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Locality, Regionality and Gender: Revisiting Industrial Protest among Women Workers in Scotland 1910 to 1913

William Kenefick

Less than one woman in twelve was a trade union member by 1914.¹ Where women competed directly with men in the labour market, their role in the workplace was not so highly valued by the wider community, so they failed to attract the support of the male-dominated union and labour movement.² Because of the patriarchal notion that men were in charge, women faced discriminatory practices both at home and in the workplace. Indeed, patriarchal notions dominated the activities of women in the public and industrial arena – even where some occupations and workplaces were distinctly gender-specific.³ Yet, despite the evident difficulties faced by women workers, they were far from being docile or apathetic. According to official statistics nearly 55,000 women were involved in industrial protest in Scotland between 1911 and 1913: one third higher than the combined totals for the previous decade.⁴ Other evidence shows that women were willing participants in industrial protest movements, and in some instances were leading the way in taking independent industrial action.⁵

¹ For a comprehensive overview on the labour unrest 1910 to 1914 see Dave Lyddon, 'Postscript: The Labour Unrest in Britain and Ireland, 1910 to 1914 – Still Uncharted Territory?', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* (HSIR), 33 (2012), 241–65. This issue of the HSIR focuses entirely on the 'Labour Unrest, 1910 to 1914'. See also Hamish W. Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Basingstoke, 1999), 120 and 122..

² Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850–1914* (Oxford, 1991), Introduction; Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, 120; Lynne Abrams, Eleanor Gordon, Deborah Simonton and Eileen Yeo (eds), *Gender in Scottish Society since 1700* (Edinburgh, 2006), 4–7.

³ Deborah Simonton, 'Work, Trade and Commerce' in *Gender in Scottish Society since 1700*, 199–200 and 215–18; also Kenefick, "'An Effervescence of Youth'", 190–2.

⁴ Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850–1914* (Edinburgh, 1991), 136: the combined total for 1900–1910 was 37,954 women taking strike action.

⁵ Thanks to the reviewers, Alan MacDonald, Arthur McIvor and Graeme Morton for their comments. This article can be viewed as a companion piece to William Kenefick, "'An Effervescence of Youth": Female Textile-Workers' Strike Activity in Dundee 1911 to 1912', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* (HSIR), 33 (2012), 189–221. Together they represent work in progress.

Since the pioneering work of Eleanor Gordon, Esther Breitenbach and others, and the studies of the Glasgow Labour History Workshop (GLHW) published in the 1990s, there has been virtually no systematic examination of the impact of the labour unrest in Scotland or the role of women in industrial protest.⁶ Catriona Macdonald's work on class, gender and political change in Scotland is one exception, and while there is little focus on the dynamic of the labour unrest, her work demonstrates that women's experience of industrial protest in Scotland varied considerably depending on geography and locality. For example, there was significant industrial unrest among female textile workers at the village of Neilston in East Renfrewshire, whereas at nearby Paisley (some 3.1 miles north of Neilston) there were no strikes among female workers between 1910 and 1913.⁷ This clearly shows that regionalism is one of the underlying causes of strike action among workers.

Building on this work with additional material derived from archival sources, and the national, provincial and labour press, this article aims to establish the extent to which women workers were willing participants in the escalation of militancy during the period 1910–13. Given the dearth of trade union records, the lack of detail often missing from such records where they do exist, and the problems associated with the compilation of Board of Trade statistics on strike activity, this line of enquiry often reveals very little about the reasons why women went on strike.⁸ The methodological approach employed here bridges that gap by examining a wide array of mainly provincial newspaper accounts of women's involvement in industrial protest.

⁶ The three chapters in Kenefick and McIvor (eds), *Roots of Red Clydeside*, refer to the GLHW; Kenefick and McIvor, 'A Class of Work Regimes: Americanisation and the Strike at the Singers Sewing Machine Company, 1911', 193–213; William Knox and Helen Corr, '"Striking Women": Cotton Workers and Industrial Unrest, c 1907–1914', 107–28; George Rawlinson and Anna Robinson, 'The United Turkey Red Strike, December 1911', 175–192: see also Eleanor Gordon and Esther Breitenbach (eds), *The World is Ill Divided: Women's Work in Scotland in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Edinburgh, 1990); and Esther Breitenbach and Eleanor Gordon (eds), *Out of Bounds. Women in Scottish Society 1800–1945* (Edinburgh, 1992).

⁷ Catriona M. M. Macdonald, *The Radical Thread: Political Change in Scotland. Paisley Politics, 1885–1924* (East Linton, 2000); Macdonald, 'Weak Roots and Branches: Class, Gender and the Geography of Industrial Protest', *Scottish Labour History*, 33 (1998), 6–30.

⁸ The general scarcity of documentary sources is a major problem associated with the study of the trade union and labour movement in Scotland as few, if any, records survive: see William H. Marwick, 'Early Trade Unionism in Scotland', *Economic History Review* (1935), 87. For an analysis of the weakness of Board of Trade statistics see Kenefick, '"An Effervescence of Youth"', 190–1.

Reports in the socialist press, in particular *Forward* the propaganda organ of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) are also important in the Scottish context. The ILP actively supported striking workers and in running their 'living wage' campaign they were equally pro-active in organising unskilled workers across Scotland.⁹ Such sources provide a valuable insight into the attitude of women involved in industrial protest and the extent to which they were supported by their local communities, trade-union and labour organisations. The main aim here is to promote further thinking and discussion of an aspect of labour history that has suffered from considerable neglect over the last twenty years. Indeed, this series of case studies reveal a good deal about agency and the willingness of women to strike around issues such as the concept of the struggle for the living wage.

1910

The Neilston Strike – East Renfrewshire, May–June 1910

When the Neilston cotton-thread workers struck on 25 May 1910 they were not union organised. Demands for an increase in wages were the main cause of the dispute but as William Knox and Helen Corr demonstrate, workers were increasingly concerned about managerial authoritarianism and employer paternalism. Crucially, the strikers were able to draw on and mobilise the support of the wider trade union and labour movement, which reinforces the importance of locality in predicating the eventual success or failure of any dispute.¹⁰

Led by Kate McLean and Esther Dick, the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) quickly came to the women's assistance and within days 'the majority of workers in the mills' were NFWW members.¹¹ They were also supported by Glasgow Trade Council (GTC), the ILP and the SDP.¹² John MacLean (along with many other leading left radicals) appealed to the

⁹ Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow*, 73–7. 'The Struggle for Living Wages' was part of the 'Scottish Socialist Summer Propaganda Demonstrations' organised in conjunction with the ILP, the Social Democratic Federation/Party and, from 1911, the British Socialist Party (BSP), together with the Fabian Society, Christian Socialist Fellowship, Clarion Scouts, and the Catholic Socialist Society. For an initial report on the 1911 campaign activities see *Forward*, 23 December 1911: see also Kenefick, "'An Effervescence of Youth'", 214–15.

