

WOMEN SHIPYARD WORKERS AND THE POLITICS OF POST-WORLD WAR II PLANNING IN THE UNITED STATES

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This article analyzes the post-war fate of women workers in the U.S. shipbuilding industry by placing their wartime employment within the context of the interactions among the government, labor unions, and shipyard owners. These relationships are examined, not with World War II as a convenient background, but as the reason for the employment of women. The maximum production of ships was the goal of the government, owners and unions during the war. To meet that goal, a wartime alliance was developed that made the employment of women in the yards a necessary expedient. But production, not social change, drove the alliance. As long as production remained the goal, the alliance held and women's employment remained secure. When the war ended, the coalition ended as well. A disrupted postwar economy and the specter of a return to the depression of the 1930's sent the three major players in pursuit of separate agendas that held nothing for women. Women were left out of the postwar reconversion plans. As a result, both intentional and incidental discrimination against women and a repressive post-war economy restricted women's post-war options. While the decline of shipbuilding in the post-war era serves as an extreme case, the reconversion process at least temporarily affected every U.S. industry.

The government agency charged with merchant ship production was the United States Maritime Commission. Established in 1936 by the Merchant Marine Act to update an antiquated American merchant fleet and shipyards, the U.S. Maritime Commission had but one agenda: to build the greatest number of ships in the shortest amount of time. Ultimately, the employment of women became necessary to that goal.

The severe depression in shipbuilding following the World War I reduced the number of major shipyards to ten. By 1943, these ten were increased to forty and employed over 1,000,000 workers, of which over 100,000 were women. However, the depression had left its mark on the industry and affected the options available to the Maritime Commission. Although a powerful agency prior to the war, the Maritime Commission's authority to resolve crises and bottlenecks in both materials and labor expanded with the critical shortage of merchant tonnage during 1941 and 1942. The Commission developed new ship designs, allocated

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materials, determined the placement of new shipyards, and coordinated labor supply all during a period of shortages. In addition, the Maritime Commission also had to mediate between other government agencies and the shipbuilding industry as well as between industry and labor. The boom in shipbuilding communities also created crises in housing, transportation and other aspects in daily life. Since those crises affected production, the Maritime Commission worked closely with other government and local agencies.

The Commission contributed directly to the employment of women by enforcing the labor ceilings placed on shipyards by the War Manpower Commission, a separate government agency. The Maritime Commission attempted to enforce those ceilings because labor shortages hampered maximum production. After the yards had exhausted the available supply of male workers, those ceilings forced many shipyards to turn to women. By 1942 women were entering the shipbuilding industry in large numbers.

The U.S. Maritime Commission also contributed indirectly to the employment of women through its advocacy of the breakdown of crafts. This occurred to the greatest extent in the new emergency yards which employed women. Lacking skilled workers, the shipbuilding industry had to alter its construction process to allow for employment of unskilled workers. Part of this altered process involved the introduction of welded ship construction. Wilding employed the most shipyard workers during the war and constituted the job category in which most women were concentrated. But the Maritime Commission, like most government agencies at this time, had few advocates for women. In actuality, only two government agencies, The Women's Bureau and the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) to the War Manpower Commission, served as advocates for women war workers. As early as 1943, one member of the WAC asked, "have they discussed at all what they are going to do with these many thousands of women who are going, supposedly, to drop out the minute the war is over?... They wouldn't drop out last time"¹. Although the Women's Advisory Committee argued that post-war planning should include a consideration of women war workers, the Committee itself had little power. When first established, the War Manpower Commission denied the WAC any role beyond that of an advisory body. Thus, most of its recommendations went unheeded. Ultimately, the Maritime Commission was only committed to women as long as they remained vital to wartime production.

The shipbuilding industry of this time was divided between the older, traditional yards such as Newport News and new, quickly constructed "emergency" yards. The Maritime Commission built the emergency shipyards, the government owned them, and private contractors, like Henry J. Kaiser, operated and managed them. These emergency yards built much of the emergency merchant ship tonnage

¹ Verbatim Minutes, Meeting of Women's Advisory Committee, 14 April 1943, p. 105, RG 211, Series, 31, Box I-6, National Archives Building (NA).

during the war. And it was here that women were employed in large numbers.

The attitudes of the shipyard owners toward the employment of women varied. Many owners saw women as an additional expense since they required new facilities and services such as Woman Counselors, daycare, and dining centers. Only the enforcement of the wartime labor ceiling forced some owners to hire women. Others, like Henry Kaiser, who hired the greatest percentage of women of all yard owners, advocated daycare centers and other innovations to improve working conditions for women.

American labor unions also differed in their response to the influx of women laborers to the shipyards. The shipbuilding industry, unlike most war industries, remained divided during the war between the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders and Helpers of America, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) affiliate, the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America (or IUMSWA). Some of the older yards also retained independent or company unions. Both unions gained unprecedented membership and power during the war and were able to transport their power to positions in government advisory. Both unions attempted to use the war to expand their power base at the other's expense.

