Anderson. (1915-1916): 62.

was the desire for the public's attention and spotlight that motivated her activism.

However, Eugene Debs himself remarked that despite her notoriety she remained "one of the humblest and most unpretentious" members of the American labor movement.<sup>216</sup>

Flynn's motivation stemmed not from a desire for attention, but a complete commitment to the social and economic emancipation of the working-class.

Flynn's expansive vision of social revolution encapsulates the enduring hope of the Progressive Era. A hope for a revolution in social understanding; when women were given full control over their own lives and bodies, and men did not sell their labor and dignity for a pittance wage. Flynn worked to restore the dignity of the worker through the building of a class-based social unity in which the masses could once again reclaim their place in society.

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<sup>216</sup> Eugene V. Debs to Ruth Albert, letter, February 1, 1926 reproduced in *The Rebel Girl*. 315.

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