

2022

The Working Class Birth of Birth Control

Jake Whitney

University of Nebraska, Kearney, whitneyj2@lopers.unk.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/grad-review>



Part of the [Labor History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Whitney, Jake (2022) "The Working Class Birth of Birth Control," *Graduate Review*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 8.
Available at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/grad-review/vol2/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Review by an authorized editor of OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. For more information, please contact weissell@unk.edu.

THE WORKING CLASS BIRTH OF BIRTH CONTROL

JAKE WHITNEY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY; UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT KEARNEY

ABSTRACT:

*The most popular image of the historic fight for birth control is connected to the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s. Prior to that, the struggle is tied to women's suffrage. Regardless of the starting point, the common understanding of the fight for birth control is one along gendered lines. Historians like Linda Gordon in the book *Women's Body, Women's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* keep with this line of thought. Although most historians currently view the struggle for birth control through a gendered lens, the organized discourse of birth control began as a radical class issue. This understanding of birth control as a class issue is made clear through the use of periodicals from the radical anarchist labor union *The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)* and memoirs of two of the most prominent birth control advocates of the early 20th century, Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman. The connection between the IWW and these two women, Sanger, a member, and Goldman, an early supporter, shows the ties between class and birth control in ways that have been overlooked.*

INTRODUCTION

The struggle for access to birth control has become synonymous with women's liberation. Popular understanding has the birth control movement springing up at the tail end of the suffrage movement, where it was (cisgender) women who led the charge. However, in actuality the birth control movement existed in a sphere separate from the suffrage movements at its origins because its biggest supporters *opposed* women's (and anyone else's) suffrage. Although most historians currently view the struggle for birth control through a gendered lens, the organized fight for birth control began as a radical class issue. This is made clear through the discourse the IWW was engaged in regarding birth control, the beginning of Margaret Sanger's career as an activist, and finally, Emma Goldman's support for the birth control movement.

That birth control began as a radical working-class issue is no secret. Historian Linda Gordon was one of the first historians to look at birth control through a social lens. Prior to her book *Women's Body, Woman's Right*, the focus of birth control history had been the science and technology of birth control. While these are undoubtedly important subjects, access to birth control does not exist because science and technology were available. It is the work of birth control advocates that gave people access to birth control. When pinpointing the beginning of the birth control movement as a social movement, Gordon focuses on collective advocacy rather than an ideological consciousness.¹ This paper will argue that the presence of an ideological consciousness was there at the beginning of the birth control movement, even though this ideology was left behind later.

¹ Linda Gordon, *Women's Body, Women's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), xv.

For the biographers of prominent early birth control movement members, the movement's radical roots are clear. David M. Kennedy's biography of Margaret Sanger ties her — and thus the birth control movement— first to the socialist party, and then the much more radical direct action tactics of the IWW, through leader William Haywood and anarchists, through Emma Goldman.² Likewise, Kennedy ties the change in the ideology of the birth control movement to the change in Sanger, noting that after 1917 Sanger moved away from radicalism.³ This paper, like Kennedy's biography, will tie much of the birth control movement to Sanger and her ideology. Everyone, from the IWW and Emma Goldman to Anthony Comstock himself, saw the birth control movement as Sanger's movement.

Biographers are not the only historians to point out the radical period of the birth control movement, and others have done so much more pointedly. Joan M. Jensen's article "The Evolution of Margert Sanger's "Family Limitation" pamphlet 1914-1921" tracks Sanger's (and thus the birth control movement's) move away from radicalism. By viewing changes in the different editions of Sanger's "Family Limitation," Jensen concludes that despite her initial radicalism, it is the suppression of the IWW— and other left-wing radicals by the federal government— that pushes Sanger away from radicalism.⁴ Sanger is not alone in this. Following World War I, the left-wing radicals who did not move to the communist party (which would see its own bout of suppression) left radical organizing. Government suppression during World War I gutted most radical organizations and communities.

These historians see radicalism as a phase through which the birth control movement goes. Very few historians have viewed birth control as a single facet of the program of early 20th-century radicals. Ann Schofield's article "Rebel Girls and Union Maids: The Women Question in the Journals of the AFL and IWW 1905-1920" compares the radicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World with the conservatism of the American Federation of Labor. Schofield argues that while the IWW supports women's issues, the class analysis limits the union's effectiveness.⁵ Schofield is correct if one measures the effectiveness of a movement with the measuring stick of liberal activism. Heather Mayer's *Beyond the Rebel Girl: Women and the Industrial Workers of the World in the Pacific Northwest, 1905-1924* is the only currently published book that looks at the IWW through a gendered lens. This is surprising for several reasons. Labor history began the movement for social history, which eventually led to women's history. It would make sense to expect labor historians to engage in other social histories. However, the historiography of the IWW shows the flaw in this assumption. Mayer is out to change this. *Beyond the Rebel Girl* argues that while many, both contemporary to the IWW in the early 20th century and today, see the IWW as an incredibly masculine organization with a few token women, women and the family were crucial to the work of the IWW.⁶ This paper pursues this view of birth control from inside the working-class labor movement. Rather than understanding the early stage of birth control activism as a radical phase, which it certainly was,

² David, M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). 10-11.

³ Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*, 93.

⁴ Joan M. Jensen, "The Evolution of Margret Sanger's "Family Limitation Pamphlet 1914-1921," *Signs* (Spring, 1981), 552.

⁵ Ann Schofield, "Rebel Girls and Union Maids: The Woman Question in the Journals of the AFL and IWW, 1905-1920," *Feminist Studies* (Summer, 1983), 354-5.

⁶ Heather Mayer, *Beyond the Rebel Girl: Women and the Industrial Workers of the World in the Pacific Northwest, 1905-1924*, (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2018), 3-4.

this paper argues from the other side, that birth control activism was an issue of great concert to many for the left-wing radicals of the early 20th century. Rather than looking at radicalism as a steppingstone of birth control activism, this paper looks at birth control as a piece of the larger American radical social movement.

THE IWW

How can it be that the most prominent and principal supporters of the early birth control movement stood hard and fast against women's suffrage? If there is an issue — and perhaps there is not— with viewing birth control as a woman's issue, the apparent contradiction of the IWW's support for birth control but lack of support for women's suffrage lays plain that issue. By tying birth control to women's issues, birth control then goes hand in hand with other issues like women's suffrage. Traditional Marxism argues that class is the most critical factor in a person's life. Class takes precedence over race, gender, nationality, or any other part of a person's identity. By liberating the working class, all the other problems will go away. The Industrial Workers of the World were not Marxists, however, and the union took significant issue with some of Marxism's biggest supporters, Communists. However, this idea that class takes precedence over everything else was vital to the ideology of the Industrial Workers of the World.

In 1910 Anna Tewksbury wrote a short piece that appeared in the IWW newspaper *Solidarity*. Addressed to the readership of a different radical periodical *International Socialist Review* —which had a larger overlapping readership with *Solidarity*— Tewksbury rebukes a man who wrote an article supporting women's suffrage. Tewksbury argues that women's suffrage would not do women any good, and it is a waste of time to work towards that end. "How about the thousands of disenfranchised workingmen?" Tewksbury asks before concluding that strikes and industrial unionism will achieve much more than any vote ever could.⁷ Not only was this argument the standard for the IWW, but it was also, as Anna Tewksbury shows, an argument that women in the union were making as well. The Industrial Workers of the World did not support women's suffrage because the IWW did not see suffrage as a means of change. In 1912, Eugene Debs, the socialist candidate for president, received some 900,000 votes.⁸ It would not be a stretch to believe that very few of those hundreds of thousands of votes were members of the IWW.

Despite the lack of support of women's suffrage in the IWW, it was committed to women and their emancipation. A new kind of union, the IWW organized entire industries rather than each trade; this meant that women were being organized right alongside men. Furthermore, while the general agreement was that the emancipation of women would come with the emancipation of working men— without the vote— that did not mean that the IWW did not take up issues focused on women, quite the contrary. However, the union viewed women through a class lens rather than a strictly gendered lens. Birth control was one of these class issues.

E. S. Nelson wrote into *Solidarity* in 1911 on the issue of controlling the birth rate— the phrase birth control did not yet exist and would not exist until Margaret Sanger coined it in 1914. Simply put, Nelson encouraged workers to practice sabotage in every way they could,

⁷ Anna Tewksbury, "Woman and Industrial Unionism," *Solidarity*, 12 February 1910.

⁸ "Socialist Gains and Victories," *The Appeal to Reason*, 16 November, 12.

particularly if it meant making the workforce smaller.⁹ Not only would fewer children give working men and women the upper hand over employers because the supply of labor would be less than the demand for labor, but too many children would lower the standard of living for the working class.¹⁰ There were no instructions in Nelson's suggestion. There was no help as to *how* the working class might go about this particular type of sabotage. However, this call to reduce family size was the basis of the support that the IWW threw behind Sanger and Goldman when they brought direction to the call for birth control.

