Helena Gutteridge: Votes for Women and Trade Unions SUSAN WADE

This paper will not provide a definitive study of either the woman's labour movement or the woman's suffrage movement. Instead, it will relate the two, through the ideas and work of one woman who wad dedicated to both - Helena Rose Gutteridge.

Her early life reflects the independence of mind and action important, and perhaps necessary, for involvement with such unpopular causes as suffrage and the unionization of women. Born in London, England, in 1879 or 1880, she left home to break of all contact with her family at the age of thirteen. Her parents did not believe that girls merited higher education, so Helena worked to support herself and to pay for her studies at the Holy Trinity Church School and the Regent Street Polytechnic School. She also attended the Royal Sanitary Institute, and earned South Kensington Department of Education certificates for teaching, hygiene, and sanitary science.

She joined the dramatic struggle for women's suffrage in Britain:

...it was as a militant suffragette that I worked. I took the stump at Hyde Park corner, took part in hundreds of parades, got thrown out of numerous meetings, waved banners in the House of Commons, anything at all to attract attention to our cause.⁶

For being part of a delegation to the House of Commons, she was once arrested. However, she was not imprisoned because there was not enough room in the jail for all of the 260 offending suffragettes. Gutteridge also took part in the magnificent parade of 250,000 women marching from the Thames Embankment to Albert Hall for the suffrage cause.⁷

She was a member of the Labour Party,⁸ and worked with them until she emigrated to Vancouver, B.C. in 1911, sailing to Canada with a number of other British suffragettes who were planning to stay for four years.⁹ Gutteridge, as it turned out, stayed much longer.

Although she was to be of great assistance to women in their flight for labour rights and suffrage, Gutteridge cannot be credited with initiating either cause in British Columbia, as both were already established. Since the 1800's, middle and upper class women had been organizing and campaigning for equal political rights. Women suffragists such as Maria Pollard (Mrs. Gordon Grant), Cecilia Spofford and Helen Gregory MacGill fought for the provincial franchise for many years, and proposed many legislative reforms along the way.¹⁰

She became actively involved in the B.C. suffrage movement almost immediately after her arrival, joining at least one organization devoted to obtaining votes for women, the Pioneer Political Equality League, 11 which was the Vancouver branch of the Provincial Political Equality League. Another organization she joined was the Vancouver Local Council of Women, 12 which did not dedicate itself solely to suffrage, but did actively support the movement.

Gutteridge had not been a member of the Political Equality League long when she decided that it was too conservative, and that it did not involve working class women as much as it should have. As a result, within weeks of first arriving in Vancouver, she formed the British Columbia Woman's Suffrage League for the purpose of obtaining votes for women on the same terms it is granted to men and to deal with all matters connected with the interests of women, particularly those things that affect women out in the labour market.

Gutteridge believed that, on the basis of human equality, women deserved the vote as much as men, and for the same reasons:

Every reason that men advanced for having the vote applies to women. We need the vote for specific legislation but outside of that we deserve it for the very reasons that earned it for men... Men don't have the vote because of their ability or intellectual attainments. They vote because they are British subjects over twenty-one years of age. 16

This attitude was reflected in the B.C.W.S.L. which demanded suffrage because of its belief in women's innate equality with men and "that what concerns all should have the consent of all." However, these arguments in favour of human justice were not the only ones used by the B.C.W.S.L.

Gutteridge felt that

the backwardness of the suffrage movement in B.C. is not due... to the desire of men to dominate their womenfolk, but due to the lack of interest displayed by the women themselves.¹⁸

Fully understanding the principle of expediency, Gutteridge decided to "attract the attention of working class women through specific pragmatic appeals clearly relevant to their lives", and also to downplay the socialist attitude of the League.¹⁹

Gutteridge also formed the United Suffrage Societies of Vancouver in 1913. This coalition of the B.C.W.S.L., the Mount Pleasant Woman's Suffrage League, the Pioneer Political Equality League, the South Vancouver P.E.L., and the Equal Franchise Association restricted its activities to sending delegations for suffrage to the provincial government.²⁰

In the spring of 1916, Conservative Premier Bowser called a referendum on the question of woman suffrage. This coincided with the 1916 provincial election, and only the male population would have a say on whether or not women would be granted the franchise. To ensure that the referendum would be successful, Vancouver suffrage societies formed the Vancouver City Central Woman's Suffrage Referendum Campaign Committee, of which Helena Gutteridge was the secretary. The Committee also organized an anti-Conservative campaign as a safeguard against losing the referendum. The Conservative Party had never endorsed suffrage, but the Liberals had promised it since 1912.

