



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Wives or Widows?

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the only way the people can defend themselves and their beliefs against the power of a few is to organize and fight TOGETHER to protect themselves.

Today women are organizing, and organizing fast, both in their trade unions if they work, and in auxiliaries and consumer and neighborhood groups if they are housewives.

Building their organizations is the best way America's women can work to keep America democratic at home and out of the war abroad. It is the best way to make sure that the horrors and sufferings of the last war shall not be repeated, regardless of measures passed by Congress to get us more deeply involved.

It is the best way to insure that the democratic way of life in which they believe shall not be destroyed, but strengthened.

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The Lessons of World War I

DURING the first World War two major events took place which were of tremendous importance to the future of the working people of America. The first was the great influx of women into the nation's industries to take the place of the 4,000,000 men who were drafted into the army. The second was the unprecedented rise in the cost of living with little or no rise in the wages paid to the workers.

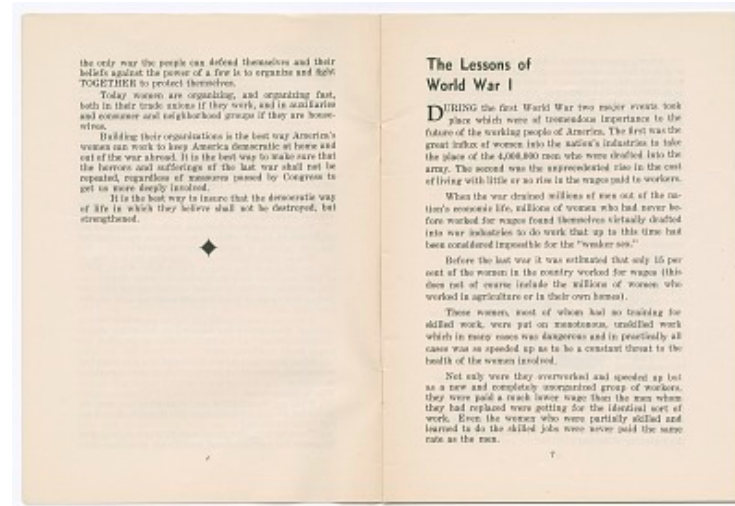
When the war drained millions of men out of the nation's economic life, millions of women who had never before worked for wages found themselves virtually drafted into war industries to do work that up to this time had been considered impossible for the "weaker sex."

Before the last war it was estimated that only 15 per cent of the women in the country worked for wages (this does not of course include the millions of women who worked in agriculture or in their own homes).

These women, most of whom had no training for skilled work, were put on monotonous, unskilled work which in many cases was dangerous and in practically all cases was so speeded up as to be a constant threat to the health of the women involved.

Not only were they overworked and speeded up but as a new and completely unorganized group of workers, they were paid a much lower wage than the men whom they had replaced were getting for the identical sort of work. Even the women who were partially skilled and learned to do the skilled jobs were never paid the same rate as the men.

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