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## THE POSITION OF FEMALE WORKERS IN YUGOSLAVIA BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE (1918 – 1939)

**Abstract:** The position of female workers from the middle of the 19th century, when they took a more active role in the world of work, was marked with double oppression, both gender- and class-conditioned. After World War I there was a strong conviction that legal framework would be changed and that it would enable women to have an equal social and political status. Although this did not happen, women still participated in the public domain. They were particularly active in the working sphere, which provided them with a more active social role, especially when it came to numerous strikes which were primarily a response to economic circumstances or demands for collective agreements and better working conditions. Within this context, the aim of the paper is to analyse the position of female workers in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, placing special emphasis on their social status and strikes as a means of gender and class emancipation. This analysis is conducted within the frameworks of microhistory and comparative history in order to create a thesis that women's labour movement, influenced by communist ideas, was an important component of the Yugoslav labour movement in the interwar years, and that it had an impact on the formation and strengthening of the class and gender awareness in Yugoslav female workers.

**Key words:** The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Yugoslavia, women, strike, social position, unemployed

### Introduction

In the early 20th century, Edith Abbot, a historian, was among the first people to claim that women in lower social classes had always worked a lot, if not in factories, then in households, so their lives did not differ much from the

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life of their predecessors.<sup>1</sup> In spite of that, it was not before the 19th century that women workers became organized. This coincided with a more intense process of industrialization and labour class creation. So, this marked the beginning of the era of the fight of women workers for their rights – political (for the right to vote) and economic (the right to equal salaries, better working conditions, etc.). While some women accepted more moderate ideas (Christian and liberal associations) in their first social activities, some adopted socialist ideas and quite soon expressed their demands, linking gender and class issues.

Clara Zetkin (1857 –1933) led the women who adopted socialist ideas. Her efforts became pronounced after World War I, when activities in the socialist and democratic, and later in communist parties and trade unions, became more organized. This inspired the establishment of women's organizations, like the Russian *Ženotdel*. These organizations, although under the patronage of political parties, had as their starting point the ideas of the labour class liberation, considering it a precondition for the total liberation of a human being, or total equality of women in the social and political sphere.

These tendencies were obvious in future female population of Yugoslavia<sup>2</sup>, who believed that with the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy they would gain greater social and political rights, primarily the right to vote.<sup>3</sup> Bearing that in mind, Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, a historian, points out that after the war women experienced new self-confidence, which was inspired by career and independence (Ograjšek Gorenjak 2014, 216). Of special importance was also a greater representation of women in the public sphere, especially during the war. According to the data available in Great Britain, in 1917 there were 5 million employed women, which was a significant increase in comparison with the beginning of the war, when the number of employed women was about 3,298,000.<sup>4</sup>

With a large-scale entry of women into the labour force on the one hand, and the growing influence of socialist parties and trade unions on the other hand, after 1918 women experienced a strong need for equal social status,

1 Goldin, Caluda. 2006. *The Quiet Revolution That Transformed Women's Employment, Education, and Family*. Retrieved from: [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/goldin/files/the\\_quiet\\_revolution\\_that\\_transformed\\_womens\\_employment\\_education\\_and\\_family.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/goldin/files/the_quiet_revolution_that_transformed_womens_employment_education_and_family.pdf)

2 Before The State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, and later The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were created, the future constituents of these countries had different political and legal statuses. Serbia was a kingdom, Bosnia and Herzegovina was under the patronage of the Monarchy since 1908, while Croatian states also had special positions in the Monarchy – The Tripartite Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia.

3 It should be mentioned that in Croatia and Slavonia in 1919 there was a selective right for women to vote. It was exercised by women who were sole providers for their families or who were employed in the public sector. (Barbara Blasin; Igor Marković, „Ženska antifašistički Zagreb. Ženske i feminističke organizacije u borbi za socijalna i politička prava i otpor fašizmu“, Centar za ženske studije, Zagreb, 2016, 8.)

Also, women in Vojvodina in 1918 also had the right to vote, although it did not last long. (In: Gordana Stojaković (ut.), *Znamenite žena Novog Sada*, Futura publikacija, Novi Sad, 2001)

4 “Working Women“, *The Horsahm Times*, (Horsham), br. 5919, 11. XII. 1917, XLV.

especially in economic sphere. This was particularly noticeable in communist organizations and trade unions, such as *The Committee for Working with Women within the Communist Party of Yugoslavia* (1926) or *Independent Workers*, which instructed women workers on how to fight the capitalist society and how to achieve gender equality.

Therefore, analysing everything mentioned above in the social and political context in Yugoslavia in the interwar years, the aim of this paper is to analyse the position of women in The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (i.e., The Kingdom of Yugoslavia), placing special emphasis on women workers who were associated with communist organizations (Independent trade unions, etc.).<sup>5</sup> This was conditioned by the fact that social democrats, organized in the Socialist Party of Yugoslavia, did not pay much attention to recruiting women in their political party, unlike the communists, and they did not support strike as a method to improve the position of the working class.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, this analysis is conducted within the dichotomy of the women's movement, including the civic and communist components, which was defined by Marija Šoljan and Lydia Sklevicky (1984: 415–417; 454–456) in the 1970s and 1980s. It should be pointed out that this dichotomy has been revised lately. For this reason, some historians claim that we can still not talk about communist women workers' movement since it did not reach mass proportions and due to the fact that communists often joined legally organized trade unions, such as The United Workers Trade Union of Yugoslavia<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, we cannot speak of mass proportions. Accordingly, the available data from 1925 showed that there were 196 communist organizations with a total of 2,300 members, out

5 It is important to point out that there was a range of women's civic organizations, such as The Croatian Woman Organization (1921), The National Women's Alliance of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1919), The Alliance of Feminist Societies of the State of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1923) or The Association of University-Educated Women (1930), which were mainly oriented towards obtaining the right to vote. They frequently sent documents to the Government, relating to the alterations in the Penal Code and Civil Law, which were a form of their active engagement in the anti-war campaign in the 1930s.

6 The attitude to the general strike was a bone of contention in the workers' movement as early as The Second International (1889–1916). This was a topic that created heated discussions during congresses in Brussels (1891) and Zurich (1893), when a more radical, anarchist fraction claimed that strike should be a weapon used in political struggle. In these discussions various ideas on moderation were juxtaposed, primarily those of German socialists and somewhat more radical attitudes of the French, Dutch and Norwegian delegations, bringing the European labour movement to the crossroads. In the Netherlands, for example, there was a division of the socialists. A more moderate fraction left The Social-Democratic League and founded The Social-Democratic Labour Party in 1894. The social democrats held a more or less negative attitude to strike, considering that this method of fighting was an unnecessary burden to the relations between the employers and workers, and had a particularly negative impact on the position of the working class. (In: Ana Rajković, "Miloš Krpan – Ana Rajković, „Miloš Krpan-predstavnik slavonske utopije“, *Zarez. Dvotjednik za društvena i kulturna zbivanja*, (Zagreb), br. 385., 5. VI. 2014., XVI.)

7 In: An Interview with Ida Ogriješek Gorenjak, available at: <http://www.zarez.hr/clanci/ida-ogriješek-gorenjak-potka-ustaljenih-rodnih-obrazaca>, August 10, 2019.

of which 18 were women (Kecman, 1987, 132). However, if mass proportions are defined as a criterion, then a new question could be raised, relating to the entire Communist Party of Yugoslavia. At that time the Communist Party of Yugoslavia did not have many members because of illegal framework it was operating within. On the other hand, the strategy of infiltrating female communist in civic associations was a part of a broader political strategy, when communists, who were largely prosecuted, started joining all legal organizations. Most of these were socio-democratic trade unions, since they enabled them a more active role.<sup>8</sup> It should be pointed out that there were legal repercussions as a result of communist activities. Therefore, many women workers were not members of the communist party formally, but due to their influence (illegal press) they created their own way of fighting at the work place. This is illustrated by an example of a certain “young female worker” from Osijek, who invited her “comrades” to join *Independent trade unions*.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of methodology, the paper relies on the analysis of the discourse present in the press and on the police reports, as well as on the comparative method, in order to create a clear picture of the position of women workers in the national framework. With the same aim in mind, and in microhistorical frameworks, the paper analyses the strikes in the Brush Factory in Osijek (1919) and Schicht Glass Factory (1926), as well as the largest strike of women organized in Osijek, in the First Osijek Candy Factory Kaiser and Stark (1939), etc. The paper also analyses the conditions, methods and impact of women’s strikes in Yugoslavia in the in the interwar years (1918–1939), considering the local circumstances.