Many women opposed the suffrage question being put to a referendum, since working to ensure its success would result in women neglecting their war work. Thus, they thought the referendum was unpatriotic. Gutteridge did not oppose the referendum because of patriotism (she was a pacifist and opposed conscription during the First

World War), but because she thought women deserved the franchise simply on the basis of human equality:

The easiest way out, if the government insists on this referendum and will not pass a straight bill at this session, is to see that the referendum passes, and appeal to the voters to lay aside all party feeling and vote for the enfranchisement of women on its merits as a matter of human justice.²²

Both the referendum and the anti-Conservative campaign were successful. The male population voted 43,619 in favour of woman suffrage, 18,604 opposed; the new Liberal government took office under the leadership of Premier Harlan Brewster. Women were finally granted the vote on April 5, 1917.

Helena Gutteridge believed that "the need of political power for working women is greater than that of any other class [because] only when she is able to influence industrial legislation will she cease to be exploited and forced into starvation and shame." ²³

She saw suffrage and the organization of women in labour as being supplementary and necessary to each other, if the economic freedom of women is to be obtained. The economic value of the ballot is one of the strongest arguments in favour of votes for women.²⁴

Gutteridge felt that if women became a collective voting force, their power could result in the enactment of legislation which would improve the lot of working class women, securing

significant changes in industrial legislation governing working conditions and pay rates, thereby eliminating sweated labour, the undervaluing of women's work and poverty-induced prostitution.²⁵

Gutteridge obviously understood the connection between the suffrage movement and the labour movement, yet she went beyond both, knowing that women workers needed a political voice in the Legislative Assembly:

The vote is automatically and directly a protection against unjust laws and unfair wages. Indirectly it is a protection against unequal social conditions, since the politically negligible are also the socially negligible.²⁶

Woman's suffrage was a means to an end; forming a political party to speak for labour was an end in itself.

Once suffrage had been granted, Gutteridge downplayed its possibilities, seeing it only as an asset to those politicians most able to attract women's votes. She concentrated all her efforts on political awareness and education through labour organization in order to teach voters "the why and the wherefore of politicians soliciting their vote at election time." ²⁷

Gutteridge had been involved in the labour movement long before women had won suffrage legislation:

Almost from the day of her arrival here Miss Gutteridge had contact with labour affairs through a suffrage office they opened in the old Labour Temple. Then after taking part in an investigation of women's wages, J.H. McVety [a member of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council] asked her to join an organization....²⁸

Gutteridge did much more than join one organization. As she said, "I began my work in the trade union movement by helping to organize the women's laundry workers, the garment workers, and others." The writer of this paper found first mention of Gutteridge in the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council minutes in July, 1913, when she wrote to the Council recommending the appointment of "a woman delegate to appear before the Minister of Labour in company with delegates from other women's societies." But, in aiding the organization of garment workers, she apparently was involved in the VTLC's work earlier than 1913, as the garment workers were associated with the VTLC by 1912, when a Miss McRae was the union's delegate to the Council. Gutteridge may also have been a garment worker's delegate at that time, but it is not stated clearly in the meeting's minutes until September, 1913. She was a worker in the garment industry, and a member of the Tailor's Union (garment workers).

At a 1913 VTLC meeting,

The report of the Business Agent....recommended that a committee consisting of Delegates Miss Coote, Miss Evans and Miss Gutteridge and the Business Agent be appointed to take up the question of attempting to organize the laundry workers.³³

Their attempts were successful; in February, 1914, the laundry workers were officially affiliated with the VTLC, Gutteridge being one of the union's delegates.³⁴

She became increasingly prominent as a member of the VTLC. When elected Secretary-Treasurer in 1914, she became the first woman to sit on the Council's executive. While continuing to work as an organizer, she later held positions as Recording Secretary, Statistician, Business Agent, Vice Chairman and Trustee. She was sent as a delegate to provincial and national labour conventions, the first being a British Columbia Federation of Labour meeting held in January, 1914. Though the date could not be found for this paper, she was the first Canadian woman delegate to an international labour congress. Gutteridge was also the *Labour Gazette's* (Federal Department of Labour paper) B.C. correspondent on women's labour issues, from 1913 to 1921, and during this period she studied the cost of living for the federal government's labour department.

