

“To the Victor Belong the Spoils”

*The Merits of a Combined Suffrage and Labor Agenda,
1877–1920*

Ethel Smith’s home state of Illinois was a microcosm of labor protest, government corruption, and social reform. As the nation moved from an agricultural to industrial economy, state and local policy makers allied with industrial interests, maintaining the dominance of decentralized government and the political philosophy of laissez-faire individualism. With support from state officials, employers smashed existing unions and thwarted attempts at unionization through yellow-dog contracts and injunctions. In response to the repeated economic downturns, political and legal conservatism, and exploitation of labor that permeated the state’s urban areas, Chicago became the site of a burgeoning reform movement that attempted to mitigate the unregulated conditions of a rapidly industrializing society. Such reform efforts brought short-term victories locally, but those who shaped and led these efforts rose to prominence by forging a national model of economic and legal reform designed to increase government responsibility for social welfare. Though Smith matured within the quiet solitude of rural Sangamon County, Illinois, she would later follow in the footsteps of these early reformers and emerge as a politically savvy and tenacious lobbyist, journalist, and trade unionist whose dedication to social reform placed her at the center of important early-twentieth-century legislative battles.

Smith’s commitment to social reform bore direct relation to her father’s persistent financial struggle. In her family history, completed in 1948, she remembered: “[I]t was always hard times with us.” Her father, Richard Smith (1852–1910), waged a constant struggle in search of employment that paid him a living wage. He moved from job to job, working as a farmer, teacher, and deputy sheriff, and he even attempted to run a livery stable business. Despite his hard work, he was “not prosperous, never a money maker, and he never could provide for us as he wished.”¹ Though a dual income would have alleviated some of his financial burdens, Richard Smith, like most men of his generation, identified as the primary breadwinner for his wife and children, and he would have deemed himself a failure if the women in his family worked outside of the home.

As the eldest child raised in a modest, working-class family, Smith learned the vicissitudes of economic struggle and value of hard work from her father. Her childhood memories were shaped by visions of his strength, a refusal to sacrifice his values, and a commitment to his family. She remembered in vivid detail the many times her father drove her around the county fulfilling his duties as deputy sheriff. She wrote:

“I was small enough to perch beside him on the little seat of the two-wheeled sulky, behind our little brown mare Dolly, with the white star in her forehead. Life was very wonderful to me, exploring the world with my father, and I remember those days very well.” As they rode around town, her father told her the “history of the old Sangamon River, the covered bridges and townships in the county,” not only creating a sense of adventure but also instilling in her a strong personal desire to long for more than marriage and to become financially self-sufficient.²

Smith’s eagerness to find a job rose to new proportions following her graduation from high school in 1895. Through persistent cajolery, she finally convinced her father that “it was becoming quite a common thing for girls to earn a living—that is, they became teachers or stenographers.” She remembered, “At first father didn’t want me to do anything—he felt it a reflection upon himself. But within a year or so I persuaded him to let me take shorthand lessons.” Over the next two to three years, she worked several stenography jobs and used the experience to refine her organizational and management skills so that she could market herself for better-paying jobs. Never content with secretarial wages or responsibilities, Smith pursued a more rewarding, better-paying position in the civil service, embarking on an adventure that she had never imagined would be possible.³

Smith’s civil service career began when she traveled to Chicago to take the examination that would qualify her as a stenographer in the Census Office. After passing the exam, she remembered: “I . . . was sworn in as a stenographer in the Office of the Chief of the Division of Manufactures in the 12th United States Census at \$600 a year.” She maintained this job for only ten months, however, because the Census Office was not yet a permanent institution.⁴ After she passed the civil service examination for stenographer and typist positions in 1901, the Civil Service Commission “transferred [her] to the Bureau of Fisheries as a clerk at \$720 a year” and assigned her to stenographic duty in the Office of the Chief of the Division of Scientific Inquiry.⁵ Within a few months, she was promoted to the position of private secretary to the chief.⁶ At this point she had moved up to \$1,000 a year, which was to say the least, better than the \$500 Springfield offered then. Smith’s salary placed her within the ranks of the highest-paid women in the civil service.⁷

Her tenure as a federal employee coincided with highly discriminatory employment practices, inconsistent wage standards, and advancement opportunities that oftentimes depended more on political connections than on the quality of work performed. The passage of the gag rule in 1902 designated department heads with primary responsibility to determine hours of work and wage levels for their employees. In addition, department heads could determine the sex of eligible candidates, contributing to the exclusion of women from some branches of the civil service and preventing their advancement into higher-paying positions. Despite the persistence of gender discrimination, civil service employment created new professional opportunities for women at the turn of the twentieth century, including working-class

women such as Smith, providing them with the financial means to achieve white-collar status.⁸ Smith's stenographic skills, combined with her youthful optimism and determination to succeed, helped her initially escape the discriminatory pay inequalities and occupational segregation that shaped the workplace experiences of so many women and men employed in government service. Her position in the U.S. Fish Commission was originally designated as a man's job. Fortunately, the Director of the Division of Scientific Enquiry rejected the first two rounds of male applicants and instead decided to hire a woman as his personal secretary. The Civil Service Commission then forwarded the names of three women to the chief and, indeed, Smith received the job. Smith's supervisor afforded her, to a great extent, the opportunity to explore her interests and to develop her abilities.⁹

As Smith worked her way through the civil service ranks, the women with whom she would later collaborate forged a reform movement that first took shape in Chicago's Hull House, a social settlement founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Located in one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods, the middle-class women who resided at Hull House worked directly with the urban poor, studied the conditions of wage labor, and developed legislative and legal remedies to alleviate the most severe forms of exploitation. Based on empirical research and direct interaction among the neighborhood's impoverished, these women built the foundation of a reform movement dedicated to remedying unhealthful working conditions, long hours of work, and low wages. At a time in which women were largely excluded from public policy debates and the philosophy of *laissez-faire* individualism reigned supreme, achieving these goals necessitated acceptance into the male-dominated political and legal circles of the period. This required a pragmatic strategy that did not overtly reject their culturally ascribed roles as women, while at the same time constrained the unregulated growth of industrial capitalism and circumvented the hegemony of conservative political and legal thought.¹⁰

