

Women and the Strike

Lizzie M. Holmes

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The men stood about in groups at the car barns, the cars were ready, the time to start had arrived—but, not a man boarded his car, not a car moved. All down the long street that stretched away to the center of the city at every street corner were groups of twos and threes or more, looking anxiously toward the car barns, from which their usually unconsidered and convenient transportation was expected to come. And down other streets all over the city, people stood on the street corners and waited— and waited in vain.

At an all-night session of the union, where the final decision of the managers which denied the modest demands of the men and refused to recognize the union as having anything to do with the matter, had been read, the strike had been declared amid great enthusiasm. This had occurred too late for the early morning papers, and so the public generally knew nothing of the situation until the newsboys began to call out, “All about the street car strike! Extra! Extra!”

Then the down-town workers began their long trudge to the factories, mills and shops, patiently and cheerfully, for they were willing to do their share toward helping the car men to a few of their rights. A little later, the express wagons, trucks, carts, as well as all the cabs and available carriages, were doing a rushing business. They were filled for the most part with clerks, stenographers, business men and women; and these, too, accepted the situation with tolerable good nature. It was only when the shoppers began to come out of their dwellings and look for a car that any decided grumbling was heard, and they were very much irritated that they should be so annoyed and inconvenienced.

The strike was on and the streets presented an odd appearance. The car tracks gathered dust, and everybody who owned any kind of a conveyance reaped a rich harvest. It was hard on the shop girls who stood all day, and could not afford a ride in an express wagon; and on men who toiled hard through long, weary hours, and had to drag themselves home as best they might. But the car men got out as many teams as possible and carried the most weary ones home free. Their strike was just and public sympathy was with them. They were almost sure to win out—there was just one doubtful element. How would the women, the wives and mothers, the housekeepers who had to depend on the wages of the men for the comfort of their families, look on the matter? Some one has written on the effect of a strike on the housewives and mothers, and seeing only the immediate moment, warned workingmen from bringing onto their devoted heads the sufferings and privations that a strike entails. Certainly women are most vitally concerned, but that is the reason they should be enlightened as to the benefits of union and solidarity, and, as the last resort,

to the necessity of the strike. The uneducated woman, the conventional housewife who knows nothing of world economics or of the progress society has made during her own life time, is apt to hold a very narrow and personal view. She has no realization of the common interests of workers, cannot conceive that an injury to one is the concern of all, does not know that without united action, the worker is a helpless waif, subject to encroaching reductions and miserable conditions until existence is barely possible. A community of such wives and mothers will crush any strike; and it behooves the educator who has the interests of labor at heart to reach the women! They are not hard to awaken, they catch ideas very quickly, and are thoroughly in earnest when once they do learn. They should attend meetings, read books, discuss and hear discussed all the industrial questions of the day, as men discuss them. Once awakened, labor has a force behind it that renders it well-nigh invincible.

It happened that in the neighborhood where most of the car men lived a woman lecturer had visited, a woman who was well posted, and clear in her expressions, genial and bright, and who was emphatically a woman's woman. She had interested them and taught them; encouraged them to think and to talk, and now they were as much concerned in the questions always being brought up by labor's conditions and claims as the men themselves. They were ready to take an active part in the strike with their brothers, and were present in goodly numbers when the company undertook to run the cars with scab conductors and motormen. They talked to the men who were taking their husbands' places and very often brought them triumphantly down from the cars. They took no notice of policemen and their clubs, usually walking by them wherever they wished to go as though they were not present; and as yet the policemen were not hardened enough to strike an unarmed, unsuspecting woman. The women stood on the tracks and even sat down in front of a car about to start, and remained there until bodily carried away by the officers. All sorts of obstructions were found mysteriously placed where they would be most effective, and it was astonishing how many cars were disabled and unfit for use during the course of the day.

But there was one woman who had attended no meetings, read no books, listened to no talks on the labor question, but who according to her own statement, "stayed at home and minded her own business, kept her house comfortable and clean, and made her husband's wages go as far as possible, and 'in doing this solved the problem of life far better than them masculine women who was always roamin' around to all sorts of meetings."

This is a sentiment usually applauded by the capitalist class and their hangers-on, but the day is gone by when a woman is at her best knowing nothing but her narrow home and its individual interests. On the morning of the strike, Terry Farnsworth, her husband, stood about rather uneasily, rather reluctant to quit, yet not daring to take his car out in the face of his fellow workers. After a time, he slowly picked up his dinner pail and plodded away toward home. He was a big, slow, good-natured sort of a man, very fond of home and his family, and hating trouble of any kind. His wife was slender, but strong and wiry, handsome and "capable" and usually had things her way about the house. Terry presented himself before her about nine o'clock in the forenoon, awkwardly dangling his dinner pail, and looking rather shamefaced before her sharp glance.

"What are you home for?"

"There's a strike, Sarah, an' I had to quit."

She looked him over with deliberation and scorn.

“A strike! That makes no difference to you. You go back and get on your car, or there’ll be another strike right here at home, and you bet it’ll win!”

With arms akimbo and fire in her dark eyes, she stepped a little nearer to him, and Terry dejectedly turned and went back to the barns. A number of women were present when he slouched among the strikers, looking undecided and wretched.

“I’ve got to go back to work, boys, my wife won’t stand for a strike.”

