DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

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DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 12, Issue 2
https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.91659
Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281
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‘At Bulova, 75% of the workers are women’: Workers’ Strike and Neuchâtel’s Women’s Liberation Movement Put to the Test, 1976

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Abstract
This article examines the involvement of Neuchâtel’s Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) in the 1976 Bulova watch factory strike as a formative moment in the emergence of a ‘class struggle tendency’ within Swiss feminism. Drawing on feminist publications such as *La Fronde*, it explores how activists sought to build solidarity with women workers amid industrial restructuring and the unions’ insufficient responsiveness to women’s concerns. While the WLM’s interventions – such as organising a crèche – were largely unreciprocated, the experience prompted critical reflection on cross-class feminist strategies. The article situates this case within wider national and transnational debates on socialist feminism and highlights the challenges of aligning feminist and labour struggles in Switzerland’s context of ‘labour peace.’

Keywords
Second wave, Feminism, Strike, Feminist press, Unions, Switzerland, Cross-class solidarity, Watchmaking industry

Introduction

In January 1976, the local group of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) supported a strike of women workers at Bulova Watch & Co factory in Neuchâtel.[1] To provide practical support, the feminist activists had set up a childcare service in the occupied premises.[2] However, the workers needed no more support with childcare during the strike than on normal working days. They had no use for the nursery. The feminist activists analysed what they saw as a 'failure', regretting their inability to create a feminist front during the occupation. 'Why didn't we take other initiatives to develop the solidarity we wanted to show the women at Bulova?',[3] they asked themselves in retrospect in the feminist journal *La Fronde* (1976).

This article examines the engagement of WLM activists in expressions of solidarity with women workers employed in the watchmaking industry in French-speaking Switzerland. Drawing on accounts published in *La Fronde* and the subsequent debates within both national and transnational feminist networks, this study highlights the early emergence of a socialist strand – referred to as the '*tendance lutte des classes*' (class struggle tendency) – within the WLM in Neuchâtel. The local activists sought to forge links between feminist and labour struggles by uniting women across class boundaries. The WLM developed in the context of rising industrial conflict triggered by the global economic crisis following the 1973 oil price shock. Even in Switzerland, where the policy of 'labour peace' formally excluded strike action through negotiation, workers responded to deteriorating labour market conditions through wildcat occupations.[4] In 1976, a total of nineteen strikes was recorded, compared to six in 1975 and nine in 1977 (Deshusses, 2014 : pp. 30-31). In line with factory occupations in the United Kingdom and France, which had drawn the interest of local feminists, the Bulova strike marked the first such mobilization in Switzerland to see broad participation by female industrial workers (Moss, 2019; Bracke, 2019 : pp. 484-99; Stevenson, 2016; Frisone, 2024, pp. 1-23; Gallot, 2014, pp. 87-99). The experience of WLM activists at Bulova was subsequently debated and reflected upon in feminist publications both regionally and internationally.

Struggles linking the feminist movement with the workers' movement have been less explored in Switzerland compared to other campaigns within the WLM, such as those for reproductive rights (Schulz et al., 2014; Schmid, 2020). Only Laurence Marti wrote a highly detailed article that addresses the issues raised by this strike, through careful examination of the negotiation protocols. However, Marti remains vague regarding the significant solidarity movement sparked by the walkout, which peaked with a demonstration attended by 3000 people, an unprecedented event in Neuchâtel (Marti, 2008). Elsewhere, the 'forgotten history' of the *tendance lutte des classes* is increasingly being revisited (Trat, 2007, Goy, 2025). The influence of industrial disputes on the development of feminist practices has been demonstrated in several countries, notably in France and the United Kingdom (Gallot, Meuret-Campfort 2015, Stevenson 2016). Generating a wealth of communication that the daily life of the factory did not provoke, information about strikes also circulated within activist networks (Deshusses, 2014). The 1973 Lip strike in Besançon (100 km from Neuchâtel) served particularly as a key example for activists in the region. It had sparked a debate about the role of women in industrial disputes, which were also transcribed and widely

[1] I thank all the people who have given me feedback on various stages of this paper, especially Frederic Deshusses, Lucy Delap and the editorial team Eloïse Forestier and Anna Nordenstam. Franky Demoulin did the English adaptation.