A year before Margaret Sanger would publish the first edition of *The Woman Rebel* and coin the term birth control, Caroline Nelson wrote an article for *The International Socialist Review* about neo-Malthusianism, a movement associated with limiting birth rate. *The International Socialist Review* was not published or edited by the IWW. However, in the same issue with Nelson's neo-Malthusianism article is an article titled "Why You Need Industrial Unionism," which shows that the periodical was closely intertwined with the IWW and its ideology. Very rarely did the views expressed in *The International Socialist Review* stand in opposition to the IWW; thus, Caroline Nelson wrote an article that undoubtedly reached much of the IWW. She argued that controlling the birth rate was a class issue. Moreover, she suggested that the ruling classes already practiced neo-Malthusianism and that it was never a controversial issue until the working class decided to try it. Nelson suggested that it was to the benefit of the working class to continue the effort to control the birth rate.¹¹ As two rank and file radicals giving voice to the issue of controlling birth rate, neither E.S. Nelson nor Caroline Nelson argued that birth control, or what would be called birth control, was a woman's issue. Each suggested that controlling the population would help *men* just as much as it would help women. When Margaret Sanger showed up and took over the fight, the most radical working-class organizations already had a foundation from which to understand birth control. For the IWW, birth control was helpful to women not because of the specific functions of female reproductive organs but because women were members of the working class, and birth control would play a part in the emancipation of the working class.

Margaret Sanger

Before she became the face of the early birth control movement, Margaret Sanger was part of the radical labor movement. In 1912, the Lawrence Textile Mill workers, primarily women, went on strike. Part of the IWW's involvement in the strike was to help the children of the striking women find homes while their parents were out of work. Sanger took part in this relocation of children.¹² Her short foray into radical labor activism would impact her journey as a birth control activist.

In 1914, after a long journey to Europe researching birth control, Sanger made up her mind to publish *The Woman Rebel*, a periodical with a focus on birth control. The motto on its

⁹ The IWW believed in violent sabotage like the destruction of farm equipment; however, less violent actions were also seen as sabotage and were much more common. For example, not working as efficiently as possible was a commonly advocated sabotage action. In this case, having fewer children is being seen through the lens of sabotage.

¹⁰ E. S. Nelson, "Pointers on Race Suicide, etc," *Solidarity*, 22 April 1912.

¹¹ Caroline Nelson, "Neo-Malthusianism: The Control of the Child Bearing," *The International Socialist Review*, October 1913.

¹² Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1938), 81-83.

masthead read "No Gods No Masters." In her autobiography, Sanger explained this choice: "Gods, not God. I wanted that word to go beyond religion and stop turning idols, heroes, and leaders into gods."¹³ Sanger put much thought into the header of her periodical but she did not invent the phrase "no gods, no masters." The phrase, a familiar anarchist maxim, dates to the late 19th century. Biographer David Kennedy suggests that Sanger came across the phrase when she was organizing with the IWW during the Lawrence strike. The IWW distributed a flyer during the strike which used the phrase.¹⁴ The IWW and the radical working-class activism influenced Sanger's birth control movement from the very start.

In the first edition of *The Woman Rebel*, Sanger tied the issue of birth control to class. Using the same argument made by E.S. Nelson in *The International Socialist Review*, Sanger suggested that the middle class knew how to keep from having children. However, unlike Nelson, she does not stop her argument with a call for smaller families. She pursued the question about how to achieve it, promising that future issues of *The Woman Rebel* would break the law and provide women with the information they so badly want.¹⁵ However, it is imperative to note that, while Sanger argued that this was a class issue, she spoke explicitly to working-class women. While this was a logical choice in the sense that birth control would change women's sexual habits, and women were the ones carrying children, it was also a break from the language used thus far by radicals. In other places, Sanger addressed men or included them in the fight for birth control. However, this break by gender was perhaps the first sign that there would eventually be a change in the tone of the birth control movement; it did not remove birth control from the radical sphere though.

Despite the slight language change, the IWW threw its support behind Sanger and the brand-new birth control movement. The Industrial Workers of the World were accustomed to seeing advertisements for other radical newspapers along the edges of the union's most popular paper, *Solidarity*. *The Industrial Worker* was perhaps the most common as it was the second most popular IWW English language newspaper after *Solidarity*. However, it was almost as common to see *The International Socialist Review* or IWW newspapers in non-English languages. In 1914 the Industrial Workers began to see ads for *The Woman Rebel*.¹⁶ The editors of *Solidarity* were not willing to reprint articles from *The Woman Rebel*— a common practice at the time— but they were more than willing to help get the information Sanger promised into the hands of the working class.

