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‘What we think is needed is a union of domestics such as the miners have’: The Domestic Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland 1908-1914

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Abstract

This article provides the first in-depth account of the Domestic Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland (est.1909-10). In a period of intensifying labour unrest, young female servants working in private homes, attempted to organize their own trade unions. Short-lived and disrupted by the First World War, their efforts left little formal documentation and have never before been the subject of historical study. Their activities can, however, be traced in the pages of women’s movement periodicals and the correspondence columns of local and radical newspapers. The idea of organizing domestic servants as workers was an anathema to many in both the labour and the women’s movements. Nevertheless, the Domestic Workers’ Union provides a fascinating case study of how, in this moment of exceptional social unrest, elements of trade unionism and feminism converged to challenge entrenched gendered divisions between the public and the private, the workplace and the home.

Keywords

Feminism, Trade Unions, Domestic Workers, ‘Domestic Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland’, Domestic Service, Servants.

Domestic servants are seldom the subject of more than a few lines in labour movement histories. In the early twentieth century, this predominantly young, female workforce constituted a significant portion of the ‘working-class’, however we may wish to define it. Domestic service was the most common form of employment for women, and servants made up between one third and one quarter of the female workforce.¹ Yet servants have often been

¹ Servants constituted thirty-four per cent of all women employed in 1891 and still twenty-three per cent in 1930, Leonore Davidoff, 'Mastered for life': Servant and wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', *Journal of Social History*, 7/4 (1974), 406-28, 410.

portrayed as cut-off from wider class-conscious communities of working people.² This has been attributed to the relative isolation of domestic servants working alone in private houses and the tendency to identify with the interests of wealthy and paternalistic employers rather than their own class.³ Such an assessment, however, owes as much to the way in which the working class has been defined historically, using an industrial paradigm which excludes domestic labour in the private sphere, as it owes to domestic workers' failure to organize collectively on a mass scale. During this period servants were sometimes defined as 'outside' the working class, primarily due to the kind of work they performed, and labour movement historians have often deployed a similarly narrow framework.⁴

This article provides the first in-depth account of the Domestic Workers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland (est. 1909-10). Although this union remained small and cannot in any way be viewed as representing domestic workers as a whole, its history provides an important new perspective on class relations in the women's movement and on labour organizing in this period. An analysis of the Domestic Workers' Union contributes to three intersecting historiographies: on the labour movement, domestic service and feminism. In spite of important developments in this field, Mary Davis has recently pointed to a continued lack of attention paid to women in histories of work and especially of trade unions.⁵ This article addresses this by placing women and a specifically feminised form of labour at the centre of a history of pre-First World War workers' militancy. It thus seeks to expand our conception of who made up the working class to include, not only women, but also that even more marginalised group performing the waged 'reproductive labour' of the home.⁶ Such work (cooking, cleaning and caring) took place in the private sphere of the home, [re]producing people rather than commodities, and is therefore frequently defined as 'non-productive'.⁷ The failure by labour

² For a discussion of this historiography, see Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 3; Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xv.

³ Brian Harrison, 'Tape recorders and the teaching of history', *Oral History*, 1/2 (1972), 3-10, 3-4; Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 181.

⁴ For the exclusion of domestics from ideas of who made up the working-class, see Vanessa H. May, *Unprotected Labour: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Laura Schwartz, 'Rediscovering the workplace', *History Workshop Journal*, 74/1 (Autumn 2012), 270-77.

⁵ Mary Davis, 'Introduction', in Mary Davis (ed.), *Class and Gender in British Labour History: Renewing the Debate (or Starting It?)* (Pontypool: Merlin Press Ltd., 2011), 1-11.

⁶ For a rare exception to the general exclusion of domestic servants from labour histories, see Caroline Bressey, 'Black Women and Work in England, 1880-1920', in Mary Davis (ed.), *Class and Gender in British Labour History: Renewing the Debate (or Starting It?)* (Pontypool: Merlin Press Ltd., 2011), 117-32.

⁷ Selina Todd, 'Domestic service and class relations in Britain, 1900-1950', *Past and Present*, 203 (2009), 181-204, 183.

historians to acknowledge such work reflects a much wider disinclination to define this labour as *real* work, ensuring that it was, and still is, undervalued and underpaid.⁸ Feminists have long agitated for both waged and unwaged domestic work to be recognised as such, and this article likewise argues for historians to reconfigure the industrial paradigm (which has focused on white male factory workers) when writing the history of Britain's working class.⁹

A new and thriving historiography of domestic service has gone some way to achieving this. Yet, as Selina Todd has pointed out, an emphasis on the personalised master-servant relationship has tended to neglect the importance of pay and conditions in shaping social relations between servants and employers.¹⁰ In following this call to re-insert domestic service into a history of modern class relations, this article seeks to reconnect a history of servants' struggles over wages and conditions with a broader developments in labour regulation and workplace rights. Research into the Domestic Workers' Union also builds on Lucy Delap's assertion that domestic service should not be seen as primarily a site of victimhood, but that servants could and did enact agency in their choice of work.¹¹ The servants discussed here viewed themselves not as victims, but as workers. They saw their grievances as extending beyond the individual mistress-maid relationship to connect with wider experiences of workplace exploitation. Given the feminist implications of a group of young, low paid women self-organising it seems strange that the Domestic Workers' Union has not thus far been included within histories of the women's movement. Yet, as this article goes on to discuss, the Domestic Workers' Union occupied an ambivalent position within early twentieth-century feminism, at once drawing upon it and challenging a widely held belief in the possibility of cross-class alliances between women. The union thus exacerbated class tensions within the women's movement by drawing attention to the domestic sphere as a workplace, and exposing the exploitation of working women that occurred within middle-class feminists' very own homes. Early twentieth-century feminism also struggled to engage with the complaints put forward by domestic servants because they could not be easily reconciled with the movement's

⁸ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: Common Notions/PM Press, 2012), 71.

⁹ The most forceful arguments for the inclusion of household workers within definitions of an economically productive working class were made in the 1970s by the Wages for Housework Movement in the UK, US and Italy, see, for example, Mariarosa Dalla Costa & Selma James, *The Power of Woman and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975), and articles in Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*; Selma James, *Sex, Race and Class – the Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings 1952-2011* (Oakland, CA: Common Notions/PM Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Todd, 'Domestic service and class relations', 190.

¹¹ Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27-28.

overriding emphasis on emancipation occurring through work outside the home. The history of the Domestic Workers' Union has therefore fallen between the cracks of labour and women's history. This article, however, demonstrates that although it was difficult to organize workers in the 'private' sphere of the home, the impetus for collective struggle could extend beyond the 'public' workplaces of the factory, docks and office.

The article shows how the turbulent years of the 'Great Unrest' (1907-1914) provided a context for the emergence of a union which challenged many of the prejudices of both the labour and the women's movements with regards to work, the public and the private, and women's relationship to both. This was a period when the 'servant problem' (a perceived shortage of competent domestic workers) generated endless commentary in newspaper columns, theatre plays, novels, and dinner party conversations regarding the impossibility of finding reliable servants prepared to remain in their posts long-term. The first section of the article argues that contemporaries *did* view the 'servant problem' as connected to wider social unrest, while the Domestic Workers' Union sought to assert themselves as workers like any other and carve out a space within the broader labour movement. The mixed response from male trade unionists highlighted various perceived and real obstacles to domestic worker organising, from ideas of servants as victims, to the refusal to see the home as a workplace, to the difficulties in uniting a dispersed and highly-surveilled workforce. Falling short of many of the expectations of the industrial trade union movement, the Domestic Workers' Union could not have formed without drawing strength from the women's movement, though there was also resistance among feminists to the idea of workers in their own homes organising to improve pay, hours and conditions. Nevertheless, the leaders of the Domestic Workers' Union were politicized by the women's movement and used feminist arguments to support their cause.

