

# Use Your Buying Power for Justice: the League of Women Shoppers and Innocuous Feminist Radicalism 1935-1948

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During the summer of 1938 Sylvia Rubin of Atlanta, Georgia took a trip to New York City to visit Russek's Department Store on Fifth Avenue with eight of her friends. This, however, was no ordinary shopping excursion. Armed with picket signs, Sylvia and her "smartly clad" companions arrived at the department store via taxi to protest the living and working conditions of Russek's employees. Sylvia, who had initially expressed her trepidation about her endeavor, remarked "somehow I felt myself a part of something big and I was right at home. Possibly, I thought, it would start people thinking...Suddenly I felt glad to be there- glad to be helping the fur workers protest against the injustice they were suffering".<sup>1</sup>

Sylvia and the other woman present at the small strike on that summer day in 1938 were members of the League of Women Shoppers (LWS), a consumer activist group born out of both the Great Depression and the political climate generated by the New Deal. Although the LWS emerged during a veritable golden age of countless and diverse consumer activist groups, all with separate agendas<sup>2</sup>, the LWS distinguished themselves from the pack through their commitment to direct action through picket lines, publicity stunts, boycotts<sup>3</sup> and their concern with the conditions under which goods were produced.<sup>4</sup> By 1939, at the height of its popularity, and just four years after its establishment in 1935, the LWS claimed 25,000 members and 14 different chapters in cities across the United States, all dedicated to the same principle of "using your buying power for justice".<sup>5</sup> This seemingly innocuous organization of female socialites, housewives and professionals possessed radical roots and attracted women inclined to socialist and

communist ideologies, thus instilling the LWS with the will to support the labor movement and a pervasive consciousness of class issues in American society.

The average LWS member was a privileged middle- or upper-class white woman enthusiastic about improving the consumer market and curbing the exploitative capitalist system. The organization began in 1935 in the New York City apartment of Aline Davis Hays<sup>6</sup>, who would later become its first president, as a way for socialites like herself to discuss and solve the strikes occurring at local department stores.<sup>7</sup> The prospect of securing higher quality products and lower prices while simultaneously promoting workers' right to organize appealed to many left-leaning middle class women who, like Sylvia Rubin, seized the chance to be a part of "something big". Many members were actually married or closely related to New Deal policy makers or belonged to this category themselves.<sup>8</sup> In 1937, after receiving a copy of the "Consider the Laundry Worker" circular distributed by the LWS, Eleanor Roosevelt herself mentioned the group in her "My Day" newspaper column observing, "It seems to me that by furnishing authentic information this organization is doing a service to industry, the public and to labor".<sup>9</sup> LWS members aimed to achieve exactly that.

The papers of the Chicago, New York, and Washington LWS branches demonstrate a staunch dedication to tracking and analyzing legislature and disseminating information about unions, civil rights, and consumer justice. Driven by an increased awareness of the consumers' role in the economic system that emerged from the Great Depression, LWS members sought to assist both labor unions and recovery efforts initiated by the government. In the process of learning about the labor movement and related legislature, LWS members also developed an anti-racial discrimination

1 Sylvia Rubin, "Dear New York League" *The Woman Shopper*. Sept-Oct 1938, Box 1, Folder 1. League of Women Shoppers Papers, Sophia Smith Collection. Smith College, Northampton, MA (hereafter SSC).

2 Glickman, Lawrence B. "The Strike in the Temple of Consumption: Consumer Activism and Twentieth-Century American Political Culture." (*The Journal of American History*, 2001), 100-102

3 Bender, Daniel E., and Richard A. Greenwald. *Sweatshop USA : the American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective*. (New York : Routledge, 2003), 111-112.

4 Deutsch, Tracey. *Building a Housewife's Paradise : Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century*. (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 111.

5 Pamphlet, Box 1, Folder 2. League of Women Shoppers Papers, SSC.

6 Aline Davis Hays was married to Arthur Garfield Hays, a notable civil liberties lawyer involved in several high-profile cases.

7 Storrs, Landon R. Y. *Civilizing capitalism : the National Consumers' League, women's activism, and labor standards in the New Deal era*. (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 54.

8 Goldstein, Robert Justin. *Little "Red Scares" : Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946*. (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT : Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 213.

9 Roosevelt, Eleanor. "My Day" July 9, 1937. *A Comprehensive Electronic Edition of Eleanor Roosevelt's "My Day" Newspaper Columns*. George Washington University.

campaign and became a part of the nascent long civil rights movement before they were destroyed along with many other radical groups committed to civil rights during the Red Scare of the late 1940s.<sup>10</sup> This paper suggests that although the League of Women Shoppers' membership was composed of mostly middle to upper class white American women, the organization demonstrated consciousness of the intersections of race, class and gender within an oppressive capitalist system before the proverbial "second wave" of feminism. However, LWS members used their privilege to improve the living and working situations of poor wage-earners without truly analyzing or seeking to mitigate the existence of their privilege and its function within their campaigns. LWS members never seemed to forget their status as ladies and drew attention to their causes using remarkably privileged tactics like fashion shows, mink coat raffles and wearing evening gowns to picket lines.<sup>11</sup> From its foundation in 1935 to its untimely demise amidst Red Scare politics in 1948, the LWS attempted to forge mutually beneficial cross-class labor coalitions in order to both amplify the voice of the workers and assert their dismay about pervasive economic injustice and capitalist abuses.

### Historiography

As a women's consumer activist group with radical inclinations, The League of Women Shoppers (LWS) and its efforts to support the labor movement figure at the junction of two very different fields of scholarship. Contemporary scholars tend to group the LWS with either the evolving consumer activist movement sparked by the Great Depression, or the tumultuous trials of the Second Red Scare in the 1940s - if it is mentioned at all. Most of the existing scholarship mainly focuses on Red Scare controversies the ignited by the LWS and not on the group itself. Furthermore, although there are attempts to place the LWS in class context, an analysis of these controversies through the lens of race has not been attempted. Given the vast amount of archival evidence that suggests radical activism intersected with conscious efforts to interact with both race and class issues, it is necessary to look to other genres of labor activist history to contextualize LWS activities.

