

COMMENT

Black Women Activists: Embracing the Struggle for Intertwined Freedoms on Multiple Fronts

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Abstract

Dorothy Cobble’s magnificent, sweeping saga of the 100 plus year struggle for “full rights feminism” introduces us to myriad activists who sought common ground in the expansion of civil, political, economic and social rights as the key for raising the standard for working women, and by extension for all of humanity. However, as Cobble notes, some full-rights activists did not measure up to the potential of this feminism. The juxtaposition of the activism of Black full-rights feminists helps expose this fault line of unexamined deep-seated racism, ethnocentrism, and stereotypical thinking that undermined the potential of full-rights feminism. Questions of economic and political democracy shaped the organizing efforts of Black full-rights feminists against disfranchisement, lynching, discrimination in housing, education and employment, and exclusion and segregation from public accommodations. In their transnational work, they supported policies and practices structured by Cold War imperatives, American racism and imperialism, and tensions between democracy and incipient autocracy in the emerging African nations. Cobble’s book demonstrates the crucial ways that Black activists working together and with white allies pushed for the expansive promise of full-rights feminism, encompassing both political and economic rights and race and gender justice.

Dorothy Cobble’s magnificent, sweeping saga of the 100-plus year struggle for “full-rights feminism” introduces us to myriad activists whose lives intersected through friendships, partnerships, and memberships in a host of organizations, institutions, conferences, and state, national, and international governmental and labor bodies. A breathtaking examination of many large and small organizing efforts, it tells the story of those who sought common ground in the expansion of civil, political, economic, and social rights as the key for raising the standard for working women, and, by extension, for all of humanity. For much of this period, they fought against legal rights feminists associated with Alice Paul and the National Woman’s Party (NWP), whose activism for equality centered narrowly on promoting the interests of largely white professional women. NWP’s one-issue goal, passage of an Equal

Rights Amendment (ERA), would overturn hard-won protective legislation designed to address working women's disadvantages in the labor force due to pregnancy, child-care responsibilities, and health concerns. However, as Cobble notes, even some full-rights activists did not measure up to the potential of this feminism. They sometimes left unexamined deep-seated racism, ethnocentrism, and stereotypical thinking, as well as ignoring the detrimental effects of US imperialism.

Black full-rights feminists, in contrast, challenged discrimination and exclusion. Questions of economic and political democracy shaped their organizing efforts against disfranchisement, lynching, discrimination in housing, education and employment, and exclusion and segregation from public accommodations. In their transnational work, they supported policies and practices structured by Cold War imperatives, American racism and imperialism, and tensions between democracy and incipient autocracy in the emerging African nations. Their intersectional approaches to fighting racism and sexism could be situational depending on political moment, organizational ties, and geographical location. Although Black activists sometimes clashed strongly with one another over priorities and strategies, they more often worked closely together for political and economic rights and race and gender justice. In the discussion that follows, I emphasize their efforts with particular attention to Maida Springer's activism, which is derived from my own research.¹

While Springer holds a prominent role in Cobble's chronicle of full-rights feminists, Cobble also brings to light lesser-known Black labor activists, such as Irene Goins of the Chicago Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), and little-known organizations like the National Association of Wage Earners, which was headed by Mary McLeod Bethune and Nannie Burroughs. Like Springer, Goins understood Black reticence to join labor unions that had neither embraced them nor fought racism within their ranks. In 1932, Springer heard a speech by labor and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph that convinced her of the importance of interracial organizing and primed her to join the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. An earlier Randolph speech in the mid-1920s galvanized white activists to push the YWCA to stop the segregation and exclusion of Black women, with the WTUL following suit.

These organizations facilitated the emergence of the Black full-rights feminist network. Springer first met Laundry Workers Union activists Charlotte Adelmond and Dollie Lowther Robinson of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) through WTUL programs, and the three formed a strong friendship and commitment to unionism and civil rights that easily survived rivalries between the heads of the needle trades and their own differing assessments of Black male leaders. Of the white women with whom they built solid friendships, Esther Peterson and Caroline Ware stand out. Cobble charts the institutional connections Peterson developed with Springer and Robinson as she moved through appointments in the Department of Labor and work with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the ILO and the President's Commission on the Status of Women.

¹Yvette Richards, *Maida Springer: Pan-Africanist and International Labor Leader* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2000); and *idem, Conversations with Maida Springer: A Personal History of Labor, Race, and International Relations* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2004).

During World War II, Black women activists supported the wartime “Double V” campaign in the fight for real democracy, which would mean victory over racism at home and fascism abroad. At the behest of Randolph, Springer, Robinson, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, and Pauli Murray organized a silent parade to protest the execution of sharecropper Odell Waller – an all-white jury rejected his claim of self-defense against a white landlord in convicting him of murder. They also protested the Red Cross for segregating blood. When a white union woman challenged Adelmound to think about her refusal to give blood possibly leading to the death of her wounded brother in North Africa, she retorted, “at least I will know that he died for democracy”.² Springer, too, refused to aid the Red Cross, choosing instead to work with the New York Chinese Blood Bank.

