

# **Nannie Helen Burroughs and the Descendants of Miriam: Rewriting Nannie Helen Burroughs into First Wave Feminism**

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## **Abstract**

We argue that early twentieth century Black women labor organizers and their movement for inclusive women's suffrage and women's labor rights stay absent from popular first wave feminist narratives. After the ratification of the nineteenth amendment, Black women continued organizing for women's suffrage and labor rights in the face of racial and gender-based policies that legalized the labor exploitation of Black women and the suppression of the Black vote. We detail African American educator Nannie Helen Burroughs's labor and voting initiatives to challenge the white women-centered chronology of first wave feminism and expand its narrative to include Black women's labor organizing both at home and abroad. While working with women's suffrage organizations, Burroughs established the National Trade School for Women and Girls in 1909 to improve the working conditions of Black domestic workers and create career opportunities that had been denied to them because of discriminatory hiring practices and intersecting racial and gender inequalities. In 1921, Burroughs co-founded the National Association of Wage Earners, a national union organizing effort for Black women. While piecing together her groundbreaking initiatives from archives, obituaries, newspaper articles, speeches, secondary literature, event notices, and the biographies of her co-organizers, we assert that her story sheds new light on the rarely acknowledged connection between Black women's labor and political organizing in the United States and abroad, drawing attention to the often-marginalized histories of Black domestic worker organizing in feminist historical narratives. We intend for this historical uncovering of Burroughs writings to begin the conversation about who she was as a national and international labor organizer.

We argue that Nannie Helen Burroughs (1870-1961) was a significant labor leader and rhetorician of the early twentieth century. We challenge racial, gendered and classed constructions of history and rhetoric that render invisible the work women like Burroughs did during nadir. She believed a women's labor collective would lead to political, social, and economic rights for the entire Black community. We examine how Burroughs employed her audacious, progressive, and forward-thinking labor rhetoric through an analysis of three major texts: "The Colored Woman and Her Relations to the Domestic Service Problem" (1902), "Divide Vote or Go to Socialists" (1919) and "My Dear Friend" (1921). Through these three texts we trace the development of Burroughs's womanist labor rhetoric over time. We argue that following her speeches, Burroughs developed and employed a labor rhetoric that led to the formation of a historic labor union for African American domestic workers in 1921, the National Association of Wage Earners (NAWE). We intend for our examination of her writings to commence rather than end a discussion about who Burroughs was as a labor organizer and rhetorician seeking to complicate the legacy of Burroughs. She was a scholar first who sought to liberate black women from penury by asserting their humanity through offering a broad educational focus, instilling pride within her students' gender and race, and placing these women into positions of stable employment through a womanist themed national labor and unionization platform.

“It has ever been from the time of Miriam, that most remarkable woman,  
the sister of Moses, that most remarkable man,  
down to the courageous women that in very recent years  
have carried the Gospel into Thibet and Africa and proclaimed  
and taught the truth where no man has been allowed to enter.  
Surely, women somehow have had a very important part  
in the work of saving this redeemed earth”  
(Burroughs 1900).

1 Early African American women’s labor organizing is omitted in popular narratives about the first-wave feminist movement, which often foregrounds white middle-class women’s fight for white women’s right to vote.<sup>1</sup> Nannie Helen Burroughs and other Black women labor organizers who dedicated their lives to advocating for Black women’s labor rights, are characterized as tangential historical figures to the women’s suffrage movement, although they simultaneously organized for women’s right to vote.<sup>2</sup> Burroughs (1879-1961) established national institutions and organizations to advocate for civil, women’s voting, and women’s labor legislation before and well after the ratification of the nineteenth amendment in 1920. She founded the National Trade School for Women and Girls (NTS), the largest school in the nation’s capital in 1909 for Black women and girls to improve their working conditions and create new career pathways that had been denied to them because of systemic racial and gender inequalities in the labor economy.<sup>3</sup> Burroughs also established the National Association of Wage Earners (NAWE) in 1921, the first Black women’s labor organization of the twentieth century that fought for national labor legislation and she co-founded the National League of Republican Colored Women in 1924, an organization that advocated for Black women’s voting rights. Still, Burroughs and Black women’s labor organizing are not widely remembered nor publicly discussed as leaders who helped create a movement for *all* women’s access to voting.<sup>4</sup> Often these clubs are forgotten because they were connected to

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<sup>1</sup> Feminist historians have produced groundbreaking scholarship debunking the waves metaphor and the myth that only white middle-class women fought for women’s right to vote. There is also a body of literature that details white suffragists’ racism towards African American suffragists and their exclusionary focus on attaining voting rights for only white women. See Nancy Hewitt’s *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of US Feminism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010; Brittany Cooper’s *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> We use African American throughout the manuscript to identify the racialized ethnic identities of Burroughs and the African American women who she worked with. We use “Black” to indicate her global view of women’s labor rights. Burroughs and her co-organizers fought for better working conditions for all Black women of the African Diaspora.

