

“A Life Stripped of Humanity”: Using the Buffalo Department Store Strike of 1913 as a
Case Study of Abused Pre-World War I Female Department Store Workers

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Imagine this: you are currently working a service job just to make ends meet. It can be Walmart, Petco, McDonald's, the location does not matter. You do not feel that you make enough money to justify your efforts and labor. On top of that, there are odd people who approach you during and off your shift about ways to make a little extra money, whether it be Mary Kay or some other scheme. For many, this frustrating lifestyle is simply a rite of passage. Everyone should work in the service industry at some point, you may hear. It is not luxurious, but it is tolerable, and it brings in much-needed funds to your bank account. Now, imagine the year is 1913, and, as a younger woman, you are looking for a job in the service industry. Many may turn to a job in a department store; it has safer conditions than a factory, and seems like easy money, right? Unfortunately for many women in this field, this could not be farther from the truth. One young woman scraped together a combined income with another sibling to allow the youngest in the family to have access to education and escape the cycle of poverty. Some had to walk twenty minutes through a Buffalo winter – heavy lake-effect snow and temperatures in the teens – just to get to work. And in one case, that odd person offering supplemental income was her boss and the father of her miscarried child that was delivered at work.

These were the conditions of employment in American department stores for many women before World War I. These specific complaints came from employees of several Buffalo, New York department stores in May 1913. Suffering under these conditions, and many other abuses, around 2000 young female clerks decided to go on strike.¹ Their goals were standard for strikes and unions of the time: an eight-hour workday, \$8 a week, and half days on Saturday.² This strike, although relatively minor, did make national headlines during its time and it remains

¹ Esther Packard, "Background Report on Buffalo Department Stores Employees Strike" (Buffalo: Factory Investigating Commission, May 14, 1913), 1, A3017-77. Box 1, Folder 1, New York State Archives, http://digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/42139.

² "Plan Strike in Stores," *Buffalo Morning Press*, May 1, 1913, 6, New York State Library.

important today. Using the conditions experienced by the Buffalo strikers in 1913, this paper will argue that, despite their profession's reputation as genteel, female department store workers of the pre-World War I era labored under abusive conditions and were not too far off from their more famous industrial counterparts. Despite the Buffalo Department Store Workers' Strike of 1913 being largely forgotten by history, it remains a valuable resource to illuminate an underappreciated era – and area – of labor.

Well before the Buffalo strike of 1913, female wage earners suffered under near constant forms of systemic abuse. One of the first areas to hire women laborers on a large-scale, were the New England textile mills of the early nineteenth century. However, as Barbara Wertheimer points out in *We Were There*, these workers were fired with little or no reason whatsoever and worked under conditions that bred diseases like tuberculosis and pneumonia.³ Even at the very outset of American female wage-earning, women were already making themselves susceptible to diseases known to cause death and were working for people who could control their working future on a whim. Around the time of the Civil War came the birth of large retail stores in urban centers of the country. Again, these girls and women almost immediately faced hostile conditions including 112-hour work weeks, being fired after three years, – regardless of work quality – and being paid no salary for the first six months of “training.”⁴ Many of these poor conditions continued over the rest of the nineteenth century and were similar to the complaints of the Buffalo workers in 1913.

³ Barbara M. Wertheimer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 66.

⁴ Although 112 hours sounds impossible, stores were only closed to the public on Sundays and still catered to individual customers and performed inventory work. While 16 hours per day sounds dubious, it is the claim put forward by Wertheimer. Wertheimer, 156–57.

Despite a jump in time, much of the conditions for the working female in America, did not change significantly between the immediate aftermath of the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth century. Some of the largest changes that women began to see were individual states passing maximum hour legislation for female workers – although this was mostly constrained to the industrial sector. The most famous of these state maximum hours legislation was Oregon's, due to its legal challenge in the 1908 case of *Muller v. Oregon*. Although earlier state legislation limiting hours had been struck down by the US Supreme Court, *Muller* was argued on the basis of women's fragility and their need for the government to help save them from the clutches of malevolent business interests. Additionally, it was argued that these women, as the mothers of the nation, needed more time at home to raise the next generation of great Americans.⁵ Although *Muller v. Oregon* strictly applied to industrial women, its precedent of allowing gendered labor laws to protect women went on to encourage more state legislation and more regulation on behalf of female workers. It should be stated, however, that it seems the only time that labor reform favoring women could be forced through government was under the auspices of sexism.

