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## “To Assure the Reign of Work and Justice”

The ‘Union des Femmes’ and the Paris Commune of 1871\*

On April 11, 1871, an “Appeal to the Women Citizens of Paris” summoned Parisian women to rise up, to defend the city, calling them “To arms! The nation (*la patrie*) is in danger!”<sup>1</sup> Signed only “a group of *citoyennes*,” the entreaty posted on walls and published in most of the Paris Commune’s newspapers, proclaimed that

Our enemies are the privileged of the current order, those who (...) enrich themselves from our misery (...) we want work, but to be able to keep the proceeds (...) No more exploiters, no more masters! Labor means well-being for all (...) the Commune will live in work, or die in combat!<sup>2</sup>

This declaration called for the founding of a working women’s revolutionary association, the *Union des Femmes*, with a dual focus: labor and defense. The *Union’s* full name, “The Union of Women for the Defense of Paris and Aid to the Wounded,”<sup>3</sup> highlighted their short-term goal of defending Paris against the enemy Versailles troops. Bidding women to “prepare ourselves to defend and avenge our brothers,” reflected the immediacy of the military threat; the defeat of the Commune would, and eventually did, mean the end of this generation’s opportunity for revolutionary change. For the *Union des Femmes*, the short-term defense was a

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1 Appel aux citoyennes de Paris, Journal Officiel, April 11, 1871.

2 Ibid.; ‘The Appeal’ appeared on April 12, in Parisian newspapers including: La Sociale, L’Egalité, L’Opinion Nationale, Paris Libre, and Le Cri du Peuple.

3 Translated from the French ‘Union des Femmes pour la Défence de Paris et les soins aux blessés’.

necessary prerequisite for the long-term priority of developing women's economic and social equity and independence.<sup>4</sup>

Questions of gender and economics played a central role in Commune women's programs and goals. In the mid-nineteenth century, Parisian working women faced limited access to trades, social attitudes which deemed women's earnings "supplemental," and wages below subsistence levels. The *Union des Femmes*, developing into a city-wide socialist and feminist women's association,<sup>5</sup> sought to fundamentally restructure female labor into producer-owned cooperatives, in an effort to allow women economic independence and the means of survival. *Union des Femmes* organizers observed that "it is recognized and agreed upon that women have the right to work in the household [ménage], but not in the workshop [atelier]." <sup>6</sup> To rectify this situation, their Central Committee declared: "Considering that during the past social order women's work was the most exploited of all, its immediate reorganization is thus of the utmost urgency."<sup>7</sup>

The Commune, greeted as the genesis of the new social order, provided a fertile environment for the conception and cultivation of egalitarian social relations of production; the revolutionary moment empowered women and allowed them the freedom to act against their oppressors. In associations, political clubs, newspapers, and on the streets, female activists criticized and assailed the existing conditions of women's labor. Simultaneously, female Commune leaders, with strong support from the rank and file, began advocating and organizing a feminist and collectivist structure.

The *Union des Femmes* developed in a time and place of upheaval and transition. Organized during a revolutionary civil war, the association emerged as a product of the experiences and ideas of its participants, and particularly it's founder, Elisabeth Dmitrieff. Multiple strands of the era's socialist, feminist, and labor theories and movements influenced it's formation, as did the robust legacy of Parisian women's revolutionary participation. Formed less than two weeks after the Commune's birth, the *Union des Femmes* operated within a city under siege. The Paris Commune, a seventy-two day long revolutionary civil war following the

4 Ibid.

5 Communardes did not use the word 'feminist', as the term did not come into use until the 1890s. No similar term existed. I use 'feminist' because it most succinctly and clearly describes the *Union des Femmes*' efforts to attain a broad-based gender equity.

6 Annexe au projet de création d'ateliers pour les femmes, *Union des Femmes*, LY22, Archives Historiques de la Guerre (A.H.G.).

7 Adresse du Comité Central de l'Union des Femmes à la Commission de Travail et d'Echange, *Union des Femmes*, LY22, A.H.G.

Franco-Prussian war, was a city-wide, primarily working class uprising against a French national government widely considered to be reactionary and repressive. With the French army surrounding Paris, and the Commune's National Guard defending the revolutionary city, the *Union des Femmes* participated in the city's defense, while working toward its perceived socialist future. The Commune fell at the end of May 1871, as the French army stormed Paris, attacked the peoples' barricades, and slaughtered over 25,000 Parisians.

The *Union des Femmes* attempted to surmount the contradictions between a capitalist past, an uncertain present, and an ideally conceived future. Emphasizing working women's need for economic independence, they established a socialist and feminist organization intended to fundamentally alter economic, social and gender relations. However, the all-male government of the Commune, which included representatives from conflicting socialist factions, tended toward reformist rather than truly revolutionary positions, such as allowing the continued presence of capitalist enterprise within Paris. The *Union des Femmes* thus operated within a transitional and discrepant milieu, constructing a feminist critique of both the old and the newly developing worlds.

During the Commune, activist women essentially focused their rhetorical and programmatic attacks on three fronts: the bourgeoisie, which exploited women economically, physically and sexually; male workers, who enforced gender divisions of labor and often accused female workers of "stealing" men's jobs; and the Catholic Church, which undercut wages and prices with its convent-run workshops. Socialist and feminist critiques emerged from the *Union des Femmes*' leader Elizabeth Dmitrieff, the social critic Paule Mink, and the flamboyant revolutionary Louise Michel, as well as from working women in political clubs. While the sophistication and theoretical base of their positions varied widely, the language of an *oratrice* at the *Club de la Trinité* captured the essence of female Communardes' optimism and exaltation. "Citoyennes (...) tomorrow you will be in the service of yourselves and not your masters (...) Prolétaires, you will be reborn. Frail women, you will nourish yourselves, clothe yourselves, you will become the powerful generators of a strong race."<sup>8</sup>

Activist women sought freedom, strength, and the option of economic independence. In the heady hours of the Commune, all things seemed within reach.

The *Union des Femmes* stands as one of the Commune's most clearly deli-

8 Quoted in Baron Marc de Villiers, *Histoire des Femmes et des Légions d'Amazones, 1793-1848-1871*, Paris 1910, 397-398.

neated and effective organizations.<sup>9</sup> Established in early April by the twenty year old Russian emigré, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, the association exhibited a sophistication and ideological clarity unique among its contemporaries. Dmitrieff understood the complexity of working class women's subjection. The multi-faceted *Union des Femmes*' program included reordering production relations into producer-owned cooperatives, to end the exploitative owner/laborer relationship, as well as attempting to eradicate intra-class, inter-gender conflict regarding women's right to work.<sup>10</sup> The *Union des Femmes* introduced a program intended to provide all women with immediate paid work, while initiating a long-term plan toward the restructuring and revaluing of women's labor. Concurrently, they established "definitive resolutions for the formation, in every *arrondissement*, of committees to organize the movement of women for the defense of Paris."<sup>11</sup> They also appointed a Provisional Central Committee, consisting of Dmitrieff and seven women workers, or *ouvrières*: Adélaïde Valentin, Noémie Colleville, Marcand (or Marquant), Sophie Graix, Joséphine Pratt, Céline Delvainquier, and Aimée Delvainquier.<sup>12</sup> A committee of representatives elected from each *arrondissement* subsequently replaced this group.<sup>13</sup>

Elisabeth Dmitrieff was the only provisional Central Committee member not identified as a "worker." Born November 1, 1850, in the Russian province Pskov, she was the "illegitimate" daughter of Louka Kouchelev, an aristocratic landowner and former army officer, and Natalia-Carolina Troskiévitch, a young nurse.<sup>14</sup>

9 I concur with the late Eugene Schulkind, one of the earliest historians to consider the Union des Femmes, in his assertion that "the Union (...) appears to have been the largest and most influential organization among the population of Paris during the Commune." Socialist Women During the 1871 Paris Commune, in: Past and Present 106 (February 1985), 124-163, Schulkind first wrote on the subject in 1950. Eugene Schulkind, *Le rôle des femmes dans la Commune de 1871*, in: 1848, *Revue des révolutions contemporaines* 42 (February 1950), 15-29.

10 The following documents are all held in the A.H.G., Paris. Statuts, *Union des Femmes pour la défense de Paris et les soins aux blessés*, LY 22; Adresse du Comité Central, LY22; Statuts généraux des associations productives fédérés des travailleuses, LY 22; Projet d'organisation pour le travail des femmes, LY 22; Annexe au projet de création d'ateliers pour les femmes, LY 22.

11 *L'Opinion Nationale*, April 12, 1871.

12 Adresse des citoyennes à la Commission Exécutive de la Commune de Paris, *Journal Officiel*, April 14, 1871.

13 Of the provisional committee members, only Marquant, a sewing machine operator from the 3rd *arrondissement*, was elected to the Central Committee. Curiously, none of the other women appear on the final committee lists of any *arrondissement*. They may have continued their involvement as rank and file members.

