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FLORENCE KELLEY

Pioneer of Labor Reform

IN 1871, WILLIAM KELLEY TOOK HIS TWELVE-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER Florence on a tour so she'd appreciate the wonders of America's new industrial age. The father was mesmerized by a Western Pennsylvania steel mill's new Bessemer converter (a huge fiery cauldron which turned molten pig iron into steel) and a glass factory's assembly-line operation for making bottles.

But Florence was more shocked than impressed. Touring the steel mill at two in the morning, she recalled, she witnessed the "terrifying sight" of "boys smaller than myself" carrying heavy pails of drinking water for men. These little boys, Kelley thought, "were not more important than so many grains of sand in the molds." At the glass factory, she observed that "[t]he only light was the glare from the furnaces." A glass blower stood in front of each furnace. Near each blower were the "dogs," as the boys were called, whose jobs were to clean and scrape bottle molds, a tedious and dangerous task in the dark and hot factory.

Kelley never forgot these images, or her impression "of the utter unimportance of children compared with products, in the minds of the people whom I am among."

As an adult, Kelley did more than any other twentieth-century American to rectify the awful conditions of child labor. She was also a leading

organizer against sweatshops and a pioneering advocate for working women. She helped lead the battle for groundbreaking local, state, and federal labor laws, including the ones that established the

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minimum wage and the eight-hour day. Kelley was a pathbreaker in conducting social and statistical research to expose workplace abuses and in developing strategies—such as factory inspections and consumer organizing—to pressure state legislatures and Congress to improve

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working conditions. As a radical and a socialist, she viewed the struggle for workplace reform as part of the broader battle for social justice and played important roles in the feminist, civil rights, peace, and labor movements of her time.

Kelley believed that women with her class privilege had a moral duty to advocate for laws to protect workers, women, and children from the often brutal conditions of unregulated capitalism. “We that are strong,” she wrote as a young woman, “let us bear the infirmities of the weak.”

Kelley was brought up in an activist family. Her father, William—an abolitionist and a founder of the Republican Party in 1854—served fifteen terms as a U.S. Congressman from Philadelphia and was a champion of high wages for working men. Her great-aunt, Sarah Pugh, was a Quaker and an opponent of slavery. Her refusal to use cotton and sugar because they were made with slave labor made an early impression on Florence.

At a time when few women attended college, Kelley’s father—an early advocate of women’s suffrage—encouraged her to further her education. She graduated from Cornell University—where she had been a member of Phi Beta Kappa—in 1882. The University of Pennsylvania rejected her application for graduate school because of her sex. Revealing her early commitment to working women, she founded the New Century Guild for Working Women in Philadelphia and taught evening classes there.

She then decided to attend the University of Zurich, the first European university to grant degrees to women. Her mind, she recalled, “was tinder awaiting a match.” There, she joined the growing circle of students excited by socialism. The socialist critique of capitalism helped Kelley understand the exploitation of women and children she had observed in American and British factories, and the racism her family had fought against. While living in Germany, she translated Friedrich Engels’s book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*—its

first English version, still in print today—and began a correspondence with Engels, Karl Marx’s co-author.

In Zurich she met Lazare Wischnewetsky, a Russian medical student and fellow socialist, whom she married in 1884. The couple had three children. In 1891, prompted by his physical abuse, Kelley fled to Chicago with the children and resumed using her maiden name, although she insisted on being called “Mrs. Kelley” so her children would not be considered illegitimate.

At the time, Chicago was a hotbed of both reform and radicalism. While robber barons accumulated enormous wealth, workers—most of them immigrants—toiled in sweatshops and lived in slums. Bankers, railroad tycoons, and meatpacking moguls controlled the economy and used private armies and bribes to politicians to exercise influence and keep workers disorganized and divided. Out of those circumstances, however, emerged a powerful movement for workers’ rights and social reform that changed America. The 1886 Haymarket riot, the founding of Hull House in 1889, the election of left-wing Democrat John Peter Altgeld as Illinois governor in 1892, the 1894 Pullman strike, and other events reflected the diversity and dynamism of Chicago’s progressive movement.

At the heart of that movement were the workers from the railroad, garment, meatpacking, and other industries that formed unions to improve working conditions, and the social reformers who fought for an end to the slums that suffocated the poor and led to high rates of diseases and childhood deaths. Some of the city’s upper- and middle-class professionals—including philanthropists, journalists, suffragists, intellectuals, members of the clergy, and the first generation of social workers—joined the Progressive Era’s crusade for reform. The web of activists included Eugene Debs, Jane Addams, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Clarence Darrow, and John Dewey.

