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### A Stitch in Time

The New Deal, The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and Mrs. Roosevelt

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The New Deal, The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and Mrs. Roosevelt

Brigid O'Farrell

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[Mrs. Roosevelt] conversed amiably with others about trade union activities among the women, relating several interesting episodes revealing her own steadfast allegiance to the cause of labor and political liberty. *Justice*, 1 April, 1934

- 1 At a White House ceremony on March 28, 1934, Sister Margaret Di Maggio, a rank and file member of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), presented a plaque to Mrs. Roosevelt, which read « To Eleanor Anna Roosevelt from her fellow workers of the Italian Dressmakers Union Local 89. » A second plaque, which she received on behalf of her husband, was dedicated to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, « Master Workman of the New Deal. » According to the union newspaper, *Justice*, the plaques were, « [...] intended to commemorate the first anniversary of the New Deal and to express publicly the faith of the Italian dressmakers in the ultimate success of the labor policy of the NRA » (*Justice*, 1 April 1934,10).<sup>1</sup>

Delegation of Italian Dressmakers, Local 89, ILGWU, at White House, *Justice*, 1 April 1934, UNITE Archives ; Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Included are Margaret DiMaggio, ILGWU member, Rose Schneiderman, president of the WTUL, David Dubinsky, president of the ILGWU and other union leaders and members.

- 2 This White House event tells an important story about the Roosevelt New Deal and the labor movement. The New Deal made a direct and dramatic difference in the day to day lives of union members and they, in turn, had an effect on the New Deal. They were key players in a complex set of evolving strategies to end the depression and start an economic recovery through legislation, organizing, strikes, collective bargaining, enforcement, education, and consumer activism. Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady and fellow worker, often supported their efforts both publicly and behind the scenes. By including union women in the analysis, the roles played by union members and Eleanor Roosevelt in the New Deal begin to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

- 3 This story has not been told in the voluminous writings about the 1930s. Historians of the New Deal, and labor historians in general, continue to focus primarily on the activities of union brothers and their counterparts in management and government. In *Rocking the Boat*, O'Farrell and Kornbluh found union women with stories about working with, visiting, or listening to « Mrs. Roosevelt, » all with admiration. At the time, however, few history books mentioned, much less explained, the relationship between the First Lady, women workers, and their unions. Autobiographies of union leaders such as David Dubinsky (Dubinsky and Raskin) and biographies of men like Sidney Hillman (Fraser) barely mentioned women. Historians such as Irving Bernstein and his important books on workers, unions, and the New Deal, and David Kennedy's masterful analysis of the daunting New Deal materials were enormously helpful in providing facts and critical insights about this period. Still, they shed no further light on the question of Eleanor Roosevelt and labor unions.
- 4 In Bernstein's landmark book on unions and the New Deal, *Turbulent Years*, for example, David Dubinsky and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union play a key role in the narrative. Eleanor Roosevelt and Rose Schneiderman, a capmaker, union organizer and president of the National Women's Trade Union League, are not mentioned. During the First Hundred Days, Roosevelt is portrayed as giving little thought to organized labor in his recovery efforts. Yet, by early May he had become « convinced » that the recovery bill must include a guarantee of collective bargaining and win the backing of industry and labor (Bernstein 1979, 29). This paper suggests that Eleanor Roosevelt and Rose Schneiderman helped « convince » the President of the need to include labor.
- 5 Bernstein also notes that the ILGWU was radically changed in the 1930s due to the development of mass-produced dresses in the 1920s. Skill levels were depressed and the membership became predominantly women. He concludes that, « While the old-time cloakmakers and cutters continued to supply the organization's leadership, backbone, and flavor, » they faced new problems (Bernstein 1979, 83). While men did maintain control of top leadership, Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman and Maida Springer Kemp, described here, are examples of the many women who provided the local « leadership, backbone and flavor » necessary, for example, to call 60,000 dressmakers out on strike in 1933.
- 6 More recently Kennedy, in *Freedom From Fear*, includes women workers in the analysis, but Eleanor Roosevelt is given only a few a sentences and the voices of women trade union members are not heard. When discussing the dramatic improvements in wages and working conditions during the 1930s, Kennedy acknowledges the achievements of organized labor and notes Roosevelt's « uncanny ability to associate himself with those achievements » (Kennedy, 321). This paper argues that FDR's strong support from the labor movement was based not solely on his uncanny abilities but, at least in part, on years of hard work by Eleanor Roosevelt and her friends in the labor movement.
- 7 While ER's political writings are a primary source, much of her work remains inaccessible and her autobiographical accounts shed little light on her work with unions. The growing body of women's labor history coupled with biographical volumes on Eleanor Roosevelt, begin to fill the gap (for example see Black, Cook Vols. 1 and 2, Foner, Harris, Lash, and Orleck). Still, the relationship between ER and the labor movement is not a central theme. Rather, these works provide the background on

which to build the current research and provide guideposts to the rich materials available in union archives.

