When exactly did the “first wave” of the women’s movement end and the “second wave” begin? Dorothy Sue Cobble has written a history of labor feminists which suggests that historians might do well to consider a “long women’s movement” in much the same way that Jacqueline Hall recently proposed a “long history” of the civil rights movement in which decades of activism preceded the dramatic events of the 1950s and 1960s. Cobble’s history of labor feminists shows that they remained active and influential from the progressive era forward. This book, especially in its emphasis on employment issues and its inclusion of African-American and non-college-educated women, fundamentally challenges assumptions about the second wave of the women’s movement. Cobble explains that middle-class feminists (and historians) often cast working women as opponents of feminism because labor feminists opposed the ERA (they feared it would endanger state legislation designed to protect female workers). Yet Cobble insists that those who worked to improve women’s lives and eliminate discrimination against women, no matter what tactics they used, should be considered feminists. Furthermore, labor feminists offer clues as to how women can best fight for rights both as women (thus emphasizing women’s difference from men) and as citizen workers (emphasizing women’s equality with men). Extremely important, she reminds us that labor feminists never chose between difference and equality—rather they wanted equality but also special treatment when necessary. If the “masculine pattern” did not work for women, then they rejected being treated by the same standards as men and sought to change the pattern.

While Betty Friedan was writing *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which detailed the inability of mostly college-educated women to find fulfillment in their roles as housewives, Myra Wolfgang was president of HERE, the union of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees. In this capacity, she bargained with Hugh Hefner over the working conditions of Playboy bunnies in his Detroit Club, including the exact length in inches of the bunny suit and other grievances. Picketers surrounded the club with signs reading, “Don’t be a bunny, work for money.” With her focus on the Playboy Club and attention to sexual objectification, Wolfgang sounds like the radical feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s who protested the Miss America Pageant. But Wolfgang and her followers were also very different from both the radicals and Friedan. Wolfgang believed that union membership was the key to solving women’s oppression, and she prioritized employment issues. Furthermore, she was against the ERA until 1972. When she and Friedan debated each other in 1970, each accused the other of being an Aunt Tom. What struck Cobble was “that the Wolfgangs of the world, far from being oddities, were, at times, the dominant wing of feminism” (p. 3). Cobble’s book draws much-needed attention to these labor feminists who did not see obtaining a career outside the home as a panacea to women’s oppression, because they had already experienced discrimination in the workplace.

One of the most significant points Cobble makes
throughout the book is that the United States provided welfare to its workers not only through government programs, but also and primarily through benefits received directly from employers. Therefore labor feminists fought on two fronts: they tried to use collective bargaining to force employers to improve pay and working conditions, and they lobbied the government for laws that would protect and benefit workers.

By the 1940s, more and more women, especially mothers and wives, worked outside the home. These women saw themselves as mothers as well as workers, and they believed that if they were paid more while working fewer hours, they would become better mothers. Seeking to improve working conditions, hours, and pay, they joined unions in record numbers. In 1940 there were only 800,000 organized women workers; this number grew to 3 million during World War II and rose to 3.5 million by the mid-1950s. Women grew to represent 18 percent of organized workers, while some unions, like HERE, had as many as 45 percent women. These women believed that the rhetoric and demands of unions spoke to the values of, and would provide opportunities for, male and female workers. Thus Cobble argues that just as the civil rights movement inspired college women, the union movement provided working women with the experience, discourse, and training that helped spark the women’s movement. As in the civil rights movement, women held few of the top national union positions, but gained power and experience in many of the secondary positions and in state and local positions of leadership.

Who were these women? Cobble points out that many came from the pre-war leadership of women like Rose Schneiderman, while others became active in the postwar period. Significantly, Cobble identifies many African-American women in leadership positions including Addie Wyatt, born in Mississippi and introduced to unions as a teenager working at a meatpacking plant in Chicago during World War II. Wyatt became vice president and then president of her UPWA (United Packing Workers of America) local, even though many of the members were white men. She experienced first hand the power of the union to address her grievances. She helped found the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, as did labor feminists Caroline Davis (NOW’s first secretary-treasurer), Dorothy Haener, and Lillian Hatcher. Wyatt was one of many working-class women at the forefront of the labor movement; there were also college-educated middle-class women who helped run unions, like Esther Peterson, who became the highest-ranking woman in the Kennedy administration as the Assistant Secretary of Labor.