Soon after arriving in Chicago, Kelley became part of that network. She moved into Hull House,

the pioneering settlement house founded by Addams to serve the working-class immigrants in the surrounding neighborhood. There, she joined a remarkable circle of women—including Addams, Julia Lathrop, and Alice Hamilton—who, for decades, played important roles in the movement for progressive social reform. Kelley lived at Hull House, worked as a librarian at night to support her children, and maintained a hectic schedule of writing, speaking, and conducting research about labor problems, social injustice, and socialism.

Kelley had a profound influence on Hull House and its counterparts around the country. As Addams acknowledged, Kelley “galvanized us all into more intelligent interest in the industrial conditions all about us.” She encouraged the settlement house movement—settlement houses were founded as centers of charity—to embrace political activism, particularly around the rights of workers, women, and children. Her activism helped win important reforms—including state minimum wage, child labor, and factory inspection statutes—that rippled across the country.

Since 1879, the Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly (CTLA)—an umbrella group of the city’s fledgling labor movement—had been trying to get the state legislature to pass legislation ending the exploitation of child workers. The campaign gained momentum after Elizabeth Morgan, a CTLA leader, organized the Illinois Woman’s Alliance and united women’s groups, unions, intellectuals, and liberal churches in the crusade. Kelley quickly became a key part of the movement. In 1892, she convinced the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics to hire her to investigate working conditions in Chicago’s garment industry. That year, the U.S. Commissioner of Labor, Carroll D. Wright, asked Kelley to conduct a survey of Chicago’s slums. In these reports, she uncovered children as young as three working in sweatshops in overcrowded tenement apartments. She found women forced to work past exhaustion, workers who risked pneumonia, and children with burns and other

injuries due to dangerous conditions, many of whom were illiterate and had never attended school because they had to work.

Kelley’s troublesome findings contributed to public outrage over the awful living and working conditions of Chicago’s poor. Like writer Upton Sinclair, journalist Jacob Riis (author of the 1890 exposé *How the Other Half Lives*), photographer Lewis Hine, and a few others, Kelley had a knack for vividly describing the harsh conditions that the urban working class was forced to suffer.

With her intimate knowledge of these terrible conditions, Kelley took state legislators—including those from rural areas—on tours of tenement sweatshops, hoping that they’d be as outraged as she was by the brutal exploitation of workers, especially children and women. She also persuaded labor and civic groups to lobby on behalf of the reform legislation.

As a result of Kelley’s research and organizing work, in 1893 the Illinois legislature passed the first factory law limiting work for women to eight hours a day and prohibiting the employment of children under the age of fourteen. An employer who wanted to hire a child between the ages of fourteen and sixteen had to obtain an affidavit from a parent or guardian certifying his or her age, as well as a doctor’s proof of physical fitness.

To help implement the new law, Illinois’s progressive Governor Altgeld appointed Kelley to be the chief factory inspector. Her strategy, she explained, was to “investigate, educate, legislate, enforce.” With a \$12,000 budget and a staff of twelve, Kelley investigated factories across the state to monitor violations of the new law and issued regular, skillfully-written reports that brought public attention to ongoing abuses.

Not surprisingly, Kelley’s findings stirred controversy. At one factory, someone fired a warning shot at her. And despite the governor’s support, Kelley also discovered that many government officials, like those in the Cook County District Attorney’s office, were not eager to prosecute employers who violated the state’s

factory laws. Kelley would bring forward a clear case of abuse—such as an employer who forced an eleven-year-old boy to work with a “poisonous fluid” that paralyzed his right arm—and have the public official refuse to take the case, practically laughing in her face. She was so angry at the legal system that she took evening classes at Northwestern University School of Law and earned her law degree in 1894.

In 1895, after the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association challenged the new law in court, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that the eight-hour-day provision of Kelley’s law was unconstitutional. Two years later, Governor John Tanner—Altgeld’s successor, who had close ties to business interests—fired her from her job as chief factory inspector.

Frustrated by these legal and political setbacks, Kelley helped forge a new strategy to improve working conditions. With Ellen Henrotin (the wife of an influential Chicago banker and the president of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs), Kelley created the Illinois Consumers’ League to mobilize women to use their purchasing power to improve the conditions of factory workers. In 1899, Kelley was recruited to direct the newly formed National Consumers League (NCL). She moved to New York and took up residence at the Henry Street Settlement, founded by Lillian Wald. Her task was to build a national organization of consumers, dedicated to raising public awareness and passing state legislation to protect workers, primarily women and children. Nothing like this had ever been done before.

For the rest of her life, Kelley worked at the NCL, turning it into a powerful group that changed public awareness of oppressive working and living conditions and influenced many of the most important pieces of social and workers’ rights legislation in the first third of the twentieth century. The NCL was not a women’s organization, but most of its leaders and activists were women.