[2] Headquartered in New York, Bulova Watch & Co had two production sites in Switzerland in Neuchâtel and Bienne.

[3] 'Pourquoi n'avons-nous pas su prendre d'autres initiatives pour développer cette solidarité que nous voulions manifester aux femmes de Bulova ?'. 'À Bulova, 75% des ouvriers sont des ouvrières', 1976. Translated by the author.

[4] Labour peace (*paix du travail*) refers to a 1937 Swiss agreement to resolve labour disputes through negotiation, avoiding strikes and lockouts (Degen, 2010).

disseminated in the 1975 booklet *Lip au féminin* (Women at Lip).[5] The Lip occupation had also sparked a significant solidarity movement from the local far-left. Indeed, the involvement of extra-parliamentary leftist groups in industrial disputes was common during this period. Driven by revolutionary ambitions, these groups sought to support, amplify, and politicize labour struggles; even going so far as to seek to compete with the trade unions on their own ground. The trade unions were then criticized for their disconnection from the working class. They were also criticized by feminists for the low unionization rate among women.[6]

This article takes as its starting point the solidarity expressed by WLM members towards the women workers at Bulova in order to explore their political engagement and their relationship to the local industrial workforce and labour movement. To understand the broader context of the factory occupation in Neuchâtel, the first section traces the emergence of a class-struggle tendency within the local WLM. The second section examines the group's intervention during the Bulova strike, while the third reflects on the debates and lessons that followed. The article argues that this event represented a pivotal moment in the ideological and strategic development of a socialist strand within the WLM in French-speaking Switzerland. The analysis draws primarily on printed materials from the feminist movement, particularly *La Fronde*. Published between February 1976 and March 1978 and collectively produced by various WLM groups from French-speaking Switzerland, *La Fronde* provides a valuable window into the internal discussions of a heterogeneous movement.

Towards a 'class struggle tendency' within the WLM

In 1970s Switzerland, the *tendance lutte des classes* within the WLM emerged amidst a diverse activist landscape, calling for a radical transformation of society and a critique of the gendered division of labour (both at work and at home). Indeed, WLM groups did not all agree on the political strategies to end such a division. For socialist feminists, the struggle against women's dual exploitation had to be waged in alliance with traditional leftist organizations, such as trade unions and left-wing parties. In contrast, groups identifying as radical feminists advocated a 'women-only' approach, viewing any collaboration with mixed-gender social movements as inappropriate – if not actively harmful to feminist aims.[7] In Neuchâtel, circa 1975, a so-called 'action group' (*groupe action*) emerged, distinct from other local WLM members due to its focus on direct action. With a contemptuous stance toward consciousness-raising groups, deemed too 'intellectual', the WLM 'action group' aimed to 'prepare agitational campaigns on a range of issues, including abortion, women in the workplace, and immigration'.[8] Members of this group came from diverse backgrounds, working part-time in services or care, with three out of twelve being university graduates.[9] They were committed to combine anti-capitalist and feminist ideas of liberation and struggle. Some members were also active in leftist groups, such as the Ligue Marxiste Révolutionnaire (LMR, Marxist Revolutionary League), the Swiss branch of the Fourth International (Challand, 2000 ; Heinen, 2018 ; Bantigny & Gallot, 2020). These activists, with a Trotskyist background, advocated for revolutionary societal change and the socialization of public

[5] 'Lip au féminin. Rien ne se fait bien sans passion', Collectif Femmes, 1975. Private Archive.

[6] In the early 1970s, women made up less than 10% of the members of the Swiss trade union federation, Union syndicale suisse (USS) (Gül, 2004).

[7] This opposition also reflected deeper theoretical divergences concerning the foundations of women's oppression. While there was consensus that patriarchal oppression would not be resolved simply through the advent of socialism, class-struggle-oriented feminists differed from radical and materialist feminists – who prioritized the fight against patriarchy – by insisting on the need to confront both patriarchy and capitalism simultaneously. For them, it was equally essential to campaign for improved working conditions for both women and men. See "Bulletin féministe", 1979. Private Archive.