The AFL and CIO differed in their response to women workers. The Boilermakers initially resisted the employment of women and maintained separate seniority lists for women workers throughout the war. In contrast, the IUMSWA supported the seniority rights of women throughout the war and into post-war period.

The attitudes of male co-workers also varied from one man to another. One underground shipyard paper printed an article in March of 1943, entitled "To the Ladies; We Hope They Find Their Ways Back to the Kitchens Again", which stated that "as a general rule the shipyard is one more contribution to the degradation of women"². A letter written by a male shipyard worker to President Franklin Roosevelt expressed a more central concern when he stated that "a man... can not take it to see these women coming to work in a shipyard... because he gets the idea that they are going to take his job sooner or later"³. In addition, the problem of women's sexuality also entered into the tension between male and female workers. In one yard, for example, the problem reached ludicrous proportions when a supervisor went around the yard with a bottle of acetone and a handkerchief forcing women to remove lipstick and nail polish after a local woman charged that her family had been broken up by an affair between shipyard workers. The solution seemed to be to desex the women shipyard workers with strict clothing regulations that often had little to do with health and safety regulations. As one

2 "To the Ladies", *Belair Wildcat* 13 March 1943, p. 2.

3 Letter, R.J. Hainan to FDR, 11 August 1942, File "Regional Office 1942", RG 178, Entry 89, Box 442, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Md. (WNRC).

woman put it. "Like soldiers infiltrating enemy lines, women in the shipyards had to be camouflaged lest the difference in sex be unduly noted and emphasized"⁴. Most male co-workers perceived women shipyard workers as a necessary evil during wartime. While some acknowledged the women's contributions to the war effort, none anticipated their remaining in the industry after the war ended.

Women themselves entered the shipbuilding industry primarily for economic reasons. Many women left low-paying service jobs for the high wages paid by shipyards. The demand by unions for equal pay gave women the opportunity to earn \$1.20 an hour, more than double the average pay for traditional women's work. Transforming highly skilled craft work to semi-skilled mass production permitted the merchant shipbuilding industry to maximize its use of women's labor. Concentrated in welding, women were not encouraged to learn an entire craft. Rapid construction of ships depended on the use of subassemblies and mass production techniques.

Women's late entry into the shipbuilding industry, however, placed them low in the seniority lists. This, in combination with the denial of seniority rights, at least by the AFL, reduced their chances for promotion and placed them in the position of "first fired". Moreover also suffered throughout the war from the "double burden" of housework and employment. Those conflicts, exacerbated by long shifts, wartime rationing, and overcrowded shipyard communities, resulted in a high turnover rate for females in shipbuilding. Although at their peak women comprised up to one-third of the workers in some shipyards, in the absence of a unified feminist movement, women could not capitalize on the gains which they made in employment during the war.

The post-war period brought rapid disruption to most major industries and a precipitous decline to shipbuilding. The coalition that had united government, owners, unions, and women splintered, as the three major players fell away to pursue their separate agendas. With maximum ship production no longer anyone's goal, the war alliance that had benefitted women came apart, leaving them without power or options. Moreover, the disruptions of postwar reconversion and specter of a return to a depression economy, joined to lock women out of employment opportunity.

The post-war viability of the industry or the unions simply did not interest the Maritime Commission. Nor did the continued employment of women. The main government institution exercising control over the shipbuilding industry and labor unions was only committed to women as long as their numbers were vital to the rapid construction of ships. The Commission had no interest in social change. Moreover, the Maritime Commission anticipated that emergency yards, where the greatest number of women were employed, would close after the war,

4 Katherine Archibald, *Wartime Shipyard: A Study in Social Disunity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1947), p. 21, 22.

so as not to compete with the traditional yards. Thus, believing that only the small core of older yards need be retained in case of a future emergency, and fearing that continued government oversight of the industry would resemble socialism, the government walked away from the emergency yards and their female workforce.

Some owners took their wartime profits and invested in other industries in the post-war period, while others depended on the more highly skilled repair work to keep their yards afloat. Even the enlighten manager of several emergency yards, Henry Kaiser, had no plans to remain in the shipbuilding industry in the post-war period. At the 47th Annual Dinner of the National Association of Manufacturers on December 4, 1942, Kaiser articulated his post-war plan. He envisioned a need for housing, automobiles, highways and medical care⁵. After leaving the shipbuilding industry, Kaiser invested heavily in the automobile and health care industries. The traditional shipyard owners realized that the opportunity to make huge wartime profits in a wartime boom would be followed by a bust. Their commitment to their labor force extended only as far as their profit margin. In the post-war period, the shipbuilding industry depended not on new construction but rather on ship repair work. Neither the new male or female shipyard workers trained only in semi-skilled tasks during the war could perform in the highly skilled repair crafts. Thus, shortages of skilled repair workers coexisted with high numbers of unemployed wartime shipyard workers.