One of the most infamous events in women's labor history is the calamity of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Most know the story of the doors that opened inward, inhibiting any potential mass exits, the tragedy of young girls leaping from windows nine and ten stories up, and the eventual 144-person death toll. It was the deadliest event in New York City until the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, that fire in 1911 affected much more than just the girls forced to suffer the flames. The fire led to the creation of the Factory Investigation Commission, headed by future Senator Robert Wagner and future New York State Governor Al Smith. This commission went around New York State, looking into the working conditions of both industry

⁵ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 186–87.

and service, with an emphasis on areas with high numbers of women employed.⁶ Its legacy was felt by workers from Lake Erie to Long Island. This is the commission that eventually sent an investigator to record and cover the Buffalo Department Store Workers' Strike of 1913. The key impact of this group was its successful push for a fifty-four-hour work week for "factory and mercantile establishments."⁷ While maximum hour legislation for a workday was growing more common, putting a cap on the total hours per week was another regulation to fill in any loopholes. A boss could still make a worker take seven, eight-hour shifts. This provided the worker with a little more protection from ownership's greed. Though a tragedy, the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire helped to wake legislators to workers' perils.

The Buffalo Department Store Workers' Strike took quite a few turns before resulting in settlement. On May 1, organized by the Socialist Party, around 1500 female clerks⁸ refused to show up to work across many of Buffalo's most prominent department stores. Many stores immediately reported little to no problems and only two closed the next day. On May 4, the Socialists were removed from the leadership for being too radical and the American Federation of Labor took over the strike. For the next week, stores consistently reported back few issues and high numbers of workers returning, while the strike simultaneously claimed that its numbers are actually growing. The first store, Sweeney's, settled with some of its strikers on May 11 and on May 13, P.J. Downey, a state mediator, was dispatched to resolve the dispute. On May 14, another representative from the state, Esther Packard, was sent to Buffalo to complete a report on the strike on behalf of the Factory Investigating Commission. A day later, newspapers reported that the public was losing its interest in the strike and the stories made their way to smaller and

⁶ Wertheimer, *We Were There*, 309–13.

⁷ Wertheimer, 313.

⁸ All of the materials refer to the workers as clerks, but many of their job responsibilities seem to fill multiple positions – saleslady, manager, and cashgirl, among others.

smaller portions of the local papers. Although the remaining stores settled on May 18, many clerks did not come back to an available position – let alone their old job – and reporting on this issue ceased after three days.⁹ Though slightly lengthy, this timeline gives a good sense of the short nature of the strike and how rapidly it progressed from Socialist planning to New York State mediation.

While an understanding of the strike is critical to understanding Buffalo Department stores of the era, much of the focus of the remainder of the paper will be the conditions the girls reported to labor under before the strike. This is all predominantly found in Esther Packard's report, which included many personal interviews with strikers, allowing them to describe their poor working conditions on the record.

The initial complaints and reasoning for the strike to occur are, again, very common to the time. The workers requested to earn \$8 per week. For many, this would have been a significant raise over what they were previously earning. Packard estimates that the average salary of the girls was only around \$5 a week, something supported by Woodbridge's assessment in her report on New York City department stores.¹⁰ Additionally, this raise was just barely breaking even with Packard's estimation of \$8 for a living wage in Buffalo in 1913.¹¹ This means that the worker's wage raise demand was only bringing them to the point where they would not lose money in a given week, not gain any. Another basic demand that the workers submitted was asking for an eight-hour day and to get Saturday nights off.¹² While an eight-hour

⁹ *The Morning Express* does the best job of covering the strike, but all four sources combined paint a clear picture of the events: Packard, "Buffalo Report," 1–2; "Various Reporting on the Buffalo Department Store Workers' Strike," *Buffalo Daily Courier*, May 1, 1913, New York State Library; "Various Reporting on the Buffalo Department Store Workers' Strike," *Buffalo Evening News*, May 1, 1913, New York State Library; "Various Reporting on the Buffalo Department Store Workers' Strike," *Buffalo Morning Press*, May 30, 1913, New York State Library.