The women who launched this reform movement called for the creation of workplace standards that included healthful working conditions, a fair wage, and the eight-hour day. Their vision of the state as an arbiter of social justice, however, starkly contrasted with the long-held tradition of the nonregulatory state. As they pursued state-level legislation that regulated the working conditions of men and women, they were stymied by a legal tradition that defined freedom of contract as the foremost of all individual rights. Because state and federal courts consistently interpreted class-based legislation as an infringement on the constitutional right to contract, these women quickly determined the need for a new strategy to advance their reform agenda. From the 1890s into the early twentieth century, they developed a network of activists that slowly built national momentum for labor reform designed to balance the rights of workers with the economic interests of their employers. To accomplish their goals, gender became a surrogate for class legislation to build the legitimacy of government regulation of the labor contract.¹¹

By creating and advancing a female-specific strategy, these women emerged as an effective lobby group that wielded substantial power. Through their efforts, they began the process of redefining the role of the state, creating government agencies such as the Children's Bureau in 1912, the Women-in-Industry Service during World War I, and later the Women's Bureau, a battle in which Ethel Smith emerged as a leading figure. In effect, these women not only advanced strategies to reform private employment but also to overcome the exclusionary aspects of civil service employment, while at the same time creating a new arm of the state to ensure that women's interests were represented in the political process.¹²

As the movement for women's labor laws emerged on the national scene, Smith underwent a period of profound personal growth and fulfillment. For three summers between 1901 to 1903, she assisted the director of Scientific Enquiry as he fulfilled his responsibilities as the director of the Commission's laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Here, for the first time, she was exposed to academic thought and investigation. During these summers, Smith worked as her supervisor's secretary and as the librarian for residence research workers. As a librarian, she interacted directly with the laboratory's researchers, remembering that the experience was "as good as a course in biology." She wrote:

Those three summers were a new era for me. Here was New England with its history and traditions . . . here was the sea, with its vast distances, its mysteries and its ships—all utterly new to me. Nor had I known anything of college life. Woods Hole . . . was (and is) a center of marine biological research. It drew professors and students from many universities for summer courses . . . and for independent research. There was a delightful social life, as well as the learned one, and a whole new aspect of the world for me.¹³

Government service offered multiple new experiences for Smith, unknown to her parents. Woods Hole exposed her to the academic world of research and afforded her the opportunity to develop the research, analytical, and publishing skills that were crucial not only to further her advancement in the civil service but to build her self-confidence and diversity of interests. By 1904, her duties moved beyond administrative when the chief asked her to assist the editor of the Commission's publications. During the next four years, she combined the responsibilities of both positions, learning about writing and editing "chiefly . . . scientific (biological) and commercial bulletins."¹⁴ She was promoted to the editor's position when he retired in 1906, and she held this position for eight years.

To become better qualified to fulfill her new responsibilities, Smith registered for courses at George Washington University during the 1906–07 and 1908–09 academic years. During this time, she attended evening classes in composition, literature, and criticism.¹⁵ Frequently, federal employees used their salaries to pay

for professional training in such areas, for example, as law or medicine.¹⁶ Smith did not, however, feel compelled to seek a professional degree. She had already become the first woman in her family to work outside of the home, and clearly she felt gratified by the opportunities afforded her as a civil servant. To Smith, college training would enhance her performance as the Commission's new editor. It would create an opportunity—much like her Woods Hole experience—to expand her analytical and organizational capacities. At this point in her life, she had every reason to believe that there were no limits to her professional growth. She embodied the values of the merit system, embracing the belief that a job well done would be recognized by her superiors. These beliefs, learned from her father's example, comprised the core of her most cherished values. Commitment to her work created a sense of dignity and distinction, of credibility and self-worth. She refused to compromise these principles, regardless of the circumstances.

After two years of experience, the completion of college courses, and continued dedication to her work, Smith's frustration grew because her salary level had not reached her male predecessor's. Initially she eagerly accepted the position without an increase in pay. As time passed, she explained:

I had an increase in pay eventually to \$1,200 and finally to \$1,600, which was the maximum that I have ever received in Government service, although I was doing the work of this man, and not only his work but much of my own inherited from my previous assignment. He, of course, was underpaid for his work at \$1,800, but I never received as much as he received.¹⁷

After supporting her advancement in the civil service for so many years the commissioner capped Smith's yearly salary at \$1,600. Though he had the authority to determine personnel policies, department heads were constrained by antiquated wage scales that were fixed by a congressional act passed at the end of the Civil War. As the civil service expanded, new bureaus and departments were established, and pay for employees was fixed by new laws and regulations that did not account for wage levels in other branches. In addition, wage scales also were based on the gendered assumptions that men were the primary wage earners, and that women entered the labor force only until marriage.¹⁸ Therefore, the concept of pay equity for men and women performing the same types of work had not yet been identified as a viable issue in the development of new federal employment practices.

