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| Workers Dance League (1932-1935) |
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| In 1932 amidst the economic and social upheaval of the Great Depression in the United States, a group of young modern dancers came together to form the Workers Dance League (WDL) in New York City. Advocating for the power of dance to change society, the WDL reached out to workers as viewers and as participants. The WDL functioned as an umbrella organisation, sponsoring concerts and lecture-demonstrations, as well as leading debates about the artist’s responsibility to society. Two strands of dance practice developed under the label of revolutionary dance: the works of emerging modern dancer-choreographers (including Anna Sokolow, Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, and José Limón), and a more agit-prop style performed by recreational groups attached to city unions and cultural groups, with many being directed by Edith Segal. Inspired by Marxist ideals, the participants’ focus on raising consciousness of working class identity shaped the WDL’s mission until its name change to the New Dance League in 1935. A shift occurred with the instigation of Popular Front policies by the Comintern (the Communist International), although the WDL was not officially a Communist Party organisation. During its three years of existence, the WDL helped a vibrant left-wing dance movement flourish in the United States by exposing dance to workers, incorporating and inviting workers into the dance world, and reinforcing a proletarian identity. |
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Describing themselves as revolutionary, they created dances inspired by and legible to a wide range of viewers and participants including office workers, garment industry workers, seamen, and schoolteachers. Diverse interests underpinned the formation of member groups, such as German immigrant hiking enthusiasts in the Nature Friends Dance Group, and the Red Dancers, an independent group familiar to audiences at Communist Party pageants. Youth dance groups affiliated with the IWO (International Workers Order) demonstrated the scope of WDL activities, as the dancer-activists strived to instill values of equality and justice through dance. Union-sponsored groups included the N.T.I.W.U. Dance Group (Needle Trades Industrial Workers Union), and the Furriers Dance Group, while the Harlem Dance Group crossed barriers of racial segregation evident within the field of dance. From the beginning, performance and participation sat side by side in dance activities that encouraged reflection on class membership for workers and their children.  Modern dancers who performed with Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman were prominent WDL members, each dancing in their own solos and in one another’s works. Among the most vibrant League groups in terms of leadership and innovation, the New Dance Group (NDG) offered low cost and racially integrated dance classes supplemented by political discussion, while also presenting dances that helped young modern dancers develop their choreographic skills. Founded by students of Holm and attracting rising talent such as Jane Dudley, Lillian Mehlman, and Sophie Maslow from Graham’s dance group, it became a leading force within the left-wing dance movement, with its impact extending far beyond the existence of the WDL. NDG co-founder Edna Ocko emerged as a significant dance critic of the period, in addition to her valuable WDL organisational work.  [Image: Maslow.jpg]  Figure Sophie Maslow in *Two Songs about Lenin*, c. 1934, Music Division, Library of Congress  <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/politics-and-dance/voice/Assets/pd0019_enlarge.jpg> Revolutionary Aesthetics The dancers denounced a range of new and pre-existing dance forms — ballet due to its European elitist foundations, Denishawn’s exoticism, the escapism of dance as entertainment promoted by musical theatre and revues, and the abstract compositions of major modern dance leaders, which they considered bourgeois. In searching for a revolutionary technique, WDL artists drew from a repertoire of dance styles that ranged from folk dances to emerging modern dance techniques. While League members criticised the choreography of Graham and Humphrey, they nonetheless viewed their techniques as appropriate forms to convey revolutionary ideologies. Themes of WDL dances were drawn from major preoccupations of the larger worker’s movement — the New Dance Group’s 1933 dances were *Hunger*, *Uprisings*, and *War Trilogy*. Sophie Maslow’s *Two Songs About Lenin* (1934) paid tribute to the Soviet leader, while in 1933 Edith Segal created dances about lynching and racism in the Red Dancers’ *Southern Holiday* and *Scottsboro*. Helen Tamiris and Her Group were regulars at WDL events, presenting dance cycles on socially conscious themes, and versions of her masterpieces *Negro Spirituals* (1928) and *Whitman Suite:* *Salut au Monde* (1934). Anna Sokolow’s satires, such as the trio *Death of a Tradition* (1934), critiqued bourgeois conventions, while the Theatre Union Dance Group performed her larger group creations, such as *Anti-War Cycle* (1933).  [Image: RedDancers.jpg]  Figure Edith Segal and the Red Dancers, Music Division, Library of Congress  <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/politics-and-dance/voice/Assets/pd0016_enlarge.jpg>  The New Dance Group’s banner, ‘Dance is a Weapon in the Class Struggle,’ encapsulates the WDL perspective. The emphasis on a dance cognizant of and responsive to the lives of workers was informed by Marxist ideology and beliefs about the function of art in society, with some League members belonging to the Communist Party. They performed at strike meetings, at benefits for left wing organisations, and in choreographic competitions called Spartakiades, which were modelled on Soviet sports games. Poetic accompaniment helped ensure clarity of expression, as witnessed in Miriam Blecher’s award-winning *Van der Lubbe’s Head* (1934) for the New Dance Group. The dance depicted the execution of a Dutch Communist accused of setting fire to the Reichstag, Germany’s political centre, an event which marked Hilter’s rise to power as conveyed in Alfred Hayes’ poem. Jane Dudley evoked the physical toll of the assembly line work in *Time is Money* (1934), working with the rhythms of Sol Funaroff’s poem of the same name. Legacy The dances presented under the auspices of the WDL generated debates in the mainstream, leftist, and specialist dance press about modern dance aesthetics, providing platforms where dancers defended and challenged perspectives of art while developing as performers and choreographers. Their short dances experimented with diverse modes of communication and choreographic expression, using poetry, working with accompanist-composers, and utilizing a variety of musical styles. The search for a revolutionary technique to match their dance ideals to empower the worker and prompt social change, marked a radical departure from existing dance trends. Dances presented at WDL events attracted the attention of critics such as John Martin of the *New York Times* and Margaret Lloyd of the *Christian Science Monitor* as well as reviewers from left-wing publications such as the *New Masses*, *Daily* Worker, and *New Theatre* (originally published as *Workers Theatre*). The WDL also established multiple strands of recreational dance activities, spreading beyond New York into cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Detroit. |
| Further reading:  (Garafola)  (Geduld)  (Graff)  (Prickett, From Works' Dance to New Dance)  (Prickett, Dance and the Workers' Struggle)  (Prickett, Embodied Politics: Dance, Protest and Identities in the USA and Britain)  (New Dance Group Gala Historic Concer 1930s-1970s) |