Besides the secondary sources, the analysis is based on the archive fundus of the State Archive in Osijek (HR-DAOS-2103, HR-DAOS-21, etc.), and the newspapers such as *The Workers’ Newspapers*, *The Horizon*, *The Croatian Defence*, etc.

The time framework of the events analysed in the paper encompasses on the one hand the end of The First World War (1918), when the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes witnessed first strikes, and on the other the strike of women workers in “Kaiser and Stark” candy factory in Osijek. From microhistorical perspective, the latter is a proof that in 1939 women workers managed to organize and articulate clearly their demands, at the same time developing a high level of solidarity.

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8 *Tekstilci Jugoslavije*, NIP Republika, Zagreb, 1966, 131.

The decision was made by The Temporary Leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1932. Therefore, if we accept the argument that due to insufficient infiltration in the civic organizations we cannot speak about the women’s communist movement, following the same logic, we cannot speak about The Communist Party of Yugoslavia between the two world wars either.

9 HR-DAOS-2103, Box 16, a transcript of a newspaper article “Harassment of young women workers in flax factory” (no date provided).

The thesis of this paper is an interpretation of how, despite various women's associations, there was a clear articulation of the need to redefine the position of women in terms of working conditions within the workers' and trade unions' sphere.<sup>10</sup> It was placed within a broader social and political context, which helped the women's communist movement cross the narrow party lines.

The aim of the paper stated above stems from the fact that women workers' strikes have not been the topic of special and more comprehensive historical analysis so far despite the fact that they present a powerful research area. Also, this topic, to paraphrase the editors of *The Lost Revolution*, presents the history that the post-war Yugoslavia failed to analyse in depth (Dugandžić and Okić 2016, 4). If there is research conducted on this topic, such as the papers written by Jovanka Kecman and Marija Šoljan, they do not provide an in-depth analysis and context of the development of the women workers' movement, starting in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So, apart from listing the quantitative data in the framework of what is known as *old labour history*<sup>11</sup>, there were no detailed analyses of the cause and effect of the development of the women workers' movement, in terms of their age and marital status. The latter is particularly interesting, especially if viewed from the perspective of Claudia Goldina, an American economist, who analyses the relationship between the marital status and employability. In interdisciplinary terms, this created a new approach to research of the gender aspect in the labour movement. There are various documents created in some factories which kept record of the marital status of their employees, as well as of those who lived in common-law marriage. The analyses of those data and their correlation with other elements, such as employability, creates numerous research areas which can make a significant contribution to understanding the gender aspect in the labour movement in Yugoslavia in the interwar years.

Bearing in mind the existing historiography relating to women in the labour movement, we should point out the work of Lydia Sklevicky, *The Characteristics of the Organized Activities of Women in Yugoslavia before the Second World War* (Sklevicky, 1984). In her research, Sklevicky developed a thesis on the activities of women in this period which directed the women's movement towards the anti-fascist fight. More recent historiographic materials presenting research on gender issues in broader framework, going beyond the

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10 This paper uses interchangeably the terms relating to the labour movement and those relating to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Although the Socialist Party of Yugoslavia represented workers, it mostly had a negative attitude to strike as a method, and often criticised it as an exclusively communist method. Accordingly, with a large-scale entry of communists in the social democratic trade unions, their members resorted to strike as a method of expressing their demands. This kind of relationship was established during The Second International, and was particularly manifested at the Congress held in Stuttgart (1907). German social democrats strongly opposed to the idea presented by French social democrats that if the war broke out, the workers should proclaim the general strike.

11 In: Marcel Van Der Linden, "Labour History: The Old, the New and the Global", *African Studies*, Vol 2-/3, 66/2007.

working class framework, include papers written by Gordana Stojaković<sup>12</sup> and Ida Ograjšek Gornjak, a historian.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, when we mention the need to conduct more research on these topics in historiographic frameworks of the post-Yugoslav area, there is a fraction of historians who claim that topics relating to labour movement have been sufficiently researched. This is not true, due to at least two reasons. The first one is the fact that in the contemporary international research numerous new research areas have been developed, such as *global labour history* and *gender labour history*, in which labour issues are analysed within diverse frameworks, creating new research paradigms. The second reason is related to the fact that Yugoslav historiography after 1945 had gone through the initial phase of studying the labour movement, and was greatly and exclusively relying on the quantitative data such as the number of trade union members and foundation of trade unions and party branches. In these terms it has not developed towards research that would encompass research of the relationship between labour movement and gender issues, the employment of foreign workers, etc. Therefore, international research relating to these issues offers much more comprehensive analyses which include various aspects of the civic and women workers' movement. That is why a pioneer research of American historiography should be mentioned. It was written by Alice Kessler-Harris in 1982 and published in the book *Out to Work: A history of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (Kessler-Harris 2003). Besides that, a comprehensive study by editor Pamela Sharpe, *Women, Gender, and Labour Migration: Historical and Global Perspectives* (Sharpe, 2001) is worth mentioning as well. Another intriguing book is *Ladies of Labour, Girls of Adventure*, in which the author analyses the relationship between the pop culture at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and political engagement of women workers (Enstad, 1999).

In order to contextualize the topic more clearly, the first part of the paper presents theoretical assumptions regarding perception of women and their social and political portrayal in the civic society until 1918. It is also

12 Stojaković, Gordana. „Ženski mirovni aktivizam u Jugoslaviji (1900.-1941.)“, Available-<http://www.afzarhiv.org/files/original/4605279301847a8a22f995910f25b1d5.pdf>, 10. VIII. 2019. *Znamenite žene Novog Sada I*, Novi Sad, Futura publikacija, 2001. Ista, (ur.), *Neda –jedna biografija*, Novi Sad, Futura publikacija, 2002.

13 In: Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak, „Otvaranje Ženskog liceja u Zagrebu“, *Povijest u nastavi*, 4/2006., br. 8., 147.-176.; Ista, „Zastupljenost ženskog pitanja u hrvatskim glasilima na kraju 19. stoljeća“, *Radovi: Radovi zavoda za hrvatsku povijesti Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu*, 34–35–36/2004, br. 1., 89.-100.

A Croatian researcher Barbara Blasin should also be mentioned here, who studies progressive women's magazines published between the two world wars, such as *Ženski svijet*, *Žena u borbi*, *Žena danas*, itd. Blasin and Ana Lovreković analyse the women's anti-fascist scene within the project “Women's Anti-fascist Zagreb“ before and during the Second World War, creating an extremely powerful historiographic area. (In: Mirna Jasić. 2015. An Interview with Barbara Blasin and Ana Lovreković. “Žene su među prvima ustale protiv fašizma“, available at: <https://www.portalnovosti.com/ana-lovrekovic-i-barbara-blasin-zene-su-med-ju-prvima-ustale-protiv-fasizma>)

a presentation of the social and political context of the period between two world wars with the aim of creating a broader framework within which women workers started their fight for greater wages and better working conditions.

The central part of the paper presents the analysis of the social position of women, primarily relating to the working conditions in factories in which women were employed, as well as to the influence of the economic crisis (1929) on the gender structure of the working class. This is placed in the framework of direct causes of strikes. Besides that, this part of the paper also portrays the relationship between other social structures and women on strike. With that in mind, there is a detailed analysis of the microhistorical example of strike of women workers in *Schicht* factory in Osijek, which received general social support.

As has been pointed out, the activities of women in the interwar years were greatly influenced by their pioneer movements from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, we will first take a closer look at the beginnings of women's organizations and their first actions.

## Entry of women into the sphere of work and first strikes

Analysing the position of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dinko Župan explains that it was supposed to be regulated by family life completely, and a woman's life was supposed to be subjected to her husband's interests (Župan, 2013, 25–26). Theodor Hertzka (1845–1924), a utopian socialist, also supported these theses. He believed that a woman's primary role was the one limited to her house (Johnston, 1993, 375). This created preconditions for pushing women into the private sphere, which was the fundamental and sole framework of their activities. As Ograjšek Gorenjak claims, referring to theoretical interpretations of Carol Pateman, women were defined according to their sexuality and libido, which resulted in their social suppression (Ograjšek Gorenjak, 2014, 17).

