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More than the Triangle Factory Speech: Rose Schneiderman's Long-Underappreciated Career of Progressive Era Reform

Emily Yekikian

Rose Schneiderman was brought into the public eye when she gave her speech at the mass meeting held at New York's Metropolitan Opera House on 2 May 1911. The speech was in response to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire that occurred ten days earlier, wherein 147 workers died, the majority of whom were teenage girls. To escape the flames, many of the victims jumped from the building's windows to their deaths. Their burned and broken bodies were strewn across the streets of Manhattan for all to see. The horrifying scene, and the conditions that caused it, was to Schneiderman the "ultimate justification for the organization of women."¹ Recited in her Opera House speech, Schneiderman called upon women workers to rally themselves together and demand change. Already years into her career as a labor activist, she asserted, "I know from experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. And the only way is through a strong working-class movement."² Women, in her view, should be seen as workers who deserved a safe and clean place of work.

While this profoundly moving speech deserved the fame it generated, this is but one achievement in Schneiderman's lifelong career of activism for America's working class. Schneiderman is an underappreciated figure of the Progressive Era's labor movement and beyond. Most of her early efforts centered around improving working factory conditions, but her career was far more nuanced. The breadth and depth of her work remains unrecognized because most accounts reproduce the same severely limited

¹ Kathleen Banks Nutter, "Schneiderman, Rose (1882-1972), Labor Organizer and Trade Union Official," *American National Biography*, 1 Feb. 2000.

² "Lament for Lives Lost: Rose Schneiderman and the Triangle Fire," <<https://www.historymatters.gmu.edu>> (23 March 2020).

biographical narrative. Schneiderman's contributions to the labor movement and overall reformist cause, however, are no less wide-ranging and significant than those of other, more well-known female reformers, including Jane Addams (founder of the Hull House), Florence Kelly (founder of the National Consumer League), and Frances Perkins (the first woman to hold a cabinet position as Secretary of Labor under Franklin Delano Roosevelt). As a prominent leader of multiple trade unions, Schneiderman gained knowledge of the legislative process. Her ability to create substantial and lasting policy reform in the workplace made her a key figure of the Progressive and New Deal eras. An analysis of the newspaper articles of the early twentieth century reveals that Schneiderman's work encompassed much more than that one famous speech. A more comprehensive survey of her life shows that she championed a feminist vision of labor reform that sought to empower women within the workplace in order to better their lives outside of it as well.

Two years after she gave her moving speech, "Lament of Lives Lost," condemning the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, Schneiderman spoke out at a fire prevention meeting in 1913. She turned this moment into an opportunity to denounce the greed of capitalist factory owners whose employees risked death daily while on the job. Recounting the events from the fire, she passionately pleaded for reform. She referred to the factory conditions that led to the Triangle Factory fire, which included locked doors and windows and flammable fabrics strewn across the floor. The reason for these inhumane conditions, she contended, was the capitalists who "feared some girl would stick some silk thread in her waist as she walked out, and so they locked the Asch building doors,"³ which prevented workers from fleeing the fire to reach safety. "Capital saved maybe its \$2 worth of thread," she finished, "but it cost us 147 lives."⁴ This is a poignant example of her

³ "Socialists Capture Fire Protest Rally: Rose Schneiderman Turns Fire Prevention Meeting to Their Purposes," *New York Times* (1857-1922), 3 Aug. 1913: 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

commitment to labor reform. As a factory worker once herself, she had first-hand experience of the deplorable conditions factory workers labored in. Schneiderman's frustration with these conditions is what initially drove her into activism, but the chance to create substantial change in the lives of working women is what inspired her to continue her efforts, no matter the barriers she confronted.

The Progressive Era was born out of the industrial revolution. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, American business boomed due to the work of men like Andrew Carnegie and John Rockefeller who capitalized on America's burgeoning industries. Consequently, the United States saw drastic changes, leaving behind its agrarian roots and developing into an urban nation. Men left farm work for factory work. The need for cheap manual labor was so great that women began to work for pay outside of the home. The inclusion of women into the workforce presented serious challenges to American social and political spheres. The fact that women were working for pay conflicted with traditional notions of gender and family, causing a sort of cultural anxiety that men and women alike struggled to navigate. Women faced these challenges head-on as they gained more experience in the workplace.