The second section of the article traces the formation of the Domestic Workers' Union within this nexus of feminist and labour movements. The Domestic Workers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland¹² was formed in September 1909, in response to correspondence in the *Woman Worker*¹³ – the socialist feminist newspaper of the National Federation of Women

¹² For short references to the Domestic Workers Union, see Barbara Drake, *Women in Trade Unions* (London: Virago, 1984 (first published 1920)), 180; Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1997 (first published 1975)), 179-80; Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 26; Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, 181-2. Lewenhak incorrectly claims that the Scottish Federation of Domestic Workers was formed during the First World War. Delap's discussion of trade unionism focuses on the TUC sponsored 'Domestic Workers' Union' (est. 1938).

¹³ The name was changed to *Women Folk* on 2 Feb 1910 and Winifred Blatchford took over as Editor. The paper retained 'Woman Worker' in the subtitle and this article will refer to all editions as *Woman Worker* for ease of reference.

Workers. The official papers (minute books, membership lists etc.) of this organisation do not survive; a factor which has contributed to historians' focus on the leaders of National Federation of Women Workers, especially its General Secretary Mary Macarthur and organizer Margaret Bondfield.¹⁴ However, the account of the Domestic Workers' Union provided here relies upon the correspondence pages of the *Woman Worker* and the *Glasgow Herald*, and on press cuttings from the local and radical press in the Gertrude Tuckwell Collection held at the TUC Library. These frequently anonymous letters do not allow for a full-demographic portrait of union members, and over-represent highly literate and politicized servants. However, they do provide an unusual opportunity for the voices of rank and file domestic workers to be heard complaining about working conditions, and discussing the problems and possibilities of a servants' trade union. The final section of the article assesses the aims and politics of the Domestic Workers' Union. In contrast to previous servants' societies with middle-class philanthropic backing, the Domestic Workers' Union aimed to be a union organized 'by servants for servants'. It sought to reconfigure the mistress-maid relationship as a formal employment contract, and did not shy away from the class antagonism which existed between these two groups of women. The article argues, therefore, that the Domestic Workers' Union needs to be written back into the history of New Unionism and the Great Unrest, when a small number of servants joined with other workers to demand improved wages, better conditions, shorter hours and, perhaps most importantly, dignity at work.

1. Between the Women's and the Labour Movement

*'This servant agitation belongs to the feminist movement'*¹⁵

Between 1888 and 1918 trade unions grew at a faster rate than any other time in their history – an expansion which incorporated unskilled and previously unorganized workers into 'general

The sale of the *Woman Worker* varied between 42,000 and 28,000 copies in 1908, *Woman Worker*, 12 June 1908, 16, 26 June 1908, 114. See also, David Doughan and Denise Sanchez, *Feminist Periodicals 1855-1984: An Annotated Critical Bibliography of British, Irish, Commonwealth and International Titles* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987), 26.

¹⁴ For this argument, see Deborah Thom, 'The bundle of sticks: Women, trade unionists and collective organisations before 1918', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 261-89, 262-64. She notes that Macarthur is the 'heroine' of both Drake and Lewenhak's work, see also Norbert C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions 1874-1976* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd., 1978), chapter 3. 'Mary and Margaret 1903-14'.

¹⁵ *Common Cause*, 7 Dec 1911, 621-2.

unions'.¹⁶ Women played an important part in such 'unrest', going on strike and joining trade unions in greater numbers than ever before. Inspired by the suffrage movement they utilized new tactics of propaganda and demonstration, to raise greater public awareness of their grievances.¹⁷ Much of this activity occurred under the auspices of the National Federation of Women Workers (est. 1906) a general trade union for women focusing on unorganized workplaces neglected by the more established male-dominated trade unions.¹⁸ The National Federation of Women Workers also sponsored the formation of the Domestic Workers' Union.

If servants have often been left out of accounts of the 'Great Unrest', contemporary attitudes tell a somewhat different story. For in the years leading up to the First World War the 'servant problem' was increasingly seen in relation to the rise in labour militancy which defined this period. Violet Butler, for example, was a middle-class social reformer with little faith in the powers of aggressive trade unionism to transform the lives of women workers. Yet in 1916, following a four-year investigation into the conditions of domestic service, even she concluded that:

Although domestic servants often speak sadly of themselves as a class apart, they are by no means cut off from the remainder of the industrial community. The fathers and brothers of many of them have been on strike in recent years, and they have read the newspapers. Industrial unrest... [has] reached the minds of those servants who think, and have helped to focus the resentment of those who have room in their minds only for their own grievances.¹⁹

The supposed shortage of domestic servants was attributed in one radical newspaper to the fact that '[t]he servant no longer sees herself as part of the "slave class"... and [begins] to hold the opinion that labour is worth paying for...'²⁰ The Domestic Workers' Union, from the very

¹⁶ Mary Davis, '1880-1914: TUC History Online', http://www.unionhistory.info/timeline/1880_1914.php [accessed 12 Nov 2012].

¹⁷ Thom, 'The bundle of sticks'.

¹⁸ Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, chapter 4; Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*; Thom, 'The bundle of sticks'; Angela V. John, 'MacArthur [married name Anderson], Mary Reid (1880-1921), women's labour organiser' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edn.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Mary Davis, 'The National Federation of Women Workers: TUC History Online', <http://www.unionhistory.info/timeline/1880_1914.php> [accessed 25 June 2012].

¹⁹ C. Violet Butler, *Domestic Service: An Enquiry by the Women's Industrial Council* (New York & London: Garland, 1980 (first published 1916)), 11. See also, A. Amy Bulley, 'Domestic service: A social study', *The Westminster Review*, 135/2 (1891), 177-86, 177-8.

²⁰ Trades Union Congress Library, London, Gertrude Tuckwell Collection (hereafter TUC), 'Press Cuttings', *Reynolds Newspaper*, 11 Oct 1908, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/3.

start, identified themselves as ‘a section of the nation’s workers’ operating within a broader labour movement – indicated by their decision to call themselves a ‘Domestic Workers’ rather than ‘Servants’ union.²¹ Its founder, Kathlyn Oliver wished to claim for servants the same rights for which factory and shop workers had fought and won, asking ‘Why should the domestic worker be the only one of all the nation’s workers whose work is never done?’²² The union demanded that servants be included in existing labour legislation, especially with regards to limited hours of work, and in 1914 it joined demonstrations in support of the Shop Hours Act insisting that servants be included.²³ The Domestic Workers’ Union leaders frequently insisted on speaking of workers in private houses in the same breath as those in commercial industries. Executive Committee member Jessie Stephen, for example, argued for servants’ entitlement to public holidays ‘such as their brothers and sisters got in the workshop and factory.’²⁴ In 1914 Grace Neal and the Domestic Workers’ Union also made a proposal to the Trades Union Congress asking that ‘the private houses where they are employed should be inspected by officials’ such as factories were currently subject to.²⁵

The union’s members and supporters also expressed a desire to stand alongside the ‘factory girl’ in her fight for workplace rights.²⁶ ‘It is surprising,’ wrote one anonymous servant, ‘that British girls have surrendered to this form of slavery for so long ... but the day is near at hand ... [when] they, *like other workers*, are beginning to realize that they not only have a right to work and exist, but also the right to live and enjoy life.’²⁷ ‘What we think is needed,’ wrote Sadie and Margie (two Scottish servants) ‘is a union of domestics such as the miners have’.²⁸ Glasgow servants even advocated employing the tactics of labour movement heroes the Clydeside dock workers and Jim Larkin’s Dublin strikers, in the knowledge that their labour too was ‘indispensable to our employers’.²⁹ ‘Why don’t all girls come out on

²¹ This was how Kathlyn Oliver expressed it in 1911, although she accepted that there was some way to go to achieving this, Kathlyn Oliver, *Domestic Servants and Citizenship* (London: The People's Suffrage Federation, 191?). For the evolution of the union’s name, see *Woman Worker*, 6 Oct 1909, 321, 20 Oct 1909, 382, 17 Nov 1909, 451.