<sup>3</sup> According to the United States Labor Census records (1900-1950), the majority of Black women and girls were concentrated in domestic service and sharecropping, US Department of Labor records.

<sup>4</sup> Black women intellectuals had to go out into the community and do the work that Black male intellectuals were ignoring or refused to do for African Americans (24). The goal of respectability politics was livable wages and fair

churches or called married women's societies in order for them to appear more respectable, but in reality, Burroughs and her colleagues were building an aggressive labor platform for rights for all women.

2 In this article, we disrupt the whitened chronology of feminism by writing Black women's labor organizing into the women's suffrage movement narrative through the story of Nannie Helen Burroughs. Black women's labor organizing history reveals the privileging of white women in the periodization of suffrage. While women were granted the right to vote in 1920, it was not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 when Black women and other women of color gained unequivocal access to the ballot box. Black women's labor organizing was instrumental to the passage of that act and thereby expands the chronology of the women's voting rights narrative.<sup>5</sup>

3 The hegemonic first-wave feminism narrative relies on the notoriety of 'big name' women leaders such as Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt and Lucretia Mott to tell the story of early women's activism. Catt even went to so far as to rebuff black women organizers such as Maude Evangeline Craig Sampson Williams ("Letters Regarding African American Suffrage Organization"). Black women's labor organizing history, however, unveils lesser-known women who were politically engaged and helped make the right for *all* women to vote possible. Burroughs could not have created labor initiatives on her own. She relied on the grassroots organizing of Sadie Henson, Lucy Holland, Mahala Hill, and other middle and working-class women in the NAWE to draw a membership of 5,000 people (Connecticut Labor Press). We believe it is important to discuss the work and specific names of women who are rarely identified (even in accounts about Burroughs) to draw further attention to the groundbreaking cross-class approach of Black women labor organizers as many early Black feminist organizers are not covered under federal unionization guidelines today.<sup>6</sup> They are also deserving of attention because their first wave organizing was a manifestation of early intersectional feminism that developed through Black women's unionization efforts. Burroughs and her NAWE co-organizers operated under the

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living conditions for Black women, yet it was limited in its relationship to labor, often favoring middle-class African American women as organizers and citing them as teachers, but not intellectuals.

<sup>5</sup> For a history of the critical role that African American domestic worker organizing played in the Civil Rights Movement, see Premilla Nadasen's *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement*.

<sup>6</sup> The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (also known as the Wagner Act) created a federal baseline for private sector workers to unionize, strike and engage in collective bargaining (to equally negotiate working conditions between employer and employee), however, it also barred both domestic and agricultural workers, creating a two-tiered system of laborers.

fundamental belief that justice for Black women meant equal rights for everyone because they were subjected to racism, sexism and classism. Finally, beyond the material, the labor and political lens we offer in viewing the NAWE shatters the common ideal of pulling oneself up by their bootstraps in the guise of upward social mobility. Members of the NAWE re-envisioned what political and economic progress looked like and what it meant to be sisters in the struggle.

4 Together, Burroughs and her NAWE co-organizers built a union, without support from the government and white women's labor organizations, through their own networks and associations attempting to take the country into their own hands and seek justice for themselves and their communities. The project of detailing the shadowed history of the NAWE through obituaries, newspaper articles, speeches and event notices is not enough to provide a complete picture of the achievements of Burroughs and her co-organizers. We hope to inspire continual archival excavation of the NAWE to advance understanding of the significant role that Black women labor organizers played in a truly inclusive movement for women's voting rights.

### **"But what's the sense of talk, if you don't do something?": Burroughs' Early Years of Labor Organizing<sup>7</sup> (Burroughs and Hammond 49)**

5 Burroughs learned early lessons about the significance of labor to the Black freedom struggle. She had a grandmother who taught her racial pride and honor and a grandfather who owned a farm and taught her the importance of entrepreneurship and manual labor (Hammond and Burroughs 47). Burroughs was also raised by a mother who taught her that domestic service labor could be used by Black women to provide opportunities for their children. Her pastor father was largely absent but instilled in her the spiritual belief that ethical labor practices were paramount<sup>8</sup>. Combining her childhood influences, Burroughs' believed that African Americans could acquire the tools needed to challenge the racial, class, and gendered barriers of Jane Crowe America through faith and labor organizing. She experienced gender and class discrimination firsthand when she was rejected from a teaching position in D.C. by the Black elite because of her dark skin tone and working-class background. After having graduated with honors from the prestigious M Street School Burroughs had few options but to work as a janitor and secretary, all while she wrote

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<sup>7</sup> Burroughs began developing a public discourse about the connections between labor, educational, and voting organizing with her 1922 book *In the Vanguard of a Race*, edited by Lily Hardy Hammond (47-62).

