



2020

"Rebel Girls" Reevaluated: Gender in the Lives of Three Wobbly Women

Jake Andersen

Brigham Young University, theteansubmissions@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean>



Part of the [Labor History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Andersen, Jake (2020) ""Rebel Girls" Reevaluated: Gender in the Lives of Three Wobbly Women," *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing*: Vol. 49 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol49/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Article

"Rebel Girls" Reevaluated Gender in the Lives of Three Wobbly Women

Jake Andersen

DURING THE 1912 LAWRENCE TEXTILE STRIKE, ELIZABETH GURLEY Flynn, a speaker and organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), stood to address local workers at a Greek Catholic Church. Before she made it to the pulpit, a local priest stopped her, insisting that as a woman she had no place to speak in the church. The priest allowed her to approach the pulpit only after she convinced him that she "spoke as an organizer, not as a woman."¹ While only a minor incident in the large Lawrence strike, the priest's actions and Flynn's denial of her own gender hints at the difficulties women faced in trying to fulfill their duties as IWW organizers. Hardly the only incident in which Flynn privileged her class identity over her gender identity, it hints at the complex, and often contradictory, role of gender in the IWW. In order to advance the IWW's cause, Flynn found it necessary to emphasize class over sex.

Long hailed as a more progressive institution because they did not officially discriminate along gender lines, general scholarship on the IWW (whose members were often referred to as "Wobblies") explores the IWW's contradictory views on women. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, in particular, historians

1. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography, My First Life (1906–1926)* (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 145.

identified the gap between the IWW's rhetoric of gender equality that existed in theory and their narrow, domestic gender ideology that existed in practice. For example, Philip S. Foner's 1979 *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* argues that the IWW's approach to women was essentially "chauvinistic," even though they officially organized workers regardless of gender.² Similarly, Ann Schofield's 1983 "Rebel Girls and Union Maids: The Woman Question in the Journals of the AFL and IWW," looks at the ideology of women in the journals of the IWW and AFL, concluding that the IWW's supposedly radical, socialist vision of the future still put women squarely in the home.³ While both scholars provide important insight, they focus more on the perspectives of the IWW and say little about the daily lives and lived experiences of Wobbly women. A more complete understanding of Wobbly women requires looking beyond the top-down perspectives of the IWW.

More recent scholars have done just that, looking more at women's perspectives and experiences, which has led to better understandings of women in the IWW. Meredith Tax's 1980 *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880–1917*, argues that during IWW strikes, working women transcended traditional forms of striking and brought issues like wages and hours out of the workplace and made them community issues that involved the entire family, not just men.⁴ However, Tax argues that the IWW primarily had an economic understanding of all issues, thinking only in terms of class conflict, which limited their ability to understand the unique oppressions that women faced.⁵ By looking at women's daily lives, Tax provides new insight into both the role of women during IWW strikes and the limits of the IWW's views on women. Ardis Cameron's work, meanwhile, focuses on women's perspective before, during, and after the 1912 Lawrence Strike, which deepens our understanding of women's role in the strike. Cameron argues that the women of Lawrence had developed an active and vibrant community long before 1912 and that the IWW did not "organize" these women into an activist community so much as they took advantage of existing community networks during the

2. Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), x.

3. Schofield, "Rebel Girls and Union Maids," 335–337.

4. Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880–1917* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), 285.

5. Tax, *Rising of the Women*, 187.

strike.⁶ By focusing on women's perspectives, like Tax, Cameron shows the importance of women in the Lawrence strike; Their scholarship provides a more nuanced view of Wobbly women.

Other scholars have looked at how ideas of gender functioned in the IWW. In particular, Francis Shor's 1999 "'Virile Syndicalism' in Comparative Perspective: A Gender Analysis of the IWW in the United States and Australia" argues that competing definitions of masculinity were a key part of industrial conflicts in the Progressive era and that the IWW emphasized "reclaiming manhood and protecting-working class masculinity" from the emasculating effects of industrial capitalism, a practice Shor calls "virile syndicalism."⁷ According to Shor, the IWW provided men "opportunities to experience a form of cultural empowerment" that included "rituals of manhood."⁸ These opportunities and rituals included the IWW's direct action campaigns and, in particular, its rhetoric of sabotage which constituted "masculine posturing" in defiance of industrial capitalism.⁹ In short, virile syndicalism was a set of ideas and practices which viewed capitalism as a threat to masculinity and offered working men an opportunity to assert their own masculinity. Shore acknowledges that this system offered little to women, but there has been little scholarship on how virile syndicalism may have impacted IWW women in practice.

Drawing on memoirs, letters, speeches, and both union and nonunion newspapers, and building on prior scholarship, this paper explores gender in the IWW through the lives of three Wobbly women: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Matilda Robbins, and Jane Street. All three made valuable contributions to the IWW's cause, suggesting their preference for the more inclusive industrial unionism over the more limited craft unionism. Yet all three faced either indifference or outright opposition from Wobbly men. Flynn, as a speaker and leader, focused on building the IWW from the top-down; as the "Rebel Girl" she came to embody the ideal Wobbly woman, but she harbored doubts about the IWW's narrow ideology and faced opposition from IWW men when

6. Ardis Cameron, "Bread and Roses Revisited: Women's Culture and Working-Class activism in the Lawrence Strike of 1912," in *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of US Women's Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 44–50.