In 1912, when Smith once again was passed over for a promotion, she confronted the commissioner with the argument that she was entitled to the same rate of pay as her male predecessor. When pressed about the issue, he blatantly told her that he had no intention of promoting her any further, and that she was "getting as much as any *woman* could expect." Instead, he decided to promote "poor old Jackson," even though "he's no earthly good to us." Despite his poor qualifications, the

commissioner explained he was more deserving than Smith, because he had a wife and child to support.¹⁹ The commissioner's attitude infuriated Smith, not only because he ignored her qualifications but also because he assumed that only men had the capacity and responsibility to become primary breadwinners for their families. The fact that she and her sister Florence shared an apartment in northwest Washington, D.C., maintained their own expenses, and assumed primary caretaking responsibility for their mother from 1910 to her death in 1925 only added insult to injury.²⁰

She was, without doubt, proud of her capacity to achieve financial independence, without sacrificing her personal values. Frustrated by the obstacles that prohibited her from advancement in the civil service, she took the initial steps to become active in efforts to redress widespread inequalities affecting women. In 1912, she began volunteering in the suffrage movement in the evenings. Two years later, she resigned her commission and devoted her attention to social and economic issues impacting women's rights and labor reform.²¹ In 1914, she accepted a paid position as secretary for the Congressional Committee of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Founded in 1890, NAWSA emerged in the early twentieth century as the mainstream woman suffrage organization. Under the leadership of Anna Howard Shaw, followed by Carrie Chapman Catt, NAWSA worked within the existing political system, and patiently attempted to establish bipartisan support for its agenda. Its members pursued a pragmatic agenda that focused on three primary approaches: (1) building the support of President Woodrow Wilson and Congress through lobbying and deputations; (2) working through state affiliations to mobilize public support for local suffrage referenda; and (3) generating public education and media to increase the visibility of NAWSA and the Nineteenth Amendment.

Smith joined the Congressional Committee following a heated period of dispute among members of the organization's more militant sect, led by Alice Paul, the chair of its Congressional Committee. NAWSA's policy of persuasion alienated Paul and her supporters, who preferred to directly challenge mainstream politics. She split from NAWSA in 1914 to launch her own organization that evolved into the National Woman's Party. Paul's break from NAWSA created significant turmoil within the organization, but at the same time created significant opportunity for Ethel Smith. As the committee's new chair, Ruth McCormick selected Smith as secretary. In this capacity, she was responsible for more than administrative duties. She worked as a state organizer for the committee, tracking congressional votes on suffrage and reporting on state organizational activities.²²

Though she had never engaged in local organizing, the analytical and editorial experience gained during her civil service career served her well as she explored and diversified her professional talents. As one of her many responsibilities, Smith

carefully studied and documented the activities of Alice Paul and her organization. During her travels, Smith learned that Paul had “called upon suffragists everywhere to resign from the National” and portrayed the organization as weak and ineffective compared to the NWP. When NAWSA’s leadership confronted Paul regarding “her avowed intention of smashing the National,” Smith was shocked by Paul’s evasive attitude and did not understand why she would so brazenly attempt to undermine NAWSA’s authority.²³ She concluded that Paul was more intent on pursuing her personal interests than engaging in a cooperative movement to bring the suffrage movement to a successful conclusion.²⁴

In her family history, Smith did not emphasize this aspect of her participation in the suffrage movement. Though she had clearly developed a critical interpretation of Paul’s leadership and tactics, she did not at this point feel compelled to devote all of her energy to combating the fallacies generated by NWP propaganda. Instead, she began to develop a broader understanding of the significance of woman suffrage to advancing the rights of women. She wrote, what “seemed to me most worthwhile was to work for the betterment of the conditions of human life, and closest to me of all were the problems of women who work for their living.”²⁵ American entry into World War I in April 1917 created new opportunities for Smith to fully develop and articulate her beliefs.

In accordance with its pragmatic approach to politics, NAWSA pledged support for American intervention in the war, viewing the situation as an opportunity to bring new recruits into the suffrage movement. As women eagerly entered the workplace to replace the men who had gone to war, NAWSA’s members assumed leadership roles within war-time agencies and emphasized the need to protect women who were new to the labor force from unnecessary exploitation. Smith emerged as a prominent figure in NAWSA during this time, based largely on her profound commitment to link woman suffrage with efforts to protect existing labor standards and to prevent the exploitation of working women. Beginning in April, Smith worked simultaneously as Director of NAWSA’s Industrial Committee and Publicity Bureau.²⁶ Under her leadership, the Industrial Committee safeguarded industrial standards during the war. She explained that the “sudden rush of thousands of women workers into new fields” created the “danger of a breakdown of the standards protecting both women and men in industry.” She organized “a systematic propaganda campaign against excessive overtime and underpay in industries where women are employed,” that not only targeted working women and suffrage activists but also state policy makers and business interests.²⁷

In her “Letter to Wage-Earning Suffragists,” Smith warned her readers that employers were using the wartime emergency to ignore labor laws that protected the wages of men to increase their profits. She urged wage-earning women to use this opportunity to defend and protect current wage standards and to demand the application of those standards to their wages. She proclaimed that women who

were eager to do their patriotic duty by assuming the jobs worked by military men should not undervalue their own skills and “should not do men’s work for less than men’s pay.” She believed that wage-earning women should not only look at themselves as women but rather as competent individuals whose skills entitled them to a fair return on the work that they did.²⁸

Smith believed that women who were new to the workplace should engage in a cooperative effort to challenge those who discriminated against them.²⁹ Based on this belief, she attempted to rally suffragists behind efforts to protect the rights of these women through media and publicity; she argued that the need for women’s labor during World War I created an opportunity for suffragists to extend their organizational experiences and interests into other areas that warranted legislative change. She urged suffragists to convey the lessons they had learned through collective action to women who were new to the labor force, emphasizing that “this is the hour when those who already understand these things can do much to help their sisters who are less experienced.” According to Smith, women workers who were unorganized were “unwittingly one of the most serious dangers to the standards of industry the world over. Let us, as suffragists, make organized demand for those equal economic rights which will enable us to remove this danger to our country’s welfare.”³⁰

She not only called upon NAWSA members at the state level to protect the rights of working women but also local government and businessmen. “Of employers we ask that they shall not lengthen the working hours of women, and that women who take the places of men in business, offices, stores, factories, or any other occupation shall be paid at the same rate as men.” Smith proclaimed that the work performed, not the sex of the worker, should determine the rate of pay. “We recognize also the unfairness to men and the injury to industrial standards in general resulting from the competition of low-paid woman labor. Furthermore, the women who take men’s places in the war emergency have likewise to bear men’s burdens in the support of their families.”³¹ She emphasized her belief that equal pay for equal work raised standards of women’s work and helped prevent the use of women by employers to undercut the standards already achieved by men in the labor movement.

