Bread and Roses: Rose Schneiderman’s Stand for the Rising of the Women in the Workplace

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Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.  

As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,  

The rising of the women means the rising of the race...  

This poem, written in 1911 by James Oppenheim and later turned into a powerful folk anthem, was inspired by a speech delivered by the fiery Polish immigrant and overlooked historical figure Rose Schneiderman. In the early 1900s, women workers were denied safe working conditions, a political voice, industrial protection, and fair pay. Nicknamed the “Red Rose of Anarchy” because of her unruly red curls, Rose Schneiderman took a stand against the male-dominated workforce by becoming involved with trade unionism and organizations dedicated to helping women workers. During her time as a union leader and organizer, she coordinated strikes, organized women workers into unions, allied with the women’s suffrage movement, and challenged rules, regulations, and legislature to make the workplace safer with reasonable hours and more commensurate salaries for women.

**From Shtetl to Tenament**

Rose Schneiderman was born on April 16, 1882, in Saven, Poland to Deborah and Samuel Schneiderman (Orleck “Rose Schneiderman”). Her father worked as a tailor, and her mother took on many jobs, including sewing, baking, treating the sick, and even bartending (Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 13). Her parents labored for long hours and earned little, which made a lasting impression on young Rose. To escape from poverty, discrimination, and a lack of options, Rose’s family snuck across the German border in 1890 to embark on the Hamburg–American liner “Bothnia” with the destination New York City (Ibid 19).
The Schneiderman’s life in New York offered more opportunities but was filled with hardships. Two years after their immigration, Rose’s father died of meningitis, leaving Rose’s mother with three young children and a baby (Ibid 27). Rose’s mother began working at a fur factory and sent the children temporarily to an orphanage. Rose was able to go to school, where she finished nine grades in four years because, as she states in her memoir, “I loved school and studied hard.” Before Rose entered tenth grade, her mother lost her job and decided Rose, at age thirteen, was old enough to start working (Ibid 34).

**Life and Labor**

Rose’s first encounter with the grueling life a women worker faced was at department stores. She worked for three years, making only $2 for a 64 hour work week. Realizing there was no room for advancement, as the men were given the best positions, Rose found a job at a garment factory where she made the linings for caps (Ibid 35; Orleck “Rose Schneiderman”). At that time over 1 million or 22% of all working women were employed in manufacturing (Henry 57). At Fox and Lederer, Rose earned $5 for a 60 hour week, but had to pay for her own machine and threads and suffer through harsh conditions (Schneiderman, “A Cap Maker’s Story”).

Rose’s rough experience in the factories was not unique. Thousands of young female immigrants flocked to the garment industry of New York in the early 1900s. The factories offered new experiences, steadier work, and better wages than the neighborhood shops reminiscent of the ‘old-country’ (Glenn 137). In reality, these factories, or “sweatshops”, were not the magnificent places some imagined, but instead an unsafe and unsanitary “prison” according to working girl Agnes Santucci (Ewen 246). The work was tedious and repetitive, the
workers had to pay for their equipment, and the rules imposed by bosses and enforced by foreman were unbearable. The girls were under constant supervision, and were fined or fired for being late, talking, singing, or spending too much time in the bathroom. “It almost drove me wild” said working girl Maria Ganz on keeping silent for eleven hours at a time (Ibid). The smells of the sweatshops were insufferable, the floors were muddy and littered, and there was a constant threat of the buildings collapsing (Ibid; Glen 138). The conditions were sometimes blamed on the workers themselves, one inspector calling Jews a “dirtier class of people” (Bender 49). Although fires were common, exits were usually locked and fire escapes unreachable (Glenn 138). Factory work broke down workers’ bodies with diseases and their minds with feelings of frustration and isolation. The work was especially hard on girls, resulting from the constant sexual predation and threats from the male bosses and workers (Bender 114). “It was a slavery really” immigrant Grace Grimaldi acknowledges “…but people had to earn” (Ewen 246-7).