14 Troskiévitch, a German-born Protestant, changed her name from her given "Carolina," to the Russian "Natalia" upon her conversion to Russian Orthodoxy, a prerequisite to marrying Kouchelev. Sylvie Braibant, Elisabeth Dmitrieff. *Aristocrate et pétroleuse*, Paris 1993, 22-26.

Although the two eventually married in 1856, when Kouchelev died in 1859 his will referred to Elisabeth and her three siblings as merely his "wards," making them recipients of his wealth, but not his title. Kouchelev sought to protect his noble title from the taint of his own "bastards." Despite this act, Elisabeth and her siblings received excellent educations in a setting of substantial privilege.<sup>15</sup>

Dmitrieff became involved in St. Petersburg's young intellectual circles in the late 1860s, a period of great political and social ferment. Earlier in the decade, activist Russian women began attending university lectures, demanding equal access to education. The government responded by expressly outlawing women's enrollment in courses or attendance at lectures. Consequently, women could attain a university education only by leaving the country, a problem compounded by the extreme difficulty of an unmarried woman traveling abroad alone.<sup>16</sup> To circumvent this barrier, Dmitrieff, as many other members of the female intelligentsia, entered into a *marriage blanc*, a marriage in name only. The "married" woman could then travel freely; she and her cooperative "husband" would go their separate ways.<sup>17</sup> In 1867, Dmitrieff married Colonel Mikhail Tomanovsky, an agreeable, unwell, older man. Elisabeth Koucheleva Tomanovskaia subsequently left Russia for Switzerland.<sup>18</sup>

In Geneva, Elisabeth joined both the new Russian emigré section and a women's section of the First International (International Working Men's Association). She also participated in organizing workers' cooperatives.<sup>19</sup> The Russian section chose her as an envoy to Karl Marx, who had recently agreed to represent them to the International's General Council in London. On December 12, 1870, the 20 year old Dmitrieff presented Marx with a letter of introduction from the section.

Permit us to recommend to you our excellent friend, Madame Éliisa Tom[anovskaia], sincerely and profoundly devoted to the Russian revolutionary cause (...) Mme. Éliisa will report to us (...) all of the information and impressions which she will gather from

15 Their educations included piano lessons and some radical political tracts from their distant cousin, Modest Moussorgsky. Braibant, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, as in fn. 14, 22-34; Vassili Soukholmine, *Deux femmes Russes combattantes de la Commune*, in: *Cahiers Internationaux* 16 (May 1950), 53-62.

16 Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*, Princeton 1978, 29-49.

17 Soukholmine, *Deux femmes Russes*, as in fn. 15, 55-56.

18 Woodford McClellan, *Revolutionary Exiles. The Russians in the First International and the Paris Commune*, London 1979, 98-99; Braibant, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, as in fn. 14, 58-59.

19 McClellan, *Revolutionary Exiles*, as in fn. 18, 99.

immersing herself in the organization of workers' societies, and of the political and social life of England.<sup>20</sup>

Elisabeth's experiences with organizing workers' associations in Geneva and London prepared her for her ensuing work in Paris. Marx apparently grew to trust and respect her. With the declaration of the Commune, Elisabeth became Marx' envoy to Paris, the "Correspondent of the General Council." Under the pseudonym Dmitrieff, she arrived in Paris by March 29.<sup>21</sup> Less than two weeks later, she had organized the *Union des Femmes*.<sup>22</sup>

The day after the *Union des Femmes* first met on April 11, an editorialist of the Communist newspaper *Le Vengeur*, proclaimed: "I have seen three revolutions, and for the first time I have seen the women involve themselves with resolution (...) It seems that this revolution is precisely theirs, and that in defending it, they defend their true future."<sup>23</sup>

Inspired by the "Appeal to the Women Citizens of Paris," this unnamed commentator lauded the *Union des Femmes*' plans to actively defend revolutionary Paris. At the *Union des Femmes*' second meeting, on April 13, the Provisional Central Committee, headed by Dmitrieff, expanded and defined its defense strategy. They issued the "Address from the *Citoyennes* to the Executive Commission of the Commune," requesting practical, organizational assistance, including meeting spaces and printing funds. The "Address" explained "that a serious revolutionary organization, of a strength capable of giving effective and vigorous aid to the Pa-

20 Comité de la section Russe à Karl Marx, 9 décembre, 1870, quoted in Singer-Lecocq, *Rouge Elisabeth*, 112–115.

21 Dmitrieff was the masculine form of her paternal grandmother's maiden name, Dmitrieva, a rather common Russian surname. The pseudonym proved extremely valuable in her subsequent escape from Paris, making it impossible for police and military authorities to find any information about her during the post-Commune repression. Singer-Lecocq, *Rouge Elisabeth*, as in fn. 20, 116–129; P. Tcherednitchenko, *La Vie générale et mouvementée d'Elisa Tomanovskaia (...)*, in: *Études Soviétiques* 87 (June 1955), 59–64.

22 I disagree with Martin Johnson's contention, in *The Paradise of Association*, that the *Union des Femmes* emerged as a result of several failed marches to Versailles by women supporting the Commune in its earliest days. As Johnson argues, these attempts clearly "appeal[ed] to the historical memory" of women's revolutionary participation, harkening back to the 1789 October Days' women's march on Versailles. This most likely contributed to women's subsequent participation in the *Union des Femmes*. However, he underestimates Dmitrieff's fundamental role in forming the organization. Martin Johnson, *The Paradise of Association. Political Culture and Popular Organizations in the Paris Commune of 1871*.

23 Quoted in Braibant, *Elisabeth Dmitrieff*, as in fn. 14, 114.

ris Commune, will only be able to succeed with the aid and cooperation of the government of the Commune."<sup>24</sup>

The nascent association conceived of itself as related to, and dependent upon, the municipal government – the Commune. Under Elisabeth Dmitrieff's definite direction, the Provisional Central Committee identified the necessity of organizing women to support the Commune. They also recognized the coexistent opportunity for bettering working women's lot. Military and medical concerns remained an integral aspect of the organization's program. However, for the next six weeks, until the Versailles troops invaded Paris and crushed the Commune, issues regarding the reorganization of women's work and the abolition of economic inequities, in terms of both gender and class, dominated the *Union des Femmes*' agenda.

Addressing the fundamental import of women's access to economically viable labor, Dmitrieff couched the *Union des Femmes*' practical requests in a feminist, socialist critique. In the Central Committee's *Adresse des citoyennes*, she argued

That the Commune, representative of the great principle proclaiming the annihilation of all privilege, of all inequality, should be simultaneously engaged in taking into account the just demands of the entire population, without distinction of sex, a distinction created and maintained by the need for antagonism on which the privileges of the governing classes rest.<sup>25</sup>

Her social critique propounded that class and gender inequity were fundamentally intertwined: the ruling classes required inter-gender conflict to maintain their rule. That this rule rested on the "distinction of sex" which was "created and maintained" by the bourgeoisie, inferred an understanding of capitalism and patriarchy as fundamentally interrelated. The Committee did not, however, imply that the end of capitalism would mean the end of gender inequity. In this, and other *Union des Femmes*' organizational documents, Dmitrieff, via the Central Committee, clearly explicated the need for specific actions to reorder women's labor, and thus women's positions in the emerging socio-economic order. Her analysis indicates that she considered the Commune, as the inception of a new, egalitarian society, to be an opportunity to repair the inter-gender breach instituted and institutionalized by the bourgeoisie.

Dmitrieff, as many other Commune feminists, bypassed the relatively abstract goals of political rights, and focused on socio-economic issues reflecting the material reality of most women's lives. Primarily emphasizing the reorganization

24 *Adresse des citoyennes*, Journal Officiel, April 14, 1871.

25 *Ibid.*

of labor, they also sought equal pay for equal hours of work, mandatory secular education, and the legalization of divorce. These women believed that the Commune had ushered in a new, socialist society, making questions of suffrage and political liberties irrelevant. Perceiving the Commune as a transitional, embryonic socialist society, they strove for equitable female participation and incorporation in the newly emerging world.<sup>26</sup>

To succeed in this social reconstruction, Dmitrieff promoted the commonality of aims between both sexes, stating that "the triumph of the current struggle, with its goal (...) of complete social renewal to assure the reign of work and justice, has, consequently, equal significance for both female and male citizens."<sup>27</sup>

Dmitrieff considered inter-gender, intra-class conflict detrimental to the progress of all people. This concern appeared again in a subsequent letter to the Commune government's Commission of Labor and Exchange, in which she argued that the attainment of "the annihilation of all competition between workers of the two sexes," required the rather progressive conception of "equal pay for an equal number of hours of work."<sup>28</sup> The elevation of female wages to parity with men's could ameliorate accusations of low-paid women stealing men's jobs, while allowing women opportunities for economic independence. Accomplishing this would have required a complete reconceptualization of the meanings of work for women and men; it directly contradicted the ideology of separate spheres, and the dichotomy of male as supporter, female as dependent.

