**Workers Dance League, 1932-1935**

**Summary**

In the midst of the economic and social upheaval of America’s Great Depression, a group of young modern dancers came together to form the Workers Dance League (WDL) in New York City in 1932. Advocating for the power of dance to change society, the WDL reached out to workers to recruit both audience members and 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: that 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 the city’s unions and cultural groups, some 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 taking dance to workers, bringing workers into the dance world, and reinforcing a proletarian identity.

**Establishing Workers’ Dance**

Co-founders Nadia Chilkovsky, Edith Segal, Anna Sokolow, and Miriam Blecher were from immigrant Jewish families living in the Lower East Side of New York and were each trained in dance and performance in the city’s settlement houses and at the Neighbourhood Playhouse. Describing themselves as revolutionary, they created dances both inspired by and germane to viewers and participants drawn from the ranks of 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 instil values of equality and justice through dance. Union-sponsored groups including the NTIWU Dance Group (Needle Trades Industrial Workers Union), the Furriers Dance Group, and the Harlem Dance Group crossed racial segregation barriers present in much of the dance field. From the start, 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, dancing in their own solos and in each other’s works. Among the most vibrant League groups in terms of leadership and innovation, the New Dance Group (NDG) offered low cost, racially integrated dance classes supplemented by political discussion, in addition to 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, 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.

**Revolutionary Aesthetics**

The dancers denounced a range of new and pre-existing 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 the emerging modern dance techniques. League members criticised the choreography of Graham and Humphrey but 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. In 1933, Edith Segal created dances about lynching and racism in the Red Dancers’ *Southern Holiday* and *Scottsboro*. Helen Tamiris and Her Group were also 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).

The New Dance Group’s banner, “Dance is a Weapon in the Class Struggle,” encapsulates the WDL perspective. The focus on a dance 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 seen in Miriam Blecher’s award-winning *Van der Lubbe’s Head* (1934) for the New Dance Group. The dance was about 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 across 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.

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**References and Further Reading**

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**Paratexts**

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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>