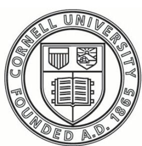

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She Was One Of Us: Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Worker

Brigid O'Farrell

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She Was One Of Us: Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Worker

Abstract

{Excerpt} For Eleanor Roosevelt, helping people achieve better lives by taking individual responsibility and then acting collectively to remedy problems was a cornerstone of democracy, in good and bad economic times, during war and peace. She saw these convictions embodied in the labor movement. Labor leaders, including Walter Reuther, the visionary young president of the emerging United Automobile Workers, earned her praise and became her close friends. She criticized leaders who abused their power, but never wavered in her support for the rank and file. One of her adversaries, however, the influential journalist Westbrook Pegler, attacked ER as a dilettante and her labor allies as thugs.

ER's core principles of workplace democracy, however, remained her model for democracy in the country and around the world. In 1961 ER told the AFL-CIO convention, "The labor movement—and perhaps I can say my movement, too, because I think sometimes I work as hard as any of you do—I feel that it is part of our job to keep alive the ideals that you started with, the ideals of really helping the people to better conditions, to a better way of life which is part of the basis of democracy." The story of how Eleanor Roosevelt became a union member, what it meant then, and why it matters now begins with a most unusual gathering on the shores of the Hudson River.

Keywords

Elanor Roosevelt, AFL-CIO, Newspaper Guild, activism

Comments

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She Was One of Us

She Was One of Us

Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Worker

Brigid O'Farrell

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Throughout the crowded years of her lifetime, Eleanor Roosevelt was the tireless champion of working men and women.... Wherever there were battles to be fought... for minimum wage or social security... on behalf of sharecroppers or migratory workers... against the unspeakable evils of discrimination, segregation or child labor... for the union shop or against spurious "right-to-work laws"... there you could find Eleanor Roosevelt.... She was an ardent advocate of the ideals of the United Nations... the architect of its Human Rights program... on our side... fighting for our right to organize... but more than that: *she was one of us.*

Eleanor Roosevelt Memorial Fund Pamphlet, AFL-CIO, 1963.

For Joyce L. Kornbluh

Contents

Abbreviations Used in Text ix

Prologue: She Was One of Us 1
1. Why Women Should Join Unions 4
2. Here Comes Mrs. Roosevelt 30
3. Practicing What You Preach 55
4. In Her Own Way 80
5. An Essential Element of Freedom 105
6. Pointing the Way 131
7. We Have Something to Offer 156
8. A Revolutionary Period 181

Epilogue: Close to Home 205

Source Abbreviations 209
Notes 211
Note on Sources and Bibliography 247
Acknowledgments 259
Index 263

Photographs follow page 104

Abbreviations Used in Text

ACWA	Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America
AF of L	American Federation of Labor
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
BSCP	Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CIO-PAC	CIO Political Action Committee
ER	Eleanor Roosevelt
ERA	Equal Rights Amendment
Guild	American Newspaper Guild, The Newspaper Guild (TNG)
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
IBEW	International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
ILGWU	International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union
ILO	International Labor Organization
IUE	International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers

NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NCF	National Civic Federation
NCPAC	National Citizens' Political Action Committee
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NIRA	National Industrial Recovery Act
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
NRA	National Recovery Administration
NYWTUL	New York Women's Trade Union League
OPM	Office of Production Management
ORT	Organization for Rehabilitation through Training
SCHW	Southern Conference on Human Welfare
TWOC	Textile Workers Organizing Committee
TWUA	Textile Workers Union of America
UAW	United Automobile Workers
UE	United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers
UMW	United Mine Workers
USWA	United Steelworkers of America
WPA	Works Progress Administration
WTUL	Women's Trade Union League

Prologue

She Was One of Us

Though she was born to a life of privilege and married to the president of the United States, the first lady was a working journalist and a union member. In late December 1936 Eleanor Roosevelt celebrated the first anniversary of her syndicated "My Day" column by joining the American Newspaper Guild. Carefully named to avoid alienating potential members with the word "union," the Guild had organized reporters, held its first convention, and signed its first contract just three years earlier, at the beginning of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. ER, as she signed her letters to FDR, made clear at her January 5 press conference that she could not go on strike or walk a picket line, but, she explained, "I do believe in the things the guild is trying to do and I was told that I could join on that basis." The front page headline above her smiling picture in the *Guild Reporter* shouted "New Member."[1]

Eleanor Roosevelt was one of the most popular yet at the same time most vilified public figures of the twentieth century. She was consistently ranked as the most admired woman in the country during her lifetime, and a survey of historians rated her the most influential. Working people wrote to her directly about their problems, seeking empathy and action; she was their champion. In response to her support for labor, closely intertwined with her outspoken defense of civil rights and civil liberties, she was criticized by politicians, fellow journalists, and ordinary citizens. She had an extensive FBI file and was frequently accused of being a communist. Hate mail and death threats followed her across the country.