Cobble traces the focus of labor feminists on achieving higher pay as well as equal pay for equal work (or equivalent work). Although states had been the first to pass maximum hours and minimum pay laws for women, the New Deal brought workers the Fair Labor Standards Act which extended similar provisions to men and women nationally. However, many women (and people of color) were left out because the jobs they worked—especially in agriculture and domestic service—were excluded. When women fought for equal pay for equal work, they had difficulty finding positions where women performed the same work as men, because employers forced to pay the same wage to both sexes generally preferred to hire men. Therefore labor feminists changed their demand to equal pay for comparable work. Cobble also provides examples of unions that, paradoxically, both supported and resisted women’s demands.

Labor feminists also debated the idea of a family wage—one with which a worker could support a family of four. On the one hand, this approach elevated men’s wages. On the other, it enshrined women in the home. Countries in Europe increasingly turned to the concept of an individual worth wage, but their governments provided support for families through state family allowances or state wage supplements based on number of children. The United States had (and still has) no universal paid maternity leave, no universal system of family and child allowances (direct income supplements paid to parents), and no universal, publicly funded infant care programs. Cobble suggests that American policy developed without these supports because there was no widespread support for minorities and the poor, and because Americans did not want to grant government support to those who were not in the labor force. Interestingly, the American Federation of Labor ( AFL) was more interested in tax breaks (that is, tax exemptions for dependents) for workers than in a direct supplement, because the union believed it would be most beneficial for workers to receive a family wage while government aid was reserved for the disabled or elderly.

Labor feminists struggled with the “double day” that women commonly worked, trying to enable women to work for wages while successfully raising children and maintaining the home. They found they could not simply adapt men’s policies to women, because, practically speaking, it did not work. They wanted child care facilities and an end to the practice of firing and refusing to rehire pregnant women. Few labor feminists were con-
cerned that special treatment for pregnant women might mark them as different and therefore less able. Rather, they argued that, because pregnancy was “a social function,” society had a duty to support pregnant women (p. 128). When labor feminists debated childcare needs, they argued that although providing better and cheaper child care was helpful, it ultimately did not change the fact that women had to work long hours for little pay. Instead, they proposed that women be allowed to work a six-hour day for more pay. Men did not necessarily agree with this approach and were more willing to work longer hours, because they were not expected to take on domestic duties and identified more with the workplace than with the domestic space of the home. Women also worried that without a maximum hours law, voluntary overtime was never really voluntary.

In 1961 John Kennedy announced the President’s Commission on the Status of Women; the Equal Pay Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, and amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) soon followed. Cobble correctly reminds us that these occurred before the rise of the mass movement—and that therefore credit must go to the labor feminists who had been pushing for changes that affected working women. The first national inter-union women’s conference was held in June 1961, and it called for far-ranging changes. These included an end to discrimination in hiring and wages, equal pay for equal or comparable work, prohibition of sex discrimination in both private and public sector jobs, extension of the minimum wage to workers in service occupations, support for child care, and higher tax exemptions.

Notably, women took men in the unions to task, complaining that unions had not adequately represented women. Neither the conference nor the President’s Commission endorsed the ERA, but instead favored a more targeted approach. The Equal Pay act passed in 1963 requiring equal pay for “equal” work rather than “comparable” work, despite some labor feminists’ desire to pursue the more inclusive language. Thus, while the act was a victory because it was the first federal law to tackle the issue of equal pay, it excluded millions of women. The President’s Commission recommended support for pregnant women, child care, allowing housewives to build equity in Social Security as housewives, equal opportunity for women in federal contracts, and voluntary affirmative action in the private sector. It also proposed that protective legislation (such as maximum hours laws) at the state level remain in place until Congress extended the FLSA to cover more people (the President’s Commission agreed, however, that the FLSA should continue to require time and a half for overtime over forty hours rather than extending maximum hours laws to men).