Angered by this tough reality, Rose became interested in politics when Bessie Braut, an “outspoken activist,” came to Rose’s factory in 1903. Bessie “talked organization as a remedy for our ills” (Schneiderman, “A Cap Maker’s Story”). She explained to the girls in the factory that the men were unionized and could therefore improve their conditions through better management. Inspired, Rose and a group of lining-maker girls collected 25 signatures from women in different factories and became chartered as Local 23 of the United Cloth Cap and Hat Makers Union, with Rose as the new charter’s secretary. She was a delegate to her union’s 1904 convention, and there was elected to the General Executive Board, the first woman granted that position. “It was such an amazing time,” she admits, “A new life opened up for me” (Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 49-50).
Around the same time Rose Schneiderman was starting her career in trade unionism, the National Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) was founded. Established in 1903, the WTUL was a collaboration between wealthy women and women workers, unionists and feminists, whose goal was to “concern itself with the many problems confronting women employed in the factories and shops of the country” (Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 74; Dye 24). Although Rose was at first skeptical of the league, owing to the fact that both men and nonworking women joined, the WTUL soon became, as Rose put it, “an organization which was to me the most important influence in my life” (Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 76). The New York WTUL recruited Rose in 1905, and from then on she rose steadily in their ranks, serving as vice president and then president of New York’s chapter, and eventually as president of the National WTUL, a position she held for twenty years (Orleck Op. Cit. 43; Amsterdam 267). Rose became close friends with Eleanor Roosevelt through the WTUL, and was said to have taught Franklin Roosevelt so much about trade unionism that “you’d almost think he had participated in some strike or organizing campaign” (Perkins 32). During her time in the WTUL, Rose helped women workers in many different professions take a stand against the employers and legislature that restricted them, in part by offering educational activities.

Together as a Union, Resisting through a Strike

Rose Schneiderman believed that “the spirit of trade unionism that is most important, the service of fellowship, the feeling that the hurt of one is the concern of all and that the work of the individual benefits all” (Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 68). In keeping with this outlook, Rose was an efficient and hardworking organizer. In collaboration with the WTUL and the
International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), Rose traveled across the country helping women workers become organized into unions, which allowed them to better their working conditions, have more security in their jobs, and be shaped into leaders. Organizing, however, was not easy. Depressed economies, anti-union towns, and factories where few workers spoke English contributed to Rose’s observations:

I found out organizing is a hard job, too, and often very frustrating. You work and you work and you work and you seem to be getting nowhere....All this could be terribly discouraging if you didn't have faith in trade unionism and didn't believe with every cell in your body that what you were doing in urging them to organize was absolutely right (Ibid, 110).

Because she felt so strongly about workers’ rights, Rose was extremely effective and found many successes in organizing. In 1908, a group of women who made “white goods” (underwear) came to Rose for assistance. These women worked long hours and their salaries had been reduced to the point where they were making little money as they had to pay for all their own equipment. Turning their complaint into action, Rose convinced their employer to raise the wages, pay for the equipment, and meet with a grievance committee of workers. She was able to do this without a strike, an impressive feat. Rose explained to the women that only by being organized into a union would their employer have to stick to the agreement, so the women formed Local 62 of the ILGWU. Soon after unionization, the women reported a new “kinship” among the workers, a drastic change from the conflicts that had resulted from the previous insecurities of their jobs (Ibid 85-6). Rose successfully organized dressmakers, shirtwaist makers, candy workers, laundry-workers, paperbox makers, and many others. Her
contemporaries thought highly of her abilities as an organizer. In the WTUL’s monthly journal in 1918, Maud Swartz reported, “We have engaged Miss Rose Schneiderman as organizer and feel that with her services we shall be able to do a great deal more and better work” (Life and Labor 59).