²² *Woman Worker*, 17 Nov 1909, 451.

²³ *The Times*, 14 Nov 1914, 8. The Shop Hours Act of 1910 entitled workers to a half holiday a week and stated meal times. A subsequent Act in 1913 limited hours of work to sixty-five a week but this only applied to restaurant workers, Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*, 60.

²⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Oct 1913, 10.

²⁵ TUC 'Press Cuttings', *Glasgow Herald*, n.d., Box 21, Reel 10, 504c/32, *Daily Sketch*, 21 July 1914, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/44.

²⁶ *Common Cause*, 9 Nov 1911, 543.

²⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 20 Sept 1913, 3. See also, *Glasgow Herald*, 30 Sept 1913, 3. Emphasis added.

²⁸ *Glasgow Herald*, 30 Sept 1913, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 Sept 1913, 3, 25 Sept 1913, 3, 26 Sept 1913, 5, 29 Sept 1913, 5. For a (unsympathetic) comparison between militant servants and Jim Larkin, the Irish trade union leader and socialist, see *Glasgow Herald*, 1 Oct 1913, 5.

strike?’ implored one letter-writing servant, ‘I for one would raise the banner [for] “Shorter Hours”’.³⁰ Although discussion of servants’ unionisation initially made it into the *Glasgow Herald* through its correspondence pages, meetings of the Domestic Workers Union were eventually included alongside the efforts of other workers in the regular ‘Labour Affairs’ column.³¹

Having voiced sentiments which one Scottish housemaid believed were part and parcel of ‘the awakening of the democratic spirit amongst the masses...’, militant maids called upon the rest of the labour movement to support them.³² The response was mixed. One *Woman Worker* journalist, Charles N.L. Shaw, recalled that:

Some time ago, when I mooted the idea to some friends in the trade union world, they laughed at it and said, “You will never be able to get the domestic servants to join a union. The long hours of employment make it difficult for them to attend meetings – there is no trade to bind them together, as in the case of factory workers – the field is too nebulous...”³³

Servants themselves admitted that ‘the task of combination is a difficult one on account of the fact that we work in ones, twos, threes, and fives and not in fifties and hundreds as mill workers do.’³⁴ Some trade unionists also believed that servants were ‘snobbish’ (even Jessie Stephen suggested this) and unwilling to ally with other workers.³⁵ Worse still, a few labour movement activists reiterated the widespread belief that servants were stupid, ‘ignorant of economics’ and deferential to the values of their middle-class employers.³⁶ Such attitudes reflected a widespread resistance to acknowledging that the private home (supposedly a sanctuary from the cut and thrust of the economic realm) was in fact a workplace for millions of waged female workers. In 1913, the Editor of the *Glasgow Herald* answered all the talk of unions, strikes, rights, and struggles that maids had brought to its letters pages, with a wilful reiteration of the

³⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 1 Oct 1913, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 23 Oct 1913, 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 29 Sept, 5, 2 Oct 1913, 3.

³³ *Woman Worker*, 22 Sept 1909, 275. Shaw lent his office on the Strand to the Domestic Workers’ Union to hold an early committee meeting, *Woman Worker*, 23 March 1910, 820.

³⁴ *Common Cause*, 23 Nov 1911, 579.

³⁵ *Glasgow Herald*, 24 Sept 1913, 5.

³⁶ TUC, ‘Press Cuttings’, *Labour Leader*, 9 Dec 1910, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/12. Nevertheless, when it was suggested in the *Woman Worker* that there were no socialists among domestic servants, a number of outraged readers offered themselves as evidence to the contrary, *Woman Worker*, 1 Nov 1908, 591, 25 Nov 1908, 634, 9 Dec 1908, 694.

belief that ‘The relation between mistress and maid is necessarily a personal one... and cannot be likened to the relation between a manufacturer and his women employee. The home and the factory are poles asunder...’³⁷

Yet these pre-War servants’ unions did not meet with the same level of resistance and disdain from the established labour movement which Lucy Delap describes in her discussion of the TUC servants’ union in the 1930s.³⁸ Male trade unionists writing in the *Woman Worker* expressed their pleasure at the idea of a union for ‘a body of women workers who have been too long neglected.’³⁹ Jessie Stephen, recalled that her union branch was ‘greatly helped’ by Labour councillors including Patrick Dolan and John Taylor. At the Glasgow Domestic Workers’ Union’s second public meeting, Mr Thomas Hamilton of the Workers’ Union enthused that ‘it was going to be an easy matter to organize the domestic servants’, and the branch subsequently affiliated to the local Trades Council.⁴⁰ ‘Representatives of the various trade unions’ also spoke in support of the Domestic Workers’ Union when, in 1913, it ‘took possession of Trafalgar Square’ to protest at their lack of employment rights.⁴¹ That same year the Domestic Workers’ Union was affiliated to the Trades Union Congress.⁴²

Yet the Domestic Workers’ Union could not have emerged outside of the mass women’s movement which played as prominent a role as labour militancy in the social unrest which marked this period. Although the union admitted both men and women it was institutionally tied to efforts to organise female workers.⁴³ Kathlyn Oliver, maintained that ‘[t]his servant agitation belongs to the feminist movement’⁴⁴ and she was not the only one to suggest that ‘waves of suffrage agitation’ had opened the minds of servants to their own struggles as workers in the home.⁴⁵ Domestic servants were themselves active in the suffrage movement, despite obstacles such as loss of ‘character’ (the employers’ reference upon which finding a new post depended), difficulty in attending evening meetings and snobbery from wealthy suffrage supporters.⁴⁶ Some were convinced that the vote would improve the lot of

³⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 4 Oct 1913, 6.

³⁸ Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 91-2.

³⁹ *Woman Worker*, 18 Sept 1908, 406.

⁴⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 23 Oct 1913, 13; Working Class Movement Library, Salford (hereafter WCML), Jessie Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves* n.d. 47.

⁴¹ TUC, ‘Press Cuttings’, *Standard*, 21 April 1913, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/23.

⁴² Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, Trades Union Congress Archive (hereafter MRC), ‘Minutes of the Meetings of the Trades Union Congress Parliamentary Committee’, MSS.292/20/2, 19, 33.

⁴³ *Woman Worker*, 6 Oct 1909, 321.

⁴⁴ *Common Cause*, 7 Dec 1911, 621-2.

⁴⁵ C. Violet Butler, *Domestic Service*, 11. See also, TUC, ‘Press Cuttings’, *Labour Leader*, 3 June 1910, Box 21, Reel 10, 504e/1; TUC, ‘Press Cuttings’ *Manchester Guardian*, 20 June 1913, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/23.

⁴⁶ For domestics active in the suffrage movement, see *Woman Worker*, 31 July 1908, 239, 25 Sept 1908, 430, 2 Oct 1908, 54, 16 Oct 1908, 502; *The Times*, 13 June 1908, 9.

domestic workers just as it would transform the lives of all women.⁴⁷ Many of the union's leaders and members had been politicized by feminist activity. Its main organizers, Kathlyn Oliver, Jessie Stephen and Frances Dickinson, were prominent feminists and suffrage campaigners. Stephen was active in the Women's Social and Political Union. During the First World War she worked for Sylvia Pankhurst's Workers' Suffrage Federation, the successor to the East London Federation of Suffragettes, and later for the Workers' Birth Control Movement. Frances Dickinson was also in the 'militant wing' of the suffrage movement; and Oliver supported the People's Suffrage Federation and contributed to feminist debates on sexuality.⁴⁸

This is not to say that when the Domestic Workers' Union was founded it did not face resistance from some middle-class feminists and suffrage supporters who were, of course, mistresses themselves. Just as the union had to assert their identity as workers like any other within the industrially-orientated labour movement, they also had to fight to include their labour within the feminist conception of useful and valuable women's work. In lauding women's right to professional employment outside the home, the feminist periodical the *Freewoman*, for example, frequently dismissed housework as beneath the modern emancipated woman.