¹⁰ Knox and Helen Corr, "'Striking Women'", 101–28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹² *Glasgow Herald*, 26 May 1910.

whole of the Scottish labour movement to get behind the Neilston workers.¹³ The strike initially involved 120 workers, but when the employers R. F. and J. Alexander and Co., of the English Sewing Cotton Company refused to speak to the NFWW, other factory departments struck in sympathy and the employers declared a lockout on 6 June. By then 1,700 women were embroiled in the dispute and in 'a hostile display of defiance' strikers smashed mill windows and personally targeted managers.¹⁴ Mass demonstrations were arranged in support and the numbers in attendance were so great that it became a cause of concern for the local constabulary.¹⁵ On 8 June there was a march of 5,000 people 'complete with pipers, singing and banner-waving', including a large group of male trade unionists from Glasgow, who rallied behind a large demonstration banner that proclaimed: 'WE WANT JUSTICE, FAIR CONDITIONS AND A LIVING WAGE'.¹⁶ There was an unprecedented level of public support for the strikers which forced the employers to call on the assistance of the Board of Trade. With their intervention, which guaranteed an increase in wages, the strike ended on 17 June.¹⁷

The dispute was regarded as a watershed, for when the hitherto unorganised 'mill girls' struck and joined the NFWW they broke with over half a century of paternalism.¹⁸ Buoyed by their success the mill girls marched to nearby Paisley behind another banner bearing the words: 'NEILSTON EXPECTS THE PAISLEY GIRLS TO JOIN THE UNION'. But it seems they and the NFWW met with little success, and while the NFWW attempted to establish a branch in Paisley the following month the turnout was so small the meeting was abandoned. The Neilston workers, the NFWW, and their political supporters were all perceived as 'unconnected' and from 'outside Paisley' and in a locality that lacked a strong labour tradition this helps explain their failure.¹⁹ Workers in Paisley were unable to mount 'a community-wide challenge to the authority of capitalism.' Indeed, it was the interference of outside forces that laid the foundation for 'third party intervention' including

¹³ *Forward*, 4 June 1910.

¹⁴ Knox and Corr, "Striking Women", 120; Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement*, 243.

¹⁵ *Scotsman* and *Glasgow Herald*, 7 June; *Forward* 11 June 1910.

¹⁶ Knox and Corr, "Striking Women", 121–2.

¹⁷ Widely reported in the *Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald* from 26 May to 18 June 1910; and *Forward* (published every Saturday), 28 May and 4, 11 and 18 June 1910.

¹⁸ By 1911 the NFWW had a membership of 10,000 workers in forty-eight branches in England, Scotland and Wales: see Rawlinson and Robinson, "The United Turkey Red Strike – December 1911", 178.

¹⁹ Macdonald, 'Weak Roots and Branches', 21.

the intervention by the Board of Trade and explains in part the disintegration of paternalism at Neilston.²⁰

The Bo'ness Strike – West Lothian, May–June 1910

The action of the Bo'ness women woodyard-workers striking in sympathy for male counterparts was a somewhat different form of industrial protest to the events at Neilston. The strikers had the support of the local trade unions including dockers, iron foundry moulders, miners and 'hundreds of other women sympathisers' from the local mining community, and the ILP.²¹ The dispute began on Saturday 29 May and involved 600 male woodyard workers organised by the English-based National Amalgamated Union of Labourers (NAUL) and 'a very gratifying feature of the strike' was the role of 100 women workers who had 'struck with the men'.²²

Trouble erupted immediately when the employers, who refused to meet with NAUL, engaged the services of 'a well-known west of Scotland strike-breaker' to provide replacement labour. Next day 100 Glasgow 'strike-breakers' arrived in Bo'ness and despite having the protection of 'dozens of extra police' they were attacked and subjected to 'molestation' by the strikers. They returned to Glasgow that same day on a specially chartered train.²³ In celebration, a large meeting of over 1,000 strikers and sympathisers was organised that evening. It was addressed by an NAUL executive member, local ILP activist and Town Councillor Mr Angus Livingstone, and an 'ILP propagandist' Mr Alex McGillvray who spoke on 'The Case for Socialism'. The celebrations were short lived, however, and next morning 350 'unemployed replacement labourers' arrived from Glasgow with fifty extra policemen.²⁴

The employers' actions galvanised the community and within hours of the strike-breakers' arrival a procession of 2,000 townspeople was organised. Led by a piper and a drummer they made for the woodyards carrying a banner proclaiming 'WE WANT JUSTICE AND A LIVING WAGE', which on the reverse bore the legend: 'No Reprieve for the Blacklegs'. *Forward* reported that the strikers 'swarmed the yards, driving the "blacklegs" out of the

²⁰ Knox and Corr, "Striking Women", 125–26.

²¹ *Forward*, 4 June 1910.

²² Ken Coates and Tony Topham, *The Making of the Transport and General Workers Union: The Emergence of the Labour Movement, 1. part 1*. (Oxford, 1991), 89 and 126–7. NAUL was formed on Tyneside in 1889 organising the unskilled shipyard and waterside workers largely in North-east England; *Forward*, 4 June 1910.

²³ *Scotsman*, 31 May 1910.

²⁴ *Forward*, 4 June 1910.

wagons and the bothies ... felled with stick and clubs'. The *Glasgow Herald* described the event as a 'riot' in which thirty people needed serious medical attention. The violence came to an end only after the employers agreed to talk with the NAUL, and there was the promise that the replacement labourers would return immediately to Glasgow.²⁵ The crowd then 'quietly withdrew, reformed themselves into processional order and marched back into town' to a sympathetic reception from the people of Bo'ness.²⁶ By one o'clock the bruised and battered 'blacklegs' were on their way back to Glasgow along with the majority of the extra police. With the promised intervention of the Board of Trade it was agreed to refer the wage claim to arbitration and on Saturday 4 June the strikers returned to work.²⁷

On the day the strike ended, *Forward* published 'A Special Descriptive Report' wherein they suggested that it 'must have gladdened the hearts of the strikers [to see] blood-bespattered blacklegs ... cowed and helpless.' They concluded rather exultantly: 'That a feature of the onslaught was the plucky and effective assistance of the women: The Glasgow 'scabs' learned to their hurt what a handy little instrument a pit-prop can be when it is swung by a Bo'ness woodyard lassie.'²⁸ By claiming the moral high ground *Forward* was excusing the violence surrounding this event. The *Glasgow Herald* viewed the matter more seriously and they reported on the injuries sustained by the Glasgow men including: severe scalp wounds; dislocated arms and legs; injuries to the back; one fractured hand; and many instances of severe bruising to various parts of the body. These injuries, the report concluded, 'bore evidence of the seriousness of the conflict' and that the injured were specifically 'targeted by women and girls'.²⁹

When the Board of Trade's arbitration committee met to discuss the men's wage claim they were presented with an additional demand: 'That the women be withdrawn from the yards'. The Board stated they were not empowered to decide on such issues and the matter was dropped.³⁰ That the matter was raised at all demonstrates that the level of sympathy and solidarity shown by the women workers was not reciprocated, and while the men secured trade-union recognition and an increase in wages the position of the women remained unaltered. There was a trade-union presence at Bo'ness, and the

²⁵ *Glasgow Herald*, 1 June 1910.

²⁶ *Forward*, 4 June 1910.

²⁷ *Glasgow Herald* and *Scotsman*, 2 and 4 June 1910.

²⁸ *Forward*, 4 June 1910.

²⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 2 June 1910.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7 July 1910.