- 8 We begin to explore how union members and leaders worked with Eleanor Roosevelt by focusing on the ILGWU and the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). ER was especially concerned with working women and the NIRA was the first critical piece of legislation affecting labor in the early New Deal. The oral histories from ILGWU members and the union archives with correspondence, convention reports, newspapers, and photographs promise to add substantially to what is available from ER's papers.<sup>3</sup>

#### Setting the Stage

Mrs. Roosevelt asked many questions but she was particularly interested in why I thought women should join unions. I remember so well telling her that that was the only way working people could help themselves [...] It all seemed understandable to her. (Schneiderman 1967, 151)

- 9 Rose Schneiderman was born in the Polish village of Savin in 1882, just two years before Eleanor Roosevelt was born in New York. As told in her autobiography, *All for One*, she emigrated to the United States in 1890 and settled in Manhattan's Lower east side. She started to work in a department store when she was thirteen and by the time she was sixteen had become a capmaker active in the United Cloth and Cap Makers Union. She became an organizer for the ILGWU and then joined the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). Union women and their wealthy women « allies » formed the WTUL to assist working women first by helping them to join unions and later by developing and lobbying for legislation that would improve their wages, hours, and working conditions. Schneiderman became president of the New York League and then the National League (Endelman and Orleck).

Rose Schneiderman sewing cap linings, 1908. UNITE Archives, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

- 10 It was through the WTUL that ER began to meet union women and learn about their experiences as factory workers. She met Rose Schneiderman in 1919, when the International Congress of Working Women was convened in Washington DC by the WTUL. There were women from 19 countries, many who didn't speak English, so ER joined several Washington women to help translate. She invited the U.S. delegation for lunch, including Rose Schneiderman and several other trade union women like Pauline Newman. Newman came to New York from Lithuania at the turn of the century. She worked in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company until the strike of 1909 and then joined the staff of the ILGWU (Newman, Orleck). Soon, the union women were invited for Sunday dinner at the Roosevelt house on 65<sup>th</sup> Street in New York, where they talked with ER about wages, working conditions and why women should join unions (Schneiderman 1967, 151).
- 11 In 1922, ER joined the New York branch of the WTUL. Rose Schneiderman recalled that one night a week she went to the club house, read to the young factory girls, and brought hot chocolate. In 1925, she began a tradition that continued through the White House years ; a Christmas party for the children whose parents were out of work. She provided a Christmas tree, magician, songs, cake and presents and candy for every child. The two youngest Roosevelt children came and the first year FDR read Dickens' A

*Christmas Carol*. She became chair of the League's finance committee and helped raise money to buy a building for their meetings and office space (Schneiderman 1967, 153-157).

- 12 As ER began her active political life in New York State, these same union women, with their organizing experience and lobbying activities, were part of her education. As a result, in 1924, when she chaired the first presidential women's platform committee for the Democratic Party, the women's agenda included the right to bargain collectively, the eight hour day, and an end to child labor ; making front page news in the *New York Times* (Cook, Vol. 2, 61).
- 13 Roosevelt was elected Governor of New York in 1928, and the family moved to Albany. At the time, Eleanor Roosevelt was a teacher, business owner, and political activist, but she continued to champion labor issues. Rose Schneiderman and the members of the WTUL were invited to the mansion when they came to Albany to lobby and they continued their discussions with the Governor. Pauline Newman recalled her early trips to Hyde Park and meetings with the Governor when « We'd just go up there sometimes and had fun. At other times, we'd just sit and talk and he would come out and join us [...] Whenever we came we talked about labor conditions and legislation » ( Newman, 65).
- 14 Frances Perkins also worked with the Roosevelts and the WTUL. FDR appointed her the first woman industrial commissioner of New York and then Secretary of Labor, the first woman ever to hold a cabinet office. She attributed much of FDR's knowledge and sympathy for unions to discussions with these union women. In her book, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, she wrote :
- His attitude toward trade unionism might have been different if his first contacts with labor leaders had been with some of the hard-boiled men who ran the building trades unions. But through the eyes of these girls he saw the exploitation in the sweat shops, and how the tuberculosis rate had shot up in the printing industry before the union stepped in with regulation of hours and wages [...] He learned why some labor leaders are sometimes rough—often quite rough. (Perkins, 32-33)
- 15 Perkins concluded that when Roosevelt went on to meet other labor leaders during his convalescent period and as governor of New York he relied on the knowledge gained from the women Eleanor Roosevelt brought to the house and he appeared to have a real understanding of the trade union movement.<sup>4</sup>
- 16 During these years, ER supported the right of both women and men to work and for all workers to receive decent wages and a reasonable standard of living. She fought for legislation that would provide a safety net of minimum wages and maximum hours, but she also fought for the workers' right to join a union and negotiate their own wages and working conditions through collective bargaining. She came to believe that unionization was an important step for women workers to achieve equal pay. In a less than perfect world, however, protective legislation for women, putting a ceiling on the number of hours they could be forced to work and floor below their wages, was a worthy goal. Ending child labor was a step in improving the working lives of everyone. But Eleanor Roosevelt did more than write about issues and work in the political world. She joined picket lines and as the Governor's wife sent letters of support to picketing workers.<sup>5</sup>
- 17 Roosevelt was inaugurated President of the United States on March 4, 1933. As the New Deal got underway, *Scribner's Magazine* carried an article in their March issue (p.140),