7. Francis Shor, "'Virile Syndicalism' in Comparative Perspective: A Gender Analysis of the IWW in the United States and Australia," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 56, Gendered Labor (Fall, 1999), 65–77.

8. Shor, "'Virile Syndicalism' in Comparative Perspective," 69.

9. Shor, "'Virile Syndicalism' in Comparative Perspective," 67–74.

she voice practical concerns and suggested a new course for the organization. Robbins, a working-class immigrant, focused on organizing workers from the bottom-up, but received little support from the IWW's male leadership, who preferred speechmaking and spectacle over substance. Street organized an effective union of domestic workers, a field infamously difficult to organize, that exercised real power over employers, but she faced vicious opposition from her male colleagues in the IWW. These women's experiences and perspectives suggest that the IWW's narrow gender ideology limited the role of Wobbly women in building a more sustainable labor organization.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: The Original "Rebel Girl"

Because of her visible role as a leader, general scholarship on the IWW often includes Flynn. Scholars like Foner and Tax highlight Flynn for her role in the IWW and argue that she understood the importance of organizing women but struggled to help her naïve male colleagues understand women's unique struggles.¹⁰ While these are valuable insights, they lack Flynn's perspective, which Lara Vapnek adds to the narrative in 2018's "The Rebel Girl Revisited: Rereading Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's Life Story." Vapnek argues that the two organizations to which Flynn was principally loyal, the IWW and the Communist Party USA, controlled and limited her image and self-expression, which in turn limited the scope of her 1955 memoir, *The Rebel Girl*.¹¹ Her loyalty to the Communist Party may have skewed her depictions of some events, but Flynn's memoir remains a valuable source of her perspectives and experiences in the IWW, especially alongside her other writings, speeches, and personal papers. These sources together help illuminate the role of the IWW's gender ideology in her own life.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's family background and education introduced her to socialism. Raised by a labor-activist father and a suffragist mother, Flynn likely found socialism at a young age. While her family struggled financially (her father was frequently out of work), she enjoyed the privilege of a formal education, where she thrived, earning straight A's and winning a debate medal. Her father was an ardent socialist, frequently taking her to meetings.¹² Her

10. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 406; Tax, *The Rising of the Women*, 142.

11. Lara Vapnek, "The Rebel Girl Revisited: Rereading Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's Life Story," *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 13–42.

12. Lara Vapnek, *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: Modern American Revolutionary* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015), 13–14.

memoir shows how close studies of everything from Thomas Paine to Mary Wollstonecraft to Karl Marx contributed to her political radicalism. Particularly influential was Edward Bellamy's socialist novel *Looking Backward*, which showed her "how peaceful, prosperous and happy America could be under a socialist system of society."¹³ Her education soon oriented her towards activism.

At age fifteen, she gave her first speech on January 31, 1906 at the Harlem Socialist Club.¹⁴ That speech, titled "What Socialism Will Do For Women," suggests that she understood women's unique struggles under industrial capitalism from a young age. While the speech itself has not survived, it drew heavily on August Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*.¹⁵ Bebel, a nineteenth-century German socialist, argued that women faced unique dimensions of oppression under capitalism and that the liberation of the working class depended on "social independence and equality of the sexes."¹⁶ In *Woman in the Past, Present, and Future*, Bebel proposed that the "solution" to the "women's question" included not just equality under the law but women's "economic freedom and material independence." This solution, according to Bebel, was "unattainable . . . under the existing social and political institutions."¹⁷ For Bebel, women faced unique economic and material difficulties and the solution was total institutional revolution. While the text of Flynn's first speech has not survived, her title and source material suggest that Flynn, from a young age, recognized women's unique place in capitalist society.

Some of Flynn's writings suggest that she maintained her sympathies for women's unique struggles throughout her time with the IWW. A rough outline of an unpublished 1915 manuscript, simply titled "Birth Control," indicate that she remained attentive to the unique struggles of working women. Her notes include phrases like "Small Families—A Proletarian Necessity" and "Babycare and Hygiene for Women." She also includes a section titled "Bebel," suggesting that August Bebel's work, which emphasized childbearing and rearing as an impediment to women's economic independence, remained important to her.¹⁸ Flynn saw birth

13. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 48–53.

14. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 54.

15. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 55.

16. August Bebel, *Woman and Socialism*, trans. Meta L. Sterne (New York: Socialist Literature Co., 1910), 1–7.

17. August Bebel, *Woman in the Past, Present, and Future* (Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 4–5.

18. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Birth Control*, unpublished manuscript, 1917, EGF Papers (Tamiment), Box 1, Folder 30.

control as a possible tool in the economic emancipation of women. Her support for birth control was not outside the norms of the IWW; the Wobblies were early advocates of contraception.¹⁹ Schofield, however, clarifies that “the IWW stance in favor of birth control was rooted not in a commitment to feminism, but rather in a class analysis of reproduction.”²⁰ Flynn’s manuscript notes suggest that her own commitment to birth control went beyond class, recognizing the challenges women faced in raising supporting large families. Another unpublished manuscript, simply titled *On Women*, further suggests that Flynn remained committed to women’s issues.²¹ A surviving outline from 1917 suggests some its main ideas, including “freedom of choice in selecting a mate,” “equality in the home,” and “a community motherhood.”²² These points suggest that Flynn continued to recognize the unique dimensions of struggle that women faced and that her commitment to a more feminist socialism, characteristic of Bebel, did not fade.

