

“America Once Led the Push for Parental Rights,” *Washington Post*, February 8, 2019.

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Is 2019 the year Americans will join the rest of the world in recognizing the social rights of working parents?

The United States is currently the *only* wealthy country in the world without any national-level guarantee of paid maternity leave after the birth of a child. More than 50 nations offer six months or more of paid leave. The majority of developed countries extend paid leave to fathers as well.

But in Tuesday's State of the Union address, Donald Trump again raised the issue of paid parental leave, despite little movement on the issue to date. This put him more in line with three incoming Democratic governors — Gavin Newsom of California, Jared Polis of Colorado and Ned Lamont of Connecticut — who all issued calls for paid parental leave in their inaugural addresses. With increased public pressure, the list is likely to grow. But the big question remains: what kind of policies will be enacted?

Past struggles for paid parental leave offer guidance. While the United States today lags behind other nations, 100 years it was a leader in expanding the rights of working parents. At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, American labor women helped lead the global movement for the rights of mothers to work in dignity and security. Women knew then—as they know today—that parental leave policies are only meaningful if affordable and available to all. It is time to recover their history and finish the work our foremothers began.

A century ago few women anywhere held the right to vote. Fewer still sat in parliaments, signed treaties or decided the fate of armies and empires. But World War I cast women's relationship to the state in a new light. From 1914 to 1918, warring nations relied on women to build munitions and staff battlefield hospitals. Women's service helped secure an Allied victory, and at war's end, with suffrage movements gathering force, international feminist leaders demanded a seat for women at the negotiating table.

Their pleas went unanswered. The Versailles Treaty of 1919, as one American feminist put it, was a “man-made peace.”

But if the negotiations remained a familiarly male affair, the Versailles Treaty also declared universal peace “can be established only if it is based upon social justice” and established the International Labor Organization (ILO), charged with formulating workplace standards around the world. Labor feminists seized the initiative.

In response to the negotiations in Paris, women in America, England, France and elsewhere began to formulate “working women’s charters” enumerating the rights of women as wage earners and mothers. They dreamed big, demanding economic as well as political rights. For justice to reign in a new world order, they insisted, the working poor — women, first and foremost — needed to be able to balance wage labor and family life.

At the Labor Commission of the Peace Conference, French labor feminists led the charge, insisting on equal living wages for men and women, women’s representation in the League of Nations and ILO and, most of all, guarantees for working mothers. They called for an international labor standard of 12-week paid maternity benefit, adequate health services for mothers and children, a mother’s “right to a half-time schedule” and nursing breaks twice a day.

American labor women agreed.

In 1919, the National Women’s Trade Union League, the largest U.S. organization of women workers of its day, formulated a comprehensive list of demands and sent two prominent American labor feminists, Rose Schneiderman and Mary Anderson, to deliver them to the peacemakers in Paris. American women called for “political, economic, and social rights” for women, living wages sufficient for “a woman with dependents, just as for a man with dependents,” shorter work hours for both sexes and abolition of child labor.

New laws that would secure the health and wellbeing of mothers were a priority for American women, just as for their French sisters.. The maternal and infant mortality rate in America was among the highest in any industrial country. Women bore children in life-threatening situations, with little assurance of adequate care or economic support. Mothers needed “social wages,” or cash support from the state, as well as nationwide health services and workplace protections.

The men in Paris listened but did not act. And when the ILO convened its first Conference in Washington, D.C. in October 1919, not a single woman was appointed to serve as a voting delegate.

American labor feminists were undeterred. Instead, they issued a call for working women around the world to come to Washington. Women must “assume responsibilities in the affairs of the world,” the call proclaimed, and through “joint action” better the “standard of life” for all. Over 200 women from Europe, North and South America and Asia responded. They caucused together at the First

International Congress of Working Women and then moved down the street to press their demands at the ILO.

Remarkably, they succeeded in substantially improving the ILO's [Maternity Protection Convention of 1919](#), the world's first articulation of fair and just conditions for working mothers. Through tenacious lobbying, working women forced male policymakers toward their view of what working mothers required — as a right, not a luxury.

The 1919 international maternity statute called for 12-weeks paid maternity leave, covering the period before and after childbirth, job guarantees upon return, mandatory nursing breaks and free medical care by a doctor or midwife. This standard has since been expanded and adopted around the world, except in the United States.

The gap between America and the rest of the world widened slowly. In 1921, America passed the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Protection Act, pioneering social welfare legislation that provided government support for health services to mothers and newborns. Under pressure from feminists, Roosevelt's New Deal also included social insurance programs for poor mothers as well as the elderly and the unemployed.

After 1945, American social policy toward mothers began to lag noticeably behind the rest of the industrialized world. As European and Asian countries began to rebound from the destruction of World War II, they took care to rebuild both their economies and their populations through measures like paid maternity leave, national healthcare, subsidized day care and family allowances.

The United States, which avoided the economic devastation of the world wars and maintained relatively high birthrates throughout the 20th century, did not experience these same pressures. The resurgence of anti-state conservatism, coupled with American policymakers' strong individualist ethos and racial biases, also made state-funded maternity leave and social services for America's poor a more difficult sell.

Without any over-arching national policy, paid maternity leave in the United States developed as a privilege rather than a social right. Today, professional and managerial women at Fortune 500 companies enjoy fairly generous maternity benefits. But blue-collar and service workers — the vast majority of Americans — are largely left to their own devices.

Some say America is just different. We have always been skeptical of government solutions and prefer to tough it out. This is a myth. American working women have a century-long tradition of championing paid parental leave, adequate health care and the rights of workers, mothers and children. It is well past time to honor their legacy.

Today, nations around the world recognize male and female caregivers for their contributions to the economy and society and make paid parental leave a state-guaranteed right for all. Perhaps 2019 will be the year when America finally does the same.