The exceptionally full and complex life of Eleanor Roosevelt has been described and interpreted by historians as well as psychologists, playwrights, family members, and friends. In this book we see her life through the eyes of American workers. Using their own words and hers as much as possible we trace her footsteps from the tenements of New York City to the White House, from local union halls to the convention floor of the AFL-CIO, from coal mines to political rallies to the chambers of the United Nations. Her compelling vision of labor rights as human rights was widely known during her lifetime but has been marginalized or forgotten since her death. By carefully examining ER's commitment to workers and her enduring partnership with the labor movement through the dramatic struggles of the first half of the twentieth century, we gain new insights into how her values were shaped and strengthened and how her commitments were translated into actions. Equally important, we return human rights to their central place in labor history.

The Roosevelts' ties to the labor movement were threaded through their lives together. Eleanor introduced Franklin to the tenements and sweatshops of the Lower East Side of Manhattan at the turn of the twentieth century. They learned about the world of skilled trade union men when Franklin was a state senator in Albany and then assistant secretary of the navy in Washington, DC. ER began advocating for workers' rights in the 1920s through her close friendship with Rose Schneiderman, a cap maker by trade and a fiery union organizer by vocation, who introduced the Roosevelts to the Women's Trade Union League.

As ER's reform ideas developed, her mutually beneficial relationship with labor deepened. Her dialogue with labor activists clarified issues that arose in the workplace and in politics. At the same time, organized labor provided a grass-roots platform for her broader reform agenda. During her twelve years as first lady, she built on her accomplishments and skills to expand her labor concerns beyond the problems of working women to include economic and social rights for all workers. After FDR's death she took her agenda to the United Nations, where she led an international team to craft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which included the right to join a union.

For Eleanor Roosevelt, helping people achieve better lives by taking individual responsibility and then acting collectively to remedy problems was a cornerstone of democracy, in good and bad economic times, during war and peace. She saw these convictions embodied in the labor movement. Labor leaders, including Walter Reuther, the visionary young president of the emerging United Automobile Workers, earned her praise and became her close friends. She criticized leaders who abused their power, but never wavered in her support for the rank and file. One of her adversaries, however, the influential journalist Westbrook Pegler, attacked ER as a dilettante and her labor allies as thugs.

ER's understanding of labor's role changed over time. As unions grew in membership and power, she expanded her concerns about organizing and strikes to include ending union corruption and discrimination. She applauded adding pension and health care benefits to bargaining for better wages and safer conditions. She challenged powerful unions to place their own workplace issues in a broader social context and assume the responsibilities of national and international leadership. She saw the movement develop as a key political force in advancing a liberal policy agenda such as full employment at home and economic aid abroad.

ER's core principles of workplace democracy, however, remained her model for democracy in the country and around the world. In 1961 ER told the AFL-CIO convention, "The labor movement—and perhaps I can say my movement, too, because I think sometimes I work as hard as any of you do—I feel that it is part of our job to keep alive the ideals that you started with, the ideals of really helping the people to better conditions, to a better way of life which is part of the basis of democracy." The story of how Eleanor Roosevelt became a union member, what it meant then, and why it matters now begins with a most unusual gathering on the shores of the Hudson River.[2]

1

WHY WOMEN SHOULD JOIN UNIONS

Mrs. Roosevelt asked many questions but she was particularly interested in why I thought women should join unions.
ROSE SCHNEIDERMAN, *All for One*, 1967

Seamstresses and glove makers, laundry workers and printers mingled with fashionable society matrons, labor organizers, and politicians as they boarded a large rented boat and slowly lumbered up the Hudson River. On Saturday, 8 June 1929, the sun was shining and a warm breeze that rippled the water in the harbor would also stir the stifling hot air in the sweatshops and the laundries, the tenements and crowded streets of Manhattan's Lower East Side, all left behind for the day. As the jumble of buildings receded from view, the hillsides came into focus, lush with the deep green of the forests dominated by oak and maple trees among the evergreens. Flowers sparkled along the shoreline, redbud, dogwood, and mountain laurel, in stark contrast to the sheer rock formations. A train whistle screeched as railcars flashed by on the narrow tracks, speeding along the river's edge going north from the city to Yonkers, Greystone, and New Hamburg. As Rose Schneiderman later recalled, it was a beautiful day to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Women's Trade Union League.[1]

On deck, distinguished New York citizens talked and laughed with recently arrived immigrants. Ladies wore lovely hats and sensible shoes, some of better quality than others. Men were dressed in dark suits and neckties, straw hats and bowlers, some more worn than others. Sounds of Yiddish, Italian, Polish, and Russian mixed musically with the English of high society and the Irish pub. The destination of these unusual traveling companions was Poughkeepsie, where buses waited to take them five miles

north on the Old Post Road to Hyde Park and Springwood, the family home of Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt. Mrs. James Roosevelt, the governor's mother, had issued invitations for a gathering from two to six in the afternoon.

