

As white men were drafted into the military by the tens of thousands, industries began to recruit white women to fill their spots. The famous images of “Rosie the Riveter” perhaps romanticize women’s experiences in the workforce, but women at the time did speak to the excitement and freedom they found in working outside the home and earning their own wages. The war did not usher in a rapid change in gender norms, at least not in majority public opinion. After the war, women were expected to leave the workforce, to allow returning veterans to take their jobs back, and to return to their “rightful” duties in the home. Yet women’s wartime experiences created changes that would eventually help create the modern feminist movements. First, although many women were ushered out of sectors of the workforce, women actually stayed in the labor force at higher numbers than ever before; married women, especially, worked in greater numbers than in any previous era of American history. Moreover, many women never forgot their experiences in the workforce, and their expectations for opportunities that the next generation of women should have were forever changed. Women in the labor movement who joined unions during the war also became leaders for a new labor-based feminism.<sup>25</sup>

Black men and women were also hired into industrial work by the tens or hundreds of thousands, but only after employers found they could not fill the jobs with white women. Mexican workers also found jobs during World War II, most notably through the federal government’s Bracero Program, a guest worker program that brought tens of thousands of Mexican workers into the United States to fill labor shortages in agriculture. Although opportunity came for black workers and women later than it did for white male workers, the war brought a radical improvement in economic conditions and raised expectations for all Americans. That the raised expectations of women and racial minorities were not fulfilled after the war meant that the increased opportunity of wartime actually helped sow the seeds for the civil rights movement and other social movements to follow.<sup>26</sup>

The United States emerged from World War II in a position to become an economic superpower. From 1945 to 1973, American workers enjoyed higher wages, greater job security, and a steadily improving standard of living. Workers in unions made even greater gains, including not only substantially higher wages but also health insurance and pensions. Even Americans on the margins of the workforce benefited from the expansion of unemployment compensation, welfare, and job training and placement programs. Unions played a major role in improving the standard of living of their members as their gains created a “ripple effect” that raised the wages and standard of living for non-union workers.

Workers made remarkable gains between 1900 and 1945. To be sure, this was no linear narrative of inevitable upward mobility and progress. But by the end of World War II, the combined forces of top-down reform and bottom-up activism had created a federal government that legalized and protected industrial workers’ right to organize and bargain collectively, as well as their right to a safe workplace with regulations for hours and wages. They had won access to a limited but growing public welfare state and a burgeoning private welfare system. Through both the AFL’s trade-union-led political activism and a broad world of working-class political activism and workers’ alliances with middle-class reformers and reform-minded politicians, they had made cities better places to live, banned child labor, won municipal ownership of utilities, strengthened their right of free speech, gained consumer protections, and opened new sectors of work to women and racial minorities. Moreover, industrial workers had earned a status as the virtuous “blue-collar” core of a self-consciously hard-working American society no longer divided so sharply along lines of national origin, though still deeply divided by the racism and segregation that remained the fundamental reality for African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. With these newly won rights, protections, and status, the once marginalized and much-maligned American worker had secured a place within