ILP were clearly not inactive, but the locality lacked the strong local labour traditions evident at Neilston that could pursue a more inclusive class agenda in support of the women.³¹ Perhaps this is a case of gender discrimination, indicative of how women were unlikely to expect wider community support when they directly competed with men for work.³²

1911

The Lochee Spinners' Strike and the Singers Strike February–April 1911

Given the predilection of women for unorganised and spontaneous strike activity – a tendency that was clearly evident among a broader cross-section of female workers across different regions in Scotland – it was perhaps surprising that Dundee's female textile workers were unusually quiet during 1910. But this changed with the dispute at Cox's Camperdown works at Lochee, when 1,000 Irish spinners, bobbin-shifters, and helpers struck on 25 February 1911. Within days the entire labour force of 4,500 women and 500 men were locked out by the employers.³³

The Lochee spinners took the unanimous decision to strike over plans to reduce spinning squad sizes from ten to eight operatives per frame.³⁴ The employers took a firm position from the start and they adamantly refused to deal with the women's union, the Dundee and District Jute and Flax Workers' Union (JFWU) and its officials.³⁵ There was much public sympathy for the striking women and the local press was uncharacteristically critical of the employers' heavy-handed tactics and their outright refusal to meet with officials of the JFWU, while ignoring the pleas of church ministers and the local Catholic priest to attempt to resolve the dispute.³⁶

A notable feature of the dispute was the daily procession from Lochee into Dundee city centre led by marching bands, and the independent leadership role played by the women which the *Weekly News* asserted far excelled that of Dundee men.³⁷ Some 75 per cent of the 1,000 spinners were members of the JFWU and, while they were in receipt of strike pay, the remaining 4,000 workers received nothing. Financial support came from

³¹ Macdonald, 'Weak Roots and Branches', 120.

³² Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, 120.

³³ *Dundee Advertiser*, 25 and 27 February 1911.

³⁴ *Scotsman*, 25 and 28 February 1911.

³⁵ *Scotsman*, 27 February 1911; *Scotsman*, *Glasgow Herald*, *Courier and Dundee Advertiser*, 3–14 March 1911.

³⁶ *Dundee Advertiser*, 15 March 1911.

³⁷ *Weekly News*, 4 March 1911.

the (male) Calender Workers' Union, and the Tenters' Union, with donations from the Trades Council, the ILP, and the SDF, and Dundee School Board fed the strikers' children during the dispute. The strikers themselves were also raising funds to relieve the poor, showing a 'spirit of self-reliance' that had never come to the surface in any previous dispute.³⁸ Nevertheless, the strike weakened and after three weeks the employees returned more or less on the employers' terms.

The Irish female spinners of Lochee were the most strike-prone in the city, but they only joined the JFWU in the months preceding the strike. As was the case with other Irish workers their more inclusive role was aided by the emergence of the Catholic Socialist Societies, first formed in Glasgow in 1906 by long-time ILP member John Wheatley.³⁹ As trade unionists the Lochee spinners helped to cement strong and permanent relations between the JFWU and the wider union and labour movement in the city, in what was 'a serious struggle between capital and labour' with labour coming out on top.⁴⁰ Indeed, within a month the Cox brothers were 'obliged to revert back to ... former spinning arrangement' with employment back at pre-strike levels.⁴¹

The Neilston strike was considered a potent example of the effectiveness of worker and community solidarity and the determination of young female workers (between fifteen and eighteen years of age), and its success demonstrated that women could benefit materially from trade-union organisation through membership of the NFWW.⁴² The Lochee dispute had a similar impact on Dundee and helped to boost the profile of the JFWU whose membership increased by over 1,000 to reach 6,300 by 1 April 1911.⁴³ The *Dundee Advertiser* had affectionately described the dispute as 'an effervescence

³⁸ *Scotsman*, *Courier* and *Dundee Advertiser*, 28 February, 3 and 10 March 1911.

³⁹ Ian Wood, *John Wheatley* (Manchester, 1990), 21–7. It was argued that the Catholic Socialist Societies were to take the 'gospel of Socialism to the Catholic population' and that this was 'the gospel as taught by the ILP: see also William Walker, *Juteopolis, Dundee and its Textile Workers, 1885–1923* (Edinburgh, 1979), 142–3.

⁴⁰ *Courier* and *Dundee Advertiser*, 18 March 1911.

⁴¹ Walker, *Juteopolis*, 302, n.1 and n.2.

⁴² Knox and Corr "'Striking Women'", 107–28; Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement*, 241–7.

⁴³ JFWU general meetings (GM) minutes book, 1906 to 1917; and JFWU committee meetings (CM) minutes book, 1906–17: General Deposit/Jute and Flax/1/1 and General Deposit/Jute and Flax/1/7 (JFWU, GM, GD/JF/1/1/ and JFWU, CM, GD/JF/1/7), Dundee City Archives (DCA): see JFWU GM, 4 and 18 February, 1 April 1911.

of young folk ... principally females'.⁴⁴ This points to another feature not generally commented upon in relation to the labour unrest: the involvement of young workers.⁴⁵

The Singer Dispute – Clydebank, March–April 1911

The Strike at the Singer Sewing Machine Company factory in Clydebank was the first of the fourteen principal strikes to take place in Scotland between 1911 and 1913, and it revolved around the issue of work intensification. Similar to the Lochee strike, it involved a reduction in squad size: from fifteen to twelve female polishers. When the women walked out in protest, all 2,000 women workers at the plant came out 'in feminine sympathy', and within days they were joined by 9,000 male workers at the factory. Of all the disputes that took place in Scotland in the years before the Great War, the Singer strike was the only one that had clear connections with the syndicalist De Leonist Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and the Industrial Workers of the World.⁴⁶ The Singer dispute ended in failure and resulted in the mass victimization of the main protagonist but, as at Neilston and Lochee, women workers took the lead and in doing so contributed significantly to the mobilisation of labour on a class-wide, rather than purely sectional, basis.

The Kirkcaldy Textile Dispute – West Fife, January to December 1911

The disputes examined thus far were relatively short in duration. The year-long struggle of male and female textile workers in the small town of Kirkcaldy was an entirely different affair in so far as they faced a determined employers' association vehemently opposed to organised labour. This struggle rarely involved more than a few hundred workers directly but for the Kirkcaldy community it symbolised much more, for it changed the industrial and political mood of an entire working-class community.

The event that triggered the dispute began when the Scottish Mill and Factory Workers Federal Union (SMFWFU) in league with William Adamson, recently elected Labour MP for West Fife, came to Kirkcaldy to support an imminent strike among unorganised powerloom-tenters in early January

⁴⁴ *Dundee Advertiser*, 3 March 1911.

⁴⁵ Dave Lyddon, 'PostScript: The Labour Unrest in Great Britain and Ireland, 1910 to 1914 – Still Uncharted Territory?', *HSIR*, 33, 247–61.

⁴⁶ Glasgow Labour History Workshop (GLHW), *The Singer Strike, Clydebank 1911* (Glasgow, 1989); GLHW, 'A Clash of Work Regimes: "Americanisation" and the Strike at the Singer Sewing Machine Company, 1911' in Kenefick and McIvor (eds), *Roots of Red Clydeside*, 193–213.