Rose Schneiderman was not on the boat. She and Maud Swartz, her friend and partner at the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), had joined the Roosevelts at their home the night before to make final preparations and be on hand to greet the guests as they arrived. Eleanor Roosevelt reminded the governor about the event: his was the starring role, "the 'piece-de-resistance' tho they have a pageant at 3." The afternoon program overflowed with education, politics, song, and dance. Mary Dreier, one of the founders and wealthy activists known as "allies" in the WTUL, put the final touches on the pageant she had written for the occasion. Pantomime and songs told the story of working girls: the shirtwaist strikes of 1909, the devastating Triangle Company fire, employer resistance, and police brutality. The young women in the cast wore the working girls' shirtwaists and skirts and performed their show for over four hundred guests on the rolling lawn of the governor's mansion overlooking the Hudson River. Their voices rang out as they marched and sang, "Though to jail we had to hike, We won the strike, hurrah." Using drama, song, and stories, they told the history of the Women's Trade Union League and the struggle of working women to join unions. They educated as they sang and danced, a familiar technique for women's labor programs.[2]

Governor Franklin Roosevelt used the occasion to ask for labor's help and to show support for their cause. He announced his appointments to a new commission created by the legislature to make recommendations on an old age pension law for the state and called on organized labor to support the program, long a goal of the WTUL. While praising the League's work, he went on to note that "employers and employes [*sic*] alike have learned that in union there is strength. . . . There has also been a growing realization on the part of our people that the State itself is under obligation to those who labor, that the citizen who contributes by his toil to the wealth and prosperity of the commonwealth is entitled to certain benefits in return."[3]

Mrs. Thomas Lamont, chair of the League's finance committee, presented Schneiderman with a check for $30,000 to retire the mortgage on the League's clubhouse at 247 Lexington Avenue. As president of the League, Rose thanked her and acknowledged the contributions of the Roosevelts. She highlighted the improvements in wages and working conditions for women that the League had helped to accomplish in its twenty-five-year history. John Sullivan, president of the New York State Federation of Labor, and Mrs. Henry Goddard Leach, president of the state League of Women Voters, also spoke.

Supper was served on the terrace. Nell Swartz, a member of the State Industrial Board, had an opportunity to visit with Morris Feinstone, secretary of the United Hebrew Trades. Eleanor Roosevelt could talk with William Collins, an organizer for the American Federation of Labor. Pauline Newman, an organizer for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), might catch the governor's ear for a moment. Young factory workers and members of the League enjoyed a very pleasant and unusual day before boarding the buses that took them back to the boat, sailing down the Hudson, and returning to the Lower East Side, praising the governor as they went. "Was not the Governor great," they enthused. "How democratic he is." The *New York Times* declared this "the first time that a labor organization had met in such a setting." It was not to be the last.[4]

This event marked a turning point for Eleanor Roosevelt. She had entered the 1920s with a basic understanding of work, politics, and unions. She first learned about dangerous working conditions, squalid tenements, and immigrant workers as a young girl volunteering with progressive reformers. Her aunt Bye, sister to Uncle Theodore Roosevelt, president of the United States, taught her about political power behind the scenes. Knowledge about the traditional world of male trade unions was gained through her husband's developing political career, but it was Rose Schneiderman and members of the Women's Trade Union League who transformed ER's basic awareness of labor issues into a core belief about unions and their ability to improve people's lives. These women conveyed the depth of the problems faced by working people and offered the union framework as a critical part of the solution on the factory floor, in the classroom, and at the statehouse. When ER asked why women should join unions, they explained to her that women, like men, should join unions to secure their rights on the job and in the community. She made sure that FDR heard their lessons as well.[5]

Some years later, speaking before a WTUL audience, ER said: "I truly believe that I understand what faces the great masses of people in the country today. I have no illusions that any one can change the world in a short time. . . . Yet, I do believe that even a few people, who want to understand, to help and to do the right thing for the great numbers of the people instead of for the few can help." The responsibility of individuals to work for the common good was one of her early core beliefs, and she credited her union friends with teaching her more than they realized. Accepted and valued by these working-class women, ER returned their friendship, incorporated their ideals and strategies into her own reform agenda, and joined forces with them to improve the lives of working women. She used her newly acquired knowledge and skills behind the scenes and in her public role as the governor's wife to support unions, orchestrating a mix of social, substantive, and political events that she carried with her to the White House.[6]

Starting on the Lower East Side

Her efforts to understand the world of work began in 1902, when eighteen-year-old Eleanor Roosevelt returned to New York City from Allenswood, a fashionable English finishing school. At Allenswood, under the fond guidance of headmistress Marie Souvestre, young Eleanor developed a lifelong love of theater, art, and music. Encouraged to be independent and to think for herself, she was exposed to new, liberal ideas. Mlle. Souvestre was an atheist, a feminist, and an English positivist. Led by Frederic Harrison, the positivists supported trade unions and legislation to help the working classes. Later she acknowledged that much of what she became in life "had its seeds in those three years of contact with a liberal mind and strong personality." She returned to New York to make her debut in society.[7]