Historical interpretations that specifically discuss the inception and continuation of the consumer movement on a broader scale during the period in which the LWS functioned (1935-1948) constitute the first critical field of relevant scholarship. The consumer movement was a

Twentieth Century phenomenon composed of multiple grassroots organizations, each with their own motives and methods of achieving improved conditions for workers and consumers themselves. Dana Frank poignantly notes that consumer activism and self-organization always constituted an integral feature of the labor movement in the United States and that scholars often overlook its importance in relation to union and working-class history.<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Glickman argues that consumer activism that took place during the LWS' existence could be categorized as a radical force that threatened corporate conservatism even though the movement consisted of disparate groups with vastly incongruous agendas. According to Glickman, the political power citizens harnessed through consumer activism threatened the status quo, and the LWS was part of this cacophony of protesting voices within the consumer movement.<sup>13</sup> Meg Jacobs assumes a different approach and investigates the construction of a consuming public by singling out three New Deal economic theorists (Robert Lynd, Paul Douglas, and Gardiner Means) in order to illustrate the shift in American concepts of consumerism that gave way to the consumer movement in the 30s.<sup>14</sup> Jacobs does not expound upon the role of women in consumer activism and New Deal agencies, but women's organizations are still integrated into her technical discussion of consumer economics, revealing the pervasive influence they wielded as organized conscious consumers. Robert Weems also discusses consumer activism on a broad scale, but from a distinctly African American point of view.<sup>15</sup> He contends that as the consumer market aimed toward African Americans grew in the 1920s and '30s, they also began to realize the respect they could command as consumers, and used their buying power to combat discriminatory practices and support black owned businesses. Considering that the LWS, as white allies, also supported African American's "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns and joined boycotts and picket lines to advance the demands of black laundry workers, Weems' work is particularly relevant even though the LWS is not explicitly mentioned.<sup>16</sup>

On the other side of the relevant spectrum of scholarship, Robert Goldstein and Landon Storrs analyze the involvement of women's consumer movements in Red Scare politics. Although accusations of communist activity often

10 Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." (*The Journal of American History*, 2005), 1235.

Arnesen, Eric. "Civil Rights and the Cold War At Home: Postwar Activism, Anticommunism, and the Decline of the Left." *American Communist History* (11, no. 1 April 2012), 5-44.

11 Goldstein, 224.

12 Frank, Dana. *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929*. Cambridge [England] ; (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5.

13 Glickman, 102, 111.

14 Jacobs, Meg. "Democracy's Third Estate:" New Deal Politics and the Construction of a "Consuming Public." *International Labor And Working Class History* no. 55 (April 1, 1999): 27-51.

15 Weems, Robert E. *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 17-23.

16 Filley, Jane, and Therese Mitchell. *Consider the laundry workers*. (New York: League of Women Shoppers, 1937), SSC Collection.

overshadowed the LWS' genuine attempts to effect change in labor policy, these two studies examine the strategies used against the LWS by anti-communist conservatives. Goldstein contends right wing hostility toward consumer groups was actually a conscious effort to reveal and remove people in the government suspected of being communist sympathizers, and became a pervasive reaction against the pro-labor, anti-racist, feminist consumer movements.<sup>17</sup> Goldstein acknowledges the LWS' persecution by the Dies committee and posits that it was the members' publicly expressed consciousness of class and race that led anti-communists to suspect the League of subversive activities.<sup>18</sup> Storrs also focuses her exploration of the LWS and its members through the lens of the controversy created by these accusations of communist activity.<sup>19</sup> Storrs discusses the LWS in relation to the Wagner Act and the National Labor Relations Board and argues that the LWS' tangible ties to the government and its rigorous campaigns for labor policy change exposed it to persecution by anti-communists. Although both Storrs and Goldstein briefly mention the consumer movement in order to contextualize their points, both choose the Red Scare as the point of departure for their exploration of the LWS' membership and activities.

Because most LWS members were also members of the upper and middle classes who used their privilege to support poor workers, it is vital to supplement their history with the histories of working-class women's grassroots activism. Anelise Orleck reveals that working-class women engaged in consumer activism and community organizing in order to survive rather than primarily because of the moral sensibilities that guided middle class allies.<sup>20</sup> Working-class women like Clara Shavelson and Rose Nelson also organized educational councils for housewives that aimed, through boycotts, rent strikes and other strategies, to improve the quality of life in their communities.<sup>21</sup> Mimi Abramowitz follows a similar line of inquiry, arguing that "low-income women developed the grievances, organizational networks, and consciousness that allowed political struggle" during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> These included

common consumer activist strategies like boycotts and lobbying. Jenny Carson also addresses the working-class labor movement and argues that laundry workers, who were mostly poor white women, African Americans<sup>23</sup> and ethnic immigrants, were able to organize due to the pervasive presence of union resources and the creation of labor solidarity during the 1930s.<sup>24</sup> The LWS monitored the working-class groups discussed in these sources and endeavored to elevate their voices through its vast network of resources.