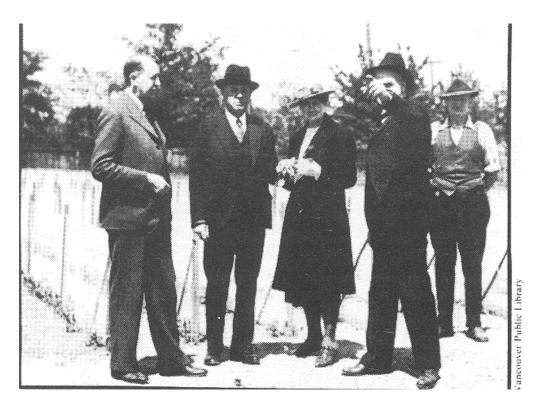
Gutteridge sometimes became discouraged with the slow progress of the women's labour movement: "Women's lack of interest in her economic future as a wage earner is shown by her lack of interest in trade unions. There is but one exclusive woman's union in Vancouver."

She was referring to the Waitresses Union in April, 1913, but by August of that year, another female organization, the Home and Domestic Employees Union, was in operation and affiliated with the VTLC.

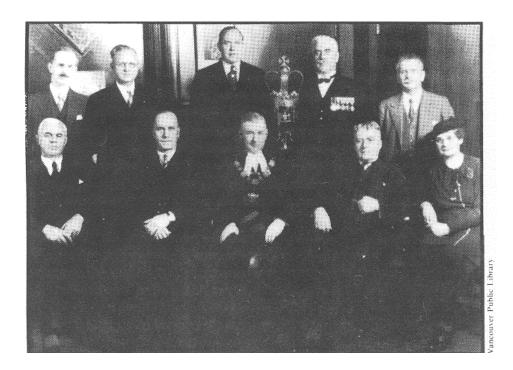
Unionization of both men and women was important (and complementary) to Gutteridge, but she was always more concerned with the plight of women than of men:

To work long hours means to increase the ranks of the unemployed, and to increase the ranks of the unemployed means to lower wages. Short hours are far more essential to women than they are to men... The injurious physical and mental effects of such work are plainly visible... and the rapid aging of the working women has its injurious effects on the next generation. Women are needed in the labour movement - all will benefit by such organization. 43

When a woman's labour issue divided the male unionists from the few female unionists, Gutteridge spoke out loudly in support of women. For example, the First World War changed some of the policies of the labour movement, notably woman's suffrage and women's unionization. As men went overseas, women took the jobs the men had once occupied. Male unionists felt threatened by the increasing number of women in the labour force because women were cheap labour and would act to lower the pay scales of all (male) workers. In addition to opposing female unionization, male unionists also opposed suffrage. They were afraid that the capitalists would give women the vote so that the women would use their political voice to keep their jobs, low-paying as they were.



Helena Gutteridge with Mayor G.G. Miller and Aldermen H.L. Corey and Fred Crone



Helena Gutteridge with Vancovuer City Council.

After a few unsuccessful attempts at preventing women from entering the labour force, the male unionists realized (as Gutteridge had long ago) that both male and female workers benefitted from the organization of women. As Gutteridge said,

low wages, long hours and miserable working conditions became a threat to everything unions had won. I brought these questions before the unions and the men endorsed our demands. I saw to it that they did!⁴⁴

But labour's position on suffrage remained negative from 1915 until women were given the franchise. But earlier, in 1912, the B.C. Federation of Labour had endorsed suffrage. By 1913, their paper, *The B.C. Federationist*, published a weekly suffrage column, edited by Helena Gutteridge. Before the publication of this column had begun, Susan Lane Clark had acted as the paper's suffrage correspondent. But with the war and consequent threat to men's wages, *The Federationist* stopped publishing the column in 1915. The paper did not even mention the Brewster bill that gave women the vote. Gutteridge, of course, opposed the opinion of the majority of her labour colleagues, and continued to actively support suffrage until it was won.