¹⁰ Packard, "Buffalo Report," 13; Alice Woodbridge, "Report on the Condition of Working Women in New York Retail Stores" (New York: Working Women's Society, May 6, 1890), 5.

¹¹ Packard, "Buffalo Report," 13.

¹² Packard, 1.

work day was slightly better than average, when compared to other female-centric industries, having to work a full Saturday was nearly unheard of anywhere but retail. Susan Benson writes, in *Counter Cultures* that “In fifteen of sixteen comparisons, stores had longer Saturday hours than the average.”¹³ Furthermore, Alice Woodbridge cites being open on Saturday as a chief complaint in her report.¹⁴ While it is understandable that stores would want to remain open on weekends, their long Saturday hours were unheard of anywhere else. The final original complaint was that the conditions were generally unsanitary.¹⁵ This too was not unheard of and will be explored at length later in the paper. All three of the general demands of the strike do not sound unreasonable, even given their original context.

When it comes to the complaint of low wages, the workers sound extremely justified in their displeasure. Calls for a \$5 minimum wage, accompanied with a living wage, had been proposed by the Retail Clerks’ Association in 1906.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Packard reports that several girls at the Buffalo department stores were making less than \$3.50 a week.¹⁷ Even when one was able to hit the \$8 living wage goal, their work was still often being underpaid. Take Ida Shultz, an employee at Woolworth’s. Ms. Shultz made \$8 a week. However, she was also placed in complete control of bookkeeping, cashiering, and “the lower floor” – probably cashgirls or clerks. Despite having the responsibilities of three different positions, Woolworth’s only paid her for one and a half positions; she was literally making half of what she rightfully deserved to be making. She claimed to be unable to save for insurance or sickness, as all of her money had to be

¹³ Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*, *The Working Class in American History; Variation: Working Class in American History*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 197.

¹⁴ Woodbridge, “Report on the Condition of Working Women in New York Retail Stores,” 3.

¹⁵ Packard, “Buffalo Report,” 1.

¹⁶ George G. Kirstein, *Stores and Unions: A Study of the Growth of Unionism in Dry Goods and Department Stores* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1950), 37.

¹⁷ Packard, “Buffalo Report,” 13.

put into her weekly budget.¹⁸ Not only were wages consistently below the living wage threshold, but even when they reached that level, the laborers were still abused and overworked.

One interesting effect of wages being so low, was the cycle of indebtedness to the very store that many debtors worked at. Many workers struggled at piecing together enough money in their budget to afford the clothes necessary for work. Packard claimed that the solution for the store was to allow the workers to purchase clothes from their place of employment on credit. Yet, this would often cost just enough to keep the workers stuck in a system of need with their employer. The employer, instead of charging their debtor/employee just took the money owed from their paycheck.¹⁹ In this way, the employee could not leave the store, as they did not have the money to pay back their uniform; the only way they could afford it was to have it removed from the paycheck before they ever received the money in the first place. If one has even briefly studied United States history, this should sound reminiscent of post-reconstruction sharecropping in the South. In this instance, instead, it can be called shareshopping. This phenomenon was not limited to solely Buffalo area stores. As Benson puts it “few saleswomen earned enough to qualify for charge accounts except where they worked.” She goes on to explain how a new worker bought her uniform on credit, only to owe the store two and a half times her paycheck a year later.²⁰ This system of shareshopping tightly bound the average department store laborer to her place of employment long past any desirable time.

Another problem found within the issue of low wages is that some owners simply did not tell the truth when explaining exactly how much their workers were making. One boss testified in front of a selection of the Buffalo Federation of Churches that “no girl in his store is getting

¹⁸ Packard, 9.