<sup>8</sup> Graves argues Burroughs' core purpose was theological and that the subjugation of Black people was part of God's plan for their eventual rise (Graves xxii- xxxiii).

hundreds of letters and documents to the NBC advocating for Black women's labor rights (Graves xxv; Higginbotham 158).

6 Burroughs was a devout Christian who believed that US society could not live up to its professed Christian ideals until white employers and government officials remedied the labor exploitation of Black women. She correspondingly believed that Black women did not have the luxury of waiting for white people to alter their perceptions of them. According to Burroughs, voting was the surest method for domestic workers and other working-class Black women to gain labor rights. From her remarks at a symposium for women's suffrage, it is clear that Burroughs saw Black women organizers as those who had their own internal worth and therefore, needed the America's public acceptance of their value in the form of equality at the ballot box:

A fact worthy of note is that in every reform in which the Negro woman has taken part, during the past fifty years, she has been as aggressive, progressive and dependable as those who inspired the reform or led it. . . . She needs the ballot to reckon with men who place no value upon her virtue, and to mould healthy public sentiment in favor of her own protection. (Burroughs, "Black Women and Reform")

7 Due to her focus on religion and working-class Black women in her labor organizing, however, Burroughs is not traditionally considered significant to the "first wave" feminist movement; her ideologies were complex (Graves xxix). On one hand, she organized with middle-class white women and African American women for women's suffrage and Progressive-era domestic and hygienic viewpoints. She was a proponent of the 3 B's—the bible, bath, and broom, the three values that she insisted that all women live by to have spiritually clean lives. On the other hand, she had an unwavering commitment to organizing for federal legislation to protect Black women from exploitation during a time when the majority of Black women were subjected to slave-like working conditions as domestic workers and sharecroppers.

8 Burroughs's meteoric rise to fame began when she was twenty-one with "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping," her speech at the 1900 National Baptist Convention (NBC) in Richmond, Virginia<sup>9</sup>. As Corresponding Secretary of the Women's Convention, an auxiliary group to the NBC, Burroughs was determined to create a national labor agenda to improve the working conditions of Black women. We are reading her speech in relationship to the purpose, which was to create a physical space for a church that is inclusive of both men and women's labor. "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping" denotes a beginning in the lone line of advocacy by Burroughs

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<sup>9</sup> Republished in Graves 2019.

of spaces where women's religious labor could be accepted as valid. While the conservative theological context of Burroughs' speech regarding Miriam<sup>10</sup> is evident, women who speak against men are punished, the implications within Burroughs' speech are much more radical than the theological. Burroughs argues specifically that Black women as "unpolished gems" are prevented from achieving their full potential in the male-led NBC and patriarchal world in general (Burroughs). Her speech employs the language of the community that she labored for and the central purpose is to define a space for Black women as descendants of Miriam, whom Burroughs acknowledges as a prophetess, writer, unwed woman and organizer.

9 No longer minoritized, the descendants of Miriam need to be freed to make wide-scale social change. Her speech was crucial in establishing the Woman's Convention (WC) within the NBC, an association which served as an adjunct to the NBC and serves as a core example of early labor activism, she wanted proportionate spaces for Black women to organize. This space was where Black women could exercise their labor and political organizing power independently of male membership and white women suffragists who shunned them from women's organizations. The speech, laced in religious meaning and teachings, is about the significance of Black women's labors within this church. Burroughs reads Black women's invisible labor as salvation for the entire race following the example of the prophet and teacher Miriam highlighting that it is time for black women to rise and become equal through all their labors. While it took several decades for the male leadership of the NBC to support her vision, Burroughs forged ahead establishing several historic initiatives for laboring Black women.

10 As an educator, Burroughs founded the National Training School (NTS), a dual liberal arts and vocational institute in 1909 (Higginbotham 162-64). The school within itself was a labor initiative. Burroughs' primary motivation for establishing the school was to improve the working conditions of the masses of Black women and girls concentrated in household employment. Specifically, Washington, D.C., had a substantial African American population due to the Great Migration of African Americans fleeing the South to escape racial and gender terrorism. Even so, domestic work was a dangerous job in D.C. According to Darlene Hines Clark, women who

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<sup>10</sup> Miriam is considered the anonymous sibling who watches his collection from the Nile into the Egyptians hands. She is cited as a prophet (Exodus 15:20). The messaging around Miriam is clear: she questions Moses (Numbers 12:1), becomes ill as a result with leprosy (Numbers 12:10), recovers when she submits to his authority and he prays for her, yet eventually succumbs to her illness (Numbers 20:1). God even later warns that he struck down Miriam for questioning his main messenger (Deuteronomy 24:9).

migrated rarely had their working conditions significantly improve, they were not paid a living wage, they were physically and sexually vulnerable to their employers, they often served as breadwinners for their families and they were never given time off, physical privacy, or a room of their own (301).