The war years also brought the economic depression of 1914 - 1915. Gutteridge, the Local Council of Women, and representatives from other Vancouver women's societies, formed the Women's Employment League in October, 1914 to aid destitute women with meal tickets, groceries, a job-registration service, and emergency funds. In its first month, the League was aiding 284 registered women;⁴⁷ By November, registration had grown to 804,⁴⁸ and the League had become more ambitious:

On November 1 a large house of 33 rooms was opened by the Women's Employment League as a factory and home where unemployed women could be put to work and live. The plan of the League to start the manufacture of toys and dolls, etc., was placed before the city council, together with a request for a grant of \$2000, the money to be used to pay the wages of as many women as possible, each working three days a week, and to receive \$3.50 per week until such time as the goods manufactured by their labour could be sold at Christmas... 49

The request for \$2000 was granted, and an additional \$1500 was donated by individuals and organizations. \$1500

The Women's Employment League received some support, mainly in the form of encouragement, from the VTLC, apparently for no other reason that its anti-Oriental policy. (There was a major anti-Oriental and Asiatic campaign by labour organizations at this time.) Recorded in the VTLC minute books is the following:

The president moved that a vote of thanks be tendered to the Women's Employment League for their cooperation and valued assistance regarding labour's protest against Asiatics being employed in hotels and restaurants of their city. Unanimously carried.⁵¹

Considerable support came from the Vancouver city council, probably because Gutteridge made known "the grave danger to morality where many women were out of employment", meaning, of course, prostitution.⁵²

Gutteridge had been trying to eliminate prostitution since before women got the vote; she saw suffrage, and resultant minimum wage legislation as a way to do so:

If women will concentrate their energies on getting the vote they will then be able to... lessen the supply of women to the vice trust [prostitution], by passing a minimum wage act that all women may get a living wage. 53

Minimum wage had been a concern of Gutteridge, at least since 1913, but she did not concentrate on it until the suffrage was granted. Then, in the winter of 1917, she "sparked the cause of minimum wage legislation for women among the women's societies.⁵⁴ Representatives from these societies attended meetings of the Vancouver Local Council of Women,⁵⁵ and in that same year, the Minimum Wage League was founded; Helen Gutteridge acted as chairman.⁵⁶

Gutteridge outlined the steps taken by the League:

I took the question to the women's organizations for action. The University Women's Club drew up proposed government regulation for minimum wages for women, later adding regulations for working hours, and campaigned for these demands. The Minimum

Wage League missed no opportunity to press the demands on the government...⁵⁷

She led a number of delegations to the provincial government in Victoria, and finally,⁵⁸ in 1918 Attorney-General Farris drew up a Minimum Wage for Women Bill, which was piloted through the House by Mary Ellen Smith (B.C.'s first woman MLA).⁵⁹

Gutteridge worked for various other legislative reforms pertaining to women and labour. She was, for example, an active advocate of the Mother's Pension cause, 60 which was initiated by the University Women's Club, for the purpose of providing destitute mothers with enough financial aid to say home and care for their children. The University Women's Club gained support from other women's societies, and the Mother's Pension Act was passed in 1920. 61

She also supported workers' compensation:

Another thing I worked very hard for was Workmen's Compensation... when we finally did succeed in 1918 in establishing the principle that injury or death on the job must be compensated by industry, it was a model piece of legislation for North America. 62

Gutteridge virtually ceased her involvement in labour and legislative reform from 1921 until 1932, during which time she was a Fraser Valley poultry farmer. Sometime during these years she married, but divorced a few years later. ⁶³

After moving back to Vancouver, she became increasingly active in politics. She had been secretary of the Federated Labour Party at its formation in 1918;⁶⁴ she was active in the Socialist Party of Canada (forerunner of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation),⁶⁵ until the CCF was formed in 1933. She held prominent positions on the CCF's executive, including chairman of its Economic Planning Commission.⁶⁶