[8] 'Notes pour une discussion sur le travail femme et les MLF', Hélène [pseudonym], 1974. Fonds Femmes en Lutte, Private Archive.

[9] *Ibid*.

services, including childcare, canteens, and laundries. This collective approach to domestic labour aimed to free women's time, not only for employment but also for political and social engagement.[10] In contrast to *operaismo*-inspired feminists, who campaigned for wages for housework (Beck, 2023), the Neuchâtel group sought to build a broad-based women's movement across class lines, with the ultimate goal of dismantling structures of domination. Their approach closely resembled the French class-struggle feminist movement, which operated within working-class neighbourhoods and industrial settings (Trat, 2011). Furthermore, female workers in the watchmaking industry were considered by the WLM 'action group' to be at the forefront of the struggle, as they experienced both capitalist and patriarchal exploitation. However, before the Bulova strike, the Neuchâtel WLM had not yet had the opportunity to establish significant contact with these women workers.

The proximity to the watchmaking industry in Neuchâtel provided fertile ground for the local WLM to develop an analysis of the gendered division of labour. Feminists were aware of the hierarchical organization of the workforce in the industry. In the feminist journal *La Fronde*, activists denounced the tasks assigned to female workers – generally low-skilled and thus underpaid – based largely on supposedly 'natural' feminine qualities such as precision and meticulousness.[11] During the global economic crisis of 1975–1976, the watchmaking industry was severely affected, and women were among the first to suffer the consequences of restructuring. Many saw their wages reduced through the introduction of piecework or were placed on short-time working, while layoffs increased across the sector.[12] Several WLM groups in the region expressed their outrage in *La Fronde*. In the feminist journal, the contributors criticized the status of women as a reserve army labour, hired or dismissed depending on economic fluctuations.[13] Furthermore, the Neuchâtel WLM also denounced the closure of workplace crèches in the region in several leaflets, interpreting this closure as a means of pushing mothers out of the labour force.[14]

The analyses circulating by feminists in their publications added a gendered dimension to the far-left's critiques of the role played by traditional labour movement organizations during the crisis. In this context, these left-wing factions with revolutionary aims, such as the Trotskyist group LMR mentioned above, attempted to support, amplify, broaden, or even direct social conflicts. Moreover, they heavily criticized the sectoral union, the *Fédération suisse des travailleurs de la métallurgie et de l'horlogerie* (FTMH), for being conciliatory towards employers and out of touch with the working-class base (Koller 2015). But none of those actors prioritized women's work like the WLM did (Rihm, 2018). Contrary to this, as activists denounced, representatives of the FTMH union considered it less problematic to reduce the income of married women, as they believed that such income was less essential for the family (Togni, 2015). Furthermore, the Federal Councillor Ernst Brugger made a declaration calling for 'solidarity' between women and men, asserting that 'in times of recession, men's jobs are the priority'.[15] This declaration provoked outraged reactions in *La Fronde*.[16]

The emergence of a *tendance lutte des classes* current within the Swiss WLM was notably driven by the economic crisis and its impact on women workers. The gendered division of labour was amplified during this period, as analysed and reported by feminists in *La Fronde*. Despite the diversity within the feminist movement, the first cover of the journal,

[10] 'Tract. Avortement – Contraception', 1974 Private Archive.
[11] 'Femmes aux cuisines ! Femmes à l'usine !'", *La Fronde,* 1976, p. 5.
[12] For a detailed take on the effects of the crisis on female waged labour in Switzerland at the time, see Togni, 2015 : p. 253.
[13] 'Femmes aux cuisines ! Femmes à l'usine !'", *op. cit.*
[14] 'Année de la femme. Année des femmes licenciées. L'horlogerie comme exemple', 1975. Private Archive.
[15] Dernières embauchées, premières licenciées", 1975. Private Archive. About the history of unemployment in Switzerland, see Togni 2015 : pp. 251-316.
[16] 'Travaillons moins… travaillons tous !', *La Fronde,* 1976, p. 3.

titled '*Avortements, Licenciements'* (Abortion, Layoffs), demonstrated that the issue gained recognition within feminist circles beyond regional boundaries.[17] The Neuchâtel WLM 'action group' was particularly engaged with these concerns within the local watchmaking industry and identified a lack of worker representation within both unions and the left. It was in this context that, when the Bulova strike erupted, feminist activists became involved, defending the women workers and, through them, promoting a broader cross-class feminist agenda.

