ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

A Failure of Feminism

"The Political Economy of Women's Work, 1900–1920" by John Sharpless and John Rury, in *Social Science History* (Autumn 1980), Sage Publications, Inc., 275 South Beverly Dr., Beverly Hills,Calif. 90212.

In the small, dirty garment lofts, cigar factories, and other sweatshops of early 20th-century America, women frequently worked 12-hour days for as little as 10 cents an hour. But few factory women—most of whom were first- and second-generation European immigrants—were promising candidates for union membership, relate Sharpless and Rury, historians at the University of Wisconsin.

Most immigrant women regarded employment as a "middle passage" between adolescence and adulthood, to be left behind after marriage. (In large American cities by the year 1900, more than 52 percent of female workers were under age 20.) Moreover, the highly seasonal nature of much women's work heightened competition for jobs.

Women from southern European families were the most resistant to organizing. Italian parents, for example, forbade their daughters to attend evening union meetings—for fear their "reputations" would be compromised by being seen on the street at night. Unions had better luck with Russian Jewish women, who were accustomed to leaving home to live on their own.

More than 60,000 women joined unions in New York after a spontaneous shirtwaist-makers' strike in 1909. But men rarely let women

The Research Libraries, the New York Public Library. From American Labor: A Pictorial Social History, *Public Affairs Press, 1972.*

Male-run labor unions and upper-class feminists ignored the needs of the women who toiled in turn-of-the-century New York City garment lofts.

speak out at union meetings. Even the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (90 percent female), with 129,000 members in 1918, had only one woman on its board of directors between 1900 and 1920. Activist women workers dropped out in frustration. Meanwhile, middle- and upper-class feminist organizers alienated tradition-minded immigrants by preaching assertiveness. Their meetings resembled tea parties and made lower-class women feel out of place.

Eventually, the feminists gave up and turned their attention almost exclusively to suffrage. As historian Alice Kessler-Harris notes, immigrant women laborers were left "between a trade union movement hostile to women . . . and a women's movement whose participants did not work for wages."

Raising Gas Taxes

"Gasoline Taxation in Selected OECD Countries, 1970–79" by Alan A. Tait and David R. Morgan, in *IMF Staff Papers* (June 1980), Publications Section, IMF Bldg., Washington, D.C. 20431.

Fearing that high prices at the gas station would heat up inflation, stall economic growth, and victimize the poor, the industrial democracies of Western Europe, North America, and Japan have actually reduced their gasoline taxes since OPEC raised its prices dramatically in 1973–74. As a result, assert Tait and Morgan, economists at the International Monetary Fund, real prices at the pump have risen only slightly—and oil conservation has fallen short of potential.

The real price of crude oil, adjusted for inflation, quintupled from 1970 to 1979. But gasoline tax rates dropped from 44.2 percent (the tax per gallon divided by the before tax price) to 18.2 percent in the United States; from 263.5 percent to 125.7 percent in West Germany; and from 141.8 percent to 72 percent in Japan, between 1970 and 1979. (The real price of retail gasoline actually *fell* in Japan through 1978.) Gas tax revenues as a share of the total tax pie declined in all Western industrialized countries except Italy.

Throughout most of the West, the authors argue, the burden of an increased gasoline tax would fall mainly on the affluent, who own most of the automobiles. But even in the United States, where rich and poor alike own cars, low-income motorists would not be penalized excessively. They currently spend only 6.5 percent of their earnings on fuel.

Initiating steep gasoline taxes is not likely to send inflation out of control, since gas purchases represent less than 5 percent of private consumption in the West. Indeed, it would give governments greater opportunities to foster both conservation and growth. A recent study conducted in the United States suggests that a 10 percent increase in gasoline prices would reduce individuals' purchases of gasoline between 7 and 14 percent. Assuming that citizens continued to spend at the pumps as before, a higher percentage of their cash would be kept in