titled « Protect the Worker, The State's Responsibility for Fair Working Conditions, » by Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt. She was introduced as one « who has given of her energy and great ability for years to efforts to secure improved working conditions for labor [...]. » The labor movement, and particularly union women had a proven friend in the White House.

#### A New Deal for Labor

One of the chief reasons for the ILG coming to life again was simply the legislation that was passed under Roosevelt [...] People were no longer afraid to be fired if they joined the union [...] and the collective bargaining law passed. And eventually the other legislation, social security, all that. (Pauline Newman 1976, 75)

- 18 For union leaders and rank-and-file union members Pauline Newman describes the New Deal legislation in a critical order of importance. First was the right to join a union, then to bargain collectively. After that, flowed the temporary emergency measures to put the unemployed back to work, including public works construction projects, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and Federal programs for the arts. The social legislation that would help all workers, union and non-union, followed : social security, wage and hour laws, pension plans, unemployment insurance.
- 19 Two major problems facing the new Roosevelt Administration in 1933 were unemployment for many workers and dramatically falling wages for those who still had jobs (Bernstein 1985, 277-278). Although no one at the time was responsible for keeping track of the unemployed, experts estimate that the number of people without work rose from 1.5 million, or a little over three percent of the workforce, in 1929 to 12.8 million, or 25 percent, in 1933. One out of every four workers couldn't find a job. According to Bernstein (1985,278), « Annual earnings of full-time employees in all industries fell from \$1,405 in 1929 to \$1,048 in 1933 ». For production workers in manufacturing, the average weekly earnings fell from about \$25 in 1929 to less than \$15 in 1933. Women, blacks, children, and farm laborers earned as little as a nickel an hour.
- 20 The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union had reached a peak membership of 105,000 in 1920. By early 1933, they had declined to only 40,000 members. The union was in debt, couldn't pay its electricity bills, and the newspaper *Justice* had to stop publication. When David Dubinsky became president of the union at age 40, in June of 1932, he said « Our union is at a low ebb, its very life may be uncertain [...] If it is destined that I be its undertaker, [...] I shall not try to duck my fate » (Bernstein 1979, 80).
- 21 Organized labor did not play a major role in the 1932 campaign. Unions were broke, memberships were declining, and the industries were in a free fall. The American Federation of Labor took a dim view of government interference in the collective bargaining process and had a policy of remaining neutral during political campaigns. David Dubinsky was a member of the Socialist Party and long in opposition to the Democratic machine in New York City. The only person advocating for a « right to organize » was John L. Lewis, the mercurial president of the United Mine Workers' Union, and he was a Republican supporting Herbert Hoover (Bernstein 1979, 3). Lillian Herstein, an activist in the American Federation of Teachers in Chicago, reflected the attitude of many union members when she assessed Franklin D. Roosevelt and

questioned « this charming squire's courage and wisdom to do what was needed in this bleak year » (O'Farrell and Kornbluh, 24). She voted for Norman Thomas on the Socialist Party ticket.

- 22 The atmosphere in the country in March 1933, was conservative. Despite the bleak circumstances, many suspected unions of being communist (and some were) and the members were increasingly immigrants in unskilled jobs. Employers would soon bring out police, thugs, and the national guard to stop workers' efforts to organize. Women were not expected to work after they married and women in high society did not work at all. Unions were considered most unladylike especially by the society the Roosevelts' called family. Few people would have predicted that David Dubinsky and the Jewish and Italian immigrant women and men of the ILGWU, would be the center of a White House celebration just one year later.
- 23 In fact, the President's first official act on labor issues was to override the wishes of the AF of L and appoint Francis Perkins as Secretary of Labor. The AF of L primarily represented the white male skilled craftworkers with a firm base in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrial system. They considered Secretary of Labor their job and Francis Perkins was not, « a union man, » in any sense. With her background as a social worker and then administrator of industrial policy in New York, however, she knew a great deal about workers and working conditions, especially in the garment trades, and she was a trusted friend to the President, the First Lady, and the WTUL (Berstein 1979, 8-11 ; Martin).
- 24 Many volumes have been written about the New Deal and Roosevelt's First Hundred Days. Seventy years later, his New Deal is credited with stopping the decline of the depression, but not bringing about an economic recovery (Kennedy, 363-380). The impact of this period on the development of the labor movement and improvement in the lives of millions of new union workers, however, was enormous. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) of 1933, with all of its weaknesses, opened a critical door and the unions walked through. The rise and fall of the NIRA, beginning with the 30-Hour Bill, as seen through the eyes of the ILGWU illustrates the complexities of the times and the interrelated strategies used by the union and Eleanor Roosevelt to bring about change.

