How Black washerwomen in the South became pioneers of American labor

Kim, Kelly


There is no one location or event that can lay a definitive claim to the founding of the American labor movement, but what is certain is the enormous debt it owes to women.

During the Victorian era, in the words of Bowling Green University's Susan M. Cruea, "Upper- and middle-class women's choices were limited to marriage and motherhood, or spinsterhood." Waged labor was seen as the exclusive realm of men, and for most middle- and upper-class women, the thought of earning money for their toil was wholly foreign.

Of course, these standards were applied specifically to native-born White women, whose status as a protected class separated their experiences from those of working-class women of color in the United States—particularly Black women, whose relationship with work in this country began with enslavement, violence and forced labor. Following Emancipation, their lives were still often defined by exploitation, abuse and wage theft. Whether held in bondage or living freely, Black women were expected to work from the moment they were old enough to hold a broom.

These women were hardly alone. By the 1830s, the American genocide against Indigenous people had been well underway for decades, and the few Indigenous women allowed into the workforce were treated abominably. As immigration ramped up during the middle of the 19th century, female workers from other ethnic groups—including Irish immigrants fleeing a colonial famine and Russian Jews seeking to escape brutal repression—were also targeted by the ruling class's white-supremacist paternalism.

But that restrictive social fabric quickly began to fray as the Industrial Revolution took flight. Middle-class White women, seeking autonomy and a stronger hand in the economic outcomes of their lives, began to seek work outside the home. And that demand for autonomy required radical action. On a balmy spring 1824 day in Pawtucket, R.I., 102 young women launched the country's very first factory strike, and brought the city's humming textile industry to a standstill.

The 19th-century Northern U.S. textile industry was almost entirely White. It wasn't until 1866, a year after Emancipation, that formerly enslaved Black female workers were able to launch a widespread work stoppage of their own—and by doing so, jump-start a wave of Black-led labor organizing that would spread through multiple industries and set the stage for decades of labor struggles to come.

On June 16, 1866, laundry workers in Jackson, Miss., called for a citywide meeting. The women—for they were all women, and all were Black—were tired of being paid next to nothing to spend their days hunched over steaming tubs of other (White) people's laundry, scrubbing out stains, smoothing the wrinkles with red-hot irons, and hauling the baskets of heavy cloth through the streets. At the time, nearly all Black female workers were employed as domestics by White families, to handle the cooking, cleaning and child care, hauling water, emptying chamber pots, and performing various and sundry other tasks that the lady of the house preferred to avoid.

Laundry, at the time a labor-intensive day-long process, topped that list in an era in which families were large, personal hygiene was negligible, and running water was scarce. The washerwomen's wages were kept so low that...
even poor White families could afford to send their laundry out for Black women to clean. The work itself was onerous, but the relative flexibility and independence it afforded was attractive to Black female workers: They were able to work out of their own homes, which in turn allowed them to plan around their own familial and community obligations, and it was a trade that could be passed down to their own daughters. For the newly emancipated, having the freedom to create their own work schedules and get through their daily labors without a White employer breathing down their necks was —almost —worth all the soiled diapers in the world.

In modern terms, the washerwomen were independent contractors, with lists of clients who paid a set rate for weekly service. The trouble with that system, though, was that it was easily abused by racist White clients who were still unaccustomed to having to pay Black people for their labor, and who weren't altogether thrilled with the idea. White employers were shocked and appalled whenever Black workers exercised their rights as free wage-earning people or dared to engage in small acts of resistance against mistreatment. One of their most powerful weapons was, simply, to quit, and go looking for more desirable clients as their former employers scrambled to hire replacements. This growing tension between employer and employee came to a head in 1866, when the washerwomen of Jackson presented Mayor D.N. Barrows with a petition decrying the low wages that plagued their industry and announcing their intention to "join in charging a uniform rate" for their labor. As their petition read: "Any washerwoman who charges less will be fined by our group. We do not want to charge high prices, we just want to be able to live comfortably from our work." The prices they'd agreed upon were far from exorbitant: $1.50 per day for washing, $15 a month for "family washing," and $10 a month for single people. They signed their letter "The Washerwomen of Jackson," and in doing so, gave a name to Mississippi's first trade union.

The media response to their action was withering, dismissing the women's intelligence and skills, predicting abject failure, and, in a move that would become common as more Black workers’ organizing efforts spread, assuming that the strike had been planned by Northern White male agitators.

There is no record of the 1866 strike's outcome, but the action itself had an immediate ripple effect in Jackson and farther afield. Throughout the Reconstruction era of 1865 to 1877, Black workers rose up and struck in Virginia, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina and Washington, D.C.

In 1869, the Colored National Labor Union was formed to represent the unique interests of Black workers who had been shut out of the larger National Labor Union. Its second president was Frederick Douglass, elected in 1872. The Great Railroad Strike of 1877, a series of often violent work stoppages in which more than 100,000 railroad workers struck over wages and dangerous working conditions, temporarily brought the railroad barons to their knees and unleashed a roving spirit of dissent that captured the imagination of workers across industries from coast to coast. Those winds of change arrived in Galveston, Tex., in July and August, when hundreds of workers crossed the color line and struck together several times to protest their low wages. Meanwhile, the laborers' wives, daughters, sisters and neighbors in the laundry business had been busy planning an action of their own. At first, they published an open letter demanding a wage increase to $1.50 per day. A few days later, a group of Black washerwomen gathered in front of J.N. Harding's steam laundry, where he was known to be employing White women, and forcibly prevented those employees from entering unless they agreed to abide by the $1.50 daily rate.