As Smith articulated the link between the interests of suffragists and women workers, she lost sight of the proposed Nineteenth Amendment. NAWSA President Carrie Chapman Catt told Smith:

I think a very great deal of the press work and perhaps all of it that has gone out concerning different phases of women’s work has been helpful, but I question very gravely the advantage of giving the impression that the National Association is “putting its fingers in every possible pie” in Washington when nothing goes out about the Federal Amendment.

Catt respected Smith's research and journalistic capabilities, commenting on how "excellently written" her articles were. She told Smith that "publicity, as you know, is not my strong point." However, Catt felt compelled to ask her to "put more attention on press work for the Federal Amendment and less on the other at the present."³² Smith, of course, complied with Catt's request, but at the same time she stepped up her activism in the labor movement.

Smith's increasing participation in the labor movement marked a pivotal moment in her life, creating the opportunity for her to combine her field organizing, lobbying, and media talents with her personal politics. Though she remained devoted to the suffrage movement, she chose to join forces with labor unions and organizations that promoted collective action to educate and unite working men and women. Most importantly, these groups created and advanced legislative strategies to establish modern standards governing the workplace and state regulation of issues that specifically impacted working women. She supported labor legislation that protected working men, but for Smith, women were in greater need of such protections because they were new to the labor force, not fully integrated into the mainstream labor movement, and more susceptible to discrimination. From this point on, she devoted herself to the principle of equal compensation for equal work, irrespective of sex, not only to protect the rights of individual workers but also to benefit society as a whole.

In November 1917, she assumed an active role in NFFE, the first national union of federal employees founded in 1917 at a meeting of delegates from local federal employee unions, Samuel Gompers and representatives of the AFL. NFFE President Luther Steward never lost sight of the organization's trade union character, consistently emphasizing the common interests among civil service employees with all wage earners and the power of collective action to provide mutual support for their common goals. The organization engaged in a wide variety of activities to establish modern standards of wages and working conditions in the civil service. From petitioning Congress and building widespread public support for proposed reforms to creating effective working relations among government officials and employees, NFFE was free to pursue legislative reform, provided that its members never engaged in or supported strikes against the government.³³

Reclassification legislation dominated NFFE's legislative agenda, because the "Federal civil service is run on antiquated, unscientific lines."³⁴ Government employment expanded haphazardly, lacking standards in the establishment of wage levels, hours, promotion opportunities, and benefits. New grades and positions with new salary levels were created at each session of Congress. New bureaus and even new departments were set up, and pay for their employees was fixed by new laws or regulations that took little account of the standards in other branches.³⁵ NFFE believed that reclassification legislation would create a more efficient civil service system that would benefit both employees and the federal

government.³⁶ Through its Legislative Committee, the organization pursued a reform agenda designed to “advance the social and economic welfare and education of Federal employees” and to “perfect systems that will make for greater efficiency” in the civil service.³⁷ It is not surprising that NFFE appealed to Smith. She was among the members selected to the Legislative Committee, a responsibility that afforded her the opportunity to actively participate in lobbying efforts to pass reclassification of civil service legislation in Congress. She assisted committee members in the organization and implementation of NFFE’s legislative program, sought cooperation and support from other reform groups, and helped keep systematic records of congressional opinions regarding civil service reform.³⁸

Participation as a member of NFFE’s Legislative Committee provided Smith with the opportunity to speak publicly about the importance of collective action and the need to protect the interests of women employed in the federal service and establish wage standards that were equitable for all civil service employees. Based on her fourteen years of experience, Smith proclaimed, “[T]here is a most startling and I think most shameful discrimination against women. I say shameful because it is our Government that is doing it.” She believed the government had the responsibility to ensure fair employment standards for both men and women, but instead “pays women less than it pays men for the same work, merely for the reason that they are women, and it frankly says so. And after women have been appointed, they are denied advancement and choice of position, frankly for the reason that they are women, and that men, by reason of being men, should have the preference.”³⁹ Under such circumstances, women needed the protections afforded by reclassification legislation “because there is in the Government Service so much that is unequal.” Though the proposed reclassification bill would benefit men who experienced workplace discrimination, Smith emphasized that the “problems of the women who work are more acute than the problems of the men. The women are massed in the lower grades of pay. There are about 30,000 in the Government service in Washington and you will find that their average salary is \$200 less a year than the average salary of the men.”⁴⁰

Smith framed her arguments within a context of tremendous hostility regarding the implementation of civil service reform. “When the Civil Service was established the Federal employee was hedged about with restrictions designed to prevent him from engaging in “pernicious political activity.”⁴¹ Two presidential “gag orders” proclaimed that civil service employees were “forbidden . . . to solicit an increase of pay or to influence . . . in their own interest any other legislation whatever . . . before Congress . . . on penalty of dismissal from the Government service.”⁴² The integration of men and women into the civil service bred even more tension. Working women challenged the “male breadwinner ethic” and middle-class standards of propriety. To discourage women from seeking employment as government workers, supervisors offered inequitable salaries, denied women the

same examination opportunities, and restricted their advancement opportunities to certain classifications.⁴³ Smith's emphasis on women's rights only added complexity to an already tense situation.