#### Congressional Hearings

- 25 Economic recovery was a critical area of policy debate within the administration. One group of advisors favored the self-regulation of employers and weakening the anti-trust laws. Others, such as Secretary Perkins, supported massive public works projects to put people to work and increase consumption. The AF of L was solidly behind a shorter work week to put more workers back on the job. The 30-Hour Bill had already been introduced in Congress by Senator Hugo Black and hearings were in process when FDR took office. According to Perkins Roosevelt thought the legislation was unconstitutional and he was concerned that there was no employer support (Perkins, 194). He agreed to have Secretary Perkins testify to try and amend the bill, but he also started the process to develop a more comprehensive alternative.
- 26 Secretary Perkins called a meeting in April to discuss changes with William Green, president of the AF of L, Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and not a member of the AF of L, and Rose Schneiderman, president of the National Women's Trade Union League. While she did not go to see Eleanor Roosevelt

when she was in Washington, on April 17, 1933, Rose Schneiderman wrote to ER about the bill and the proposed changes :

At the summons of the Secretary of Labor I was in Washington Thursday. Together with other members of a Labor Advisory Committee we considered the 30-hour week bill and made suggestions for amending the bill so as to give employers some lee-way. We all felt that it is necessary that the bill also carry a provision for industry boards which shall have power to fix minimum wage rates for the specific industry. We also discussed public works programs which could be launched right away providing, of course, the appropriation is there. We later went to see the President on both these measures and were much heartened by his understanding and willingness to help [...].

27 On April 25, Eleanor Roosevelt attended the Congressional hearing of the House Labor Committee on the Black Bill and brought Ishbel MacDonald, the daughter of the British Prime Minister Harold MacDonald who was visiting the White House. The President called Secretary Perkins, first, and she agreed to have them come, acknowledging that, « [...] the attendance of Miss MacDonald and Mrs. Roosevelt made it a matter of considerable publicity. One could not avoid the ballyhoo of the photographers, the press, the radio, the klieg lights » (Perkins, 195).

28 Perkins goes on to say that after her testimony Roosevelt was publicly committed to the idea of using legislation to regulate working conditions :

From that time on, Congress, the newspapers, the people knew he was in favor of doing something by law to mitigate the hardships of unemployment by techniques of control of hours, wages, and working conditions. He was committed to the principle but not to this particular program. (Perkins, 196)

29 Roosevelt's commitment, however, was expressed not only by her testimony, but by the appearance of his wife at the hearing. It was so unprecedented for a First Lady to attend a Congressional hearing that 400 people crowded into the hearing room (Martin, 262). It also acknowledged not only a commitment to wage and hour laws, but the right to organize and bargain collectively. The Black Bill contained language guaranteeing workers' rights. The same rights would be incorporated into the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), as section 7A.

Eleanor Roosevelt, Ishbel MacDonald and Frances Perkins leaving the Capitol, 25 April 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York

30 Just a year later, Rose Schneiderman sent ER a detailed letter, March 14, 1934, on the NIRA code hearings in Puerto Rico, asking her to attend :

Mr. Long has just had word that the hearing on the Needlework Code is to be held at Washington on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the morning of my return there. I thought I would let you know this in case you should feel inclined to attend the hearing. [...] Your idea of having the hand work here limited to decent material is a most constructive one. If you could make such a statement either at the hearing or send me the written statement to that effect it will do much in getting a decent Code.

31 Attending Congressional and administrative hearings was a way for the First Lady to show support for issues and organizations. She expanded this strategy during her White House years and by 1940 she was testifying at government hearings on worker issues, as well as other issues.

In the Press and Behind the Scenes

32 The 30 Hour-Bill did not move forward. Secretary Perkins saw no evidence that the amendments would be added, and the more comprehensive National Industrial

Recovery Act was sent to Congress less than a month later on May 16. Title I encouraged voluntary cooperation to stabilize prices, prevent unfair competition and overproduction, raise wages, limit hours of work, end child labor, and improve working conditions. Section 7A was incorporated to give unions the right to organize and bargain collectively. Title II was a public works construction project.

33 Perkins suggested that the section for unions was added almost as an after thought when she had it reviewed by William Green, the president of the AF of L (Perkins, 199-200). Yet Roosevelt had become committed to the idea that he needed a bill that had something for everyone in it and that included labor ; a point if not suggested, no doubt reinforced by his wife and friends like Rose Schneiderman who were now invited to events at the White House and to participate in the New Deal initiatives.