11 Burroughs wanted to create employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for Black women who wanted to pursue careers outside of domestic service. The NTS offered an expansive curriculum to meet the varied life goals of students. It included general educational and liberal arts-based core courses in English, History (American and African American), Science and Mathematics alongside vocational topics of Domestic Science, Dressmaking, Business, and Social Service (Burroughs 15-21). Across the various occupational programs, Burroughs sought to organize laboring Black women and girls through a curriculum that emphasized the significance of spirituality, racial pride, African American history<sup>11</sup>, and self-reliance. In addition to her educational activism, Burroughs worked with internationally with the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) challenging colonialism and addressing full citizenship not only for Americans, but for all Africans (Hornsby-Gutting 40). Specifically, Burroughs educated missionaries and sent them abroad, across Africa and held educational programming discussing ongoing social and historical events such as colorism abroad.

12 Burroughs's vision became a reality for some NTS students. Susie Green, a student who could not initially afford the NTS tuition, opened her own printing business after graduation and volunteered at the YWCA to assist other young Black women who were seeking gainful employment (1929, 5). According to *The Worker*, Beatrice Oger, a student who graduated from the NTS's domestic science program, refused to work in the homes of employers who did not pay living wages and provide safe working and living conditions (Burroughs<sup>12</sup>). After landing a position that met her standards, she was able to support herself financially as well as her mother and siblings down South. Ruth Doswell, an NTS student who initially disliked the school and cried

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<sup>11</sup> There was a specific room in the NTS dedicated to African American History (Classroom with sign "This room is for the Study of Negro history" at the National Training School for Women and Girls, Washington, D.C. Washington D.C, 1935. Photograph).

<sup>12</sup> Burroughs wrote about Beatrice Oger's story in her newspaper publication entitled *The Worker* to advertise the NTS domestic science program. *The Worker* was one of the first national Black women's labor periodicals of the early twentieth century and it was produced in the Printing Department of the NTS. Burroughs was the sole author of the paper for the first ten years of its existence. *The Worker* still circulates to this very day, although its focus has shifted to Baptist missionary work. See <https://www.pnbc.org/resources/publications/the-workers-magazine>. Accessed September 13, 2020.

every single day to go back home, later sent her own daughters to the NTS and crafted a political organizing career for herself (14). Burroughs was not merely advertising her school<sup>13</sup>; she advertised her values through the education and organizing goals she met through changing the lives of black young women, deifying black motherhood and the role that black women can have in building a nation.

13 Drawing parallels to the Women Wage Earners and the National Association of Wage Earners, its successor, shows that Burroughs and her organizers were aware of the challenges in front of them and still sought to move forward. In 1917, Burroughs co-founded the Women Wage Earners Association in Washington D.C. for Black women domestic workers. Run by lawyer and Black Republican party advocate, Jeanette Carter, the organization sought better wages, fair working conditions, and certification from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) as a union (Washington Bee). While this early union effort sought to organize domestics and cooks, they also broadened their scope to include Black female business owners within Washington, D.C. (Washington Bee). The association gained attention from national media outlets and local D.C. residents. Like the NAWE, this organization met in D.C. with a national focus with plans to move to other locations and was centrally located near the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA which offered housing for African American women domestic workers who had enough funds to make it feasible not to live in employers' homes. The association planned forums to engage in community discussions about Black women's labor issues. The speakers included women and men from a variety of occupations including domestic workers, professors, census administrators, government workers, and military personnel. Jeanette Carter sought a variety of perspectives to influence her union and actively advocated for federal jobs for domestic workers and cooks in the World War I industry (Washington Herald; Washington Times). Carter advocated for technical skill training for average Black women workers including mechanical or nursing work through a platform of venerating labor of Black women through the Women Wage Earners Association (*Washington Herald; Washington Times*). There are no membership records of the association, yet the press described their meetings as well-attended, even citing a surprising shortage of chairs. Like

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<sup>13</sup> Post-war she was seeking funding opportunities and, again, creating her legacy as a black woman intellectual educator through celebrating the successes of her students (Burroughs, Nannie. *Making Their Mark: Results in the Lives of Graduates*. Women and Social Movements. Database. Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. 1929. 1-21).

Burroughs, Carter saw labor rights as integral to voting rights. She collaborated with Burroughs and the National Association of Colored Women on suffrage organizing (*Evening Star*).

