

**CAPITALIZING ON THE WOMAN QUESTION:
ORGANIZING OKLAHOMA WOMEN INTO THE
SOCIALIST PARTY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH
CENTURY**

SUZANNE H. SCHREMS
Rose State College

In Oklahoma, three women, Winnie Branstetter, Kate Richards O'Hare and Caroline Lowe stand out as strong Socialist party organizers who capitalized on the women suffrage question to gain recruits to the party and, therefore, a new voting strength with which to initiate social change in turn-of-the-century Oklahoma.

In 1910 Winnie Branstetter, Assistant State Secretary of the Oklahoma Socialist party, walked into the state headquarters of the Oklahoma Suffrage Association to offer assistance in promoting suffrage for Oklahoma women. Ida Porter-Boyer, national suffrage organizer from Pennsylvania assigned to Oklahoma, received Branstetter's visit with caution; she was uncertain whether an affiliation with the Socialist party would do more harm than good in promoting woman suffrage. She later wrote, "at that time all of us were wary of the effect socialism might have on our advocacy"(Meredith 1969, 70; see also Ameringer 1983; Green 1978).

Women's suffrage was an important issue to Branstetter and other Socialist women in Oklahoma who considered suffrage a weapon with which to fight a capitalist system that subjected women to low-paying jobs, the drudgery of farm labor, and the dependency of marriage. With suffrage, women could vote for advocates of political and economic equality and share responsibility for a cooperative commonwealth. Socialist women also viewed suffrage as an opportunity to recruit women into the party. There was immediacy to their recruitment efforts. Although American Socialists were the first to include equal suffrage in their party platform, many believed that it was only a matter of time before the Republicans and Democrats followed suit. By 1910, a number of states, especially in the West, passed suffrage amendments. The race was on to see which party would capture women's votes.

Early twentieth-century American society called women's struggle for political equality the "woman question." Socialist women expanded the definition to include the struggle of working class women for economic and social equality in the work place of industrial and rural America. Socialist women believed that with suffrage they could change political, economic, and social system that affected adversely the quality of their lives. In Oklahoma, three women, Winnie Branstetter, Kate Richards O'Hare and Caroline Lowe stand out as strong party organizers who capitalized on the woman question to gain recruits into the party and, therefore, a new voting strength with which to initiate social change.

Socialist party organization in Oklahoma began when the national party leadership asked Otto and Winnie Branstetter to organize for the state. The Branstetters were followers of Victor Berger who, along with Eugene Debs and Morris Hillquit, founded the Socialist party of America in 1901 (Meredith 1969; Green 1978). It was not difficult for Oklahoma Socialists to establish a successful party organization. As early as 1895, they had organized their first meeting at Medford, where they wrote a party platform that reflected the principles of late nineteenth-century Populists. Socialists added to their plank universal suffrage regardless of sex, color and creed. After the founding of a national organization, the party sent organizers into the Southwest to establish Socialist chapters. Oklahoma became fertile ground for recruitment because of rural discontent and the need for agricultural reform. Socialists began to view agriculture in the same light as industrial capitalism: agricultural operation required capital and ownership of land

and market forces determined profit. Farm laborers, like their industrial counterpart, profited little from their work. When Socialists began their work in Oklahoma, farmers' problems were not addressed by the major political parties. This left an opening for Socialists to propose programs appealing to farmers (Miller 1981; Dancis 1976).

Women's involvement in the socialist movement began shortly after the organization of the national party in 1901. Initially, however, the party barely acknowledged the woman question. The platform of 1901 included little mention of equal rights. The 1904 platform supported equal suffrage, but only as an afterthought. It was apparent to Socialist women that they needed to form their own organizations to promote women's political and economic equality with educational programs on women's issues and political outreach (*Socialist Woman* July 1907, November 1907, January 1909).

Of primary concern to Socialist women was the effect that capitalism had on marriage and the home. Most agreed that a woman's place was in the home, where they contributed to the welfare of the family and society. The high divorce rate in the twentieth century indicated a breakdown in the family, which Socialist women viewed as a by-product of industrialization. Socialists argued that the capitalist system forced women into marriage for economic salvation and that most women did not marry for love but out of "fear of hunger and starvation." If women were economically independent they would not find it necessary to marry, but would do so for natural reasons such as love and companionship. Therefore, educating women to the societal ills created by capitalism and the solutions provided by socialism would better women's economic and social condition. It was important to work toward removing elements of the law that subjected women to unequal status in society and to fight for full citizenship including the right to suffrage (Porter-Boyer 1910).