During Rose Schneiderman’s career, workers were powerless against their managers’ demands. Strikes were the most utilized way to compel the employers to consent to the requests of the employees and were a vital tool for the labor movement. Rose was the only woman leader during her victorious first strike against Fox and Lederer, who tried to open their union factory to non-union workers (Orleck Op. Cit. 43). Rose continued using her leadership skills to arrange numerous strikes that benefited working women. In collaboration with the WTUL, she helped to organize the nation-wide 1909 Shirtwaist Uprising, the largest women workers’ strike in America (Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 96; Orleck Op. Cit. 57). The strike ended with increases in wages, shorter hours, overtime pay and union recognition for most of the strikers, but began with the leadership of Rose Schneiderman and her fellow trade unionists. Many months before the strike occurred, they helped the women prepare through organizing smaller strikes as well as teaching the strikers how to conduct meetings, organize picket lines, and respond to ruthless employers (Orleck Op. Cit. 63; Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 90). Once the 20,000 shirtwaist makers left their jobs, taking a stand against the inhumane conditions, they were equipped with the skills necessary for a successful strike. During the strike, Rose spoke across the country, securing funds for paying the strikers and bailing them out of jail by appealing to well-off women (“Girl Strikers Tell the Rich their Woes”). Even though the strikers were struggling with antagonistic employers and brutal policemen, Rose’s published speeches motivated the strikers to keep fighting for what they believed in. When the strike ended in February of 1910, Rose had acquired the expertise she needed to go on and organize countless
other strikes, including a general strike for the White Goods Union which Rose orchestrated independently (Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 104-8).

**Empowerment and Protection through Legislation**

Rose and the WTUL utilized legislation to take a further stand to improve the conditions of the underpaid and exploited women in the workplace. Organizing was a tiring job and only helped a few women at a time. Legislation, on the other hand, could be more efficient in regulating hours, wages, and safety conditions (Orleck Op. Cit. 121). When 143 girls were killed in the horrific Triangle Factory Fire of 1911, Rose and the WTUL launched their first successful legislative campaign. The Industrial Code of New York State, the first code of its kind in the country, imposed a 50 hour workweek and strictly enforced factory health standards (Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 6, 102; US Dept of Labor).

Rose, speaking at a memorial for the Triangle Factory Fire, emphasized the need for further change to the unbearable work conditions. “Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers. Every year thousands of us are maimed” (Schneiderman, “We Have Found You Wanting”; Perkins 31). The necessity to fix these “industrial wrongs” and the prevalent notion that women should be cared for as future mothers united to create protective labor legislation. This legislation gave working women economic rights and safer conditions by regulating minimum wage, working hours, and equal pay, as well as the abolition of night work and the restriction of women from certain jobs (Lehrer 116; Orleck Op. Cit. 125). As vital as the legislation seemed, not all women were ardent advocates of such protection. Feminists argued that these laws were used as discrimination and made women seem unequal in the eyes of the
male workers and bosses, therefore inhibiting them from rising to the same positions as men (Leher 4; Kessler-Harris “Rose Schneiderman” 117). Rose, along with many of her contemporaries, disagreed with this view and helped further protective labor legislation through speeches and lobbying (Leher 116).

In order to turn their legislation into legacy, women turned to the suffrage movement. The vote for women, according to Rose Schneiderman, could be “a tool in the hands of working women with which, through legislation, they could correct the terrible conditions existing in industry” (Ibid, 121). Rose founded the Wage Earners’ Suffrage League, which believed that the vote could help women take a stand through using a political voice to better their workplace. To help further the suffrage movement, Rose conducted street meetings, passed out literature, collected open letters, and traveled around America giving inspiring speeches (Ibid 124; Brooks 288). When a New York senator claimed that women with the vote would lose their “charm” and become “emasculated”, Rose fought back with her powerful voice to argue, “Surely...women won’t lose any more of their beauty and charm by putting a ballot in a ballot box once a year than they are likely to lose standing in foundries or laundries all year round” (Schneiderman, “Delicacy and Charm of Women”). Through her tireless and potent work, Rose helped give the American women their overdue political voice in 1920 with the 20th amendment to the Constitution.

Later in her life, Rose helped to write labor codes for industries that employed women with the National Recovery Administration (NRA) in 1933. Through the NRA, Rose was able to begin the process of government recognition of the necessary labor regulations to protect its women workers (Amsterdam 267; Schneiderman and Goldthwaite 9, 195). She referred to the
codes as “a Magna Charta [sic] of the working women” (Kessler-Harris Op. Cit. 177). With her diligent efforts in fighting for legislation, Rose helped establish the forty hour work week, eliminate child labor, create minimum wage regulations, and put in place other laws pertaining to women workers making their lives easier.