In spite of this prevailing attitude, according to which the theory of power over women as inferior beings was created, American women workers founded the first women's trade union in 1863, known as *Collar Laundry Union*. Soon after that, a trade union *Women's Protective and Provident League* in Great Britain was founded as well, led by Emma Paterson (1848–1886).

An important fact should be pointed out – in the beginning, trade union leaders <sup>14</sup> were not thrilled with the emancipatory potential exhibited by labour movement, despite nominal proclamations of social-democratic parties <sup>15</sup> which emphasized the general right to vote as a significant political

14 Belgian socialists, after obtaining the general right to vote for men in 1893, were against women obtaining the same right (Mirjana Gross, *Radnički pokret u Hrvatskoj potkraj XIX. stoljeća*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1957, 60).

15 Social democratic parties were founded in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The German Social Democratic Party was among the first ones (1875), followed by the establishment of the same kind of parties in Austria (1889), France (1879), Belgium (1885), Hungary (1890) and Sweden (1898).

issue. That also placed women in the framework of *The Second*, despite the progressive circumstances. Samuel Gompers (1850–1924), the first president of the *American Federation of Labour* (AFL), believed that women working outside the household will have, as a consequence, weak children who will be brought up with insufficient care provided by their mothers, since they would be preoccupied with their work instead of raising children.<sup>16</sup> These theses continued throughout the interwar years, and were aimed at reducing the number of women workers as unfair competition.<sup>17</sup> In 1927, in Vienna, the Alliance for Defence of Human Rights was founded, which emphasized “the abolition of professional employment of women”.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Marxist ideas create a different view of women’s entry into the sphere of work, emphasizing a greater exploitation of women in comparison with men. Karl Marx (1818–1883) believed that capitalism enabled women to get employment with the aim of subduing all members of the working class families, regardless of their gender and age. As Milislav Mijaušković states, Marx lists in his *Capital* a range of drastic examples of the exploitation of women. According to his interpretation, women worked for a smaller wage, performing work which did not match their physical and psychological abilities (Mijaušković, 1964, 41–62). Babel, a German socialist, also wrote about the underestimated female labour force. He stated that women’s entry into the sphere of work is a result of their modest material needs, due to their weaker gender nature (Babel, 1956, 195).

Due to unequal position of women at work and their low wages, especially for those working in textile industry (mainly women workers), the first strikes of women workers were organized. The best known one was the strike of women workers in textile industry in New York, which was organized in 1857, and of English women workers in February 1875, organized in Dewsbury. Still, from historical perspective, the most influential strike was the one organized by women workers employed in Lawrence textile industry in 1912, led by the legendary Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (1890–1963), which was remembered as *Bread and Roses Strike*.<sup>19</sup> *It is still considered one of the most significant events in the history of labour movement*.<sup>20</sup> The fact that women were really underpaid

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The majority of social democratic parties on the territory of the future Yugoslavia were created in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Social Democratic Party of Croatia and Slavonia was founded in 1984, in Serbia in 1903, while the social democrats in Bosnia and Herzegovina united in 1909.

16 Leckie, Shirley. *Women in the Workplace – a history; Labor Unions*. Available at: <http://www.thelaborsite.com/women1.cfm>

17 In: Gregory Wood, “‘The Paralysis of the Labor Movement’: Man, Masculinity, and Unions in 1920s Detroit”, *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 1, 30/2004, 59–91.

18 „Žene u proizvodnji“, *Organizovani radnik*, (Zagreb), br. 20., 12. V. 1927., VII.

19 The slogan was created when Rosa Schneiderman, an activist, quoted James Oppenheim’s poem, saying: *The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too*.

20 Ana Rajković. 2019. „Ususret 8. martu – kratki podsjetnik na povijest ženskog aktivizma“. Available at: <https://voxfeminae.net/pravednost/ususret-8-martu-kratka-povijest-zensko-ga-aktivizma/>

was best illustrated by the following slogan: *We are starving while we work, we might as well starve while we are on strike.*<sup>21</sup>

Besides the establishment of the civic women's associations (*The Circle of Serbian Women in Belgrade, The Ladies' Association for Education and Wages*, etc.) in Yugoslav countries at the end of the 19th century, there was a gradual redefinition of *The Second* in progressive workers' framework. It could be read in *The Worker's Friend* that there were initiatives, following the example of other cities (Budapest, Vienna), to found a women workers' society. Therefore, this period witnessed the establishment of various women's sections in workers' associations, such as *The Workers' Society for Mutual Aid* within which a women's section was founded in 1882 (Šoljan, 1969, 6).

Accounts of women's entry into the labour movement can be found in the records made by the City authorities of Osijek in 1895, in which it is mentioned that "two women"<sup>22</sup> were present at the workers' assembly, besides fifty men. The following assembly, held in June the same year, testifies that the number of women entering the labour force was increasing and that they became more active, since it was also attended by several women.<sup>23</sup> In 1905, Osijek city authorities mentioned Tereza Welzer<sup>24</sup> as a chief of cooks and chambermaids. She was extremely active in the labour movement, organizing female workers, due to which she was exiled from Osijek in 1906. The reason for this was the rebellion of workers in sugar cane factory<sup>25</sup>, probably initiated by her. Besides her, we should mention Marija Sukić (1883–1927) as well. She was the first female worker to speak at a workers' assembly in Osijek in 1905. This was important since she pointed out that it was necessary for women to fight alongside their husbands in order to secure a better future for their children. According to historiographic records, her speech inspired everyone attending the assembly. In it she mentioned "harmful and unreasonable activities of many women who, due to ignorance of malice, criticize their husbands, or even forbid them to participate in political struggle and organization" (Plečaš, 1973, 18). Sukić continued: "A woman should stand behind her husband and fight together with him for the better future for herself and her children." Among the most active female socialists and also pioneers of labour movement were Milica (1854–1881) and Anka (1855–1923) Ninković, Stojanka Jovanović – Canka (1873–1905), Ana Delić, Marija Sukić, Adela Pavošević (1897–1928), etc.

Moving back to the topic of strikes, it should be mentioned that women on the territory of the future Yugoslavia were extremely active. Women workers in Rijeka Tobacco Factory went on strike in 1887, when they were paid the

21 Leckie, Shirley. *Women in the Workplace – a history; Labor Unions*. Available at: <http://www.thelaborsite.com/women1.cfm>

22 HR-DAOS-5753a, izvještaj s radničke skupštine u Osijeku, 7. II. 1895.

23 HR-DAOS-5753a, izvještaj s radničke skupštine u Osijeku, 1. VI. 1895.

24 HR-DAOS, izvještaj o gibanju socijaldemokrata u Osijeku, 3. VI. 1905.

25 HR-DAOS, HR-DAOS, kut. 5753a, popis prognanih radnika iz Osijeka 1906. godine, nema nadnevka

wages they had been demanding (Šoljan, 1967, 5). A year before that a strike was organized by women workers in printing factories. They demanded the same working hours as men, which, according to *The Freedom*, enraged the gentlemen working in the same factory. The number of women workers on strike was particularly evident in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when first general strikes broke out in this part of the world, following the massive strikes organized by workers across Europe.<sup>26</sup> In Croatia, more precisely in Osijek, the first general strike<sup>27</sup> broke out in 1905, taking its first victim – Srećko Kulundžić (1888/1889–1905), a worker, was killed in it.<sup>28</sup> Among “about 1,000 people, both men and women”<sup>29</sup> who participated in this strike were also Rozalia Orf and Reza Slama, who even encouraged killing the city captain, Eugen Gayer. These women were also accused of instigating people against the authorities and encouraging rebellion. In the end, Rosa was sentenced to a month of solitary confinement with little food. Although her attorney called for a milder punishment, since she was ill and had a small child who would be deprived of maternal care, the court rejected the motion.<sup>30</sup> The authorities were very well aware of these circumstances and even encouraged the rumours that workers were planning to abolish religion and share women,<sup>31</sup> all in an attempt to discourage women from taking part in workers’ activities.

On the other hand, as has been pointed out earlier, women’s fight was of dual nature – they were fighting for economic freedom as well as for their political independence, which was reflected in their attempts to obtain the general right to vote. That was also the agenda of the social democratic parties of that time.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, The Social Democratic Party of Croatia and Slavonia promoted “the abolition of all the laws which do not guarantee women the equal rights as men” (Šoljan, 1967, 8). Croatian social democrats published a booklet “What is the general, equal, straightforward, secret and proportional elective right” in 1907, in which they emphasize the importance of the women’s right to vote, since “legal regulations applied to them as well as to men” (Henč, 1907, 18). Following these lines, The Social Democratic Party of Croatia and Slavonia founded its first women’s party branch in 1910. The Social Democratic Party of Serbia followed the example and founded its own women’s section – *The Women’s Secretariat of the Social Democrats of Serbia*.