1911.⁴⁷ The union arranged a large demonstration of the benefits of trade-union organisation. The speakers noted that organised powerloom-tenters in nearby Dunfermline earned six shillings more than the unorganised men at Kirkcaldy. In addition, they stressed that unionised woman weavers earned four shillings more than weavers in Kirkcaldy, and that their rate of pay was comparable with organised female textile workers in Lancashire. The Kirkcaldy branch of the SMFWFU was formed that evening and next day the powerloom-tenters struck. Within days the textile employers formed their own association and immediately declared a lockout. So began a dispute for trade-union recognition and improved pay and conditions that would take eleven months to resolve.⁴⁸

The female textile workers, although at this point still unorganised, were actively involved in the dispute in providing sympathy action and by chastising non-strikers. Indeed, as a result of 'such hostile demonstrations at the hand of the women and girls' several men joined the MFWFU and the strike. As the strike went on the actions of the women and girls were almost entirely focused on 'replacement labour' drafted in at various times throughout the eleven-month dispute as the Kirkcaldy employers' association stepped-up their attempt to break the strike.⁴⁹

The employers' association asserted that 'English interference' was at the root of the dispute and, for the first three months, argued consistently that the strikers were being used as pawns by disreputable English trade unionists.⁵⁰ It is true that English textile trade unionists were actively assisting the SMFWFU in Kirkcaldy, as they had done earlier at Dunfermline, but the SMFWFU was a Scottish trade union representing Scottish textile workers – the great majority of whom were women. Indeed, the SMFWFU had great success against the employers at Dunfermline and in June 1911 and resolved a five-week push for

⁴⁷ The Scottish Mill and Factory Workers Union (SMFWFU) was formed in 1889 and largely operated as in East Scotland with branches in Ayrshire: see William H. Marwick, 'The Beginnings of the Scottish Working-Class Movement in the Nineteenth Century', *International Review of Social History*, 3 (1938), 19. *Fife Free Press*, 21 January 1911. William Adamson was one of only three Labour MPs elected in Scotland in 1910, the others being Alexander Wilkie, Dundee, and Dundee-born George Barnes who was elected MP for Blackfriars, Glasgow: both Wilkie and Barnes were elected in 1906.

⁴⁸ Address by John Young, *Fife Free Press*, 21 January 1911: news of lockout, *ibid.*, 28 January.

⁴⁹ *Fife Free Press*, 28 January 1911: there were continual reports on the 'women and girls' throughout the eleven-month dispute.

⁵⁰ *Fife Free Press*, 28 January and 15 April 1911.

trade-union recognition in favour of the women weavers.⁵¹ There was another big strike in September for a shorter working week and, with the backing of the community and support from Dunfermline Trades Council, the ILP and the SDP, the SMFWFU entered into successful negotiations with the employers.⁵²

At Kirkcaldy the paternalist ethos of the employers still held sway and most women declined to join the SMFWFU. But by the summer of 1911 a group of around 200 female workers had joined and by September they were at the core of a well-supported recruitment campaign. At one well-attended event Mrs Donaldson (Women's Trade Union League) expressed her surprise that during the present unrest 'Kirkcaldy had strangely been left alone in the labour world.' Mr Thomas Shaw, Secretary of the Northern Counties Amalgamated Textile Association (representing 250,000 English workers), made a passionate appeal for women to join the SMFWFU arguing that if Lancashire weavers earned twenty-four shillings per week 'why should the girls of Kirkcaldy' who earned four shillings less 'be any different?' Labour MP William Adamson, James Robertson of the Fife and Kinross Miners' Association, and Mr Young of the Ayrshire SMFWFU all likewise called on women workers to organise.⁵³

By early October the women were on strike and, with Mrs Donaldson and Mr Young, they organised 'soap box meetings' at the mill gates to persuade workers to join the union and the dispute, holding a large placard that read: 'Great Kirkcaldy Strike! – Workers Thoroughly Roused – Wemyss Factory Out – OBJECT: Better Conditions for Women Workers.'⁵⁴

The momentum was gathering and at a 'large and enthusiastic' meeting held on 13 October, local United Free Church Minister, the Rev. William Milne, pledged his support, arguing that the time had come for the church 'to show her sympathy with the working men and women' in supporting the SMFWFU's fight for better wages and a shorter working week. William Adamson was once again in attendance, as was Mrs Donaldson and Mr Young, and the meeting concluded by reminding the women that they earned four shillings less than weavers in Dunfermline 'and that was reason enough to join the union'.⁵⁵

It was mid-December before the employers finally agreed to recognise the SMFWFU and settle the strike with the powerloom-tenters and the women weavers.⁵⁶ *Forward* praised the women for what they had achieved, stating that,

⁵¹ *Scotsman*, 20 June 1911; see also Kenefick, *Red Scotland*, 106.

⁵² *Fife Free Press*, 2 and 16 September 1911.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 30 September 1911.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7 October 1911.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14 October 1911

⁵⁶ *Scotsman*, 19 December 1911; *Fife Free Press*, 2, 9, 16 and 23 December; see also

due to their actions, wage increases had been granted in every factory in the district, and in following their lead 'a number of union branches had been established among the previously unorganised workers' (including carters, 'dockers and tramwaymen').⁵⁷ According to Mrs Donaldson this was due in the main to the 'splendid courage and enthusiasm' of the women weavers of Kirkcaldy.⁵⁸

The Vale of Leven Strike – Dunbartonshire, December 1911

Another strike of note involving women took place at the United Turkey Red (UTR) Combine at the Vale of Leven, West Dunbartonshire, in December 1911. Similar to Neilston, the strikers were led by Kate McLean but as the work of George Rawlinson and Anna Robinson demonstrates, the NFWW had been active in the area for some time before this particular dispute broke out.⁵⁹ The first branch of 600 members was formed in January 1911 and by mid-February the NFWW had some 2,000 members organised in seven branches. Glasgow Trades Council and the Glasgow ILP were involved from the start, and it was the Scottish organiser of the Liverpool-based National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL), who addressed the meeting when the first branch of the NFWW was formed at the Vale of Leven.⁶⁰ Indeed, the link with the dockers remained strong and by the time of the strike the women had the active support of the Glasgow-based Scottish Union of Dock Labourers (SUDL) after it was formed in the summer of 1911.

It was the policy of the NFWW to organise women workers and to channel them into male unions where these existed and where women could be admitted.⁶¹ By the summer of 1911, under pressure from the women and the NFWW, the women were admitted as members of a new branch of the National Amalgamated Society of Dyers, Bleachers, Finishers and Kindred Trades (commonly referred to as the ASD). This was the first time the ASD had opened its ranks to women at UTR and in November, in conjunction

Kenefick, *Red Scotland*, 106.

⁵⁷ *Forward*, 30 December 1911.

⁵⁸ *Fife Free Press*, 28 October 1911: for recruitment meetings involving Donaldson and Pemberton see *ibid.*, 2, 16 and 30 September and 7 October; for later reports on the strike and its resolution see *ibid.*, 11, 18 and 15 November and 16 and 23 December 1911.

⁵⁹ Rawlinson and Robinson, 'The United Turkey Red Strike, December 1911', 175–92.