34 Under the NRA three advisory boards were established representing industry, labor, and the consumer, to determine the codes for each industry. Secretary Perkins made sure that Rose Schneiderman joined the Labor Advisory Board to help set the codes affecting working women. For many years, the League's efforts to organize working women met with resistance and hostility from many of the male union leaders. Now she joined these leaders on an equal footing on the Board, sharing an office and a secretary with Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (Schneiderman, 195-6 ; Endelman).

35 On June 15, the day before the NIRA was signed by the President, the First Lady held one of her newly instituted press conferences. According to the notes of one of the press women, she introduced Schneiderman as president of the National Women's Trade Union League and a member of the Labor Advisory Board for the NRA. They talked about the codes and the importance of getting the opinions of the workers :

Mrs. Roosevelt : « Our hope is that before codes are made an attempt will be made to get the opinion of workers, both men and women, as to what a code should be like. The logical way is to hold hearings—both men and women—in centers of industry. ☹...☹ Only where they are organized do women get equal pay for equal work. » (Beasley, 12)

36 Rose Schneiderman considered her work on the NRA Labor Advisory Board the high point of her career :

Here was an opportunity to help working women such as had never existed before [...] I helped make the codes for industries employing women, and it still thrills me that I had a part in bringing about monumental changes in the lives of working men and women [...] The greatest of these came when Section 7A was included in every code. It gave workers the right to collective bargaining through representatives chosen by themselves, not by their employers, and it legalized the worker's right to join a union. (Schneiderman, 9)

37 As with most of the New Deal, however, women were not treated equally. In August 1933, Schneiderman was quite concerned that women were not going to receive equal wages with men in many of the codes. According to Foner's account in *Women and the American Labor Movement*, she notified Eleanor Roosevelt, who returned from Hyde Park to the White House in order to discuss this issue with General Johnson, director of the NRA, and Secretary Perkins. The principle of equal pay for equal work was announced as the basis for all the codes and inequalities were to be eliminated. Sixty codes with wage differences by sex were revised and eventually 75 percent of the 493 codes provided for equal pay. The change was attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt (Foner, 279-80).

- 38 Yet one-fourth of the codes still specified wage differentials between men and women and African American women fared worst of all. While many efforts on behalf of equality failed, strong efforts were made and in the end, wages and working conditions improved for many women contributing to their « incremental progress. »<sup>6</sup>
- 39 Frances Perkins also referred to ER's role in cabinet meetings. She reported that the President would say, « You know my Missus gets around a lot, » or « My Missus says that people are working for wages way below the minimum set by NRA in the town she visited last week. » She concluded that, « He often insisted on action that public officials thought unnecessary because Mrs. Roosevelt had seen with her own eyes and had reported so vividly that he too felt he had seen. They were partners » (Perkins, 70). The material reviewed here suggests that some presidential actions were based not only on ER's reporting skills, but on the work she did with people both inside and outside the administration and the labor movement.

#### Union Organizing and Educating

When the strike was settled, industrywide, then we had to begin to build the union. Just hundreds and thousands of workers were enrolled into the garment workers' union, and this was a great excitement. My own local 22 was one of the bigger locals. Everyone who was not Italian belonged to Local 22, the dressmakers. We had 32 nationalities. We prided ourselves on this [...]

You still had the Italian workers belonging to Local 89, which was the Italian-language local [...]

You think of Luigi Antonini, with his flowing black tie [...] He brought to the garment workers a kind of cultural content. When we had our celebration in Madison Square Garden after we won the general strike, everybody from the Met was there to sing for the workers. You had the great freedom song of the Italian workers. « Pan y Rosa, » « Bread and Roses. » That's why I say that, for me, the trade union movement was always a great love affair and a great excitement. (Maida Springer, 1996)<sup>7</sup>

- 40 Maida Springer was born in Panama. She arrived at Ellis Island with her parents on August 19, 1917, when she was seven years old. She worked in a garment factory during high school, but after graduation she became a receptionist for a short while, before marrying Owen Springer and having a baby. Her husband had a good job and they both expected her to stay home. But when the Depression hit, Owen took a large cut in salary and Maida went back to the garment factory. Family took care of her young son.
- 41 In her oral history, Maida Springer begins to capture the excitement of those early days in the New Deal and the dramatic effect on workers. Everyone soon realized that the NRA had flaws and weaknesses, but it opened a door as never before and union leaders and workers were ready to act. David Dubinsky, of the ILGWU, Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers, all watched the development of the NIRA very carefully and moved swiftly once it was

passed into law. While William Green and the AF of L craft unions hailed it as the « magna carta » of labor, they took little action. Dubinsky referred to the period after the passage of the NIRA as, « the two months that shook the Ladies' Garment Industry » (Bernstein 1979, 85).