Flynn’s public speeches and writings as a Wobbly, however, often echoed the IWW’s limited gender ideology. In an article she wrote around 1909 for *Solidarity*, an official IWW organ, specifically addressed the issue of women in the IWW. She declared that “society moves in grooves of class not sex,” and labelled “sex distinction(s)” as “insignificant.”²³ Further, the IWW “makes no special appeal to women as women,” sees “no basis in facts for feminist mutual interest,” and declares the “sisterhood of women” to be a “sham.”²⁴ These ideas are inconsistent with the more women-centric approach to socialism she had demonstrated a few years earlier, but right in line with the IWW’s emphasis on class over sex. In a 1911 speech, published in the *Industrial Worker*, Flynn at first channeled a more nuanced, Bebel-esque view of women and socialism, recognizing that women face unique difficulties, such as “dependence upon individual men for their existence” and spending one’s entire life “exclusively within the four walls of one’s individual composite home.”²⁵ However, towards the end of her speech she explained that if women are not properly taught the principles of

19. Schofield, “Rebel Girls and Union Maids,” 337–341.

20. Schofield, “Rebel Girls and Unions Maids,” 340.

21. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *On Women*, unpublished manuscript, 1917, EGF Papers (Tamiment), Box 1, Folder 34.

22. Flynn, *On Women*, EGF Papers (Tamiment), Box 1, Folder 34.

23. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “IWW and Women,” 1909 or 1910, EGF Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University (Tamiment), Box 1, Folder 12.

24. Flynn, “IWW and Women,” EGF Papers (Tamiment), Box 1, Folder 12.

25. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Women in Industry Should Organize,” *Industrial Worker*, June 1, 1911.

unionism, they will be a source of discouragement to their husbands, and may even lead their husbands to betraying their fellow workers.²⁶ Thus, according to Flynn, it is important to organize and educate the working women of today, because "the union factory girl of today is the helpful and encouraging wife of the union man of tomorrow."²⁷ Flynn may have supported organizing women, but she limited the purpose of that organization to women's influence in the home, implying that while women may work for a time, their ultimate role was in the home, supporting their union men.

Flynn echoed the IWW's ideology in other ways. In one instance she spoke out in support of sabotage, which she defined in virile syndicalist terms. As a policy, the IWW maintained an open platform during strikes: anyone was welcome to speak. This policy at times caused problems for the IWW, particularly during the 1913 Paterson Silk Strike when Socialist Frederick Summer Boyd used the open platform to advocate sabotage, which brought a storm of condemnation down on the IWW.²⁸ While there were mixed feelings among IWW leaders, they decided to endorse and defend his controversial comments. In this context, Flynn made a speech in support of sabotage in 1915 that the IWW adapted into a pamphlet.²⁹ She clarified that sabotage, not necessarily violent, refers to various means of interfering with the production process, such as simply working at a slower pace.³⁰ Flynn also casted sabotage in masculine terms. Referring generally to male workers, she said, "his choice is between starvation in slavery and starvation in battle. His wife's worries and tears spur him forth to don his shining armor of industrial power . . . his manhood demands some rebellion against daily humiliation and intolerable exploitation. To this worker, sabotage is a shining sword."³¹ In this analogy, Flynn casts the working man as the defender of his home and family against the bosses that exploit and make them miserable; it is his duty to protect his wife and children from the evils of industrial capitalism, and sabotage is his weapon. In presenting sabotage as a means by which working men could reclaim and defend their manhood, Flynn fell in line with the IWW's virile syndicalism.

26. Flynn, "Women in Industry Should Organize," *Industrial Worker*, June 1, 1911.

27. Flynn, "Women in Industry Should Organize," *Industrial Worker*, June 1, 1911.

28. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 162.

29. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage: The Conscious Withdrawal of the Workers' Industrial Efficiency* (Chicago: IWW Publishing Bureau, 1917). <https://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/flynn/1917/sabotage.htm>

30. Flynn, *Sabotage*.

31. Flynn, *Sabotage*.

As an outward supporter of the IWW's ideology, Flynn became a symbol of the ideal Wobbly woman, immortalized in the song "The Rebel Girl," which both celebrated and limited the role of women in the IWW. The song was the work of Joe Hill, a migrant worker convicted and executed in Salt Lake City for a murder he likely did not commit.³² While awaiting execution in 1915, Hill received a visit from Flynn that inspired him to immortalize her in song.³³ The first verse describes women "living in beautiful mansions" and "wearing the finest of clothes," but declares that "the only and thoroughbred lady is the Rebel Girl."³⁴ These lyrics reflect the IWW's emphasis on class over sex while also defining what it is to be a "lady," declaring that proper femininity can only be found in the Rebel Girl. These lines also deny any commonality between women, drawing the sharp line of class between society women and rebel girls. The song goes on to describe how her "hands may be hardened from labor and her dress may not be very fine/But a heart in her bosom is beating that is true to her class and her kind."³⁵ Here are two critical qualities of the Rebel Girl: a close association with labor and loyalty to the working class. Hill ties femininity to proper class loyalty; true womanhood could only be found in the working class. The song's chorus describes the true purpose of the Rebel Girl: "To the working class, she's a precious pearl/She brings courage, pride and joy to the fighting Rebel Boy."³⁶ All of the Rebel Girl's hard work, class consciousness, and activism are to support the Rebel Boy, an idea in line with the IWW's limited vision for women that scholars like Foner and Tax describe. Furthermore, characterizing the Rebel Girl as a "precious pearl" suggests that the ideal Wobbly woman was an inspiring beauty to be admired rather than a fellow worker on the picket line. "The Rebel Girl" reflected the limited role that leaders envisioned for women in the IWW.