A woman's strike at Bulova?

When workers at Bulova launched a wildcat strike in January 1976 to oppose the closure of the Neuchâtel site and the transfer of 190 employees – three quarters of whom were women – to nearby Bienne, it took many by surprise. Women workers featured prominently in the media, responding defiantly to the transfer ('We are not cattle'[18]) and appearing knitting inside the occupied factory ('It feels strange – we've never just stood around here before!'[19]). Media coverage highlighted the specific challenges facing the women: the move would increase their costs and time spent on transport, childcare, and meals. Meanwhile, immigrant workers risked losing their work permits if they changed cantons. Attention also turned to the factory's stock of watches, drawing comparisons with the 1973 Lip occupation in Besançon, just across the French border. At Lip, workers had taken over production under the slogan: 'It's possible: we make it, we sell it, we pay ourselves'.[20] That action had sparked a transnational solidarity movement, including in Switzerland, where Lip's main investors were based in Neuchâtel (Brahmi, 2025). For local leftist groups advocating revolutionary and transformative alternatives to the existing system, the idea of a similar movement in Switzerland was highly appealing.

One of the key novelties of the strike was the broad wave of solidarity it sparked within civil society. The most striking moment came when a demonstration brought together supporters from across Switzerland – including WLM activists from Bienne, Zürich, Bern, Lausanne, and Geneva – under the banner 'À Bulova, 75% des ouvriers sont des ouvrières' (At Bulova, 75% of the workers are women).[21] However, Marti's analysis of the negotiation minutes reveals that the strikers never considered self-management (Marti 2008 : p. 41). The conflict was quickly channelled into traditional structures, led by the FTMH union, which prioritized job preservation over demands for structural change or challenges to established hierarchies. Women and immigrant workers were largely absent from the negotiations and gradually faded from media coverage. Ultimately, the union secured support measures tied to a one-year delay in the factory's transfer. In union discourse, this outcome was presented as exemplary. Workers reappeared in the press smiling, wearing 'Bulova must live!' badges.[22] But for left-wing movements, the resolution was disappointing. As Marti has shown, it reflected the suppression of potentially dissenting voices by established organizations. Throughout the conflict, factory hierarchies remained intact, and workers resisted politicizing the occupation (Marti 2008 : p. 50).

While the factory doors were generally closed to political activists, the WLM was nonetheless able to propose an action inside the occupied premises: the establishment of a daycare. Likely viewed as harmless, the proposal was accepted with caution and supervision. According to WLM reports in *La Fronde*, while three women workers welcomed the idea, one of the male strike leaders insisted on attending the discussion 'so that everything went smoothly'.[23] The WLM also noted the lack of women's participation in the negotiation

[17] 'Femmes aux cuisines ! Femmes à l'usine !', *op. cit.*
[18] 'On n'est pas du bétail', Translated by the author. *La Lutte Syndicale,*1976.
[19] 'Ça fait bizarre – on ne s'est jamais croisé les bras ici !', *Ibid.*
[20] 'C'est possible : on fabrique, on vend, on se paie !'. About LIP, see Reid, 2018.
[21] *La Fronde, n°1*, 1976.
[22] 'Bulova doit vivre', 1976. Translated by the author.
[23] 'Pour que tout se passe dans l'ordre', 1976. Translated by the author.

process and viewed the daycare as a way to enable their political involvement. This idea may have been inspired by Lip, where women had later regretted the lack of childcare during the occupation.[24] The feminist group had also long advocated for better childcare infrastructure in Neuchâtel.[25] Finally, they hoped to draw attention to the double burden faced by working women. Yet to their disappointment, the childcare remained empty throughout the occupation. The WLM activists quickly dispersed, redirecting their efforts to support funds.[26] The childcare proposal went largely unnoticed. Apart from the report in *La Fronde,* it was only mentioned briefly in a press interview by a worker without further comment.[27]