- 42 Dubinsky's strategies included cooperation, the strike, and using the NRA code hearing process. He immediately set to work with the New York employer associations to standardize conditions through an NRA code for the coat and suit industry. The code prohibited child labor, established a thirty-five hour week in manufacturing, unemployment insurance, and a substantial increase in wages. In the all important dress industry, however, his strategy was to organize the nonunion employers and stall the NRA hearings until after the code was approved in the coat and suit industry. He met with Rose Schneiderman and he succeeded. The coat and suit code was signed on August 4 and on August 16, he called a general strike in the dress industry. Sixty thousand workers, mostly women, walked out in New York City and in shops between New Haven and Camden. It was one of the largest work stoppages in New York and ILGWU history. *Justice* wrote, « All came out of the factories with song on their lips and with victory glowing in their eyes » (1 September 1933).

New York Dressmakers strike, August 1933, UNITE Archives, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca New York.

- 43 A settlement was reached four days later and terms similar to the coat and suit code were written into an NRA code for the dress industry. The timing had been crucial. The strike was called just twelve days after the first code was approved and six days before the hearings on the dress code were to begin. While Bernstein gave credit to Hillman for helping Dubinsky in Washington, Dubinsky was grateful for Rose Schneiderman's help in this strategy. He acknowledged her importance and the significance of her close White House ties during an executive board meeting, « Rose has a lot to say in Washington. If anybody does not do the right thing, Rose Schneiderman knows the address of the White House. If it is not the President, it is the First Lady to whom she makes her complaints » (Endelman, 120).
- 44 Thousands of workers joined the union. The Italian dressmakers' Local 89 became the largest local in the nation with 40,000 members. Maida Springer's Dress Local 22 grew to 28,000 members. She was one of 4000 African-Americans to join the union. Similar successes were found in the coal fields and the men's garment industry. But this was not to be a time of industrial peace as Roosevelt had predicted. Employers fought section 7A guaranteeing union recognition and company unions grew dramatically. Once the NRA codes were established, they had to be enforced. Employers who broke the code were known as « chislers. » In the first half of 1933, the number of days lost to strikes did not exceed 603,000 in one month. In July, that number went to 1,375,000 and in August it reached 2,378,000. A labor dispute board had to be quickly put into place and Senator Wagner of New York agreed to chair it (Bernstein 1979, 172-173). For the dressmakers like Maida Springer the NRA was just the beginning :

I'm a member ; I work in the shop. I go and work in the shop every day from 1933 until 1941 or 1942. But I'm active, very active...I took all the courses that were required of me. [...] I could not be a member of the Committee on Prices in my local union if I did not know what I was talking about. I could not represent the shops. So I took the courses I did on the advice of my business agent so that I could be a better union member...But the employer tried to intimidate you. This was a brand-new experience [...] We were fighting for legislation, for all of the things that went on in

the Roosevelt administration in which labor was so closely identified. The union changed our way of life. (O'Farrell and Kornbluh, 90).

- 45 In addition to going to education classes and learning from the business agents, the union used the newspaper as a major educational tool. The September 1, 1933 issue covered the New York dressmakers strike, Rose Schneiderman's appointment to the Labor Advisory Board, and Dubinsky's speech to an NRA rally at Madison Square Garden. In an October 1 article, « A New Era Opens for Labor Education, » Fannia Cohn, a long time educator for ILGWU and Executive Secretary of the Educational Department, stressed that the educational activities were designed to meet the economic, social, cultural, and health needs of the workers. In addition to evening classes and residential schools, an important educational medium would be the publication, *Justice*, which would carry the programs into the membership meetings and was sent home free to all members.
- 46 By April 1934, the ILGWU had established a Codes Observance Bureau and there were regular columns explaining the codes, amendments, and how the code authorities worked. They addressed the often complicated workings of the industry for the many different types of garments (coats, suits, dresses, children's clothes, undergarments, rain wear, knit goods, silk dress) and the many different workers (embroiderers, button hole workers, blouse workers, cutters, pressers, stitchers, sewers, operators, and finishers, to name a few) who were organized by skill, industry, and language into locals, joint boards, and regions across the country.
- 47 The paper was used to present helpful tools for union activists like Maida. In October 1934, the New York Dressmakers' Section addressed « The Task of Minimum Wage Enforcement. » Because of the piece work system, wages and hours varied from week to week and few factories had time clocks, workers complained to the union that at the end of the week they were paid less than the guaranteed minimums agreed to in the summer of 1933, but it was hard to prove. The union developed a form, published it in the paper, and then printed 250,000 copies to provide a method of keeping accurate account of the hours and wages.
- 48 The union recognized that it took more than Roosevelt and the legislation to change the workplace. Action on the part of the union was needed. This point was reinforced by Rose Schneiderman in 1935, as she also called for women in union leadership positions, in the *Justice* article « Our Rose »—America's Premier Woman Laborite : »
- The N.R.A. has achieved a tremendous job in codifying industry [...] It has aided both skilled and unskilled workers in hours and wages in many instances, in the needle trades, it has doubled the wages of the worker [...] there are weak points in the NRA [...] But this is not the fault of the law alone ; as trade unionists, we cannot and should not rely on the Government to achieve a millennium for us. Better trade union organization would give codes better policing. Conditions can only be improved with strong trade unions. (*Justice*, 15 April 1935)
- 49 As these changes were being made, Eleanor Roosevelt was again providing support for the workers. While she felt that she could not join picket lines as First Lady, she refused to cross them. In one year she donated the profits from her radio talks to the WTUL to keep it going. She visited work sites and spoke at union meetings. Shown here is the First Lady at a later union meeting with Rose Pesotta, a fiery organizer for the ILGWU.