⁶⁰ *Forward*, January–February 1911.

⁶¹ Kenefick, "'An Effervescence of Youth'", 195.

with the NFWW, the ASD tabled a joint demand for a 10 per cent increase in wages for male and female workers, and a reduction of the working week to fifty-five hours.

The employers rejected these demands outright. On 9 December a general strike was declared and with 7,000 in dispute the UTR complex was brought to a standstill.⁶² The 2,000 striking women held regular meetings and, with the NFWW, Glasgow Trade Council and the ILP, they organised several large public demonstrations. One rally, which was led by four bands, attracted more than 5,000 people holding aloft two effigies representing a company director and a head-clerk at UTR. In common with other disputes involving women there was a carnival atmosphere, but events could and did turn into more serious protests. The *Glasgow Herald* reported on one incident where several clerks were lifted bodily and thrown into the nearby river.⁶³ The women earned a degree of 'notoriety' for their 'chastising' of directors, managers and clerks who crossed the picket lines: on 18 December the *Dundee Advertiser* printed a photograph of smiling strikers being cautioned by a policeman, asserting that they were none too impressed 'with the dignity of the law'.⁶⁴

Through their connection with the SUDL the women strikers came to be addressed by the well-known French anarcho-syndicalist Madame Sorgue of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) who was influential in the formation of the SUDL during the summer of 1911.⁶⁵ Madame Sorgue was interviewed by leading ILP activist Patrick Dollan for *Forward* earlier in June, when she discussed her imprisonment in Portugal and Italy in 1908 and 1909 with the result that the State Prosecutor in France described her 'as the most dangerous woman in Europe'.⁶⁶ It is clear that the ASD was unhappy with the interference of 'the foreign lady Madame Sourgue' in their strike, and it instructed the women to 'dissociate' themselves from her and the SUDL. The women ignored these instructions and held the meeting as planned.⁶⁷

The employers initially refused to meet with union officials, but they were under considerable public pressure to broker a deal, and on 20 December they

⁶² Rawlinson and Robinson, 'The United Turkey Red Strike – December 1911', 181–2.

⁶³ *Glasgow Herald*, 14 December 1911.

⁶⁴ *Dundee Advertiser*, 18 December 1911.

⁶⁵ *Lennox Herald*, 16 December 1911; William Kenefick, 'Rebellious and Contrary': *The Glasgow Dockers, 1853-1932* (East Linton, 2000), 218; Kenefick, *Red Scotland*, 126.

⁶⁶ *Forward*, 10 June 1911: 'Madame Sorgue "The Most Dangerous Women in Europe": An Interview with P. J. Dollan.

⁶⁷ *Lennox Herald*, 16 December 1911.

agreed to refer the matter to the Board of Trade for arbitration. The men were keen to settle; the women were unhappy about the decision, but under pressure from ASD they grudgingly agreed to return to work on Christmas Day 1911. The arbitration committee met in January 1912 and ruled in favour of the wage claim, but recommended that the women should receive only 50 per cent of the wage demand offered to the men. The women rejected this and ASD were forced to refer it back to the Board of Trade.⁶⁸ When they met again in February 1912 the outcome was the same and the women reluctantly accepted the decision.⁶⁹

The UTR dispute was another example of the willingness of women to take the lead in industrial protest. But the unhappy outcome seemed to mark a turning point for the women of the Vale of Leven, as female membership of ADS declined considerably thereafter.⁷⁰ The reasons are not entirely clear. Perhaps becoming a women's section of a male-dominated trade union was to blame, or the perceived lack of support by the men and the union over the wage claim? The involvement of the NFWW, Glasgow Trades Council, the ILP, and the dockers clearly encouraged the women to get involved in industrial protest, but the 'outsider' status of these organisations was clearly viewed with a degree of suspicion by the local trade-union movement. Clearly, the ASD branch was unhappy about outside interference in the strike and specifically the role of Madame Sorgue and the SUDL. Thus, like at Paisley, the 'inter-connectedness of industry and locality' arguably reinforced employer paternalism, even if unintentionally, and the union failed to overcome the prevalent fragmented class and gender ideology that persisted at the Vale of Leven.⁷¹ The ready acceptance of the Board of Trade decision by both the employers and the ASD dashed the aspirations of women workers and shows that on this occasion industrial protest was not moulded into an active, community political movement as occurred at Neilston, Dundee and West Fife.

Female Textile Workers and the Carters and Dockers Strike – Dundee, December 1911

As the women of the Vale of Leven concluded their strike, 600 carters and 700 dockers at Dundee were laying down a challenge to railway carting employers

⁶⁸ *Glasgow Herald*, 9 January 1912.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 9 February 1912.

⁷⁰ Stuart MacIntyre, *Little Moscovs* (London, 1980), 87.

⁷¹ Macdonald, 'Weak Roots and Branches', 21, 27.

and the Shipping Federation. In what was described as a syndicalist-style strike, the dispute attracted much press attention from across the country. It was to end in victory for the transport workers, and for the ILP and the trade union and labour movement it was hailed as ‘a glorious lesson in the usefulness of solidarity’.⁷² The details of this strike have been documented elsewhere but are briefly examined here because of the support and involvement of female workers and the JFWU.⁷³

The strike was led by the Carters’ leader and local Dundee syndicalist sympathiser Peter Gillespie (founder member of a breakaway union the North of Scotland Horse and Motormen’s Society), colleague Peter Fletcher, and JFWU President Nicholas Marra: all well-known members of the ILP, Dundee Trades Council and Dundee Labour Representation Committee (LRC – Dundee Labour Party).⁷⁴ A feature of the dispute was widespread sympathy from transport workers in the east-coast ports of Bo’ness, Grangemouth, and Leith, the west-coast ports of Glasgow and the Clyde, and the English ports of Hull, Liverpool and London. With the backing of the SUDL, the NUDL, the Seaman’s Union and the National Transport Workers Federation (NTWF), the strike was well planned and organised, bringing transport on the docks and railways to a standstill.⁷⁵

Trouble began when the employers introduced replacement labour and widespread street rioting and disorder ensued. Fearing mass disorder, the town council brought in 300 soldiers, 160 police officers, and a contingent of mounted police. With the jute mills and factories at a standstill, thousands of textile workers joined the strikers, including JFWU members and the female spinners of Lochee. They were involved in several incidents including a baton charge by police, provoked by a band of millgirls who ‘singing a strike song and shouting words of incitement’ encouraged the men to unyoke a horse from its cart: in another incident they encouraged the men to hurl a lorry into King William Dock.⁷⁶

The millgirls were also involved in ‘a monster procession’ of 4,000 people led by Tom Mann and Peter Gillespie. It was reported that the piper at its head could hardly be heard ‘above the din of the vocal efforts of the mill lassies who took a prominent position within the ranks’ (another report included

⁷² *Forward*, 30 December 1911.

⁷³ Kenefick, “‘An Effervescence of Youth’”, 202–7.

⁷⁴ Baxter and Kenefick, ‘Labour Politics and the Dundee Working Class’, 201.

⁷⁵ Kenefick, *Red Scotland*, 107–8.

