WOMEN, CONSUMERISM, AND THE NATIONAL CONSUMERS' LEAGUE IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA, 1900-1923

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Historians of reform in the Progressive era usually assert that American consumers gained self-consciousness as a group during this period. The National Consumers' League—although it never had more than a few thousand members during its heyday in the first two decades of this century—was an important manifestation of the growing concern in the United States about the role of the consumer. Indeed, already by the end of the 1890s consumer consciousness was deemed a vital issue by the middle and upper class women who comprised the bulk of the League's membership. The concept of "organized consumerism," which had been developed in Europe, spoke to the needs of these American women.¹

With the development of industrialization in the early 19th century, women's productive sphere within the home was continuously shrinking. Goods that once had been produced at home could now be bought at the store, and at a far more reasonable cost. U.S. Census Bureau analysts commenting on the 1910 census figures asserted that the phenomenal growth of the consumer goods industries reflected the change from home production to factory production. From 1869 to 1909 the canned goods industry had risen from a manufacturer's value of approximately $6,000,000 to over $100,000,000. In that same span of time the ready-made women's clothing industry had grown in worth from $12,000,000 to over $300,000,000—"largely, no doubt, because of a gradual transfer of . . . work from the homes and custom dress-

making establishments to the factories.”

These changes created jobs for working class women, but middle and upper class women remained confined to the home in accord with the prevailing dictates of the “Cult of True Womanhood,” which stressed domesticity and submissiveness as the correct womanly characteristics. Maud Nathan, who later became the president of the New York City Consumers’ League, reflected in 1933 on the part of her life spent as “a True Woman” during the late 1880s:

There were no women’s club activities in the eighties. We had no civic duties, no public meetings to distract us from our homes and social duties. After my housekeeping duties were attended to, I spent my mornings practicing my singing and embroidering buffet scarfs, doilies, bureau covers, etc. Only the other day, while looking over my linen press, I came across an elaborately embroidered buffet scarf that I had worked in those long ago days of comparative leisure. And marveled that I ever had the time and patience to spend my mornings at such work.

When the tensions of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration surfaced during the Progressive era, middle and upper class women sought to find an issue that would allow them, as a relatively disenfranchised group, to participate in the larger reform movement. They found this issue in their role as industrial society’s chief consumer. This discovery was summed up by Florence Kelley, the guiding spirit of the National Consumer’s League:

Since the exodus of manufacture from the home, the one great industrial function of women has been that of the purchaser. Not only all the foods used in private families, but a very large proportion of the furniture and books, as well as the clothing for men, women and children, is prepared with the direct object in view of being sold to women. It is, therefore, very natural that the first effort to educate the great body of miscellaneous purchasers concerning the power of the purchaser should have been undertaken by women, among women, on behalf of women and children.

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2 U.S. Census Bureau, *13th Census 1910* (Washington, D.C., 1911), vol. 8, 382, 399. Census analysts reported that in the canning and preserving industry “these figures show that rapid growth has taken place in these branches of the industry, partly by reason of the transfer to factories of a considerable part of the canning, preserving, etc., formerly done in private houses.” (382). In the case of factory made clothing “the increases shown for this industry have been phenomenally large at each succeeding census, largely, no doubt, because of a gradual transfer of such work from the homes and the custom dressmaking establishments to the factories.” (399).

Thus, according to Kelley, the League was to have two main goals. The first objective revolved around the amount of power women could exert as consumers. The second was to use this power to improve working conditions for women and children workers.4

Today we generally think of a consumer's organization as being concerned with the protection of the consumer in terms of price and the quality of goods purchased. The officers and members of the Consumers' League, however, were just as concerned with the impact their organization could have on worker's conditions. The League constitution stated that the organization’s aim was to “educate public opinion and to endeavor so to direct its force as to promote better conditions among the workers, while securing to the consumer exemption from the dangers attending unwholesome conditions.”5

League officers also argued that the woman consumer and hence her family were at the mercy of an industrial system whose chief concern was profits. Who really knew what ingredients were included in store-bought foods or what disease a family might contract from ready-made clothes produced under unhealthy conditions. Florence Kelley maintained that as a consumer she was “in as great danger as ever of buying smallpox, measles, scarlet fever, infectious sore eyes, and a dozen forms of diseases of the skin in my new garments.”6

Ideologically, the League contained individuals of strongly divergent views—as can be gleamed from the stated beliefs of Maud Nathan and Florence Kelley. According to Maud Nathan, the consumer held vast power if she could just be organized to use it. Nathan maintained that organized consumers could act not only as arbiters between capital and labor through their potential control over public opinion but also would have to be reckoned with as a third force in modern society:

When the consumers organize, as capital and labor have organized, their power will be greater than either of the two forces. The consumer will be in a position to dictate terms.