While rapid industrial progress turned the country into an economic powerhouse, it came at workers' expense. Neglected in all aspects, many workers were mutilated or killed on the job. The turn of the twentieth century saw the rise of worker advocacy and protest against dangerous and inhumane working conditions. One of the central aspects of the Progressive Era was the formation of the labor movement and trade unionization. No longer were wage laborers powerless victims of egregious work environments. Early unions focused their efforts on organizing members to directly challenge their employers, often via strikes, to achieve better treatment and conditions in the workplace. While these strikes resulted in some beneficial changes, union priorities switched to championing the legislative reforms affecting labor that

proliferated during the New Deal years. Rose Schneiderman not only lived through this transition but served as a key figure. Part of the exodus of Jewish people from Eastern Europe, Polish-born Rose Schneiderman immigrated to the United States in 1890 with her father, mother, and younger siblings. Shortly after settling in New York's Lower East Side, her father suddenly passed, leaving her mother to care for three young children with a fourth on the way.⁵ Schneiderman grew up in grave poverty that only worsened after her father's death. In an effort to support her family, Schneiderman took on her first job as a salesgirl in a local department store at the age of thirteen. She worked sixty-four hours a week with a starting salary of \$2.16 (which roughly translates to \$57 in 2020). After three years she was earning only about sixty cents more, making \$2.75 (approximately \$72 in 2020) a week.⁶

Soon after, Schneiderman entered factory work, sewing lining for men's caps. Though the pay was substantially better, at \$6 a week, this job was her first exposure to the grim realities of the garment industry.⁷ The pay raise was considerable (the equivalent to \$157 in 2020), but it came at a cost.⁸ Schneiderman became increasingly frustrated by her surroundings and the corruption she witnessed in the factory. When she expressed these frustrations, "more seasoned women workers began to teach her about three political ideologies...trade unionism, socialism, and feminism."⁹ This opened her up to the burgeoning world of organizing workers and set her on the path to becoming an influential speaker, labor organizer, trade union official, and politician. She pioneered lasting change for the American working-

⁵ Nutter, "Schneiderman, Rose (1882-1972), Labor Organizer and Trade Union Official."

⁶ <<https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>>

⁷ Nutter, "Schneiderman, Rose (1882-1972), Labor Organizer and Trade Union Official."

⁸ <<https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>>

⁹ Annelise Orleck. "Rose Schneiderman," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 20 March 2009, <<https://jwa.org/>> (15 Feb. 2020).

class and was especially sensitive to the needs of women and immigrants.

Jewish Americans were one of the most politically aware immigrant populations, and their communities had strong socialist leanings built into them.¹⁰ Jewish immigration peaked as the ready-made clothing industry rapidly expanded. Jewish American workers soon dominated garment factory work in New York. These factories were not filled with men alone. Unlike in their countries of origin, urban Jewish American women were expected to work as well because their families depended on their contributions for survival. Women who entered the factory system experienced the same unsafe working conditions but earned lower wages than men and were routinely harassed by employers. However, as immigrants and women, and often as mothers as well, they interpreted their trials differently than did men. Labor historian Alice Kessler-Harris explains, “As women, they brought to trade unions their sensibilities about the organizing process and encouraged...government regulation to protect women in the workforce. As Jews...they nurtured a commitment to social justice”¹¹ Women found solidarity with their sister workers. The strength of this new combined community emboldened them to at least attempt to improve their livelihoods. Consequently, women became one of the main contributors to the Progressive Era’s labor movement.

It was not an easy task for women to be politically active. Regardless of Jewish immigrants’ aptitude for socialism and their stronger desire to organize than other ethnic groups, the labor movement proved difficult to break into. Any attempts at doing so presented early leaders, including Pauline Newman, Clara Lemlich Shavelson, and Rose Schneiderman, with several challenges. For instance, early trade unions were dominated by men. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1886 and led for

¹⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris, “Labor Movement in the United States,” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 27 Feb. 2009, <<https://jwa.org>> (15 Feb. 2020).