¹⁹ Packard, 11–12.

²⁰ Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 234.

less than \$6.00 a week.”²¹ Packard stated that he had found nine girls making less than \$6. But not content to stop there, Packard listed every girl who made less than \$6, along with a brief description of each one’s home life, financial situation, or other facts that make \$6 a week sound less like a luxury and more like a deprived necessity.²² If an owner was willing to testify in front of God – represented by the churches – and lie, then it is logical that he would lie to his employees. In fact, Annie Maclean claims that she agreed to a wage with a manager, only to show up to work on the first day to a new wage that relied heavily on commission to be the new agreement.²³ Maclean was only conducting research and not looking for actual employment, but for many women, they had no choice in that scenario; they either had to walk away with no job or take the lower-paying option. If one was trying to feed a family, there would be no decision. Through deceit, managers exercised dominance over their employees.

When one is earning such a bare-bones paycheck, it is logical that they would not have very much time for leisure activities. However, this was, apparently, not the belief of the management of at least one store. There, a manager is reported as stating that the female employee’s salaries go towards “pin money.”²⁴ Pin money was often used in the era to describe extra money to be spent on non-necessities and typically was associated with women and wives. Despite this assertion, Packard has several testimonials in direct opposition to management’s thought. The first comes from Elsa Jorge who made \$3.50. \$2.50 went toward rent, \$0.60 went toward transportation, and the remaining \$0.40 went toward clothes. She asserted “I never go out in the evening because I never have even an extra nickel to spend for fun.”²⁵ Another worker

²¹ Packard, “Buffalo Report,” 7.

²² Packard, 7.

²³ Marion Maclean, “Two Weeks in Department Stores,” *The University of Chicago Press* 4, no. 6 (May 1899): 724.

²⁴ Packard, “Buffalo Report,” 5.

²⁵ Packard, 8.

named Lilian Strohme made \$6 a week. While this sounds like enough for one person, she actually was combining her funds with her other sisters' paychecks to care for their mother. Due to this, she walked twenty minutes – including during the brutal Western New York winter – from her home to work and back every day.²⁶ If she even had a few leftover cents, one could certainly understand it being spent on transportation. Finally, another worker only known as Miss Driscolli was seventeen and had two sisters, one working age and one around eight. Together with her working-age sister, they made around \$5.85 a week. They paid \$8 a month in rent and, outside of food, much of the rest of the money went toward sending her little sister through school.²⁷ One does not make those kinds of sacrifices, and then go out and blow their paycheck on a fun night out with their friends, family, or suitors. Instead, Miss Driscolli, like most of the other workers, spent her money on the bare necessities and, in her rare case, invested her leftover funds on her sister's future. This was not isolated in Buffalo. In her experiment, Maclean ended her first week only making seventeen cents profit.²⁸ Even this would have been considered fortunate, but it was hardly enough to plan for the future with. To insinuate that department store employees spent their extra funds on needless items is to distance oneself from the reality of the situation; these women were barely scraping by.

The final, and most disparaging impact that low wages had on department store employees was the immorality – or necessary prostitution – that it produced. Simply put, many of these women needed to supplement the incomes they received from the store. Packard's report mentions the issue of morality three times. First, a Miss Genosa claimed that two thirds of the girls sold their bodies to supplement their income. Genosa went out her way to specify that these

²⁶ Packard, 10.

²⁷ Packard, 11.

²⁸ Maclean, "Two Weeks in Department Stores," 733–34.

girls would not prostitute themselves if they could afford not to.²⁹ By including the last part, Packard created the assumption that if one does not support higher wages, then one supports prostitution.

