Strange Bedfellows

The Boilermakers and Women During World War II

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While many California women were serving their country in the military during World War II, their sisters on the home front were also doing their part. These women, who flooded the factories and shipyards of the state, provided a vital labor force during the crisis. By November 1942, only eleven months after Pearl Harbor, California women represented 19.2 percent of all factory workers.¹ These women's reasons for working in durable industry were many and varied, ranging from patriotic duty to financial need.² Women were rapidly entering unions that had in many cases been exclusively male enclaves. The relationship between these unions and their new female workers was often hostile, with women often being the victims of discrimination and prejudice from their male co-workers.³

The role of women during World War II has been the subject of much study by historians. Several books, such as D'Ann Campbell's Women at War With America and Doris Weatherford’s American Women and World War II, have dealt at length with the subject of the changing roles of females during that era. However, the question of the relationship between women and the previously all-male unions they entered during the war has been only peripherally studied in these works. Both Campbell and Weatherford, echoing the sentiments of most historians, conclude that wartime durable goods industry unions, such as the Boilermakers and Machinists, were almost exclusively classified as "hostile." "Hostile" means that these unions would not admit women until manpower shortages made female workers a necessity for production.

Further, once women were included as members, these unions were for the most part insensitive to their differing needs, ignoring their grievances and making no effort to retain them after the end of the war. Women were often denied the basic rights signified by the union compact, arbitration, fair work standards, and protection from unfair termination.

¹"Women in California Industry," Labor Clarion, 13 November 1942. Before the war less than 1 percent of factory workers were female, with most being secretarial help.


³Ibid., 142-3.
The International Brotherhood of the Boilermakers is often used to illustrate the workings of a "hostile" union. Both Weatherford and Campbell, as well as other historians in the field, utilized the records of Seattle Local 568 to prove their contentions that the Boilermakers were a "hostile" union. Unfortunately, other Locals are not cited as examples, which raises the question of how typical Local 568 can be considered. Local 6 of the International Brotherhood of the Boilermakers, a Bay Area union, provides an opportunity for a study of another local union.

The records of Local 6, a Lodge which encompassed San Francisco, Oakland, and much of the North Coast of California, are deposited at the San Francisco State University Labor Archives and Research Center. These documents are unprocessed and have only recently become available to researchers. A study of these documents reveals that Local 6, like Local 568, was a "hostile" union: The northern California Boilermakers never fully accepted their women members, allowing them to fall victim to discrimination from all quarters, and quickly purged them from their ranks at the end of the war.

The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, an American Federation of Labor (AFL) union, was the organization with which most Bay Area war workers came in contact. Lodge 6 of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers was the union in charge of the four largest shipyards in northern California, Marinship in Sausalito, Bethlehem Steel in San Francisco, Kaiser Metalworks in Oakland, and Chicago Ironworks in Eureka, home to many hundreds of women workers.5

When the war broke out, the Boilermakers were faced with a difficult choice: Should they accept women workers into their membership, or resist and try to continue production with a rapidly decreasing pool of male workers? According to the Pacific Master Agreement, the bible of the California union shipyard, a union shop was not to employ non-union personnel.6 Shipyard hiring was done by the individual yard, with union membership as a requirement for employment. However, with the tremendous manpower needs brought on by the war, shipyards increasingly began to ignore this provision of the agreement.

Before the outbreak of the war there were only thirty-six female shipyard workers in all of America, with apparently none employed in the yards of Lodge 6. By 1943 there were over five

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5Boilermakers Local 6 papers, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University (uncatalogued).

6Ibid.
hundred women workers at Marinship alone, many working "temporarily," and according to the Pacific Master Agreement, illegally, in jobs that required union membership. The five hundred women employees at Marinship and the many others working at the other Bay Area shipyards were not union members. The International Boilermakers’ headquarters, located in Kansas City, sent a letter to all its lodges on 24 July 1942, addressing this sticky question. The letter stated:

Whereas this International Brotherhood, as the result of the tremendous industrial expansion required by the war effort, finds itself compelled by the force of circumstances to depart from many long established policies, among them being the question of opening our doors for the admission of women members.

The International urged all its member lodges to vote on this matter for amendment to its constitution. Local 6 held a special meeting of its general membership on 9 August 1942, for the purpose of discussing the admission of female members. After a general discussion, the Lodge voted to admit women and their ballots were sent off to Kansas City. The seeming ease of this decision is deceptive, as no record remains of the actual votes pro or con, so it is impossible to ascertain just how close the decision was. The minutes of Local 6’s meetings were revised and rewritten before being committed to the minutes book, often with "superfluous" discussion deleted. Local 6’s neighbors to the north, Seattle Local 568, opposed women members by a three-to-one margin. One hint of just how close the vote may have been can be seen in the actions of Local 6’s business manager, Edgar Rainbow, who initially refused to admit women to his union’s rolls when asked privately by the president of Marinship one week before the vote.