14 Burroughs and her colleagues needed collaborators, therefore, they attempted to gain solidarity support through the International Congress of Working Women (ICWW) in 1919. In collaboration with Elizabeth Ross Haynes and Mary Church Terrell among other organizers, Burroughs petitioned the International Congress of Working Women (ICWW) for Black domestic worker representation at the Congress and was ignored. The ICWW chose to defer to the agenda of mostly European and White American women's labor efforts, while the ICWW had an interest in the status of Black women organizers and domestic workers, they could not translate their guilt and culpability into practice (Vapnek 5). Haynes was a social worker who published a portion of her master's thesis, "Two Million Negro Working Women," in *The Southern Workman* covering the barbaric and dehumanizing conditions in which domestic, agricultural, and factory workers labored. Domestic positions had escalated since the war and there were nearly one million across the United States, but the work came "with all of the shortcomings of ordinary domestic service; namely, basement living quarters, poor working conditions, too long hours, no Sundays off, no standards of efficiency, and the servant 'brand'" (Hayes). Burroughs consistently cited Haynes' numerical data to ICWW and to Black themed advertisements and publications, regarding education, labor and political organizing of black women for the NAWE and beyond. Yet, without support from white women allies and with their petition rejected from the AFL, Burroughs and her colleagues continued to organize independently without help or governmental assistance. Burroughs consistently cited Haynes' quantitative data in her published writings about education and labor to galvanize political organizing among Black women for workers' and voting rights.<sup>14</sup>

**"The women backing this organization are not misfits and failures, but successful in their particular lines"** (Burroughs, "My Dear Friend")

15 In 1921, Burroughs deepened her commitment to reforming domestic service employment by creating the National Association of Wage Earners, a national union with the primary purpose

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<sup>14</sup> The petition was one of the first places she cited Haynes' thesis data, citing 853,357 Black women in domestic service and 1,051,137 in agriculture ("First Convention of International Conference of Working Women." November 4, 1919. International Federation of Working Women Records, Schlesinger Library, Folder 3. Washington, D.C.). Burroughs later used this data in the NAWE organizing drive through her publications in the *Connecticut Labor Press* among other local Washington D.C. papers for black readership.

of organizing Black domestic workers (NAWE). The organization consisted of twenty-three chapters and a membership of NTS students and middle- and working-class Black women and men who advocated for higher wages for domestic workers. Their belief was that improving the working conditions of domestic workers would lead to better working conditions for all Black workers (Higginbotham 202). While the primary goal was to attain labor rights for domestic workers, the organization was open to Black women of all professions.

16 Although scholarship about Burroughs describes the NAWE as an unsuccessful organization because it ended in 1926, we argue that Burroughs was successful in creating and establishing an independent union in a country that still has not established federal labor protections for domestic workers<sup>15</sup>. Our analysis of the feminist activity through the NAWE's active years and beyond provide a new framework that allows for a detailed examination of what the organization accomplished, Burroughs's feminist approach to labor organizing, and the largely unknown women who helped establish such a historic initiative.

17 Burroughs composed a letter dated March 26, 1921, for the NAWE asking for 10,000 women from all professions to recruit 10,000 more, building on Carter's call from the Women Wage Earners citing for 5,000 women to recruit 5,000 more. Burroughs insisted on a living wage for domestic workers through occupational training and community organizing. She also sought to create entrepreneurial opportunities for domestic workers by creating an on-site factory for women to design their own uniforms and household appliances. The factory was a profit-sharing enterprise for NAWE members and officers. Burroughs' NAWE vision reflected the feminist ethos of equality across class lines. Two internal membership letters Burroughs titled, "My Dear Co-Worker" (an elaboration of "My Dear Friend") and "The Way to Make Money" (an internal union document on profit sharing) indicate that Burroughs sought to create a labor union of Black women workers to stand equally earning funds together to support themselves and the NAWE<sup>16</sup>. She addressed the first document "fellow co-worker" to imply collegiality and collaboration with NAWE members. The second document is not addressed at all, implying that all members of the NAWE were equal and engaged in fundraising collectively. Burroughs and Hammond detailed Burroughs's inclusive approach to women's organizing in the NAWE *In Vanguard of the Race*:

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<sup>15</sup> Scholars use rhetorical terms invoking the union's loss of life, brief life and overall collapse in 1926 due to the Depression and fire at the settlement house (Higginbotham 219; Graves xxv; Thomas 251; Easter 102).

<sup>16</sup> Nannie Helen Burroughs papers 1922, National Association of Wage Earners. Box 308, Washington, D.C.. Library of Congress.

Miss Burroughs is at present working to unite the women of her race for mutual service. She is organizing them as workers--including artists, teachers, business and professional women, domestics, and home women in one big group, without regard to class distinctions. She wants them to stand together as women with common ideals of work, of standards of living, of service, and of self-respect. She wants the most favored women of her race to stand beside the poorest and, in doing so, to give the latter a new respect for themselves and their work, new hope, and new ambition, that, through a better service, they may win a better reward (Burroughs and Hammond 61-62). Burroughs differed because she did not only wish to work with the elite women, subverting the Talented Tenth ideal; she wanted to work with all Black women under the guiding philosophy of justice for all.