Dmitrieff's strong emphasis on workers' cooperation stemmed from the recent historical experience of laboring women in Paris and throughout the industrializing world. Many male workers accepted and perpetuated a gendered division of labor, which barred women's access to skilled trades and maintained their wages at a fraction of men's. Rather than ally with female laborers to fight against inequitable wages and conditions, working men viewed women as competitors for a shrinking

26 Kathleen Jones and Françoise Vergès, 'Aux Citoyennes!': Women, Politics and the Paris Commune of 1871, in: *History of European Ideas* 13 (1991), 716-719.

27 Adresse des citoyennes, *Journal Officiel*, April 14, 1871.

28 Adresse du Comité Central, LY 22, A.H.G.



number of positions.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, the de-skilling of labor accelerated these fears.<sup>30</sup>

Over the period of the nineteenth century, a growing number of skilled, male-dominated trades experienced a degree of mechanization and the breakdown from one individual's craft to many people's repetitive toil. Many artisanal trades underwent major production reorganizations as employers broke crafts into many tasks, subcontracted, and put-out aspects of the manufacture. This effectively lowered labor costs while intensifying the exploitation of the laborers.<sup>31</sup> As artisanal crafts became deskilled or mechanized, they no longer required apprenticeship and training, methods by which male-dominated crafts controlled access to their ranks. Employers tended to hire women for these unskilled tasks, replacing male artisans at a significantly reduced wage, and sharpening gender polarizations within the working class. Male craft unions vehemently opposed these changes, not due to the heightened exploitation of laboring women, but because women were taking "male" jobs. Mlle. Bosquet, an orator at an 1868 Parisian public meeting, directly confronted this sex division of labor: "Men do not want to allow us into their work for fear of the competition."<sup>32</sup> Rather than establish solidarity with female workers, male labor organizations pressed for women's exclusion from the labor force.<sup>33</sup>

The combination of inter-gender economic competition and bourgeois gender ideology, with its conceptions of "separate spheres" and "women's place," seriously circumscribed women's labor options. Women's labor was conceptualized as "supplemental" to that of a presumed (male) primary bread winner, effecti-

29 Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, The 'Family Wage': Some Problems for Socialists and Feminists, in: *Capital and Class* 11 (Summer 1980), 53-58; Jane Lewis, The Debate on Sex and Class, in: *New Left Review* 149 (1985); Laura Levine Frader, Women in the Industrial Capitalist Economy, in: Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz and Susan Stuard, eds., *Becoming Visible. Women in European History*, 2nd. ed., Boston 1987, 321-323.

30 Madeleine Guilbert, *Les fonctions de femmes dans l'industrie*. Paris 1965, 42-45; Tony Judt, *Marxism and the French Left. Studies in Labour and Politics in France, 1830-1981*, Oxford 1986, 90-92.

31 William H. Sewell, Jr., *Artisans, Factory Workers, and the Formation of the French Working Class, 1789-1848*, in: Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, eds., *Working Class Formation. Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, Princeton 1986, 51-52.

32 Quoted in Alain Dalotel, Alain Faure and Jean-Claude Freiermuth, *Aux Origines de la Commune. Le mouvement des réunions publiques à Paris 1868-1870*, Paris 1980, 170.

33 Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the 19th Century*, New York 1983, 93-107; Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford 1988, 137-139; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work. A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*, Oxford 1982, 69.

vely guaranteeing their inferior wage levels. Rather than being paid for the labor they performed, female workers received wages according to an "understood" need: they were paid based on what they were (women), rather than on what they did (work).<sup>34</sup>

Expressions of opposition to women's wage labor emerged from France's male dominated labor organizations, as well as from the *International Working Men's Association*. France's eight delegates to the International's 1866 Geneva meeting issued a document, arguing that

From the physical, moral, and social point of view, the labor of women and children in factories must be energetically condemned in principle as one of the most pressing causes of the degeneration of the species, and as one of the most powerful means of demoralization put in place by the capitalist caste.<sup>35</sup>

The male delegates blamed women's (and children's) factory work for "the degeneration of the species", a human crisis which they attributed to a deliberate capitalist plan. By employing women in factories, capitalists ripped mothers and wives away from their families, resulting in dissipated, daunted, malleable workers. In accepting waged work, female laborers could thus be considered guilty of complicity in this socio-economic disaster. The delegates' intense argument reflected an express acceptance of bourgeois gender ideology: no distinction existed between the "labor of women and children," women's natural role rested within the family, and the flourishing of humankind depended upon women's adherence to this position.

Members of the International did not limit their attacks to women's factory work. In 1868, Henri Tolain, one of the International's founders, decried the fate of women, and the nation, when women toiled in workshops. "One pities the demoralization (...) Prostitution increases in industrial nations where women enter the workshop [atelier]. A woman's health is ruined, the atelier causes hysteria."<sup>36</sup>

34 Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman's Wage. Historical Meanings and Social Consequences*, Lexington, KY 1990, 1-19; Barrett and McIntosh, *The Family Wage*, as in fn. 29, 56-68.

35 Quoted in Steven K. Vincent, *Between Marxism and Anarchism. Benoît Malon and French Reformist Socialism*, Berkeley 1992, 15.

36 Quoted in Dalotel, Faure and Freiermuth, *Aux Origines*, as in fn. 32, 172-173. The General Council of the International later expelled Tolain, on April 25, 1871, for refusing to resign his seat in France's National Assembly. The expulsion, written by Friedrich Engels, stated that "Tolain (...) after having been elected to the National Assembly as a representative of the working classes (...) has deserted their cause in the most disgraceful manner (...) the place of every French member of the I.W.M.A. (International Working Men's Association) is undoubtedly on the side of the

Any wage labor outside of the home, whether in a factory or a workshop, therefore endangered both women and society as a whole. Laboring women transgressed physical and moral boundaries, confines based on bourgeois conceptions of gender propriety, accepted and perpetuated by working class and socialist men. Tolain's contention that "the atelier caused hysteria," prefigured the late nineteenth century fascination with psycho-sexual analyses.<sup>37</sup> By entering the workshop, a woman undertook an unnatural, unfeminine role, effectively destroying her innately fragile constitution. Physically and emotionally undone, she fell prey to the ultimate feminine disorder: hysteria.

Tolain, like many French socialists and members of the International, espoused the views of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, a fervid misogynist who contended that "at the workshop, as in the family, she [woman] remains a minor and is not a part of the citizenship."<sup>38</sup> Proudhon's anti-woman expressions extended well beyond those of most of his adherents.<sup>39</sup> He professed that

Between woman and man (...) there is no real society. Man and woman are not companions. The differences between the sexes places a wall between them, like that placed between animals (...) Consequently, far from advocating what is called the emancipation of woman, I would be inclined (...) to exclude her from society.<sup>40</sup>

Proudhon exemplified an extreme anti-feminist position in advocating women's exclusion from society, yet this indicates the acceptable rationale for circumscribing women's economic options. A being so fundamentally different from man could, and should, live in a distinct, separate world. Women's programmatic exclusion from wage labor, therefore, presented a logical corollary of these ideas.

Debates over waged work focused on women stepping out of the private, female sphere and into the workshop and factory. In the pre-Commune era, male critics

Commune of Paris and not in the usurpatory and counter-revolutionary Assembly of Versailles." This reflected the reality that many of the first workers elected as representatives, tended to be neither socialist nor labor activists, but rather democrats supportive of bourgeois parties. Quoted in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, Moscow 1971, 235.

37 Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux*, Los Angeles 1992, 11 and 100-101.

38 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *De la création de l'ordre dans l'humanité ou principes d'organisation politique*, quoted in: Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the 19th Century*, Albany 1984, 153-154. For Henri Tolain, see M. Egrot and J. Maitron, *Dictionnaire Biographique de Mouvement Ouvrier Français*, Deuxième partie: 1864-1871, vol. 9, Paris 1971, 218-221.

39 A few, including the male Communards Benoît Malon and Léo Frankel, accepted Proudhon's socialism while completely rejecting his conceptions of gender.

40 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* Paris 1966, 274-275.

rarely analyzed the reality of women performing paid labor in their homes as part of the "putting-out" system.<sup>41</sup> As a third locus of labor, the home, clearly within the private sphere, suggested an "ideal" situation where mother and family remained together. Jules Simon, author of *L'Ouvrière*, an extremely influential study of women's labor, argued for the "superiority, from the point of view of morality, of homework over work in workshops."<sup>42</sup> He contended that

The father has no need to remain among his family all day (...) But if the mother takes the same road as her husband, leaving the youngest child in a day nursery, sending the oldest to school or an apprenticeship, it is against nature, all suffer: the mother removed from her children, the child deprived of (...) the mother's tenderness, the husband profoundly feeling the abandonment and isolation of all he loves.<sup>43</sup>

Simon did not argue against women earning wages, but rather against their "abandoning" the home and family. In the face of industrial social degeneration, women's "morality," their adherence to the domestic, private sphere, determined the fate of family and society. For Simon, this superseded all other concerns.<sup>44</sup> He proceeded,

If we lament women's entrance into manufacture, it is not that the material conditions are very bad (...) The room where she works, compared to her home, is pleasant; it is well ventilated, clean, and gay. She receives a higher salary (...) What thus is wrong? It is that the woman, once a worker, is no longer a woman.<sup>45</sup>

Simon contended that a woman loses her sex by laboring in the public sphere. Prioritizing ideology over economics, his bourgeois social-reformist view stood distinctly removed from working class women's experience.