Flynn's personal life suggests that in practice she did not totally fit the Rebel Girl image. In 1908 she had married Jack Jones, an IWW miner. After a couple years of marriage, most of which she spent travelling and speaking, he

32. Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 307–311.

33. Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* vol. 4, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905–1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 154.

34. Joe Hill, "The Rebel Girl" in Joyce L. Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 145.

35. Hill, "The Rebel Girl."

36. Hill, "The Rebel Girl."

confronted her and implored her to stay home and raise a family, which she refused.³⁷ She explained in her memoir that "a domestic life . . . had no attractions for me. . . . I wanted to speak and write, to travel, to meet people, to see places, to organize for the IWW. I saw no reason why I, as a woman, should give up my work for his. I knew by now I could make more of a contribution to the labor movement than he could."³⁸ Flynn clearly was not interested in domestic life and saw that she was far more valuable to the IWW than Jones. She may have supported the IWW's gender ideology outwardly, but privately she maintained a personal opposition to some of the limits of the Rebel Girl image.

Flynn also grew skeptical of sabotage and questioned the IWW's male leadership. She remembered being "greatly troubled" to see her pamphlet *Sabotage* used as evidence against Wobblies on trial.³⁹ Wobblies constantly faced arrests, trials, and prisons, and legal fees consumed a great deal of the IWW's financial resources.⁴⁰ Financial struggles often caused organizational problems, like in the Paterson Silk strike of 1913, where a lack of funds was key to the IWW's defeat.⁴¹ Apparently Flynn was concerned that rhetoric about sabotage threatened the IWW's viability. She also became skeptical of William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, a major IWW leader. Haywood had grown up a miner in the mountain west, joined the radical Western Federation of Miners, and gained fame when accused of murdering Idaho's governor.⁴² A founding member of the IWW, he was a major leader and speaker, frequently found alongside Flynn at major strikes like Lawrence and Paterson.⁴³ In 1916 centralized his authority over the IWW from his office in Chicago, moving all IWW papers to Chicago and demanding that all IWW funds, whatever their purpose, be sent to his office. Flynn was skeptical of Haywood's actions, believing it was dangerous to "put all our eggs in one basket for the government to scoop up at one blow."⁴⁴ In other words, Flynn worried that the IWW faced real legal danger and Haywood's centralization of authority and records only imperiled them further.

37. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 112–113.

38. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 113.

39. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 162–163.

40. *Industrial Worker*, April 25, 1912; *Industrial Worker*, July 25, 1912. These two editions of the *Industrial Worker* provide some examples of the IWW's frequent calls for money to support legal defense funds.

41. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement* vol. 4, 365–367; Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 281.

42. Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 25–27, 98–105.

43. Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 76–81, 237–256, 271–282.

44. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 213–215.

Flynn's concerns about sabotage and Haywood's actions show how Flynn began to step outside her role as the Rebel Girl and questioned both the ideology and the leadership of the IWW.

A climactic confrontation between Flynn and Haywood in 1917 demonstrates how gender and virile syndicalism in the IWW limited Flynn's leadership and contributed to the IWW's legal difficulties. On her way to visit workers in Seattle, Flynn stopped at the IWW headquarters in Chicago for what turned out to be her last visit. She met with the board of editors, including Haywood, and asked that they stop printing her pamphlet *Sabotage* in order to orient the IWW more toward "job organization and mass action and away from individual action."⁴⁵ Flynn saw sabotage as a liability and proposed that the IWW focus less on virile syndicalist direct action and more on organization. After the discussion, Haywood replied in "an unfriendly tone," asking, "What's the matter, Gurley? Are you losing your nerve?" and ordered the editorial board to print a new version of *Sabotage* with a "lurid cover" adorned with "black cats," a symbol of sabotage.⁴⁶ In this incident, Flynn suggested a direction for IWW literature more consistent with building a sustainable labor organization and less likely to land them in legal trouble. She recognized that tactics like sabotage, characteristic of virile syndicalism, were at best ineffective and at worst dangerous. Haywood's response, doubling down on sabotage and questioning Flynn's dedication, reveals Haywood's preference for virile syndicalism. For him, sabotage was a gut check, a test of dedication that Flynn had failed. Her time in the IWW ended shortly thereafter.⁴⁷ Her concern for the IWW's legal future proved prophetic as the Department of Justice prosecuted the IWW nearly out of existence beginning in 1917.⁴⁸ Flynn recognized the weaknesses and dangers of the IWW's virile syndicalist tactics like sabotage and proposed a broader organizational vision, but her warnings fell on Haywood's deaf ears. Her experiences and perspectives show that the Rebel Girl image limited her role, particularly as she grew critical of virile syndicalism and the IWW's limited gender ideology. Haywood ignored Flynn, preferring the tactics of virile syndicalism, opening the door to the IWW's future legal troubles. It is impossible to say what would have happened had Flynn stayed, but the IWW clearly lost an important voice of reason.

45. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 226.

46. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 227.

47. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 246.

48. Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 398–468.