Anthony Comstock, and his censorship laws, would eventually catch up to Sanger, first with the arrest of her husband William, and then Sanger herself. The IWW and many other left-wing radical organizations showed support for the Sangers as they faced censorship. This was perhaps the safest way for them to support the movement and hope to help get birth control into the hands of the working class, as they could not publish the information without falling victim to censorship themselves. This did not mean that there was *no* promotion of Sanger's work.

¹³ Sanger, *An Autobiography*, 110.

¹⁴ Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 22.

¹⁵ Margaret Sanger "The Prevention of Conception" in *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger*, ed. Ester Katz, Cathay Moran Hajo, Peter C. Engelman, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 72-3.

Commonly called the "Comstock Law" as it was the brainchild of Anthony Comstock, it was illegal to distribute "obscene" information. Birth control was the primary target of this law. The careers of Comstock and Sanger are inseparable.

¹⁶ "The Woman Rebel," *Solidarity*, 2 May 1914.

When *Solidarity* covered William Sanger's trial, next to the article "William Sanger convicted," there was an advertisement that read "Sanger's Books" promoting the two uncensored early works of Sanger's: "What Every Mother Should Know" and "What Every Girl Should Know."¹⁷ These two works did not deal intimately with birth control, like the pamphlet "Family Limitation" that William Sanger got in trouble for distributing. Furthermore, although *Solidarity* did not publish or promote "Family Limitation," that does not mean that the IWW was not actively distributing the pamphlet. Sanger remarked in her autobiography that the lumberjacks of the IWW would distribute the pamphlet as part of their working-class agitation.¹⁸ The IWW was not ready to risk censorship of its most crucial publication; *Solidarity* was how the union mobilized workers for strike support and free speech fights. Despite not being willing to risk censorship, the IWW supported the birth control movement and Margaret Sanger in other ways.

Emma Goldman

Unlike Sanger, Emma Goldman was never a member of the IWW. Towards the end of her life, she would be quite critical of the union. In the early 20th century, however, Goldman and the IWW, though not officially connected, were allies on various subjects. Birth control was one of those subjects.

Before Margaret Sanger took the birth control movement under her wings, the most significant movement was that of neo-Malthusianism. More popular in Europe than in the United States, radicals — Sanger and Goldman chief among them— were able to go to Europe and come into contact with this movement. Goldman, being older than Sanger by ten years and having been involved in radical left-wing politics longer than Sanger, came to neo-Malthusianism first. In 1900, after a neo-Malthusian conference, Goldman added control of the birth rate to her lecture topics.¹⁹ This decision, however, came with much deliberation, as Goldman was not looking to get arrested, since she was already constantly on the verge of being arrested. However, her attitude changed when the Sangers, both Margaret and William, began to have difficulties with the law. It was then that Goldman resolved to be a true revolutionary concerning birth control.²⁰ When Goldman truly joined the crusade for birth control, she did so within the existing parameters. While she stressed freedom and individuality in her anarchist analysis of birth control, it was the freedom and individuality of the working class she was working towards.

It would have been very easy for Goldman to take the birth control issue and make it entirely her own. She was already very well known in all circles of left-wing radicalism, and she had an existing publication *Mother Earth*, two things Sanger was lacking before publishing *The Woman Rebel*. Goldman, however, did not take complete control of the birth control movement, in part because, as mentioned, she was worried about arrest. Her autobiography gives another perspective. Goldman genuinely admired Sanger. When discussing who was *first* to the birth control discussion, Goldman conceded that Sanger was not the first to talk about such a thing; however, "[Sanger] was the only woman in America in recent years to give information to women on birth control, and she had revived the subject in her publication after many years of

¹⁷ "William Sanger Convicted," *Solidarity*, 18 September 1915.

¹⁸ Sanger, *An Autobiography*, 205.

¹⁹ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1982), 552.

²⁰ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 553.

silence."²¹ This admiration (and desire to keep from being arrested) meant that Goldman played by the established rules. Those rules were set by Sanger and the IWW.

Similar to *Solidarity*, Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* was careful not to distribute work that would get caught by the censors. However, like *Solidarity*, *Mother Earth* showed support for the birth control movement by showing support for the Sangers. In his *Mother Earth* article "The Persecution of Margaret Sanger," Harry Breckenridge urged "every working man and working woman" to support Sanger. This support of Sanger came with the language previously used by the IWW before Sanger was the star of birth control.²² Breckenridge did not merely encourage support, however. He made the argument that had been made before by members of the IWW that the working class was most in need of birth control and that the issue of birth control was not worth the government's attention until the working class was interested in controlling their birth rate.²³ It is impossible to tell whether or not Breckenridge was a member of the IWW. However, he had all the same talking points as members of the IWW. That Emma Goldman included it in *Mother Earth* suggests that Goldman, too, supported IWW talking points.