To Maud Nathan's way of thinking (and probably the majority of Consumers' League members agreed with her) capital, labor, and consumers would all live harmoniously with their various needs ful-

filled: capitalists would get a fair return on their investments; workers would get a fair wage, good working conditions, and a voice in controlling these conditions; consumers, in return for the markets they supplied, would get satisfactory products as well as good service.\(^7\)

These concepts were not shared by Florence Kelley whose ancestors had subscribed to a number of 19th Century American reform movements including feminism, abolitionism and Radical Republicanism. After attending Cornell University, she was refused entry into graduate school because she was a woman and subsequently went to study in Zurich. There she came into contact with European radicals and became a lifelong socialist. Upon returning to the United States she translated one of Engels' works into English and maintained a correspondence with him. At first glance it might seem peculiar for a committed socialist to have dedicated much of her life to head an essentially reformist organization but her activity was in accord with the ideas held by many evolutionary socialists during this period.

In 1887, she gave a paper entitled "The Need of Theoretical Preparation for Philanthropic Work" to the New York Association of Collegiate Alumnae. In her paper she spelled out what she saw as the difference between bourgeois and working class philanthropy. Bourgeois philanthropy was merely an attempt to return to the workers a little bit of the wealth that they had created. This wealth had been taken from them by the bourgeoisie who made their profits from the workers' labor and gave them nought but a subsistence wage in return. Bourgeois philanthropy consisted of such patchwork remedies as donations to a hospital, soup kitchens for the unemployed, and a new home for the poor unwed mother. This kind of philanthropy could never really solve the problems of poverty because nothing was done to change the economic or social arrangements that had created the poverty. Ultimately bourgeois philanthropy merely propped up a dying order. Middle class women were in danger of being put to work at this kind of philanthropy. This was true especially of college women since they had been influenced by an institution that represented the interests and ideas of the upper class. According to her, "we are as a rule condemned as members of the ruling class, to meet our working brothers and sisters either as employers or alms givers."\(^8\)

\(^7\) Maud Nathan, *The Story of an Epoch Making Movement* (New York, 1926), 125, 123.

\(^8\) Florence Kelley, "The Need of Theoretical Preparation for Philanthropic Work," a paper presented to the New York Association of Collegiate Alumnae, May 14, 1887,
If socially concerned women wanted to break out of this trap they should spend their time participating in institutions that the working class themselves had developed. Trade unions were the strongest and most important of these institutions. Working class philanthropy meant not paternalism but working with people in reciprocal and mutual associations. Florence Kelley did not spell out how middle class women were to join workers in their associations, but asserted that any contribution which made the working class stronger as a whole furthered the cause of socialism. (In time her views changed somewhat. She no longer suggested that the middle class join workers organizations; instead she urged members of the middle class to organize themselves separately in order to fight for Federal reform legislation).  

When asked how she thought socialism would come about, her reply was "socializing industry consists of two elements, acquiring public possession and making that public possession democratic." She cited the Post Office, public libraries, publicly owned utilities, and elementary education as examples of "public possession." As for the tools of democracy that allowed such possession to be achieved she gave as an example political practices in Oregon which had universal suffrage, the initiative, referendum, recall, and direct primaries. These were "all means of enabling the citizens to control the industries when these became public possessions." For Florence Kelley her work as head of the Consumers' League was not at odds with her socialist strategy. The League sought to educate citizens about the need for legislation to improve working conditions. It furthered the passage of this legislation by helping to frame laws and lobbying for them. It sought to organize consumers to purchase only from those employers who upheld an industrial code which would enable the working class to further organize and strengthen itself. For her then, the Consumers' League was a harbinger of the socialism that would be achieved through an evolutionary process.  

But except for Florence Kelley and a few others the League membership on the whole did not question the institution of private property. Production for the capitalist marketplace was not challenged. And the

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9 Ibid., 123.