“No, you don’t! You’re not the man to go back on your comrades. You can go back in a day or two with the rest of us, but not before.”

But he shook his head, saying sullenly “he couldn’t lay around home doin’ nothin’.”

The women gathered around and talked to him, and shamed him, and showed him that he could not be a traitor and hold up his head among them ever again. He sulked, but would not promise not to go to work. They sent a delegation to his home to talk to his wife. Sarah Farnsworth would not let them into the house and would not listen to what they had to say. She said they were a lot of mischief makers and were trying to take the bread from children’s mouths. They tried to tell her that the unions were looking forward to the future of the children—that at the sacrifice of a little comfort now they could secure better conditions for them in the time to come. She shut the door in their faces while they were speaking.

Terry Farnsworth did not go back on his car; but he was about the barns a good deal, and the men surmised that his wife supposed him to be working.

The other women acted very differently. They declared they could get along with much less money than the men would have allowed them. They hunted for work; they washed, sewed, scrubbed, went into the factories where it was possible, and even the children ran errands and sold papers to help along. One little woman had a brother and a father among the strikers, and she herself was as good a union man as any of them. She brought work home from the suit factory, and sewed in her mother’s kitchen; and worked so fast that she managed to get a great deal of time to go among the homes of the strikers and help the women and children. No voice was more sympathetic and invigorating than that of Minnie Walters, no hand so soothing and willing, no presence so strong and helpful. She assisted the wives in their work, nursed the sick and the young children, encouraged and upheld the men, and unceasingly worked to make the strike a success. If there were more women like Minnie Walters, workers would be better united and much nearer the goal of justice and fair conditions.

One evening just at dusk, three cars were sent out, manned by men from another city, guarded by plenty of police, but empty as to passengers. The crowd about the barns hooted and hissed as they started out, but no violence was used, and the cars proceeded slowly and cautiously for a mile or two, when they got up speed and rounded a curve where a narrow bridge spanned a deep cut in the street; only vacant lots adjoined the tracks in this locality and the ground was very uneven. There might have been a broken rail, or some obstruction on the road, for just here the first car flew the track, turned over and crashed to the bottom of the cut, and the next, striking the end of the falling car, was thrown to one side, where for a moment it toppled, then careened and fell a broken mass atop of the other. The third car was derailed but did not go over, and the men quickly jumped to the ground unhurt.

But beneath the broken cars men were lying crushed, wounded, dying or dead. It was a terrible accident, and in a moment the inevitable city crowd had gathered. The patrol wagons, ambulances and surgeons soon arrived on the scene, and everyone went to work.

An excited boy, who thought he knew, ran away to tell Mrs. Farnsworth of what had happened. "Was your man workin'?" he asked breathlessly, as he leaned over her gate, eager to be the first to tell the news.

"Why yes, he's working—I'm expecting him in pretty soon."

"Well, I 'spect he's killed then, fer they's three cars went over the Deering street cut, an' they're all smashed to flinders," and the boy having delivered himself of this piece of information, flew away.

Sarah Farnsworth started out to grab the boy before he could get away, but her limbs refused to do her bidding; she trembled, felt cold and numb, for she was a good woman for all her narrowness and very fond of her easy-going husband. She had made him go to work, when all sorts of dangers threatened the cars that tried to run, and now perhaps he was dead. She did not, in her terror and remorse, even think to condemn the hands that possibly wrecked the cars; she was thinking only how she had driven him to his death. Perhaps, too, she had been a little sorry that she had taken the decided stand she had, before this terrible thing had happened. The women had not left her alone; in spite of her discourtesy, they had called repeatedly, and when she would not admit them to her house, they talked to her over the gate. They told her the particulars of the noble struggle the men were making, how necessary it was that the struggle should be made if they were to be free men, of the sense of security and solidarity that would be theirs when the battle should be won. Sarah was a woman of good common sense, if she had been rendered somewhat narrow and prejudiced by her environment and education. She saw that they might be right, but though she came to be more friendly in her attitude toward them, she was too stubborn to yield the main point. And so, every day her husband left the house at the usual hour, apparently to go to work.

And now it might be that Terry was dead and would never come home again. Or, he might be badly hurt and needing her—once the thought took possession of her, she ran into the street without stopping for a wrap or bonnet, and out in the direction of the accident. She stumbled and fell, and scrambled to her feet again, and ran on, and at last panting and wild-eyed she reached the spot. All the dead and injured had been carried away, but the broken cars still lay there, and a crowd lingered about gazing with curiosity and awe at the wreck.

"Where is my husband? Was he killed? Was he hurt? Why don't you tell me?" she exclaimed wildly.

"Who was he?" someone asked.

"Terry Farnsworth—tell me, someone."

At first no one seemed to know the name, but presently a young fellow spoke up, "I don't see how Terry Farnsworth could a' been hurt—he wasn't a scab."

For the first time Sarah Farnsworth realized what the word meant, and that she had been the one to condemn him in the eyes of his fellow workers. Oh, where was he now? If only he were safe, alive and well, she would never oppose him again in his work or his union—and then a group of men came up, and a hearty voice exclaimed:

"Why, if there ain't my wife! And frightened half out of her wits, poor little woman!" And Sarah flew to the protecting arm, overjoyed that he was alive and well, and also that he was not and never had been "a scab."

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