¹¹ Ibid.

decades by the notoriously chauvinistic Samuel Gompers, became one of the most established organizations in the labor movement. Even the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, one of the first unions with significant female membership, was headed by men who did not understand the point of diverting already limited union resources to women who they insisted were, “destined for marriage,” and “unorganizable.”¹²

Women originally assumed they would be welcomed into already established unions as valued members. Yet, their status as workers was dismissed and the focus was on their identity as women. Schneiderman’s first experience with such discrimination was in 1903 when she was barred from joining the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers Union. When Schneiderman approached the union to inquire about membership, she and two of her coworkers were told that they would need to get “twenty-five women from a number of factories before [they] could acquire a charter.”¹³ There is no record of male workers having to complete similar tasks to gain membership to the union. Known for her persistence, but moreover her strong desire to learn and be involved in the labor movement, Schneiderman recruited the necessary number of women within a few days and they were chartered as Local 23.¹⁴ With a resolute personality and strong oratory skills, Schneiderman appeared destined to become a social organizer. Only four feet nine inches tall and barely into her twenties, she nevertheless captured the attention of audiences and inspired workers to mobilize.¹⁵ In 1905 the Cap Makers’ Union went on strike for thirteen weeks calling for higher wages and safer work spaces. The strike showcased her abilities as an organizer. She led meetings, gave speeches, and walked the picket line.¹⁶ This was a formative

¹² Ibid., 3.

¹³ Rose Schneiderman and Lucy Goldthwaite, *All for One* (New York, NY: Eriksson, 1967), 49.

¹⁴ Ibid., 50.

¹⁵ Nutter, “Schneiderman, Rose (1882-1972), Labor Organizer and Trade Union Official.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

time for Schneiderman. It cemented her socialist worldview and belief in the trade unionist cause. In her autobiography, she recalls that during this time a new life appeared before her, opening “wide many doors that might have remained closed.”¹⁷ Schneiderman became fully active in the unionist scene and rose quickly through the ranks of union and league membership.

Having struggled to incorporate herself and other women who wished to be organized into the mainstream labor movement, Schneiderman sought ways to create female-centric unions. “Discouraged by their union brothers,” writes Kessler-Harris, “[and] recognizing their issues as different from those of male workers, women turned to other women for help with their work related problems.”¹⁸ The issue was not simply that men did not want to accept women into their organizations, but that the working-class women themselves were apathetic to the cause.¹⁹ Moreover, with long hours in the factory in addition to household responsibilities, most women had no time to dedicate to union work.

Schneiderman realized that in order for union membership to appeal to women, unions needed to offer social services as well as focus on problems in the workplace. To incentivize membership, female unions established a community that recognized the particular needs of women and offered tangible benefits to its members. They hosted dances, concerts, lectures, and education opportunities, fostering a broader vision of unionism and a strong sense of loyalty and sisterhood.²⁰ No league epitomized this sense of sorority more than the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), founded in 1903 with the New York branch established the following year. Other locals were soon established in major cities in the East and Midwest including Boston and Chicago. The

¹⁷ Schneiderman, *All for One*, 50.

¹⁸ Kessler-Harris, “Labor Movement in the United States.”

¹⁹ Alice Kessler-Harris, “Rose Schneiderman and the Limits of Women’s Trade Unionism,” *Labor Leaders of America* (1987): 164.

²⁰ Kessler-Harris, “Labor Movement in the United States.”

league's mission was to consolidate the modest number of women who belonged to unions and bring them into the league so that, as a larger group, they would have more support and strength.²¹

After her impressive showing at the Cap Makers' Union strike, Schneiderman was approached by Margaret Dreier Robins, president of the New York branch of the Women's Trade Union League (NYWTUL). While Schneiderman could have stayed with the Cap Makers' Union, the NYWTUL promised her "the opportunity for self-improvement through the enactment of a social program. It offered her the chance to construct a career, associate with other women, and exercise leadership"²² After joining the NYWTUL in 1905, the rest of Schneiderman's long career in labor activism revolved around the League. Schneiderman held several administrative positions within the WTUL as well as its New York branch. She became Vice President of the NYWTUL in 1906, was its chief organizer until 1914, elected president in 1917 and then elected president of the National WTUL in 1926, a position she held until she fully retired from public life in 1950, the same year the League dissolved. Her work with the League was formative. She increased its membership and continued to instigate workplace change through organized efforts. It was one of the most significant periods of her life, culminating in her close friendships with Eleanor and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

She developed a strong friendship with Eleanor in particular. Their association signified a new type of friendship that transcended class. Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt came from wealthy families of "old-line American stock."²³ Schneiderman helped to expose them to the lived realities of most Americans. Eleanor Roosevelt earnestly sought to learn about the problems facing American workers. According to Schneiderman, "Mrs.