House work is a craft. Like a craft, it should be done deftly and accurately, either by those who have a natural leaning towards it or by those who are unfitted for work demanding a greater degree of intellectual endowment. *It is lower grade work.*⁴⁹

Kathlyn Oliver argued against this 'entirely wrong conception of housework as *menial work*' and insisted that:

⁴⁷ Oliver, *Domestic Servants and Citizenship*.

⁴⁸ The Women's Library, London (hereafter TWL), Oral Evidence on the Suffragist and Suffragette Movements, Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Jessie Stephen' 1977; Suzie Fleming and Glodan Dallas, 'Jessie', *Spare Rib*, 32 (Feb 1975), 10-13; WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 56; Audrey Canning, 'Stephen, Jessie (1893-1979), suffragette and labour activist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edn.; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004); *Freewoman*, 22 Feb 1912, 270; Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914* (London: Tauris Parke Paperback, 2001 (first published 1995)), 281-2, 291-2; Lucy Bland, 'Heterosexuality, feminism and the *Freewoman* in early twentieth-century England', *Women's History Review*, 4/1 (1995), 5-23, 14; Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 26; *Woman Worker*, 11 Aug 1909, 126.

⁴⁹ *Freewoman* 23 Nov 1911, 16-18. My emphasis.

Cleaning, rightly understood, is a necessary and therefore honourable occupation and unless we are prepared to deny the necessity of clean well-kept homes, there really is no more important work than housework. The health of our national life is dependent on our home life.⁵⁰

Servants were not always satisfied with the response from the women's movement and insisted that it should pay more attention to their situation as the largest group of women workers. '[E]quality in pamphlets and from the platform', was not enough for one maid, who told the editor of the *Common Cause* (the organ of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) that she and fellow servants 'want it in reality and not as an idea only'.⁵¹

Yet, as this challenge reveals, some domestic servants were able to subvert feminist rhetoric to argue for greater attention to the rights of household workers. Grace Neal, General Secretary of the Domestic Workers' Union, wrote to the *Common Cause* noting that 'We so often hear it said that women are anxious to leave the home but of equal importance to this movement are the conditions still imposed on domestics'.⁵² Editors at the *Common Cause* agreed, declaring in 1911 that 'Nothing could be of greater advantage to the status of women than to raise domestic work to a skilled trade with proper conditions ... protected by unions.'⁵³ Publishing letters from Grace Neal and Kathlyn Oliver in support of the Domestic Workers' Union, the *Common Cause* supported legal regulation of domestic service.⁵⁴ The *Freewoman*, also published an article which linked the rights of domestic servants to the wider struggle of women to escape the domestic sphere, declaring 'Servants have struck against the tyranny of home life – more power to their elbow.'⁵⁵

Since the formation of the Women's Trade Union League in 1874, activists had been pushing for women's involvement in trade unions (sometimes in the face of a total ban on female membership), and denouncing the low pay and 'sweated' conditions of many women workers.⁵⁶ The focus on these sweated trades shifted attention away from traditionally male spheres of work to less visible labour taking place in the private sphere of the home. An Address delivered at the Sweated Industries Exhibition in Oxford 1907 defined 'sweating' as 'Unduly low rates of wages, excessive hours of work, and insanitary conditions of the workplace.' While it was admitted that

⁵⁰ Oliver, *Domestic Servants and Citizenship*, 14-15.

⁵¹ *Common Cause*, 9 Nov 1911, 543.

⁵² *Common Cause*, 19 Oct 1911, 484.

⁵³ *Common Cause*, 9 Feb 1911, 710. See also 19 Oct 1911, 484.

⁵⁴ *Common Cause*, 19 Oct 1911, 486, 26 Oct 1911, 594, 2 Nov 1911, 521.

⁵⁵ *Freewoman*, 25 Jan 1911, 187.

⁵⁶ Drake, *Women in Trade Unions*; Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*; Thom, 'The bundle of sticks'.

such conditions also occurred in factories, they were to some extent guarded against by factory legislation. Whereas, for those women undertaking piecework in the home, no such protection was available.⁵⁷ Feminists very occasionally recognized that domestic service was ‘the most sweated trade of all’⁵⁸, yet the Anti-Sweating League, which included representatives from the Women’s Cooperative Guild and the Women’s Industrial Council, focused primarily on the clothing industries.⁵⁹ Waged domestic labour still lay largely outside the women’s movement’s conception of real ‘work’, and was not included, for example, in the Trades Boards System which established minimum wages for mainly women’s industries organized by task and wage.⁶⁰ Moreover, the question of sweated work was no easy issue for feminists, and divisions existed within the women’s movement as to the best way to improve the conditions of the lowest paid workers.⁶¹ Although the women’s and labour movements had provided the conditions for the formation of the Domestic Workers’ Union, an organisation which recognized servants as part of the nation’s workforce and drew attention to the exploitative nature of a private employment contract between mistress and maid was nevertheless an innovative development.

2. The Formation of the Domestic Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland

*‘What we think is needed is a union of domestics such as the miners have’*⁶²

The possibility of servants coming together to assert their rights as workers was first mooted in the *Woman Worker* by a reader’s letter printed in December 1908.⁶³ Over the next nine months, domestic servants wrote to the *Woman Worker* supporting the idea of a trade union and expressing their willingness to help organize fellow workers.⁶⁴ Kathlyn Oliver, a London-based household worker in her early twenties, sent a particularly trenchant letter insisting that the servant ‘should be encouraged to feel (what she really is) as important to the community as

⁵⁷ Viscount Milner, *Sweated Industries: An Address Delivered at the Opening of the Sweated Industries Exhibition at Oxford, Dec 6th, 1907* (London: G.H. Farrington, Printer, 1907), no pagination.

⁵⁸ *Freewoman*, 7 Dec 1911, 45. See also, Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 8.

⁵⁹ *National Anti-Sweating League: Report of Conference held at the Guildhall, London* (London: Co-operative Printing Society Ltd., 1906).

⁶⁰ Thom, ‘The bundle of sticks’, 272.

⁶¹ Sheila Rowbotham, ‘Strategies Against Sweated Work in Britain, 1820-1920’, in Sheila Rowbotham (ed.), *Threads Through Time: Writings on History and Autobiography* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 149-89.

⁶² *Glasgow Herald*, 30 Sept 1913, 3.