Unlike many women in the Socialist party, Winnie Branstetter believed that Socialist women could work with existing suffrage organizations. Branstetter served for three years as vice president of the Oklahoma Suffrage Association, and in 1912 attended the National Suffrage Convention in Philadelphia as an Oklahoma delegate (Leonard 1914, 123). Branstetter maintained that her working class background helped her to understand the oppression of American workers.

Born Winnie Shirley in Missouri in 1879, she attended Kansas City schools and worked as a department store clerk until her marriage to Otto Branstetter in 1899. The couple subsequently moved to Oklahoma where they maintained a farm in Cleveland County. In 1904 they relocated to Norman, Oklahoma where Otto worked as a paperhanger (*Oklahoma Pioneer* October 29, 1910). Four years after settling in the Sooner State, Winnie moved her two girls, Gertrude and Theresa, to a homestead in Roswell, New Mexico. The purpose of the New Mexico interlude was to organize the New Mexico area for the Socialist party. With few resources, Branstetter conducted Socialist meetings in schoolhouses and lodge halls. As her daughter Gertrude later recalled, "Mother conducted most of the meetings alone, talking, teaching, distributing literature, debating local politicians, discussing local problems, and bringing the socialist interpretation to territorial and national economics and politics" (Stone and Taft n.d.).

Branstetter eventually became the first secretary of the Socialist party in New Mexico. Once the government approved her claim to 160 acres, she sold the farm and rejoined her husband in Oklahoma City.

Back in Oklahoma, Branstetter worked to increase women's membership in the party. One method was to sell subscriptions to the *Socialist Woman*, a magazine for women established in Chicago in 1907 by Japanese Socialist Kiicki Kaneko. The magazine was a propaganda tool designed to educate women to the merits of socialism and to solicit their help in party recruitment (Buhle 1983). As one Oklahoma woman wrote to the magazine's editor,

We have a field to work to get the Socialist principles before the women. First let us get acquainted, then make every member of our organized body a worker, starting propaganda to pay for papers, magazines, and leaflets, the latter to be given away to women who don't know what socialism means" (*Socialist Woman* June 1907).

Branstetter was a frequent contributor to the *Socialist Woman*. Her articles related her concerns for the economic dependency of women and children under the capitalist system and the lack of party initiative in addressing the woman question. In the February, 1908 issue, she wrote that the Socialist party needed to take an active stand on female suffrage. She reasoned that the advancement of capitalist-class women toward

the ownership of private property would induce both the Democrat and Republican parties to advocate woman suffrage. She recommended that the Socialist party pay less attention to reforming the capitalists and more attention to reform within the party. She urged the national party to accept resolutions similar to those adopted in Oklahoma that pledged strong support for woman suffrage (*Socialist Woman* February 1908).

Branstetter followed the party line in her arguments for woman suffrage. Suffrage was not a sex question but an economic question. If there was sex discrimination, the economic struggle inherent in the capitalist system was the culprit. Branstetter directed her remarks to the wives of Oklahoma tenant farmers, who along with their families suffered a decline in agricultural markets and economic disadvantage under the landlord system (*Oklahoma Pioneer* March 9, 1910).

Woman suffrage was expected to save the nation's youth from undue toil and labor. Branstetter pointed out that in Oklahoma child labor was just as much an issue as it was in industrial cities. Branstetter estimated that tenant farmers raised seventy-five percent of the cotton upon which the state's economy depended. In order for a tenant family to make a living from cotton, every member of the family had to work in the fields. She wrote that,

We have a condition in Oklahoma bordering on feudalism, where the entire family, father, mother and children, are forced to work in the field in order to produce the barest necessities of life (*Progressive Woman* July 1912).

Even the compulsory education law did not protect children from the rigors of fieldwork. Branstetter explained that the law only required children to attend school three months of the year, which left nine months for field labor. Branstetter hoped that the child labor problem would be solved by increasing the membership of women in the party, thereby increasing the voting strength of the working class.

In February 1908, the Oklahoma Socialist party elected Winnie Branstetter Assistant State Secretary and appointed her as a delegate to the Socialist National Convention in Chicago (*Socialist Woman* June 1908). While in Chicago, Branstetter attended the Women's Socialist League of Chicago, a meeting to unite Socialist women and to address the woman question. The delegates agreed that suffrage was an important tool with which to fight for their rights in the industrial world. They

reasoned that women and men were physically and mentally equal and suffered under the same industrial conditions. Now that the working class struggle included women, they, like their male counterparts, should be able to use their vote to better their condition. Women called on the party to take an active stand on the suffrage issue. They also believed that they must organize to fight for suffrage. As Branstetter told women, "I don't blame the men for overlooking us; they have enough to look after in fighting their own battles. We must fight for ourselves" (*Socialist Woman* June 1908).

