"At last we have our magazine," wrote a triumphant Florence Custance as she launched the first issue of the Woman Worker, official organ of the Canadian Federation of Women's Labor Leagues, in the summer of 1926. Custance, a long time socialist and member of the Communist Party of Canada, promised her readers something very different from the usual fare in "women's" magazines: "It will not contain fashions and patterns, and we are leaving recipes for cooking to the cook book." Nor would readers find "sickly love stories." Instead, she vowed, "Everything that will be printed in our magazine will deal with life, real life, not imaginations. Its sole objective will be to champion Protection of Womanhood, and the Cause of the Workers generally."

This was no idle boast. Readers of this paper were not permitted to escape into a fantasy world where fancy souffles and romantic love obscured the difficult realities of working-class life. There were no images of carefree "flappers" or housewives in dream kitchens, no ads showing women "liberated" by the purchase of a new "Hoover" or, better still, a shiny new model Ford. During its run from July 1926 until April 1929, the Woman Worker gave full exposure to the ugly warts of industrial capitalism in the hope that the working-class women who constituted its primary readership would assess their female experience with a Marxist understanding of class and class conflict. Never limiting itself to simply reporting the dreary conditions of women's lives under capitalism, the paper highlighted resistance as well as victimization, encouraging women to fight the existing order by organizing against class-based economic and social injustice.

The Woman Worker represented the first, and for many years the last, separate English-language socialist paper for women in Canada. The best the pre-World War I socialist press had done for women was to initiate on occasion a women's column, such as the one Mary Cotton Wisdom edited for the Socialist Party of Canada's Cotton's Weekly from 1908-1909. Women's columns, however,
proved a controversial issue among early socialists and many papers refused to cater in any way to a specifically female audience. For much of the interwar period the Women's Section of the United Labour-Farmer Temple Association (ULFTA) was able to boast its own separate publication for women, but both the *Holos Robitnytsi* and the much longer running *Robitnytisia* ("working woman") were edited by men. With the appearance of the Women's Labor League paper in 1926 working-class women with English-language knowledge were offered their own monthly publication, which while not entirely excluding the voice of male comrades, was edited and controlled by women. The *Woman Worker* documented and analyzed the hardships of women's daily lives and presented a vision of dignity, respect and equality which spoke to both their class and gender oppression.

If the paper was pathbreaking for its time, the issues raised were relevant for many years to come and some are still significant to socialist feminists. Carried through its three-year run are questions like how can we organize women workers in ghettoized sectors like personal service? How can the "bourgeois" ideology of the mainstream press be challenged and an alternative analysis offered? What is the meaning of "peace" and how can we organize against imperialist war? How can women resist the state while also accepting the modicum of "protection" it extends? How can a socialist economy be achieved? How can family life be reformulated to better meet the needs of women? The Women's Labor Leagues' answers to these questions were certainly partial, revealing some of the blind spots of Marxism with its much more serious appraisal of class than gender, and its neglect of other key axes of power such as race, sexuality, ability, age, and region. Yet the seriousness with which the paper took up the "woman question," as it was called, and the boundaries that were pushed as contributors explored concerns that were not always considered important by the Communist Party leadership, make this paper highly significant in the history of Canadian socialist-feminism.

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Women's Labor Leagues first appeared in Canada in the pre-World War I period. Modelled on the British WLLs, which were linked to the British Labour Party, they were composed initially of the wives and daughters of trade unionists and Labour Party activists. The Canadian WLLs also closely resembled the Finnish 'sewing circles' attached to Canada's pre-war Social Democratic Party. The Canadian WLLs, like these earlier sewing circles, combined fundraising and support work for the labour movement with political self education. Operating as much more than mere auxiliaries to the
labour movement, the Labor Leagues developed their own priorities and initiatives as well as cooperating with labour and sometimes reform interests.