Although direct sources on the perspectives of Bulova's female workers are limited, several indications suggest they took a different approach. Many had already childcare arrangements in place that enabled them to work year-round, and thus did not require the WLM's intervention. Like the feminist activists, they recognized the childcare shortage in Neuchâtel but relied on informal networks and mutual support, as recent research by Stéphanie Lachat and Francesca Falk has shown (Falk, 2019; Lachat, 2014). For immigrant workers, the situation was particularly fraught: as Magali Michelet notes, they occupied an 'impossible position' – dependent on employment for residency while being socially criticized as working mothers (Michelet, 2025 : p. 145 - 196). The unused daycare at Bulova might therefore be read as a form of silent resistance or resignation by women who had little expectation that their needs would be met (Ferrari, 2020, pp. 123-42). It may also reflect communication failures, as some immigrant workers relied on colleagues for translation and updates.[28] Other strike accounts reported that communication within the occupied factory was severely limited, with brief and poorly prepared workers' assemblies. For more politicized workers, this suggested union co-optation of the movement (Goy, 2025). As in other industrial disputes, Bulova illustrates how women workers' political engagement was shaped more by class and nationality than by gender (Stevenson, 2016). The WLM's minimal engagement with immigrant groups such as the Colonie Libere Italiane or the Movimiento Democrático de Mujeres,[29] and its tendency to treat 'immigrant women' as a homogeneous, oppressed category, further underscores the disconnection between feminist activists and the diverse realities and political priorities of immigrant women workers.[30]

The Bulova strike illustrated the challenges of building effective solidarity across gender, class, but also nationality. Unlike at Lip, the majority of Bulova's workers were foreign women, for whom issues related to maintaining residence permits through employment compounded existing class-based struggles. While the WLM's intervention – particularly the daycare initiative – was well-intentioned, it was ultimately unused, revealing a disconnection between feminist activists and the realities of working and immigrant women. For WLM activists, the episode also exposed how little attention the traditional workers' movement paid to women's needs and voices, particularly in the context of industrial disputes. The experience underscored both the limitations of the local feminist strategies that overlooked class and migration dynamics, and the structural barriers faced by women within male-dominated union frameworks. It revealed the urgent need for more inclusive and grounded forms of activism attentive to intersecting forms of oppression.

[24] *Lip au féminin*, *op. cit.*
[25] No official list of institutions or statistics on early childhood care places exists for the period. The Neuchâtel WLM counted six such facilities in the early 1970s, three of which were workplace crèches. One of them closed in 1976. "Liste de crèches existantes", 1975. Private Archive.
[26] *La Fronde, n°1*, 1976.
[27] *Construire*, 1976.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] It is not known if workers at Bulova were part of those organizations (Baumann, 2014).
[30] 'Tract. Avortement – Contraception', *op. cit.*

Forging Class-Conscious Feminism: Lessons from the Bulova Strike

Following the occupation of Bulova, the Neuchâtel WLM expressed its disappointment in *La Fronde*. The report's primary focus was the group's own organizational capacity as a feminist collective. The authors voiced frustration at the empty daycare and reflected on their inability to sustain a strong feminist presence during the occupation: 'Why did our group break up so disconcertingly quickly after our first failure?'.[31] Strikingly, the article barely addresses the question of women workers' representation in the strike and remains silent on both the negotiation outcomes and the end of the occupation. Moreover, rather than questioning the relevance of their own intervention, the authors implicitly place the burden of their disappointment on the factory workers themselves:

> The workers certainly did not ask themselves why it is always them who, in addition to working in the factory, are still responsible for the children, domestic tasks, and, above all, what impact this has on their autonomy, their integration into social life, and, in this case, on their availability for the struggle.[32]