Matilda Robbins: An Organizer at Heart

There is relatively little scholarship on Matilda Robbins. Joyce Shaw Peterson's 1993 biographical article "Matilda Robbins: A Woman's Life in the Labor Movement, 1900–1920" focuses less on Robbins' actual activity with the IWW and more on her own struggle to reconcile her class-based radicalism with her own feminism and how working as an organizer in the IWW helped her find greater meaning.⁴⁹ Peterson focuses on Robbins personally, looking at her own motivations and challenges, instead of solely focusing on her contributions to the IWW. Anne Mattina's 2014 article "Yours For Industrial Freedom: Women of the IWW, 1905–1930," argues that Robbins was an effective organizer who grew disillusioned with the "flamboyance and egos" of IWW leaders and that she faced condescension because she was a woman.⁵⁰ While Robbins did face condescension based on her gender, there was more to her distrust of IWW leadership, which was rooted in her background as an organizer.

Matilda Robbins's background as an immigrant and factory worker naturally led her to socialism. In her memoir, *Immigrant Girl, Radical Woman*, Robbins traces her story from childhood immigrant, to labor organizer, to mother and activist. Born Tatiana Rabinowitz in the Ukraine, she left at twelve years old along with her mother and the rest of her siblings to join her father in New York City, where her name was anglicized to Matilda Robbins. Living in poverty in Manhattan, she started working in a shirtwaist factory, clipping threads off of the finished products for ten hours a day. Because her employment was illegal, she sat at the bottom of a crate covered in shirtwaists whenever an inspector came by. She later found employment in a corset factory in Bridgeport, Connecticut.⁵¹ All of these experiences led her to socialism. She remembered that her "frustrated dreams for an education," the struggle of her family to survive, and the need to work as a young child made her aware of "economic conditions as they affected the working class."⁵² These realizations "opened [her] road to socialism, never to be closed."⁵³

49. Joyce Shaw Peterson, "Matilda Robbins: A Woman's Life in the Labor Movement, 1900–1920," *Labor History* 34, no. 1 (1993): 33–56.

50. Anne Mattina, "Yours For Industrial Freedom: Women of the IWW, 1905–1930," *Women's Studies* 43, no. 2 (2014): 170–201.

51. Matilda Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl, Radical Woman: A Memoir from the Early Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 3–88.

52. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 88.

53. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 88.

Unlike Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Robbins did not find socialism through reading Bebel or Bellamy, but through living the working-class life.

As she moved into labor organizing, Robbins focused on workers at the ground level. Working in a corset factory, she tried unsuccessfully to approach her fellow workers about organizing, so she turned to the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) for assistance. Together they drew up a leaflet and went directly to her coworkers but failed to put anything substantive together. She tried working through her Socialist Party local but found them thoroughly dedicated to craft unionism with little interest in the corset industry. Robbins did not spend much time making speeches, instead focusing on approaching fellow workers one at a time in order to try and organize them. She was not so concerned with ideology as she was for what was effective. Her associations with the WTUL helped her get various jobs doing statistical and organizational work throughout New England.⁵⁴ This like brought her into contact with many women workers throughout the region, solidifying her association with everyday workers. Robbins grew up a worker, identified as a worker, and lived among workers. After doing statistical work for the WTUL she wanted to attend college, a path that perhaps may have taken her beyond the working class.

It is impossible to say, however, because towards the end of 1912 her life took a dramatic turn when she assumed leadership of the Little Falls, NY strike. As an organizer, she focused more on the practical needs of the strike, rather than ideology and speechmaking. Inspired by Lawrence, Little Falls textile workers struck in 1912.⁵⁵ Her friend and lover, fellow Wobbly Ben Legere, rushed to the city in hopes of assuming a leadership position. When he was arrested on the picket line, she wired the IWW office for more information; they instructed her: "Go to Little Fall at once. Name N.O (National Office) as authority."⁵⁶ Suddenly, Robbins was in charge of the strike. She went straight to work, organizing a kitchen and donation center and ensuring their consistent operation. In her memoir, she recalled her daily schedule: "The picket line at six in the morning. . . . The daily meeting with the strike committee in the forenoon with a report on the response to appeals, funds, developments. Correspondence and bookkeeping; details of the office."⁵⁷ Robbins maximized her time as an organizer and focused on the strike's administration and logistics, rather than the

54. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 89–107.

55. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 113.

56. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 113.

57. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 118–119.

drama of the picket line. Her own recollection of the strike stands in contrast with how the Wobbly press reported it. Coverage of the Little Falls strike in the *Industrial Worker*, an official IWW organ, tended to focus on the violence and drama of the strike. Reports on the strike include cases of "clubbing and beating from the police," "assaults from above and underminings from beneath," mass arrests and imprisonments, poor prison conditions, and women subjected to "constant insults and indignities."⁵⁸ Such violence often brought the strike attention, sympathy, and much-needed funds. Strike reports published in the *Industrial Worker* typically ended with an appeal to send funds to Little Falls, addressed to "Matilda Robinowitz."⁵⁹ Robbins likely recognized the value of publicity—in one case she made a personal appeal for funds in the *Industrial Worker* that emphasized the daily beating of strikers—but she said little about these events in her memoir, suggesting that her focus was not on picket-line violence.⁶⁰ Violence alone does not sustain a strike, and funds need careful managing. Robbins, as a working-class immigrant with a background in organizing, focused on the practical needs and management of the strike.