At the 1908 Chicago convention, the party made women's fight for suffrage a more organized effort by establishing the Women's National Committee (WNC). The founding of the committee was also the result of a recommendation of the 1907 Second International meeting in Stuttgart, Germany. At the Stuttgart meeting, delegates adopted a resolution that called upon socialists to campaign for woman suffrage within their own organizations. The function of the committee was to manage the organization of women into the party and to maintain funds for a woman activist in the field (*Encyclopedia of American Left* 1990, 830). Ultimately, the *Socialist Woman* magazine, with ever-increasing readership, served as a news outlet for the WNC. Kate Richards O'Hare and Winnie Branstetter were founding members of the Women's National Committee. Like Branstetter, O'Hare fought for the Socialist cause in Oklahoma. Her oratorical skills and ability to reach her audience made her a popular speaker and one of the leading Socialists of the early twentieth century.

O'Hare was born Kate Richards on March 26, 1876 on a 160-acre farm in Ottawa County, Kansas. Her family lost their farm in the drought of 1887 and moved to Kansas City, Missouri, where they lived in relative poverty until her father secured permanent employment. It was during this period that Kate experienced city crime and adverse industrial conditions. To help improve city conditions, O'Hare joined the Christian Endeavor Society, Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the Florence Crittenton Missionary Society. She also attended Pawnee City Academy in Pawnee City, Nebraska, where she received her teaching certificate in 1894. She taught school for a couple of years but eventually resigned because of stress from overwork. O'Hare returned to Kansas City, where she moved in with her parents and secured a job as a secretary in her father's machinist shop. She acquired a share of

the enterprise and entered the machinist crafts industry with a membership in the International Association of Machinists. Through her union activities, O'Hare became acquainted with the doctrines of socialism. She listened to Socialist speakers like "Mother" Jones and Julius A. Wayland, editor of the Socialist paper, *Appeal to Reason*. In 1901, Kate moved to Girard, Kansas, to attend the International School of Social Economy. Here she met Frank P. O'Hare. The two were married in Julius Wayland's home in Girard, Kansas, in 1902. Their honeymoon was a tour of the Midwest, where they lectured on socialism. (*Socialist Woman* October 1908; Basen 1980). In 1904, the O'Hares moved to Chandler, Oklahoma Territory, where Frank accepted a job writing for the Socialist-oriented newspaper the Chandler Publicist (Miller 1981).

Kate O'Hare was instrumental in building a strong grass roots Socialist organization in Oklahoma. She traveled throughout the state and the Southwest delivering the Socialist message in town meetings or at Socialist encampments (Basen 1980). Camp meeting forums borrowed from the Populists were much like a religious revival. Although the initial encampment was held outside Saline, Texas, in 1904, Frank O'Hare quickly saw the effectiveness of such gatherings and recommended that Oklahoma Socialists schedule encampments across Oklahoma (Green 1978). A typical summer season of encampments lasted more than four weeks. One source noted there were "sixty red hot propaganda meetings a month, with an attendance of from 500 to 10,000 at each lecture" (*International Socialist Review* 1909). Under big canvass tents that could accommodate over 1,000 people, Socialist speakers, including Eugene V. Debs, Oscar Ameringer and Kate Richards O'Hare lectured Oklahoma farmers on how socialism could reduce the high rate of farm tenancy by initiating cooperative land ownership.

Kate O'Hare differed from Winnie Branstetter in the priority of her message to women. Branstetter fought to increase Socialist membership by explaining to women how suffrage was an important tool. This tool was to be used to vote for candidates and programs that promoted the Socialist cause and therefore women's causes. Kate O'Hare, on the other hand, crafted her message as an indictment against capitalism. O'Hare did agree with Branstetter that suffrage was a very important issue for women. Like Branstetter, O'Hare attended the Socialist Convention in Chicago in 1908 and joined Branstetter at the

Women's Socialist League of Chicago meeting. She informed the ladies at the meeting that the Republican party of Oklahoma planned to insert a plank in its platform supporting woman suffrage. The threat, she warned, was that Republicans would recruit the support of Oklahoma women. O'Hare urged Socialists to defeat the Republicans by actively supporting woman suffrage (*Socialist Woman* June 1908; Green 1978).