This statement is best understood in light of the WLM's emphasis on solidarity grounded in shared gendered oppression (hooks, 1986). It reveals how some activists saw themselves as a 'knowing' avant-garde, seeking to draw women workers into their own frameworks for challenging the gendered division of labour. This top-down approach, also present in other leftist groups like the LMR, had been criticized for overlooking the agency of workers (Gallot 2014). While the excerpt from *La Fronde* alone does not warrant generalization, it suggests a degree of idealization of working-class struggle. At Bulova, this ideal clashed with practical constraints – not only union strategies prioritizing job preservation but also structural barriers, such as limited communication within the factory, language obstacles, and the legal precarity faced by many immigrant women. These factors severely limited mutual understanding and further exposed the limits of solidarity grounded solely in shared gendered oppression. The situation echoes Fanny Gallot's observations in France, where class-struggle feminists often failed to recognize the workers' capacity to articulate their own demands – especially concerning the politicization of childcare and gendered labour divisions (Gallot, 2015 : pp. 169-86). Notably, the local WLM made no comment on the quality of the proposed childcare, nor demonstrated sustained engagement with Bulova workers beyond the strike.[33] However, the authors showed self-criticism at the report's conclusion, admitting they could have consulted the workers directly to better understand their practical needs. This reflection found expression in *La Fronde* through other regional groups, such as the *Femmes en Lutte* of Bienne,[34] who published several interviews with female workers and unemployed women during the crisis.[35]

The debate continued during preparations for an international meeting of feminists with a 'class struggle tendency', organized in Paris in May 1977. Convened by the French *tendance lutte des classes* in 1975, the meeting aimed to compare international contexts and

[31] 'Mais pourquoi notre groupe a-t-il éclaté avec une rapidité aussi déconcertante dès notre premier échec ?', 1976. Translated by the author.

[32] 'Les ouvrières ne se sont certainement pas demandé pourquoi ce sont elles qui en plus du travail à l'usine s'occupent toujours des mômes, des tâches domestiques et surtout quelles répercussions cela a sur leur autonomie, sur leur intégration dans la vie sociale et, dans le cas présent, sur leur disponibilité dans la lutte'. 1976. Translated by the author.

[33] 'Travailleuses dans l'horlogerie', *La Fronde,* 1976, pp. 6-7.

[34] Femmes en Lutte, a group with links to Maoist circles, was active in both Bienne and Lausanne. In the latter, the group split from the WLM over ideological differences, particularly due to its desire to continue the struggle by integrating class-based issues (Voirol, 2017).

[35] 'Travailleuses dans l'horlogerie', *op. cit.*; 'Chômeuse !', *La Fronde,* 1976, pp. 8-9; 'La Suisse accepte les femmes immigrées comme force de travail… mais elle les rejette comme mères !', *La Fronde,* 1976, pp. 8-10.

foreground the relationship between feminism and the labour movement, as well as explore the potential for a broad, cross-class women's movement.[36] The Neuchâtel action group was actively involved, contributing to a detailed *Document de préparation* (Preparatory document) analysing the gendered division of labour and the crisis impact on women's work in Switzerland. Comparing their experiences with their French, English, and Italian comrades – where feminist and labour movements were more closely allied – the Swiss delegation lamented the difficulties in engaging both movements on women's work.[37] Their report denounced the 'failure of the workers' movement to take charge of women's struggles has led women's groups to withdraw into themselves and to theorize in terms of giving priority to the struggle between the sexes'.[38] The intricate position of the 'class struggle tendency' was thus summarized: in-between the labour movement and the feminist movement.

The *Document de préparation* also highlighted further experiences reported by Swiss feminist groups during other industrial disputes after Bulova. In the months following Bulova, WLM activists showed solidarity with strikes at Matisa (April 1976) and Dubied (August 1976), where women's groups formed, uniting female workers and striking workers' wives. However, the WLM took a more observational role, noting some women workers expressed hostility towards the so-called 'WLM crazies'.[39] This hostility can be interpreted as another symptom of miscommunication, or perhaps further evidence of the WLM's difficulty in overcoming class differences with the workers – echoing what Gallot has shown about the reluctance of many working-class women to identify with feminism, despite shared concerns (Gallot, 2015). The activists also observed that women workers appeared to relate differently to the gendered division of labour, criticizing job insecurity and emphasizing women's isolation at home. To their surprise, the WLM found that many women did not draw the same conclusions from their experience of the double burden of paid and domestic work; rather, their identities were often shaped by class or nationality as well as maternal roles. They wrote: '[Participants] talk more about their work as women [and] consider their work to be less important than their duties as housewives, mothers and spouses'.[40]