Many Parisian women labored in their homes, but they did so based on economic reality rather than an acceptance of bourgeois gender ideology. Few working class women enjoyed the privilege of choice. In 1871, the majority of Paris' female workers labored in textile-related trades. Women frequently produced under the "putting-out" system. By "putting-out" a phase of production to people laboring in their homes, manufacturers minimized overhead, eliminated "down time" via

41 By the end of the nineteenth century, women's 'homework' became a subject of enormous study and concern. For a fascinating analysis, see Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work*, Princeton 1996, 46-73.

42 Jules Simon, *L'Ouvrière*, as in fn. 42, Paris 1871, 61. The work was first published in 1860.

43 *Ibid.*, 81.

44 Coffin, *Politics of Women's Work*, as in fn. 41, 66-69.

45 Simon, *L'Ouvrière*, as in fn. 42, IV-V.

piece work, and effectively maintained a reserve army of labor for the busy season. This system particularly suited garment production because of its extreme seasonality. And while it did have advantages for working women, such as retaining an element of control over their time, and, for women with children, avoiding the problem of finding childcare, the intensive and erratic nature of homework often posed the highest form of exploitation.<sup>46</sup>

Feminist and socialist women reacted against the multiple forms of gender-based discrimination during the Second Empire's final years. In 1868, at a series of Parisian public meetings concerning the *travail des femmes* (women's work), female speakers defended the essential nature of women's right to work.<sup>47</sup> A woman named Randier confronted the International's anti-feminist position, demanding, "Are we to be free, yes or no? (...) The International (...) confines us within the family and declares us inferior to man." She questioned their aims: how could women be included in the International's stated goal of the "complete emancipation of the working class," if they remained "confined," and considered "inferior?"<sup>48</sup>

A future Commune, the feminist social critic Paule Mink, lectured at one of these public meetings, addressing the interwoven, dual subjugation females faced as both wage laborers and women. She argued that

In denying women the right to work, you drag her down, you put her under the yoke of man, and you totally surrender her to men's pleasure. In preventing her from becoming a worker, you take her liberty hostage, and consequently, destroy her responsibility (...) she will no longer be a free and intelligent creature, but only a reflection, a detail of her husband.<sup>49</sup>

46 Madeleine Guilbert and Viviane Isambert-Jamati, *Travail féminin et travail à domicile. Enquête sur le travail à domicile de la confection féminin dans la région parisienne*, Paris 1956, 11–19, and 24–26.

47 Between 1868 and 1870, in the wake of the Emperor's 1868 laws liberalizing the press, speech, and association, Parisians held hundreds of public meetings addressing social, economic, political, and gender-related issues. For an analysis of these meetings, and their influence on future Communards, and on the formation of the Commune, see Dalotel, Faure and Friermuth, *Aux Origines*, as in fn. 32.

48 *Ibid.*, 170; James Guillaume, *L'Internationale: documents et souvenirs, 1864–1878*, Paris 1905, 15. These public meetings, although dominated by men, attracted 'a great number' of female orators and audience members, including the future Commune, André Léo, Paule Mink and Maria Verdu. For questions of women's work, see Dalotel, Faure and Friermuth, *Aux Origines*, as in fn. 32, 168–178.

49 Paule Mink, 'Le travail des femmes,' discours prononcé par Madame Paule Mink à la réunion publique de Vauxhall le 13 juillet 1868, in: Alain Dalotel, ed., *Paule Mink. Commune et féministe, 1839–1901*, Paris 1968, 120–122.

Mink described women's denigration, dehumanization, and ultimately, dissipation when barred from access to economic independence. Impeding a woman's right to work "drag[s] her down" to a position of complete objectification. Her humanity comes into question when, like a beast, she is "put (...) under the yoke of man." Finally, she ceases to exist, becoming "only a reflection, a detail of her husband."<sup>50</sup> Mink portrayed a hideous downward spiral, the result of economic disempowerment, leading to social, and ultimately individual, disintegration.

Mink recognized the potential empowerment that paid labor could provide for women, and yet she also understood how the existing conditions of work, under the Second Empire's developing capitalist system, rarely allowed the fulfillment of this possible liberty. In her 1869 critique of French society, *Les mouches et les araignées* (The Flies and the Spiders), Mink likened employers to the predatory spider, and laborers to the entrapped fly.

The fly is the miserable laborer, obliged to submit to all the terrible conditions created by the proprietor, because the unfortunate worker is without resources (...) The fly is the modest young girl who wishes to remain well-behaved and to live honestly from her work, but who is only able to find work by giving in to the shameful desires of the employer.<sup>51</sup>

Mink illustrated working women's triply exploited position, enduring class, gender, and sexual oppression. The dearth of options for economic survival perpetuated women's vulnerable, often desperate situations.

In the *Union des Femmes'* attempts to employ working women displaced by war and economic dislocation, Elisabeth Dmitrieff emphasized the importance of focusing on "the crafts essentially practiced by women." Garment-related trades dominated her list, including haberdashers, glove-makers, bandage rollers, linen makers, and embroiderers.<sup>52</sup> To utilize this labor force, Dmitrieff asked that the Central Committee be "charged with the reorganization and distribution of women's work in Paris, beginning by allowing them [the *Union*] to produce military uniforms."<sup>53</sup> Although war and revolution suspended much of Paris' usual production and trade, the Commune's army, the Parisian National Guard, generated a substantial demand for textile-related goods.

50 Ibid.

51 During the Second Empire, Mink published a weekly paper also entitled 'Les mouches et les araignées'. Idem, *Les mouches et les araignées*, in: Dalotel, Paule Minck, as in fn. 49, 50.

52 She also specified book-binders, doll makers, umbrella assemblers, glass blowers, and porcelain painters.

53 Adresse du Comité Central, LY 22, A.H.G.

To meet this immediate need, and to develop a long-term, sustainable, self-supporting structure for women's labor, the *Union des Femmes* strove to

assure the product to the producer by establishing free producers' associations, operating various industries to their collective profit (...) the formation of these associations, by freeing labor from the yoke of capitalist exploitation, will finally assure workers the control of their own affairs.<sup>54</sup>

To facilitate this process, Dmitrieff requested that the Commission of Labor and Exchange "make available, to the federated producers' associations, the sums needed to operate the factories and workshops abandoned by the bourgeoisie."<sup>55</sup> The Commission of Labor and Exchange agreed to finance Dmitrieff's proposal. The *Union des Femmes*' Central Committee immediately commenced to develop a detailed structure and strategy to implement their program. Garment production fell within the realm of women's "traditional" tasks. Working women's various specializations involved skill-levels ranging from the production of fine lingerie and tapestries, to bleaching fabrics and laundering clothes.<sup>56</sup> In their efforts to alter production processes and relations, activist women critiqued the extant conditions of this work. The Communarde André Léo observed that

Generally, needlework is considered physically easy labor. This is erroneous (...) In a working woman, the circulation of blood is always inactive, the vital warmth very weak, the appetite poor or irregular (...) anemia, illnesses of the chest or stomach, are the frequent results of this exhausting labor (...) performed continuously for 12 to 14 hours.<sup>57</sup>

Thus the traditional, acceptable female labor clearly contradicted conceptions of the "gentle" tasks of womanhood.<sup>58</sup>

The *Union des Femmes* perpetuated the French socialist tradition of championing producer-owned cooperatives and workers' associations. The legacy included a mix of revolutionary and reformist socialist proponents: Louis Blanc and

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Le Comité du 10e Arrondissement de l'Union des femmes, LY 22, A.H.G.; Le Comité du 3e Arrondissement de l'Union des femmes, LY 22, A.H.G..

57 André Léo, *La Siège*, Mémoires, 72, Descaves Collection, International Institute for Social History (I.I.S.H.), Amsterdam. André Léo was the pseudonym of writer Leodile Bera Champseix. The pseudonym derives from her twin sons' names, André and Léo.

58 Briot à Ministre de la Guerre, LY 7, A.H.G.; Louise Tilley, Paths of Proletarianization. Organization of Production, Sexual Division of Labor and Women's Collective Action, in: *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7 (1981), 402-405.

Phillipe-Benjamin-Joseph Buchez advocated state-assisted cooperation; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon promoted workers' mutualist associations, while opposing strikes or revolutionary upheaval; and Louis-Auguste Blanqui supported cooperative associations as an ultimate replacement for the state.<sup>59</sup> Within the labor movement, trade socialists since 1830 had endeavored to emancipate workers from wage labor by forming producer-owned cooperatives, seeking the collective ownership of the means of production within a federation of trades.<sup>60</sup> Members of the Commune government, including the essentially Proudhonian (although feminist) Benoît Malon and the Blanquist Victor Jaclard, also promoted the cooperatives.<sup>61</sup> The *Union des Femmes* appropriated various influences from these differing, yet overlapping, socialisms. They designed an organization primarily based on Proudhonian federalism, but whose centralization of authority reflected Dmitrieff's Marxian influences.