26 In London, musicians went on strike (1907), while in the USA one of the most violent strikes in history broke out – the strike of streetcar drivers, in which about 30 people lost their lives.

27 More about the general strike in Osijek: Luka Pejić. „Crtica o prvom generalnom štrajku u hrvatskoj povijesti“, datum pristupa: 6. 4. 2019., <http://www.h-alter.org/vijesti/crtica-o-prvom-generalnom-strajku-u-hrvatskoj-povijesti>; Ana Rajković. „Radnici kao neposlušni građani iz 1905.“, *Zarez. Dvotjednik za kulturna i društvena zbivanja*, XV, br. 372, (Zagreb, 5. 12. 2013.), 10.-11.

28 „Prolila se krv. Jedan ubijen, više ranjenih“, *Narodna obrana*, Osijek, br. 109., 10. V. 1905., IV.

29 „Generalni štrajk u Osijeku“, *Narodna obrana*, (Osijek), br. 109, 10. V. 1905., IV.

30 „Osuda proti štrajkašima“, *Narodna obrana*, (Osijek), br. 144, 23. VI. 1905., IV.

31 HR-DAOS, kut. 5753a, Izvještaj s radničke skupštine održane u Osijeku, 15. IV. 1895.

32 In: Mirjana Gross, „Neke karakteristike socijalne demokracije u Hrvatskoj i Slavoniji“, *Historijski zbornik*, br. 3.-4., 5/1952., 311.-323.

Still, as has previously been mentioned, the widely accepted and determined status of *The Second* at that time, before World War I broke out, started to change slowly. That was particularly obvious in a changing discourse, so women were encouraged to step out of the private sphere. *The Horizon* published the news about job positions of conductors in Budapest occupied by women, which was practically impossible before the war.<sup>33</sup> In The Kingdom of Serbia there were cases of women who became “peace judges” during the war and they were mediators in conflicts between workers and employers. As newspapers wrote, this did not satisfy conservative peasants, who did not understand how “women could judge men”.<sup>34</sup> There were certain cultural changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. During the war, due to finding employment in factories, women started throwing away head scarfs and veils, which was inevitable once Muslim women joined the world of work (Čaušević ed, 2014, 53).

This led to the final deconstruction of female identity as a housewife, wife and mother, void of traditional prejudice. Unfortunately, the new identity did not last long, but it left an unerasure trace on a social role of a women in the years to come.

## Social and political context of the period between the two wars and the labour movement

Right after World War I ended, a tidal wave, as a British historian Ian Kershaw calls it, spread across Europe (Kershaw, 2017, 104). Social unrest and strikes, inspired by The October Revolution, broke out in many European countries. Strikes became an everyday occurrence, while sad widows, orphans and mutilated soldiers roamed the cities and villages all over Europe, together with the starving and unemployed people (Kershaw, 2017, 104). Despite all this and the growing fascist sentiment, there was a feeling that things were starting to improve in the second half of the 1920s. Social life, especially women’s social life, became more evident. *Jazz* and *charleston*, and young women whose behaviour became more unconventional became ordinary.

In such social circumstances, women workers believed that once the war ended, their position of *The Second* would finally change. However, that did not happen. There was a re-emergence of tendencies to bring women back to traditional role.<sup>35</sup> This was corroborated by statistical data gathered by The Service for Mediation in Employment in Sarajevo, which indicate clearly that

33 „Zarada za žene vojnih obveznika“, *Obzor*, (Zagreb), br. 218., 9. VIII. 1914., LVII.

34 „Žene kao mirovne sudije u Srbiji“, *Narodna obrana*, (Osijek), br. 222., 13. VIII. 1914., VII.

35 This was particularly evident during The Peace Conference in Paris (1919), when Millicent Fawcett managed to include the women’s right to vote on the official agenda, even for a short time. However, the leading politicians of the time, including Arthur James Balfour, the British Minister of the Foreign Affairs and the French Prime Minister George Clem-

employers were still encouraging men's entry into the world of work rather than women's. According to data released in 1919, The Service for Mediation in Employment in Sarajevo helped 348 men and 99 women find employment. At the same time, employers offered 65 vacancies, but only 13 for women (Milenković, 1981, 109–232). Towards the end of 1919, The Service had records of 631 men and 213 women. Only 53 women got a chance to find employment, in comparison with 324 men.<sup>36</sup> This further corroborates the thesis that after the war, there was a renewal of traditional society, trying to bring women back to their traditional roles of mothers, housewives and wives.

Women workers found themselves in an extremely difficult position. Apart from retraditionalization which was largely supported, labour movement was at the crossroads. On the one hand, a radical fraction of traditional social democratic parties separated and homogenized within communist parties.<sup>37</sup> A more moderate fraction, which relied on the evolutionary socialism theses introduced by Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932) at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, remained within social democratic parties.<sup>38</sup> In this way, two opposing fractions were created, which had consequences for the entire development of the labour movement in the interwar years, and for the female members of social democratic parties.

This was also a turbulent period in the territory of the future Yugoslavia. After a short existence of the State of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was established on December 1, 1918, ruled by the Karadjordjevic dynasty. During the establishment of the constitution and elections for Constitutional assembly it was already obvious that social and political life will be full of conflict and disagreement. Additional difficulties in consolidation of the new state included a range of strikes organized at the same time as those all around Europe, in which women workers had a significant role. In June 1918, *The Workers' Newspapers. The Socialist Journal* reported on the strike of women workers in "Krauss" factory<sup>39</sup>, and on strike of janitors in *Hrvatska Zemaljska Banka*. This wave of strikes spread across the newly established state. In 1919 the general strike broke out, in which women workers in Sarajevo were especially active, demanding the right to vote. These political

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enceau, were not genuinely interested in this issue. (In: Margaret MacMillan: *Mirotvorci. Šest mjeseci koji su promijenili svijet*, Naklada Ljevak, Zagreb, 2008, 92)

36 Ibid.

37 In 1919 The Communist Parties were founded in Bulgaria and Germany, and in 1920 in France and Switzerland.

38 These parties, based on Bernstein's theory, accepted the thesis about the need for revision of Marxism. It was clear to Bernstein even at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that certain Marxist postulates were incorrect, since labour force in capitalist countries had not become revolutionary. Therefore, he rejected class struggle and developed the opposite thesis on gradual/evolutionary creation of socialism through parliament.

The theory of revision was presented in Bernstein's book *The Assumptions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy*.

39 „Strukovni pregled“, *Radničke novine. Socijalističkog glasilo*, (Osijek), br. 1, 20. VI. 1918., 1.

demands were intertwined with the economic demands, so women workers in “Kandit” factory Zagreb/Osijek went on strike in August 1919, demanding higher wages (Šoljan, 1976, 65). The motives of this strike, just like in the rest of Europe, were mainly caused by economic circumstances. In winter 1916/1917, in The City Hall yard in Vukovar, women protested against food shortage. The same was the cause of demonstrations of women workers in Rijeka (Kecman, 1978, 17). All this encouraged women workers in Bosnia and Herzegovina to revive socialist organizations (Kecman, 1978, 17).

The disputes in the international labour movement were evident on the territory of the future Yugoslavia in 1917.<sup>40</sup> Despite that, a false unity was maintained until April 1919, during which period women workers started their own organizations. They founded various women’s sections within the social democratic party. At the end of February, *The Workers’ Newspapers* published the news that progressive women in Osijek founded their own section with the aim of fighting for the equality of women.<sup>41</sup> The section was founded on March 16, 1919 and was led by Marija Sukić, who advocated women’s political organization.<sup>42</sup> According to newspaper reports, it was successful. In December 1918 *The Women’s Secretariat of the Social Democrats of Serbia* was renewed, run by Draginja Draga Stefanovic (Kecman, 1978, 67). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was also a period of a more intense political activity; rallies and lectures were organized, in which the need for equality of women was proclaimed (Kecman, 1978, 73). In 1918 the first celebration of the International Women’s Day was organized in The Workers Hall, gathering about 2,000 women (Čaušević, 2015, 48–49).