As the leader of the strike, she interacted with IWW leaders like Bill Haywood, whose preference for speechmaking and spectacle reveals weaknesses in IWW leadership. In November 1912, Haywood arrived in Little Falls. The *Industrial Worker* reported that after his arrival he spoke to six hundred workers which "applauded almost continuously."⁶¹ Someone who was not applauding was Robbins. She remembered Haywood as lacking "repose, concentration, patience."⁶² Before Little Falls, she thought of him as "the symbol of militant unionism, of organizing genius, of revolutionary ardor," but when she met with him in a committee meeting she "felt the lack of constructive value in what he said" and of the "thousands of words he uttered" she recalled "very few."⁶³ Evidently Haywood's presence did not make a good impression on her. Robbins, focused on workers at the ground level, received little constructive advice from Haywood concerning organization. She found that he drew disproportionately on past experiences that added no value to the situation in Little Falls and that "his approach lacked vigor and his methods realism." In her memoir she emphasized

58. *Industrial Worker*, Nov. 21, 1912, Dec. 19, 1912, Jan. 2, 1913.

59. *Industrial Worker*, Nov. 21, 1912, Nov. 28, 1912, Dec. 19, 1912.

60. *Industrial Worker*, Jan. 2, 1913.

61. "Liberty is Dead in Little Falls," *Industrial Worker*, Nov. 28, 1912.

62. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 121.

63. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 123.

that even though Haywood was at the height of his prestige, coming off the heels of the successful Lawrence strike, she “felt the weakness of the man. He wrote a leaflet . . . he made some short speeches . . . and then he was gone.”⁶⁴ Robbins felt that Haywood lacked substance. His appearance may have temporarily boosted morale, which the presence of six hundred applauding workers suggests, but it seems he did little to support the strike effort. A strike’s success depended on numerous factors, including organization and administration, which were Robbins’ strengths. Standing on a stage and making men feel good about themselves, Haywood’s preferred method, was insufficient.

Virile syndicalism offers one possible explanation of Haywood’s approach. In his Little Falls speech, Haywood declared that the class struggle would not end until “overalls are put on every capitalist in the country.”⁶⁵ With this analogy, Haywood asserted a working-class masculinity, represented by overalls; the success of the class struggle results in the triumph of true masculinity over the capitalist class. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn commented on this vision of working-class masculinity in a speech she gave towards the end of her life at New York University. She remembered that, as far as the IWW was concerned, in order to belong to the working class “you had to wear overalls, you had to be muscular, you had to work.”⁶⁶ In other words, the working class bore a distinctly masculine identity represented in the very image of the working man, to which Haywood appealed in his speech. This appeal falls in line with virile syndicalism, which advocated a confrontational reclamation of working-class masculinity. Robbins made no such appeals to masculinity, she focused only on what it took to win the strike. Virile syndicalism, embodied in Haywood’s speech, was blind to the actual needs of the strike, making Haywood of little value to Robbins in Little Falls.

Haywood was not the only leader who failed to be of any real assistance. Prominent Wobblies like Carlo Tresca (Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s long-term lover) showed the same preference for style over substance. Tresca, an Italian immigrant who ran a socialist newspaper in New York, joined the IWW in 1912.⁶⁷ He became an important speaker, appearing alongside figures like Flynn and Haywood in various IWW strikes.⁶⁸ He went to Little Falls in 1912, but Robbins was not impressed. She remembered in her memoir that “he was little help to us in

64. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 123–124.

65. “Liberty is Dead in Little Falls,” *Industrial Worker*, Nov. 28, 1912.

66. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Personal Recollections of the Industrial Workers of the World,” EGF Papers (Tamiment), Box 15, Folder 18.

67. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 152.

68. Flynn, *The Rebel Girl*, 166.

Little Falls. He gave one or two speeches, but whatever effect he may have had in the union halls of New York City, he fell flat in Little Falls."⁶⁹ The reason for this, according to Robbins was that, "this was not a dramatic situation involving thousands of strikers. These 1,600 mill workers were dogged, humble strikers unable to appreciate his sophistication."⁷⁰ Robbins points out the divide between the better educated leadership class of the IWW and the uneducated workers at the ground level, suggesting that leaders like Tresca focused too much on speeches and ideology, when the needs of the strikers were more practical. Her final words on Tresca develop this more: "He talked, he ate spaghetti and drank wine, and we paid the bill. When he left I was relieved and greatly disappointed."⁷¹ Tresca lacked the ability to communicate effectively with the strikers and did not seem to realize or care. Meanwhile, Robbins understood organizing work to be far more than just making speeches. She recognized that while "Haywood, Flynn, and Tresca were in the headlines and in the public eye," the outcome of a strike depended on "the work and the endurance of the strikers."⁷² Understanding that strikes lived and died by the strikers, Robbins saw the role of an organizer to be "both administrator and teacher," "to lay the groundwork for a union, to develop the meaning of economic solidarity, to organize relief, to publicize the strike, to assume various and innumerable administrative details. The daily picket line, the nightly meeting, the reports, the negotiations, at last."⁷³ In short, Robbins was an organizer and the IWW leaders who stood on their soapboxes were not. While Robbins preferred practical organization and addressing real needs, Haywood and Tresca preferred preaching ideology in the spotlight.

Robbins' later went to Greenville, South Carolina to organize workers on behalf of the IWW. Her experiences here confirm the gendered, organizational weaknesses of the IWW witnessed in Little Falls. Arriving in the spring of 1914, Robbins described Greenville in her memoir as the most difficult assignment she faced as organizer. The workers had no union background and she faced fierce resistance from bosses. After six weeks of hard work she had established a small local of about one hundred workers but asked the national office to be relieved due to exhaustion. No one was willing to take her place. Joe Ettor, an IWW organizer best known for his role in the Lawrence Strike, went to Greenville, but stayed only a few days. He promised to send another organizer to relieve her,

69. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 142.

70. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 142.

71. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 142.

72. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 149.

73. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 151.

but that never happened.⁷⁴ Remembering her interactions with Ettor, Robbins felt that he “preferred the platform of the large industrial centers to the squalid isolation of the hinterland.”⁷⁵ The lack of institutional support Robbins received in Greenville suggests that the IWW indeed prioritized spectacle over substance. The workers of Greenville were far away from major industrial and were not even on strike, so there was little press coverage, no drama, and no room for grandiose speeches. The dramatic, masculine speeches of Haywood likely would have fallen flat. After six weeks of struggle without relief, Robbins burned out. The local she had established “disintegrated,” and “the IWW abandoned the Southern textile field.”⁷⁶ It was her last major project with the IWW; she later took a job with the AFL.⁷⁷ Her experiences in Little Falls and Greenville indicate that the leaders of the IWW were often concerned more with dramatic speeches and spectacles, a characteristic of virile syndicalism, than they were with the actual process of organization, a focus that contributed little to organization and allowed workers like those in Greenville to fall by the wayside. No one wanted to lay the necessary organizational groundwork. Robbins’ experience suggests that the preference of IWW leadership for the gendered tactics of virile syndicalism limited their ability to effectively organize workers.

Jane Street: Denver’s Rebel Maid

Like Robbins, there is little scholarship on Street. Foner spares a few pages to highlight her accomplishments, but says relatively little of the resistance she faced from the IWW, arguing that the IWW’s legal perils at the end of World War I brought Street’s union down.⁷⁸ Tax contextualizes Street’s local within a distinct, masculine, western IWW culture, suggesting this unique setting may have contributed to the strong opposition Street faced from male Wobblies.⁷⁹ In *Union Maids Not Wanted: Organizing Domestic Workers, 1870–1940*, Donna Van Raaphorst briefly covers Street and the IWW, arguing that the opposition Street faced, along with the IWW’s domestic ideology of womanhood, “clearly indicates that the Wobblies were not as different from the AFL in their views

74. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 168–170.

75. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 171.

76. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 171.

77. Rabinowitz, *Immigrant Girl*, 171, 235.

78. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 410–411.

79. Tax, *The Rising of the Women*, 133–134.

about women as they would have liked to believed.”⁸⁰ While both the AFL and IWW were misogynistic, Street’s experiences suggest that gender functioned in different ways in the two organizations.

Street faced unique organizational difficulties and limits. As domestic workers do not share a single place of employment or a single employer, conventional means of organizing and striking were not an option for Street. In a letter to a Mrs. Elmer F. Buse, a woman in Tulsa, Oklahoma who was also trying to organize domestic workers, Street explained her tactics. She started by placing ads for domestic services in newspapers and recruiting the women who responded. After a year of this kind of recruiting, Street had interviewed, by her own account, “about 1500 or 2000 girls, telling them about the I.W.W. and making them more rebellious, and placing over 1000 in jobs. We have on our books the names of 155 members, only about 83 of whom we can actually call members.”⁸¹ The transient nature of the work made it hard to find reliable members, so 83 is no small accomplishment. Aside from that, the sheer number of domestic workers coming through their office, interacting with Street, learning about the IWW, and finding jobs shows that Street had created a serious, robust union. Furthermore, Street’s description of her union’s tactics suggests that she and her fellow workers bore legitimate economic power. Street described her tactics to Mrs. Buse: “with our handful of girls and our big expenses, we have got results. We actually have POWER to do things. We have raised wages, shortened hours, bettered conditions in hundreds of places.”⁸² In order to accomplish these things, Street’s union kept track of all the domestic jobs posted in city newspapers. When a job opened up, a union worker responded to the ad, but made certain demands about what she would and would not do. If the employer objected and put out another ad, the union would catch the ad again and send out another worker who would make the same demands, forcing the employer to either accept the demands or go without a worker. In short, according to Street, “If you have a union of only four girls and you can get them consecutively on the same job you soon have job control. The nerve-wrecked, lazy society woman is not hard to conquer.”⁸³ Street and the union women also assembled a card catalog of domestic jobs in the Denver area, centralizing job

80. Donna L. Van Raaphorst, *Union Maids Not Wanted: Organizing Domestic Workers, 1870–1940* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 174.

81. Jane Street to Mrs. Elmer F. Buse, 1917, IWW Historical Archives. <https://www.iww.org/history/library/Street/letter>

82. Street to Buse, 1917.

83. Street to Buse, 1917.

control within their office.⁸⁴ These women used their ability to refuse work in order to exercise collective power over their employers, acquiring greater control over their work and lives.

In addition to her innovative tactics, Street also advocated a unique kind of sabotage. In an interview with Street reported in the *Washington Post*, she said that they intended to challenge the oppression of domestic workers “by a system of our own. You may call it sabotage or what you please. We will not poison food nor resort to any crude methods of violence. Members of the Housemaids’ union will resent ill treatment and quit.” The article clarifies that “the kind of sabotage used will be for domestic workers to quit without notice.”⁸⁵ Quitting without notice, refusing demands on the spot, and blacklisting employers fit the IWW’s vision of sabotage. Indeed, many of Street’s tactics were consistent with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s pamphlet on sabotage. Street took the principle of sabotage to heart and used it as a tool to exercise power over employers. She checked all the boxes that ought to please the IWW: she organized those considered unorganizable and used direct action to undermine employers and interfere with the labor process.