Given the relative obscurity of this topic, it is surprising to discover a small body of scholarship that acknowledges the existence of the LWS and even attempts to analyze its campaigns. Scholarship that specifically mentions the LWS in any capacity has only emerged in the past ten years, which can be attributed to an increased interest about the creation of the consumer movement and to a new determination among women's historians to produce a feminist analysis of the Red Scare. However, these studies tend to reinforce the historic trivialization of the LWS as a frivolous organization composed solely of housewives, and simultaneously fails to consider its productive interactions with working-class and minority groups. Although large parties and events like fashion shows were a part of the LWS' labor campaigns, I hypothesize that it was the belittlement of these "distinctively feminine"<sup>25</sup> activities and the distortion of its mission under the conservative anti-communist regime that made it obscure to traditional historical scholarship in the first place. LWS members used the limited pathways afforded to them in a patriarchal society in order to assert their political statements as citizens in an inescapably capitalist sociopolitical system. Unlike the analyses of the LWS produced previously, this paper intends to take advantage of the LWS' versatile history and examine its strategies by incorporating knowledge of the class and race conscious radicalism that led it to be accused of being a communist front group and its genuine efforts to change labor conditions.

### **"Use Your Buying Power for Justice"**

The LWS emerged from benevolently intended middle class consumer activism that began with the National Consumers' League (NCL) during the Progressive Era in 1891. The NCL reached out to middle class women, who did most of the shopping for their households, to improve the

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17 Goldstein, 214.

18 Goldstein, 233.

19 Storrs, Landon R. Y. *The second Red Scare and the unmaking of the New Deal left*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013),

20 Orleck, Anelise. *Common Sense & A Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 217-218.

Bender, 205-206.

21 Orleck, 221, 225. Shavelson's housewives' councils were more overtly radical because of her dedication to the Communist Party and aggressive efforts to incorporate Marxist-Feminist ideology into their functions.

22 Abramowitz, Mimi. "Learning from the History of Poor and Working-Class Women's Activism." *Social Science, The Annals Of The American Academy Of Political And, Social Science* 577, (September 1, 2001): 119.

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23 For more on the history of African American women in laundry work and their organized protests, see Hunter, Tera W. *To Joy my Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

24 Carson, Jenny. "Taking on Corporate Bullies: Cintas, Laundry Workers, and Organizing in the 1930s and Twenty-First Century." *Labor Studies Journal* 35, no. 4 (December 2010), 453-479.

25 Goldstein, 217.

conditions of working girls and eliminate child labor. The NCL composed lists of approved companies and practiced grassroots organizing that proved effective before the outset of World War I.<sup>26</sup> At a time when women did not have the right to vote and political activism was considered an improper hobby for a lady, consumer organizing was one valid way middle class housewives could assert their political convictions and enact social reform.<sup>27</sup> The NCL's overwhelmingly female membership and leadership believed that by only purchasing goods and services at institutions that treated their workers fairly would they force employers who perpetuated terrible working conditions to reconsider their principles.<sup>28</sup> Like the LWS, the NCL educated both their members and workers about the paths available to improve the living and working conditions of laborers and investigated working environments.<sup>29</sup>

However, most members subscribed to the maternalist ideology that characterized the progressive social reform movement at the turn of the century. NCL members felt that they had a moral duty as mothers to save the children of the working classes through ethically conscious consumerism.<sup>30</sup> Conveniently, this publically upheld sense of maternal righteousness also justified their civic engagement.<sup>31</sup> Members of the NCL expressed their anxiety about the dirt and diseases that sweatshops supposedly incubated, which they believed could be transmitted through the goods that impoverished and infected workers produced.<sup>32</sup> According to the NCL, workers were meant to be pitied and not empowered, therefore they refused to ally themselves with unionized workers even when such an alliance would have proved beneficial to the workers' cause.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the LWS primarily sought to support unionized workers and pro-union legislation in addition to practicing conscious consumerism. Although membership from the NCL overlapped with the LWS' during their initial years, the NCL relied on government connections, abandoned consumer campaigns, and essentially became a lobby group by the late 1930s.<sup>34</sup> The LWS enmeshed itself in the labor movement and eschewed overbearing maternalist ideology in favor of empowering themselves and the workers they helped.<sup>35</sup>

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26 Deutsch, 107.

27 Haydu, Jeffrey. "Consumer Citizenship and Cross-Class Activism: The Case of the National Consumers' League, 1899-1918." *Sociological Forum* (29, no. 3 September 2014), 629.

28 Haydu, 632.

29 Haydu, 635.

30 Bender, 206.

31 Haydu, 635.

32 Haydu, 637. Bender, 205.

33 Haydu, 640.

34 Bender, 212.

35 LWS literature rarely mentions their role as mothers. The absence of the rhetoric of motherhood suggests that they focused

The New Deal era consumer movement consisted of disparate groups with vastly incongruous agendas that nevertheless threatened the capitalist status quo. In the wake of the Great Depression, consumers felt powerless against corporations that manufactured supply and demand using aggressive advertising tactics.<sup>36</sup> Lawrence Glickman posits that the Great Depression served as an awakening for American consumers that led to a veritable explosion of consumer activist activity. Glickman also suggests that this era formed "perhaps the only decade in American history when commentators could speak of "consumer society" as a potentially radical force".<sup>37</sup> American consumers grew deeply suspicious of chain stores and corporately owned stores because they believed these places controlled by faceless individuals represented a market system that deceived consumers.<sup>38</sup> In order to resist this undesirable phenomenon, reformers promoted the economic education of consumers.<sup>39</sup> As the primary purchasers of household goods, women usually stood at the front of grassroots consumer activist movements that aimed to promote the political agendas of various groups such as African Americans, labor unions, and communists.<sup>40</sup> The "consumer movement" is an umbrella term that encompasses many organized and unorganized groups that each sought to serve their own goals for social and economic reform. Although these groups lacked unity, they all adhered to the principle that consumption had far-reaching consequences and through these means they were able to protest loudly and effectively.<sup>41</sup> The LWS fit into this equation and stressed that consumers were responsible for the condition of workers and encouraged them to take action when poor conditions were discovered.<sup>42</sup> Women's organizations like the LWS dominated the consumer movement because women were taken more seriously when they presented themselves as consumers and not representatives of labor or business.<sup>43</sup> Indeed consumption, especially for the home, was a type of work that was traditionally gendered female and considered a wife's responsibility.<sup>44</sup> Political opponents accused women who joined consumer activist groups of merely being bored housewives swept up in a fad and eager for publicity, but most LWS members identified as activists with strong convictions in their cause.