Another instance of immorality was found in a friend of Molly Linden. Linden claims that her friend could not survive on \$4 a week and, when approached by a customer in the store, she agreed to have sex with him for more money. Linden's friend then became pregnant and the father left. The girl then had to sell herself to support the child. Linden claims her friend told her "how I hate it, but it's doing it or watching the kid starve, so I'm going to do it."³⁰ Again, this seems to have never been a choice for many of these girls; it was either be immoral or starve. The final example Packard gave is that of an anonymous girl. This girl was "kept" by a manager at the store she was employed at. One day, she had a miscarriage at the lace counter. She reportedly continued working and continued to be favored by her manager.³¹ Viewed through the current lens of #metoo, it has become increasingly clear just how hard it is to have a truly consensual relationship with someone in a power position above oneself.³² Although there is no physical evidence to point in any direction, it can be inferred that this relationship was used by the worker to maintain her standing while the manager used it to assert his. Through most of these examples, one can see that immorality was rarely preferred and was often either a necessity or a pressured situation.

This, again, was not an isolated problem with the Buffalo community. In Woodbridge's report, she argued that "woman's wages have no limit since the paths of shame are always open

²⁹ Packard, "Buffalo Report," 2.

³⁰ Packard, 2-3.

³¹ Packard, 3.

³² This is not an exercise in presentism, rather a new understanding of a dynamic that has been influencing relationships for thousands of years.

to her.”³³ This was not used as justification for lower wages. Rather, a condemnation of anyone who would have kept women’s wages low. Keep the pay down and open the workers up to a life of sin. Benson argued that around the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a belief that saleswomen were especially prone to prostitution through combination of low wages, the public nature of the store, and its “sumptuous atmosphere.”³⁴ That this belief was simply engrained in the mind of the public suggests that it must have occurred often enough. At the very least, the theory recognized the realities that department store workers faced daily and gave the public an avenue to empathize with them. Finally, Maclean addressed two different types of sexual activities among department store workers. First, she pointed out the dangers of the city, and recounted being chased down the street by a man who had waited for her to get off the bus. Second, she brought up the idea of prostitution for income among workers. This is brought up once she received her second, and very disappointing, paycheck.³⁵ All three of these examples prove that selling sex, or being sexually exploited, was often a part of the job of being a department store worker.

Outside of low wages, one of the other three complaints was that the hours were simply too long. The impact of this can be found in the poor condition that many of the workers were left in after working these long shifts. One woman, Bessie Walker, supported both herself and her mother on only \$7 a week. However, after not eating to save money, working such long shifts, and then experiencing stress from worrying about her mother, Walker began to develop ulcers. Her doctor testified that it was from being worn-out and the position she found herself in all day as a shoe-fitting associate. This was a woman who would sleep in the bathroom on lunch

³³ Woodbridge, “Report on the Condition of Working Women in New York Retail Stores,” 10.

³⁴ Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 135.

³⁵ Maclean, “Two Weeks in Department Stores,” 731, 736.

breaks.³⁶ The stress and sleep deprivation could have both been eliminated with better hours. Another anonymous girl also had to visit the doctor to discuss work injuries. When the doctor told her the root cause was work and that all she needed to do was take off and rest she rejected the advice. She – and her recently-made fatherless house—could not afford for her to skip a day of work to heal.³⁷ In this instance realism met pragmatism. As much as it may have helped to take a long shift off, this woman could not justify taking the rest she so badly needed.

While the women in these first two examples had internal problems from stress and over-tiredness, the next two examples had direct physical issues as a result of strenuous shifts. Ella Neiss was made to stand for the entire duration of her shift every time she went to work. Repeated foot damage caught up to her and she had to see a doctor regularly costing \$1.50 each visit. This reduced her earnings from her paycheck to only \$3.³⁸ In this instance, the poor qualities of her job were costing her money, but she needed a steady income more than uncertainty. It is tragic in this regard, that the only thing that paid for her foot treatments was the cause of them. Molly Linden not only suffered from similar foot ailments as Neiss did, but she also was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Again, when the doctor confronted her with the treatment of rest, she laughed and stated, “then I might as well starve to death, as to kill myself with worry.”³⁹ Unfortunately the choice once again came to, preserving one’s physical and/or mental health, or providing for oneself and those charged to one’s care. And still again, Maclean’s “Two Weeks” adds to this some credibility. Maclean alleged that, by the end of the day, workers were practically limping across the store and that there was a stool, but no one

³⁶ Packard, “Buffalo Report,” 4.