Conflicts between the AFL and CIO throughout the war had affected their ability to carry their wartime gains into the post-war period. As the war drew near its end, and as shipyards closed nationwide, both unions saw their membership and power decline. Labor unions too pursued post war agendas that had little to benefit women. Although the AFL and CIO had held different perspective toward women's employment during the war, women were only one small portion of the ranks of the unemployed shipyard workers, and the segment of least concern to the part of unions. The departure of women from the shipyards went unmentioned and unnoticed on the part of unions.

Unions urged the government to retain its commitment to shipbuilding, but met with little success. In 1943, the CIO offered its post-war plan at its Sixth Constitutional Convention. The CIO shared the concern of many Americans that the country would reenter a depression after the war. While the CIO advocated full employment for men and women and the conversion of war plants to consumer goods, it did not include any specific mention of the role of women war workers or what might occur if they began to compete with men for jobs⁶. Ultimately, the unions' fight against their inevitable decline was routed by the post-war, anti-union conservatism in American society.

5 Kaiser, Henry, *Management Looks at the Post-War World*, Newcomen Society, 1943, p. 16.

6 *Report of the President Philip Murray to the Sixth Constitutional Convention of the Congress of Industrial Organizations*, 1 November 1943, p. 57, Andrew A. Pettis Sr. Papers, Box 11, loose, University of Maryland, College Park.

According to wartime surveys, most women wanted to retain their high-paying war jobs. However, those surveys did not ask women what they would do if faced with the choice of lower paying clerical or service jobs or going back to the homes. The U.S. Employment Services documents give a clear picture of the complex set of circumstances that affected the post-war fate of women.

First, as the reconversion process began the high paying war work ended, and jobs for both men and women evaporated. However, women clearly were fired first in many industries as a result of separate seniority lists, their late entry into many jobs and owners who were blatant in ignoring their own hiring policies. As Ruth Milkman states in her analysis of women's wartime employment in the auto and electrical industries, employers generally preferred to hire young males. In the post-war period, that category generally was comprised of veterans. Clearly employers used the reconversion process to reassert their control over labor⁷.

Second, women constituted a part of the overall surplus army of labor. As long as enough men were available for the higher paying industrial jobs, employers had no incentive to hire women. Even veterans found it difficult to obtain employment commensurate with their expectations. As one report put it, "age and skill qualifications are reacting against young veterans without work histories". In addition, the equal pay for equal work provision during the war served its purpose in the post-war period. Employers found it profitable to hire women "only if a wage differential prevails"⁸. In general, owners and unions continued after the war to struggle over wage differentials industries that had already practiced sex-segregation in the pre-war period.

Third, the breakdown of skills in shipbuilding and other war industries left both male and female workers unemployed in the post-war labor market. Although shortages of skilled workers frequently occurred in the post-war period, the semi-skilled war workers were not eligible for these positions. The necessity for rapid production during the war had not provided the essential craft training required in the post-war world.

Fourth, the Employment Services ruled that like, women had the right to demand work at their previous rate of pay and in their previous skill category. That heightened the contradiction between women's wartime rate of pay and their post-war options. Women refused jobs at the lower wage rates in service and assembly work for as long as possible. According to one report it was "impossible to say with any conviction that the majority of the industrial women workers who have remained unemployed for many months are really not interested in jobs,

7 Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

8 USES, Labor Market Survey Report, Los Angeles, April 1948, RG 183, BES, LMSR CA, Box 24, File "Los Angeles, Calif", NA.

but only in collecting insurance, so long as the wage rates offered them are appreciably below their last earnings"⁹.

Ultimately, a woman's individual economic situation determined her post-war fate. Those who could afford to stay home simply remained there after their unemployment benefits ran out. Those who depended on their wages were forced to accept jobs in the lower paying "women's work" and reentered the work force. As women welders traded their welding rods for washing machines and "Rosie" put down her riveting gun and picked up babies, the domestic ideology emerged that legitimated that choice. Clearly, many women wanted to work in the post-war period, but often not at the wages offered. Until wage rates increased or the new household consumer items demanded an additional income, women remained in the home. Of course, in some cases, all those babies drove women back to the comparative sanity of the workplace.

Thus, the post-war reversals for women did not result from any conspiracy among the power elite to return women to the homes. As long as most of the country believed in the possibility of a post-war depression, little chance existed that women would retain their jobs at the expense of the returning veterans. Most women had survived the depression and remembered the bias against women competing against men for scarce jobs. Only full employment would have ensured women's continuing employment in the industrial sector.

However, the government, owners, and unions were not blameless in women's post-war fate. Each was in a position to help women maintain their gains, at least in the area of wages, but instead focused their attention on consolidating or maintaining their own power. As a result, sex-segregation and discrimination also played a decisive role in determining women's options. Yet, none of those factors operated in isolation, rather within a complex set of interrelations that had existed prior to the war and continued into the post-war period.

⁹ USES, Labor Market Development Report, New York Metropolitan Region, June-July, 1946, RG 183, LMSR NY, Box 254, File "NY, NY 1945", NA.