A debutante's life was filled with theater and concerts, lovely lunches, elegant dinners, and elaborate balls, but ER could not make this social world her whole life. She soon joined a group of elite young women who formed the Junior League for the Promotion of Settlement Movements. Led by Mary Harriman and the daughters of several other wealthy New York families, they decided to do something useful for their city. They were part of a movement that swept through urban areas during the Progressive Era. By 1910 there were more than four hundred settlement houses across the country providing shelter, health care, and various forms of education and entertainment to the poor and to newly arrived immigrants. The movement was in full force on the Lower East Side of Manhattan at the turn of the century.[8]

Tall and willowy, with long golden hair swept back from her face and caught in a braid in back, ER dressed in the fashionable high-necked, long-sleeved blouse known as a shirtwaist and a slim ankle-length skirt. Family and friends noted her lovely blue eyes. She cut a stylish figure when taking the elevated train or the Fourth Avenue streetcar from cousin Susie Parish's house on the Upper East Side, then walking across the Bowery to the College Settlement on Rivington Street, two blocks south of Houston on the Lower East Side. She insisted on taking public transportation even at night and refused the rides offered in her friend Jean Reid's carriage. Passing drunken men on the street corners and in the saloons of the Bowery made her fearful, but she loved working with the children. At the settlement house, a stately six-story red brick building with a basketball court on the top floor, she taught calisthenics and dancing to children who had already put in long hours of work in the factories or doing piecework at home. They were the sons and daughters of Jewish and Italian immigrants who were flooding the wretched tenements to work in the rapidly expanding garment industry. Between 1881 and 1924, 2 million Jews emigrated from eastern Europe to the United States; the vast majority started their new lives in this neighborhood.[9]

ER valued her work and soon introduced her cousin Franklin D. Roosevelt, then a Harvard senior, to this new world. She remembered that a "glow of pride ran through her" when one of the little girls said that her father wanted ER to come to their home so he could give her something because the girl enjoyed her classes so much. "Needless to say, I did not go," she recalled, "but that invitation bolstered me up whenever I had any difficulty in disciplining my brood!" On another occasion a little girl was ill, and ER and Franklin went to visit the tenement where the child lived. "When we got out on the street afterward," she wrote, "he drew a long breath of air. Not fresh air, there in those crowded, smelly streets with pushcarts at the curb. But better than the air in that tenement. 'My God,' he said, aghast. 'I didn't know people lived like that!'" Eleanor and her "feller," as the children called Franklin, began an education that profoundly affected their views of the world.[10]

Learning about poverty, poor working conditions, and ways to confront these problems went well beyond giving dance lessons. Gathering the facts was a central tenet of the newly emerging field of social work and the basis on which to challenge existing laws and public policies, part of the Progressive Era "search for order." Firmly rooted in this tradition, ER believed that "nothing could be done, of course, until someone knew the facts: seeking for them, checking them, investigating to make sure of what was actually happening. All of this was necessary before anything could be done to better conditions." ER began the process of collecting data when she joined the Consumers League that winter. She went with an experienced older woman from the League to investigate garment factories and department stores. It had never occurred to her, she later recalled, that "the girls might get tired standing behind counters all day long, or that no seats were provided for them if they had time to sit down and rest. I did not know what the sanitary requirements should be in the dress factories, either for air or lavatory facilities. This was my first introduction to anything of this kind." When she investigated the sweatshops in which artificial feathers and flowers were made, ER was appalled. She later recalled:

> In those days, these people often worked at home, and I felt I had no right to invade their private dwellings, to ask questions, to investigate conditions. I was frightened to death. But this was what had been required of me and I wanted to be useful. I entered my first sweatshop and walked up the steps of my first tenement. It is hard to look back and remember the terrible world that, in actual years, is not really so long ago.... I saw little children of four and five sitting at tables until they dropped with fatigue, and earning tragically little a week. Conditions of employment were such that the workers were often in real physical danger and yet the average person was rarely aware of the situation.[11]

Through the Consumers League, ER was introduced to the "white list" and the potential power of the shopper. Members of the League evaluated retail stores and urged women to patronize only those stores on the list, which had been found to follow policies of equal pay for equal work, a ten-hour workday, and a minimum wage of $6 per week. She also learned about the need for legislation. One of the League's major goals was to enact child labor legislation to end the kind of sweating work for children that ER observed. Acknowledging companies that had good working conditions and lobbying for legislation to prohibit bad working conditions were strategies she would long remember.[12]