Historians often ignore consumer activism in favor

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on their own political ends and did not seek validation for their activity outside the home.

36 Jacobs, 27-30.

37 Glickman, *Strike in the Temple of Consumption*, 102.

38 Deutsch, 105.

39 Jacobs, 27.

40 Deutsch, 106-107.

41 Glickman, 230.

42 Glickman, 205.

43 Goldstein, 223.

44 Frank, 6.

of more obvious aspects of the labor movement, but the LWS' commitment to supporting and encouraging unions makes the development of the early Twentieth Century labor movement particularly relevant to their history. LWS members conceptualized women as both wage-earners who needed to secure workplace rights and consumers who needed to provide quality goods for their household, which was a relatively radical notion at the time.<sup>45</sup> The American Federation of Labor (AFL), an alliance of unions that was often the only organizing resource in small towns during this period, was still extremely reluctant to support women's trade unions in favor of making working conditions and wages sufficient enough to make men the sole provider for their families.<sup>46</sup> As a result, many working women and wives of AFL trade unionists became labor organizers in their own right, formed consumer groups reminiscent of knitting circles like the Seattle Card and Label League, and reached out to form tentative alliances with primarily white middle-class women's groups like the previously mentioned NCL and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL).<sup>47</sup> Members of labor unions also encouraged their friends and family to purchase only union-made products as part of their strategies and reached out to middle-class women, the symbolic face of the consuming public, to help their cause.<sup>48</sup>

At this point it is important to delineate the differences, overlaps and conflicts between working class and middle class consumer activism. Although sympathetic white middle-class people supported the labor movement and their efforts to politicize and direct ethical consumerism, the working class composed the majority of social and labor reform groups in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>49</sup> One of the major problems with this emerging paradigm of cross-class activism was that middle-class reformers often claimed to speak for underprivileged workers while inadvertently speaking over them.<sup>50</sup> Radical working-class activists like Rose Schneiderman and Leonora O'Reilly collaborated with the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a precursor organization of the LWS that adhered to the maternalist tradition, during the first half of the century. Despite their skepticism about involving non-wage earning women, they could not deny that such collaborations gleaned excellent publicity for their cause.<sup>51</sup> However, women of the WTUL often acted out of a "patronizing benevolence" that created

inevitable tension and exacerbated cognizance of the class divide even in spite of the friendships these collaborations forged.<sup>52</sup> Union organizers welcomed upper-class women's figurative ability to deflect police billy clubs at strikes they attended. Appreciated as well were their lavish displays of support, which included such largesse as funding cafeterias for striking workers. However, these measures also made class differences more apparent.<sup>53</sup> Although they did not operate with the same "patronizing benevolence" of the progressive era, it is possible that a quarter of a century later the LWS' ostentatious tactics similarly alienated the wage earning men and women the desired to support.

During the Great Depression, working class women once again congregated and concluded that they could wield more power as consumers if they united together. Poor wives and mothers in urban areas established housewives councils that staged food boycotts and anti-eviction demonstrations and lobbied for food and rent price control.<sup>54</sup> Unlike their middle class counterparts, who acted on political conviction, urgent need compelled these women, who often belonged to explicitly radical and communist-influenced housewives councils.<sup>55</sup> The fear of potential homelessness and starvation constituted a real threat to working class women, while middle class reformers possessed an abstract and removed understanding of how exactly their consumer activism affected their supposed beneficiaries. Discriminatory workplace conditions and the prospect of retailers selling products to African American shoppers for excessive and unfair prices also would have been foreign to white middle-class members of consumer activist groups.<sup>56</sup> However, certain consumer groups like the LWS and the New York Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) acknowledged this divide and attempted to publically expose and chastise employers and shopkeepers who perpetuated discriminatory practices, unsafe conditions, and insufficient wages.<sup>57</sup>

These groups used cross-class coalitions to enact change by promoting legislative changes in a political climate ruled by the New Deal. The New Deal was a multi-front government initiative that began enacting reforms in 1933 with the intention of recovering the disintegrating economy, triggering the creation of dozens of new administrative bodies that tended to the demands of labor unions and consumers. New Deal policy makers legislated labor standards and promoted unionism, incurring the resentment of businessmen who believed increased wages would cut into their bottom line.<sup>58</sup> The Roosevelt administration believed that

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45 Goldstein, 223.

46 Kersten, 112.

Frank, Dana. *Purchasing Power*, 2.

47 Abramovitz, 119. Frank, 121.

48 Bender, 205. Deutsch, 107.

49 Croteau, David. *Politics and the Class Divide : Working People and the Middle-Class Left*. (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1995), 16.

50 Croteau, xii.

51 Orleck, 43.

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52 Orleck, 44.