³⁷ Packard, 6.

³⁸ Packard, 6.

³⁹ Packard, 9.

could sit on it.⁴⁰ This was only Maclean's first few days in the store; many of her coworkers could do that every day as they slowly crumbled from the brutal shifts. In the end, these women knew the root cause of their problem was work. These women knew that the solution was to take a break from working. But, due to the crushing nature of working in a department store, they could not afford to skip any day of work.

The final chief complaint offered up by the union originally was the unsanitary condition that they had to work in. One of the simplest complaints that was offered was that there were rats that had been seen on the lunch table outside of the lunch hour. Miss Genosa reported that she never heard of any person cleaning off the tables, despite how open the event had been.⁴¹ Any environment that is so unsanitary that it does not clean up after rats have made their presence known could be truly detrimental to an employee's health. Although she did not bring up anything about a rodent infestation, Maclean did describe a scene that sounds familiar: rough board tables and chairs that were falling apart, or even rotting.⁴² Even without rats, this stuffy, thrown-together break room did not sound like it was an appropriate space to hold staff members.

Outside of the break room, one of the only other respites for the department store worker would be the restroom. Here, an employee would be as alone as they would be all day long and, maybe most importantly, be able to sit down. However, these areas also seemed to be doomed to unsanitary conditions. In Buffalo, Ella Neiss complained of a broken and overflowing toilet in the ladies' room. Additionally, because the store refused to hire a cleaner, Neiss had to serve in that capacity, on top of her normal job as a clerk. To put the cherry on top, when a health

⁴⁰ Maclean, "Two Weeks in Department Stores," 726.

⁴¹ Packard, "Buffalo Report," 10.

⁴² Maclean, "Two Weeks in Department Stores," 730.

inspector arrived to look at the bathrooms, all he did was ask if they were working and clean. The inspectors never actually checked on the bathroom's condition.⁴³ Despite a process for worker protection in place, workers still suffered unsanitary conditions in the early twentieth century department store.

These conditions can also be found in the Woodbridge report. She writes "the toilet conditions in many stores are simply horrible; yet, the Board of Health apparently takes no notice of the fact." She additionally, mentions that the workers needed to blackmail the floor manager to keep the bathroom door unlocked.⁴⁴ While complaints about sanitary conditions may seem more fitting in a meat-packing plant of the time than a discussion of seemingly upscale department stores, they were still valid complaints. As evidenced, the department store laborers had to toil in unhealthy environments, putting themselves at risk, just for enough money to scrape by.

Throughout the course of labor history, people seem to always attempt to qualify women's achievements in the industry. Women only gained status in the working world each time there was a war and therefore a shortage of available men to work. Women only worked when single. Women only find their way to genteel industries and areas of the labor force, never suffering or being abused as much as men. If the female working experience was not devalued, then why did it take so long for the American Federation of Labor to allow women to join? Just because women take advantage of historic opportunities, or become self-sufficient out of necessity, or tend to group together in some early version of the pink-collar sector, does not mean that their role in labor history and the shaping of the American labor force is any less valuable.

⁴³ Packard, "Buffalo Report," 6.

⁴⁴ Woodbridge, "Report on the Condition of Working Women in New York Retail Stores," 4.

In this paper I have provided a brief, highlight-reel version of women's labor history as it pertained to my research. I then moved on to a brief discussion of the Buffalo Department Workers' Strike of 1913, the impetus of my scholarship into the subject of women's labor. Next, I discussed the struggles associated with low wages and how some women choose to suffer through them or adapt to the conditions. I then discussed the complaints of long, harsh working conditions and concluded with a short discussion of the lack of sanitary conditions in the early twentieth-century department store.

Using the 1913 Buffalo Department Store Workers' strike as a guideline to working conditions immediately preceding World War I, I have argued that female department store workers were an abused working group that suffered many similar perils to those that the more conventional female labor groups, like industrial workers, suffered under. Though the strike is largely forgotten today, it yields significant power as a window into the early twentieth century and the working conditions that a newer labor force of women had to face.

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