A Legacy of Bread and Roses

By 1920, Rose Schneiderman was a national figure, known for empowering working women to “live, not simply exist” (Brooks 288). She helped the oppressed women of the factories to take a stand against the greedy employers and a male-dominated industry that ignored the needs of its undervalued and unprotected women. By the time of her death on August 11th, 1972, at the age of 88, Rose’s achievements in organization, strikes, the women's suffrage movement, and legislation made the workplace safer and more economically satisfying for women. Thirty years earlier, at a party for the 25th year of her presidency in the New York branch of the WTUL, her friends and colleagues already understood the lasting magnitude of her invaluable work and sang to her:

No light in the factories
No rest rooms
No water
Low wages
These were the evils which Rose dared to fight...
But Rose dared to organize
And Rose dared to fight
Rose was so little
But Rose had great might (Kessler-Harris Op. Cit. 181)

Rose Schneiderman accomplished her daunting task: she gave the working women bread, through raises in pay and successful strikes. But she also gave them roses, by providing them a political voice and a community of workers.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


Protective labor legislation was a confusing concept to grasp, and this book made it easier to understand and apply to Rose’s life by compiling the different views of many prominent trade unionists on protective legislation that existed at the time Rose was supporting it. It supplied direct quotes and the background of her beliefs, as well as people who disagreed with her.


<http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbcmiller:@field(DOCID+rbcmilsclrp3007601)>

This is a letter written by the Equality League of Self Supporting Women to the Governor of New York, on behalf of the working women in New York. Rose Schneiderman's name is signed at the bottom. This source helped me understand how Rose was impacting public figures and what her goal was at this time in her life. It also shows how far she’d grown as a leader.

The National WTUL annually released a journal on their activities during that year. In 1912, Rose gave an important speech on the suffrage and labor movements, which referred to the ideas of bread and roses for the women workers. This journal provided information on what Rose was doing for the suffrage movement, the text of this powerful speech, and what the leaders of the WTUL thought of Rose’s organizing abilities.


This newspaper article reports on Rose’s work in speaking in front of rich women to provide funds for the 1909 shirtwaist makers uprising. It gave me the information necessary to understand the way she delivered her speeches and her role in the uprising.

James Oppenheim's poem, which was based on a speech of Rose Schneiderman's, had a long lasting significance. This is the text of the poem, which I quoted in my essay and used to understand Rose's influence.


Frances Perkins was an important figure in government for the women's working rights. Her memoir helped me understand Rose’s legacy as well as the effect the Roosevelts had on the labor movement.


The New York times reported on Rose’s death in 1972. This newspaper article provided the details on her death and the powerful legacy she left behind, as well as how her legacy had spread throughout the nation.


Rose’s autobiography was an invaluable source. It showed the accurate and untouched details of her life and her feelings on all of the movements she participated in, which allowed me to write about only the ones that were the most important to her.


This is a newspaper article Rose wrote about her experiences early in her life with trade unionism. It provided a contrast to her later memoir, showing me how she analyzed her life later on in comparison to when she was younger. It also gave me the details of her strikes and organization with the factory she worked at.

This powerful speech Rose Schneiderman made against a New York Senator who claimed that women were losing their charm by being in politics was an important part of what she did to give women the vote. She defends the suffrage movement and talks about the horrible factory conditions. This source gave me more of an insight onto her political beliefs and fiery speeches.


The Triangle Factory Fire of 1911 was call for the drastic changes to factory safety conditions. This is a speech given by Rose Schneiderman after the fire. She discusses the horrible conditions for working women and incites the audience to help her cause. This source was one of the first few sources I read and it set up Rose’s guiding conviction that the workplace needed to be changed.


This was a later edition of the National WTUL’s annual journal. In this 1918 edition, Maud Swartz, Rose’s lifetime colleague and friend, praised Rose for her hard work in organizing. This source showed Rose’s abilities as an organizer and what others thought of her abilities.