53 Orleck, 62, 77.

54 Orleck, 218-219.

55 Orleck, 239.

56 Deutsch, 115.

57 Orleck, 161-162.

58 Bender, 205. Goldstein, 218.

women, the main consumers and buyers for their households, would be invaluable to the country's recovery because Keynesian economic theory stipulated that increasing consumption and restoring mass purchasing power would decrease the unemployment rate and strengthen the economy.<sup>59</sup> In fact, many New Deal era politicians and economists increasingly blamed "under consumption" and irresponsible, unregulated monopolistic business practices for causing and prolonging the economic depression.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the New Deal was largely responsible for the "construction of a consuming public."<sup>61</sup>

The National Recovery Administration (NRA), established in 1933 by the National Industrial Recovery Act, was one of the short-lived New Deal government agencies geared toward the consumer that attempted to promote businesses that followed the labor standards they established using a Blue Eagle seal of approval.<sup>62</sup> The NRA also created a women's division that encouraged people in their communities to only purchase products from retail establishments that displayed this symbol.<sup>63</sup> However, the NRA was declared unconstitutional in 1935 just a month before the LWS was founded in June because it allowed the President Roosevelt to wield too much regulatory power over commerce.<sup>64</sup>

The LWS emerged out of this situation and sought to continue the vein of women's labor advocacy encouraged by the NRA. Other bureaus established during the New Deal, like the National Labor Relations Board, the Consumer Advisory Board, and the Office of Price Administration, allowed an unprecedented number of women to enter into government careers, although rarely equal ones.<sup>65</sup> LWS members often filled these positions, which demonstrates their intimate connection with the New Deal politics that emerged from Depression era economic turmoil.

When the LWS began in 1935 in New York City amidst

a slew of union activity, their mission statements incorporated socialist ideologies and reflected a commitment to improving the working and living conditions of workers. One of the first pamphlets they released entitled "What is the League of Women Shoppers?" revealed that after the court-ordered dissolution of the NRA, New York businesses reinstated the 48 hour work week. As a result, "the League mobilized protests and mass meetings in which all kinds of organizations cooperated".<sup>66</sup> This commitment to cooperation and collaboration with labor unions and other consumer activist groups in order to mobilize citizen consumers characterized the functions of the LWS throughout its existence. Members initially argued for the necessity of consumer activist groups acting for unions by borrowing language from radicals, remarking that the employer "owns the tools of production" and "the worker sells his labor and his only chance to equal the power of his employer is to be able to withhold that labor in a body."<sup>67</sup> As a mode of operation, the LWS waited for members of a union to approach them with a request for support before investigating the situation and deciding if the strike was justified. If they ever actually rejected one of these requests, LWS leaders did not bother to make note of it because there is no evidence in the archives to suggest that they did. Just two months after its creation, the New York chapter of the LWS claimed "Innumerable requests for assistance from labor organizations have come to us. We have already been instrumental in winning one strike and gaining for these workers union recognition, a living wage, fair hours and healthy working conditions"<sup>68</sup> Members of the LWS sought to support and promote unions for the good of their communities and to suppress the power of corporations that exploited both their workers and their customers. The commitment to sustainable labor standards and collaborative efforts served as the most basic tenets of the LWS.

While the LWS focused on attaining adequate labor conditions for the working class, in the process it educated middle and upper class women about the labor movement and legislature. Some of the members were fortunate enough to have received an education, but many considered themselves undereducated and uninformed about labor organization and the democratic process. The LWS widely disseminated pamphlets and newsletters breaking down economic issues and current legislative measures and also hosted countless lectures at which prominent labor leaders, professors, and sympathetic lawyers spoke. Every chapter

59 Bender, 209.

Badger, Anthony J. *The New Deal: the Depression Years, 1933-1940*. (New York : Hill and Wang, 1989), 68.

60 Badger, 88.

McKellar, Susie. "Seals of Approval: Consumer Representation in 1930s' America." *Journal of Design History*, (Vol. 15, No. 1 2002), 11.

61 Jacobs, "Democracy's Third Estate:" New Deal Politics and the Construction of a "Consuming Public", 28.

62 McKellar, 4.

63 Jacobs, "Democracy's Third Estate:" New Deal Politics and the Construction of a "Consuming Public", 36.

64 Badger, 92.

65 Storrs, Landon. "Red Scare Politics and the Suppression of Popular Front Feminism: The Loyalty Investigation of Mary Dublin Keyserling." *The Journal of American History* (2003), 495. In *Civilizing Capitalism* Storrs suggests that OPA employees made conscious effort to racially integrate their division and used guerilla techniques to hire black women, adding an interesting layer to this surge of women in the government.

66 "What is the League of Women Shoppers?" Pamphlet. Nov 27, 1935. Mary Van Kleek Papers. SSC.

67 Ibid.

68 *The Woman Shopper*. Vol.1 No.1, August 1935. Consumers' League of Massachusetts. Records, 1891-1951. Box 424, Folder 7. Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. Harvard University Cambridge, MA. (Hereafter Schlesinger Library)

sent out postcards advertising lectures with titles like “Your Meat and Our Union”, “Japanese Labor Conditions”<sup>69</sup> and “Behind the Labor Headlines”.<sup>70</sup> These were widely attended by League members, who relished the chance to learn about the complex systems that effected their everyday lives, right down to the groceries they bought. For instance, Alice Lesser Shepherd, who “suffered from a feeling of educational inadequacy”<sup>71</sup> because she never received the opportunity to attend college, joined the League in New York City in order to acquire knowledge and counter inflation during World War II. The education of housewives deprived of a traditional education was a positive and inadvertent result of the League’s operations.

LWS members, especially those of the D.C. branch, closely monitored legislative issues and distributed hundreds of “Legislative Lowdown” circulars that urged members around the country to take immediate action and call their local legislators. These packets reported any number of bills being considered in the house and senate involving anti-lynching laws, unemployment relief, anti-concentration camp bills, social security and housing provisions.<sup>72</sup> In addition, these informative packets that synthesized current events contributed to the education and civic awareness of LWS members. The legislative measures the LWS was particularly concerned with would be accompanied by “WRITE YOUR OWN SENATOR” or alternatively, “write PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT”.<sup>73</sup> One such campaign focused on the Wagner Act of 1935, also known as the National Labor Relations Act, which most notably recognized the workers’ right to form unions and required employers to bargain with these unions.<sup>74</sup> The LWS apparently believed that this legislature and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) it created was effective and essential because they led an extensive campaign against potentially detrimental amendments to the law in 1939 that would have restricted union rights. Advocates for black and female workers supported the NLRB in its early years; its defense of union rights also won the affection of pro-labor

anti-discrimination groups like the LWS.<sup>75</sup> Representatives appeared before the Labor Committees in both the House and the Senate in order to voice their opinion in favor of the labor protections upheld by the NLRB. The LWS was very passionate about vocally supporting legislation they believed was moving democracy in a more equitable direction and many of the members learned to adeptly analyze legislature and predict its impact on workers.