⁷⁶ *Dundee Advertiser*, *Weekly News*; *People’s Journal*, 23 December 1911.

a photograph of 'millgirls' marching triumphantly along the docks to a procession on 'day five' of the dispute).⁷⁷ The success of the strike was a cause of great celebration for the trade union and labour movement at Dundee, and like the disputes at Neilston and Kirkcaldy, demonstrated what could be achieved when working-class organisations and institutions worked together with the support of the wider community.⁷⁸ A key feature of the strike was the prominent role of female textile workers, and its successful conclusion prompted the promise that the carters and dockers would do everything to assist the women and the JFWU in any future dispute.⁷⁹

1912

Dundee Textile Workers Dispute – Tayside, January–April 1912.

In all the case studies examined thus far it is clear that an important and significant role was played by trade union and political activists from outside the various regions of industrial activity, and they played a leading role in encouraging unrest among women. But these activities were clearly likely to be more successful when they were conducted in tandem with local networks of support from within the local community; or in the case of Kirkcaldy, the wider regional support offered by workers at Dunfermline. This would confirm Catriona Macdonald's assertion that regionalism is important as an underlying cause of strike action; or conversely, as was the case of Paisley, a means by which strike action is averted.

The importance of outsiders and support from within the local and wider community in Dundee proved essential during the strike wave in the textile industry in the city between January and April 1912 in what was the second principal strike among women in Scotland during the labour unrest. From the moment the strike wave broke out Dundee Trades Council and the ILP supported the women's action, and Peter Gillespie of the carters' union made good his promise to support the women of the JFWU. Notes of sympathy also came from Tom Mann at Liverpool, Ben Tillett at London, Manny Shinwell at Glasgow, A. W. French of the Scottish seamen, and the SUDL at Glasgow

⁷⁷ *Courier and Dundee Advertiser*, 21 December; *Dundee Advertiser*, 23 December 1911.

⁷⁸ *Courier*; *Dundee Advertiser*, 18–26 December 1911.

⁷⁹ GD/JF/1/1: this promise of support is first referred to in the minute of the 'Special Committee Meeting', 23 December, and was clarified in the Committee Meeting minutes 7 January 1912. Manny Shinwell representing the seamen, Joe Houghton the SUDL and carters' leader Peter Gillespie, were all on record indicating their support for JFWU in any future industrial action: see Kenefick, *Red Scotland*, 106–8.

promised ‘every possible assistance’ in blocking raw materials or goods at Glasgow (and even New York) destined for Dundee.⁸⁰

What occurred between January and April 1912 at Dundee was a rolling strike wave across some thirty-four establishments that concluded with a general strike and lockout between March and April – and in the main focused on wage increases. However, even when wage increases as high as 5 per cent were granted many women were reluctant to return to work.⁸¹ Others who had secured increases wanted to strike in sympathy believing they were ‘blacklegging’ while other women were on strike.⁸² Indeed, 400 women at one establishment were granted a 5 per cent wage increase in March, only to reject it and remain on strike on the grounds of solidarity.⁸³ However, for the great majority of unorganised textiles workers’ wages and conditions remained the same and this was unlikely to change as the Dundee Jute Spinners’ and Manufacturers’ Association (the employers’ association) had made clear they would not ‘promise any advance’ on wages. Supported financially by the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) in London, the JFWU were set to call a city-wide strike, and thus the scene was set for the first general strike of textile workers in Dundee’s history.⁸⁴

The impact was immediate: on 1 March 10,000 mill workers went on strike, and within two days this had risen to 18,000.⁸⁵ On 6 March they were joined by 5,000 workers at Lochee (who led the strike action in February–March the year before), and two days later, 2,000 workers at Baxter’s works were locked-out. By 8 March some 25,000 workers were in dispute.⁸⁶ Of the estimated 34,000 textile workers at Dundee only 10–12,000 were organised and in receipt of strike or lockout pay: the remainder had no alternative means of support.⁸⁷ With the level of distress increasing daily, and many workers

⁸⁰ Kenefick, *Red Scotland*, 109.

⁸¹ GD/JF/1/7: JFWU Committee Minutes, January 31, 1912: Williamson, Cuthbert and Davidson persuaded the full committee to vote 130 to twelve in favour of the women remaining on strike.

⁸² GD/JF/1/7: JFWU Committee Minutes, 12, 26 and 29 February 1912.

⁸³ *Courier*, 9 March 1912.

⁸⁴ GD/JF/1/7: JFWU Committee Minutes, 1 March 1912: see also Walker, Juteopolis, 309: the JFWU affiliated to the GFTU in April 1906: see Kenefick, “An Effervescence of Youth”, 208. The JFWU affiliated to the GFTU in April 1906 just after its formation in March that year.

⁸⁵ *Courier*, *Dundee Advertiser* and *Scotsman*, 2 March 1912; *Dundee Advertiser*, 4 March 1912.

⁸⁶ *People’s Journal*, 9 March 1912.

⁸⁷ GD/JF/1/7: JFWU Committee Minutes, 19 and 21 March 1912.

returning to work, the dispute began to collapse.⁸⁸ But the arrangements for a lockout were still in place because 4,500 female spinners (including 2,000 JFWU members) and 500 male calender workers (Calender Workers' Union members) at Lochee refused to return to work. The Cox brothers locked their gates as did the other firms run by members of the employers' association. When the Baxter Works – and the other firms previously unaffected by the strike – joined the lockout on 4 April, 30,000 workers in Dundee were idle.⁸⁹

Strikers at Lochee used the tactics of intimidation and five female Lochee millgirls appeared before Dundee Sheriff Court charged with attempting to compel 'eleven women workers' to join the strike 'and threatening them with bodily violence'.⁹⁰ In another incident the police had to be called in when a 'hostile crowd' of 1,500 female spinners and 500 male calendar workers attempted to force 500 female weavers to join the strike.⁹¹ Reminiscent of the actions of the millgirls at the time of the carters' and dockers' strike, another disturbance at Lochee saw a large crowd attack a jute lorry and pelt the police with 'sticks, stones and other missiles' when they attempted to intervene.⁹²

The Lochee strikers would not return to work until their demands were met, while the Cox brothers and the employers' association were equally determined not to acquiesce and steadfastly refused to talk to the JFWU. But through intermediaries and the intervention of Labour MP Alex Wilkie the dispute was finally brought to an end, with an agreement on union recognition and the establishment of collective-bargaining procedures for the industry.⁹³ On 15 April the lockout notices were withdrawn and the 'Great' Dundee general strike and lockout was over.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ *Dundee Advertiser*, 26 March 1912.

⁸⁹ *Courier*, 4 April 1912.

⁹⁰ *Weekly News*, 6 April 1912: the women were Elizabeth Docherty, Catherine Rooney, Jessie Ann Tosh, Mary Brownlie and Mary Grimmond; all millworkers and all from Lochee.

⁹¹ *People's Journal*, 9 March 1912. It should be noted that the millworkers (spinners, bobbin shifter and preparers) were thought to be a cut below weavers in terms of respectability and that this incident was viewed initially as a sectional dispute in so far as these two groups rarely mixed in the workplace or socially: see Valerie Wright, 'Juteopolis and After: Women and Work in Twentieth-Century Dundee' in Jim Tomlinson and Christopher A. Whatley (eds), *Jute No More: Transforming Dundee* (Dundee, 2011), 36.