²¹ Gary Edward Endleman, "Solidarity Forever: Rose Schneiderman and the Women's Trade Union League," in *Dissertations in American Biography* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1978), 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

²³ *Ibid.*, 172.

Roosevelt asked many questions. She was particularly interested in why I thought women should join unions.”²⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt was truly invested in political and social equality. She frequented NYWTUL meetings, and Schneiderman was often a guest at the Roosevelt’s house at Hyde Park. Schneiderman opened up both Roosevelts to the plight of the working class and taught them much of what they knew about labor issues.²⁵ Regardless of background or upbringing, Roosevelt and Schneiderman appreciated each other as friends, but moreover, as equals. Schneiderman’s relationship with Roosevelt garnered interest in the League and bolstered both its reputation and Schneiderman’s as a leading organizer.

Out of all union leaders, Schneiderman gave the most effort to building cross-class coalitions, as seen through her relationship with the Roosevelts. She found allies among other middle- and upper-class white women, especially in the National Commerce League. Wealthy women supported her organizing work in the NYWTUL, offering her financial assistance so she could continue the League’s work. This, however, presented its own set of challenges. The financial support from well-off women was greatly appreciated, but their presence in unions and general labor activism damaged the sense of community within these groups. Many working-class women were justifiably skeptical of their motivations. The inclusion of wealthy women created a power dynamic that had to be delicately balanced.²⁶ Though they caused tension in the League, it was Schneiderman’s connections with these middle- and upper-class women that brought her out of the depths of labor organizing from which she had buried herself.

Schneiderman had always been civically engaged, but as she continued to build relationships with wealthier women, she saw more opportunity to create greater change through politics, seeing

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 173.

²⁶ Julie Novkov, *Constituting Workers, Protecting Women: Gender, Law and Labor in the Progressive Era and New Deal Years* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 80.

government as the path to her ultimate goal of labor reform. In May of 1920, the *New York Times* reported that the “state convention nominate[d] Rose Schneiderman,” as one of only two women among the six nominees for New York Senator.²⁷ She ran, unsuccessfully, on the Independent Labor Party ticket. However, even this failed attempt marked her growing prominence in the public eye and the increasing attention women were receiving in politics. As she became more involved in politics, her work extended beyond organizing. She took positions on other issues facing the nation such as prohibition, unemployment, civil rights, and international relations. This was groundbreaking work for a woman, especially one of immigrant descent whose childhood was spent in the ghettos of New York’s Lower East Side.

She was never shy about her political leanings, publicly supporting like-minded candidates. This included Al Smith, who unsuccessfully ran for president as a socialist in 1928. Then, more notably, she backed Franklin Roosevelt in his 1928 bid for New York Governor. She was quite influential, garnering votes for both candidates. Frances Perkins even asked Schneiderman to promote Roosevelt’s gubernatorial candidacy in her union meetings and in other working-class leagues. According to Perkins, “Schneiderman was awfully good...Rose, I’m sure, made many converts telling them why they should vote for Roosevelt for Governor. She was a very effective person.”²⁸ Schneiderman also supported Roosevelt’s presidential campaign in 1932. The *New York Times* quoted her favoring the Governor’s “labor record and his unequivocal stand upon the question of public utilities and water power control.”²⁹ She campaigned vigorously for Franklin Roosevelt. Her ability to dictate the course of New York politics, particularly ensuring that

²⁷ “Woman for Senator is Named by Labor: State Convention Nominates Rose Schneiderman and Picks Six State Candidates,” *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 31 May 1920: 2. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

²⁸ Endelman, “Solidarity Forever,” 159.

²⁹ “Rose Schneiderman for Roosevelt,” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, 9 Oct. 1932: 25.

it remained a blue state, was exceptional. She established important connections to politicians who would not forget the work she had done to help the Democratic party. These connections would come in handy for her later legislative and political endeavors.