Still, when the new state was consolidated, the social democrats accepted participation in its structures, while the left wing, i.e. communists, still insisted on fighting against the bourgeoisie order. This fraction still insisted on class struggle after December 1918. Since this was in obvious opposition to social democrats, led by Vitomir Korać (1877–1941), *the radicals*, as they were called, founded their own party in April 1919 – *The Socialist Party of Yugoslavia (the communists)*, which changed its name into *The Communist Party of Yugoslavia* in June 1920. Referring to the split in the labour movement, Kecman points out that this had a negative impact on the work performed by women. Some of them suddenly became passive and detached themselves from the class workers’ movement (Kecman, 1978, 124). In spite of that, the communists tried hard to recruit as many women members as possible. “In order to ensure efficient work performance among women, the party formed various committees at municipal and city levels, among which was the committee in charge of working with women.” (Ščapec, ed., 2013, 9). This led to the formation of *The*

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40 This was conditioned by the success of The October Revolution, whose methods were accepted by the left wing of the social democratic parties at the time. *Sloboda*, published in Zagreb, with Vitomir Korać as its editor, was an opposition to the Bolsheviks, and supported cooperation with the civic parties. This was in stark contrast with the left-wing views.

41 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 6., prijepis članka iz *Radničkih novina*, 27. II. 1919.

42 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 6., prijepis članka iz *Radničkih novina*, 20. III. 1919.

*Central Women's Secretariat of the Socialists (Communists) of Yugoslavia*, with its regional secretariats. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, communist women founded a regional secretariat, *The Secretariat of Communist Women*, and organized a protest in which more than one thousand people participated (Kecman, 1978, 91). Still, Kecman points out that the regional organizations were not collaborating and that women mostly acted on their own initiative (Kecman, 1978, 123). This shows that women's organizations were not homogenous, despite the decisions made at a higher level. Their work was mainly based on independent regional activities, without networking with other organizations based on the same ideological principles.

After the split, a certain number of women workers, such as Marija Sukić, Adela Pavošević, etc., joined the communist wing and continued their activities within various organizations and parties supported by communists. Despite the fact that their activities were forbidden, following the legal framework set forward in *Proclamation* (1921) and the *State Protection Act* (1921), the communists found a way to act legally in a form of mimicry. They established several organizations, both party and trade union organizations, such as *Independent Labour Party* (1923), *Independent Trade Unions* (1924), *Workers' and Peasants' Block* (1925), etc., in order to proceed with their activities despite the ban. Due to the strengthening of the repressive apparatus, especially after The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was established (1929) and after introduction of The 6 January Dictatorship, the communists started infiltrating social democratic trade unions. This was suggested by The Communist International, and the communist activities became more intense.

In these circumstances, women workers were exposed to double oppression – gender– and class-based. The legal framework of The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, i.e. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia, should also be taken into consideration, which, despite all the expectations, did not grant women the right to vote, especially considering that the British women obtained the general right to vote right after the war.<sup>43</sup> Women were, despite certain legal regulations, still marginalized. That is why their position was to a great extent a result of their inferior legal status, or “legal inequality”.<sup>44</sup> Among other things, women in Yugoslavia could not be legal guardians nor court witnesses. Therefore, neither legal regulations nor constitutions (The Vidovdan Constitution (1921) and The Octroic Constitution (1931)) “offered legal possibilities for women in pre-war Yugoslavia to take part in political life”. This kept women in an inferior position, which led to all other negative repercussions (Begić, 1965, 137–198).

43 Only highly educated women who had turned 30 obtained the right to vote.

44 It is necessary to point out that different legal regulations were valid in The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, i.e. Yugoslavia. Each region applied the law which was in force before the unification. Serbia and Macedonia applied The Serbian Civil Code (1844), Montenegro applied *The General Property Code* (1888), while Croatia and Slavonia applied The Austrian Civil Code (1811). In Bosnia and Herzegovina there was a range of codes, such as *The Turkish Civil Code* or *The Turkish Land Law*. (Kecman: *Žene Jugoslavije u radničkom pokretu i ženskim organizacijama 1918.-1941.*, 57–59; 63.)

Still, women who belonged to women's civic movement<sup>45</sup> were more interested in these political issues than were women workers, who placed more emphasis on economic aspect while participating in strikes. This is a result of a research carried out on a sample of women workers' strikes in Yugoslavia, which were primarily motivated by difficult economic circumstances caused by underpayment and poor working conditions. Despite employment laws, primarily *The Workers Protection Act* (1922) which provided minimum protection of women workers by regulating maternity leave, prohibition of work in night shifts, introduction of 8-hour working day and right to hygienic working conditions, legal regulations were rarely applied. The regulations which were breached most frequently were those regarding working hours and hygienic working conditions, which was a motivation for strikes.

## The Social Position of Women Workers and Redefinition of Their Roles

Although women entered the labour force more frequently, as has already been mentioned, after the war they experienced further social and economic deprivation. Unemployed women workers in Britain received lower financial aid than men. Further growth in differences between men's and women's wages continued in the years to come, so in early 1930s women earned 50% less than men.<sup>46</sup> In spite of that, women's entry into the labour force became more frequent and women abandoned their traditional roles. The percentage of women in the entire Yugoslav labour force was constantly on an increase.<sup>47</sup> This is particularly evident in the textile and food processing industry, which were best developed in Slovenia and Croatia. According to data available in 1928 in *The Organized Worker* published in Zagreb, there were 1.4 million workers in The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, out of which 300,000 were women.<sup>48</sup> They also made up a majority of labour force in "Trikotaža" (*Eng. knitwear*) factory in Belgrade (in which 500 out of 1,200 workers were women) and in "Penkala" factory in Zagreb (250 workers out of 300 were women). 80% of the labour force in "Herman Pollak and Sons" factory in Zagreb were women (Kecman, 1978, 220). The situation was similar in other factories, so "Tivar" factory employed 1,850 workers, 1,000 of which were women.<sup>49</sup>

45 This was evident in the fight for the right to vote and actions of *The Action Committee of the Women's Movement*, which organized a range of rallies which proclaimed the women's right to vote.

46 "Post WWI and work." Available at: <https://www.striking-women.org/module/women-and-work/inter-war-years-1918-1939>

47 An Interview with Ida Ograjšek Gorenjak. Available at: <http://www.zarez.hr/clanci/ida-ograjsek-gorenjak-potka-ustaljenih-rodnih-obrazaca>, August 19, 2019.

48 „Proleterski ženski pokret“, *Organizovani radnik*, (Zagreb), br. 45., 15. XI. 1928., VIII.

49 Ibid.

As far as regions are concerned, in 1928, Slovenia had the highest rate of employed women – 32.5%. In Serbia, the percentage was 14.2%, and in Croatia and Slavonia 24% (Kecman, 1987, 28). According to data, two years earlier there were 14.6% employed women in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Čaušević, 2014, 51).

There were some basic problems that women workers were faced with, despite the regulations stated in *The Workers Protection Act*: poor/unhygienic working conditions and abuse and low wages, resulting from insufficient legal protection of women in The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia. *The Worker* published in Zagreb in mid 1920s stated that women who were selling their labour force were abused in the worst possible way (Šoljan, 1967, 85). It also stated that it was considered everywhere that women were objects that had to be satisfied, and that capitalism is responsible for such exploitative position (Šoljan, 1967, 85).

In this context, newspapers published in Osijek printed a letter written by “a young woman worker” about working conditions and hostility in an Osijek flax factory. According to her account, a certain headman, in charge of receiving the delivered goods, named Jurić, was constantly furious at women workers, treating them like slaves and punishing them financially for even the slightest mistake. He also “swore badly” and insulted women workers by calling them names, without any shame. He punished “a colleague” for a trivial matter and set the punishment of 3 dinars. He also started yelling at her. When she reported him to the manager, he said that she had hit him in the stomach, so he had to yell.<sup>50</sup> Jurić also sacked women workers for no particular reason, as was the case of Marija Igl, who was fired without previous notice. The employer wanted to reinstate her, but “she, with her hurting proletarian pride, would not hear of it”.<sup>51</sup> Due to situations like these, the young woman worker invited everyone to join *The Independent Trade Unions* and put an end to all forms of abuse and harassment. A good illustration of women workers’ position is an example of women construction workers, who, “carrying a bucket of concrete on their heads, were climbing the steep scaffold to the fourth or fifth floor”, as was published in *Organizovani radnik* (eng. *The Organized Worker*). They were paid 3 dinars per hour for this job, and were exposed to harsh treatment, swear words and curses.<sup>52</sup>

The situation was the same in “Siva” factory in Osijek. Another “young woman worker” wrote about their manager, named Čok, who was having an affair with one of the workers and treating others like slaves, calling them names.<sup>53</sup> The last part of the text reads: “We are sending a message to Mr. Čok and warning him to be careful, otherwise the workers will settle the matters with him”. This

50 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 16., isječak iz novina pod naslovom „Maltretiranje radnica u tvornici lana“, nema nadnevka

51 Ibid.

52 „Život žene – građevinske radnice“, *Organizovani radnik*, (Zagreb), br. 49., 13. XII. 1928., VIII.