In developing their socialist program, the *Union des Femmes* produced a feminist critique of the era's social and labor theories. By appropriating aspects of these positions to form a feminist organization, these Commune women rejected the male-centered intent of the theorists, and, particularly in the case of Proudhon, the specifically anti-female programs they posited. The *Union des Femmes*, and particularly Dmitrieff, confronted the contradictions inherent in socialist labor theories which refused to recognize the essential and permanent nature of women's work. They did not, however, address the apparent contradictions in combining various, and often contradictory socialisms. Proudhonism again presents the most obvious example, as the *Union des Femmes* adapted his anti-revolutionary, anti-female mutualism to a revolutionary feminist organization.

The *Union des Femmes*' organizational documents indicate a city-wide association, its authority centralized in a representative Central Committee and a paid Executive Commission. On April 17, the Provisional Central Committee posted a notice of the *Union des Femmes*' "third public meeting, on Friday, April 21." They invited "all the *citoyennes* devoted to the cause of the people, to join their efforts with those of the committee to definitively organize their work."<sup>62</sup> The actual contribution of women attending this meeting remains indeterminate,

59 G.D.H. Cole, *Socialist Thought: The Forerunners, 1789-1850*, London 1953, 61, 79, 164-165, and 178-179; Vincent, *Between Marxism and Anarchism*, as in fn. 35, 10.

60 Bernard Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement 1830-1914. The Socialism of Skilled Workers*, Berkeley 1976, 2-5.

61 Both Malon and Jaclard also belonged to the International. Vincent, *Between Marxism and Anarchism*, as in fn. 35, 9-10; and William Serman, *La Commune de Paris*, Paris 1986, 59-65.

62 Avis, *Murailles Politiques*, 305.



as the organization's structure and goals already stood in place.<sup>63</sup> Based upon the consistency and sophistication of the plan, we can hypothesize that Elisabeth Dmitrieff, drawing on her experiences in Geneva and London, supplied the group with a rather evolved, highly centralized, organizational framework.

The representative Central Committee, elected to "assume the general direction" of the *Union des Femmes*, "received reports from the arrondissement committees, gave instructions, [and] met with its respective committees." Considered the "vital link between their *arrondissement*" and the center, they reported daily to the Executive Commission of the Central Committee. Its paid administrative branch, the Executive Commission "does not represent any *arrondissement*; they execute the decisions of the Central Committee."<sup>64</sup> Six out of seven of the Executive Commission members did, however, represent *arrondissements* as members of the Central Committee, indicating their acceptance of two distinct, yet interrelated roles. Only Elisabeth Dmitrieff, an "auxiliary member," did not represent an *arrondissement*.<sup>65</sup>

The Executive Commission consisted of: Nathalie Le Mel, a bookbinder; Blanche Lefebvre, a milliner; Marceline Leloup and Adèle Gauvin, seamstresses; Aline Jacquier, a bookstitcher; Jarry, whose first name and vocation are unknown; and Elisabeth Dmitrieff, the "auxiliary member."<sup>66</sup> Although an estimated 1,000 Communardes accepted their proposals and joined the *Union des Femmes*,<sup>67</sup> the association's top down, centralized structure may have alienated high profile female writers and activists, such as André Léo, Paule Mink, Anna Krukovskaya Jaclard, and Louise Michel. Of these women, only André Léo participated in the organization; she did so, in a limited capacity, as a 17th *Arrondissement* Committee member.<sup>68</sup> Both Léo and Anna Jaclard appeared on an 18th *Arrondissement* Com-

63 Appel aux citoyennes, Journal Officiel, April 11, 1871.

64 Comité Central, Union des Femmes, LY 22, A.H.G.

65 Membres des Comités, Union des femmes, LY 23, A.H.G.; Mairie du IVe Arrondissement, Murailles politiques, 546.

66 At least one public notice, the May 17 Appel aux Ouvrières, listed a woman, Collin, (first name and arrondissement unknown) as an Executive Commission member, in place of Adèle Gauvin. Appel aux Ouvrières, Murailles Politiques, 522; Membres des Comités, A.H.G.;

67 This number represents an extrapolation and approximation from existing fragmentary evidence, including: Membres des Comités, A.H.G.; Commune Sociale de Paris: Union des Femmes, A.H.G.; Comité du 7e arrondissement: Organisation du Travail, A.H.G.; Comité du 10e, A.H.G.; Onzième arrondissement, Union des Femmes, A.H.G.; Octavie Tardif à la commission de Travail et de l'Echange, A.H.G.; Bureau de Renseignements du Travail et de l'Echange, A.H.G.; Thomas, Women Incendiaries, 74, 75, and 86.

68 Appel Aux Citoyennes (4 Mai), reprinted in: Jean Bruhat, Jean Dautry and Émile Tersen, La Commune de 1871, Paris 1970, 189.

mittee list, but no evidence corroborates their participation in this group.<sup>69</sup> Consistent with Dmitrieff's roster of female trades (in her letter to the Commission of Labor and Exchange), the Central Committee, as a whole, reflected the predominance of "needle trades," with thirteen of its eighteen members (there were no representatives from either the 2nd or 15th *arrondissements*) engaged in textile-related work.<sup>70</sup> The Committee functioned as a "powerful coordinator for the organization [of women's labor]." Their clearly delineated and highly structured "Women's Labor: Organizational Plan," called for a city-wide federation of producer-owned cooperatives, built upon the twenty *arrondissement* committees.<sup>71</sup> Once established, the workers' federation would remain a subsidiary of the *Union des Femmes*. The plan proposed the creation of eleven-member *Comités d'Arrondissements*: "the *arrondissement* committees will each name five members," forming a delegation of one hundred representatives, to "cooperate in the completion of the federation of working women's associations."<sup>72</sup> This group of one hundred would subsequently divide into five organizational commissions: Drafting Statutes of Federation, Purchasing, Style Selection, Cashiers-Bookkeepers, and Inquiring into Abandoned Premises. Carefully categorized and cataloged, each commission would address particular issues relevant to the reorganization of women's wage work; together, the commissions encompassed the components which the *Union des Femmes* deemed necessary to construct a federation of producer-owned cooperatives.<sup>73</sup>

The Commission for Drafting Statutes of Federation ranked first, based upon "the necessity of forming administrative frameworks for each *arrondissement*." A document entitled "Notes: Women's Labor," explained the rationale and motives behind the final draft of "Women's Labor: Organizational Plan."<sup>74</sup> The "Organizational Plan" directed the Drafting Commission to "join with the Central Committee to discuss the drafts of the statutes, which will be submitted to the *arrondissement* committees and approved by the General Assembly [of the *Union des*

69 Commune Sociale de Paris: Union des Femmes, Union des femmes, LY 22, A.H.G.; Rapport, Femme Jaclard, née Krukovsky, Anna, BA 1123, A.P.P.; Krukovskoy, Anna Corvine, Femme Jaclard, LY 125, A.H.G.

70 The Central Committee consisted of five seamstresses, a sewing-machine operator, a milliner, a linen draper, a dressmaker, a vest-maker, a bookstitcher, a cardboard maker, an embroiderer of military ornaments, a gold-polisher, a bookbinder, and three women without trades. Membres des Comités A.H.G.

71 Travail des Femmes: Plan d'Organisation, Union des Femmes, LY 22, A.H.G.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.; Notes: Travail des Femmes, Union des Femmes, LY 22, A.H.G.

*Femmes*].”<sup>75</sup> This process demonstrated the “democratic centralism” operating in this association. Proposals emanated from above, were vivified by a representative delegation, and finally ratified by the rank and file. The “Notes,” presumably authored by Dmitrieff, although transcribed by another hand, assumed that by the time of the Organizational Plan’s issuance,

Certainly, the municipalities will already have directed the most suitable working women to form an administration; it thus only remains to give them the necessary instructions to understand the federated system; in other words, the groups organize and manage themselves, but are all inter-dependent in terms of profits and losses.<sup>76</sup>

They recognized the local women’s ability to establish a functional foundation, but the elaborated, socialist plan explicitly came from above. The “General Statutes of the Federated Productive Associations of Female Laborers,” which the drafting commission issued, clearly illuminated the extent of this prescription.<sup>77</sup>

The “General Statutes” essentially explicated and codified the assertions presented in the above “Notes.” Specifically, the ten articles of the “General Statutes” detailed the operating rules and procedures for the federation of producer-owned cooperatives. Echoing the “Notes,” Articles Two and Seven of the “General Statutes” decreed:

All female workers’ productive associations in Paris are federated together, and are dependent on the *arrondissement* committees of the *Union des Femmes* (...) The profits and losses of the collective labor are equally distributed among all the members of the association.<sup>78</sup>

The members of the Commission for Drafting Statutes of Federation accepted the prescribed program for organizing women’s labor. This “democratic centralism” indicated a form of cooperative tutelage by the *Union des Femmes* hierarchy, particularly Dmitrieff. While Article Four guaranteed that “each association retains its autonomy for interior administration,” Article Nine assured that “the Central Committee of the *Union des Femmes* (...) will hold the general direction of women’s labor.”<sup>79</sup> The Commune presented Dmitrieff with a revolutionary moment, of un-

75 Travail des Femmes: Plan d’Organisation, A.H.G.

76 Notes: Travail des Femmes, A.H.G.

77 Statuts généraux des Associations productives fédérées des travailleuses, Union des Femmes, LY 22, A.H.G.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

certain duration, to implement her ideas of socialist labor organization.<sup>80</sup> Applying her experiences in Geneva and London, she initiated a federated system intended to meet Communarde women's immediate needs. Although authority rested in the center, all elected positions, including the Central Committee, were revocable by Union members. This plan may have been indicative of Dmitrieff's perception of Communarde women: radicalized, ardent, and intrepid, yet frequently unsophisticated and unschooled. An imposed system and structure would harness working women's revolutionary fervor, limiting popular input in favor of rapid organization and development.