Other members of the Roosevelt family discouraged this volunteer work. They were concerned that ER might be hurt or that she might bring some disease home with her from the tenements filled with immigrants. But family members had gone to the Lower East Side before: ER accompanied her father there when she was only six years old to help serve Thanksgiving dinners to the newsboys and went with him to help at the Children's Aid Society. She accompanied other family members on charitable errands to Hell's Kitchen and the Bowery Mission, much in the tradition of her grandfather. The Junior League and the Consumers League, however, offered a new way to meet the charitable obligations of her class, one that was compatible with her father's work in the past but also offered a deeper understanding of the causes of social and economic problems. Eleanor wrote Franklin that she had spent the morning "at a most interesting class on practical Sociology!" adding, "Now, don't laugh, it was interesting and very practical and if we are going down to the Settlement we ought to know something." She took her work seriously, spoke up in meetings, and became a confidante of other debutantes.[13]

Yet ER's childhood experiences were quite different from life at Allenswood and volunteering in the tenements. The Roosevelts were one of the oldest and most distinguished families in New York. Anna Eleanor Roosevelt was the first of Anna and Elliott Roosevelt's three children. In 1892 her beautiful socialite mother died of diphtheria. In a few short years, however, Eleanor had learned insecurity and fear from her lovely but remote mother. Several months later her younger brother died of scarlet fever, and she and her youngest brother, Hall, were sent to live with their maternal grandmother, Mary Livingston Ludlow Hall, in her brownstone on West Thirty-seventh Street. Her father visited only occasionally. Elliot Roosevelt was lost to alcohol, drugs, and unsuccessful rehabilitation efforts, but he remained the primary source of love and encouragement for his young daughter until he died two years later, leaving ten-year-old Eleanor and her brother with the Halls in New York City. Summers were spent at the family estate in Tivoli on the Hudson River, with various aunts and uncles, often in states of distress. Alcoholism

was one of several devastating and recurring problems that plagued this grand and wealthy family. While Grandmother Hall insisted on strict rules and cold baths, there were also tutors, French lessons, tennis, horses, and occasional raucous weekends with Uncle Theodore and the Oyster Bay Roosevelts. Eleanor later described a full but sad and lonely childhood despite the wealth and prominence of her family.[14]

ER's exposure to the world of work and social change soon came to an end when she assumed her adult place in the family social order. On 17 March 1905, she married Franklin Delano Roosevelt, her fifth cousin once removed. Uncle Theodore, former governor of New York and now president of the United States, gave his niece away at an elegant wedding ceremony in her cousin's home. Franklin completed his last year of law school at Columbia University, and their first child, Anna, was born on 3 May 1906. The next year he joined the firm of Carter, Ledyard and Milburn. His mother, Sara, and aunt Susie insisted that Eleanor could do more for the less fortunate by "serving on proper charitable boards and making modest donations, the appropriate activity for a young matron."[15]

ER was no longer teaching immigrant children or inspecting sweatshops, but she refined her organizational skills by managing her family and negotiating with her mother-in-law and the large Roosevelt clan. She moved the growing family several times a year from New York City to Hyde Park to their summer home on Campobello, a Canadian island off the coast of Maine. Later the itinerary would include Albany, Washington, DC, and Warm Springs, Georgia, with more children and an ever larger staff. During her first ten years of marriage, Eleanor gave birth to six children. These were years when women of the upper class were confined to home during much of their pregnancies. When she did go out, there were numerous social and family obligations that she was duty bound to fulfill, and fulfill them she did, while also supporting her husband's growing political ambitions.

Forming a Political Partnership

FDR's admiration for Theodore Roosevelt and his own political ambitions were no secret. In 1910 he decided to run for a state senate seat in New York, beginning his career as Uncle Theodore had in Albany. After conferring with his uncle, he decided to maintain some independence by running as a Democrat, his father's party, in the heavily Republican rural district encompassing Hyde Park. It was his first political victory. During this time Eleanor gave birth to their fourth child, Elliot. Anna and James were then four and three years old, respectively. Their third child, Franklin, had died in infancy, a heartbreaking experience for his mother.[16]

While ER professed to have no role in her husband's political life, she had also spent time in Washington, DC, with her aunt Bye during the formative years before she married. President Roosevelt was a frequent visitor to his sister's house, seeking her counsel in what became known as the "little white house." ER learned something of the passion and power of politics as well as how some women could participate even when they did not have the right to vote. She recalled, "In Washington, I gradually acquired a faint conception of the political world"; she loved being with her warm and welcoming aunt Bye. When the Roosevelts moved to Albany in 1911, their home soon became a place where people of influence and power congregated. The house on State Street was a meeting place for Franklin's constituents and for the liberal Democratic coalition that was opposed to the Tammany Hall machine of New York City. There, insurgents were sometimes joined by Tammany regulars. ER got to know many of the men, including the Tammany Twins: Robert Wagner, the thirty-three-year-old president pro tem of the state senate, and Alfred E. Smith, the assembly majority leader, both of whom became important to her and to the labor movement.[17]