After faltering amidst the post-war atmosphere of political repression and economic depression, the WLLs were revived in the early 1920s. Not coincidentally, their revival and growth before the economic recovery was complete paralleled the emergence of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), initially called the Workers’ Party of Canada. Inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution, by the creation in 1919 of the new Communist International (or Comintern), and by the major labour uprisings that followed on the heels of the armistice, the new Party was formed largely by members of the earlier socialist parties, the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), the Social Democratic Party of North America (SDPC), and the small Socialist Party of North America (SPNA). Although the leadership was almost exclusively male, and not generally very interested in the particular problems of women’s oppression, the new Party was directed by the Comintern and the Russian Party which controlled it to develop plans that would stimulate Canadian women’s revolutionary consciousness and increase their involvement in the Party. Women’s militance had, after all, been crucial to the success of the Bolshevik revolution. To plan and coordinate the mobilization of women, national Communist parties were urged to establish women’s departments similar to the Soviet Union’s Zhenotdel and the Communist International’s Women’s Secretariat. The Canadian Party, after some stalling, set up its Women’s Department in 1924. Key among its tasks was the building up of the existing Women’s Labor Leagues into a Communist-controlled WLL “movement” that would attract both wage-earning women and housewives. Under this plan and the spearheading efforts of Communist leader Florence Custance, older WLLs were reinvigorated and many new ones formed, and the Leagues, which had always been socialist-leaning, became increasingly tied to the Communist Party. Not all women who joined, however, were Party members. Some were sympathizers, and others were socialists of a different stripe or social democrats who saw the Leagues as one means of moving towards socialism and women’s equality. Throughout the Leagues’ existence, there remained some tension between the firm Communist leadership provided by the Women’s Department and a more politically eclectic membership.

In 1924 the ten Leagues which lay scattered across the country banded together as a Federation, with Custance elected national Secretary. Local Leagues were urged to cooperate with one another as partners in an autonomous working-class organization, but in keeping with the Communist Party’s “united front” strategy they were also advised to make links with certain labour, women’s and farm organizations that were “reformist” in nature. This approach
reflected the Comintern's blending of Marxist theory with the practical strategies promoted by Lenin before his death in 1923, and it remained the accepted practice until late in the decade. The purpose of "boring from within" and cooperating with progressive groups was to identify potential Communist sympathizers and develop a revolutionary core that would attach itself to the Party. The work of building a WLL movement proved difficult indeed. Recalling the first years of the Federation's work, Custance complained "we received little, if any, support from 'our men' in the labour movement." Perhaps the most troubling rebuff from male unionists came when the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada—the largest federation of craft unions—refused to allow the Federation of WLLs to affiliate, almost certainly because of the Communist strength in the Leagues. Resigned to the realization that "if we were to make headway, we must do things ourselves," Custance and others in the Federation executive looked to the creation of a national paper, the Woman Worker, as an invaluable tool to reach out to more women and unify the Leagues. (Woman Worker, October 1927, p. 15) The paper's monthly publication as the mouthpiece of the Federation, together with the untiring organizing efforts of Custance herself, inspired the creation of seventeen more Leagues by October 1927, bringing the total to 37, according to the Woman Worker.

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The appearance of the paper in the mid-1920s was timely indeed, for this decade witnessed the triumph of a mass media with the power to influence Canadian women of all classes. Mass circulation magazines and movies thrust bourgeois ideals within easy reach of working-class women, whose potential militance was endangered by the pacifying effects of "false consciousness." Although Communists worried about the effects of this "poison" on all working-class women, it was the housewife who prompted the greatest anxiety. Housewives, confined for large periods within the home, were thought to be almost completely under the influence of the capitalist class through the church, newspapers, and movies. The Woman Worker was seen as an important counterweight to this influence. Despite the paper's declaration that it would appeal to "all working women, whether they work in the factory, at home, or in the office," the paper was aimed most pointedly at the education and politicization of working-class women working in their homes as housewives and mothers. The Leagues themselves never brought in substantial numbers of wage-earning women. This focus revealed the Party's understanding of the pivotal role housewives played in families. As managers of domestic budgets and caretakers of family members'
emotional needs, housewives could make or break the working-class unity that was needed to sustain strike action and build revolutionary resistance. Consistent with prevailing Communist fears about housewives' latent conservatism, the constitution of the Federation of WLLs proclaimed its intention to organize wives into auxiliary unions, an idea that never translated into reality.