Pesotta eventually resigned her position as the only woman vice president of the union in protest of the unspoken policy to have only one woman on the executive board.<sup>8</sup>

Eleanor Roosevelt speaking at a union meeting, with Rose Pesotta standing behind. 1943, UNITE Archives, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

- 50 Union members were also included in the First Lady's events as Maida Springer recalled :

I would be called out of the shop, for example, to go to a meeting at lunch to represent the union. On one occasion, it was a luncheon meeting at the Waldorf-Astoria. This was a great honor. I came to work that morning in my moccasins and working clothes, you know, a heavy coat. I was a size ten then. The whole shop got involved. I was loaned somebody's pocketbook ; a dress was taken off of the dressform and fitted on me, and somebody else gave me a better-looking coat than the one I had on, and I marched off to the luncheon dressed to the nine. Three women were there, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Madame Litvinov, and Mrs. Roosevelt—and there I was, representing my local union, representing the ILGWU in solidarity. I went back to the shop and stitched my dresses, and at six o'clock I went to the union board meeting in my moccasins and my old coat and my tam-o-shanter. There was a great howl because a few hours earlier I had been so dolled up. This was the kind of political and social atmosphere of that whole period. (O'Farrell and Kornbluh, 92)

#### Consumer Activism

- 51 It was in the area of consumer activism, however, where the strategies of the union, women workers and ER most directly converged, beginning with the Blue Eagle logo and the slogan « We Do Our Part, » which became a national symbol of the NRA. The NRA had no enforcement power and the legal staff thought that the act would be found unconstitutional. General Johnson turned to the idea of a symbol to be awarded to companies for their voluntary compliance with the codes. He took credit for this idea based on his experiences during World War I. Some historians overlook the effort all together, while others classify it as « hoopla. »<sup>9</sup>
- 52 For the ILGWU and Eleanor Roosevelt, however, it was a serious strategy to mobilize workers and housewives, the wealthy and the poor. David Dubinsky and the ILGWU, like Eleanor Roosevelt, used multiple strategies to reach their goals. While organizing and collective bargaining were the bedrock of the union strategy, education was important and so was consumer support. Having representatives in top government positions and passing the best laws were not enough. You had to mobilize the American people, an idea central to Eleanor Roosevelt.
- 53 In the clothing industry, a label to certify « good » employers had been discussed for some time. The WTUL had worked on this issue and in April, 1933 there was a conference on the label idea at which Eleanor Roosevelt was a principal speaker. Right before joining the New Deal, Rose Schneiderman asked if ER might be honorary chair of the « National Committee for the Abolition of the Sweatshop and for the Promotion of an Identification Label on Women's Clothes, » if it wouldn't get her into « hot water » (24 April 1933). ER declined to be honorary chair, but she was a strong supporter of the idea (25 April 1933).
- 54 Eleanor Roosevelt firmly believed that a new social order was developing and consumers had an important role to play. In November 1933, she published her first book, *It's Up To The Women*. She said, « we are going through a great crisis in this country and the women have a big part to play if we are coming through it

successfully » (Roosevelt, 1933, vii). The book was a call to women across class lines. She told the wealthy women to live more frugally and treat the people who work for them with respect and decent wages and working conditions. She advocated for the right of all women to work, including married women. She called on working class women to demand equal pay for equal work and to join unions or form their own unions. She offered menus and money saving tips to housewives and called on all women to « create a will to peace » (Roosevelt, 238). She devoted an entire chapter to the NRA and the responsibility of women to use their buying power to establish a permanent basis of fair play, because, « by watching now, the women will help to lay this permanent foundation » (Roosevelt, 249). The NRA label was a strategy to involve citizens in the New Deal. ER saw consumer power as a way to change the world and unions like the ILGWU were powerful grassroots partners.