53 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 16, isječak iz novina pod naslovom „Položaj radnika-ca u Tvornici ‘Siva’ u Osijeku, nema nadnevka

proves that women's self-confidence increased in the labour movement, creating a narrative for self-liberation. Corroborating this is a fact that an invitation for women workers to a political meeting was published in the newspapers, appealing to all 'aware' comrades to join the women's political section as soon as possible, with the aim of networking and starting their own newspapers, in order to create a weapon to fight for the future of the entire mankind.<sup>54</sup>

The latter indicates that women workers were completely aware of the need for political organization and of the fact that they had to become the agents of their own liberation, not the mere observers of the social and political changes. In this sense women workers made a large step forward, creating a new social paradigm in which they became active agents in the struggle for the improvement of working class position.

Besides the previously mentioned problems, women workers were severely underpaid. Kecman says that women's wages amounted to 45%-75% of men's wages (Kecman, 1978, 41). This trend remained till 1928, when women's wages were increased but were still kept under the average, which was 5.38 dinars (Kecman, 1978, 42). That can be illustrated by the example of "Siva", a brush factory from Osijek. It employed 120 workers, out of which 80 were women. Their wages amounted to 10–12 dinars. Women workers in "Soleil", a candy factory, worked 72 hours a week and earned between 100 and 160 dinars.<sup>55</sup>

Apart from underpayment, women workers were frequently not paid for the work they had performed, and were often forced to do overtime work. Jozo Špis, in Kaiser factory in Osijek, forced women to work longer than 8 hours in order to do what belonged to his job description. When some of them rebelled, he fired them.<sup>56</sup>

Considering everything that has been already said, the theses mentioned by Miles in his book, relating to exploitation of women and their exposure, discipline, work without breaks, psychological and physical torture during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Miles, 2009, 255–256), can easily apply to women workers in the 1920s and 1930s. This socio-economic aspect of the position of women was particularly emphasized by communists, in an attempt to recruit as many female members of their party. Agitation of this kind was conducted via newspapers. An example is an article published in *The Workers' Word* in Osijek, in July 1920. In the Marxist manner, the article claims that capitalists humiliated the entire proletariat, especially women.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, another article states that women were slaves of capitalism and that they had to take a difficult path of irreconcilable class struggle in *Independent Trade Unions* because they were fighting for the equal rights of women and men.<sup>58</sup> The communist fraction

54 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 16, isječak iz novina pod naslovom „Agitacija žena“, nema nadnevka  
55 „Iz tvornice kandita 'Soleil'.....“; *Riječ radnika i seljaka*, (Osijek), br. 45., 12. XI. 1927., I.

56 HR-DAOS-2103, HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 8. prijepis članka iz *Riječi radnika i seljaka*, „Iz Kaiserove tvornice“, I. X. 1927.

57 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 17, prijepis članka iz *Radničke riječi*, „Ženski pokret“, 31. VII. 1920.

58 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 16., isječak iz novina pod naslovom „Borba žena za ravnopravnost sa ostalima“, nema nadnevka

of the labour movement used gender exploitation to stress “the suffering” life of women workers. Furthermore, they pointed out that women, due to their extremely difficult position, became class aware and aware of the humiliation they had been exposed to, realizing the need for the liberation of their gender and the entire working class from the capitalist rule.<sup>59</sup>

The above can be viewed in light of Marx’s premise that capitalist society in a certain way made women join the labour force, in order to exploit them as well. On the other hand, this also supports the thesis that communists used their legal organization, primarily *The Independent Trade Unions*, to lead the actions aimed at redefining the social position of women. In that way they made a significant contribution not only to strengthening the position of women in labour movement but also to their general position in society.

This was reflected in a newspaper article “Women’s fight in equality with others” in which it was written that women were no longer humble and charming, but heroes with their own independent ambitions in life; heroes who prove their own personality, who protest against capturing of women in a state, family, society and factory.<sup>60</sup> Another article on the necessary political emancipation of women states that women could no longer remain in the background, since capitalism absorbed them in the world of work. Therefore, the author believes that women have to be equipped in an appropriate way to be of use to the working class in a difficult struggle which capitalism imposes on society. That is why women should join political organizations in order to revolutionize and enable the triumph of the working class.<sup>61</sup>

Despite all these attempts, women workers still had an extremely difficult position in society, which was even worsened after 1929, when the economic crisis broke out. Some schools and state institutions in the USA fired women workers if they got pregnant.<sup>62</sup> A similar model was applied in The Kingdom of Yugoslavia, when a saving measures package was designed, which mostly affected women. According to the new budget of The Kingdom of Yugoslavia, it was planned to sack women clerks.

As the crisis was becoming more serious, the number of unemployed women was on an increase. Women’s sections of the Public Employment Office were founded, and were working busily in 1931, like the one in Osijek.<sup>63</sup> The Employment Office in some cases offered financial aid to unemployed women workers, while in some cases it rejected such requests. One such example was the case of a housemaid Julka Maričević, who complained to The Workers’

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59 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 16., isječak iz novina pod naslovom „Ženski pokret“, nema nadnevka

60 Ibid.

61 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 16, prijepis članak iz *Radničke riječi*, „Ženski pokret“, 31. VII. 1920.

62 Shmoop Edutiruaak Team. 2019. *Gender in History of Labour Unions*. Available at: <https://www.shmoop.com/history-labor-unions/gender.html>

It was not until 1978. that the US got *Pregnancy Discrimination Act*.

63 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 28, prijepis članka iz *Hrvatskog lista*, „Ženski odsjek Javne burze rada u Osijeku“, 5. VII. 1931.

Chamber in Osijek about refusal of financial aid. The complaint was forwarded to The Employment Office in Osijek. Apart from pointing out impolite behaviour of the Osijek Employment Office branch clerks, it also claims that rejection of the financial aid was unjustified in this case.<sup>64</sup>

**Table 1.** Monthly numbers of unemployed women workers in Osijek kretanja nezaposlenih radnica u Osijeku

The number of unemployed women workers in Osijek (1930)			
Time period	Total number	Women workers	Structure
6–11 January, 1930	489	27	Factory workers, servants, maids...
12–19 January, 1930	632	49	
3–9 February	813	62	Weaver, confectioners, factory workers, servants, housemaids, private employees...
June 1930	174	153	Cooks, servants...
3–9 August, 1930	221	22	Cooks, servants, waitresses...

Source: HR-DAOS-23, Box 28, reports from the Osijek Bureau published in *The Croatian Newspapers*

Data on unemployment can be analysed based on the reports made by public employment offices and published in daily papers. According to a report of the Osijek branch of Public Employment Office, there were 1,535 unemployed workers in 1930, out of which 97 were women.<sup>65</sup>

It should be pointed out that the data were mainly published on a weekly basis, in *The Croatian Newspapers*, but these reports were fragmentary. The data for July show only the total number of the unemployed, but do not specify the number of unemployed women in that month.<sup>66</sup> Also, the data referring to a time period were incomplete, so there is no exact number of unemployed women in entire February, but only in its first week. In spite of that, this data structure reveals trends in the number of unemployed women workers in the first years of economic crisis.

The crisis affected women even more than men, since they had already been on the margins of society. Therefore, job losses deteriorated their position even further. In that context we can analyse an article which portrays an extremely difficult situation of single mothers and poor widows, whose income depended solely on their work. Mara Šimić, a servant, a single mother of an 8-month-old baby, was looking for a job everywhere. She sought *support from good people* even in the newspapers. She pointed out that she was willing to take any kind of job, but nobody wanted to hire her because she had a baby.<sup>67</sup>

64 HR-DAOS-2103, kut 6, žalba Julke Maričević upućena Radničkoj komori u Osijeku, 4. VI. 1938.

65 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 28., prijepis članak iz *Hrvatskog lista* „Sa osječke burze rada“, 5. I. 1930.