⁶³ *Woman Worker*, 9 Dec 1908, 694.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24 Feb 1909, 189, 2 June 1909, 518, 28 July 1909, 78, 4 Aug 1909, 102, 25 Aug 1909, 182.

the worker in any other sphere'.⁶⁵ The paper's editors swiftly took her up on this, printing a response which asked 'Will Miss Oliver start a Domestic Union herself? The WOMAN WORKER will be happy to receive and forward names of those willing to join.'⁶⁶ More letters appeared in favour of such a union, but the offer had to be put to Oliver again until, a full month later, she agreed to take on the organization of 'A Domestic Servants' Trade Union', announcing a first meeting in October 1909 with the intention of forming a committee. Oliver advertised the prospective union as an organization which would not only provide out-of-work benefits for its members, but also 'agitate for legislation to compel employers to provide proper and healthy accommodation for servants, and reasonable hours of labour and rest.' The *Woman Worker* summed up the new development, declaring grandly (though not entirely truthfully) that 'for the first time in the United Kingdom ... a Servants' Trade Union has been started.'⁶⁷

Over the next few months, the *Woman Worker* (now the 'official organ' of the union) reported frequently on the hard work of Kathlyn Oliver, who was, she claimed, 'besieged on all sides with letters from servants requiring information'. She announced plans to organize 'park demonstrations' and a rally in Trafalgar Square, appealed to readers for funds, and sent the union's existing supporters knocking on back doors to recruit new members directly from London's servant population.⁶⁸ Following their first open meeting, the union printed leaflets which were distributed among servants in the London suburbs and elsewhere.⁶⁹ The 'Domestic Workers' Union' was formally launched in the spring of 1910.⁷⁰ Membership was to cost only two pence per week, once an initial fee of one shilling had been paid, though for an extra weekly three pence members would receive a weekly payment of five shillings after ten years of membership. The union also acquired its own banner, choosing the colours 'red (for Progress), green (for Hope), and gold (for the Dawn)'. Kathlyn Oliver remained in charge of funds, but passed her acting role of General Secretary over to a new member, Grace Neal.⁷¹

The new Domestic Workers' Union acquired an office in Bayswater, London, and a dedicated group of working-women on the executive committee. General Secretary Grace Neal

⁶⁵ Kathlyn Oliver stated that she began service at the age of twenty-two, had been working for 'a year or two'. 'I went into seven situations before I found a reasonable and fair employer', *Ibid.*, 5 Jan 1910, 606, 4 May 1910, 942-3. It is possible that Oliver already had a relationship with the National Federation of Women Workers and that the letter was planted, though there is no evidence of this apart from the fact that we know Oliver was involved in feminist and socialist circles. Either way, the grassroots readership of the paper played an important role in pushing for the formation of the union.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 Aug 1909, 182.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8 Sept 1909, 230, 22 Sept 1909, 275.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 13 Oct 1909, 345, 20 Oct 1909, 382, 3 Nov 1909, 426, 17 Nov 1909, 451.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3 Nov 1909, 426, 1 Dec 1909, 494.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 23 March 1910, 820, 27 April 1910, 920.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 11, May 1910, 965.

gave up her job as a Cook-General, to work full-time for the union on a wage of £1 a week. She took up residence in the back room of the union offices, equipped only 'with a little camp bed for night quarters'. Mrs Emilia Cox soon joined her on the executive committee. Frances Dickinson, a housekeeper for a socialist family in the West End of London, was given the role of President, and Rose Black became Neal's Assistant Secretary.⁷² By January 1913, the union had acquired a regular subscribing membership of about 400 servants, while another 2,000 had been on its books at some point. Local branches were also established in Manchester and Oxford.⁷³ The executive opened their London office to 'ordinary members' every Sunday afternoon – the only time of the week when domestic servants were guaranteed any time-off. Over tea and cakes they created a 'very pleasant and sociable environment' to share ideas and experiences. What they learnt from members regarding conditions of work and desire for change were translated into propaganda, which they distributed every week in Hyde Park and London's other open air spaces.⁷⁴



Rose Black, Assistant Secretary of the DWU c.1913

⁷² WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 56; TUC, 'Press Cuttings', *Daily News and Leader*, 16 Sept 1913, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/38.

⁷³ TUC, 'Press Cuttings', *Weekly Dispatch*, 5 Jan 1913, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/21.

⁷⁴ WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, pp.56-7.

[From Trade Union Library, London, Gertrude Tuckwell Papers, 'Press Cuttings', *The Daily News and Leader*, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/38.]

The objects of the union, first confirmed in 1910, were:

1. To raise the status of domestic work to the level of other industries, so that domestic workers shall cease to be a despised species, and to educate these workers to a proper sense of their own importance.
2. To obtain better conditions for an overworked and often underpaid class of workers.
3. To agitate for legislation to compel employers to provide proper and healthy accommodation for servants.
4. To secure the inclusion of domestic servants in the operations of a Weekly Rest-Day Act.
5. To render it illegal for any servants to be on duty sixteen hours a day as many are at present.
6. To obtain a ten hours working day limit, after which servants shall be entirely free each day, and not kept in like prisoners or watch dogs.
7. To provide a free registry office.
8. To provide free legal advice.
9. Out of work pay to servants who shall have been members of the Union for not less than twelve months.
10. Protection from bad and tyrannical employers.
11. To keep a black list of bad employers, as well as a black list of bad servants as we have at present.
12. To make it impossible or illegal for an employer to supply a servant with a bad or indifferent character for no better reason than that he or she wishes to leave their situations, or because an employer has for some petty reason taken a dislike to a servant.
13. Help for unfortunate girls.⁷⁵

These objects reflected some of servants' most common complaints. The Domestic Workers' Union constantly reiterated that room and board was not bestowed due to the kindness of employers but part of a servant's wage, and therefore inadequate food and uncomfortable

⁷⁵ TUC, 'Press Cuttings', *Labour Leader*, 20 May 1910, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/11.

sleeping arrangements constituted a breach of contract. Within a broad commitment to improving wages and conditions, the union focused particularly on definite hours of work and rest time when a servant would not be on call. The union also believed that the existing ‘character system’, whereby a servant was dependent upon an employer’s reference to find a new position, needed to be radically overhauled. At present, it was felt that many mistresses withheld references or slandered their former employees simply because they were annoyed at their leaving. Servants were not permitted to see their references and had little legal recourse in the case of unfair treatment regarding this matter.⁷⁶ Object 13 – for the union to provide support for the unmarried mothers among their members – made oblique reference to the workplace hazard of sexual harassment (often by male employers) and the still common practice of firing servants if they were found to be pregnant.⁷⁷ The union remained committed to these central demands throughout its lifetime, though its objects were extended and amended over the next few years, reflecting a responsiveness to feedback from members and an awareness of the everyday realities of servants lives. For example, by 1913 the union’s objects included the right to use the same bathrooms as their employers, and that ‘no female servant be required to clean the outside of upstairs windows’.⁷⁸

The Domestic Workers’ Union’s aims were ambitious from the very start, when Kathlyn Oliver asked her new supporters ‘to imagine a Union of, say, 5,000 servants, with 10,000 employers desiring these servants.’⁷⁹ Aware of industrial organising by other servants around the world, especially in northern Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, the Domestic Workers’ Union positioned itself as part of an international movement.⁸⁰ It was referred to by the *Woman Worker* as a ‘national union’ even before its first meeting, and by 1913 the Domestic Workers’ Union had linked up with a parallel organising effort in Glasgow, where Jessie Stephen, a twenty-year-old ‘general’ maid, had been organising fellow servants into the Scottish Federation of Domestic Workers since about 1911. Some years previously Stephen had been dismissed from her second post as ‘between maid’ in the house of Sir John Chisholm, when she dislocated her ankle and was unable to perform her duties to the standard

⁷⁶ Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 75.

⁷⁷ Suzie Fleming and Glodan Dallas, ‘Jessie’, 11. It was noted in one suffrage newspaper from this period, that ‘the statistics of illegitimate birth shew [sic] that this class of women [domestic servants] is the one most victimised by men.’, *Common Cause*, 10 Aug 1911, 313.

⁷⁸ TUC, ‘Press Cuttings’, *Weekly Dispatch*, 5 Jan 1913, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/21.

⁷⁹ *Woman Worker*, 3 Nov 1909, 426.