Through the NCL, Kelley forged an alliance of working-class, middle-class, and wealthy women. Inspired by a group of Jewish housewives in New York who organized a successful boycott of butchers who raised the prices of kosher meat in 1902, Kelley recognized that middle-class

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consumers, mostly women, could be mobilized to protest the unethical practices of businesses that abused their workers and took advantage of consumers. One of Kelley’s most successful strategies was educating consumers about the conditions facing the workers who produced their clothing. The local NCL branches compiled lists of factories and stores that paid decent wages, didn’t make employees work more than ten hours a day, provided safe workplaces, and didn’t hire children—and urged consumers to shop in stores on the NCL’s “white list.” Adopting the trade union tactic of sewing a label on goods produced by union workers, Kelley’s NCL sponsored a “Consumers’ ‘white label’” on clothing to certify that garments had been produced without child labor and under working conditions that obeyed state laws—an idea that many environmental and consumer organizations adopted later in the century.

Kelley traveled constantly, helping to build sixty NCL chapters in cities in twenty states. She spoke to unions, women’s clubs, settlement houses, college students, legislative committees, and other groups to build support for the NCL

and its reform causes. “She had the voice and the presence of a great actress,” observed Frances Perkins, one of Kelley’s protégés who became FDR’s Secretary of Labor and continued crusading for the same causes as her mentor.

Kelley didn’t think that consumers alone could change abusive business practices. She supported union organizing campaigns and worked side by side with unions to push for stronger pro-worker laws.

Kelley played a key role in one of the most important pro-worker court decisions in American history. It was Kelley who—in 1907, along with her NCL colleague Josephine Goldmark—persuaded attorney Louis Brandeis (later a U.S. Supreme Court justice) to defend Oregon’s ten-hour law for women. Drawing on their network of NCL researchers, Kelley and Goldmark worked long hours for weeks to put together the sociological and medical data that Brandeis used to demonstrate the harmful effects of long working days (often twelve to fourteen hours) on women’s health. This “Brandeis brief” made legal history by relying primarily on scientific and social facts, instead of just legal precedent, to win the *Muller v. Oregon* case in 1908. In a precedent-shattering ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that Oregon’s law, which set limits on working hours for women, did not violate the Constitution.

After this ruling, the NCL and other groups were able to push more state legislatures toward adopting a variety of protective labor laws. By 1913, thanks in part to the NCL and various women’s and labor groups, nine states had adopted minimum wage laws for women. These laws later became the basis of the portion of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act that extended minimum wage laws to almost all workers.

From her earliest activist days, Kelley fought against the exploitation of children. In 1902, she and Wald had the idea to create a federal agency to advocate for the improvement of children’s lives. That year, they organized the New York

Child Labor Committee, and two years later they created the National Child Labor Committee to push for state laws to protect children. Finally, in 1912, the group’s organizing efforts persuaded Congress to create the Federal Children’s Bureau. President William Taft appointed Julia Lathrop, a Hull House resident, as its first director.

Using the bureau’s research findings, Kelley helped lobby Congress to pass the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of 1916—which banned the sale of products from any factory that employed children under the age of fourteen—and, five years later, the Sheppard-Towner Act, which created the nation’s first social welfare program by funding health care clinics that provided services to combat maternal and infant mortality. In 1918, the Supreme Court ruled that Keating-Owen had overstepped the federal government’s powers to regulate interstate commerce. But, in 1923, the high court upheld Sheppard-Towner.

Kelley drew on her extensive network of contacts to build a broad movement to link together diverse groups and issues. In 1909, she helped organize the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A strong pacifist and a Quaker, she opposed America’s imperialist adventures in the early 1900s. In 1919, she was a founding member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

An ardent socialist her entire adult life, Kelley joined the Socialist Party, and served as the president of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society (1918-1920), frequently speaking on campuses to recruit students to the cause of radical reform. The group later changed its name to the League for Industrial Democracy, which—in the 1960s—gave birth to Students for a Democratic Society, the leading radical campus group of the era.

Kelley was an active member—and, for several years, the vice president—of the National Woman Suffrage Association. After the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, which

gave women the right to vote, she helped keep feminism's social justice agenda alive through the founding of the League of Women Voters and the Women's Joint Congressional Committee. Kelley

The social reform laws that Kelley fought for eventually bore fruit during the New Deal.

had also been a leader of the National Women's Party, but left the organization because she disagreed with its activism on behalf of an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution.

She believed that the ERA's mandate of equal treatment for men and women would undermine the laws she'd fought for to protect women from workplace exploitation.

The minimum wage, child labor, and other social reform laws that Kelley fought for eventually bore fruit during the New Deal. Many of the people who led those battles were people Kelley had inspired and worked with. But Kelley died in 1932 and didn't get to enjoy the sweet taste of those victories.

Principled, brilliant, impatient, and self-confident, Kelley never backed away from a fight. "Explosive, hot-tempered, determined, she was no gentle saint," said Frances Perkins. At Kelley's funeral, her friend Newton Baker observed: "Everyone was brave from the moment she came into the room."