Despite innumerable obstacles hindering federal civil service reform, NFFE's membership increased by more than 300 percent between 1917 and 1919, and more than 200,000 federal employees received salary increases.⁴⁴ Among its greatest achievements was the establishment of the Congressional Joint Commission on Reclassification of Salaries, "created by Congress in 1919 to determine what reclassification and readjustment of compensation should be made so as to provide uniform and equitable pay to Federal employees."⁴⁵ Once established, the commission at once selected an expert group of men in the field of personnel to aid in its investigation. Smith believed that the commission should provide special consideration to women's experiences as federal employees. Though she felt confident "in the fair-mindedness and fair purpose of the Commission," she asked Edward Keating, the commission's secretary, to appoint "*a woman expert for consultation on all matters of policy and method, not only affecting women in the Government service*" but also "in the same way as it consults with other experts who are men."⁴⁶ Smith requested that after the commission "assembled the facts upon which it will base its reclassification, a special study be made of those facts as recorded for the women employees." She believed that only the representatives of women workers could accurately evaluate the conditions of women's work. Though Keating was sympathetic to Smith's viewpoint, he did not convince the commission to include women experts in its membership.⁴⁷

Smith continued to publicly push for the inclusion of women in decisions to reform civil service employment. She argued that long and bitter experience had taught women that men do not understand their problems as members of the labor force, and "with all due respect to the fairest of men, and with the utmost confidence in their good intentions and sincerity, we know that woman's interests are not safe in their hands alone." She believed that an effective and comprehensive program of reform would be impossible if women were not provided with equal representation in all policy making and executive agencies.⁴⁸

Smith attempted to raise awareness of the extent to which women were excluded from civil service appointments. Statistics then showed that women were excluded from 60 percent of civil service examinations because they were women.⁴⁹ She proclaimed: "[T]his is outrageously unjust, undemocratic, stupid and unnecessary." As a firm believer in the merit system, Smith argued that if women did not qualify for the job in question, the civil service examination would reveal that fact, and their names would not reach the register. "If they can fill the job, and the examination reveals that fact, they are entitled to certification with eligible men, and should be appointed or *rejected according to their fitness as shown by examination.*"⁵⁰ Smith did not argue that women should receive special protection. She believed that

equal competition would provide women the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities as workers. She argued that federal employees, both men and women, did not seek “special privilege” or to be “put . . . in a class apart from the general public.” Instead, she wrote: “Give us a square deal and keep your favors.”⁵¹

Smith pondered how men consistently justified the exclusion of women from entrance to many examinations and from better-paying jobs. She contended:

Very largely, I think, the discrimination of women is involuntary, and represents merely men’s instinct and habit of mind. The world was made for *man*, you see, and it was upon second thought that women entered it. Not even yet do most men freely concede our right to economic freedom—our right to work in fair competition with men. The normal order, as they see it, is for women to be limited in opportunity, limited as to field, limited as to pay. The big things, the creative jobs, and the best paid jobs, by divine right belong to men and are outside women’s sphere.

Smith complained that it never occurred to the bureau chiefs in Washington “that some women might be equally capable or more so, that she might be equally in need of a job, since it takes just as much to support women’s families as it takes for men’s families.”⁵² She also emphasized that efforts to strengthen the merit system and ensure standards in the federal civil service would fail unless men accepted the fact that women were permanent members of the labor force, that they were capable of financially supporting themselves, and regularly contributed to the economic well-being of their families.

Smith’s outspoken commitment to “equal rights, equal opportunity, [and] equal compensation” for working women impressed Margaret Dreier Robins, President of the WTUL, so much that she offered her two part-time paid jobs as Executive Secretary for its Washington Committee and as Resident Secretary for its National Legislative Committee. Smith accepted both positions and easily combined her newfound responsibilities with those as a member of NFFE’s Legislative Committee. With the WTUL, Smith found work she “could do with zest, and . . . found many of the most vital associations and cherished friendships” of her life.⁵³

Founded in 1903 by William English Walling and Mary Kenney O’Sullivan, the WTUL worked closely with the social settlement movement, especially in Chicago and New York, to unionize working women, promote labor legislation, and educate working women about their rights as workers. The WTUL also became an affiliate of the AFL. According to its constitution, drafted by prominent social settlement activists, the objectives of the WTUL included serving the “interests of wage-earning women, to acquaint the public more fully with the unhealthful and sometimes shocking conditions under which women often were employed . . . to assist women in organizing for the purpose of securing better working conditions, and

also to obtain improvements by means of legislation.”⁵⁴ At first, the organization lacked effective national leadership. Robins, without question, filled that void. She initially worked closely with the middle-class settlement workers who founded the organization but ultimately focused on promoting wage-earning women, who quickly dominated the WTUL’s ranks, to positions of leadership.⁵⁵

In addition, she worked to build the confidence of wage-earning women, and was not afraid to associate the WTUL with militant labor protests. Most notably, during the Shirtwaist Strike in 1909, the affluent members of the WTUL walked the picket line, endured threats from the crowds and police, and were arrested. Their elite social status, in addition to their financial resources, brought media attention to the strike and provided the resources to keep the demonstration moving. The WTUL provided bail money for arrested strikers and created an information bureau that generated sympathetic media and public support. As the WTUL matured, Robins led the move toward a broader organizational platform. This included developing leadership among women workers to achieve equal pay for equal work and the eight-hour day and securing representation of women on industrial tribunals and public commissions. Most significantly, the WTUL adopted the strategy of pursuing female-specific legislation to achieve its objectives of equal pay for equal work, irrespective of sex.⁵⁶

At its 1909 convention, the Legislative Committee issued a report summarizing the need for legislation. The report stated: “We believe that the organized women, who have the power because of their organization to contract collectively for their labor, are bound to secure protection for their weaker sisters and brothers and to demand that the state secure for all conditions that will safeguard the health of the workers and the welfare of future generations.” The committee outlined a legislative program designed to protect wage-earning women, “because the mass of them are young, between 16 and 21 years, inexperienced, unskilled, without the . . . power to bargain on equal terms with their employers, for, while the employer has the power to wait, these girls are helpless because of the struggle for a mere existence.” This legislative program contained a series of measures “to safeguard the health of female employees,” such as the eight-hour day, elimination of night work, protected machinery, an increased number of women factory inspectors, and a legal minimum wage in sweated trades. By 1920, the WTUL had 600,000 affiliated members organized in twenty local branches and had substantially diversified its agenda.⁵⁷