However, the LWS did not merely act as lobby group like the NCL and other contemporary consumer organizations. Although they viewed reformative legislation as vital to gaining recognition from employers, they rejected the illusion that new laws would solve all problems faced by workers and consumers.<sup>76</sup> In practice, the LWS preferred to take direct action through boycotts, various publicity stunts and participating in solidarity strikes. Five-and-Dimes and Department stores, the bulwark of American consumerism at this time, served as a significant point of contention for LWS members, who frequented these establishments.

In 1936 LWS members boycotted Woolworths Five-and-Dime stores because they sold products from striking factories.<sup>77</sup> The situation escalated when the LWS released their 1937 booklet entitled “Consider the Woolworth’s Worker” that addressed the long hours and insufficient wages received by Woolworth’s workers from the floor to the stockroom.<sup>78</sup> The LWS devised a profound and subversive way to promote unionization among the salesgirls that involved handing them cards from the United Retail and Wholesale Employees of America informing them of the nearest branch and that shoppers supported them, even if their employers did not. It was a silent display of sympathy and an acknowledgement that they were suffering that also proposed a radical solution.<sup>79</sup> Alice Lesser Shepherd’s husband later recalled of her participation in the department store campaigns: “Mostly they went around trying to guarantee colored people a break. Like on Fifth Avenue- to get them jobs as clerks. They would picket- put on mink coats and walk around in front of department stores”.<sup>80</sup> The LWS was

69 “Hello Woman Shopper” Nov 1938. Box 118, Folder 17. Jesse Lloyd O’Connor Papers. SSC.

70 Flyer. Box 119, Folder 1. Jesse Lloyd O’Connor Papers. SSC. This lecture was given by Arthur Garfield Hays, husband of the League’s president at the time. However, most of these lectures appear to have been given by union organizers.

71 “A Woman Gentle and Wise: Fond Memories of my Mother, Alice Elise Lesser Shepherd” Dec 2000, Box 1 Folder 15. League of Women Shoppers Records, SSC. This document is a transcription of oral histories taken in 1991 by Lesser Shepherd’s daughter about her involvement in the LWS.

72 “Legislative Low-Down, January 17<sup>th</sup> 1940” National Legislative Committee of the LWS. League of Women Shoppers (Washington, D.C.) Records Box 1 Folder 3. Schlesinger Library.

73 Ibid.

74 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 53.

75 Ibid, 56. The amendments were initially proposed because the AFL claimed the NLRB unfairly favored the CIO. This was true in a sense because the NLRB perceived the CIO as less racist, less susceptible to bribery and more adept at accommodating the needs of workers than the traditionalist AFL.

76 Orleck, 160. Legislative campaigns often serve as helpful catalysts for more impactful organizing, but do not necessarily represent a sure solution.

77 “Socialites Picket ‘Five and Ten’ Store” The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, November 27, 1936. Google News Online Archive.

78 Although many socialites joined the LWS, they publically disdained wealthy women like the Woolworth’s heiress Barbara Hutton, who refused to acknowledge or

79 Consider the Woolworth’s Worker, League of Women Shoppers Papers, SSC.

80 “A Woman Gentle and Wise: Fond Memories of my Mother, Alice Elise Lesser Shepherd” Dec 2000, Box 1 Folder 15. League

intolerant of discriminatory practices, refused to be complicit in the oppression of department store workers and consistently sought to incorporate a consideration of race into their pro-union activities.

Two of the LWS' most prominent campaigns that recognized racial discrimination and actively sought to combat it were their movements to enfranchise both African American laundry workers and domestic workers. The LWS published another study entitled "Consider the Laundry Worker" that focused on the suppression of unionization by employers in industrial laundries and the unsafe, discriminatory practices they upheld.<sup>81</sup> The LWS documented and projected the voices of African-American and Puerto Rican women who attested to receiving unequal wages and experiencing the propagation of race antagonism by their bosses.<sup>82</sup> The LWS was also concerned with the lack of education and opportunity for advancement available to minority workers and believed unionization and a higher, legislatively enforced minimum wage would allow workers enduring sweatshop conditions to seek other opportunities.

Despite previous efforts by the YWCA and other women's groups, domestic work remained unregulated and controlled completely by private employers, leaving the African-American women who filled these positions vulnerable to abuse.<sup>83</sup> The LWS wanted to create a standard written contract that would outline terms of employment, wages, length of workday, and benefits afforded to domestic workers. They also endorsed Rose Schneiderman's<sup>84</sup> request that insurance for domestic workers be covered by the Compensation and Employee Insurance Act.<sup>85</sup> The House Ways and Means Committee's failure to consider extending social security to domestic workers in 1939 prompted Nina Collier, the National Legislative Chairman for the LWS, to write an editorial in the *Washington Post* saying, "Since 50 per cent of those employed in household occupations are Negroes, the net effect of their exclusion from social security benefits constitutes a highly discriminatory situation."<sup>86</sup> In both of

these instances, the LWS demonstrated their understanding of the intersections of labor exploitation and racial discrimination and evolved their campaign around racial issues.