Schneiderman served as a political leader at both the state and federal level. For example, Perkins, under Roosevelt, appointed Schneiderman to the National Recovery Administration (NRA) Labor Advisory Board. She was the only woman and brought to the board her extensive labor reform experience. The NRA Labor Advisory Board sent Schneiderman to Puerto Rico to reform that nation's needle trade industry through legal codes designed to improve working conditions. This work expanded to other Puerto Rican industries, including tobacco and sugar. Her time abroad gave her a global perspective on labor issues that evaded other activists. Additionally, Schneiderman served as secretary of the New York State Labor Department for seven years between 1937 and 1944. She resigned from the position to give more time to her presidency of the NYWTUL, where she would "devote herself especially to labor legislation and the enforcement of laws protecting working women."³⁰ Even her exposure to American politics, and the influence and network that came with it, could not sway her to abandon the true backbone of her work: creating better factory work environments for women.

As Schneiderman became increasingly politically active throughout the progression of career, her public persona and outwardly socialist leanings sometimes subjected her to harsh criticism. People including male unionists and conservative politicians vehemently disagreed with her work and ideologies, fearing that they would upend traditional American society. Accusations that she was a communist or revolutionary intensified during some of the most precarious times of the twentieth century,

³⁰ "Rose Schneiderman Out: Resigns State Labor Department Post After Seven Years," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, 7 April 1944: 16.

including both world wars and the Great Depression. In 1934, Dr. William A. Wirt, a school superintendent, called Schneiderman the “red rose of anarchy” and charged that “members of President Roosevelt’s ‘brain trust’ were plotting to bring about a revolution in the United States.”³¹ In true Schneiderman fashion, she wasted no time in suing Dr. Wirt for libel. She faced xenophobic rhetoric throughout her career due to her immigrant status, Polish background, and Jewish heritage.

It was not only outside criticism that Schneiderman struggled against during her career. Schneiderman’s work with the WTUL was tedious. While she did achieve some great victories, like the Equal Pay Law passed in 1943, not all her efforts ended in the League’s favor. After a three-year long effort, for instance, the WTUL admitted to its shortcomings in organizing workers in the laundry industry. This was partially due to the Great Depression’s detrimental impact on the labor movement. According to the *New York Times*, “the entire labor movement has been facing a difficult period, particularly because of extensive unemployment.”³² The WTUL had to cut several of their services, and membership significantly declined. External forces, however, were not Schneiderman’s only problem with the League.

The NYWTUL provided her with many opportunities for personal and professional development. In the *Washington Post*, for example, Schneiderman was favorably depicted as a “woman general” who put her “energy and experience in to the great experiment of industrial control...[Schneiderman] sees stitched tightly into each, the dreams and cares of women, bent weary over machines—long tedious hours stolen from their homes and children.”³³ Her efforts in bringing women into the labor

³¹ “Dr. Wirt is Sued by ‘Brain Truster’: Rose Schneiderman Files a Libel Action Asking \$400,000 for Educator’s Attack,” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, 17 Oct. 1934: 25.

³² “Decries Condition in Laundry Trade: Women’s Trade Union League Reports Failure to Organize Workers in Industry,” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, 2 June 1919: 1.

³³ “Mary Harriman Rumsey, Daughter of Rail Magnate, Heads Important Advisory Board,” *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*, 7 Aug. 1933: 9–10.

movement's fold warranted such praise. She guided the WTUL to expand its efforts for adequate labor legislation in the South, which was as yet immune to the labor movement. The goal was to implement higher standards, including equal pay for equal work that enabled female workers of the South to enjoy dignified workplaces.

She found, however, that with growing demand for the League's expansion came many tasks that she often struggled to balance. After almost a decade of furious organizing, her relationship with the WTUL and the New York branch deteriorated, for she believed them to be antisemitic and antisocialist. Disillusioned, Schneiderman resigned from her post as chief organizer for the League in 1914, turning her attention to the women's suffrage movement. Though known as a labor reform activist, her contribution to the suffrage movement was also significant. She traveled throughout the Midwest and east coast on behalf of the National American Women's Suffrage Association. Schneiderman's time spent campaigning for women's suffrage opened her eyes to the advances that could be attained through government intervention. For decades, the act of organizing workers against their oppressive environments was absolutely central to her work. Schneiderman believed "that workers had to rely on their united strength to achieve greater bargaining power with employers."³⁴ For all her dedication to the unionist effort, one thing unions could not do for their members was enact protective labor legislation. After returning to union work after her stint as a suffragette, Schneiderman "slowly abandoned her socialist dreams, turning instead to Democratic party politics that promised immediate, if more limited, results."³⁵ She gradually began to prefer a more active state that intervened on the women workers' behalf over the power of the collective.