When Smith joined the WTUL two years prior, she played a key role in promoting organizational growth and diversifying the WTUL’s legislative agenda. Through its Committee on Legislation, chaired by Agnes Nestor, Smith assumed primary responsibility for operating the WTUL’s newly formed Legislative Department in Washington, D.C. The Washington Committee, as it was called, became the WTUL’s “instrument for furthering beneficial legislation in Congress, and to

becoming a center of nation-wide propaganda on behalf of wage earners.⁵⁸ As a member of the WTUL's national Legislative Committee, Smith earned a reputation as the organization's legislative watchdog and as an effective lobbyist for minimum-wage laws, the creation of a Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor, and the eight-hour day. At the same time, her responsibilities as Washington Committee secretary provided her with the opportunity to forge a well-defined publicity agenda for the WTUL. Her primary responsibility included educating working women in Washington, D.C. specifically about the power of unionization.⁵⁹

Smith immediately built the case for the creation of a national publicity service to build support for the WTUL's reform agenda. At a 1921 Executive Committee meeting, she argued, "[E]veryone of us knows that organizations that get before the public most often in a creditable way are the organizations that grow." She continued:

[W]e know that nobody, not even our own members fully understand our story unless they hear it in every possible way; we know that the general public, which is the audience we must reach, is slower still to understand. . . . Whether they admit it or not, people *do* believe what they read in the newspapers. Therefore the newspapers are the *most* important medium of communication for us, and money spent for an efficient League press service is money well spent. Such a service would supplement every other department of the League's work.⁶⁰

Smith's arguments were well received, as was the national publicity campaign she orchestrated. Because of her talents, the WTUL reached more than 1,000 newspapers, keeping the WTUL's activities before the public and reaching individuals who they may not have reached through on-the-ground organizing. Through the media service, Smith received coverage in such prestigious national newspapers as the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. In addition to reaching a national audience, she also tailored her written work to capture the attention of the WTUL's primary constituency through its publication, *Life and Labor Bulletin*, and NFFE's newspaper, *The Federal Employee*.

In the period 1918–1920, Smith produced articles that demonstrated her commitment to the establishment of pay equity in government and private employment. During this two-year period, she strongly and consistently supported labor protests and legislation designed to establish a legal minimum wage. Corresponding with her concern for the establishment of a living wage, Smith also called for "a woman's movement within the . . . labor movement" as a "necessary and inevitable" outcome of the "general movement for political democracy."⁶¹ In May 1918, she published a series of articles that described the strike conducted by eighty nonunion women cigar makers in Washington, D.C. from March to May 1918. The WTUL's

Washington Committee, including Smith, assumed an active role in mediating the dispute between the women workers and their employer, Henry Offerdinger, the owner of the largest cigar factory in Washington, D.C. According to Smith, Offerdinger refused to increase the pay of his women workers because “of the increased cost of his materials.” She criticized him for being impervious to the needs of his workers, accused him of operating a “parasitic business, subsidized by the families of his employees,” and claimed that his business had “no moral right to exist.”⁶² Smith believed that employers were responsible for providing a living wage for their employees and equal pay for men and women. With the help of the WTUL, the women cigar makers’ demands were met.

Smith described the women cigar makers’ strike in Washington, D.C. as a successful example of cooperative action. With the help of the WTUL’s Washington Committee, the women strikers were introduced to Joseph Dehan, a representative of the Cigar Makers International Union, and Samuel Gompers, “who took steps at once to organize and secure proper affiliation for the plucky but thus far isolated group of strikers.”⁶³ She also argued that the cigar makers’ strike was a situation of “interest and concern to our membership, since it involves three basic principles—collective bargaining, minimum wage, and equal pay for equal work, regardless of sex.” Smith wrote that Rebecca Perry, the leader of the women strikers, along with officers of the WTUL, investigated the wage differentials between men and women employed in Offerdinger’s factory. The outcome of such inquiries revealed that women cigar makers were paid by the week, while the men were paid by the piece. According to Smith, the support of the WTUL and the Cigar Makers International Union enabled the women strikers to play a key role in the struggle to establish equal pay among the sexes in the workplace.⁶⁴ In May, Offerdinger conceded and fulfilled the strikers’ demands for “better wages, equal pay for equal work, improvements in sanitation and the right to organize.” Smith proclaimed that the victory was “of great significance to women workers in the District of Columbia, where the prevailing wages for women were notoriously low.”⁶⁵ Overall, she believed that the strikers “learned what organization means” and the importance of a “solid front,” not only for better wages, but for “self-government in the workshop.”⁶⁶

In June 1918, Smith’s focus shifted from wage-earning women in private employment to women in government service, turning first to writing articles that exposed the inequitable working conditions endured by the women in the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.⁶⁷ The bureau employed more than 4,000 women, the largest number of women in any branch of the civil service. Their responsibilities included making federal paper currency, liberty bonds, and postage stamps.⁶⁸ Through her written work, Smith emphasized how poorly paid these women were compared to their male counterparts. She wrote, the “record of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, so far as its women employees are concerned, has been one

of notorious overwork and underpay.” These women earned, on average, less than fifty dollars a year and had not received an increase for salary in fifteen years.⁶⁹ In one of her articles, Smith cited Agnes Nestor, chair of the WTUL’s Legislative Committee:

Men who wipe machines in the Bureau of Engraving and Printing get better pay than the women who operate those machines. Men who carry the product of the machines from one place to another in the building receive more than the women who work those machines. Messengers, ink carriers, waste paper sorters, stablemen, drivers, who are men, receive better wages than do the women who help to make, examine, and are responsible for the perfection and integrity of the count on American paper money, stamps and Liberty bonds.⁷⁰

As the “largest employer in the District and the largest employer in the world,” Smith argued, the government held the responsibility to ensure that men and women received equal compensation for equal work.⁷¹ To achieve that goal, however, Smith recognized that women needed to unite to demand to be recognized as competent participants in the labor force. The battles waged by the Bureau women led to one of the early collaborations between the WTUL and NFFE.