League was most careful in trying to express a class neutrality as the 1901 annual report for the Consumers' League of the City of New York made clear: "We are . . . in no spirit of animosity towards any class."11

The National Consumers' League grew out of a New York City organization, the Working Women's Society, which was the basis of the New York Consumers' League. During the latter part of 1889 and the first weeks of 1890 the society had studied the working conditions of saleswomen and cash girls in the city's leading department stores. These conditions were found to be generally so deplorable that a meeting was called for May, 1890 to discuss the situation and possible actions that might be taken to improve it. The participants—including clergymen, working women, and wealthy reformers such as Josephine Shaw Lowell—agreed that the saleswomen and girls could not organize a union; they faced too many obstacles. The women were too young, most being between 14 and 20 years old. And in an age of craft unionism, the women were too unskilled to be accepted by any of the existing craft unions. As an alternative, a committee was established organizing the shoppers. Since the workers could not organize, it was assumed to be the duty of the consumer to improve conditions for women workers—especially as there "is no limit beyond which the wages of women may not be pressed down, unless artificially maintained at a living rate by combinations, either of the workers themselves or of consumers."12

The New York group developed tactics and goals (many of which were later adopted by local League groups and the national organizations) that fell into two general categories: protective legislation and ethical control of consumption. From the time of its organization in the mid-1890s the first Consumers' League in New York State strenuously pursued these goals. Through lobbying, letters and petitions to state legislators, and organizations of public sentiment by lectures at churches and meetings at settlement houses, the New York League was instrumental in getting the New York State legislature to pass in 1898 the Mercantile Inspection Act. The first protective legislation worked on by a state League, the act provided for a 60 hour week for women under 21 and boys under 16 as well as a working day of ten hours not to begin before 7:00 a.m., not to last after 10:00

11 Consumers' League of the City of New York, Report (New York City, 1901), 5.
12 Ibid.
p.m. The act also included a provision for sanitary rest rooms.\textsuperscript{18}

The New York League also set up a White List to aid the consumer in buying ethically. To get on the White List an employer had to meet the “standards of a fair house”: equal pay for equal work; a minimum wage for sales girls of $6.00 weekly; paid overtime, and at least one week paid vacation during the summer. 1,000 copies of a contract embodying these provisions were sent out; only 30 were returned. And upon inspection only four of them passed. The White List was published in newspapers and posted on subway walls. It was never a huge success. Most stores ignored it; some newspapers who had department store accounts refused to print it.\textsuperscript{14}

Although limited in its accomplishments the New York League inspired the founding of other leagues. In 1899 the four existing Leagues of New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Illinois decided to form a National Consumers’ League to coordinate the activities of the state Leagues. It was argued that a National League would make their campaigns more viable since many of the consumer industries were national business. And national organization, it was maintained, would also be more effective in lobbying for Federal legislation.

The National Consumers’ League relied on a small core of dedicated women, although men also participated in the organization as members and in leadership positions. It was composed of a loose federation of state leagues which varied in membership. At the tenth anniversary of the National Consumers’ Leagues, Ms. Nathan claimed the organizations had grown to 25 chapters in 9 states. By 1900, Massachusetts, one of the largest chapters, had 1,400 members in 5 local leagues. Local leagues were also formed on college campuses. Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, Vassar, Smith, Swarthmore, Simmons, Mount Holyoke and the University of Wisconsin all had local chapters.\textsuperscript{15}

The National Leagues’ best known tactic for achieving ethical consumption was the campaign for the “Consumers’ Label.” On May 24, 1898 an interstate conference was held in Albany, New York to discuss the possibility of a Consumers’ Label campaign. Participants argued that there was a responsibility to go beyond a concern with retail

\textsuperscript{18} Athey, 143.
\textsuperscript{14} Maud Nathan, \textit{Epoch Making Movement}, 46. She claimed that firms which didn’t appear on the list threatened to withdraw their advertising accounts from newspapers which published it. Only the editors of the New York \textit{Evening Post} did not give in to the pressure.
\textsuperscript{15} Athey, 49.
clerks and to deal directly with working conditions in the factories. At this conference it was suggested that the state Leagues grant a label to manufacturers who fulfilled the requirements that their goods were made on the premises of the factories, that their factories were approved by the state Factory Inspector, and that their employees were paid a fair wage. Later the wage demand was dropped.