Dmitrieff's strong ties to the International undoubtedly precipitated the General Statutes' first article: "All members of the *Union des Femmes*' productive associations are correspondingly members of the International Workingmen's Association, and will be responsible for paying its monthly dues."<sup>81</sup> Dmitrieff intended to take the cooperatives beyond their city-wide associations, and into an internationalist milieu. The General Statutes established a framework to "put them in contact with similar associations in France and other countries, in order to facilitate the export and exchange of products." They hoped to surmount national barriers and connect workers of many nations.

Maintaining contact with the International in London, Dmitrieff promoted internationalism and social revolution. In a letter to Hermann Jung, the Swiss delegate to the International in London, she apprised him of "the great success (...) of the internationalist propaganda I have been conducting, with a view to demonstrating that all countries, including Germany, are on the eve of a social revolution; this propaganda pleases many of the women."<sup>82</sup>

Dmitrieff saw the Commune as a spark to ignite many revolutions. Yet, while agitating locally for international upheaval, Dmitrieff maintained her attention to logistical detail. The General Statutes provided that, in the immediate future, "employment agents and traveling saleswomen" would facilitate the proposed inter-city and international links between workers' associations.<sup>83</sup>

The *Union des Femmes*' "Purchasing Commission," the second of the Organizational Plan's subcommittees, was to "gather information on the most current merchandise," in order to produce salable products for "advantageous markets."<sup>84</sup>

80 Comité Central, A.H.G.; Administration des Comités d'Arrondissement, A.H.G.

81 Ibid.

82 Elisabeth Dmitrieff à Hermann Jung, quoted in: Singer-Lecocq, Rouge Elisabeth, as in fn. XX, 143-146; and in: McClellan, Revolutionary Exiles, as in fn. XX, 156.

83 Statutes généraux, A.H.G.

84 Travail des Femmes: Plan d'Organisation, A.H.G.

Composed of five delegates to the Central Committee, it also included members of the Commune's Commission of Labor and Exchange "who possess special knowledge of fabrics and other raw materials." As requested by Dmitrieff, the Commission of Labor and Exchange would provide financial support; the *Union des Femmes* received "a weekly credit for each municipality to immediately initiate the organization of women's labor." In turn, they demanded oversight. No purchases could be made "without previously consulting (...) Labor and Exchange."<sup>85</sup>

The project's success required the monetary assistance of the Commune. The *Union des Femmes* demanded that "These *citoyennes*, these mothers, lack work and resources, and the Commune (...) will fail in its mandate if it does not immediately find the means to satisfy their legitimate needs."<sup>86</sup>

In one of the few instances where they used the traditional equation of woman as mother, the women imposed a moral imperative on the members of the Commune. As the embodiment of "the new order of equality, solidarity, and liberty," they held ultimate responsibility for "the completion of the peoples' victory." To this end, the *Union des Femmes*' polemical pronouncement, "The Proposal for the Organization of Women's Labor," proclaimed: "The Commune bears the strict duty, vis à vis the workers, from whom they emanate, of taking all measures necessary to bring about a decisive result."<sup>87</sup> This "decisive result" clearly included rectifying the "terrible crisis" of working women's lives.<sup>88</sup>

Although male suffrage elected the Commune, these *citoyennes* considered the

85 Ibid.

86 *Projet d'organisation pour le travail des femmes*, Union des Femmes, LY 23, A.H.G.

87 Contemporary editors and authors attribute the authorship of this document to different sources, although none have raised this as a point of contention. I argue that the "Projet d'organisation pour le travail des femmes" is a Union des Femmes work. It is clearly a draft, and it is unsigned. Several scholars attribute the four page work to a male member of the Commission of Labor and Exchange, primarily due to a note on the first page which reads, "good for printing 200 copies, B. Malon." Malon, a member of Labor and Exchange, signed this printing authorization, but the document is written in another hand. His note indicates that the Commune paid for the Union des Femmes' printing costs, as they had requested in the "Address from the *Citoyennes* to the Executive Commission of the Commune." In his memoirs, Malon indicates nothing of his, or his commission's, contribution of any specific plans or objectives to the organization. Benoît Malon, *La Troisième défaite du prolétariat français*, Neuchâtel 1871, 272-281; *Projet d'organisation*, A.H.G.; *Adresse des citoyennes*, *Journal Officiel*, April 14, 1871; Maitron, ed., *Dictionnaire Biographique*, as in fn. 38, 230-234. The works quoting, or excerpting, the *Projet d'organisation*, include: Jacques Rougerie, ed., *Procès des Communards*, Paris 1964, 228-229; Stewart Edwards, ed., *The Communards of Paris, 1871*, London 1973, 124-125; Thomas, *Women Incendiaries*, 81; Schulkind, *Socialist Women*, as in fn. 9, 150; and Braibant, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, as in fn. 14, 146-148. Only Thomas and Braibant credit the Union des Femmes with authorship.

88 *Projet d'organisation pour le travail des femmes*, A.H.G.

government as representative of, and responsible to, the entire Parisian working class. Believing that they stood on the threshold of a new, egalitarian socialist society, the *Union des Femmes*, as most Commune women, did not seek female suffrage. They understood society to be in the process of fundamental reorganization, eliminating the need for amending the existing political structure. In the short term, the *Union des Femmes* focused on immediate economic need; in the long term, they endeavored to ensure the inclusion of gender equity in the nascent order. Certain male members of the Commune supported feminist positions, including Léo Frankel, Benoît Malon, and Eugene Varlin, and yet the Commune never independently addressed these concerns.<sup>89</sup> The *Union des Femmes* made specific, tactical demands, and supported them with strong ideological and political assertions.

The federation of producer-owned cooperatives received substantial support from the Commune's Commission of Labor and Exchange. Led by Léo Frankel, a Hungarian-born member of the International, and representative of the 13th *arrondissement*, this Commission proposed fundamental labor reform, similar to the *Union des Femmes* program, but intended for male workers.<sup>90</sup> Dmitrieff and Frankel shared a commonality of interests, presumably reinforcing Labor and Exchange's cooperative stance.

The *Union des Femmes* accepted the Commission of Labor and Exchange's oversight in turn for their funds and expertise, but they deemed temporary their "tutelage under the Commune." The "Annex to the Project Creating Workshops for Women," addressed the "grave question" of autonomy, maintaining the necessity of a "transitional path" to self-sufficiency. Aware that they must "remain subject to the surveillance of the Labor Commission [which is] responsible for their borrowed funds," the *citoyennes* insisted that once financially stable, they would "take full responsibilities for their undertakings."<sup>91</sup>

The *Union des Femmes*' practicality and attention to detail distinctly displayed itself in the Organizational Plan's third commission, the Commission for

89 Benoît Malon à André Léo, July 16, 1868; André Léo, Descaves Collection, I.I.S.H.; Benoît Malon à André Léo, n.d., André Léo, Descaves Collection, I.I.S.H.; Malon, Troisième défaut, 272-281; Léo Frankel, quoted in: Journal Officiel, May 6, 1871; Appel aux ouvrières, Murailles politiques, 522; Léo Frankel, L'émancipation, January 1, 1872, Toulouse, quoted in Schulkind, Socialist Women, as in fn. 9, 137; Eugène Varlin, Commission ouvrière de 1867, ed. Tartaret, quoted in: Schulkind, Socialist Women, as in fn. 9, 144.

90 Assemblée Nationale, Enquête Parlementaire sur l'insurrection du 18 mars. Paris 1872, 533-535; Dictionnaire Biographique, 91-94.

