Anne Morgan and the Shirtwaist Strike of 1909-1910

By Joseph J. Portanova, Ph.D.

The shirtwaist (women’s blouse) factories were notorious for exploiting labor, especially that of immigrant women. They were underpaid, charged for “extras” invented by the management, crowded into unsafe and poorly ventilated structures, searched when leaving the buildings, and often herded through a single exit while other doors remained locked. These conditions were to lead both to the great strike of 1909-1910, and ultimately to the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911.

In late September of 1909, the employees of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory went on strike. Management responded by hiring thugs and prostitutes to attack the strikers, and received the assistance of police who arrested the strikers on the slightest of pretexts or none at all (Von Drehle
On November 22, 1909 in a meeting at Cooper Union, Local 25 voted for a general strike. Within a day, between twenty and thirty thousand shirtwaist workers (out of an estimated total of thirty-two thousand) walked out on strike (Basch 3, Daniels 100, Von Drehle 54). The majority of the strikers were women between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. Most were immigrants: about 75-80% were Eastern European Jews and about 6-10% Italians. (Daniels 100, Von Drehle 60-61). The strikers faced a powerful manufacturers’ association, a corrupt government, and a hostile police and court system.

The strike gained support from an unexpected quarter—women of upper-class New York society. Many of these belonged to the exclusive Colony Club, which did not admit Jews or non-whites, and rarely Catholics, as members (Lewis 208). The wealthy women who supported the strikers were sometimes referred to as the “mink brigade”. They included Mrs. Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont.
(whose first husband was William Vanderbilt), as well as Anne Tracy Morgan, the daughter of the financier and collector John Pierpont ("J.P.") Morgan. This was an unusual alliance, and a controversial one.

Anne Tracy Morgan (1873-1952) was the youngest child of John Pierpont Morgan and his second wife Frances Louise Tracy. Morgan was one of the wealthiest men in the world. His U.S. Steel Company was worth 1.4 billion dollars, and his financial interests “dominated the railways, electricity, steel, shipping, farm machinery, anthracite, telephones, telegraph, and insurance.” He did not, however, have any financial interest in the garment industry (Tax 26,230). Anne was brought up in luxury, in the Morgan mansion on Madison Avenue, the first house to be entirely illuminated by electricity. She was educated at home (Lewis xv, 55-6). Anne Morgan remained unmarried, living on a $20,000 a year allowance at the family mansion. This was quite a large disposable income for a woman of her time (Lewis xv, Strouse 521, Von Drehle 71).
When she met Elizabeth Marbury, on February 7, 1901, her life changed. Marbury was a noted literary and theatrical agent (Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw were among her clients) seventeen years older than Morgan (Strouse 522-3). Marbury and her partner, the actress and interior decorator Elsie De Wolfe, were devoted companions and almost certainly lovers—and together known as “the Bachelors” (Von Drehle 71-2, Strouse 522; though at this time the line between what was known as romantic friendship and what today would be termed lesbian love is difficult to gauge: see Vicinus 148-51). Anne Morgan and Marbury soon became inseparable, and the three women were known as the “Versailles Triumvirate” (named after that of their villa in France). We know that Morgan and Marbury were “passionately drawn to each other” though the exact definition of their relationship as lesbian and/or romantic friendship is difficult (Strouse 524). Marbury described Morgan as “young for her age” and “not allowed to grow up”, and felt “Her mind was ready for the spark plugs to be adjusted.” She took credit for awakening Morgan’s social conscience. She encouraged Morgan to defy her father, but if he disliked Marbury he did not attempt to limit her
contact with his daughter (Strouse 528, 531).

The relationship between feminism, lesbianism, romantic friendship, and the struggle for unionization and women’s suffrage is a complicated one. The Women’s Trade Union League included among its founders Jane Addams and Lillian Wald. Addams was involved in what was called a “Boston Marriage” and lived with Mary Rozet Smith; Lillian Wald’s primary emotional relationships were with women (Knight 217, Neumann). Here perhaps the suggestions of the historian Martha Vicinus and Susan Hartman might apply: “women in the international women’s movement in the first half of the twentieth century formed a variety of relationships, with both women and men, and cannot easily be characterized as ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ in any case. …Coupled women’s relationships might be characterized as lesbian partnerships, romantic friendships, loving caretaking, or some combination. In fact, given the variety of bonds, we might wonder whether internationally organized women managed to cross the boundaries of sexuality more easily than those of class, religion, and nationality” (Vicinus 595, n57).