Once this move was implemented, female membership in Local 6 exploded. Local 6’s Unemployed Worker Logs, the books in which out-of-work Boilermakers signed up for union benefits, can be used as a general gauge of the make-up of the membership in a given year. Comparing the Local’s Unemployed Worker Logs from before the resolution to those from after

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8 Boilermakers. The voting results of Local 6 are lost.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid. No records remain of the voting or how close it may have been. Not much in the way of controversy ever made it into the minutes of Local 6. The only controversial incident discovered in twenty years’ worth of minutes was found in the personal notes of business manager Ed Rainbow, who recounted the goings-on of a meeting in 1943, in which a lively argument ensued between a white member who felt that blacks had no place in the union and the blacks’ supporters.

11 Campbell, 144.

12 Wollenberg, 61.
the influx of women is clearly shown. The log from 19 February 1942 shows sixteen out-of-work members, all apparently male, while a log from February 1945 shows that eight out of twelve unemployed members were female. Marinship, a yard which employed almost two thousand workers at the height of its output, housed over five hundred female workers in late 1943.

These masses of women workers did not quickly climb the ladder of success at the shipyards, however. Women were for the most part restricted to the lowliest of "light work," welding and riveting. *The War Worker*, a black newspaper for the Bay Area, highlighted the first woman shipwright at the large Moore's Shipyard in Oakland. She was promoted in July, 1943, fully one year after the International resolution. The advancement from welder to shipwright only took a male employee three to five months, even with the accelerated apprenticeship period warranted by the war manpower shortages. A petition received from Marinship, requesting Saturdays off, dated 15 March 1944, almost two years after the admission of the first women to the union, shows the disparity between male and female promotions. All of the signing supervisors and foremen were male. In contrast, fully one-half of the laborers were female, as well as three-quarters of the welders.

According to a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics survey of November, 1942, the most common jobs for female shipyard workers were welding positions. In the yards covered by the Pacific Master Agreement, welders were paid $1.13 per hour, while exclusively male jobs such as foremen paid $2.40, illustrating the disparity between men's and women's pay.

Even with integration into the union, women workers were often given short shrift with regards to the usual benefits of membership, such as the privileges of voting and sitting on various committees. No women sat on the governing board of Local 6, a reflection of the

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13Boilermakers.
14Wollenberg, 59.
15Shipwright was a mid-level position, one grade above welder.
17Boilermakers.
18Ibid.
20Boilermakers, 1943 amendment to Pacific Master Agreement.
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International as a whole. Even when it came to voting, the leaders of the Local found ways to keep women out of the loop. In the minutes of a general meeting of 3 May 1943, a motion was suggested that "we appoint four women to serve as an advising committee to the committee for revision of the local bylaws, and that they will have a voice but no vote." The motion carried, illustrating another way in which the Local thwarted direct female participation.

Trying to remedy this sort of discrimination, a panel of women labor leaders toured the state in late 1942, discussing the female role in trade unions. This panel recommended that women be given "equal status in trade unions and the fullest participation in deliberations, and that the leadership of women be encouraged." This panel also counseled that unions should sponsor classes in trade-unionism for their female members, to facilitate their full participation. However, the findings of this well-intentioned panel had little impact on the workings of Local 6.

On the job, many women had to deal with ingrained perceptions regarding their unsuitability for "heavy work." Mary Stumph, a welder at a Long Beach shipyard, echoed the tale of many female Bay Area workers when she was promoted to spot welder and "the men got up in arms. They didn't want any woman on there and they all protested." Stumph did not get the promotion. The union grievance process, wherein workers were able to bring disputes and slights to the attention of an appointed panel for arbitration, seemed to hold out a promise for women in dealing with problems such as the one mentioned above. However, this process, at least in the case of the examples presented here, repeatedly failed these women.

Women who faced sexual harassment on the job seem to have received little help from Local 6. Men who harassed women at work often could do so and still stand in good favor with their Local. Jenny Hooke, a Leadwoman in Reclamation at Marinship, registered a complaint against M. L. McCullough, a foreman, stating that he had "rubbed up against her . . . and classified himself as a wolf." This complaint was corroborated by two of Hooke's female

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21Boilermakers, membership rolls.
22Boilermakers, minutes of general meeting of 3 May 1943.
25Many of the examples cited come directly from the uncatalogued and unorganized Boilermakers' files at the Labor Archives and Research Center. It is difficult to determine exactly from which record grouping a particular example comes. However, from the information contained in the surrounding papers, it is safe to assume that these are from grievance files.
26Boilermakers, grievance file. 7 May 1943.
co-workers. The case was dropped when the Superintendent of Sub-Assembly stated that he could not fire McCullough because he "had done a good deal for the training school [of Marinship]." After this incident, no further records regarding Hooke were deposited with the Local, leading to speculation that she was fired or quit. However, McCullough seems to have worked in the yards of Local 6 at least into the mid-1950s, with one promotion, implicitly showing the union’s attitude toward perpetrators of harassment.