Woman suffrage, however, was only one of many issues that concerned Kate Richards O'Hare. Like many Socialist women, O'Hare did not view suffrage as the solution to societal ills (Miller 1981). She believed that regardless of whether women could vote, the bigger issue was informing men and women of the possibilities of a socialist utopia where all enjoyed the egalitarian world of a cooperative commonwealth. O'Hare pulled at the heartstrings of her listeners with stories about the lives of women and children who toiled in factories or farm fields. She wrote about silk mill operators who hired young girls because "little girls have nimble fingers, and besides they are cheaper," and of women who had "stooped shoulders and dead faces" (*Chandler Publicist* June 21, 1904). The low wages that they earned and the high cost of living decreased women's chances for lasting love and marriage. O'Hare claimed that under socialism children would know the joys of childhood, women the joys of wifehood, and all would enjoy the wealth of the universe.

Winnie Branstetter and Kate Richards O'Hare were pioneers in speaking out on women's behalf during the early years of party organization. They were, however, part of a small minority of women who participated in party affairs. In 1908, women were only ten percent of the membership in the Socialist party and of the delegates to the national convention. But compared to the other major political parties, where less than one percent of the women participated in party politics, the Socialists had a significant female representation. After the establishment of the Women's National Committee, Socialist women became more visible and organized in their recruitment efforts. They appointed a general correspondent for the Woman's National Committee and an office of Woman's State Correspondent to act as a liaison for local, state and national committees. Simultaneously, the national parties recommended that in each state Socialist locals organize a woman's committee (Miller 1981).

Besides organizing communication networks between state and national committees, women participated in national speaking tours to recruit men and women into the Socialist party. Oklahoma and the Southwest was a popular region on the lyceum circuit. Kate Richards O'Hare was already well known throughout the country and especially Oklahoma. Next to O'Hare, Caroline Lowe was probably the most popular speaker in the Southwest. She was sent by the party to organize for Kansas and Oklahoma, where she presented her view of socialism to the farmers of the region. Lowe was born November 28, 1874 in Essex County, Ontario. By 1890, her family had relocated to Kansas City, Missouri. After graduating from Kansas City High School, Lowe obtained her teaching credentials and taught school in the Kansas City system, where she also organized the first teachers union in 1898. It was through her union activities that Lowe became acquainted with the tenets of socialism. By 1908, she abandoned the teaching profession and became a lecturer for the Socialist party. Lowe was also a member of the Woman's National Committee of the Socialist party and was the first to hold office as general correspondent (*Encyclopedia of the American Left* 1990, 437).

As national lecturer and organizer of the party, Lowe first concentrated her recruitment work in the coal region of southeastern Kansas, where she organized schoolhouse meetings to recruit women into the party. Lowe was also a popular speaker at Socialist encampments in Oklahoma. Throughout the summer encampment seasons, Lowe presented her views to Oklahoma farmers on the religious, political and economic conditions of the country (*Vinita Daily Chieftain* September 12, 1906).

On the woman question, Lowe agreed with Branstetter and O'Hare that the question was part of the working class struggle for political and economic equality. She looked at the struggle from a historical perspective. In her testimony before congressional hearings on woman suffrage, Lowe explained that women once worked at home spinning, making bread, or butter for a limited market. Women's status changed when machines and factory work replaced home industry. This change forced women into a work place where they labored long hours for low pay under autocratic bosses. She agreed that suffrage would give women the self-protection they needed in the industrial work place — a voice in making laws that affected their lives (U.S. Congress 1912, 16-20).

Women in Oklahoma echoed Lowe's analysis. Stella Ruch from the Union Social Club explained that woman suffrage was,

an important question to every wage earning woman since the ballot is the only means whereby we could secure the laws which control our wages, hours of labor, and the many conditions which we are employed . . . as voting workers we would cease to be cheap labor in the wage market" (*Oklahoma Pioneer* October 13, 1910).

Ruth Williamson of Shattuck, Oklahoma wrote in the *Ellis County Socialists* that women should join the Socialist party because it was the only party to endorse woman suffrage and that with suffrage, "Many evils now prevalent in the world, such as the whiskey traffic will be eradicated when women have the privilege of asserting their rights at the ballot" (*Ellis County Socialist* August 19, 1915).