The sexuality, explicit or implicit, of women in the movement for equality or for unionization was rarely mentioned. One positive instance was a speech in 1904 by the German reformer and lesbian Anna Rüling: “the homosexual woman is particularly capable of playing a leading role in the international women’s rights movement for equality. And indeed, from the beginning of the women’s movement until the present day, a significant number of homosexual women assumed the leadership in the numerous struggles” (Rupp 580). More often, the reaction was negative: “an attack on women’s suffrage went hand in hand with an attack on same-sex friendships” (Vicinus 151). Morgan and Marbury were fortunate to have the protection of their wealth, family names and influence—during the strike no attacks of this sort took place, though Marbury’s perceived masculinity certainly
offered such a target (Strouse 522, 530, Von Drehle 71-2).

Once awakened, Anne Morgan’s interest in social issues was considerable. She volunteered at Settlement Houses in the Lower East Side ghettos. Yet at the same time, she was also one of the founders of the exclusive Colony Club, the first social club for women in New York (Von Drehle 71-2). As one of her biographers notes, “Anne Morgan was in daily communication with those elements of the workforce who were considered natural enemies by her father. To his credit, he disapproved but never did anything to prevent her from fulfilling her commitment to the victims of the world. For her part, no matter how justified she might secretly have found criticisms leveled at Morgan by her new associates, never did she utter a single public word against him.” (Lewis 234). This contradiction between principle, wealth, and family was striking.

On March 7, 1908 Anne Morgan had hosted a meeting at her home to organize a women’s auxiliary to the National Civic Federation in order to improve the conditions of working women. Conflict
between wealth and reform is evident in a speech made by Mrs. J. Borden Harriman at a second meeting, which combines concern for the workers with a desire to avoid confrontation with management: “All of us have an influence…and some of us are the wives or sisters of employers of large numbers of factory operatives, or perhaps ourselves are owners and stockholders… Should not the woman who spends the money which the employees help to provide, take a special interest in their welfare especially in that of the women wage earners? We will learn… what should be done for the betterment of conditions among wage earners, and then we will not use coercive methods, undertaking to secure improvements, but will try to find opportunities to offer friendly suggestions to those in power” (NY Times 7 March 1908).

Morgan herself seemed more practical than this: on a visit to Germany in 1908, she visited laborers’ homes in Berlin to observe their condition (NY Times 14 July 1908). She also gained experience at speaking in public on social issues. On June 7, 1909 she spoke to a difficult audience at the Brooklyn Navy Yard: “She rose to speak when, from the jeering reception given to the former speakers, friends of the Federation… were beginning to fear the failure of the project. There were some whistles and catcalls when she began to talk, and when she sat down it was with the crowd all on her side and amid a perfect roar of applause” (NY Times 8 June 1909).

Anne Morgan and the “mink brigade” were particularly active in the shirtwaist strike of 1909-1910. Incidents with the police and strikebreakers prompted the union to put well-to-do women on the picket lines along with the workers. Their arrests made front page news in a way the arrests of ordinary workers had not (Von Drehle 52). On December 4, 1909 Mrs. O.H. P. Belmont rented the New York Hippodrome for a rally in support of the striking shirtwaist workers. Donations by wealthy women provided much-needed funds for the strikers.
Much of this involvement was due to the influence of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL). Established in 1903 to bring together middle-class (known usually as “allies”) and working-class women, it “stressed the importance of cross-class cooperation between upper-class and working-class women, and it was the only early twentieth-century women’s organization to attempt to build an egalitarian, cross-class alliance into its administrative structure” (Dye 25).