⁸⁰ For reports of servants’ unions internationally, see *Ibid.*, 10 July 1908, 174, 10 Mar 1909, 227, 8 Sept 1909, 222, 22 Sept 1909, 275, 19 Jan 1910, 646, 26 Jan 1910, 666; *Woman’s Dreadnought*, 8 March 1914, 4. During the First World War the Domestic Workers’ Union joined the International Labour Women and Socialist Committee, TUC, ‘Press Cuttings’, *Labour Leader*, 11 Nov 1915, Box 17, Reel 8, 353/8.

required by her unsympathetic mistress.⁸¹ Yet Jessie's fury at this injustice was tempered by the knowledge that she had used her time in this post wisely, for she had spent the last few months meeting with other servants in the street with the aim of organising a union.⁸²

According to Stephen's autobiography she had already, at this point (and while working a sixteen hour day) formed the Scottish Federation of Domestic Workers to which she recruited her fellow maids. After leaving the Chisholms', to work for the artist David Gould, she kept in touch with her provisional committee. 'This was not at all a simple matter because I only had one afternoon or evening free a week'. Yet she continued to enlist further support by visiting and writing to other servants, helped by 'a labour man' named Bailie Alston who allowed the Scottish Federation of Domestic Workers to meet in his teashops. Stephen then took a new post as a daily 'live-out' maid, which left her evenings free to 'get around more of my members'. It was this agitation which Stephen subsequently claimed led to the flurry of correspondence in the *Glasgow Herald* from domestic servants voicing their resentments.⁸³ Over the course of two and a half weeks, sixty-three letters were printed on the question of whether servants should be permitted a weekly half day holiday (time off during the week in addition to the Sunday afternoon which was already the general rule).⁸⁴ Over half of these letters were from servants expressing support for some form of collective action or trade union to improve their working-lives. Only eight were from servants who were content in their posts or believed the institution of service did not require reform. Employers also contributed their views, and the correspondence only ceased when an October Editorial on 'Mistress and Maid' signalled the close of the debate.⁸⁵

Jessie Stephen 'took advantage of this opportunity by writing ... [to the *Glasgow Herald*] and inviting girls to get together in a meeting' in Bailie Alston's Tea Rooms.⁸⁶ Over sixty years later Stephen still remembered how:

I and my colleagues arrived ... at least half an hour before the meeting was due to start and we got the biggest surprise of our lives, it was already packed with

⁸¹ WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 1-32.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 33-5.

⁸⁴ The demand for the half holiday had been among some of the earliest made by London-based Domestic Workers' Union, TUC 'Press Cuttings', *Daily News*, 2 Oct 1909, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/8.

⁸⁵ *Glasgow Herald*, 17 Sept 1913-4 Oct 1913.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 24 Sept 1913, 5, 14 Oct 1913, 1, 3. Stephen's autobiography remembers the meeting taking place in the Christian Institute, Bothwell Street, though the notice in the *Glasgow Herald* advertized it at Alston's Tea Rooms which were in the same street, WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 35.

girls who had come from all parts of the city and they were overflowing into the corridors outside.⁸⁷

The newspaper men were also present and later reported that between 130 and 150 maids attended the meeting, despite it being very difficult for domestic servants to obtain evenings off. ‘After a general discussion of the grievances of domestic servants a series of demands was formulated and agreed by the meeting’. These amounted to thirteen points, including the weekly half-holiday, and it was agreed that ‘[t]he three things they should agitate for first were shorter hours, increased wages, and better food.’⁸⁸ Jessie later remembered that about two hundred people joined the union that evening, but even if this was an overly-optimistic recollection, organising efforts certainly gained momentum with frequent meetings and social events held in Glasgow over the next few months.⁸⁹

The *Glasgow Herald* reported at the time that Jessie Stephen’s meeting had been held under the auspices the Glasgow branch of the Domestic Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland, which had been in existence for over a year and of which Stephen was Secretary.⁹⁰ This is consistent with Stephen remembering elsewhere that the Scottish Federation of Domestic Workers merged with Grace Neal’s London-based union in the early months of 1913, though her autobiography insists that the decision to affiliate did not occur until some time after the Scottish Federation of Domestic Workers had established itself following the *Glasgow Herald* correspondence and the subsequent public meetings.⁹¹ Either way, the final months of 1913 were important ones for domestic worker militancy in Scotland. Jessie decided to take up temporary work as a servant so that ‘I would be able to spread my trade union activities over a much wider field than was possible in a permanent position’.⁹² She began frequent trips to towns outside of Glasgow to agitate among the Scottish servant population.⁹³

⁸⁷ WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 35.

⁸⁸ *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Oct 1913, 10, 17 Oct 1913, 8. These demands were: Weekly half holiday; two hours daily; Specified meal hours; abolition of servants’ registries; provision of uniform; graded scale of wages; recognition of union; twelve hours day; 14 days annual holiday; public holidays; Sundays off at 2 till 10 o’clock; fortnightly payments; a week’s notice instead of a fortnight’s.

⁸⁹ TWL, Harrison, ‘Interview with Jessie Stephen’ 1977. For reports and advertizements for subsequent meetings, see *Glasgow Herald*, 23 Oct 1913, 13, 3 Nov 1913, 1, 7 Nov 1913, 5.

⁹⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Oct 1913, 10.

⁹¹ WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 54-5. Stephen recalls that it was after returning from the Women’s Social and Political Union’s Working Women’s delegation to London that she decided to look into affiliation with the Domestic Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland, but this occurred in January 1913, some months before the *Glasgow Herald* correspondence.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 42-3, 46. Stephen also fought her own battles with her employers during this period, taking legal action against those who refused to pay her the wages she was entitled to after dismissing her for disobeying orders which she deemed unreasonable, *Ibid.*, 40-46.

Soon domestics in Glasgow's outlying areas of Falkirk, Milngravie, Rutherglen, as well as Edinburgh and Aberdeen and towns in Fifeshire and Ayrshire, attempted to form branches of the Domestic Workers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland.⁹⁴ Some concessions from employers were secured by these militant maids, including winning two hours rest-time each day.⁹⁵ Such success, however, caused problems for Jessie Stephen's own 'career as a maid'.⁹⁶ The situation in Glasgow eventually became 'too hot', and she found herself blacklisted by mistresses and unable to secure a post. Stephen therefore decided to move to London, where the Domestic Workers' Union Registry found her a job as maid with a union-friendly family in Purley, South London and the union executive committee welcomed her with 'open arms'.⁹⁷

3. The Politics of the Domestic Workers' Union

*'I was very sorry to find the note struck was one of class war'*⁹⁸

The Domestic Workers' Union was not, as its champions in the *Woman Worker* claimed, the first union for domestic servants but it did offer a new and distinctive vision of organising. Pamela Horn's history of domestic service records attempts in 1872 by the maidservants of Dundee and the men-servants of Leamington to 'combine in order to improve their working conditions' though this lasted only for a 'short time'.⁹⁹ Horn also noted the 'London and Provincial Domestic Servants' Union' (1891-93), whose committee included a number of servants from the higher end of the industry such as butlers, cooks and ladies maids. Like the Domestic Workers' Union, this earlier union demanded higher wages and shorter hours, yet the preface to their rule book also insisted that its aim was to educate and improve servants so

⁹⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 7 Nov 1913, 5.

⁹⁵ TWL, Harrison, 'Interview with Jessie Stephen'. She was also reported to have informed a meeting of maids that many mistresses had started to meet the Domestic Workers' Union's demands, *Glasgow Herald*, 7 Nov 1913, 5.

⁹⁶ WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 19.

⁹⁷ TWL, Harrison, 'Interview with Jessie Stephen'; WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 54-5.

⁹⁸ *Woman Worker*, 13 April 1910, 880.