91 Annexe au projet de création d'ateliers pour les femmes, Union des Femmes, LY 23, A.H.G.

Style Selection. Once the Purchasing Commission decided on the most marketable products, "the delegates [of Style Selection] must immediately go to shops to acquire information (...) regarding current models and styles within that specialization."<sup>92</sup>

The Commission for Style Selection consisted of two representatives from seven different trades, including sewing-machine operators, and producers of fine and common linen, children's clothing, layettes, feathers, and flowers. Dmitrieff chose these trades because many Communarde women had originally trained in these skills. For example, of the 356 women listed on the 7th *arrondissement* rolls, 106, or 30% of the members, identified themselves as producers of coarse linen, and 64, or 19%, as fine linen makers; the 71 women of the 10th *arrondissement* included eight producers of coarse linen and two of fine, constituting 14% of the total.<sup>93</sup> Dmitrieff explained that

A considerable number of female workers, forced to leave their original industry because of unemployment, have sought a means of survival in the production of National Guard uniforms (...) However, we must recognize that the Commune will not always have to fill this heavy demand for clothing; this is why it is appropriate to prepare the workers to return to their original industry.<sup>94</sup>

The bourgeois exodus from Paris left many textile workers unemployed; they sought work producing uniforms for the Commune's army, the Parisian National Guard, because it was available during the Commune. Looking forward to a peacetime economy, the *Union des Femmes* attempted to reorganize and reconstruct these particular vocations based on a combination of practical and optimistic considerations.

Linen production presented the *Union des Femmes* with a particular circumstance involving the issue of anti-clericalism: "The convents are enormous competitors in the production of ordinary and luxury linen."<sup>95</sup> Communarde women expressed intense hostility toward women in religious orders, as the *citoyenne* Morel proposed at the May 19th meeting of the *Club Éloi*: "I request that we throw

92 Travail des Femmes: Plan d'Organisation, A.H.G.

93 Comité du 7e Arrondissement, A.H.G.; Le Comité du 10e Arrondissement, A.H.G.

94 Travail des Femmes: Plan d'Organisation, A.H.G.

95 Travail des Femmes: Projet d'organisation sous diverses formes, A.H.G. This states nothing specifically about the *Union des Femmes*. I attribute its connection to the group based on its contents, style, and the structure of its title.

all the nuns in the Seine, so we can be done with them."<sup>96</sup> For decades, French workers resented the competition of, and exploitation by, convent-run workshops. Convent *ateliers* consistently depressed the market price for goods by undercutting competitors. Operating with an essentially captive labor force, the convents' production costs remained below those of workshops utilizing wage workers.<sup>97</sup> The *Union des Femmes* argued, that by "suppressing the convent enterprises, it will be possible to increase salaries [of linen producers]."<sup>98</sup> In 1868, Paule Mink had argued accordingly: "One of the major causes of women's excessively low salaries is exploitation by convents, who monopolize certain types of women's work and set the prices ridiculously low, contributing, on a grand scale, to the diminution of salaries."<sup>99</sup>

Eliminating these "unfair" rivals would allow wages to rise, once producers received a fair price for their goods; the depressed prices of goods pressed wages downward, as labor costs constituted the primary profit-related variable cost.

Convent workshops employed lay as well as clerical women. Families frequently consigned daughters to their tutelage. The nuns served a "protective" role over young female employees, maintaining a rather severe form of *in loco parentis*.<sup>100</sup> Assessing these *ateliers*, Jules Simon observed

It is more than probable that the resident girls are poorly nourished, poorly lodged, poorly cared for when ill (...) thirteen hours a day of work under surveillance, entire Sundays spent in church or school (...) nearly absolute prohibition against communication with the outside, constitutes conditions which frighten the imagination (...) one wonders how this regime differs from that of a prison.<sup>101</sup>

These women worked under constant surveillance to ensure their proper behavior, morality, and, especially, productivity. The convent workshops' rigid structures, harsh conditions, and exploitation of young workers', combined with their price-cutting practices, exacerbated anti-clerical sentiments among the working class.

96 Paul Fontoulieu, *Les Églises des Paris sous la Commune*, Paris 1873, 64.

97 Roger Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class, Volume I: The Age of Artisan Revolution, 1815-1871*. Oxford 1992, 253-258; Persis Hunt, *Feminism and Anti-Clericalism Under the Commune*, in: *Massachusetts Review* 12 (Summer, 1971), 420; Laura Struminger, *Women and the Making of the Working Class: Lyon 1830-1870*, St. Alban's 1979, 57-61.

98 *Travail des Femmes: Plan d'organisation*, A.H.G.

99 Paule Mink, *La Lutte des femmes*, in: Dalotel, Paule Minck, as in fn. 49, 133.

100 Struminger, *Women and Working Class*, as in fn. 97, 8-9 and 55-63; Frader, *Women in Industrial*, as in fn. 29, 322.

101 Simon, *L'Ouvrière*, 58-59.



To Communarde women, the nuns represented the Church's economic and moral oppression. Yet, a nun was also a woman, initially faced with the same limited choices as other women. Religious life presented an economically viable, and socially acceptable, alternative to marriage for women across social strata. Communarde women's resentment and enmity toward the Church's practices and doctrines was frequently fiercely directed against the religion's female emissaries. While Communardes expressed their rhetorical, economic, and sometimes violent wrath toward all levels of the clergy, the nuns, the bottom of the hierarchy, posed the most visible and proximate threat. Their "cutthroat" economic competition, and moral and physical repression, qualified them as prime targets. Extreme anticlericalism blinded Communarde women to the economic pragmatism involved in a poor woman's decision to join the clergy. Most revolutionary women did not blame prostitutes for the social ills of prostitution, but rather sympathized with their plight as "victims" of dire economic circumstances. In contrast, female Communardes did blame nuns for the social ills of the Church, disregarding similar causational factors pressing women into religious life. The prostitute exemplified female victimization, effectively removing the onus of responsibility from these women; the nun, as a conspicuous agent of the despised Church authority, appeared to embody the institution's oppressive power. Communarde women's conceptualization of female clerics omitted the reality of nun's subjugated and repressed existence. The possibility of the economic, social, and gender oppression suffered by nuns, as females, remained unaddressed. In proposing the abolition of convent workshops, the *Union des Femmes* intended to develop a strong, lucrative trade in linen, absent the "unfair" competition of the nuns.

Sewing machine operators formed another priority group for the Commission for Style Selection. The Organizational Plan stated "the sewing machine operators will be able to work in their homes, if the association helps them to own their instrument of labor; they serve in the great division of labor, which in these competitive times, will be able to render sufficient wages."<sup>102</sup>

The Plan's authors understood the sewing machine's significant role in garment production; it could replace hand-work for certain facets of an item's production, effectively reducing time and costs. Because sewing machines replaced primarily unskilled tasks, and not fine hand work, their increased use would create additional work for unskilled women, while doing no harm to skilled needleworkers.<sup>103</sup>

The *Union des Femmes* selected sewing machine operators as a specialization

102 Travail des Femmes: Plan d'Organisation, A.H.G.

103 I am grateful to Louise Tilly for this information.

for long-term development based upon the intended interrelation of trades. For proposed producers' association,

they will be useful to the producers of linen, children's clothing, and [National Guard] military uniforms; it will be the organization's responsibility to distribute work to them, and to pay them.<sup>104</sup>

Sewing machine operators could undertake aspects of production for several trades within the proposed federation of cooperatives. With the cooperatives' financial assistance, sewing machine operators could own their machine and "work in their homes." The *Union des Femmes* was not motivated by the bourgeois ideology of domesticity, in terms of women's proper place in the home, rather, practical economic and social factors would have contributed to this decision. By "own[ing] their instrument of labor," and keeping it in their homes, female sewing machine operators could avoid child care problems, as well as the time and expense of commuting to an atelier. As part of a producer-owned cooperative, these women would have a degree of control over their hours, conditions, and locus of labor.

*Plumes et fleurs*, "feathers and flowers," constituted the final trades specified for the Commission for Style Selection. The Organizational plan stated: "Because feathers and flowers are luxury articles, it is important to prepare a new future for this industry."<sup>105</sup> This trade typified the fine handwork performed by Parisian working women. Laboring in highly seasonal occupations, these artisans suffered "considerable periods of unemployment." The Organizational Plan determined that "they will no longer make the merchandise on commission; and the workers' associations, in the long months of unemployment, will be able to manufacture other products."<sup>106</sup>

The *Union des Femmes* sought an end to the agonizing cycle of seasonality, which "in these two professions (...) had the deadliest results."<sup>107</sup> They served a primarily bourgeois clientele, people able to afford the frill and frivolity of crafted feathers and flowers. Retraining these women would allow them access to a consistent, reliable income, and it would free them from dependence upon the bourgeois fashion cycle. The *Union des Femmes* did not, however, intend to abandon luxury production; although they believed that Paris had inaugurated the new, egalita-

104 Notes: Travail des femmes, A.H.G.

105 Travail des Femmes: Plan d'organisation, A.H.G.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

rian society, the foreign market remained. They expected to compete head on with capitalist producers.