On December 14, 1909 Anne Morgan announced that she had applied for membership in the WTUL in support of the strike: “If we come to fully recognize these conditions we can’t live our own lives without doing something to help them, bringing them at least the support of public opinion. We can see from the general trade conditions how difficult it must be for these girls to get along. Of course, the consumer must be protected, but when you hear of a woman who presses forty dozen skirts for $8 a week something must be very wrong. And fifty-two hours a week seems little enough to ask…These conditions are terrible, and the girls must be helped to organize…and if public opinion is on their side they will be able to do it” (NY Times 14 December 1909).
The next day, Anne Morgan along with Elizabeth Marbury and Mrs. Egerton E. Winthrop Jr. invited working girls of the WTUL to a meeting at the Colony Club. Present were one hundred and fifty of the wealthiest women in New York, who listened to the stories of workers: “An Italian girl said she earned $6 a week as a finisher. ‘Yes, I get 4 cents a dozen for waists,’ she declared, and the audience gasped. ‘A priest came to our shop and told us girls that if we struck we should go—excuse me, please, ladies—to hell.’ ” Rose Schneiderman, a WTUL organizer, noted how the managers sat Italians next to Jews, and played on rivalries to divide them but now “a good many girls in this fight have come to know each other’s names and to know a sisterly feeling for the first time in their lives.” Mrs. Archibald Alexander and Elsie De Wolfe passed around hats and raised $1300 (probably equivalent to $20,000 in current exchange). Anne Morgan is said to have contributed more (NY Times 16 December 1909, Lewis 257-8, Von Drehle 73).

Not all in the labor movement were thrilled with the meeting, in which Jewish and Italian women spoke at a club that would not admit them under other circumstances. An article in the socialist newspaper The Call described it as “A remarkable meeting, one that was as peculiar as it was interesting, and as unique as it was pathetic.” It compared the “bejeweled, befurred, belaced and begowned audience” with the “ten wage slaves, some of them mere children” and noted “Seldom, if ever, have [rich women] listened with such interest to the tales of the war between capital and labor, to the incidents of pain, of misery, of grief in the great struggle between the classes” (The Call 16 December 1909, Von Drehle 77).

The New York Times noted that the picketers were more determined than ever thanks to the support of the women of the Colony Club. Many club members also joined the WTUL, following Anne Morgan’s example. The names and influence of prominent women offset that of the wealthy
manufacturers (*NY Times* 17 December 1909). Morgan and Mrs. Belmont headed a committee to recruit pickets and challenge police harassment, while Mrs. Belmont created a sensation by pledging her mansion as surety for the bail of four strikers (Von Drehle 76). On December 21, 1909 seventy-five strikers rode in a parade in eleven automobiles loaned by wealthy women (Anne Morgan hired half a dozen taxicabs). Even the “scabs” in the factories rushed to the windows to watch. The socialists wrote “It was amusing to see rich women carrying cards on which was proclaimed the need for organization for labor and which demanded shorter hours and increased pay” (*The Call* 22 December 1909, Von Drehle 77). The *New York World* noted the unusual harmony between classes: “For almost the first time women of widely different social ranks have joined forces in a common cause which, though directly for the betterment of one element, is for the ultimate political advancement of all….The support given to the waist-makers by women of prominence is unprecedented” (*World* 22 December 1909, Von Drehle 77).
Socialists criticized the headlines given to the wealthy women, which ignored the work of socialist women in the strike: they “took an active part in the Hippodrome meeting, for which Mrs. Belmont alone received the credit, and helped arrange the demonstration and parade to City Hall” (Tax 233). Divisions increased with the strikers’ rejection of an offer to settle without an agreement for a closed shop (the hiring of only union members) in late December. On January 1, 1910 Anne Morgan issued a statement which indicated “full sympathy with the struggles of the striking waist makers to obtain recognition for their union” but added “any fair and reasonable proposition for a settlement ought to be carefully considered by the girls. It is very important to obtain an honorable settlement of the strike as soon as possible in order that the suffering among the girls may be stopped by their going back to work with their union recognized and with better conditions than obtained before the strike” (NY Times 1 January 1910).