The National League took up the work for the Consumers' Label and this campaign became one of its chief projects. To test the efficacy of the Label the national organization picked an industry that primarily employed and produced goods for women and children. The women's and children's white, cotton muslin underwear industry was chosen. A survey of manufacturers in the industry by the League found that 17 out of 22 manufacturers polled said they would be willing to use a Consumer's Label and guarantee minimum working standards, if the League could produce a national demand for the underwear. The League then mobilized its forces to get women to buy this underwear trying to make good its promise to guarantee organized consumption. Eventually, the label was granted to 69 factories in 13 states, most of which were in Massachusetts.16

One of the problems with this campaign was the class difference between League members who could afford to wear a better grade of underwear and women who normally wore cotton underwear. The League had always appealed to wealthier members of the community. The New York League, for example, had advertised its White List by sending out post cards to selected names taken from the Social Register. The Massachusetts League, however, recognized the difficulty in trying to build a mass base by relying solely on this class of women: as a Massachusetts League report on the Label campaign asserted —"the goods endorsed by our League are mostly of inferior quality such as do not appeal to the class of people from which we have as yet recruited our membership."17

The Massachusetts League subsequently sought to reach more wo-

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16 Papers of the Consumers' League of Massachusetts, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass. Most of the factories receiving the label were in Massachusetts. These companies used the Label in advertising their products. An example of this is a magazine advertisement run by Paul, Enochs and Company: "Beware of Petticoats that are made in city sweatshops. Such goods are unfit to sell, they never give satisfaction, frequently spread disease and your best customers wouldn't buy them if they knew of the conditions under which they are made. PECO PETTICOATS all bear this Label CONSUMERS' LEAGUE."

men through an organized campaign. The campaign included meeting with mothers of children enrolled in public kindergartens, reaching public school children indirectly through their teachers at the meeting of the teachers' Educational Association, girls' clubs, womens' clubs, church organizations, and Granger societies. The Massachusetts League sent out 178 letters and 434 postcards to these groups asking to make addresses to them.\textsuperscript{18}

The national organization and the various state leagues were also active in fighting for protective legislation for women and children. At first emulating the New York group, they worked to obtain a shorter day for women employed in mercantile establishments. In Massachusetts, the state League joined with the 20th Century Club, the Union for Industrial Progress, and the Massachusetts Association of Working Women to support a bill limiting the hours of women and children in mercantile establishments to 58 hours per week. A bill with that provision was passed in June, 1900.

In 1911 a bill calling for the reduction of hours for women in industry from 60 hours to 54 hours per week was introduced into the New York State Legislature by the State Federation of Labor. Members of the Leagues attended the hearings and its members wrote letters to state senators and assemblymen urging their support of the bill. It was passed in May, 1912.

The National Leagues' leaders first came in contact with the idea of minimum wage legislation at a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, in September, 1908. The meeting was called by the Consumers' League of France. The conference took up two topics: the sweating system and minimum wage legislation. As a result of the conference, the National Consumers' League decided to make the demand for minimum wage legislation part of its program. In 1910 a committee of the League drafted a minimum wage bill based upon the recently passed British Trade Board Act of 1909. In accordance with this new minimum wage program the Massachusetts League was influential in 1911 in creating a state commission to study underpayment of women wage earners. As could have been anticipated this commission reported that the wages of women in textile mills, candy factories, steam laundries, and department stores were deplorable. Based on this study legislation establishing a minimum wage for women was passed in 1913. The national organizations and the various state leagues were very ac-

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
tive in the passage of minimum wage laws which followed in 12 states and the District of Columbia. The National League put out educational material for the framing of minimum wage state laws. It suggested laws that set up boards consisting of representatives of employers, employees, and the general public. It also argued for laws that provided for a permanent wage commission with subordinate wage boards for the separate trades. These boards would recommend to a state commission what a living wage for a women should be. An important part of the campaign for the minimum wage legislation consisted of educating the public about the working conditions of women and children in various occupations. Extensive research was involved.10

A good example of this kind of research was "Night Working Mothers in Textile Mills in Passaic, N. J." by Agnes De Lama, Research Secretary of the Consumers’ League of New Jersey. This study was undertaken during the summer of 1920 and investigated 100 such mothers. The goal of the report was to supply definite facts for the legislative campaign planned for and designed to improve the plight of working women in New Jersey. All of the workers studied were employed in the textile industry. Most were engaged in the spinning process. For the most part they worked the night shift and were young married women with children. Most were Poles, Hungarians, or Russians. The researcher described a typical home:

Mrs. S., a weaver, has three black rooms in a rear flat on the second floor of what was once a cottage. The sagging porch overflows with pale, sickly children who live inside. Seven of them belong to Mrs. S., who is still nursing the youngest, only a few months old. She earns from $19 to $24 weekly, seldom more; her husband makes $25 in a lumber yard. Worn and haggard, she sat there, the child pulling at her breast. Her mother, who interpreted, said: "She never sleeps—how can she with so many children," She works up to the last moment before her babies come, and as soon as they are a month old. Mrs. L., who lives below in the same house, has just stopped work because she was pregnant, and although the boss has told her she could stay, she found the reaching on the heavy spinning machine too hard. Three children, ranging in ages from five to twelve years, sickly and forlorn, must be cared for, and a tubercular husband, unable to work steadily, who brings in only $12 a week. During the interview he sat in a huddled heap in one corner. Two babies had died, one because she had gone to work too soon after its birth and lost her milk. She fed him tea and bread, “so he died.” She

was now planning—though obviously unfit for heavy work—to do day’s cleaning to tide the family over the present “emergency.”

The report concluded that the wages of the men were too low to support a family, forcing the women to take up night employment. The League report also noted that in 1904 the Legislature had annulled a law of 1892 prohibiting the employment of women and minors in manufacturing for more than 55 hours a week and after 6:00 p.m. on five days of the week and after twelve noon on Saturday. 20

Although the National Consumers’ League survived the war intact, it ran into difficulty afterwards. Various controversies crippled it. The first of these involved organized labor’s opposition to the League’s label. American unions first had begun to use the union label in 1874 when San Francisco cigar makers affixed a white label to their boxes to insure customers that the cigars were made by white labor, not by competing Orientals who worked for cheaper wages. The union label idea spread quickly as labor leaders saw its value for enlisting consumer support. Unions, like the Consumers’ League, believed the use of the label could enlist the buying power of women. According to an AFL pamphlet on the use of the union label:

It aims to be the schoolmaster abroad, the schoolmaster at home, teaching the women folks their primal obligation to the great cause, while steadily winning its way into the hearts of the general public. . . . It seeks to enlist woman as the chief auxiliary and trumpeter of the affiliated legions; not alone the wife, mother, and daughter of the organized wage-earner, but through them and their propagandism all other women. 21

In 1909 the International Ladies Garment Workers Union assigned Pauline Newman to advertise its label. The next year in a report she claimed that since the overwhelming majority of union members were men it was difficult to agitate among working women for the union label. Through the placement of ads in several Boston newspapers she had found society women and the members of women’s clubs to be most responsive to her campaign. She was invited to speak before various organizations. Newman further reported that many thought the National Consumers’ League label sufficient but changed their minds after hearing her speak. She convinced them that the “union

label is the only label that counted for anything." 22

As early as 1904 the National Consumers' League had clashed with the ILGWU over use of a label. At the union's 1904 convention the League label was declared "dangerous to the welfare of the International." Since the National Consumers' League could not control labor's primary wage demands, ILGWU officials could not understand what the League hoped to accomplish through its use of the label. 23

The next year a meeting was held between the leadership of the ILGWU and officers of the National Consumers' League, who agreed to discontinue the use of the League's label on all goods except white goods. However, League officials vehemently refused to discontinue use of their label. It was argued that the people that the League appealed to did not believe in unions so that the union's label and the League's label were not in competition. Besides, it was pointed out to withdraw the League's label would mean giving up the League which probably could not function without its label campaign. It was agreed, however, to withdraw the League's label from any company which might injure the interests of organized labor. 24

Despite the meeting, the conflict between the ILGWU and the National Consumers' League over the label continued. A 1918 letter to an officer of the Massachusetts League summed up the reasons why the National Consumers' League finally dropped its label by the beginning of the 1920s. The letter writer reported that in some factories organized workers felt that the League label was unfair. The New York press had reported that an officer of the ILGWU had branded the Consumers' League as "an organization whose label had been used by employers hostile to organized labor." The League, it was said, had further alienated labor by refusing to withdraw the label from a factory after a fire broke out caused by bad conditions and while its workers were engaged in a prolonged strike. 25

With the disappearance of the League label, the national organization and the state leagues lost an important organizing tool. Edith Howes, a one-time president of the Massachusetts League, declared in 1922 that dropping the label campaign was having harmful effects:

The National League was brought into being to standardize and promote

25 Letter to Miss Wiggin from a member of the Label Committee, January 25, 1918, Mass. Consumers' League MSS.
the use of the label. Mrs. Kelley was chosen Executive Secretary because of her valuable work as Factory Inspector in Illinois. In spite of many difficulties the label built up throughout the country a united membership in one national effort. When because of the opposition on the part of trade unions the label was given up, Mrs. Kelley regretted the necessity of abandoning this method of securing co-operation from the rank and file of our membership, yet in spite of her wonderful vision nothing has been found to take its place in the education of the consumer. More and more we have drifted away from this original purpose and some of us find it hard to honestly give support to an organization whose politics, however admirable, are no longer devoted to the education of the consumer.²⁸

Another though probably less damaging controversy which involved the League was the challenge made in the mid-1920s by the new Women's Party to the strategy of protective legislation for women. According to the Women's Party, an equal rights amendment was needed to guarantee female equality. The party's leaders argued against protective legislation for women. In an issue of its paper Equal Rights the Party attacked minimum wage laws and protective legislation supported by the League—arguing that to maintain one sex needed special protection implied it was inferior. What was needed was universal legislation. Special protective legislation for women would only result in their being replaced by men and kept out of certain fields that might require night work. And indeed this had happened at Harvard University where after the passage of a state minimum wage law for women the scrubwomen all were fired and replaced by men. The Party also claimed that the only reason the AFL had supported industrial legislation for women was to prevent them from invading mens' sphere in the job market.²⁷

Florence Kelley answered these arguments. The problem with making protective laws universal at this time, she declared, would mean that women would once again become dependent upon men. Traditionally women had gotten better conditions through legislation whereas men had relied upon negotiation backed up by strikes. An Equal Rights Amendment would allow women to change their hours and other working conditions by law only when men were ready and willing to make the same changes for themselves. This, she said, "would be a new subjection of wage-earning women to wage-earning men and

²⁸ Edith Howes to Newton Baker, November 3, 1922, Mass. Consumers' League MSS.
²⁷ "The Cat is Out of the Bag," Equal Rights, February 22, 1930, 3; Mass, Consumers' League MSS.
to that subjection we are opposed on principle and in practice."  

The general reactionary tone of the 1920s also had its effect on the League. The Supreme Court overturned many of the state minimum wage and child labor reform bills that the League had fought so hard to get. The League was "redbaited" along with other progressive organizations. In 1921 Vice President Calvin Coolidge wrote a series of three articles, one of which was entitled "Are Reds Stalking Our College Women?" Many League members had attended the schools Coolidge discussed and were implicated in that attack. A "Spider Web Chart" was circulated around Washington, D.C., showing how many women's organizations throughout the country were involved in an interlocking directorate which formed a conspiracy to undermine the government. Government officials denounced this chart, but still it was used to attack "the womens' lobby" in Washington. This lobby, officially called the Women's Joint Congressional Committee, was comprised of the American Association of University Women, the National Consumers' League, and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. Blacklists began to be circulated around Boston under the auspices of the Daughters of the American Revolution. These lists contained organizations as well as specific speakers who were thought to be dangerous to the national interest. The Consumers' League was listed. A 1931 letter from a Massachusetts League member shows both the decline of the organizations and the effect of these attacks as well as her solution to the problem:

We had a very interesting discussion at the board meeting yesterday about why we only have 490 members. ... Mr. G. N. Fay's pamphlet "Radicalism and Politics in the Episcopal Church" has, in one instance that we know of, kept a small group of women from joining the League. I do not know just how to counteract things of that sort. Probably the very best way is to try to have prominent conservatives associated publicly with the League.  

By 1931 the National Consumers' League was very much on the wane. Its most effective years had been during the Progressive Era. The idea of organized consumerism appealed to the needs of middle and upper class women who felt that women's traditional role of domestic producer was becoming antiquated. These women then

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29 Margaret Weissman to Edith Howes, May 13, 1931, Mass. Consumers' League MSS.
sought to organize around the one function they performed as housewives which tied them to the industrial society—their role as society’s chief consumer. They sought to bolster women’s role within the family by concentrating on her importance as a consumer. The League held that women, by organizing around their consumer function, could hold great power, perhaps as important as labor and capital.

Although some members of the League recognized that its strategy could never be effective unless the League could break out of its class boundaries, they were never successful in recruiting a wider range of membership. Consumerism would be organized, but not on the League’s terms. With the development of mass production techniques, business in the 1920s put more and more money and talent into the development of advertising to ensure a constantly growing national market of consumers. Given industry’s resources, the ability of the League to influence consumers’ behavior (for other ends than that of mere consumption) was minimal. The decline of the National Consumers’ League was understandable.