A year later, Goldman continued to show that it was radical left-wingers breaking trails for birth control. In *Mother Earth*, Goldman reviewed Dr. Wm J. Robinson's book on birth control and berated him for suggesting that he was a pioneer in birth control propaganda. She pointed out that she had been talking about Neo-Malthusianism since 1906, and Robinson's dismissive attitude towards radicals showed he had not done his research on the movement he was trying to join. "Yet," Goldman wrote, "it is precisely such foolish action of an extreme radical which has already assisted in the downfall of Anthony Comstock."²⁴ Goldman was overly optimistic with this analysis, as Sanger's arrest did not bring the downfall of Comstock laws. However, Goldman was right to point out that the radicalization of Sanger assisted, if not carried, the birth control movement up to that point.

By the end of 1915, William Sanger was in jail, and in October of the following year, Margaret Sanger would serve thirty days in jail, both for violating the Comstock Laws. While the Sangers, Goldman, and the IWW were fighting a crusade for working-class access to birth control, Europe was fighting what would come to be known as the First World War; by the middle of 1916, America would join the fight. This war was the perfect opportunity for the federal government to finally crush a radical movement they had been waiting to move against.²⁵ It was this crackdown on radicalism that historians Gordon, Kennedy, and Jensen identify as the cause for Sanger's move away from radical left-wing politics. It was nearly impossible to be a high-profile radical in America at the time, and so Sanger fit her song to a tune the government would accept.

This eventual move to the middle class, where, as biographer Kennedy puts it, there was "influence, money, and manpower" need not overshadow the working-class origins.²⁶ The birth control movement existed before Sanger took the reins, and, as has been shown, Sanger was

²¹ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 553.

²² Harry Breckenridge, "The Persecution of Margaret Sanger," *Mother Earth*, November 1914.

²³ Breckenridge, 1914.

²⁴ Emma Goldman, "Limitation of Offspring," *Mother Earth*, July 1915.

²⁵ Dean A. Strang. *Keep the Wretches in Order: America's Biggest Mass Trial, The Rise of the Justice Department and the Fall of the IWW*, (Madison: The Wisconsin Press, 2019), 45.

²⁶ Kennedy, 93-4.

willing to sing her song to whatever tune needed to make sure people heard her. In the beginning, that was the tune of the radical working class. This working-class origin stands not in conflict with but has been overshadowed by the view of birth control as a cohesive women's issue. However, the working-class birth of the birth control movement is laid bare by an analysis of the IWW ideology, Margaret Sanger's beginnings, and Emma Goldman's support.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

- Breckenridge, Harry. "The Persecution of Margaret Sanger." *Mother Earth*. November 1914.
- Goldman, Emma. *Living My Life*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1982.
- Goldman, Emma. "Limitation of Offspring." *Mother Earth*. July 1915.
- Nelson, Caroline. "Neo-Malthusianism: The Control of the Child Bearing." *The International Socialist Review*. October 1913.
- Nelson, E. S. "Pointers on Race Suicide, etc." *Solidarity*. 22 April 1912.
- Sanger, Margaret. *An Autobiography*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1938.
- Sanger, Margaret. "The Prevention of Conception" in *The Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger*. Edited by Ester Katz, Cathay Moran Hajo, Peter C. Engelman. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003.
- Tewksbury, Anna. "Woman and Industrial Unionism." *Solidarity*. 12 February 1910.
- "William Sanger Convicted." *Solidarity*. 18 September 1915.
- "The Woman Rebel." *Solidarity*. 2 May 1914.
- "Socialist Gains and Victories." *The Appeal to Reason*. 16 November, 12.

Secondary Sources

- Brodie, Janet Farrell. *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth Century America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Gordon, Linda. *Women's Body, Women's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1981.
- Jensen, Joan M. "The Evolution of Margaret Sanger's 'Family Limitation' Pamphlet 1914-1921." *Signs* (Spring, 1981), 548-567.
- Kennedy, David M. *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.
- Mayer, Heather. *Beyond the Rebel Girl: Women and the Industrial Workers of the World 1905-1924*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2018.
- Schofield, Ann. "Rebel Girls and Union Maids: The Woman Question in the Journals of the AFL and IWW, 1905-1920." *Feminist Studies*, (Summer, 1983), 335-358.
- Strang, Dean A. *Keep the Wretches in Order: America's Biggest Mass Trial, The Rise of the Justice Department and the Fall of the IWW*. Madison: The Wisconsin Press, 2019.