

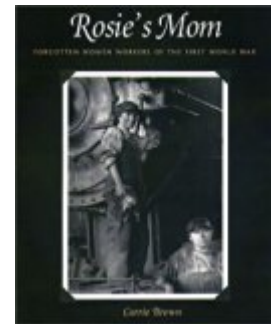
H-Net Reviews

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Carrie Brown. *Rosie's Mom: Forgotten Women Workers of the First World War*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002. ix + 240 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55553-535-3.

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Women Workers during the First World War

During World War I, many women participated in the war effort by taking jobs in munitions factories, shipyards, meatpacking plants, the fledgling airline industry, and on railroads and streetcars. After the war was over, most of the women workers either married or returned to the traditionally low paying jobs that they held before the war and most Americans had forgotten these women by the Second World War, when they would view women workers in the defense industry as something new.

In *Rosie's Mom: Forgotten Women Workers of the First World War*, Carrie Brown traces the history of women workers from 1913 to 1919 in New York, Bridgeport, Chicago, and other cities. This is the story of the working-class women who struggled to survive in low paying jobs and who later made up the majority of women working in the war industries. Brown also describes the contributions of the activists and female government officials who tried to help them along the way. This story is similar to that of women workers during World War II, because women workers initially received praise for contributing to the war effort but eventually lost their jobs after the war ended.

These women workers encountered daunting problems along the way. Some of the women were intimidated by the thought of using new and unfamiliar machinery. Their work often required them to work with hazardous chemicals and with hostile male co-workers, who refused to train or work alongside women. African-American women also faced racial discrimination, and

industries often assigned them more physically demanding jobs than white women.

Yet many working-class women grew to appreciate their new jobs. They were earning a living wage for the first time in their lives and they often found that the work was no more physically demanding than their prewar jobs. Some women took pride in mastering new skills. This war provided new opportunities for some African-American women who were able to find jobs as clerks or doing clerical work in government offices.

Because World War I created an increased demand for labor, the status of women workers changed. While reformers had long sought to reduce the number of hours women worked and to improve working conditions, the war was a turning point for women workers. Prior to the war, poor economic conditions made it difficult for workers to successfully fight for better wages or conditions. After the war started, American companies supplied the warring nations and needed more workers to fill the demand for ammunition and arms, thus creating a labor shortage. The high demand for workers made it easier for men and women workers to pressure companies for higher wages and the establishment of the eight-hour workday.

After the United States entered World War I, many feared that if the government did not protect workers, then American workers would end up like their exhausted British counterparts. A group of women formed the Committee on Women in Industry to protect the

women workers, but the committee could only study the treatment of women employees and make recommendations; it had no real enforcement power. However, several of its members served in federal positions created to investigate the treatment of women workers to make sure that women were receiving fair treatment. While they were able to convince the government and industry to make improvements such as separate restrooms for women, they would ultimately be unsuccessful in saving women's jobs after the war and many women would be forced back into low-paying jobs.

Although many Americans may have quickly forgotten the contributions made by women workers during World War I, the author makes it clear that women's wartime work did lead to some improvements. Women, for example, received the right to vote "at least partly [as] a response to women's war work" (p. 187). The author also credits these women workers with smoothing the way for the next generation of women workers. As a result of women's wartime work, factories also became cleaner and safer. "Welfare" measures such as bathrooms, chairs, and cafeterias remained.

Ironically, the women appointed to government positions designed to protect women workers often kept

their jobs after the war ended. The author describes the backgrounds of female federal officials such as Mary Van Kleeck and Mary Anderson, the director and assistant director of the Women in Industry Service in the Department of Labor. The women who filled the various government positions seemed to work extremely well with each other and with the nation's female workforce. After reading this book, this reviewer would have liked to learn more about possible debates these women had with each other or possible conflicts with female workers.

The often bleak and depressing history of women during this period will not be surprising to anyone who has studied women's history or the struggle for workers' rights. However, this work does provide an excellent overview of women workers during World War I because of its broad scope and its detailed description of workers' lives and the various bureaucracies promoting women's work. The author effectively uses records from variety sources, including records from the National Labor Board, Chicago Urban League, and the Amy Hewes Collection at Mount Holyoke College Archives. The book also includes many photographs of women workers performing various tasks, which provide the reader with additional insight into the experiences of women workers during World War I.

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