⁹⁹ Horn, *Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, 178. For an extended account of the 1872 union activity, see Jan Merchant, "'An insurrection of maids": Domestic servants and the agitation of 1872', in Louise Miskell, Christopher A. Whatley and Bob Harris (eds.), *Victorian Dundee: Image and Realities* (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press, 2000), 104-21; Fae Dussart, 'The servant/ employer relationship in nineteenth-century India and England', PhD Thesis, University College London, 2005, 175-89. For a history of servants' unions after the Second World War, see Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 91-2. For the United States of America, see Donna L. Van Raaphorst, *Union Maids Not Wanted: Organising Domestic Workers 1870-1940* (New York: Praeger, 1988); May, *Unprotected Labour*.

that the good feelings that had existed between them and their employers of old might be re-established. They were also opposed to strikes.¹⁰⁰ The Domestic Workers' Union, by contrast, had little time for nostalgic musings on the 'the good old faithful servant' and the sentimental bond between mistress and maid: 'Ladies complain that servants today are not what they were years ago...' wrote Kathlyn Oliver, '...and we rejoice to hear it.'¹⁰¹

The Domestic Workers' Union organizers tried their hardest to define the mistress-maid relationship as a formal contract between employer and employee, and make the case for unionisation regardless of the sympathies or otherwise of individual mistresses.¹⁰² 'I rejoice in one of the best employers myself,' Kathlyn Oliver told two servants who had written to her, 'but I say most emphatically that servants want a union.'¹⁰³ Scottish servants likewise wrote to the *Glasgow Herald*, stating that they were not interested in the condescension of kindly mistresses: what they wanted was 'rights, not privileges'.¹⁰⁴ Jessie Stephen adopted a straightforward tone when discussing the role of mistress, rejecting older tropes in which employers were alternatively sentimentalized as moral guardians or depicted as tyrants. 'It was no use beating about the bush any longer', she said at the Glasgow maids' first public meeting, servants simply wanted 'to put their position fairly and squarely before the mistresses.'¹⁰⁵

The Domestic Workers' Union maintained that it did not represent a threat to *good* employers, and it called on them to lend their 'moral support'.¹⁰⁶ Yet the union's view of the home as a place of employment made it necessary to recognize that mistresses and maids had competing and sometimes opposing interests. Jessie Stephen even stated that mistresses had their own 'business' to 'look after', 'and no one can ... blame them', yet the servant likewise needed to 'become fully awake to her own interests'.¹⁰⁷ This led some, even progressive, employers to complain that the Domestic Workers' Union was 'organized along class war lines'.¹⁰⁸ Although the union had invited sympathetic mistresses to attend its early meetings, they were also clear that 'we have never attempted to deny the fact that the Domestic Workers'

¹⁰⁰ Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, 178-9.

¹⁰¹ Oliver, *Domestic Servants and Citizenship*, 11.

¹⁰² This represented a shift from the 1870s union attempts if, as Dussart has argued, 'ideas about reciprocity and benevolence were embedded in servants' relationships with their employers, undermining claims to workers' rights.', Dussart, 'The servant/ employer relationship', 187.

¹⁰³ *Woman Worker*, 8 Dec 1909, 522. See also, Oliver, *Domestic Servants and Citizenship*, 12-13.

¹⁰⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 30 Sept 1913, 3, 1 Oct 1913, 5, 2 Oct 1913, 3.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 16 Oct 1913, 2.

¹⁰⁶ *Woman Worker*, 20 Oct 1909, 382, 13 April 1910, 880.

¹⁰⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 24 Sept 1913, 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Woman Worker*, 13 April 1910, 880. This remark was made by Alice Melvin, who favoured collective housekeeping in the belief that it would improve conditions for domestic workers, though Kathlyn Oliver criticized her plans for continuing to envisage a subordinate role for domestic servants, *Freewoman*, 4 April 1912, 386-7, 11 April 12, 410-11, 20 June 1912, 98, 4 July 1912, 137.

Union is to benefit the *workers*. We think employers are quite able to guard their own interests ... may I now mention very emphatically that we are for the *workers* ...'¹⁰⁹ Jessie Stephen likewise informed an audience of both maids and mistresses that 'she was out to preach the divine doctrine of discontent, and if there were any there who were content to put up with the present conditions she asked them to leave the meeting.' Such militancy was met with applause from fellow servants, and Stephen's rhetoric of class antagonism was reflected in the *Glasgow Herald* correspondence in which some maids referred to their employers as 'toffs' and 'idle gadabouts'.¹¹⁰

It was this intransigent tone that distinguished the Domestic Workers' Union from other organising efforts taking place at the time. In Scotland the Glasgow branch of the Domestic Workers' Union came into conflict with a rival 'Scottish Domestic Servants' Union'. This competing organisation had previously confined itself to the work of a friendly society, providing benefits and financial assistance to its paying members. A representative from this organisation attended Jessie Stephen's first public meeting and argued that her society was far larger than the Glasgow branch of the Domestic Workers' Union (having 5,000 members as opposed to the 60 maids who had already signed up to Stephen's union) and should therefore be in charge of organising servants in that city.¹¹¹ The following evening, the Scottish Domestic Servants' Union held another meeting in which they reiterated their more established position (15,000 members throughout Scotland) and determined to form themselves into a union-proper with similar demands to those agreed upon at the Domestic Workers' Union. It is possible that some of this conflict resulted from internal divisions within the Glasgow labour movement. Jessie Stephen, for example, denounced her rivals, claiming that 'she had attempted to speak at a meeting two years ago of the Scottish Union and she was howled down'.¹¹² However, as the *Glasgow Herald* reported it, there were important differences between the two organisations. The Scottish Union's Secretary, Miss Elizabeth M'Lean, told her audience that she had attended the meeting of the Domestic Workers' Union and 'been disgusted with the tone of the speaking; it seemed to be a wholesale slanging of mistresses'. She also reassured those present that 'it was important not to disturb existing good relations between employers and employed', while Mr J.C. M'Lean, Treasurer of the Scottish Domestic Servants' Union, said that 'he did not think a strike would be desirable even in the worst straits'.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ *Woman Worker*, 13 April 1910, 880, 4 May 10, 942-3.

¹¹⁰ *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Oct 1913, 10, 29 Sept 1913, 5, 23 Sept 1913, 3.

¹¹¹ *Glasgow Herald*, 16 Oct 1913, 10.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 16 Oct 1913, 10.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 17 Oct 1913, 8, 13.

Another key difference between the Domestic Workers' Union and their rivals was the former's emphasis on servants' self-organisation. The Domestic Workers' Union was emphatically not a charitable association, nor even a top-down labour movement project concerned with the welfare of domestic workers. It wanted, instead, to be a grass roots union. Jessie Stephen was insistent upon 'the fact that the Domestic Workers' Union worked entirely by servants for servants'¹¹⁴ The Domestic Workers' Union was also clear that its success depended, not on its leadership, but on the hard work of its members. Kathlyn Oliver brusquely stated in one of her early reports that:

Many of the letters sent to me have been written in a "God bless you" strain. I appear to be regarded almost as another Messiah. This is very nice, and I appreciate it muchly; and reluctant as I am to disillusion these friends, I want to candidly tell them that if they are waiting for *me* to make better conditions for them, they will wait a long time... *I cannot insist that servants shall not be on duty sixteen hours a day... but they can rise en masse and say it themselves...*¹¹⁵

Conclusion

This article has argued that the Domestic Workers' Union represented an important moment in British labour history. Even today the interests and needs of domestic workers often fall outside of traditional trade union organising structures. That young, female servants, working in the private sphere of the home, could come together to organize themselves as workers suggests the

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 23 Oct 1913, 13. Elizabeth M'Lean attempted to defend her organisation against accusations that, by contrast, the Scottish Union 'was run entirely by ladies, and that domestic servants should not join... because it would not be a democratic society'. Yet domestic servants made up only two thirds of the existing committee of the Scottish Union, Ibid., 17 Oct 1913, 13.