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act also brought critical changes for women. Cobble delves into why Howard Smith, the conservative senator from Virginia, proposed an amendment adding the word “sex” to the law. Smith mocked women by reading a letter that complained there were not enough men for every woman to be married. It seems likely that Alice Paul of the National Women’s Party (NWP) had two of her colleagues ask Smith to propose this change to Title VII, because they thought it would derail the civil rights bill. The NWP did not actually want sex included, because it would endanger the ERA by making the amendment seem unnecessary. One wrote about members of Congress, praising those “who will use their brains and energies to prevent a mongrel race in the US and who will fight for the rights of white citizens in order that discrimination against them may be stopped” (quoted, p. 175). Other southerners argued that without the inclusion of sex, black women would be entitled to rights as African Americans that white women would still be denied. Surprising everyone, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), set up to enforce Title VII, was inundated with women claiming sex discrimination, in addition to claims of race discrimination.

The coalition of labor feminists began falling apart at this very moment of success in the 1960s. Some supported NOW; some were against NOW and against the ERA. A few helped found NOW and then withdrew a year later when NOW endorsed the ERA, while some were simply getting older, eclipsed by younger women. Working women were divided about the benefits of state protective legislation. Women in service and retail sectors benefited from the laws and favored them for decades, while women in industrial jobs came to reject these laws earlier, because they wanted the promotions and higher pay that maximum hours laws denied them. Women in the United Auto Workers (UAW) were the first to defect to the side of the ERA, professional women, and NOW. They believed protective labor laws were harmful, not helpful. But other labor women disagreed, because even in the 1960s, they were not ready to challenge the division of labor within the home. They sought fewer hours at work and more hours at home with their families. Ultimately, the EEOC sided with NOW and ruled that state protective laws were in conflict with Title VII. By the late 1970s, most labor women had accepted this conclusion and come around to supporting the ERA.
In the 1970s, labor feminism briefly came to resemble second-wave feminism, when women broke with male unions and formed female unions which focused more directly on issues related to gender. Flight attendants, for example, utilized Title VII to resist mandatory retirement for women still in their thirties and rules which prohibited married women from working as flight attendants. They both influenced the new movement and were influenced by it, as they moved away from hiring discrimination to issues of sexuality and exploitation. Flight attendants resented and resisted airline attempts to market them as sexually alluring through revealing uniforms and “Fly Me” buttons (some wore “Go Fly Yourself” buttons in response). Braniff even “promised a midair striptease like fashion show” (p. 209). In response, female flight attendants organized female unions, and developed closer connections to other middle-class feminists than to the male-dominated unions.

Office workers also organized around issues related to the treatment of women rather than wages or hours. But this trend faded as labor feminists increasingly returned to the original issues of equal pay, maximum hours, and working conditions. And women continued to debate how best to deal with pregnant workers, whether to treat pregnancy the same as any other disability, or to have state laws protecting pregnant women as a special class. Ironically, as labor women gained more control within the labor movement, the labor movement as a whole lost its power.

Cobble ends this major work with her hope that a future feminist movement will remember this phase of the women’s movement and direct more attention to employment issues and the working class. She succeeds brilliantly in challenging historians to rethink the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s in both ideological and temporal terms. Some labor feminists were sidelined by the anti-communist fervor of the Cold War, as were many African-American labor activists. But, as Cobble points out, the majority of the labor feminists of the 1940s and 1950s were still lobbying for women in the 1960s. Their disappearance from the typical history of the women’s movement comes largely from their successes—such as the Presidential Commission, Title VII, and an Equal Pay Act—which spurred other women to more radical and memorable protests. But labor feminists themselves were already challenging the double shift, the exclusion of women from men’s jobs, the devaluation of women’s housework, and other issues which fundamentally challenged gender roles and formed the basis for the claim of radical feminists that the personal was political.

In this important book, Cobble forces us to reconsider the role that labor feminists played in the decades leading up to the 1970s. Given the prominent role of labor feminists in NOW, Cobble also challenges our understanding of that group. NOW has commonly been portrayed as the “conservative” wing of the movement, with its commitment to a legal strategy and liberal reform. But the philosophy of some of its founders would suggest that perhaps scholars should rethink NOW’s place in comparison to both labor and radical feminists. And Cobble suggests that, given the success of biracial coalitions of working women, historians can and should offer an additional and alternative story to the common tale of how middle-class white feminists excluded women of color from their movement. The Other Women’s Movement makes a clear and compelling case that scholars of the 1960s must now reevaluate and redefine their understanding of the modern women’s movement.

Note