⁹² *Weekly News*, 9 March 1912.

⁹³ GD/JF/1/7: JFWU Committee Minutes, 6, 9 and 11–14 April 1912.

⁹⁴ GD/JF/1/7: JFWU Committee Minutes, 15 April 1912; see also *Courier and Dundee Advertiser*, 16 April 1912.

For the JFWU the decision to form the Joint Committee of Textile Unions in April was one of the positive outcomes of the strike.⁹⁵ The other was the formation of the Dundee Conciliation Board and Standing Joint Committee.⁹⁶ The *Dundee Year Book* reported that, even if born in the throes of an upheaval among millworkers', followed by 'crisis after crisis', and 'strike after strike', the Dundee Conciliation Board 'had more than justified its existence'.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, membership of the JFWU continued to grow, reaching a record level of 8,946: including an increase in trade union membership among the Irish spinners of Lochee to over 2,000 by December 1912.⁹⁸

1913

The Kilbirnie Networkers Strike – Ayrshire, April–September 1913

For many Scottish workers 1913 to 1914 was a period of consolidation as they built on the gains made between 1910 and 1912 and the on-going struggle between capital and labour. Women workers were organising and taking direct action in greater numbers than ever before. But there were few big strikes of note except for the protracted dispute that took place in the Ayrshire town of Kilbirnie in 1913: the last big strike to take place before First World War.

The Kilbirnie networkers struck shortly after the first annual meeting of the NFWW at Kirbirnie on 28 March 1913.⁹⁹ As was the case at Neilston and the Vale of Leven the strike was led by Kate McLean and, like every other dispute examined in this article, the 390 female strikers had the solid support of the local community, the churches, local and national trade unions, and the now ubiquitous ILP. But it was the networkers themselves who took the lead.

Many demonstrations were held during the six-month dispute but one held in May was so large and well-supported that *Forward* felt moved to describe it 'as the greatest labour demonstration in the industrial history of Ayrshire in support of strikes.' Around 4,000 trade unionists from the surrounding districts marched to the nearby town of Beith and from there to a mass

⁹⁵ GD/JF/1/7: JFWU Committee Minutes, 30 April 1912; the Joint Standing Committee of Textile Unions was made up two representatives each from the JFWU and the DMFOU, and one each from the Calender Workers' Unions, the Tenters' Union and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers.

⁹⁶ GD/JF/1/1: JFWU General Meetings' Minutes Books, 11 July 1912.

⁹⁷ *Dundee Year Book* (1913), 50: ARMMS, K Loc 941.31 D914.

⁹⁸ GD/JF/1/7: JFWU Committee Minutes, 4 and 18 February 1911 and 24 December 1912.

⁹⁹ *Ardrossan and Salicoats Herald*, 4 April 1913.

meeting of 10,000 in Kilbirnie. *Forward* also noted that 'Strikes in Kilbirnie [were] akin to village carnivals' and came to involve whole community. Indeed, it reported with some pride that 'Mothers with babes in their arms walked the six miles ungrudgingly in the cause of justice'. Indeed, for many women it was their first involvement in a labour demonstration.¹⁰⁰

Support came from all quarters. Glasgow Labour MP George Barnes spoke in support and at one large meeting on Friday 23 May 1913, asserted that the strikers had every right to protest against the 'conditions of labour and wages [that] tyrannical employers forced upon them'. He added that a woman's rightful place was at home 'not the factories' but if women were compelled to do men's work, he argued, 'then they ought to have the same wages as men' as was the case in the cotton mills of Lancashire.¹⁰¹ In concluding his address, Lochee-born Barnes offered the crowd a short biographical sketch, noting: 'That he was employed in a jute factory in Dundee at nine years of age: that his sisters were still working away in Dundee, and that his mother, though eighty-four years of age, was still taking a keen interest in the labour movement.'¹⁰² It is therefore likely that his sisters were involved in the strikes at Dundee and despite his patriarchal view of women and work the women in his own family had little choice but to seek paid employment and enter the workplace.

That evening a meeting organised by the ILP appealed to all workers 'to combine for the emancipation of their class'. The main speaker was ILP member and leader of the Ardrossan dockers, Gilbert Lewis, who first congratulated Kate McLean on bringing 200 women into the NFWW at the Nobels' dynamite factory at nearby Ardeer in Stevenston. He expressed his hope that all the organisations would soon be 'combined and centralised', adding, in a distinctive syndicalist tone, that when that happened 'they would strike a blow that would do away with strikes altogether'.¹⁰³ As occurred at Dundee and the Vale of Leven, a feature of the strike at Kilbirnie was the presence of the SUDL, which actively supported and assisted McLean and the NFWW in organising women workers. Indeed, Lewis chaired the inaugural meeting of the recently-formed NFWW branch at Ardeer, sharing

¹⁰⁰ *Forward*, 19 May 1913.

¹⁰¹ Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland*, 254, 277.

¹⁰² *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 30 May 1913, and 14 June 1913. Barnes repeated this view of women and work at a later meeting on 7 June. He attended several other meetings thereafter in support of the women.

¹⁰³ *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 30 May 1913.

the platform with McLean and William French of the Scottish Seamen's Union.¹⁰⁴

Lewis' role as leader of the Ardrossan dockers brought him into close contact with well-known syndicalist Tom Mann. He had supported the dockers during a protracted strike the previous year, alongside London dockers' leader Ben Tillett, Robert Williams of the National Transport Workers Federation (NTWF) and Madame Sorgue (CGT).¹⁰⁵ Mann had returned to Ardrossan along with Houghton, leader of the SUDL, to address a meeting of dockers and seamen, and it was Lewis who invited both to address the Kilbirnie networkers on the afternoon of 30 May. Mann congratulated the strikers and their supporters for their industrial organisation and solidarity and encouraged them to do more. He also warned them to beware of religion and the churches, 'which were bound hand and foot to the capitalist classes', but was heartened that working people dared to have organisations of their own. Houghton followed him noting that, with no fewer than five different strikes taking place at that time, North Ayrshire 'was seething with discontent'.¹⁰⁶

Despite Mann's warning to be wary of the churches, as at Kirkcaldy the strikers of Kilbirnie had the support of the United Free Church. The Rev. Colin Kidd was invited by Kate McLean to address a large meeting on 11 June and, like his counterpart in Kirkcaldy, he was unequivocal in his support for the female networkers. He noted that the cost of living had gone up by 29 per cent in just five years and that the networkers had not received a wage rise in forty years. Thus they earned well below the accepted minimum average of £1 1s 8d per week that a family could be expected to live on: it was 'a scandal and a disgrace' that they and 10 million other people in Britain 'were living below the poverty line'. He therefore urged them to stand firm and if their position was 'right and just' they would be 'immortalised in the annals of their fair town'.¹⁰⁷

Kidd's words proved portentous for the dispute had wide-ranging repercussions for Kilbirnie and the surrounding area. The NFWW recruited 1,000 new members and, as occurred at Kirkcaldy and Dundee, the women's

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 23 April 1913.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 6 June 1913. Ben Tillett visited Ardrossan on 12 November; Madame Sorgue on 5 December; Robert Williams on several occasions during December, and Tom Mann on 17 December 1912: see *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 15 November and 13 and 20 December 1913.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 6 and 20 June 1913.