The stage was now set for the washerwomen's biggest moment yet —this time, in Atlanta.

In 1881, Atlanta was abuzz with promise and industry. A glittering International Cotton Exposition aimed to establish Atlanta's place as the belle of the New South and show off its purportedly pliable, happy workforce. But despite this veneer of progress, Atlanta's White power brokers had declined to invest any time and energy into improving the lot of working people or addressing the rampant racial discrimination that continued to relegate Black Atlantans to undesirable, labor-intensive jobs on society's bottom rung. Still denied the right to vote, Black women had to find other ways to build power.

Atlanta's laundresses made up a majority of the Black female workforce in a city where 98 percent of Black women worked as domestic laborers (and washerwomen alone outnumbered male laborers). They also made up a powerful collective organizing bloc.

In early July, 20 of them gathered in a church in Summerhill, one of Atlanta's first predominantly Black
neighborhoods, and founded a trade association they dubbed the Washing Society. The organization's first order of business was setting a higher, standard wage rate for their labor, and they called a mass meeting to make their demands public. They told local Black clergymen to spread the word throughout their congregations, and less than a month later, on July 19, they called for a strike.

Over the next three weeks, the strike grew from those first 20 women to more than 3,000 thanks to the organizers’ brilliantly effective tactic of doing daily rounds of home visits to laundresses around the city to persuade them to join in the fight. They held daily meetings to keep up momentum and brought in the city's White washerwomen (who made up only 2 percent of the workforce) to support their cause. Newspapers of the time declined to print the White women's names to protect their privacy (a courtesy not extended to the Black female strikers), but it is likely that they were poor Irish immigrants.

On the employers' side, the strike hit like a wrecking ball. As washerwomen began returning soiled or still-wet laundry to clients who refused to pay the higher wage, White employers scrambled to find workers to fill the laundry gap as they feared the strike would spread to other industries.

And spread it did: Black waiters at the National Hotel in downtown Atlanta refused to work until their bosses raised their wages —and they won. That scene repeated itself in kitchens, nurseries and sculleries across the city.

"The Washerwomen's strike is assuming vast proportions and despite the apparent independence of the white people, is causing quite an inconvenience among our citizens," the Atlanta Constitution reported on July 26, a week into the strike. "There are some families in Atlanta who have been unable to have any washing done for more than two weeks. Not only the washerwomen, but the cooks, house servants and nurses are asking increases."

Ten days into the strike, police arrested six of its leaders. The women —Matilda Crawford, Sallie Bell, Carrie Jones, Dora Jones, Orphelia Turner and Sarah A. Collier —were delicately described in the press as "ebony-hued damsels," but found themselves slapped with charges of disorderly conduct and "quarrelling" as a result of their home-visit campaign. Five of the women were fined $5 apiece, but Collier was ordered to pay a $20 fine. She refused to pay, and as punishment, the 49-year-old asthmatic mother of two was sentenced to work on a chain gang for 40 days.

These workers had everything riding on this strike; the vast majority of the demonstrators were mothers who had to feed children and keep households afloat during the campaign, and couldn't count on regular relief checks or a strike fund to pay the rent.

As the strike stretched into August, the Atlanta City Council got involved. Its solution: a $25 annual business license fee on any member of a washerwomen association (more than $670 in 2021 dollars) —a proposition intended to economically hobble the workers at war for a mere $1 per dozen pounds of laundry.

But instead, the washerwomen wrote a letter to Atlanta Mayor Jim English expressing their willingness to pay the fees —so long as the city agreed to formally grant them control over the local hand-laundering industry. The strikers' letter ended with a warning: "Don't forget this. We hope to hear from your council on Tuesday morning. We mean business this week or no washing."

Atlanta's City Council backed down, and while history is murky on the resolution, it appears that the workers had successfully shifted the balance of power. Several weeks later, as the International Cotton Exposition neared, Black female workers took the opportunity to leverage their power against the ruling classes once again. The fair was intended to reassure respectable Yankee business folk that there was fun to be had and, more importantly to this contingent, money to be made in the postwar South. City boosters were well aware of the potential costs if their plan went awry —and so were the washerwomen.

As Tera W. Hunter writes in "To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War," "African-American women threatened to expose the tyranny in the New South by disrupting this celebration of new-found harmony at an early stage of its public relations campaign."

As the city prepared for an influx of fashionable visitors whose arrival would require spotless hotel rooms, hearty meals and quick laundry services, the domestic workers of Atlanta invoked labor's "nuclear option" and threatened a general strike. A cease-fire came through and the fair went on without a hitch, but Atlanta's Black female workers...
had prevailed in making their collective power felt. The city's white-supremacist employer class had come face-to-face with the reality of Emancipation: Black workers would tolerate injustice no more.

DETAILS

Subject: White people; Strikes; Black people; Textile industry; Workforce; Middle class; Employers; Women; Manual workers; Labor unions; Wages & salaries; Female employees

Business indexing term: Subject: Strikes Textile industry Workforce Employers Manual workers Labor unions Wages & salaries Female employees

Location: United States--US; Atlanta Georgia

Publication title: The Washington Post (Online); Washington, D.C.

Publication year: 2022

Publication date: Apr 17, 2022

Section: Local

Publisher: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post

Place of publication: Washington, D.C.

Country of publication: United States, Washington, D.C.

Publication subject: General Interest Periodicals--United States

ISSN: 26419599

Source type: Blog, Podcast, or Website

Language of publication: English

Document type: News

ProQuest document ID: 2651463029


Copyright: Copyright WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post Apr 17, 2022

Last updated: 2022-04-20

Database: Global Newsstream