Though the Bureau women were organized in Federal Employee Union 12776 of the AFL, they turned to the WTUL for assistance in waging a protest to demand higher wages. Representing the WTUL, Smith “joined hands in the fight” to demand pay equity for the women in the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, helping them organize a publicity campaign to “bring the Bureau women’s case before the public and the Treasury Department (of which they [were] a part.)”⁷² In addition, Agnes Nestor asked the Secretary of the Treasury to recommend to Congress an increase in salary for the women in the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Specifically, she requested “a minimum of \$75 monthly.” The Treasury Department, with the approval of President Woodrow Wilson, agreed. However, Swagar Sherley, chair of the Appropriations Committee in the House of Representatives, refused to uphold the Treasury Department’s request.⁷³

Smith followed congressional debates over the appropriation in both the House and Senate Appropriation Committees. She wrote that under the leadership of Representative Sherley, the House voted to cut the Treasury Department’s original suggested appropriation from \$669,000 to \$200,000. She reported triumphantly that the Senate Appropriations Committee voted to restore the original suggested amount of \$669,000. In the end, according to Smith, the “conferees compromised, as not infrequently happens, and the bill as passed carried but \$330,000 for the increase, or about half the original figures.” Nonetheless, she argued, the “fact that any increase at all was secured counts . . . as an important victory for the

allied forces" in behalf of the women employed in the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. She believed that the struggle "demonstrated once more the necessity and the possibilities of organized effort."⁷⁴

Smith's support and coverage of the cigar makers and Bureau of Engraving and Printing strikes helped build her reputation as a well-known advocate of minimum wage legislation.⁷⁵ In 1918, the Central Labor Union of Washington, D.C. selected her to serve as the unpaid labor representative on the local Minimum Wage Board created by the Keating-Trammell minimum wage law.⁷⁶ Congress enacted this law to protect the women and minors of the District from conditions detrimental to their health and morals resulting from wages that were inadequate to maintain decent standards of living. The 1918 law authorized the board to "represent as far as practicable, the employing class, the employed class, and the general public." The three members of the board had the legal authority to convene a conference to examine the conditions of labor within a particular industry if they believed the women employed in that industry were underpaid. According to the provisions of the law, "[T]his conference shall be composed of not more than three representatives of employers in such occupation, an equal number of representatives of the employees in such occupation, of not more than three disinterested persons representing the public, and of one or more members of the board."⁷⁷ Board members could legally "summon witnesses and examine the books of employers" and ultimately determine whether or not "a substantial number of women workers [were] receiving wages inadequate to supply them with the necessary cost of living."⁷⁸

Smith assumed an active role on the Minimum Wage Board as the representative of workers' interests. She served with Jesse Adkins, President of the NCL, who represented the public interest, and Joseph Berberich, President of the Merchants' and Manufacturers' Association and representative for employers' rights. Between 1918 and 1919, the board heavily relied on the labor of its secretaries, Clara M. Beyer and Elizabeth Brandeis.⁷⁹ Though it is difficult to determine the relationship between these two women and board members, Adkins explained that Beyer and Brandeis were the people who really did the work. "They go out and look over the payrolls in the store and if they find that the proprietor is violating the law they call his attention to it, and so far they have been able to persuade him to correct the mistake; usually it has been a mistake." When necessary, Beyer and Brandeis convened the board to address existing pay inequities in industries that employed women throughout the District.⁸⁰

As a member of the Minimum Wage Board, Smith worked to uphold the provisions of the "highest minimum wage for women thus far achieved through legislation."⁸¹ Following a conference for the mercantile industry, the board ruled that "it will be illegal for any merchant in the District of Columbia to pay less than \$16.50 per week to any woman in his employ who has had seven months' experience." Moreover, the board's decision applied "to all the women workers in the establishment—

not only the saleswomen, but office workers, telephone operators, milliners, tailor-esses, janitresses, and all others.”⁸²

The District of Columbia minimum wage law helped unite the women’s and labor movement in a way that Smith had envisaged. AFL leaders, for example, supported the law as an effective way to increase women’s wages and to stimulate union organization. Frank Morrison, Secretary of the AFL, argued, “It has brought a wage increase of approximately 38 percent to more than 10,000 working women, most of whom were formerly far below the bread line, and it has stimulated organization,” leading to two new local AFL affiliates.⁸³ In addition, Smith’s defense of the minimum wage law brought her into an alliance with a mode of legal thought that challenged the dominance of *laissez-faire* individualism. By arguing that women were entitled to special legislation, the minimum wage law created one of several legal precedents that convinced policy makers of the need to regulate the terms of the labor contract. Because the substance of this legislation countered long-held traditions of legal thought, conservative forces quickly challenged its constitutionality.

As the legality of the minimum wage law worked its way to the Supreme Court, Smith continued to worked tirelessly in support of legislation and organizational efforts to establish equal rights and opportunities between men and women workers in the labor force. She devoted tremendous time, energy, and her own money to ensure the continued operation of the Washington branch. The WTUL struggled financially between 1918 and 1920. Nonetheless, Smith agreed to continue working for the committee without a guarantee that she would receive a monthly salary. In June 1919, Smith “asked two banks for a loan on [her] liberty bonds, and [could] not get it.”⁸⁴ She warned Robins that they “will simply have to close up the office if the National cannot send us what it owes for the period since January.”⁸⁵

From 1919 to 1920, Smith and other committee members used their salaries and personal savings to support the WTUL’s work in Washington. By June 1919, conditions had become so precarious that Smith wrote to Robins to say: “I am sorry to bother you with things like this, but I think you ought to know how serious is our financial situation.”⁸⁶ In August, Smith told Robins that because she had used her personal resources to fund the committee’s work, she had “practically no money at all,” and her “July salary ha[d] not yet come.”⁸⁷ She explained that other members of the Washington Committee had “all advanced money to meet emergencies, and still there are outstanding bills for printing and rent.” Smith further explained:

With the check you sent us the other day I paid one month’s rent, the telephone and telegraph bills, and one bill for office supplies, which had held over so long we could have had to lose the telephone and the telegraph account if

we hadn't, and collectors were making our lives so miserable about the others we couldn't afford, for the League's sake, to let the thing run on."⁸⁸