¹⁰⁷ Rev. Colin Gibb made his address on 6 June but it was not reported until June 20.

cause prompted other workers to take strike action, generating unprecedented levels of support and solidarity. But more importantly:

It contributed significantly to the mobilisation of labour in the area on a class-wide basis rather than on a purely sectional one, with steelworkers, miners, and non-wage-earning members of the community participating in the women's demonstrations, and the striking women giving their support to the disputes of other workers.

It also led to the formation of an ILP branch and 'a permanent socialist presence in the district'.¹⁰⁸

The Kilbirnie networkers' strike ended on 2 September 1913, and that evening a packed public meeting celebrated its satisfactory conclusion. Joe Houghton (SUDL) and several leading members of the ILP from Glasgow and Ayrshire were in attendance. Kate McLean made the closing address and stressed that it was trade-union organisation that brought about the increase in wages and improvements in working conditions for the networkers. But the NFWW still had work to do with the unorganised networkers at nearby Beith and thereafter 'to the east Coast to organise [women there] with a view of getting higher wages'.¹⁰⁹

Conclusions

What do these case studies add to our understanding of the role of women and the impact of the labour unrest on women workers? Clearly women were striking for better wages and conditions but they were also deeply concerned about union recognition and workplace control. The supporting role of the local community was also important and in all but two of the localities where women were engaged in industrial protest – Bo'ness and the Vale of Leven – the largely fragmented class ideology that had existed hitherto was translated into an active community political involvement that included male and female workers. The United Free Church also played its part in supporting the women's campaign for a 'Living Wage'. At Kirkcaldy the Rev. Richard Milne bemoaned the great gulf in wealth that left the women weavers struggling to achieve anything like a living wage, and at Kilbirnie Rev. Colin Gibb made

¹⁰⁸ For details of the Kilbirnie dispute see Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland*; 247–55; Kenefick and McIvor, *Roots of Red Clydeside*, 35–6.

¹⁰⁹ *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 5 September 1913.

public his unequivocal support for the striking networkers and was angered by the lack of concern shown by an employer.¹¹⁰

Female workers clearly suffered setbacks as the examples of Bo'ness and the Vale of Leven show, and here we can identify cases of gender discrimination where women were unlikely to get support from male trade unionists when they directly competed with men for work.¹¹¹ In these cases the importance of regionalism worked against the interest of women; women not only suffered discrimination in the workplace but also within the wider labour movement. Yet it is also clear that women were more than willing to take aggressive action to secure their demands or in support of organised community action as occurred at Bo'ness in 1910 and during the general strike and lockout in Dundee in 1912.

The regional perspective is fundamentally important to our understanding of why strikes occurred, but also the role played by outsiders in encouraging trade union recruitment, bolstering local support networks, and in encouraging female workers to take strike action. Local and national trade unions such as the Dundee JFWU, the east coast SMFWFU, the NFWW, NUAL, NUDL, SUDL and the Seamen's union, radical left organisations such as the ILP, the SDF/SDP and the BSP, and local LRCs and trades councils, worked together in close community partnerships in support of unorganised workers and women workers. But it was more likely 'the material benefits of unionization' rather than the propaganda of the left political parties that swayed the opinions of most women workers, as Eleanor Gordon argues was the case with the millgirls at Neilston.¹¹² But as Jim Smyth reminds us, the ILP in particular were 'consistently and successfully active' in organising unskilled workers, which suggests that they had a role in marshalling working-class support in the area and in leading workers' unrest amongst women.¹¹³

This also raises the issue of the role of 'outsiders' and 'outsider groups' and the manner in which their activities laid the foundation for third-party intervention. These case studies clearly show that the changing nature of female industrial relations and the attack of employer paternalism by women also encouraged employers to look to 'outsider groups' to solve

¹¹⁰ The address by the Rev. Colin Gibb was reported in full in *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 20 June 1913.

¹¹¹ Fraser, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, 120

¹¹² Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement*, 245–7.

¹¹³ Jim Smyth, 'From Industrial Unrest to Political Debacle?': The Labour Left and Industrial Militancy, 1910–1914' in Kenefick and McIvor (eds), *Roots of Red Clydeside*, 251; Knox and Corr, "Striking Women", 113.

their industrial relations problems by drawing on the conciliation services of the Board of Trade.¹¹⁴ It was the work of outsiders that was crucial to the outcome of the general strike and lockout in Dundee in 1912. Had it not been for the support of the London-based GFTU, the JFWU would have been bankrupted by the dispute. Indeed, from the employers' perspective the Lancashire Federation of Master Cotton Spinners (an employers' association) were influential in persuading their association to accept collective bargaining and the establishment of a Dundee textile board of conciliation, as a mean of dealing with the escalating militancy among female textile workers in the city.¹¹⁵

In the aftermath of the carters' and dockers' dispute in Dundee in 1911 *Forward* proclaimed the strike to be 'a glorious lesson in the usefulness of solidarity'. These same sentiments were expressed time and again after strikes but most notably following the action of female textile workers in Kirkcaldy, and again, after the last of the 'great' strikes, at Kibirnie in 1913. In the case of Kirkcaldy the role of women was even more significant, because their actions and activities contributed significantly to the gains made by the trade-union and labour movement. Indeed, they helped convert Kirkcaldy into one of the most radical areas in West Fife – later it was to become a stronghold of the British Socialist Party.¹¹⁶ Kirkcaldy was a clear example of a town in a textile region of East Scotland where the actions of the women were supported and also welcomed by the local community, and the labour movement more widely within the region of West Fife. The same was true of Kilbirnie where women made a significant contribution to the further mobilisation of the labour movement in North Ayrshire.¹¹⁷

These case studies overwhelmingly testify to a strike wave that in the main was instigated by women. They also demonstrate how, and to what extent, women made a significant contribution to the further mobilisation of the labour movement not only in their own specific regions but across Scotland as a whole. These case studies reveal too the distinctive story of women workers through their actions and activities during the industrial unrest, as well as their relationship with the male-dominated trade-union and labour movement: particularly in the regional context as the work of Eleanor Gordon and

¹¹⁴ Knox and Corr, "Striking Women", 113.

¹¹⁵ Kenefick, "An effervescence of Youth", 213.

¹¹⁶ Kenefick, *Red Scotland*, 125.

¹¹⁷ Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland*; for details of the Kilbirnie dispute see 247–55; Kenefick and McIvor (eds), *Roots of Red Clydeside*, 35–6.

Catriona Macdonald clearly demonstrates. Building on their work, this article reveals more about agency and the willingness of women to take strike action, become trade unionists, and to actively campaign on industrial and political issues such as the campaign for the living wage. And while some of the evidence presented here reflects too on the limits of that agency the overall picture affirms the existence of an autonomous and independent role for women in the development of textile trade-unionism across Scotland between 1911 and 1913.¹¹⁸

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¹¹⁸ For a more detailed examination of textile trade union formation and trade union penetration among textile workers at Dundee between 1906 and 1914 see Kenefick, “An Effervescence of Youth”, 189–221.