In 1911 Wagner, Smith, and the Factory Investigating Commission began to develop reform legislation after the devastating Triangle Fire, which killed 146 garment factory workers, mostly young immigrant women. FDR was more involved in the agricultural issues of his rural district but seemed to learn and grow in that first year. By 1912 he favored a workmen's compensation bill, personally investigated work hazards in an Adirondack iron mine, and gave strong testimony at a legislative hearing supporting the thirty-two bills proposed by the commission. He expressed reservations about unions, especially the use of the boycott, but that did not stop him from reintroducing the workmen's compensation bill on behalf of the New York State Federation of Labor. He also moved from a neutral position to support for women's suffrage, a change attributed in part to the progressive debates at the time and to the active role of Teddy Roosevelt.[18]

In these early years ER learned much about the practical side of politics and a labor movement dominated by skilled tradesmen. She listened, observed, and went to the senate gallery to hear the debates and follow the issues, including labor issues that her husband was addressing. Social gatherings were a way to develop allies in the reform effort. FDR cited the Albany years as the beginning of ER's political involvement. She did not participate in the suffrage movement, however, nor did she publicly address the Triangle Fire or the work of the investigating commission.[19]

FDR came to admire Woodrow Wilson and supported his campaign for president on the Democratic ticket in 1912, despite Teddy Roosevelt's effort to recapture the White House with the new National Progressive Party. Eleanor apparently remained loyal to her uncle. FDR won reelection, and in

early 1913 he was asked to join the new administration of President Wilson as an assistant secretary of the navy. This was a post he very much wanted, having long loved ships and the sea, but also because it was another position that Uncle Theodore once held. The family moved to Washington, DC. Their fourth son, also named Franklin, was born there in 1914, and their youngest child, John, in 1916.[20]

During these early years at the Navy Department, ER first showed her awareness of FDR's work with trade unions, which she attributed to loyal aide Louis Howe, as she described him, the gnome-like, frail, indefatigable Albany newspaperman. He went to Washington as Franklin's secretary and soon decided that they needed new experiences. Howe insisted that FDR find out about labor conditions in the navy yards, which were his special province in the department, and come in contact with the men. From ER's perspective "this was Franklin's first close contact with labor; and there is no doubt... that it was one of the turning points in his development. Certainly it proved of value to him later, both as governor and as president." With Howe at his side, Roosevelt invited the unions in and asked them to teach him. According to historian Frank Freidel, "hardly a day passed without a labor delegation visiting Roosevelt's office." This experience formed the base on which both FDR and ER would build labor support.[21]

As the buildup for World War I began, FDR represented the navy on several of the emergency labor boards and with Howe worked closely with labor leaders, especially the presidents of the International Machinists Union and the Metal Trades Council. ER's awareness of organized labor was reflected through her social role as she worked to connect people with her husband and with one another. When friends at the British embassy responsible for reporting on labor complained that they had to get information from the newspapers, she casually suggested to one of them "that the American Federation of Labor had a building filled with officials in the city of Washington." Knowing that the young Englishman would never call on people he did not know, she arranged for a luncheon with "a number of the heads of various unions, and from that time on [the British] were able to write more comprehensive reports, as they could verify newspaper stories by actual contact with the people involved."[22]

On 2 April 1917 a reluctant President Wilson led the United States to war. In addition to all of her family obligations, ER assumed more active volunteer roles, working at a Red Cross canteen, supervising a knitting room at the Navy Department to make sweaters and scarves for the sailors, and raising money to help care for the wounded. She began to regain her independence, sense of responsibility, and skills, but her life was shaken to the core in September 1918 when she discovered FDR's affair with her social secretary, Lucy Mercer. While this was clearly a watershed moment in the life of the Roosevelt family,

ER's independence, competence, and compassion were already formed, providing a foundation on which her life could be rebuilt: a life with Franklin, but also a life very much apart from him. Under pressure from FDR's mother, they agreed to stay together, but the relationship was forever changed.[23]

During these war years, government policies supported union organizing and management concessions in return for union pledges not to strike. Membership in the American Federation of Labor (AF of L) soared from around 2 million in 1916 to over 3.25 million when the war ended. FDR proudly claimed that there were no strikes or serious disagreements at navy installations or among navy contractors during his seven and a half years of leadership. The end of the war, however, was soon followed by the resumption of fierce hostility in labor-management relations. As the cost of living skyrocketed, with increases in food, rent, clothing, transportation, and taxes, the unions sought higher wages and new members, while employers tried to return to the prewar terms. In 1919 there were more than 2,600 strikes involving over 4 million workers.[24]

With the appointment of Mitchell Palmer as attorney general, the "Red Scare" began in earnest, and unions were a target. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the founding of the Communist Party, USA, joined with concerns about anarchist violence to stimulate fear of a revolution in the United States. The Justice Department was soon infiltrating union meetings and rounding up anyone associated with socialists for deportation in the infamous Palmer Raids. A bomb exploded on the Palmers' doorstep in elegant Georgetown, where they were neighbors of the Roosevelts. Despite these events, ER was beginning to show more awareness and independent thinking about public issues, including labor, revolution, and race. In September 1919 she wrote to a friend, "Now everyone is concerned over strikes and labor questions and I realize more and more that we are entering on a new era where ideas and habits and customs are to be revolutionized if we are not to have another kind of revolution." In the midst of this labor strife, race riots erupted in Washington and ER replaced her entire white household staff with black workers.[25]