The LWS always concerned themselves with the intersections of race and class in legislature and the labor movement, but eventually began participating in the long civil rights movement in earnest. During the 1944 presidential election the LWS released a packet entitled "Women of America: Look at the Record Before You Vote" that juxtaposed the stances of Roosevelt and Dewey on pertinent political issues.<sup>87</sup> The LWS lauded Roosevelt's wartime efforts to regulate equal pay for equal work and create equitable work environments for people of color in the war industries while reviling Dewey for scuttling efforts to institute a Civil Rights Bureau.<sup>88</sup> The League claimed to be an impartial organization, but they clearly leaned toward Roosevelt regarding this issue.<sup>89</sup> In 1948, shortly before their disintegration, the organization steeped themselves even further into the civil rights movement by encouraging members to participate in community audits that investigated and ascertained the extent of discrimination in their communities. Alice Lesser Shepherd, who served as the LWS' National Chairman of Anti-Discrimination, distributed a pamphlet on about how to conduct a community audit with a cover letter that stated "this is an excellent opportunity for League members to accomplish League aims" and that "presentation of scientific data on discrimination in one's own back yard speak for themselves and help to bring about democratic action".<sup>90</sup> Whereas their previous campaigns had mainly focused on discrimination in the workplace, the League developed a desire to tackle racial discrimination on a grander scale with the intention of making democracy more inclusive after World War II.

Despite their apparent cognizance of the importance of class and race to their movement, the League accomplished this without ever acknowledging their own inherent privilege as middle and upper class white women.<sup>91</sup> Extravagant social events, especially in the early years of the LWS, were a major aspect of the organization's activism and the fact that

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of Women Shoppers Records, SSC.

81 In *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* Glickman observes that the LWS often used social sciences in their activism and investigations.

82 Filley, Jane, and Therese Mitchell. *Consider the laundry workers*. (New York: League of Women Shoppers, 1937), SSC. This kept workers disconnected from one another and less likely to unionize.

83 Bunch-Lyons, Beverly A. *Contested Terrain: African-American Women Migrate from the South to Cincinnati, Ohio, 1900-1950*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 51.

84 Rose Schneiderman (1882-1972) was a working-class radical socialist labor leader known for her powerful speeches. See Orleck for more details.

85 "Domestics are Workers, too" *The Woman Shopper*. Sept-Oct 1938, Box 1, Folder 1. League of Women Shoppers Papers, SSC.

86 Collier, Nina P. "Domestic Workers and Social Security." *The*

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*Washington Post*, March 23, 1939. League of Women Shoppers (Washington, D.C.) Records Box 1 Folder 3. Schlesinger Library.

87 "Women of America: Look at the Record Before You Vote" League of Women Shoppers Papers, SSC.

88 *Ibid*.

89 The LWS always claimed to be politically impartial in their official literature and their organizational constitution, but this assertion was demonstrably false. Conservatives at the time universally reviled groups like the LWS using blatantly misogynistic (See Storrs, *Anti-feminism*) language because they dared to uphold liberal principles.

90 Letter from Alice Shepherd to LWS Members, November 30, 1948. League of Women Shoppers (Washington, D.C.) Records Box 1 Folder 7. Schlesinger Library.

91 Goldstein, 215.



they were invariably “clad in costly furs” and “expensively-dressed”<sup>92</sup> always attracted the press and therefore became central to their personal brand. Members deliberately used their ability to array themselves in fancy dress to draw the attentions of abusive employers, the press and the general public to the strikes they supported, but never sought to mitigate their privilege or present themselves as equal to working-class women. As an organization, the LWS wielded undeniable star power, gaining the support of novelists, actresses, socialites and even Eleanor Roosevelt.<sup>93</sup> The fun events they hosted in the name of spreading pro-labor sentiments made them extremely popular among affluent socialites and inherently exclusionary to the working-class people they sincerely intended to assist. For instance in 1937 they hosted a fashion show that was meant to be a “dramatization”<sup>94</sup> of their boycott against Japanese silk as a result of Japanese aggression in Manchuria.<sup>95</sup> While they modeled silk-free fashions at an extravagant venue, the LWS was fundamentally based on the idea that women with access to disposable income could use that advantage for the benefit both themselves as the consumer and the workers. It was an interventionist organization that capitalized on its notable members and race and class privilege in order to offer support to unions and workers of color that needed extra publicity and public outrage to achieve their goals.

Despite their shortcomings, the LWS’ nascent attempts to dissect oppressive systems of power functioning within American society drew the attention of undesirable eyes.<sup>96</sup> Because critiquing the capitalist government and participating in union organization were considered characteristically communist activities, by 1939 the LWS had become a target for the anti-communist administration and were explicitly marked as a subversive group by the Dies committee, a precursor to the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that conducted needlessly militant witch-hunts against suspected communists. The Dies committee construed consumer groups’ disdain for corporations as a desire to take down the entire economic system and believed that the Communist Party had a meeting in 1935 in which they demanded the creation of a series of front organizations, including the LWS.<sup>97</sup> From that

point on, the entire organization constantly fought accusations of un-American activity, so much so that it is hard to imagine how they got anything else done. This is particularly ironic because LWS pamphlets and literature indicates that they were committed to creating a more inclusive democracy instead of completely dismantling the system. In one of their most widely distributed pamphlets they wrote “In keeping with the democratic traditions of our country, we believe in the right of men and women to assemble and organize in order to protect their own interests”<sup>98</sup>. When considering this statement along with Lesser Shepherd’s previous call to end discrimination and promote a more equitable democracy, it is plain to see that the LWS did not want to dismantle the American government, only make it more inclusive and sentient of the needs of its citizens. The continued accusations brought against the League by the Dies committee and its various incarnations seem even more ironic because the Office of Economic Stabilization sent Katherine Armatage, the leader of the LWS in 1946, a letter to “express our deepest appreciation of the distinguished services you and your members have rendered the Government’s program for economic stabilization” after World War II disrupted the market.<sup>99</sup> The director of the post-war Office of Economic Stabilization Chester Bowles lauded the LWS’ grassroots community organizing for price stabilization on all necessary goods and genuinely believed their consumer activism had aided the U.S. government in their efforts to allay inflation and unemployment.