This is a historical newspaper reporting on a group of women (which included Rose Schneiderman) petitioning to give female teachers the same rights as male teachers. There is also a quote from Rose on her experiences with anti-suffragists. This gave me details of Rose’s political standings and what she was doing to challenge unfair laws.


Rose Schneiderman’s run for a spot in the Senate was not detailed in many other sources, so this historical newspaper reporting on her nomination for US senator was important. It gave me the information of the time frame of her run, the party she was affiliated with, and what other people were running for the same seat.
Secondary Sources


The National WTUL was a complex organization which was a major part of Rose’s career. This paper is about her time working for the league in different positions and as an organizer. This source gave insight into Rose’s complex relationship with the Roosevelt’s as well as the benefits the WTUL offered in comparison to other labor organizations.


Rose strived to fix the horrendous conditions of the sweatshops in New York. This book supplied a comprehensive study of the reasons behind the disgusting environment as well as a list of all of the conditions workers had to face daily. This was a crucial source in understanding Rose’s drive to make the factories safer.


Protective labor legislation was a widely disputed concept in trade unionism. This book analyzed the conditions before and after women received the right to vote and how that changed the workplace dynamics between men and women. It was vital in understanding how Rose’s belief in protective labor legislation defined her views on women workers.

This study focuses on interactions between working women in the WTUL (Women’s trade union league), which Rose Schneiderman was a part of for a long time. This source gave me more information on how she impacted the league and what friends and foes she made during her time there.


The many other female trade unionists who were working at the same time as Rose were showcased in this book, along with the many speeches and opinions female trade unionists had during Rose’s career, including many of her own. This source helped me to analyze all the beliefs Rose had and compare them to her contemporaries, showing her similarities and differences.


Rose’s immigration shaped the rest of her life. This book gave examples of many other young women who went through the same experience Rose did. Although it lacked some analysis, it helped me put Rose’s life in context.

This book included a chapter on Rose Schneiderman’s life which gave more information on how Rose was selected for each of the different organizations she worked for. The book had many important figures in it, so it only briefly discussed Rose and therefore didn’t do the best analysis of her life. However, it was useful to compare the timeline given in this book to other sources.


Rose’s immigration to the United States is one example of the mass exodus of, especially Jewish, families coming over from Eastern Europe. This book did an amazing analysis of how the young women in these families transitioned from the old culture of their homelands to the new culture of America. I utilized this source in finding information about life in sweatshops.


This scholarly book had an in-depth analysis of Rose’s work in trade unionism and how that affected her, the people around her, and the labor movement. It gave me powerful quotes and I utilized the analysis to further my understanding of Rose’s life.

This book, written while Rose was working as an organizer, showed that Rose’s contemporaries thought very highly of her work in the labor movement. It also gave me information on how she pursued her education while working.


Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt’s dictated many parts of Rose Schneiderman’s work in the labor industry, especially later in her career. This book detailed their complex relationship. I used it to understand what Rose did for the Roosevelts, and what they were able to help her accomplish. Although I didn’t use much of the information in my paper, it was important for me to understand Eleanor’s impact in the WTUL.


Many different groups disagreed with Rose’s stance on protective labor legislation. Although this book did not go very in depth, it supplied quotes from Rose on the legislation as well as examples of the reasons behind the extreme dislike of some of these laws.


I used this article from the US Department of Labor to clarify and fact check the consequences of the New York Investigating Commission.

This book provided an analysis on Rose and three of her other colleagues lives in the labor and women's movements. I referenced this book many times when writing my paper, as it provided connections between Rose’s life and aspects of the trade union movement.


This encyclopedia was one of the original sources I read, so I used it as my introduction to the topic. It gave me an overview of Rose’s childhood, her leadership positions within the labor movement, and her influence on union creation. This source provided a background on Rose’s life, and also listed the different groups she worked with.


Rose’s childhood was complex and inspiring, and as such has been written about many times. This book offered more details on her life in New York, as well as the life and death of her father and how that influenced her.