The Oklahoma Socialist party made significant gains in recruitment from 1907 until 1916. Eugene V. Debs, Socialist candidate for president, received eight percent of the Oklahoma vote in 1908 and sixteen percent in 1912. By 1914 the Socialist candidate for governor received twenty-one percent of the vote and five Socialists won state legislative offices. The gain in the ranks of Oklahoma Socialists held steady in 1916 but lost significant ground by 1918. The decline in the Socialist party after 1916 was due to President Woodrow Wilson's preparedness program and the eventual involvement of American forces in World War One (Burbank 1973). At the Socialist convention in St. Louis, in 1916, the party took a stand against American involvement in the European conflict. This branded the party as pro-German and drew criticism from many sectors of American Society. Even though the Oklahoma party did not endorse the anti-war stand, Socialists in the state spoke out against American foreign policy. This "un-American" attitude, along with radical activities of the Working Class Union, a militant tenant farmers union, which initiated draft riots called the Green Corn Rebellion throughout several Oklahoma counties, caused many in Oklahoma to abandon the Socialist party. Also significant were the improved economic conditions for the farmers. President Wilson's economic programs to prepare America for involvement in the war enhanced the economic well-being of the country. In Oklahoma, the federal government encouraged farmers to expand their acreage and the production of wheat and corn. Farmers

often went into debt to do so, but the high price of commodities and the increased European demand assured economic success. The farming community no longer found socialism an attractive alternative to a good market economy. When the Oklahoma party began to wane in 1916, so too did the work of Socialist women and their recruitment efforts in Oklahoma. In 1917, Socialist Patrick Nagle sponsored a party resolution that disbanded the Socialist party in Oklahoma (Meredith 1969).

Fighting within the party caused Otto and Winnie Branstetter to leave Oklahoma in 1913. Many considered Otto an outsider from Chicago and refused him a seat at the state convention. The Branstetters moved to Chicago, where Otto eventually became Executive Secretary of the national party and Winnie continued her involvement in the Woman's National Committee, succeeding Caroline Lowe as general correspondent. During the war years, Winnie Branstetter served as liaison from the national office to anti-war Socialist activists imprisoned at Leavenworth, Kansas. In 1921, she represented Cook County, Illinois, as a delegate to the Amnesty International Conference held in Washington, D.C. (*Socialist Party of American Papers*, n.d.). She died in 1960.

Frank and Kate Richards O'Hare moved from Chandler, Oklahoma, to Kansas City, Kansas, in 1909. Kate continued her work for the party and was elected to the National Executive Committee of the party in 1910. In that year O'Hare also ran for Congress, the first woman to do so from Kansas. A few months after her failed candidacy, both Frank and Kate accepted positions as editors of the Socialist newspaper, the *National Rip-Saw*. In 1917, O'Hare served as Chairwoman of the War and Militarism Committee at the St. Louis Emergency Convention and was elected International Secretary of the Socialist party (Basen 1980). With the approaching American involvement in the European conflict, Kate O'Hare became an outspoken critic of American foreign policy. Officials of the federal government arrested her for her anti-war stand and she spent four years in Missouri State Penitentiary. After her release, she put her energy into prison reform for women. She died in 1948 (Basen 1980).

Unlike Branstetter and O'Hare, Caroline Lowe never took up residence in Oklahoma. She did, however, spend a significant amount of time in the state working the encampment circuit to recruit for the party. Similar to O'Hare, Lowe ran for political office, managing a thirty-

five percent return in the 1914 election for Kansas state legislature. That year she enrolled in law school and four years later the State of Kansas admitted her to the bar. During the war years Lowe defended members of the Industrial Workers of the World who were on trial in various Midwest cities for anti-war activities. In 1923, she served as the official counsel for the United Mine Workers. Lowe continued practicing law in Pittsburg, Kansas, until her death in 1933 (*Encyclopedia of the American Left* 1990).

In 1910 national suffrage organizer Ida Porter-Boyer wrote a letter to Carrie Chapman Catt updating her on the progress of the suffrage campaign in Oklahoma. Boyer made a point to discuss the role of Socialist women in helping to promote suffrage to Oklahoma women. Boyer related the success of Socialists and suffragists in placing an initiative on women's suffrage on the ballot in 1910. Boyer noted that the Socialists had collected more signatures for the initiative petition than women suffragettes. Ultimately, however, the initiative failed by 40,000 votes (Porter-Boyer 1910; Harper 1969, 526). It was shortly after the initiative campaign that Winnie Branstetter, Kate Richards O'Hare, and Caroline Lowe moved out of Oklahoma. They continued, however, to serve as national spokeswomen for the party and to capitalize on the woman question until the first world war brought a temporary halt to Socialist activities in the country. The issues that were of concern to Socialist women continued to be of concern to politically active women in the Republican and Democrat parties in Oklahoma in the 1920s. In their new role as political citizens, women worked through the political process for improved working conditions and wage equality for women in industry, for better health care of women and children, for enforcement of child labor laws, and for the establishment of Women's Bureau in the State Department of Labor.

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