Perhaps the difficulties in establishing sustained and direct contact discouraged the WLM from pursuing this path, favouring instead engagement with labour movement organizations – an approach also recommended during the Paris weekend meeting. In the months that followed, members of the Neuchâtel WLM 'action group' participated in initiatives such as the 1977 maternity protection campaign, launched jointly with trade unions and left-wing parties for the first time.[41] Though regarded as a success by socialist feminists, the campaign reignited criticism from radical feminists. A growing rift thus emerged between different movements within the WLM. For socialist feminists, this resistance signalled the danger of being isolated in a marginal struggle, which was precisely the risk they had denounced in Paris. Conversely, radical feminists argued that aligning too closely with male-dominated organizations could only reinforce existing hierarchies.[42] Without attempting to

[36] 'Internationaler Frauenkongress Pingsten 1977', Autorinnengruppe BRD, autopublished, 1977. Private Archive.
[37] 'Document du groupe suisse de préparation à la rencontre internationale des femmes à Paris', 1977. Private Archive.
[38] 'L'absence de prise en charge de la lutte des femmes par le mouvement ouvrier entraîne les groupes de femmes à un repli sur eux-mêmes et à des théorisations accordant la priorité à la lutte des sexes.' 'Document du groupe suisse de préparation à la rencontre internationale des femmes à Paris', 1977. Translated by the author.
[39] *Ibid*., p. 9.
[40] 'Les travailleuses considèrent que leur travail est moins important que leurs fonctions de ménagères, mères et épouses. Leur travail ne les intéresse guère. Lors des enquêtes, elles parlent de leur travail de femmes.' 1976. Translated by the author.
[41] '*La maternité : une affaire de femmes ? À propos de l'initiative 'pour une protection efficace de la maternité'* MLF (Publication collective), 1978. Private Archive.
[42] 'Les quatre principaux courants du mouvement des femmes en Suisse*',* Streckeisen, 1977. Private Archive.

caricature either side, we may simply note that these tensions were also mirrored in *La Fronde*. Throughout 1976, the journal remained primarily focused on workers' rights but gradually shifted towards other priorities, such as abortion rights. Subtly, the evolution of headlines and editorial choices reveals the growing divergence within the WLM.[43]

The aftermath of the Bulova strike prompted a critical re-evaluation within the Neuchâtel WLM, revealing the limits of feminist solidarity when disconnected from workers' everyday realities. The activists experience underscored how a universalist focus on gendered oppression could overlook class, migration, and workplace dynamics. These reflections contributed to the articulation of a socialist feminist position, situated uneasily between labour and feminist movements, and calling for cross-class alliances without diluting feminist aims. This position gained traction in international debates, particularly at the 1977 Paris meeting of socialist feminists, where Swiss activists highlighted the specific challenges posed by Switzerland's labour peace system. In doing so, the feminists of the *tendance lutte des classes* helped position feminist labour politics within a broader transnational conversation. The question of ties with female workers remained a sensitive issue for the WLM. One approach was to merge trade unions to address internal obstacles within labour organizations. Despite critiques from radical feminists concerned about co-optation, the 'class struggle tendency' maintained that they remained politically autonomous, advancing their feminist agenda by integrating gendered demands within broader left-wing campaigns, notably the maternity initiative.[44]

Conclusion

In this contribution, I drew on feminist debates in the Swiss WLM journal *La Fronde* (1976-1978) to examine the challenges that arose when feminist activists supported female workers in the Swiss watch industry during the 1976 Bulova strike. I have argued that this moment constituted a pivotal early articulation of a *tendance lutte des classes* ('class struggle tendency') within the Swiss WLM, as activists sought to forge solidarity across class lines through direct engagement with industrial labour struggles. Yet, their well-intentioned interventions – such as the symbolic childcare initiative – revealed the limitations of a feminist praxis that insufficiently addressed the material realities and political subjectivities of immigrant and working-class women. This recognition catalysed a crucial phase of self-criticism and strategic reorientation, particularly evident in *La Fronde*, as activists moved from moral solidarity towards a more grounded, reciprocal understanding of labour politics (hooks, 1986 ; Featherstone 2020 : p.5).