66 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 28., tjedni izvještaji sa osječke burze objavljavani u *Hrvatskom listu*, srpanj 1930. godine

67 „Nezaposlena udovica s djetetom...“, *Hrvatski list* (Osijek), br. 171., 3. VII. 1935., XV.

The sources said that she was a young woman willing to work, and that she was looking for a job in nearby villages. Yet, nobody wanted to hire her because of the baby. *The Croatian Newspapers* concluded that the process of finding a job was the most difficult for women with small children.<sup>68</sup>

In these circumstances, women went on strikes more frequently, supported by communists. The fact that they used strikes as a method, which was proclaimed by communists (unlike the social democrats), supports the thesis that a women's movement was formed under communist influence. Although it did not have many members, its influence was significant.

The failure to obtain the right to vote, inferior social position and lack of interest of the authority in settling gender issues led to a greater homogenization of women workers' movement, which included both class and gender issues. This was particularly manifested in strikes organized in factories.

## Women on Strikes

As has already been mentioned, when labour movement was renewed, women started joining trade unions and continued their struggle for improvement of working conditions (Kecman, 1978, 122). This was, as could be seen in international context as well, evident in numerous strikes.<sup>69</sup> In April 1918, 85 women workers in Osijek organized a strike in "Krauss" cloth factory, demanding a 1-crown raise<sup>70</sup> and better working conditions. According to the workers' press articles, the factory was a farm of bacteria, which infected 10 women workers.<sup>71</sup> After a six-week strike, they succeeded. Their wages amounted to 8 crowns and the factory management promised to secure better working conditions. After this, women milliners in Zagreb also went on strike, due to low wages. This was followed by the general strike in Zagreb (1920) in which a great number of women took part (Kecman, 1978, 122–123).

It should not be forgotten that *The Law on Protection of Public Safety and State Order* (1921) banned strikes and that each such action was considered a subversive act. Therefore, strikes of women workers meant serious rebellion against the authority at that time.

From this aspect we should analyse the strike which, at a microhistorical level, had a great social impact – the strike of women workers in "Schicht" soap factory in Osijek. The strike broke out on August 9, 1926. 112 out of 124 women

68 Ibid.

69 We should not disregard the fact that the fall of the Russian imperial family started with a women's strike. They were protesting on the streets, against the lack of bread. (More information in: Maja Solar:, „Dok se svaka kuharica ne politizuje“, *Stvar. Časopis za teorijske prakse*, 9/2017., Gerusija, Novi Sad, 46.-69.),).

70 „Štrajk radnica u Krausovoj tvornici krpa“, *Radničke novine. Socijalističko glasilo*, (Osijek), br. 1., 20. VI. 1918., I.

71 „Tvornica krpa“, *Radničke novine. Socijalističko glasilo*, (Osijek), br. 10., 24. X. 1918., I.

workers went on strike, after the factory management had refused negotiations on higher wages.<sup>72</sup> City authorities, including labour inspectors and the police, were trying hard to suppress the spreading of the strike. In its beginning, 7 women workers and 3 men workers were arrested. The three workers were even banished from the city.<sup>73</sup> This led to even greater tensions, so on August 17, after the police had attacked women workers, a conflict broke out in front of the factory. Four women workers (Katica Vidaković, Ema Schoth, Ružica Plaurer and Marija Detling) were seriously injured after the police attacked them with sabres. Additional police patrols were sent to the factory and the police took women to their homes by force, in an attempt to put an end to the strike.<sup>74</sup>

A range of strikes followed, mostly led by women in coordination with *The Independent Workers*. The authorities were aware of that as well. The Zagreb police banned the meeting of women workers on February 10, 1928, at which they had planned to discuss matriarchy.<sup>75</sup> The reason to ban the meeting, as interpreted by the workers' press, was to keep women workers in the dark and make them endure the slavery of the capitalist society.<sup>76</sup> The article was signed by the *Local Workers' Trade Union Council*, and in the end it invited women workers to respond to these bans with more intense actions about "class enlightenment of women workers and their entry in the *Independent Trade Unions*."<sup>77</sup> Employers tried hard to prevent the organizations of women workers, which can be illustrated by "Piller and Sons", a biscuit factory in Osijek. A women worker named Salaj started a trade union organization of women workers, for which she was fired. This was a reason for a local communist newspaper *The Word of Workers and Peasants* to invite comrades to help create a strong combative organization which would protect them from the attacks of employers and their agents.<sup>78</sup>

In spite of everything, women workers managed to organize themselves in a much better way. This is corroborated by an article "A Woman Worker Is Waking up" published in *The Organized Worker*, which says that women have become the objects of the most unscrupulous capitalist exploitation. Women workers in bigger factories had grasped the meaning of the workers' organizations, so they continued organizing all women workers in those factories.<sup>79</sup> This was a success, since the papers showed that women workers had already achieved considerable success and that they had chosen their leaders. Furthermore,

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72 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 11., prijepis članka iz *Borbe*, „Štrajk u tvornici Schicht u Osijeku – policija golim sabljama ranjava radnice“, 28. VIII. 1926.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 „Zabrana sastanka žena radnica“, *Organizovani radnik*, (Zagreb), br. 7., 16. II. 1928., VIII.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 „Šikanacija radnica u tvornici Keksa Piller i sinovi“, *Riječ radnika i seljaka*, (Osijek), br. 39., 1. X. 1927., I.

79 „Žena radnica se bunila“, *Organizovani radnik*, (Zagreb), br. 28., 7. VII. 1927., VII.

another argument supporting the class awareness of women workers was the organization of the agitation committee in a sewing factory, which employed the highest number of women workers. The committee held regular meetings, with the aim of recruiting more women.<sup>80</sup>

Homogenization of this kind was manifested in more frequently organized strikes, so at the end of 1928, women workers in a biscuit factory “Bizjak” in Zagreb stopped working on November 7, demanding higher wages. Again, just like two years earlier in Osijek, the capital and repressive apparatus collaborated again, so workers were arrested the next day by the police. According to the workers’ press, the police interrogated the arrested women workers in the presence of director Bizjak, who, allegedly, said that he could even kill a woman worker and not be held responsible for that (Šoljan, 1967, 165).



The strike of “white scarves“ in “Tivar”, a factory in Varaždin (Source: Saša Ščapec (ed.), *Partizanke Hrvatske u Narodnooslobodilačkoj borbi*, 11).

The wave of strikes spread in 1936. Bogdan Krekić, a prominent Yugoslav social democrat, wrote about this phenomenon, stating that more strikes were organized in that year than ever before (Krekić, 1936, 7). In Zagreb only, there were 59 strikes that year, with 15,000 people taking part in them (Blasin and Marković 29)<sup>81</sup>. In the same year, a famous strike of women and men workers in “Tivar” sewing factory was organized in Varaždin. The strike was organized

80 Ibid.

81 Barbara Blasin; Igor Marković, „Ženska antifašistički Zagreb. Ženske i feminističke organizacije u borbi za socijalna i politička prava i otpor fašizmu“, Zagreb, Centar za ženske studije, 29.

by a communist party organization and Anka Butorac was a prominent figure in this strike. It should be pointed out that 7 women were members of the strike committee (Kecman, 1978, 229).

Another great strike, which has not been sufficiently explored yet, and which is at the same time a microhistorical reflection of the events in a broader social and political context, was organized in Osijek in 1939. 120 women workers in *The First Osijek Candy Factory Kaiser and Stark* went on strike which lasted for the entire three weeks. This strike, according to the Osijek press, was a topic of discussion and the object of admiration of Osijek working class, because women workers took over the factory and would not let anyone in. In that way, according to the newspapers, they fought with determination for food, higher wages and workers' rights.<sup>82</sup> The newspapers stressed the fact that women workers had been at the mercy of factory owners for 35 years. They were forced to fight because of their difficult and unbearable position, so they succeeded in defeating the factory owners, who agreed to sign the collective agreement and increase wages by 15%. The highest raise was given to the workers whose wages were lowest – they received 12 dinars and got a 33% raise.<sup>83</sup> *The Voice* claimed that the attempts of opponents and informers, who had tried to destroy the unity of women workers, were fruitless, as were various emissaries who, "like mangy dogs, walked around the strikers."<sup>84</sup>

It is interesting to note that the newspaper reports emphasized the gender aspect. It was stated that women workers proved how capable they were to all those who had underestimated them in their everyday fight for their rights and workers' interests. It was also added that 120 women workers showed that they were better, more resourceful and dedicated to their fight than were the male workers. They cleared the names of all workers and made them proud, and should be taken as role models in whose footsteps others would follow. The city took great pride in them. After the strike, the newspapers wrote that women workers proved their worth and persistence of the labour movement.<sup>85</sup> This shows that the strike had an enormous emancipatory potential, especially in terms of newspaper reports, which recognized the need for gender-conditioned social struggle for a better and more just position of women workers in society.