³⁴ Kessler-Harris, "Limits of Women's Trade Unionism," 164.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

In 1913, Schneiderman appealed directly to President Wilson at a women's suffrage march to the White House. She incorporated her labor agenda into her advocacy for suffrage, claiming that "the vote to us [working women] is an economic necessity."³⁶ In her eyes, the vote was a form of legal protection from the dangers of factory work. According to Schneiderman, women needed the vote, "so that they may have political, legal, and industrial equality. The other aims include...the protection of motherhood and the guarantee to every child of the highest possible development."³⁷ Similarly, her participation in the Industrial Working Women's Conference in 1919, where she represented over 100,000 organized women, clearly showcased that women's rights were encompassed in her platform. The issues discussed during this meeting included social security and pensions for retired workers, maternity benefits, accident insurance, and sick leave.³⁸ These commonplace practices in almost every work environment were created by the likes of women like Schneiderman who brought their female perspective to the workforce, looking beyond wages. At other points in her work, she was even known to speak on the right of women to have access to birth control.³⁹ Her agenda clearly reached beyond the physical work environment to include all parts of a woman's life.

Influential women like Florence Kelly and Frances Perkins, who began careers as labor activists years before Schneiderman joined the cause, had already confronted many problems Schneiderman was just coming across. Labor associations, including the National Association of Manufacturers, for example, who "adamantly defended the right to employ children," incited

³⁶ Elizabeth Glendower Evans, "An Audience at the White House," *La Follette's Magazine*: 5.

³⁷ "Plan Worldwide Union.: Misses Schneiderman and Anderson Will Start for Paris Monday," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 7 March 1919: 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "Forum Tomorrow on Birth Control: Mrs. Thomas N. Hepburn to Be Among Speakers at Meeting in Carnegie Hall," *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, 1 Dec. 1935: 8.

battles between laborers and the government at the state and federal level.⁴⁰ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, labor reform efforts were blocked by Supreme Court rulings that stymied the potential for labor reforms. In *The Woman Behind the New Deal*, Kristen Downey notes that Perkins “wondered whether it was even possible to implement some of the ideas in light of Supreme Court rulings.”⁴¹ For instance, in 1905 the Court ruled that restricting bakery workers to a ten-hour day workday violated workers’ rights to contract for their own work hours. It also ruled against federal restrictions on child labor in 1918, calling them a violation of states’ rights to regulate production. Lastly, the Court determined that setting a minimum wage for women was illegal, regardless of whether they were earning a living wage.

By 1920, however, protective labor legislation was not universally accepted, even among female union members and officials. For some, these intrusive policies were seen as an encroachment on their right to make independent decisions with their employer. Schneiderman found herself at odds with the Equal Opportunity League, which opposed her legislative efforts. In a plea for support, the league explained its grievances in the *New York Times*. In the article “Women’s Work Limited by Law,” they denounced the possible implementation of a shortened workday, claiming, “So-called ‘welfare’ legislation is not asked for or wanted by real working women,” and asserting that these, “‘welfare’ bills are drafted by self-styled social uplifters who assert that working women do not know enough to protect themselves.” There was a clear sense of hostility and anger. The line that followed, “aided by a few women who once worked but who are now living off the labor movement” was a pointed attack on

⁴⁰ Kristin Downey, *The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life and Legacy of Frances Perkin–Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, and the Minimum Wage* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2009), 116.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

women like Schneiderman.⁴² Though her life's work focused on raising the standard of work environments for women, many who still labored in the factory felt abandoned by women who rose in the ranks of trade unions and leagues. The solidarity that Schneiderman had worked so hard to instill within the League was crumbling.

As Perkins worked to reconstruct the labor department and implement reform legislation, the labor movement was experiencing additional setbacks. In the early 1930s women were still working in poor conditions even as the New Deal was forming under President Roosevelt. One of the biggest points of contention at the federal level was the fragile line between what constituted public and private work and the division between states' rights and the power of the federal government. *The New Republic* recorded a response from Schneiderman, representing the WTUL, countering critics of Perkins as New York's Commissioner of Labor. Schneiderman indicated in her response a resolution from the WTUL, which pledged "its support to the Commissioner of Labor in her untiring and effective efforts to so administer the law that justice shall be done to all."⁴³ Surely influenced by Schneiderman's working relationship with Perkins, this outwardly political stance illustrated solidarity between working women and Perkins' reform agenda.