Sponsored by the CCF, she ran for city council twice before being elected in 1937, when she became Vancouver's first alderwoman.⁶⁷ As soon as she was elected, Gutteridge became the council's representative on the board of the Alexandra Orphanage and the Vancouver Exhibition Board, and Chairman of the Vancouver Town Planning and Parks Commission.⁶⁸ She concentrated much of he aldermanic work in this latter area:

Time and again I raised in council the need for city-assisted, low-cost housing schemes. Now the council is finally getting around to it, but at the time my proposals were just brushed aside.⁶⁹

When Gutteridge said this in 1957, just three years before her death, she was still a member of the Town Planning Commission.⁷⁰

In 1939, the Royal family visited Vancouver, this being, of course, at the end of the Great Depression. Gutteridge called the visit "an unnecessary circus", objecting to the substantial civic expense when many were unemployed or on what she referred to as "starvation wages".⁷¹ This attitude was considered disloyal, and was blamed for her defeat in the 1940 election.

Gutteridge worked in a cannery for two or three seasons, 72 before running for a seat in the provincial House of Commons as a CCF Point Grey candidate in 1941. She was defeated, and became the welfare officer of the Slocan City Japanese interment camp. 74

Returning to Vancouver at the end of the Second World War (1945), Gutteridge remained active and involved until she died in October, 1960.⁷⁵ In 1957, she spent Monday nights at the meetings of the Provincial Council of Women's School for Citizenship.⁷⁶ This was an educational association similar to the New Era League, of which Gutteridge had been secretary in 1937.⁷⁷

Since its Vancouver branch was formed in 1917, Gutteridge had become a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. The League's Canadian headquarters was originally housed in the Vancouver Women's Building, was officially recognized by the United Nations, and had consultative status on some U.N. agencies.⁷⁸ Gutteridge was Chairman of the League at the time of her death.⁷⁹

While it would be simple to praise Gutteridge for her involvement in suffrage, labour, politics and community affairs, it is even easier to let her congratulate herself, adding only that this paper shows she certainly practiced what she preached:

I always try to follow the advice I give to other women: Take an interest in public affairs. Keep yourself informed and express your opinions. Above all, be active. No matter how busy they may be with their families and homes, women are part of the larger community. They owe it to themselves to develop their abilities and to work for a better, peaceful world. There's still a lot to be done!⁸⁰

Footnotes

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¹ British Columbia Federationist, October 10, 1913, p. 5

² Mrs. Hilda Kristiansen, interview, July 8, 1980. Mrs. Kristiansen met Helena Gutteridge through the CCF in 1934. Gutteridge rented part of Kristiansen's house after she retired as alderman in 1939, and continued to live there until she died.

³ Civic Federation of Vancouver, *Yearbook of Vancouver, British Columbia* (Vancouver: Civic Federation of Vancouver, 1938), p. 10.

⁴ Linda Louse Hale, "The British Columbia Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890 - 1917", unpublished M.A. thesis, U.B.C., 1977, p. 148.

⁵ Province, April 24, 1937, magazine section, p. 8.

⁶ Vancouver News Herald, March 31, 1937, p. 8.

[′] Ibid.

⁸ Dorothy G. Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada* (Vancouver, 1960), p. 34.

⁹ News Herald, March 31, 1937, p. 8

¹⁰ Susan Wade, "Preliminary Chronology of the Women's Movement and Social Reform, 1880 - 1980, in British Columbia" (student paper, Camosun College, August, 1979).

¹¹ Hale, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁴ *Province*, October 3, 1960, p. 11.

¹⁵ Hale, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹⁶ Province, April 7, 1916, p. 7.

¹⁷ B.C. Federationist, October 10, 1913, p. 5.

¹⁸ Catherine L. Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto, 1950), p. 90.