During the war, Springer also encountered white male immigrants reluctant to allow their young sisters or daughters to attend weekend education programs at Hudson Shore Labor School because of the possible presence of a few Black men. In meeting with some of these families, she not only disputed the Black male rapist myths behind their thinking, but shared how prejudice affected them in their countries of origin. As Cobble remarks: “Like the YWCA industrial clubs, labor schools were sites where friendships and understandings crucial to inclusive egalitarian social movements and policy happened.” The burden was often on Black activists like Springer to create the room for the emergence of “understandings”.

Springer decided again to make room for the growth of understanding after experiencing persistent racist treatment in the nation’s capital while preparing for a high-profile government sponsored labor exchange to England, which nearly caused her to quit in anger. Bethune, then the head of the National Council of Negro Women and the highest-ranking Black in the federal government, convinced Springer that what she made of her resentment was the greater challenge. Quitting was the easy way out and would foreclose the opportunity to gain knowledge abroad, which she could put to use and share at home. Using her connections with Eleanor Roosevelt, Bethune arranged for a chauffeur driven limousine to solve Springer’s transportation discrimination. Blacks constantly faced such treatment, especially when traveling South. In 1940, Murray and her friend Adelene MacBean were arrested in Petersburg and charged with violation of state segregation statutes, but Virginia courts avoided a test case by dropping those charges. Four years later, Murray witnessed the same scenario of a potential test case fall apart when Virginia again dropped violation of segregation statutes in the arrest of some young Howard women students who traveled between Washington, DC, and Fairfax, Virginia for a picnic at the farm of their professor, Caroline Ware.

After relaxing at the Ware farm before her exchange trip, Springer arrived in England, where she forged a connection to the expansive pan-African network led by former communist George Padmore. Becoming involved in this network dramatically changed the direction of her activism into the arena of labor international affairs. Known as Mama Maida to many African labor leaders, Springer was often the only woman in attendance at various meetings and conferences; however, she

²Anna Arnold Hedgeman, *The Trumpet Sounds: A Memoir of Negro Leadership*. (New York, 1964), p. 81; Jennifer Scanlon, *Until There is Justice: The Life of Anna Arnold Hedgeman* (New York, 2016).

used her influence to push for expanded opportunities for African women by upholding the importance of addressing issues of access to vocational training, labor educational programs and childcare.

Randolph served as the conduit for supporting the priorities of African labor in the councils of the AFL–CIO, the policy formulations informed by Springer’s connections. As some African governments gained independence and forced the labor movements to become part of the apparatus of government in the name of nation building and adopted neutralism, Springer began to experience some conflict in her function. As Cobble notes, Springer, along with Randolph, fought against US racism and Western colonialism while opposed to Soviet-style communism. But AFL–CIO policy under the controversial leader Jay Lovestone went further than their positions, drawing a hard line against contacts with communist countries and incorporation of labor movements into governments.

Black women activists had varying reactions to these rapid changes. While Springer and Anna Arnold Hedgeman were willing to give some leeway to Kwame Nkrumah as head of the pan-African movement, trying to hold together nations whose borders they had not drawn, Murray was alarmed at the suppression of civil liberties and viewed Ghana as sliding toward dictatorship. Outraged by the 1959 lynching of Mack Charles Parker, Murray had traveled to Ghana to teach at its law school. She also attended with Hedgeman the Conference of Women of African Descent held in Accra, where they opposed a resolution linking US racism to South Africa apartheid. While her eighteen-month African sojourn led Murray to embrace her Americanness, Springer’s travels led her to embrace her Africanness. Thoroughly disillusioned with Civil Rights progress, Springer considered moving permanently to the continent until the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Still, Springer had a complex and situational approach to issues of gender discrimination and American racism. A few examples highlight her varying responses. When government officials nervously asked her how she would respond if a Guinea labor delegation visiting during the 1963 March on Washington (MOW) asked to see the South, she stated it was better to let them see for themselves rather than be left to form distorted impressions. While hosting this delegation, Springer let Edith Sampson, the first African American representative to NATO, know, through a kick under the table, that Sampson should refrain from starting a testy exchange with the head Guinean labor leader, who answered a question Sampson had posed directly for the sole woman in the delegation. After strategizing in Springer’s apartment with a group of white women about the sexist exclusions happening around the march events, Murray asked Springer if she would be willing to join in a protest, if need be, against Randolph, for accepting an invitation to speak at the gender exclusionary National Press Club. Springer emphatically declined. Yet, Springer herself once gently chided a labor leader suffering under Preventative Detention, not for his complaints about the extreme shoulder and neck pain induced by hauling water but for his added comments that it was humiliating because it was woman’s work. While, in 1963, she was instrumental in helping Kenyan labor set up a training school, the Institute of Tailoring and Cutting, she threatened to abandon the project should the union leadership not accord equal pay to the sole woman teacher.