The Organizational Plan's fourth sub-committee, the Commission of Cashiers-Accountants, was "charged with establishing the levels of prices and wages." They would analyze each style of garment slated for production, as determined by the Commission for Style Selection, "including the value of materials used (...) general expenses involved, and labor costs." In calculating prices, the Cashier-Accountants were to "compare with those of the best known Parisian shops, so that the competition will not harm the associations."<sup>108</sup>

The *Union des Femmes* faced competition from privately-owned, capitalist enterprises operating in Paris. The Commune permitted independent businesses to function, as it did the Bank of Paris, as long as they participated in the city's economy and cooperated with the Commune.<sup>109</sup> Relations between these employers and workers remained unaltered. An anonymous *citoyenne* informed the Commission of Labor and Exchange that

A group of women without work, and consequently without bread, are going, at this moment, to seek work with a shameless contractor who will pay them 25 to 35 sous less than the 4 francs the clothing cooperatives pay (...) Is this just? (...) We only ask for our rights, we do not want to be exploited.<sup>110</sup>

Echoing this indignation, another unnamed woman, "an anonymous *citoyenne* from Montmartre," presented Labor and Exchange with a similar example of unequal treatment, querying: "Is what I have come to learn true? Are we under the Empire (...) or under the Commune?"<sup>111</sup> Pressed by Frankel, Malon, and the Commission of Labor and Exchange, the Commune passed a measure on May 12th, determining that "purchasing contracts be directly awarded to workers' cooperatives."<sup>112</sup> They did not, however, dispute member Victor Clément's proposal to "forbid changing the terms of existing contracts" with capitalists.<sup>113</sup> This seriously diluted the socialist nature of the Commune's economy, leaving many

108 Ibid.

109 Déposition de M. de Ploëuc, Enquête parlementaire, 390-399; Georges Bourgin and Gabriel Henriot, eds., Procès-Verbaux de la Commune de 1871, vol. I. Paris 1924, 241.

110 Une citoyenne à Commission de Travail et Échange, Paris, May 9, 1871, LY 23, A.H.G.

111 Une citoyenne de Montmartre à Commission de Travail et Échange, May 12, 1871, LY 22, A.H.G.

112 Georges Bourgin and Gabriel Henriot, eds., Procès-Verbaux de la Commune de 1871, vol. II. Paris 1945, 367.

113 Ibid., 354-355.

workers under the exploitative wage system, and cooperatives directly rivaling capitalist enterprises.

The *Union des Femmes* attempted to compete with capitalist producers on a truly uneven playing field. Although subsidized by the Commune government, cooperatives faced labor costs likely to exceed those of capitalist producers. Capitalist production relied on extracting profit from people's labor; they accomplished this by keeping wages to a minimum. Whether worker-owned cooperatives were willing to pay themselves at depressed rates, or able to find alternative means to lower costs, constituted the salient question of the cooperatives' viability.

The *Union des Femmes*' Organizational Plan, inaugurated prior to the Commune's decree on workers' cooperatives, attempted to deal pragmatically with the shifting economic and political/legal milieu. It equipped the Commission of Cashiers-Accountants with a basic financial formula for developing a realistic wage and price structure, instructing them to analyze fixed and variable costs, as well as competitors' rates. In creating this Commission, the *Union des Femmes* attempted to bridge the gap between a capitalist past, an indeterminate present, and an ideally perceived future.

The Commission for Investigating Abandoned Premises comprised the fifth, and final, subcommittee in the Organizational Plan for women's labor. The Plan stated that "In each *arrondissement* there will be one or several premises chosen, depending upon the requirements for the distribution, the cutting, and the receipt of manufactured goods."<sup>114</sup>

As such, the Commission's objective was "to find abandoned shops which would be usefully employed" by the federation of producer-owned cooperatives. This constituted the final step, the selection of decentralized spaces for production and for sales. In investigating potential sites,

The delegates, accompanied by a ministerial officer, will draft inventories of furniture, equipment, fixtures, etc., which might be contained there. A statement of condition will then be drawn up with the aid of the Commission of Labor and Exchange. This statement and the inventories will be deposited in the permanent archives of the Minister of Public Works.<sup>115</sup>

The *Union des Femmes* proposed an extremely legalistic expropriation, executed under a ministerial officer's watchful eye. Two delegates of the Commission for Investigating Abandoned Premises, the *citoyennes* Desprez and Ringard, repor-

114 Travail des Femmes: Plan d'organisation, A.H.G.

115 Ibid.

ted that they "continued their investigations into properties," including at least four unattended sites in the 10th *arrondissement*.<sup>116</sup> The police commissioner of the Porte St. Martin Quarter certified that these businesses indeed stood empty, in accordance with *Union des Femmes* regulations, and in compliance with the Commune's proclamation on abandoned workshops.<sup>117</sup>

The *Union des Femmes*' procedures reflect a rather un-revolutionary carefulness and respect for private and personal property; this paralleled the Commune government's position. The Commune did not abolish private property. On April 16 they decreed that only property "which had been abandoned by people fleeing their civic duty" could be seized, by reason of their "cowardly desertion." The Commune created an investigative commission to "establish the practical conditions for promptly developing *ateliers*, not for the deserters who have abandoned them, but for the workers who might have been employed there."<sup>118</sup> Although the decree ensured property rights to all who demonstrated even nominal cooperation, the appropriation of abandoned workshops constituted a relatively revolutionary measure. At this stage of the insurrection, the Commune refrained from expropriating and redistributing private or public wealth. Whether their measures would have radicalized over time remains conjecture.

In the Commune's final days, the Executive Commission of the Central Committee posted an "Appeal to Women Workers," inviting "all female workers to meet together, today, May 17 (...) to name delegates from each workers' association to form syndicated chambers [*chambres syndical*], each of which will contribute two delegates to form the Federal Chamber of Working Women."<sup>119</sup>

They envisioned city-wide cooperation amongst female laborers of every trade. The Executive Commission viewed these "syndicated and federated laborers' associations as organizations of workers, in trade specific sections, forming free productive associations, federated between themselves."<sup>120</sup>

The future of the Federal Chamber of Working Women, finalized at an ensuing meeting on May 21,<sup>121</sup> ended abruptly as the Versailles troops invaded Paris on May 22, leaving unanswered the question of the feasibility of the *Union des Femmes*' plans. They had struggled to "facilitate the birth of serious and homo-

116 Rapport des Citoyennes du Comité du 10e Arrondissement déléguées pour la requisition des locaux au Comité Central, *Union des Femmes*, LY 22, A.H.G.

117 Ibid.

118 Journal Officiel, April 17, 1871.

119 Appel aux Ouvrières, *Murailles politiques*, 522.

120 Ibid.

121 Mairie du IVe arrondissement, *Murailles politiques*, 543.

genous groups, to preside at their formation, and, while leaving them free and autonomous, give them the spirit of federation."<sup>122</sup>

And while they clearly made substantial efforts, the Commune's seventy-two day life allowed little time to develop the projected socio-economic metamorphosis.

The *Union des Femmes*' Organizational Plan reflected a revolutionary pragmatism. They attempted to coordinate critical current demands with ideal future aspirations. Operating in a transitional, undefined period, the *Union des Femmes* program combined both revolutionary and reformist components. They called for the fundamental reorganization of production relations, replacing capitalist ownership and wage labor with producer-owned cooperatives. Dmitrieff developed a federated system, combining a highly centralized structure and authority with a degree of local autonomy: essentially, a labor-based democratic centralism. Yet, they still operated in a capitalist driven world: production choices, and wage and price levels depended upon market demands and competition. The organization proposed the expropriation of abandoned properties, but, like the Commune government, ultimately respected private capital and property.

The *Union des Femmes* believed that worker-owned cooperatives could effectively compete with capitalist producers in a somewhat moderated free market. The Commune government's financial and organizational assistance, combined with its agreement to direct all subsequent purchasing contracts to cooperatives, made the federation's potential survival possible. Its viability rested heavily on governmental support. Workers' cooperatives faced competition from exploitative capitalist manufacturers, enterprises which maximized profits via minimizing workers' wages. By carefully selecting and pursuing trades which they determined relevant and profitable, the *Union des Femmes* may have increased their chances of success. Their survival remained dependant upon the laborer-owners' willingness to draw only limited wages; higher pay would require cost reductions and productivity improvements substantial enough to counterbalance increased labor costs. The practical possibility of such advances remains indeterminate.

The *Union des Femmes* presented a feminist socialist critique of capitalist ownership which, in apparent contradiction, yet in accord with the Commune government, allowed for the perpetuation of capitalist relations within their emerging socialist society. However, they unequivocally attacked the economic repercussions of the bourgeois ideology of domesticity and separate spheres. The *Union des Femmes* saw the recognition of their lives as full participants within the public, laboring world as essential to their access to economic independence, which was

122 Travail des Femmes: Plan d'organisation, A.H.G.

their primary goal. This stance suggests reform more than revolution, and yet their program did seek the ultimate eradication of capitalist and patriarchal relations. Facing the immediate reality of working class women's economic need, and their understanding of the Commune as a developing, evolving society, the *Union des Femmes* took a pragmatic and transitional stance, while planning for their ideally conceived future.