Alongside subsequent experiences at Matisa and Dubied, the Bulova strike exposed entrenched structural barriers – such as male-dominated union apparatuses and the marginalization of reproductive labour – that limited the WLM's capacity to mobilize effectively across social divisions. These constraints redirected debate toward the potential and limits of collaboration with the labour movement, a shift that crystallized at the 1977 Paris conference. Within unions, women increasingly recognized that existing structures and hierarchies – shaped by male-dominated traditions and priorities – posed significant challenges to advance a substantive politics of equality. While gains were possible, they required sustained effort and often met with internal resistance, particularly around demands for stronger representation in negotiation committees and leadership bodies.[45] At the same

[43] Thematic focuses of the seven issues of *La Fronde* included: 'Avortement, licenciements' (*Abortion, Redundancies*); 'Spécial travail' (*Work Special*); 'Sexualité' (*Sexuality*); 'Fête des femmes' (*International Women's Day*); 'Travail domestique" (*Domestic Labour*); 'Pour des enfants désirés' (*For Wanted Children*); and 'Contre la violence faite aux femmes' (*Against Violence Towards Women*).
[44] *La Maternité…*, *op. cit.*
[45] Bracke (2019) has noted comparable challenges faced by women within Italian trade unions, highlighting structural and cultural barriers to gender equality. For a detailed account of the gradual feminization of the FTMH and the internal struggles around equality, see Gül, 2004, pp. 95-106.

time, strategic disagreements within the WLM deepened existing tensions between radical and socialist feminists.

The question of the WLM's potential influence within the labour movement – and, crucially, how working-class women themselves perceived and responded to feminist solidarity – remains underexplored. Attending to these voices is vital for enriching our understanding of cross-class feminist politics and for constructing a more inclusive historiography of labour and gender struggles. Ultimately, the Bulova case illustrates both the promise and the challenges of socialist feminist praxis in negotiating the complex intersections of gender, class, nationality and labour in late 20th-century Switzerland.

This case study offers critical insight not only into the political aspirations of the *tendance lutte des classes* but also into the broader socio-political dynamics that shaped its trajectory. As several scholars have demonstrated, the feminist movement in Switzerland increasingly prioritized workplace equality from the 1980s onwards – a strategic shift that led to concrete achievements, most notably the adoption of the 1996 Equality Law (Loi sur l'égalité). Yet, viewed within the longer historical arc traced in this contribution, the successes of the class struggle movement remain limited. The growing emphasis on 'professional equality' during the late 1980s and 1990s suggests a liberal appropriation – and partial dilution – of more radical feminist demands (Kiani 2019). This turn was met with resistance by Swiss feminists and by women's commissions within trade unions, which had expanded steadily in the years following the Bulova case (Monney, 2020; Gül, 2004, pp. 95-106). These commissions played a key role in challenging the narrowing of feminist agendas and were instrumental in the mobilization that culminated in the 1991 Women's Strike. Initiated by female watchmakers in the Vallée de Joux, the strike was explicitly feminist, calling on women to withdraw from both paid and unpaid labour for an entire day. The organizers successfully mobilized women across class divides in several cities, with industrial workers often engaging in brief but symbolically powerful actions (Studer, 2019, pp. 52-65). By this point, women's participation in the labour market had become less contentious than it had been in the 1970s. Nevertheless, essential structural measures – such as the expansion of childcare provision and the implementation of maternity insurance – would require another decade to be realized, and even then, only minimally when assessed by international standards.[46] Taken together, these developments reveal the enduring tensions between liberal institutional reforms and the more transformative goals of socialist-feminist activism.

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