Older women were often the victims not only of sex discrimination, but of age discrimination as well. Lucilla L. Perry, a forty-five-year-old welder with Marinship, was not rehired after she injured herself on the job in May 1943. In the memo that was sent to Local 6 regarding the firing, it was stated that she was not rehired because her supervisor said she was an old woman and he did not want her on the job. However, older men were welcomed in the yards and on the Local 6 governing board, the most notable example being the aforementioned Ed Rainbow, the Local’s business manager during the war years. Rainbow served his Local in one capacity or another for almost forty years.

Women union members were often in peril of losing their jobs. Union membership was supposed to give them protection from unlawful termination, but many ways were found to circumvent this rule. Women were always let go if a pregnancy was discovered, ostensibly to protect their health. There was no maternity leave available, and these women were not often rehired if they wanted to continue work after the birth of the baby, since their positions were filled immediately due to the ever-increasing production demands on the shipyards.

As the war production effort heated up, women were pressed to work more hours and to attempt more strenuous tasks, with increasing on-the-job injuries as a result. Many women who were hurt at work felt that the union-hired doctors were insensitive to their needs and wished to see their own physicians. However, injured women who refused to deal with the union doctors could not receive sick leave, leading to a "Catch-22."

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27 Ibid.
28 Boilermakers, membership rolls.
29 Boilermakers, grievance file.
30 Rainbow was employed by Local 6 from 1933 until at least 1972.
31 Boilermakers.
32 Ibid.
With the above examples as illustration, it is no surprise that women were not wildly supportive of union membership.33 Most women joined the union because they had to in order to work in the shipyards, not because they had aspirations of presiding over a Local. At the 1943 AFL convention, the status of women in America's labor unions was discussed. It was decided that in order for women to receive full equality in pay and all other union benefits:

Women must carry the full share of the load. Do more than pay dues--serve on grievance committees, negotiate wage contracts, work on labor management committees wherever they are set up.34

This rhetoric stands in stark contrast to the reality of the real world in which these women worked, where they were essentially locked out of any valuable contribution to the workings of their union.

Regardless of what the AFL said at their conventions, women were looked upon as a temporary labor force by the unions.35 Women often felt that becoming involved in the union, if only to put forth a grievance, was futile, as their jobs were for the duration of the war only.36 Doris Dillon, a "temporary" worker at Chicago Ironworks Eureka plant, who complained to a Local 6 business manager about the food served in the cafeteria, also stated:

[M]ay I add that I have not been a member very long and expect to go back into commercial work soon, and have offered the above criticism in the hope that it may prove constructive. I could go on for another four or five pages, but like so many of the women who feel we will only be there another few months, and are getting a lot more money than we're worth—sometimes it doesn't seem like it's any of our business.37

While this statement may not be typical of most female Boilermakers, it is illuminating. If Dillon's sentiments are at all representative of the feelings of women war workers, it becomes easier to explain the lack of challenge on the part of these women when they were closed out of their jobs at the end of the war. It is also interesting to note that there was no effort made to reply to Dillon. A similar attitude toward union status was illustrated by Helen Studer, another Long Beach worker. When asked about her future in the union, Studer answered, "There was no need

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33Campbell, 153-5.
35Weatherford, 150.
37Boilermakers.
for a union for me, I was not a permanent worker. With attitudes such as these, it is not surprising that the Boilermakers faced few problems in purging their union of women after the war.

In the post-war years, the Boilermakers effectively closed their ranks to women. A comparison of unemployed worker logs from before V-J Day with those of the immediate post-war months shows a striking difference. On 21 February 1945, half of all unemployed workers were women. By early 1946, women were few and far between on the logs, with the annotation "returning serviceman" following many female names. The mention of women is also rare in the unemployed worker logs of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The "hostile" union had finally won, leaving women with no place in their yards. While the resolution allowing female membership remained on the books, it was not until the tumultuous 1960s that women again graced the Boilermakers' rolls in large numbers.

Women and the Boilermakers union led a tenuous co-existence during the war years, a relationship driven by the necessities of a national emergency. Local 6 never fully accepted its women members, having allowed them to fall prey to sexual discrimination and prejudice from all quarters. Advancement for these women, whether to better-paid grades or to supervisory positions, was effectively hindered by union leaders who regarded them more as temporary annoyances than full-fledged Boilermakers.

The Labor Archives evidence showing the antagonistic stance of Local 6 toward female members is consistent with the findings of Campbell and Rutherford, who concluded from their study of Boilermakers Local 568 and other durable goods unions that these unions were hostile to the idea of female membership. Because of its reluctance to integrate women fully into its workings, its rapid purge of women after the war, and its apparent apathy in dealing with the discrimination faced by female members, Local 6 during World War II met the criteria for being

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38Gluck, 92.
39Unemployed worker logs were the books kept at the Local business office where all out-of-work members were required to sign in each day they were out of a job. These records are used here because of their thoroughness in recording a wide cross-section of personnel during the war and the immediate postwar years.
40Boilermakers.
41Ibid.
42Ibid.
a "hostile" union. The Boilermakers, in failing to embrace the new female labor force, reaffirmed the union as a men's union.

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