For Morgan, a major break with the socialist strikers came after speeches at a Carnegie Hall meeting of January 2nd that she attended, which involved “Fifth Avenue and the lower east side, both represented chiefly by women and girls.” Morris Hillquit, a socialist, put the events in the perspective of the class struggle; his remarks were defended by Leonora O’Reilly of the WTUL (NY Times 3 January 1910, Von Drehle 82). Some of the society ladies present could not have been comfortable with this, but only Morgan spoke to the press: “I am heartily in favor of the strikers… A protest along sane and reasonable lines was justifiable, but I deplore the appeals of Morris Hillquit, Leonora O’Reilly, and others. It…was dangerous to allow this Socialistic appeal to emotionalism, and it is reprehensible for the Socialists to take advantage at this time to preach their fanatical doctrines” (NY Times 4 January 1910).

Most of the WTUL did not discuss these comments with the press, but O’Reilly did: “Perhaps if Miss
Morgan had ever been face to face with hunger or eviction for the sake of principle...she would understand the way those strikers felt” (American 5 January 1910). Hillquit suggested “that Miss Morgan’s active connection with the labor movement is as yet of too recent date to qualify her as a judge of the manner and methods in which its struggle should be conducted” and accused her of trying to introduce “partisan politics” (NY Times 4 January 1910). An anonymous letter to the Times, possibly by the shirtwaist manufacturers, stated that Belmont and Morgan might not be so generous if their servants went on strike, adding “As charity begins at home, a good New Year’s resolution would be to see if the girls who work for the rich...had as good times, wages, and conditions as the strikers whom the society dames are putting up funds for” (NY Times 4 January 1910, Lewis 260-1).

The controversy worsened when Eva M. Valesh criticized the socialists and the strikers’ executive committee. In a speech she claimed that socialists were using the strikers for “their own dangerous purposes”. After describing the WTUL as “full of socialism”, she proposed a campaign to form “clean, sensible labor unions” since “The existing unions aren’t doing what they ought to stem the tide of socialism in this country”. She warned that socialism was “a menace” and added “There’s nothing constructive about socialism. It just makes those ignorant foreigners discontented, sets them against the government”. This speech antagonized the socialists and the WTUL, and insulted the predominantly immigrant strikers. Valesh “said afterward that she might be considered as representing Miss Morgan”(NY Tribune 22 January 1910).

Morgan, a friend of Valesh, quickly but indirectly repudiated her statements. The WTUL informed the press “A statement has recently appeared in the press to the effect that Miss Anne Morgan does not indorse [sic] the methods of the Women’s Trade Union League and proposes to start a campaign for a new trade union movement for women. Miss Morgan is a member of the present organization, and has asked that the statement in question be formally denied.” Over the telephone Miss Morgan
confirmed this statement” \((NY\ Tribune\ 25\ January\ 1910)\). The socialists denounced Morgan, Valesh, and others: “Will these ‘society’ ladies succeed in their…noble effort to obtain control of the organizations of their wage-slaves?" \((The\ Call\ 1\ February\ 1910)\).

With their funds exhausted and support fading, in February the strikers abandoned their demand for a closed union shop. They accepted the terms refused in late December, which included higher wages and shorter hours, and the owners’ agreeing not to prohibit union membership. The strike ended on February 15, 1910. \The Call\ announced this as a great victory \((Von\ Drehle\ 86)\). At a peace luncheon at Delmonico’s arranged by Mrs. Belmont for strikers and manufacturers, Mrs. Belmont asked “Won’t you all promise to wear only union shirtwaists for one year?” Morgan responded “All those that I get in this country” \((NY\ Times\ 8\ February\ 1910)\).

Anne Morgan continued to involve herself in social causes, and on April 2, 1910 joined an organization devoted to protecting immigrants \((NY\ Times, NY\ Tribune\ 2\ April\ 1910)\). Her involvement in the women’s suffrage movement was also criticized by the socialists. She and Mrs. Belmont were called “notoriety seekers” and “representatives of capital seeking control of women’s votes” \((NY\ Tribune\ 20\ May\ 1910)\). On February 4, 1911 Morgan visited a new shop owned by women that sold only union label shirtwaists: she bought “several fluffy white garments…. and every garment had a trade union label … showing that it had been made under clean and healthful conditions. In between times Miss Morgan drank tea from pretty little union cups, and ate union cake” \((NY\ Tribune\ 5\ February\ 1911)\).