Cobble's impressive tome on the activism of a prodigious assortment of feminists and movements does not claim to be exhaustive. Two women whose addition to this text would expand and solidify her argument for full-rights feminist praxis are Anna Arnold Hedgeman and Ora Lee Malone. Springer deeply admired both of these women who share with Murray, Bethune, and Fannie Lou Hamer a commitment to equality and social justice grounded in religious faith. Hedgeman, like Dorothy Height, had a leadership role in the Black YWCA and supported programs that shined a spotlight on struggles of household employees, a group excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act until 1972. (Discrimination against people with disabilities stands as a remaining challenge of FLSA reform.) Born of a middle-class midwestern family, Hedgeman struggled with prejudices she harbored against poor people. An incident in the 1920s at Mississippi's Rust College deeply affected her outlook on poverty and elitism. After she had tried to dismiss a poor elderly Black domestic worker who had approached her on a busy commencement day, the woman unraveled a knotted handkerchief of coins totaling about two dollars. As she dropped the coins, one by one, into Hedgeman's hands, she explained that she had never had a chance for an education but wanted to donate her hard-earned money to help ensure some young person did. Hedgeman felt not only deep humility, but also anger that Blacks lived under such oppressive conditions. Committing her life to changing these conditions, she worked with Randolph as executive director of the 1940s MOW movement and, later, as the only woman on the planning committee of the 1963 MOW. Hedgeman was largely responsible for organizing through the Council of Churches tens of thousands of whites to participate in the march. She also fought with the male civil rights over the lack of women on the march program. Failing to make significant inroads, she joined forces with Murray and Height and later helped form the National Organization for Women (NOW).

Murray and Hedgeman, who headed NOW's Women in Poverty Task Force, became disillusioned as NOW committed to passage of the ERA in 1967, a move they feared would sideline issues of class specifically related to Black women's poverty, invalidate women-specific labor protections, and make it more difficult to fight sex discrimination using the 14th Amendment. The reminiscences of Sonia Pressman Fuentes, who, as assistant counsel for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), coordinated sex discrimination cases with NOW, exemplify the differences between legal-equality feminists and full-rights feminists. A long-time supporter of the NWP, Fuentes admitted to being "blithely unaware of the legislative history" of the 1964 Civil Rights Act when, by happenstance, she was hired for the EEOC. Yet, in retrospect, she praised Paul for lobbying segregationist Congressman Howard W. Smith to include sex as a prohibitive category, while noting that he may not have wanted "African Americans" to get rights at the expense of "white women".³ This formulation rendered invisible Murray's intersectional use of Jane Crow to describe the compounded discrimination Black women face.

Ora Lee Malone, the first Black international business agent for the ACWA and the leader of the St. Louis branch of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, dedicated

³Sonia Pressman Fuentes, *Eat First – You Don't Know What They'll Give You: The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter* (Bloomington, IN, 1999), pp. 126–132.

her efforts to voter education and registration. The epitome of a full-rights feminist, Malone combined activism in civil rights, women's rights, and labor rights, with the anti-apartheid struggle. She was a founding member of both the Coalition of Black Trade Unions in 1972 and the Coalition of Labor Union Women in 1974. A talented organizer, she rejected the trappings of elite organizations that were not conducive to building a grassroots leadership. In addition to fighting for wages, hours and conditions, unions, she asserted, had a larger responsibility to address social issues, like problems with transportation and childcare, which interfered with the ability of working women to maintain employment. When asked in the hospital as her health declined what message she wanted to give, she stated "keep the voting rights act alive and keep fighting for justice".⁴

Cobble's book enlarges our understanding of the huge network of feminists fighting for full-rights feminism. Her tracing of the multiple and overlapping networks of activists reveals how they worked and struggled together and passed on knowledge to prepare the next generation for leadership. With periodic conservative retrenchment, Cobble points out that progress is seldom linear. As Black women have stood in the forefront of progressive change, it is worth remembering Ella Baker's philosophy: "Learn from others, pass on what we learn, and stay in the struggle for a free and just world."⁵

⁴"Ora Lee Malone," *The Saint Louis American*, 8 November 2012. Available at: http://www.stlameric.com/news/obituaries/ora-lee-malone/article_3c7b89de-295a-11e2-b205-001a4bcf887a.html; last accessed 12 October 2021; Keona K. Ervin, *Gateway to Equality: Black Women and the Struggle for Economic Justice in St. Louis* (Lexington, KY, 2017).

⁵*Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker*, directed by Joanne Grant (1981, NY: Icarus Films).

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