18 The NAWE's constitution, steeped in the Black suffragist belief that women's domestic work is skilled labor and held significant social and economic value, included a strike clause when workers' expectations were not met, professional development training, employee placement in both temporary and permanent positions, fair housing and wages, and a grievance filing process.<sup>17</sup> Employers who wanted to hire NAWE members were required to sign a document adhering to the working standards outlined in the NAWE's constitution. While Burroughs believed that Black women-owned organizations were critical for changing their working and living conditions, she also had a clear understanding that true and lasting change was impossible without voting. Thus, the NAWE constitution also consisted of a commitment to community organizing for labor legislation to protect Black women from labor and sexual exploitation in their homes of employment (Burroughs 1922).

19 The NAWE's headquarters in Washington D.C. consisted of a practice house for weekly meetings and events to discuss labor issues. The headquarters also provided a space for Black women to document grievances against their employers and strategize ways to attain higher pay, benefits, and a room of their own to take breaks (Evening Star, 1924). With a governing board across seven states, the NAWE had members from Florida, Connecticut, Virginia, Massachusetts, Kentucky, New York and Pennsylvania.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Burroughs's contemporary and fellow suffragist Anna Julia Cooper, for example, argued that Black women's domestic labors strengthened the US economy and were critical to the survival of the Black community. See Cooper's "Colored Women as Wage Earners."

<sup>18</sup> Burroughs writes to DuBois a letter asking him to forward photographs of the headquarters of the NAWE to a woman who was part of women's suffrage organizing magazine, Mrs. Raymond Brown. ("Letter from National

20 As Burroughs was personally aware because of her own work experience prior to establishing the NTS, Black women moved in between professions and rarely stayed within one field for the entirety of their lives. A union for all Black women workers was necessary to create a bottom-up and member-driven organization that served the diverse needs of labor Black women in Jane Crow America (McClusky 418-23). Like any good organizer, publication and data management was a crucial component of Burroughs' platform. Interviewed by Fredrick J. Haskin and advocating for the NAWE in national membership call, Burroughs emphasized that nearly three million Black women served as domestics and personal servants and the job standards were lower than working-class (*Evening Star*). Burroughs referred to Hayne's data in all her membership publications and calls, citing that only great numbers of women from a variety of backgrounds and life histories would be able to achieve equal rights together. Therefore, quantitative data helped make her case for the importance of Black women having access to the ballot box.

21 She put her theory into action by creating a diverse labor organization. The organizers of the NAWE were active clubwomen in Washington, D.C., including domestic workers, service workers, homemakers and public-school employees. Each co-organizer brought their own community networks, expertise, and personal labor experiences to NAWE organizing. Mahala Hill was a domestic worker and organizer in the National Association of Wage Earners (NAWE). For nearly seventy years, Hill worked in the home of the Gloves, a wealthy socially progressive D.C. based banking family. She received a cash allowance of \$3,000, a pension, and a \$4,000 trust, and died in their family home (*Evening Star*). Hill was the type of woman who Burroughs organized for. She was active in the D.C. social scene and fundraised for the NTS (*Evening Star*). According to her obituary, she was an educated woman who taught the household children, read voraciously, and traveled to Europe as a companion to Mrs. Glover (*Evening Star*). She used her connections and status at the Glover household to recruit domestic worker members to the NAWE (Murphy 145). The respect and gratitude from the family is shown in their dedicated obituary to her memory and celebration of her life through a funeral service at her home church, Ninetieth Street Baptist. Similarly, Lucy E. Holland was another influential organizer who brought her own networks, skills, and personal knowledge of Black women's labor issues to the NAWE. She worked as a

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Association of Wage Earners to W.E.B. Du Bois"). This letter is one of the only examples of the full board of the NAWE.

waitress and joined the NAWE immediately after the call for membership, listing her own name as her recruiter<sup>19</sup> (Murphy 27). She organized for the NAWE within club women's organizations as well through the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA's Premiere Club for Business (Y.W.C.A. News). Holland similarly brought other members who lived near her home such as domestics and custodial wage-earners in working class jobs into the NAWE (Murphy 141). As Hill and Holland's history shows, the best organizers are people in the professions that they seek to transform for themselves and for future generations.

22 Lizzie Fouse, another NAWE organizer, was a successful community organizer in Kentucky and a former teacher who left the profession upon marriage.<sup>20</sup> Fouse had expertise in teaching domestic science courses, emphasizing preservation and preparation during WWI, and she was an effective political organizer. She recruited over one thousand signatures for a pledge to conserve food in 1918 in Kentucky from primarily Black signatories associated with her school (*The Kansas City Sun* 1918). Fouse was the registrar for the NAWE and later served as an officer of the National Association of Colored Women (*National Association Notes*). Working between both organizations, Fouse maintained the membership and official records from across the 23 chapters in the United States (*Connecticut Labor Press*). Generally, within labor unions themselves, there is usually one dedicated personnel who confirms lists and dues payments, therefore, her dedication to the organizing work is admirable, so much so that Fouse gave up her other work as President of the Kentucky chapter of the NAACP in 1920-1922 to work at the NAWE. During her time at the NAACP, she collected data specifically on the sexual assault of Black minor children.<sup>21</sup> As an educator and tireless advocate for Black women and young girl's rights, Fouse served as an unpaid full-time labor organizer for the NAWE.