After the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of March 25, 1911, Anne Morgan was involved in relief and reform efforts. She joined a committee of twenty-five to improve workplace safety, and donated $100 to the fund for the victims \((Stein\ 136-41,\ 207\ NY\ Times\ 30\ March\ 1911)\). She rented the Metropolitan
Opera House on behalf of the WTUL for a mass meeting on April 2, 1911, but indicated that she had urgent business out of town and would be unable to attend (perhaps recalling the controversy of the Carnegie Hall meeting of 1910) (Lewis 263, Stein 140-1, *NY Times* 3 April 1911). She added, “I am heartily intent upon doing all that I can to assist in accomplishing vital results” (*NY Tribune* 2 April 1911).

The Metropolitan Opera House meeting emphasized class differences: “Those in the grand tier came in automobiles, and were admitted at a special side entrance opened thirty minutes before the other doors.” It “proved to be more cosmopolitan than harmonious” (*NY Times* 3 April 1911). Speakers were interrupted by shouts from socialists in the galleries, and the upper galleries applauded those who dissented from the program, feeling that the citizens’ committees were useless. Rose Schneiderman’s speech indicated that the public could not help the workers: “I would be a traitor to these poor burned bodies… if I came here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting… This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in the city… The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job it matters little if 143 of us are burned to death… [Y]ou have a couple of dollars for the sorrowing mothers and brothers and sisters by way of a charity gift. But every time the workers come out… to protest against conditions which are unbearable[,] the strong hand of the law is allowed to press down heavily upon us… Too much blood has been spilled. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. The only way they can save themselves is by a strong, working-class movement” (*NY Times* 3 April 1911).
On April 18, 1911 Morgan was elected to the executive committee of the Fire Prevention Bureau, dedicated to better safety laws in the wake of the Triangle Fire (NY Times 19 April 1911). In June she left with Elsie De Wolfe for three months in Europe, to attend the coronation of King George V and to visit their Villa Trianon near Versailles (NY Times 9 June 1911). Morgan continued her charity work, later helping the steerage survivors of the Titanic. She was especially active in helping France during and after both World Wars, eventually becoming the first woman Commander of the Legion of Honor (NY Times 18 April 1912, Cook 418-19).
The effects of the participation of wealthy women such as Anne Morgan in the WTUL and the shirtwaist strike were mixed. They provided publicity and funds at a time when these were most needed. Their observers and picketers kept harassment of the strikers in check, and wealthy women paid bail for those arrested. But upper-class women also produced a “genteel atmosphere” in the WTUL that contrasted with the lives of the workers. Leonora O’Reilly wrote “Contact with the Lady does harm in the long run…It gives the wrong standard” (Dye 28). Pauline Newman, a Jewish immigrant who joined the WTUL during the strike, wrote: “[T]he ‘cultured’ ladies may be very sincere[,]…but because their views are narrow and their knowledge of social conditions limited, they cannot do as well as some of us can” (Dye 30). These ladies had little in common with the Jewish majority of the shirtwaist strikers (only one “ally” knew Yiddish), and once refused to reschedule a meeting set for Yom Kippur. Some harbored prejudices: “Jewish women were often described as ‘dark-eyed’, ‘studious’, and ‘revolutionary’ in League literature. Italians were…‘docile’, ‘fun-loving’, ‘submissive’ and ‘superstitious’ ” (Dye 30). Society women were given special treatment by the
authorities. They could always retreat to their villas or clubs, while the shirtwaist workers had nowhere to go. Perhaps a coalition of society women, Jewish and Italian immigrant workers, suffragists, trade unionists and socialists was doomed to failure. For a moment, though, during the shirtwaist strike of 1909-1910 women like Anne Morgan transcended their class prejudices and turned their wealth and leisure to active support of the shirtwaist workers. The cultural, educational, religious, and social divisions (to name but a few) between the “mink brigade” and the workers were too wide to bridge, but their efforts were of help to others at a time of economic misery and social injustice.

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Anne Morgan (center, facing left) investigating conditions of coal miners in Western Pennsylvania c.1911.
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