The WLLs had always reflected the ethnic diversity of the early Canadian Left. In cities like Toronto with a heterogeneous ethnic population, Finnish, Ukrainian, Yiddish, and English-speaking groups met separately, but often joined forces to work on common causes. In the Alberta mining towns and other smaller centres, one or two ethnic locals often dominated. Despite the Comintern's push for unity of the language groups, ethnic and language barriers encouraged separation. Moreover, the exclusion of Finns, Ukrainians, and Jewish women from the seats of leadership in both the Federation and the Party produced resentment that led the non-English-speaking League members to lean inward, looking within their ethnic groups for support that was lacking outside.

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Although there were many contributors to the Woman Worker, not all of whom were Communist, and not all of whom signed their names, without a doubt the dominant voice in the paper was that of its editor, the indomitable Florence Custance. Prominent in the Communist Party leadership, where she was one of the only women during the 1920s, Custance was a formidable force, passionately committed to socialist ideals and never one to back down from a good fight, even within her own Party where her relationships with male comrades changed with the political weather. Custance undoubtedly left her mark on the Party and was a household name in the many families receiving the Woman Worker every month, yet her early death in 1929 cut her political involvement short, and she is only a shadowy figure in Communist Party histories. Described in one such history as "rather prim and straight-laced" but with "revolutionary fervour," Custance had been a school teacher in England before emigrating to Canada with her husband, a carpenter. Once in Canada, she became outspoken in the labour movement, especially through the Amalgamated Carpenters of Canada Wives' Auxiliary. Just before the war she joined the SPNA, a small and short-lived organization that tried to move even farther to the Left than the Socialist Party of Canada, a party whose official refusal to cooperate with any reformist currents earned it the label "impossibilist." Custance must have outgrown the rigidity of the SPNA for after helping
form what would become the new Communist Party at a secret meeting in 1919 she stood solidly behind the united front approach that dominated the 1920s. She founded the Toronto Plebs League and was active in the Ontario Labour College. During her tenure as editor of the *Woman Worker* and secretary of the Federation, Custance was also head of the Friends of Soviet Russia and secretary of the Toronto WLL.

Ever the schoolteacher, Custance was one of the strongest intellectuals in the Party and lectured frequently to Communist and non-Communist audiences. Somewhat reserved, she nonetheless whipped the paper into shape, prodding would-be contributors to send in submissions, admonishing them not to sit silent and merely read the *Woman Worker* but to make their voice heard by taking up their pens. She seemed inexhaustible. What a shock it must have been therefore when readers picked up the October 1928 issue of the *Woman Worker* and learned that Custance was seriously ill and had been ordered complete rest for three months. During her absence her comrades in the Toronto League picked up the pieces, made a special appeal to readers to contribute articles and reports, and the paper continued to publish, reporting in November that the editor was feeling much better. After an absence of three months, Custance was apparently back at her post in January 1929, but she would never fully recover. The paper contained no more references to her health, and readers must have assumed all was well, yet it is unlikely that Custance was able to be as involved with the paper as she had once been. The paper had changed appearance during her absence—the table of contents, for example, with its regular columns was replaced with a listing of “Special Contents” that allowed for more flexibility—and after the April 1929 issue the paper fell apart.

Custance died on 12 July 1929. The *Woman Worker* had been her creation and it died with her. It is possible that changes in the Party’s political tactics (already hinted at in 1928-29) and especially the more rigid left-wing rejection of the united front, may have soon led to the demise of the *Woman Worker*, or even Custance’s estrangement from the Party. We will never know. What is apparent is that Custance’s political determination and labour produced a paper whose appeal and message resonated with many working-class women. The result was a short-lived but significant socialist-feminist venture quite unparalleled for many years to come.

*General Sources for Further Reading:*