23 Sadie Tignor Henson served as president of the NAWE's district union chapter in D.C. Prior to the NAWE, she organized with the Women Wage Workers Association (*Washington Post; Washington Bee*). As D.C. local president, Henson was responsible for recruitment and maintenance of the membership. In addition, she was a long-time member of the Freemasons Order of the Eastern Star and was buried with full honors (*Evening Star*). Henson worked as a truant officer in Washington D.C. and was familiar with the struggles young Black women underwent in

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<sup>19</sup> Nannie Helen Burroughs papers 1922, National Association of Wage Earners. Box 308, Washington, D.C.. Library of Congress.

<sup>20</sup> See the edited collection on all of the lesser-known activists of Kentucky (McDaniel 274-293).

<sup>21</sup> Papers of the NAACP, 1913-1930, Lexus Nexus. University Publications of America.

receiving fulfilling and long-term employment after their education. A longtime supporter of Black women's rights in education, employment and voting, Henson traveled often and lectured about her work at the Women Wager Earners Association meetings during its inception (Washington Bee). Henson and her husband both worked in solidarity with their shared goal of elevating the status of Black workers. Henson served in two other management positions as a Zion Baptist Sunday School and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Through her matrix of affiliated organizations, Henson was able to meet and recruit a diverse number of workers to the NAWE (Murphy 27).

24 Maggie L. Walker served as the Treasurer of the NAWE and was responsible for the funding and dues of the organization. According to Elsa Barkley Brown, the women that Walker recruited to the NAWE sought coalition building, "a women's organization that sought to pool the energies and resources of housewives, professionals, and managerial, domestic, and industrial workers to protect and expand the economic position of black women. The NAWE argued that it was vital that all black women be able to support themselves" (612). As the first Black woman to found a penny save bank and appoint as many women as possible working around her, Walker believed that *all* Black women deserved to have a fair wage and access their own funds and savings from the results of their own labor (Brown 617). Like Fouse, Walker left the teaching profession upon her marriage because it was not legal at the time for married women to teach, therefore, she shifted her attention into a full-time position of unpaid labor organizing on issues such as suffrage and fair pay (Brown 612). The only way for Black women to grow together would be through collective economic development. As Burroughs was building the NTS, Walker was one of the only Black women to support her both emotionally and financially, "When things looked most hopeless, Mrs. Maggie L. Walker, the woman banker of Richmond, gave her 500 on condition that she would not tell anyone who gave it to her" (Burroughs and Hammond 55). Walker embodied solidarity through her principals based on economic equality of Black women laborers. While never being able to draw a salary for themselves, both Fouse and Walker were the two housewives listed on the NAWE membership roll making the invisible organizing labor of Black women visible.

25 While presiding over the NAWE, Burroughs never lost sight of voting rights and its importance to bringing the NAWE's goals into fruition. Although Black women could legally vote after the ratification of the nineteenth amendment, local governments implemented racist policies

that blocked their access to the ballot box for the following forty-five years. In 1924, Burroughs co-founded the National League of Republican Colored Women (NLCRW), an organization that advocated for the right for Black women to vote. The NLCRW was also instrumental in collecting qualitative and quantitative data that measured the suppression of the Black women's vote. Burroughs created an NLCRW questionnaire to measure Black women's political engagement in the presidential election of 1924. As she explained, "The Race is doomed unless Negro women take an active part in local, state, and national politics . . . They must oppose parties and candidates opposed to equal citizenship. They must organize to fight discrimination and class legislation.<sup>22</sup> The questions included in the survey made clear that Burroughs believed that attaining labor rights for domestic workers was integral to collecting information to "fight discrimination and class legislation" and "help our women become a factor in the body politic" ("Colored Women in Politics"). As someone who was intentional about everything that she did and said, Burroughs' decision to type the questionnaire on NAWE letterhead signals that she believed domestic worker organizing was integral to voting rights, and voting rights was thereby critical to the larger goals of the NAWE.

26     Similarly, Burroughs sought to extend her programming not only nationally, but internationally. She advertised in many newspapers, including in Dallas, Texas, where she announced the forming of the NAWE with the reasoning to create locals and gain membership all across the United States ("Wage Earners Association Meets"). She composed a personal letter to Margaret Murray Washington in the papers of Mary Church Terrell (fellow clubwoman) on NAWE stationary titled, "A Labor Organization with a Constructive Program" indicating Burroughs sought to send students abroad for the "Darker Races Group." Dated 1925 it shows that the NAWE was firstly an organization about labor rights for black women at work (even missionaries) and potentially sought to move their program transnationally when it was successful in America. Burroughs sought to align all black women together in a single united vision of sisterhood and togetherness.

