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ALICE M. LORD: LABOR ORGANIZER

[This article is one of a series on lost women written by Erika Gottfried as part of an independent study project at the University of Washington in history and women's studies. The essay was first printed in the Seattle Post Intelligencer, July 18, 1976.]

Probably few of Washington's workers ever have stopped to wonder who gave them their eight-hour work day. If they had, they would have learned that a large share of credit goes to one courageous woman—Alice M. Lord. Lord, who was instrumental in forming the Waitresses' Union Local 240, was the moving force behind the lobbying efforts to give women a minimum wage and better work conditions in the early 1900's.

She was 23 years old when she came to Seattle at the turn of the century. All that is known of her previous life is that she was born in Lordville, New York, a small town north of New York City.

Seattle in 1900 was a rough town, not only for Yukon prospectors, but for the workers who were lured by the promise of jobs. Employment was unstable and there was no regulation of hours or wages. No one suffered more from these conditions than women workers. One trade unionist recalled: "When girls came here, whether they got a job or walked the streets destitute was nobody's business but their own." But when they did get jobs, they worked from 10 to 15 hours a day, seven days a week for usually no more than \$5 weekly—substantially less than the low wages of male workers.

Lord and a group of 65 waitresses realized that as individuals they could do little about these conditions; so they organized Waitresses' Union, Local 240 (now Dining Room Employees Union, Local 3) on March 23, 1900. It was the first chartered waitresses' union and one of the earliest women's unions to receive a charter from the American Federation of Labor.

Local 240 was militant and effective. A year before the state's 1901 10-hour law for women went into effect, the union had asked for and received a contract limiting its waitresses' hours to 10 hours daily, as well as raising their wages to at least \$8.50 per week. The next move was to secure a six-day week for union waitresses, and they struck successfully to retain it in December, 1907. The six-day week did not become state law until 1920.

The next step was to secure the eight-hour day. For eight years, from 1903 until 1911, the waitresses fought for it. Prodding the Washington State Federation into supporting their efforts, garnering support from women's clubs, the waitresses and their supporters lobbied until March 4, 1911, when Washington became one of the first four states to pass an eight-hour law for its women workers.

Through the years that followed, Waitresses' Union Local 240 participated in many other efforts to better conditions for themselves and working women in general. They created a rest home for waitresses, the first of its kind, a minimum-wage law for women and a woman deputy labor commissioner. But the eight-hour law remained their greatest triumph.

Protective-hours legislation is the foundation upon which most other protective-labor legislation rests. Washington's law, while by no means perfect (it exempted the large percentage of women workers engaged in canning fish and shellfish and in harvesting and processing fruits and vegetables), served as

a precedent for extending the eight-hour law to most workers and for minimum-wage statutes.

In those days, it required courage and stamina to proclaim oneself a trade unionist and Lord, speaking on her soapbox, risked jail for attempting to interest unorganized workers in joining the union. Throughout her 40 years' membership, Lord served her union as secretary-treasurer, business agent, manager and president. "A good many people thought an organization run by girls would not last long," she said in 1914. "But you see, the girls belong to a race whose forefathers fought for the liberty of humanity in 1861-65 and they are fighters too—this time for the liberty of the wage earner."

In spite of the prejudice against female trade unionsists, Lord also was active in the general labor movement and served as a delegate to the Joint Board of Culinary Crafts, the Seattle Central Labor Council and the Washington State Federation of Labor.

Alice Lord and her campaign to better the conditions of women workers are the stuff of which legends are made. Several union members mentioned with pride how Alice Lord had walked to Olympia from Seattle to lobby, when times were hard and union funds were low. She told legislators, when arguing for a six-day week, "You give even your horses one day's rest in seven."

What of Alice Lord's personality? She is described as having an "aggressive nature and an indomitable spirit," but also as a person who "loved life" and relished social Saturday get-togethers of the waitresses, over crab dinners and beer. Another described her as a good hostess who gave lots of parties.

On April 9, 1931, Alice Lord resigned her position of secretary-treasurer and married Walter C. Dunn, a retired railway express employee. But the life of a housewife could hardly have been expected to content a ceaseless campaigner like Alice Lord. In less than two years, she had rejoined the union and in 1933, she was elected its president. She continued to serve in that capacity until March 8, 1940 when, after suffering a stroke, she died.

Many tributes were given her. Of her accomplishments on behalf of union waitresses, the Seattle Central Labor Council said: "... the full effect of her efforts can be realized by a comparison between conditions when she came and when she died. Working hours have been reduced more than 50 percent while wages have increased more than 300 percent." But the greatest and most fitting tribute to her was contained in a clergyman's eulogy at her funeral: "She left the conditions of working women far better than she found them."

Erika Gottfried