¹¹⁵ *Woman Worker*, 3 Nov 1909, 426. It is possible that such an emphasis emerged in response to an earlier aborted attempt by the National Federation of Women Workers to establish a branch for domestic servants in Birmingham towards the end of the summer in 1908. None of the Birmingham branch's supporters were identified as being domestic servants themselves, and included Miss Ethel Smyth, a prominent middle-class suffrage campaigner, and the Rev. Arnold Pinchard. The Reverend hosted the founding meeting of the branch, noting in his opening speech that he 'was confident that the formation of a union would not only improve enormously the position of domestic servants, but also smooth and make more easy the way of mistresses and masters.' The failure of this branch of the National Federation of Women Workers to establish itself might have provided a warning to the Domestic Workers' Union that it required greater worker autonomy if it was to succeed, *Woman Worker*, 4 Sept 1908, 367. For an unsympathetic report of this union's formation, see TUC, 'Press Cuttings', *Birmingham Dispatch*, 29 Aug 1908, Box 25, Reel 12, 609/2.

strength of both the labour and women's movements during the years of the Great Unrest; a strength which sometimes exceeded their professed objectives. For, despite resistance from some male trade unionists and a section of middle-class feminists, an organisation did emerge which insisted that reproductive labour was *real* work and that servants ought to be considered a valued part of the nation's workforce. Thus, whilst emerging against the grain of these two intersecting political vocabularies, the Domestic Workers' Union in many ways reflects the characteristics of labour unrest and feminist militancy which dominated the early years of the twentieth century.

Kathlyn Oliver and Jessie Stephen were active in a women's movement which was beginning to turn its attention to conditions of women's labour in the home. They subverted feminist rhetoric on the tyranny of the domestic sphere – more commonly used to argue for women's right to work outside the home – to point out the exploitation that occurred within it, and demanded that a movement concerned with women's rights also attend to 'this servant agitation'. The Domestic Workers' Union was both inspired by and capitalized on a rising urge among unskilled workers to resist the worst aspects of their working conditions, and began to call for the rights won by workers in more organized trades to be extended to their own workplaces. They insisted that the private home was a workplace like any other, challenging traditional divisions between the public and the private, men's and women's work, and called upon the government to legislate for their protection. Yet they also recognized the importance of self-organisation, dismissive of charitable attempts to improve their conditions from above.

The Domestic Workers' Union did not survive the First World War, when thousands of women (including many of its members) left for war work.¹¹⁶ It was reformed in 1919, as a branch of the National Federation of Women Workers under the energetic leadership of Jessie Stephen, but remained unable to recruit more than a few thousand members.¹¹⁷ It nevertheless laid the foundations for successive attempts by domestic workers to organize, an impetus which remained during the inter-war years. Many of these attempts were spearheaded by Jessie Stephen, whose autobiography records how:

Right from my teenage years and onwards, there ran a continuous thread of resolve that I must never admit defeat in the campaign to improve the conditions of domestic

¹¹⁶ WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 66.

¹¹⁷ TUC, 'The Annual Report and Balance Sheet of the National Federation of Women Workers: 10th Report for the Years 1918 and 1919'; TUC, 'Press Cuttings', *Daily News*, 9 April 1919, Box 21, Reel 10, 504e/3

workers. At every sort of meeting, at conferences connected with women and their work, I raised the matter if an opportunity presented itself to put the case.¹¹⁸

Stephen attempted to revive the Domestic Workers' Union again in 1926.¹¹⁹ A parallel attempt to organise domestic workers in Birmingham in 1919 was supported by Julia Varley of the Workers' Union, although this tended towards a greater degree of employer-employee co-operation than Stephen was prepared to accept.¹²⁰ The desire for a union for domestic servants remained among some rank and file activists, and the Trades Union Congress Archive contains letters from local trade unionists inquiring of Trades Union Congress headquarters as to the existence of such a union. In 1930 moves were made by the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations, again supported by Jessie Stephen, to establish a Domestic Workers' Charter, approved by the National Conference of Labour Women in 1931.¹²¹ The two main general unions, the Transport and General Workers' Union and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers were, however, unenthusiastic at the prospect of organising at the national level.¹²² In 1932 the Trades Union Congress, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers and the Hampstead Trades Council supported the formation of a Domestic Workers' Guild in Hampstead, North London, but this emphasised welfare and recreational provision over agitation around wages and conditions.¹²³ A new Domestic Workers' Union was not established until 1938, this time by the Trades Union Congress as a top down project which pursued a conciliatory policy towards employers – a far cry from the rank and file

¹¹⁸ WCML, Stephen, *Submission is for Slaves*, 151.

¹¹⁹ MRC, 'Trade Union Correspondence Regarding the Organisation of Domestic Workers 1926-36', H.V. Tewson to C.L. Norman (27 Nov 1926), MSS.292/54.76/4.

¹²⁰ TUC, 'Press Cuttings', *Birmingham Post*, 13 May 1919, Box 21, Reel 10, 504e/3; MRC, 'Trade Union Correspondence Regarding the Organisation of Domestic Workers 1926-36', 'Association of Employers of Domestic Workers' (nd), MSS.292/54.76/4.

¹²¹ MRC, 'Trade Union Correspondence Regarding the Organisation of Domestic Workers 1926-36', 'Report of the Sub-Committee on Questionnaire for the Domestic Workers' Charter' (8 Sept 1930), MSS.292/54.76/4. This charter was based upon a Labour Party document 'What's Wrong with Domestic Service?' (1929), Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 89.

¹²² When a small conference was proposed in 1931 to discuss the organisation of domestic workers, Ernest Bevin, Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union expressed the union's lack of interest in this project. While National Union of General and Municipal Workers did attend the conference early in 1932 it declined to appoint representatives to a committee to discuss further the best way to organise domestic workers 'on account of the difficulties in the way of successful organisation, which were so numerous as not to justify the time and money that would necessarily have to be expended.', MRC, 'Trade Union Correspondence Regarding the Organisation of Domestic Workers 1926-36', Ernest Bevin to E.P. Harries (2 Dec 1931), 'Minute of Meeting of Advisory Committee (17 Feb 1932)', MSS.292/54.76/4.

¹²³ In 1932 the TUC's National Advisory Committee on Women's Organisations approached Hampstead Trades Council suggesting that it start a local organising project among domestic workers. The Domestic Workers' Guild Hampstead was formed in May 1932, MRC, 'Trade Union Correspondence Regarding the Organisation of Domestic Workers 1926-36', E.P. Harries to C.E. Catford (22 Feb 1932), 'Domestic Workers' Guild Hampstead' (13 May 1932), MSS.292/54.76/4. See also Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 90.

militancy of its pre-First World War namesake.¹²⁴ A subsequent wave of agitation, however, bore a closer resemblance to Stephen and Oliver's union, when in the 1970s female cleaners and Women's Liberationists formed campaign alliances – though these focused on organising cleaners in offices and university colleges rather than in private homes.¹²⁵ What begins to emerge, then, is a more continuous picture of domestic worker organizing, stretching from New Unionism to present day cleaners' struggles.¹²⁶ Such initiatives have straddled, sometimes uncomfortably, the women's and the labour movements, and the difficulties specific to organising this form of work remain. Yet their existence demonstrates that reproductive labour is not automatically excluded from the urge to transform the conditions of work and the people who do it.

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¹²⁴ Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 90-91.

¹²⁵ For 1970s campaigns, see Sheila Rowbotham, 'Cleaners' organizing in Britain from the 1970s: A personal account', *Antipode* 38/3, 608-25; Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 91-2; Laura Schwartz, *A Serious Endeavour: Gender, Education and Community at St Hugh's 1886-2011* (London: Profile Books, 2011), 133-4.

¹²⁶ For contemporary initiatives see, for example, Jane Wills, 'Making class politics possible: organising contract cleaners in London', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 32/2 (June 2008), 305-323.