27     Burroughs and her co-organizers tried to expand the political power and reach of the NAWE by attempting to work with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Speaking to the *Connecticut Labor Press* twice, Burroughs announced that she was seeking a charter with the AFL

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<sup>22</sup> "Colored Women in Politics." Nannie Helen Burroughs Papers. Questionnaire 1922. National Association of Wage Earners. Box 308, Washington, D.C.. Library of Congress.

in March and revealed in October that the AFL rejected the NAWE's petition to become an affiliated charter (Connecticut Labor Press). Burroughs and her co-organizers continued organizing and pushing their membership forward. As Burroughs explained, "This is an organization for every worker, skilled and unskilled. This is an organization for every woman, high or low, servant or secretary, college president or field hand" (Connecticut Labor Press 1924). Without support from white labor organizations and the federal government, NAWE organizers recruited a total of five to ten thousand women (*Connecticut Labor Press*)<sup>23</sup>.

28 While the NAWE's activities declined in 1926, Burroughs' labor organizing, and political activism continued within other commensurate organizations. In 1934, she co-founded the Cooperative Industries outside of Washington D.C. based on the ethic and principal of shared labor in providing educational, medical, and grocery services for the D.C. community. Many of the shareholders in the cooperative were Black women who were unemployed domestic workers and desired to labor outside of household employment. The cooperative provided services for Black and white D.C. communities as seamstresses, laundresses, bakers, cooks, nurses and clerks staffing a grocery store with plans for a credit union, shoe repair shop and a broom factory (Weinberg). One of the primary goals of the cooperative was for Black women to control their own labor production, create their own means of income, and invest back into their communities in a society that had denied domestic workers the right to file for unemployment benefits and a federal government that refused to invest in Black communities. Black women and other women of color would not gain equal access to the ballot box until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Black women's labor organizing, however, helped establish a strong foundation from which Civil Rights leaders could make the argument for such an act.

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<sup>23</sup> Scholars Deborah Gisele Thomas found 1,787 membership cards in 1998 whereas Mary Elizabeth Murphy found 1,820 membership cards in 2012 of the Washington D.C. chapter at the Library of Congress (283; 156). The NAWE was comprised of twenty-three chapters. The membership number cited in the article "Union for Negro Women Workers Gaining Ground" might include the number of members in the other chapters. In addition, due to a flood at the Library of Congress and a fire at the practice house in 1926, some of the NAWE membership records could have become lost or damaged. These multiple factors help explain the difference in membership reporting between the article and current archival evidence.

### **Conclusion: “Society Has Always Deemed to Look Down on Those with Caps and Aprons”**

(Burroughs, ““The Social Security Act looks down on us who toil with our Hands’ says Nannie Burroughs.””)

29 The absence of Burroughs’s historic undertakings in the first wave era repeats the same white suffragist practice of undervaluing Black women’s domestic labors and political activism: domestic workers are still excluded from federal unionization in the United States, their labors still marginalized, and their rights curtailed. In 1937, the Social Security Administration Act was passed to aid the unemployed, excluding domestic workers from receiving benefits. Burroughs fumed to *The Pittsburgh Courier* that this exclusion displayed how domestic workers and their political power was again written out of the story. By considering household work invisible, Burroughs argued that equality can never be gained until domestic workers have full legal rights within America tying their labor to the ballot box (*The Pittsburgh Courier* 1937). Organizations such as The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) based in Washington, D.C., operate under the same principles that Burroughs operated the NAWE, asserting that domestic labor is of significant value and domestic workers should be granted the same benefits as other workers.

30 While Nannie Helen Burroughs and her colleagues did not author books espousing a formal theory about race, labor, and voting, their work in building solidarity with all Black women was based on early feminist organizing principles. Through the NAWE and NTS, Burroughs created an intersectional suffragist agenda that simultaneously challenged racial, class, and gender inequalities by centering domestic workers in a justice movement for all women and all Black workers. Burroughs was a clubwoman who did not unequivocally conform to respectability politics, or the idea that only elite and middle-class Black women could lead the Black race into political, social, and economic advancement. She believed in cross-class organizing choosing to collaborate with members of national club organizations and local organizers to challenge systemic barriers that prevented Black women from voting. Labor organizers such as Carter, Fouse, Henson, Hill, Holland and Walker are forgotten among the history books, but their vision moved a generation of Black women workers. It is up to us to construct a comprehensive narrative that recognizes how Black women labor organizers helped create a voting rights movement for *all* women.

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