Although the accusations had existed since 1939, members started to resign and strike their names from the record when mass loyalty investigations among government employees were conducted internally and the LWS was listed on the Attorney General’s blacklist of “disloyal” organizations in 1948. The Report of the Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities of 1948 listed the LWS among groups that supposedly sought to “destroy our freedom by force, violence, threats, undermining and sabotage, and to subject us to the domination of foreign powers and ideologies”.<sup>100</sup> In addition, the committee damningly branded the LWS as “completely Communist created and controlled”.<sup>101</sup> Armatage was suitably outraged by this de-

92 “Socialites Picket ‘Five and Ten’ Store” *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 27, 1936. Google News Online Archive.

93 “Prominent Women Among League Shoppers” *The Woman Shopper*. Vol.1 No.1, August 1935. Consumers’ League of Massachusetts. Records, 1891-1951. Box 424, Folder 7. Schlesinger Library.

94 January 23, 1938 Press Release. Box 119 Folder 2. Jesse Lloyd O’Connor Papers, SSC.

95 It should be noted that the LWS officially supported people of Japanese descent in the U.S. and considered proposed internment camps and alien deportation acts to be undemocratic.

96 Goldstein, 233.

97 Hilton, Matthew. *Prosperity for All : Consumer Activism in an Era of Globalization*. (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2009),

158. There is no evidence that this occurred other than the embittered false testimony of a man named J.B. Matthews, whose organization Consumer’s Research was investigated and condemned by the LWS, eventually leading to its dissolution.

98 “Join the League” 1938. Box 1 Folder 2. League of Women Shoppers Papers, SSC. emphasis theirs.

99 Letter from Chester Bowles to Katherine Armatage, May 14 1946. League of Women Shoppers (Washington, D.C.) Records Box 1 Folder 7. Schlesinger Library.

100 Report of the Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities: 1948. Communist Front Organizations. [http://archive.org/stream/reportofsenatefa00calirich/reportofsenatefa00calirich\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/reportofsenatefa00calirich/reportofsenatefa00calirich_djvu.txt)

101 Ibid.

velopment and asked “By what possible standard can the attorney general judge the League of Women Shoppers to be “subversive” when the same organization, with the same policies, aims, activities and leaders was embraced by his own government during a period of national emergency?”<sup>102</sup> As Cold War hysteria and the widespread persecution of Communist Party affiliated individuals by the U.S. government commenced, all LWS members were unduly and irrevocably labeled as dangerous radicals despite their attempts work with democracy and not against it.

Members of the LWS who worked for the Office of Price Administration (OPA)<sup>103</sup>, which was initially “established during World War II to administer a system of rationing and price controls”<sup>104</sup> or other progressive government bureaus quickly became targets of the aggressive anti-communist movement. Most women who faced persecution at the hands of anti-communist committees were not actually communists, although some members of the party were certainly among the ranks of the LWS. Jessie Lloyd O’Connor, the president of the Chicago League whose archived papers contributed greatly to this paper, was herself a socialist activist and communist sympathizer, but never actually joined the party. Members of the LWS along with representatives of 40 other women’s groups protested the closure of the OPA in 1946 in order to ensure government regulation of continued post-war inflation in some capacity, but they were shocked and appalled when their peaceful protest was interrupted and forcibly broken up by police.<sup>105</sup> The privilege they previously relied on while participating in solidarity strikes suddenly did not have as great an impact anymore because they were branded as un-American, subversive communists undeserving of respect they previously took for granted.

In the absence of a unified and visible women’s movement in the ‘30s and ‘40s, the League of Women Shoppers served as a conduit for education, democratic involvement, and cross-class community organizing. Despite their seemingly innocuous appearance as a group of socially conscious housewives, in truth the LWS consisted of both profession-

als and non-wage earning women who subscribed to different degrees of radicalism. Even if some members did not fully agree with the tenets of socialism, the consumer activist work the LWS engaged in was nevertheless radical and considered dangerous by both anti-labor capitalists and anti-communist politicians. Upon its dissolution in 1948, many former members of the LWS were forced into obscurity or obligated to repeatedly renounce their progressive beliefs in order to preserve their careers, their families and their dignity.<sup>106</sup> The Red Scare suppressed pseudo-radical groups driven by women that demonstrated the potential to make contributions to later the twentieth century civil rights movement and perhaps even the second wave. Although the LWS exhibited an understanding of the function of race and class in the labor movement that was unexpected for their time while genuinely seeking to help the working class people who requested it, their strategies often revolved around showcasing their privilege in order to gain publicity and inherently excluded working class women. However, the League of Women Shoppers considered the voices of these women and organized on their behalf with the intention of creating a more equitable society.

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102 Letter from Armatage to Chapter Presidents, April 3, 1947. League of Women Shoppers (Washington, D.C.) Records Box 1 Folder 7. Schlesinger Library.

103 To be clear, members of the LWS practically ran the OPA themselves. Harriet Elliot, a political economist and League member, headed the operation. Conservatives emphasized and exaggerated women’s participation in these bureaus in order to discredit and belittle their projects. See Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*.

104 Jacobs, Meg. “How About Some Meat?’: The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941-1946.” *The Journal of American History*, (1997), 910.

105 “OPA Women Say Capitol Cops ‘Shoved ‘em Around Like Nazis” April 1946. League of Women Shoppers (Washington, D.C.) Records Box 1 Folder 9. Schlesinger Library.

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106 Two notable examples are Margaret Bourke-White and Mary Dublin Keyserling, both professional women who were relentlessly persecuted by HUAC for their affiliation with groups like the LWS.