With over eight million women industrial workers in the Northeast and South by the 1920s, their needs had become of national interest. Many marches, conferences, and conventions took place at the nation's capital to address the issues of the female worker. Schneiderman participated in most of them. For example, during President Coolidge's administration, a Women's Industrial Conference was called together in Washington, D.C. to "discuss

⁴² "Women's Work Limited by Law: Equal Opportunity League Fighting Legislation Which Restricts Their Hours of Labor A Case in Point. Views of Mrs. Catt. The Bills Objected to," *New York Times (1857-1922)*, 18 Jan. 1920.

⁴³ Rose Schneiderman, "Correspondence: What Working Women Think of Frances Perkins," *The New Republic*, 18 June 1930: 128.

the problems of women in industry.”⁴⁴ It was to explore opportunities for women, industrial relations, wages, and hours of labors. Schneiderman asserted that abusive working conditions prevented women from “exercis[ing] the privileges of citizenship.”⁴⁵ Women were consumed with basic survival and had no time to dedicate to building better lives for themselves and others. They were excluded from pursuing personal hobbies, education, or involving themselves in social issues. It was only when “she is freed of the drudgeries and worries that come from long hours and low wages,” Schneiderman contended, that a woman worker could “improve the caliber of her citizenship.”⁴⁶ This excerpt reinforced her holistic approach to labor reform. Schneiderman understood that legislation could bring positive change to industrial wageworkers. Legislation created standards and held employers to the laws and changes that outlived the temporary solutions early unionists achieved.

Schneiderman nonetheless continued to advocate against the Equal Rights Amendment. The ERA sought to end the legal distinctions between men and women, but it was those exact distinctions upon which Schneiderman based her labor reform work, noting from the beginning of her career that women experienced the workplace differently and therefore needed specific protections. In 1940 she claimed that the ERA “actually jeopardize[d] most of the social gains women have secured in wages and hour legislation.”⁴⁷ Kessler-Harris notes how Schneiderman thoroughly understood how men in positions of power perceived women and she uses these perceptions to explain why female unionists should support protective legislation: “If women were to be protected because they were the ‘mothers of the

⁴⁴ Marie B. Manly, “The Women’s Industrial Conference: Attempt to Change Program of Conference to a Discussion of Harmless Subjects is Halted,” *La Follette’s Magazine*, Feb. 1923: 28.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “GOP, Democratic Women Win Increased Attention at Convention this Year,” *The Progressive*, 27 July 1940: 7.

race,’ then the state had an interest in their well-being.”⁴⁸ Conventional gendered notions of femininity, with a particular regard to motherhood, enabled Schneiderman to push this legislative agenda forward.

Schneiderman understood that legislation could bring positive change to industrial wage workers. Legislation created standards and held employers to the law with changes that outlived the temporary solutions early unionists achieved. She was concerned with not only the physical work environment but how that would impact all aspects of workers’ lives. Schneiderman recognized that this meant something different for women than it did for men. As a result, Schneiderman built a career in pushing for workplaces that protected the female worker and pressed for progressive reform that included maternity benefits, childcare, an end to child labor, and access to education—issues that had not been addressed before. Schneiderman fervently advocated for the rights of working-class women and remained steadfast in her desire to establish legislative reform until the end of her far-reaching career.

Overshadowed by the Triangle Factory Fire speech, Schneiderman’s remarkable career full of hard work has been all but forgotten. Reducing historical figures to a single key event presents its own set of dangers. It fails to present complete narratives, distorting the nation’s past and the history of its development. Schneiderman’s unwavering devotion to the cause of labor legislation created her unique place among women activists. She continually pursued the cause of the female worker over the course of her four-decade-long career. Schneiderman’s path from the factory floor to renowned labor activist and politician was filled with many obstacles. Schneiderman took each pitfall and criticism as an opportunity to learn and improve her approach. While she lived to see a great deal of change in the personal and working lives of women in her lifetime, the struggle for female

⁴⁸ Kessler-Harris, “Limits of Women’s Trade Unionism,” 175.

equality was still far from over. Even now, it is still a work in progress. Yet, without the likes of women like Rose Schneiderman, who worked tirelessly to end social injustices, the status of women would remain far less developed. Rather than be ignored entirely or reduced to a single speech, her contributions should be celebrated and expanded.

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