At the same time, other branches of the government were trying to bring various factions together, and ER provided firsthand reports. High priority was given to finding a way for labor and management to be more cooperative and end the wave of strikes. President Wilson called for an Industrial Conference beginning on 6 October, with fifty-eight members representing capital, labor, and the public. The meetings were chaired by Franklin Lane, secretary of the interior, who was seen as a neutral party. The Lanes were among the Roosevelts' closest friends in Washington; they met with several other couples on a regular basis for ER's scrambled egg dinners. Labor issues were FDR's responsibility at the Navy Department, but at the time he was in New Brunswick hunting with friends, which suggests that he did not see the meeting as

critical. ER attended the conference and wrote to FDR about the collapse of the talks as the labor delegates walked out, the preparations for another labor meeting in the November, and the continuing threat of a coal strike.[26]

Just as the Industrial Conference ended with no resolution to the labor problems, three international meetings converged on Washington. The International Federation of Trade Unions and the Women's Trade Union League both called meetings in preparation for the month-long session of the International Labor Organization, convened as part of the new League of Nations. On 28 October, as trade unionists arrived from around the world, sixty thousand people gathered in downtown Washington and watched the labor parade honoring Samuel Gompers, president of the AF of L, and proclaiming the right of workers to organize in trade unions. The women's conference passed resolutions supporting child care for employed mothers and the eight-hour day, opposing child labor, and declaring that women should be represented at all future labor conferences.[27]

Because ER spoke French as well as German and Italian, she volunteered to attend one of the teas for the International Women's Conference, where she could be helpful as a translator. She remembered this conference as her first contact with the president, Margaret Dreier Robins, and other members of the Women's Trade Union League. She wrote to her mother-in-law, "I had an interesting amusing time at the tea for the delegates to the International Congress of Women Workers, 19 nations represented & of course a very advanced & radical gathering presided over by Mrs. Raymond Robins!" She also noted in her diary that she had talked with Mrs. Robins, Mlle. Bouillat, and many others.[28]

In 1920 ER first campaigned nationally as a candidate's wife. At the Democratic convention in San Francisco, FDR was nominated for vice president of the United States, with James M. Cox, governor of Ohio, at the top of the national ticket. ER joined the campaign train. Although Louis Howe had been part of their lives since their days in Albany, it was on this campaign trip that he began to engage ER in the issues and to encourage her public speaking. She acquired valuable new skills that enabled her to play a more independent political role. Cox, Roosevelt, and Al Smith all lost in the Republican landslide that saw the election of Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge as president and vice president of the United States. Nathan Miller became governor of New York.[29]

The Roosevelts found themselves back in New York. FDR and those around him saw the defeat of the national ticket as a temporary setback. He formed a law partnership and became vice president of the Fidelity and Deposit Company, a bonding business that insured government contracts. One of his clients was the American Construction Council, which included unions involved in low-cost housing projects; here he learned about wages

and practices in the building trades. He observed the powerful construction union leaders, such as Big Bill Hutcheson, president of the Brotherhood of Carpenters. They had tested each other during the war, and Roosevelt found Hutcheson "tough as armor plate." While caring for their five children and managing schools, staff, and various houses, ER attended classes in typing, shorthand, and cooking. She joined the board of the nonpartisan League of Women Voters and directed its national legislation committee, learning to read the *Congressional Record* and to discuss and summarize bills relevant to the League's progressive agenda. A competent, skilled hard worker, she helped negotiate internal disputes and was soon elected vice chair.[30]

In the summer of 1921, when the Roosevelt family congregated at Campobello, they faced a devastating crisis. After an outing with the children, FDR returned to the house chilled and wet and promptly went to bed. He would never walk unassisted again. Felled by what was ultimately diagnosed as polio, Franklin began the arduous schedule of therapy to regain the use of his paralyzed legs which would continue for the rest of his life. The strain on this robust family was overwhelming, but at the same time the illness helped to strengthen the frayed relations between husband and wife. ER undertook full-time nursing responsibilities, and Franklin learned to rely on her in new ways. Warm Springs, Georgia, where FDR established a treatment center for polio, was added to the list of homes they regularly visited. Friends thought that he became more serious during this period and more "conscious of other people . . . of weak people, of human frailty."[31]

Once the medical routine was in place, ER was ready to expand her public career to include helping to rehabilitate FDR's public role. With encouragement from Howe, she made an effort to keep Franklin's name before the public, while continuing to develop into a political force in her own right. Her work began in earnest with the New York State Democratic Party. After women won the vote in New York State in 1917, followed by the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, they were of new interest to the political parties. In 1922 Nancy Cook, then assistant to the first director of the newly formed Women's Division of the New York State Democratic Party, invited ER, as the wife of the former vice presidential candidate, to give a speech to a large fund-raising event. Building on her apprenticeship with the League of Women Voters, and working with Cook and her partner, Marion Dickerman, ER soon became an integral part of the New York reform network.[32]