Despite her success and affinity for IWW tactics, Street faced significant opposition, the strongest of which came from local male Wobblies. Unsurprisingly, a coalition of Denver upper-class women, the YWCA, and domestic employers strongly opposed the union and used intimidation to try and curb their activity.⁸⁶ In November 1916, someone stole the union’s card catalog, a significant setback. Both Foner and Tax attribute this theft to the antiunion coalition of women, but both cite the same article in *Solidarity*, which does not actually identify a culprit, and this coalition of women was not Street’s only enemy.⁸⁷ Street’s letter to Mrs. Buse identifies another group whose opposition had been far more vicious: “The Mixed Local (of the IWW) here in Denver has done us more harm than any other enemy. . . . They have cut us off from donations from outside locals, (and) slandered this local and myself from one end of the country to the other.” Local Wobbly men had issues with Street’s work and took measures to limit it. Whatever their motives, their measures went

84. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 408.

85. “How a Cold Storage Egg Started the Servant Girls’ Union,” *Washington Post*, September 24, 1916.

86. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 410.

87. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 410; Tax, *The Rising of the Woman*, 137; “Denver Housemaids’ List Stolen,” *Solidarity*, November 11, 1916.

beyond slander. Street told Buse: "they have assaulted me bodily and torn up our charter."⁸⁸ Violence was not out of the question for male Wobblies opposed to Street's activities. As bitter as Denver housewives may have been about the union, there is no indication that they ever went so far as to physically attack Street. The article in *Solidarity* that reported the theft of the card index also mentioned that Street "had been sleeping in the headquarters at night with a 'gatt' under her pillow and a section of gas pipe within easy reach guarding against just such an occurrence."⁸⁹ Street expected some kind of violence which, along with her insistence that Wobbly men had done the union the most harm, suggests that she may have suspected her fellow Wobblies of the theft. Whoever the thief, the local men of the IWW were not friends of Street and their seditious activities likely limited her ability to effectively organize women.

While the motives of these male Wobblies are not clear, the IWW's emphasis on virile syndicalism may have played a role. Street reported to Buse that, "Phil Engle, a soap boxer, told me about nine months ago that he 'would see me on the outside of the I.W.W.' before he got through with me, and he has worked with maniacal fervor toward that end ever since." During a local free speech fight, Street and her union held a street corner until Engle "and his bunch took it away from us and held it down for months."⁹⁰ To the Wobblies, street corners were valuable spaces where they could speak and attract listeners; the right to speak on street corners was the key motive of the IWW's free-speech fights.⁹¹ Why would Wobbly men take a street corner that their Wobbly allies already possessed? If virile syndicalism is any indication, street corners were the perfect place for male Wobblies to assert their masculinity; they were visible, confrontational, and attention-grabbing, a situation that allowed for the kind of masculine posturing associated with virile syndicalism. From a street corner, Wobbly men could preach sabotage and direct action, reclaiming their masculinity. Street and her domestic workers holding a street corner prevented Wobbly men from reclaiming their own masculinity. Whatever their precise motives, Wobbly men directly undermined Street's union and threatened her organization. Somehow, however, Street remained optimistic about the IWW. In her letter to Buse she despaired "these very men who forget their I.W.W. principles in their opposition to us," but declared that "the Method of Emanci-

88. Street to Buse, 1917.

89. "Denver Housemaids' List Stolen," *Solidarity*, November 11, 1916.

90. Street to Buse, 1917.

91. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement* vol. 4, 173–205.

pation that we advocate is greater any or all of us and that the great principles and ideals that we stand for can completely overshadow the frailties of human nature.”⁹² Street kept her faith in the IWW, but her experiences suggest that the IWW’s gender ideology limited her effectiveness.

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Rebel Girl

There is little doubt that the IWW was radical and visionary for its time; its supposed willingness to organize all workers regardless of skill, race, or gender was a radically inclusive vision, even it only ever existed on paper. But for all its radical talk, there was often little substance beneath. Lawrence, Massachusetts may have been a major success, but it does not make up for a decade and a half of the IWW’s failure to build a sustainable organization of workers. The IWW failed for many reasons and women’s experiences suggest that gender was one of those reasons. The Rebel Girl stereotype confined women like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to a pedestal, limiting women’s abilities to play an active role in the IWW. Still, the Rebel Girl remains the most enduring image of Wobbly women. People sing Hill’s song today and Flynn’s legacy, in particular, is closely tied to the Rebel Girl, as her memoir’s title, *The Rebel Girl*, indicates. What then was the overlap between the Rebel Girl and virile syndicalism? Perhaps the Rebel Girl was only a traditional wife and mother recast in socialist terms, conjured up to give working men an ideal helpmate. What does this mean for IWW conceptions of the home? What was the role of home and family in the IWW’s socialist vision? How much of the social order remained essentially the same in the Wobbly future, merely recast in class language? How much did the IWW’s class-only approach to resistance limit their ability to envision a more radical alternative? Perhaps their vision was not as radical as they would have liked to believe. Class and sex overlap and intersect in a variety of ways and any social movement that does not understand these intersections will likely struggle to enact change.

Jake Andersen, who graduated from BYU in April 2020, calls Boston home. He will be attending Georgetown University this fall to pursue a Master of Arts in Global, International, and Comparative History.

92. Street to Buse, 1917.