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<sup>19</sup> Hale, op. cit., p. 68.
<sup>20</sup> Ibid., fn. 92, p. 93.
<sup>21</sup> Hale, op. cit., pp. 148 - 149.
<sup>22</sup> Province, May 16, 1916, p. 5.
<sup>23</sup> B.C. Federationist, October 3, 1913, p. 5.
<sup>24</sup> Ibid., October 17, 1913, p. 5.
<sup>25</sup> Ibid., October 3, 1913, p. 5.
<sup>26</sup> Ibid., October 10, 1913, p. 5.
<sup>27</sup> Marie L. Campbell, "Women and Trade Unions in B.C., 1900 - 1920: The Social Organization of Sex
Discrimination" (paper prepared for the Vancouver Women's Research Centre, June 30, 1978), p. 22.
<sup>28</sup> News Herald, March 31, 1937, p. 8
<sup>29</sup> Pacific Tribune, March 8, 1957, p. 11.
<sup>30</sup> Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, Minutes of Regular Meetings, July 3, 1913.
<sup>31</sup> Ibid., September 18, 1913.
<sup>32</sup> Kristiansen interview.
<sup>33</sup> VTLC minutes, December 18, 1913.
<sup>34</sup> Ibid., February 5, 1914, and April 2, 1914.
<sup>35</sup> Ibid., February 5, 1914.
<sup>36</sup> Hale, op. cit. p. 149.
<sup>37</sup> VTLC minutes, December 18, 1913, January 8, 15, and February 5, 1914.
<sup>38</sup> Steeves, op. cit., p. 32.
<sup>39</sup> Yearbook of Vancouver, 1939, p. 9.
<sup>40</sup> Province, April 24, 1937, magazine section, p. 8.
<sup>41</sup> Labour Gazette, April 1913, pp. 1079 - 1080.
<sup>42</sup> VTLC minutes, August 21, 1913.
<sup>43</sup> Sun, December 12, 1914, p. 8.
<sup>44</sup> Pacific Tribune, March 8, 1957, p. 11
<sup>45</sup> Cleverdon, op. cit., p. 90.
<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 97.
<sup>47</sup> Labour Gazette, November 1914, pp. 576 - 577.
<sup>48</sup> Ibid., December 1914, pp. 681 - 682.
<sup>49</sup> Ibid.
<sup>50</sup> Ibid.
<sup>51</sup> VTLC minutes, February 18,1915.
<sup>52</sup> Ibid., September 17, 1915.
<sup>53</sup> B.C. Federationist, October 17, 1913, p. 5.
<sup>54</sup> Elsie Gregory MacGill, My Mother, the Judge: A Biography of Judge Helen Gregory MacGill (Toronto:
1955), p. 158.
<sup>55</sup> Pacific Tribune, march 8, 1957, p. 11.
<sup>56</sup> Hale, op. cit., p. 149.
<sup>57</sup> Pacific Tribune, March 8, 1957, p. 11
<sup>58</sup> Steeves, op. cit., p. 37.
<sup>59</sup> MacGill, op. cit., pp. 158 - 159.
<sup>60</sup> Hale, opt. cit., p. 149.
61 Helen Gregory MacGill, "The University women's Club" (unpublished manuscript) MacGill Papers, City
Archives of Vancouver.
<sup>62</sup> Pacific Tribune, March 8, 1957, p. 11. In 1918, the Liberals extended the original terms of reference
set up by the earlier Conservative legislation.

63 Kristiansen interview and Helena Gutteridge File, Mss. 285, City Archives of Vancouver.
<sup>64</sup> Paul Phillips, No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia, (Vancouver, 1967), p. 71.
<sup>65</sup> Labour History Association, "Helen Gutteridge, 1880 - 1960", Labour History, vol. 1, no. r (Vancouver:
B.C. Federation of Labour) Fall, 1978, p. 37.
<sup>66</sup> Province, April 24, 1937, magazine section, p. 8.
67 News Herald, March 31, 1937, p. 8.
68 Ibid.
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⁶⁹ Pacific Tribune, March 8, 1957, p. 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *Province*, October 3, 1960, p. 11.

⁷² Kristiansen interview.

⁷³ Sun, October, 18, 1941, p. 14.

⁷⁴ Kristiansen interview.

⁷⁵ *Province*, October 3, 1960, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Kristiansen interview.

⁷⁷ Hale, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁷⁸ Pacific Tribune, March 8, 1957, p. 11, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, letterhead.

⁷⁹ Hale, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁸⁰ Pacific Tribune, March 8, 1957, p. 12.

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