Described by historians as social feminists, the women in this network had fought for the right to vote, but they saw suffrage as only one of many reforms necessary to help women achieve economic, social, and political equality. Engaged in a wide range of issues, and opposed to the narrow focus of an equal rights amendment, they played a critical role in New York policies and politics. Legislation was a necessary strategy to protect women workers and

to improve the wages and working conditions of men as well. The women belonged to the City Club, the League of Women Voters, the Joint Legislative Conference, and the Women's Trade Union League, which was where ER met Rose Schneiderman.[33]

A Labor Education Begins

In 1903 several trade unionists and social reformers met in Boston at the same time that the American Federation of Labor was gathering there. Among the settlement house leaders and union activists who wanted to form an organization modeled after the British Women's Trade Union League were Jane Addams of Hull House; Leonora O'Reilly, a shirtmaker; Vida Scudder, a professor; Mary Kenny O'Sullivan, a union organizer; and William Walling, a social worker. They invited unions that included women in their trades to talk with them about forming a new organization. Representatives came from the Retail Clerks, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, the Boot and Shoe Workers, and the United Garment Workers.[34]

Membership in the Women's Trade Union League was open to all men and women, union and nonunion, who were, as Schneiderman reported, "in sympathy with the aims and aspirations of the trade union movement." A constitution was adopted and objectives were established, including aiding women workers to organize, assisting the organized to improve their working conditions, starting clubs and lunchrooms for women working in factories, and helping arrange entertainment for workers. Samuel Gompers of the AF of L voiced restrained support for the WTUL, though he insisted on approving all the organizing activities, which were the lifeblood of the unions. Branches soon opened in Chicago and New York City. The organization gave the unions a way to show they were doing something for women. Financial assistance was very limited, however, and tensions between union men, union women, and middle-class reformers ran high. Nevertheless, the WTUL generated a new community for women in the factories, and they were joined by workers making gloves and artificial flowers and women's and men's clothing, as well as printers, cigar makers, and teachers.[35]

The national and local Leagues were always an uneasy alliance between wealthy women "allies" and "working girls." There were also tensions between the American-born working women, often employed in more skilled jobs, and the immigrant workers, many of whom were Jewish socialists. Over the years they succeeded in forging working relationships. Allies helped organize women workers, housed strikers, joined picket lines, got picketers released from jail, defended them in court, and assisted with contract negotiations. The allies were particularly effective at getting prominent women to volunteer

to march in picket lines, improving press coverage of the strikes, and raising money to support these efforts. Under the direction of founder Margaret Dreier Robins, they established a year-long residential school in Chicago to train women organizers and raised scholarship money to enable working women to attend. As struggles with the male-dominated unions continued, attention increasingly focused on education programs and legislative efforts to protect all working women. Gradually the factory women assumed leadership of the organization.[36]

When Eleanor Roosevelt and Rose Schneiderman met in 1922, the New York League was run by union women. Schneiderman was president and Maud Swartz was secretary. Eleven of the twelve board members were union members, with Mary Dreier, sister of the founder, the only remaining "ally" in a policy-making position. The goals of the New York WTUL continued to shift from union organizing toward legislative solutions and educational activities. Unemployment was high. The labor movement, which had previously included many socialists of various political persuasions, was rent by a fierce struggle between adherents of communism and anticommunists. Schneiderman proposed buying a house where the women could meet and hold classes and parties. A cafeteria would help offset the costs. She saw the house as "a haven of peace when there was strife in the labor movement caused by the Communists, for the League was absolutely non-partisan and non-political." Mrs. Willard Straight, one of the wealthiest women in the city, agreed to chair a fund-raising committee to pay for the house and began with a tea for her friends. She invited Eleanor Roosevelt. Schneiderman reported: "From the moment we were introduced I was impressed by her simplicity of manner and her lovely eyes. As we shook hands, she told me how nice it would be for the League to have its own house and how glad she would be to help us."[37]

Rose Schneiderman was small, she said, like her "mother and... grandfather... four-and-a-half feet tall," with fiery red hair and a powerful voice honed on the street corner soapbox circuit of the Lower East Side. Born in 1882 in the small village of Savin, then part of Russian Poland, she immigrated to the United States with her family in 1890 and settled in the tenements, where her father took up his tailoring trade. Like ER, Rose lost her father quite suddenly when she was only ten years old. Her widowed mother had no money and spoke no English. Rose and two young brothers were placed in orphanages until they were old enough to help support the family. She went out to work at the age of thirteen and became a cap maker by trade. A few years later, when the family went to live with an aunt in Canada, Schneiderman learned a great deal about socialism and trade unions, as well as a love of music and theater. When she returned to New York City, she began organizing the Jewish and Italian immigrants in the sweatshops and factories at about the same time ER was volunteering at the Rivington Street Settlement House.