She also wrote a letter to Emma Steghagen, the WTUL's Treasurer, to say that her "personal account is now down to nothing—I can't even pay my own house rent tomorrow, nor meet my share of our household expenses. What with paying out of my own pocket a salary to Miss Quay [the committee's secretary]. . . . I am completely 'broke.'" Smith proclaimed, "I can't really go on dodging collectors and working without supplies," and she told Steghagen that "we will simply have to close up the office if the National cannot send what it owes for the period since January."⁸⁹

Smith told Robins: "As you know, I have always utilized the League's press service to assist any of our affiliated unions who furnished material or wanted the service." NFFE "had a more extensive service than any others, partly because they furnished their own machinery for the service . . . , and partly because of the close interrelation of their Legislative program and the League's." When NFFE decided to set up its own publicity service, Smith was its first selection to lead it.⁹⁰

In December 1920, NFFE's Executive Council offered Smith the paid director's position of its newly formed Publicity Bureau, believing that her demonstrated writing and analytical ability would keep civil service concerns before the public and encourage new memberships. As the bureau's director, Smith actively corresponded with publicity committees in all of the 215 NFFE unions, facilitating the organization of local campaigns in support of reclassification and other legislation.⁹¹ Smith asked for the WTUL's consent before she accepted NFFE's offer. She explained to Robins that NFFE had decided by convention resolution and council vote to establish its own publicity service on a larger scale and selected Smith as the person to direct the service. "As I did not want to give up my work for the League, however, they asked me to consider a part-time arrangement."⁹² The Executive Committee consented and applied the unused portion of her salary to add a full-time assistant to the Washington Committee's staff. Smith was pleased that she would be freed "from the harassing office details and mechanical work which have been so burdensome" and "can put that time to creative purpose for the League."⁹³

Smith also assisted in the publication of that organization's newspaper, *The Federal Employee*. NFFE established the bureau in December 1920 "to meet both the needs of its larger membership" and to increase appreciation for the "importance of keeping the public informed of the purposes of organized employees and needs of the civil service. As the bureau's director, Smith conducted an "active correspondence with publicity committees in all of the 215 local unions composing the National Federation of Federal Employees."⁹⁴ She also submitted her written work to Washington newspapers and to correspondents for other media sources throughout the country. Smith received high acclaim for her publicity work. NFFE members printed an article to acknowledge her contributions to the orga-

nization, complimented her as an unassuming character, and emphasized her invaluable service to *The Federal Employee*. “She is both the conductor and motorman of the new publicity bureau at National Headquarters. Most folks don’t know news when they see it. Those who do rarely know how to get it printed. Ethel Smith can do both.”⁹⁵

In late 1920, however, she halted her work for over one month to recover from severe exhaustion. In November, she wrote that she was getting over “this exasperating siege of mine.” She was not very good at relaxing, because if she was not working, she did not know what to do with her time. In a letter to Margaret Dreier Robins, Smith explained:

[T]he only sensation I’ve been conscious of for months has been conflict. It was in every phase of my work, of course, and it stayed with me every waking moment, translating itself into all my other relationships and giving me no peace, for there was always myself to fight and the despair of ever conquering that most formidable enemy.

Smith’s reform work consumed her to the point that she no longer maintained a private life. She became so obsessed with her legislative, journalistic, and organizational responsibilities that she collapsed. Even as she recovered from severe exhaustion, she lamented that she could not “get [her] mind and eyes to dwell upon the beautiful and the happy things,” and she continued to ruminate over all of “the struggle and the hardship.”⁹⁶

From mid-November through December, Smith attempted to direct her energy to regaining her strength. In a long letter to Margaret Dreier Robins, she wrote: “It’s quite a horrid feeling when one realizes, as I have done these past weeks, that one has forgotten how to play, has lost the power of relaxation, and is unable to put oneself in key with the pleasure and with beautiful things.” She told Robins, “[T]here are two types of reading matter I could make my mind take hold of, namely books and articles relating to my work, which were bad for me, and stories of adventure which carried me along without any mental effort. I’ve become completely fascinated by the moral code of the six shooter and the conversation of the cowboy and feel as if I could absorb indefinite narratives of that atmosphere and simplified mode of existence.”⁹⁷ In literature, the West “functions as a symbol of freedom, and the opportunity for conquest” in which the protagonist displays his “unswerving purpose” and “capacity to continue in the face of total exhaustion and overwhelming odds.” The simplified language of the cowboy demonstrates his ability to control his feelings and to “maintain boundaries that divided [him] from the world.” However, Smith did not possess the silent, mysterious, and impenetrable traits of the cowboy.⁹⁸ Her struggle, to a great extent, was “the personal is political,” well before the second wave of twentieth-century feminism coined that

phrase. She was fully engaged in her work, and not even persistent illness would keep her from pursuing her goals.

At age forty-three, her life had moved through various stages, each one solidifying the values learned as a product of a rural, working-class family. As she adhered to the values of hard work and the merit system, Smith never forgot her personal experience with gender discrimination. Such memories galvanized her to challenge gender barriers in the workplace and to quickly develop a reputation as an outspoken field organizer, lobbyist, and journalist. In her mid-twenties, she achieved financial security, breaking with the tradition of the male breadwinner, not to mention the compulsion to marry. Smith became a leading figure within a community of women that shared her commitment to legislative reform to establish government responsibility for working conditions and to equalize women's place in social and economic life. She earned recognition among these women for her keen intelligence, quick wit, and tenacity of spirit, and she formed the relationships that sustained her both professionally and personally for the rest of her life.

As her views came to fruition, her primary opponent in the 1920s—Alice Paul—also had begun to articulate and pursue a legislative strategy to advance women's rights. Smith joined NAWSA following Paul's split from the group. Her departure created significant opportunity for Smith to refine her organizational and lobbying talents. However, Paul's break with NAWSA set the stage for her emergence within the ranks of women leaders during and after the suffrage movement. Paul was just as committed as Smith to her personal convictions, and she also refused to compromise her principles, regardless of the consequences. Her rise to power, however, followed a different route.