- 55 On October 13, 1934, the First Lady and her daughter Anna sewed on the first Blue Eagle NRA labels, made under the Coat and Suit Code. She received the coat from the shop workers, and union cooperation in the effort was reflected in President Dubinsky standing by her side in the photograph. In January of 1934, Secretary of Labor Perkins sewed in the first dress label and in February, Eleanor Roosevelt sewed in the first hat label with a golden thimble from the Millinery Workers Union. These events were covered not only in the union newspapers, but in the mainstream press, such as *The New York Times* (Cook, Vol. 2, 79).

Eleanor Roosevelt and daughter Anna sewing in the first NRA label for coats with David Dubinsky and other union and industry leaders, 12 October 1933, UNITE Archives, Kheel Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

#### Beyond the NRA

- 56 In 1935, the Supreme Court ruled that the NIRA was unconstitutional and the advisory boards and related administration were dismantled. But much had been learned. Senator Wagner was already working on the National Labor Relations Act, in consultation with his old colleagues from New York, including Francis Perkins and Rose Schneiderman. Federal protection of wages and hours for at least some workers, both women and men, would reemerge in 1938 as the Fair Labor Standards Act. A role for the federal government in improving wages and working conditions and establishing the right of workers to join unions and bargain collectively had been established. Gains won through the NRA and negotiated into collective bargaining agreements remained intact.
- 57 The NRA is one example of how union factory workers and their leaders supported and used one of the first initiatives of the New Deal and worked with the First Lady in that process. In today's world, it is hard to imagine how radical this was. Mrs. Roosevelt invited the Italian shop workers to the White House. A shop worker went to the Waldorf Astoria for lunch with Mrs. Roosevelt. ER spoke at union meetings and visited their workplaces. Like her attendance at hearings, these were not one time events, but a long term strategy. Having unions represented at the White House gave them a respect and visibility that was unprecedented at the time. The President met with them and their talks continued to provide an opportunity for working class women and men to share their views and concerns with him. Eleanor Roosevelt could not stop the brutal attacks that would develop in the steel plants of Pittsburgh and Chicago or the sit down strikes in the auto plants of Detroit, but she could and did provide another model for working with unions in an atmosphere of dignity and respect. As the Italian workers

said, President Roosevelt was the « Master Craftsman, » but First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was « their fellow worker. »

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## NOTES

1. This is the first paper from a new study of Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Labor Movement, part of the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, George Washington University, Washington, DC (<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers>). I would like to thank Allida Black, director, and the staff of the ER Papers Project for their encouragement, support, and continued good cheer. Staff at the Kheel Center, Cornell University, and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park have been more than generous with their time and ideas. A travel grant provided by the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute was very much appreciated. Helpful comments were provided by participants in the affiliated scholars seminar, Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Stanford University, and by the participants at the CIRNA conference. Any errors of fact or interpretation are, of course, mine.

2. Eleanor Roosevelt is usually referred to as Mrs. Roosevelt or the First Lady by union members and in union publications. In general, however, Eleanor Roosevelt or ER are used here reflecting more current references to her.

3. The Kheel Center, Cornell University, holds the UNITE Archives which includes the papers of the International Ladies'Garment Workers'Union. There is no correspondence between David Dubinsky and Eleanor Roosevelt before 1937. Given the photographs and

union newspaper coverage of events from 1933 to 1936 that both ER and Dunbinsky attended, and the letters after 1937, it seems likely that there was earlier correspondence, but it has not yet been located.

4. Perkins does acknowledge that FDR came in contact with other labor leaders in the 1920s. For example, as counsel for the American Construction Council he met building trades leaders (Perkins, 28).

5. ER was arrested in the 1926 paper box makers' strike, *The New York Times*, 9 December 1926, and she sent a letter of support during the 1930 ILGWU strike against the Hattie Carnegie dress company, *The New York Times*, 19 November 1930 (Cook, Vol. 1, 363).

6. This concept was introduced and fully developed by Alice Kessler Harris in *Out to Work*.

7. Quotes for Maida Springer are taken from O'Farrell and Kornbluh, Chapter 5, « We Did Change Some Attitudes, Maida Springer Kemp and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, » based on interviews conducted by Elizabeth Balanoff for the Twentieth Century Trade Union Woman Oral History Project (TUWOHP), Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. She became Springer-Kemp when she married James Kemp in 1965. For a full biography see Richards.

8. For more about Rose Pesotta see her autobiography, *Bread Upon the Waters and Leeder, The Gentle General: Rose Pesotta, Anarchist and Labor Organizer*.

9. Kennedy, for example, found that the Blue Eagle badge, « signaled the poverty of the New Deal's imagination and the meagerness of the methods it could bring to bear at this time against the Depression » (184).

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## INDEX

**Keywords** : New Deal, Eleanor Roosevelt, ILGWU, labor Legislation, Union Women, union label

**Mots-clés** : législation du travail, ouvrières, label syndical

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