The strike drew a lot of attention in the city and its surroundings, despite strikebreakers' activities. The newspapers expressed the view that this unique movement of women workers was also an incentive for the rest of the Osijek workers, whose position had become unbearable, due to the increased prices of groceries. The strike was also interpreted as a warning to employers, so one of them took initiative and gave his workers a raise. It is interesting to stress that, among other things, financial aid was raised for women workers. More than

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82 HR-DAOS-2103, kut. 34, prijepis članka iz *Glasa*, „Zasluzena pobjeda radnica“, 10. XI. 1939.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 HR-DAOS-2103, Box 29, a chronology of labour movement in Osijek

10,000 dinars were raised, which “lay the foundation for permanent solidarity of workers.”<sup>86</sup> This supports the thesis that a wave of strikes, starting in 1936, had a great impact – soup kitchens for strikers were founded, food was collected in villages and cities, strike guards were organized, as well as messenger service (Ščapec, 2013, 12), which testifies to a great level of organization among women workers during strikes.

Table 2. The list of the most important strikes in The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, with majority participation of women

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes			
The year when the strike broke out	The factory/firm	Duration of strike	Result
1918	“Krauss“ factory (Osijek)	6 weeks	Higher wages and better working conditions
1919	“Union“ factory (Zagreb)	9 days	30% higher wages
1921	Underwear factory (Zagreb)	3 weeks	20% higher wages
1926	“Schichth“ factory (Osijek)	8 days	
1928	Weaving factory Plc. (Duga Resa)	11 weeks	Not achieved
	Knitwear factory “Moravija“ (Beograd)	6 weeks	Not achieved
	“Bizjak“ factory	16 days	Not achieved
The Kingdom of Yugoslavia			
1935	“Herman Pollak and Sons“ cotton factory (Zagreb)	6 days	Secured minimum weekly wage of 144 dinars (the management did not obey the agreement till the end)
1936	Maribor textile industry workers strike	30 days	Collective agreement
	Leskovac textile industry workers strike	24 days	Signed collective agreement, 10–15% higher wages, secured 8-hour working day
	”Tivar“ (Varaždin)	42 days	Higher wages, signed collective agreement, the right to trade union membership
	“Merima“ soap factory (Kruševac)	7 days	Signed collective agreement
1939	The First Osijek Candy Factory Kaiser and Stark (Osijek)	3 weeks	Signed collective agreement; 15–33% higher wages.

86 HR-DAOS-2103, Box 34, a transcript of an article published in *The Voice*: “A deserved victory of women workers”; November 10, 1939

Women workers had already complained about working conditions in the factory, which was even then referred to as “the cave“. They started a strike in 1927 because the extremely poor working conditions resulted in various lung diseases among workers. (HR-DAOS-23, Box 8, transcripts from *The Word of Workers and Peasants*: “From Kandit factory..”; November 19, 1927)

It is also important to point out that women workers were members of The United Workers Trade Union of Yugoslavia, in which the influence of social democrats weakened, and the communist influence increased.

Although we do not have the data on the exact number of women workers, it is obvious that they made up a significant portion of the labour force and that they took an exceptionally active role in strikes, either as organizers (“Krauss“ factory and “Schich“ factory) or participating in them with other workers (“Tivar”). Most of these factories/firms employed a significant number of women workers. In “Herman Pollak and Sons” factory women made up 80% of labour force (Kecman, 1978, 220). The situation in other factories was similar, so in 1935, “Tivar” employed 1,000 women workers, out of 1,850 employees.<sup>87</sup> As far as production of these factories is concerned, they mostly belonged to the textile industry (“Triglav”, “Tivar”).

It is interesting to note that in most of the strikes certain requests were fulfilled, which supports the thesis that women workers, apart from being aware of the exploitation they had been subjected to, were exceptionally well organized and that they were able to articulate their dissatisfaction and demands very clearly.

These demands, according to the analysis, matched those published in the workers’ newspapers, not only relating to higher wages, but also to creating trade union organizations or joining them. *The Organized Worker* warned about capitalist exploitation of women by publishing the letters written by anonymous “young women workers” who talked about working conditions and invited other women workers to join *The Independent Trade Unions*.

Besides these strikes, women workers participated in a whole range of strikes organized in factories in which they were not more numerous, but even in those cases they joined strikes and manifested their class awareness. They went on strike in 1937 in *The Našice Factory of Tannin, Plc.* in Đurđenovac, in which out of 1,099 employees, 109 were women. The reasons for strike were demands for higher wages and new collective agreement, which was achieved in the end.<sup>88</sup> This microhistorical example shows that strikes at that time assumed a gender dimension as well, which would be of great significance in the years to come.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the position of women workers in The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia was primarily conditioned by restrictive legal framework and poor economic circumstances. This also created the need to redefine the position of *The Second*. Therefore, women workers in factories and firms started actions to change their position and abolish their political and economic dependence, following the events in the international women workers’ movement.

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87 Ibid.

88 HR-DAOS-21, kut. 57, izvještaj Oblasnog nazorničtva rada Osijek, 1937. godine

The most obvious manifestation were strikes, which had been seen as a basic mechanism of workers' fight for greater rights and earnings, ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were efficient because, apart from bringing production process to a halt, they resulted in the loss of profit for employers, in this way creating additional pressure on the managing/ownership structures. Women participated in these actions from the very beginning. For them, strikes created an opportunity for organized actions on the one hand, while on the other hand they could point out specific gender issues, such as salaries equal to those that men received. The analysis of these strikes offers us an insight into various forms of exploitation and inequality of working women, mostly in the textile and food processing industry, at the same time creating a greater historiographic visibility of women workers themselves.

As has already been explained in this paper, the communists found an opportunity to recruit women in their organizations. The aim was to draw as many members as possible, since they were active in extremely restrictive legal framework. Therefore, recruiting women workers to *The Independent Trade Unions*, which, in The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, were the only legal organizations (supported by communists), was a very important party feature. This was possible because the communists fully accepted and supported strikes, which enabled them the spreading of their ideological platform, in comparison with the social democrats, who were also making attempts at recruiting working class to their parties and trade unions.

In this way the fight of women workers was more or less oriented toward economic issues in relation to the wages, working hours, etc., while the right to vote mainly belonged to the domain of civic women's associations. This was entirely in line with the Marxist postulates, in which economic basis was the foundation of any action, while everything else was interpreted as an upgrading process.

Strikes of women workers, their invitations to join *The Independent Trade Unions* and establishment of trade union organizations point to the fact that in the interwar period women workers' movement did exist. In the given circumstances it could assume massive proportions, but it was noticeable. In that way it created an awareness of gender-conditioned exploitation, and the fact that women could certainly be more productive in their fight for better working conditions and higher wages.

The above stated circumstances have still not been sufficiently explored, mostly in terms of analysing women's sections of The United Workers Syndicate Coalition of Yugoslavia, which would enable us an insight into the ways in which communist women workers infiltrated social democratic trade unions and its actions in legal trade unions structures. On the other hand, in order to follow contemporary trends in research on various aspects of labour movement, it is important to explore the issue of masculinity among workers, following the research trends in Anglo-Saxon historiographies.

Finally, it is important to point out that these issues are as current today as they were in the 1920s and 1930s. According to the data provided by The European Commission, there is a difference between men's and women's income in all countries, varying from 8% in Belgium to 20% in The Czech Republic. This also resulted in a grassroots campaign *Women's Global Strike*, which called for strikes and provided arguments that strikes were not only an effective tactic to change oppressive systems, but also a mechanism which helped strengthen solidarity in fight for changing the oppressive systems, be it patriarchy, neoliberalism or militarism. Accordingly, the need for historical analysis of women's strikes can be seen in the contemporary neoliberal system which is trying hard to suppress women's activism, especially in trade unions.

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