

Triumph and Tragedy: How Frances Perkins Shaped the Labor Movement

by Amelia Weimar

For the employees working at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory, Saturday was coming to a close like any other day. The weekend, always anticipated with much excitement, was almost at hand. In a bustling city like New York there was never a lack of things to do, even for those poor workers with little money. The workers, mostly women and young girls, began to shut down their machines, gather their few belongings, and put on their threadbare coats and wraps. It was near closing time, and soon they would hear the bell that signaled the end of the workday. Moments later, the mild calm of that spring day was shattered when fire broke out violently in the southeast corner of the eighth floor.

The Tragic Fire

Like a ravenous lion, the fire roared through the work room, consuming the easy kindle—the finished shirtwaists that hung on lines above the workers' heads, the trimmings and cuttings that littered the floors beneath the machines, and tragically, the women themselves. It devoured the eighth floor, forcing women to jump from the windows in desperation as its searing flames and suffocating smoke surged around and accosted them. The fire pushed upward, forcing its way through the elevator shafts and stairwells, seeking the victims trapped on the ninth and tenth floors. Some managed to escape via the stairs before they were engulfed in flames. Others made it to the roof and escaped with ladders that students from the university next door pulled across the roof, but the remaining 146 employees, poor immigrant women and young girls, were either burned to death or fell to their death when they jumped from the factory windows eight and nine floors above the ground.¹

Among the throngs of onlookers who gazed up in horror at the rising column of heavy black smoke, the tongues of flame licking the upper floors of the Asch building, and the bodies of those who chose to leap to their death rather than burn, was a young woman named Frances Perkins. A labor rights activist, she had been at the home of a friend near Washington Place, the scene of the fire. In her own words, she described what they saw:

They began to jump. The window was too crowded and they would jump and they hit the sidewalk. The net broke, they [fell] a terrible distance, the weight of the bodies was so great, at the speed at which they were traveling, that they broke through the net. Every one of them was killed, everybody who jumped was killed. It was a horrifying spectacle,² a never-to-be-forgotten reminder of why I had to spend my life fighting conditions that could permit such a tragedy.³

This tragedy was forever sealed on her mind and heart.

The Beginning of the Reform Movement

Although women in New York did not yet have the vote, nor were they permitted to participate in jury service and other civic roles,⁴ Perkins threw herself into the work of improving conditions for laborers with a vigor that astounded many. With passions aroused over the senseless loss of life in the Triangle Factory fire, New Yorkers rallied around the cause of labor with new zeal. A fiery brunette born in Boston, Perkins knew that the enactment of legislation was the only solid way to protect working men and women and “right industrial wrongs.” However, she knew this protection would not come easy or overnight. Her plan of attack? Organize. Unlike many women of her class, Perkins knew the great value and potential of working-class organization.⁵ Already her life had been immersed in such organization. In addition to being active in the quest for woman’s suffrage, she was the head of the New York Consumers’ League.

Enraged at the inability of the law to hold anyone accountable for the deaths of the 146 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory victims, the people of New York announced a meeting. A few days

before the funeral procession was to be held, reformers, civic leaders, teachers, religious leaders and many others gathered at the Metropolitan Opera. Though diverse in lifestyle, history and background, this company of folk came together through grief and passion for innocent lives lost. Out of this passion for justice came the establishment of the Committee on Safety. With Perkins at its head, the Consumers' League worked closely with this committee to promote worker protection, lobby for better working hours and conditions, and press for a thorough investigation of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.⁶

In short, the committee served as a central institution of information on fire safety. However, stretching beyond the imaginations of even those at its head, it was to become one of the most powerful and effective political forces the state had ever seen. It urged the state government to sponsor a thorough investigation of the tragedy. Galvanized to act, the committee took their plea for justice straight to Albany, advancing on the capitol. It was there that Perkins, along with two other lobbyists, brought the fight to New York State Assemblyman Alfred Smith. In Perkins' own words: *We decided to ask the legislature to create a commission and this is where Al Smith came in.*⁷

However, Al Smith was not the only man won over. Along with him came Robert Wagner, the state Senate Majority Leader and later U.S. Senator. In the face of the intensity of the lobbyists, they could see no other option but to act—and act swiftly. They also knew that legislation was the only solid way to protect working men and women from another catastrophe like this happening again. Moved by the first hand testimony of Perkins and the other New Yorkers, the two legislators immediately introduced bills that led to a law creating the Factory Investigation Commission. It passed on June 30, 1911, three months after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.⁸

The Influence of the Factory Investigation Commission

In addition to establishing the Commission, Smith and Wagner did something that would astound even those of the labor movement. Wagner appointed himself Chair of the Commission, with Smith his Vice Chair. As members of the state legislature, they could have appointed anyone they wanted to the Commission, and they appointed themselves. Their motive? Not pride. Not control. These men truly wanted to see what was happening. They knew that the power of legislation they held would be crucial in taking the labor movement from simple organization to solid laws capable of protecting the disparaged working class. Furthermore, they cast their eyes upon the array of characters that had come to them in Albany, and singled out none other than Frances Perkins to be the Chief Director of Investigations. In this station, Perkins had the power to directly testify before the commission, conduct and lead investigations, and run on-site factory inspections. With this power in her hands she forged ahead, determined to turn the tragic flames of the Triangle Factory fire into a torch that would illuminate the squalid state of the industrial work site for all to see. In an address given at Cornell University, Perkins described her work and her mission:

We went all over the state . . . I was a young person then and certainly not fit for service on any super commission, but I was the chief—I was the investigator, and in charge of the investigations and this was an extraordinary opportunity, you see, to get into factories to make a report and be sure it was going to be heard . . . we went on and kept expanding the function of the commission 'till it came to be the report on sanitary conditions and to provide for their removal and to report all kinds of unsafe conditions and then to report all kinds of human conditions that were unfavorable to the employees.⁹

Indeed, the Factory Investigation would go far beyond just the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory—it would also look into fire hazards, unsanitary conditions, occupational diseases, effectiveness of factory inspection, tenement manufacturing, and many other matters. Fueled by

the passionate conviction of Smith, Wagner, and Perkins, it would go on to conduct the most intensive study of industry ever undertaken in the United States.¹⁰

One of the investigation's main battles was the fight for child labor laws to prohibit employers from hiring young children. The need for this was especially impressed upon Perkins after reading this excerpt from the heart-wrenching poem "Little Toilers" by Sara Claghorn:

*The golf links lie so near the mills,
That nearly every day,
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.*¹¹

How could this possibly be right? With children, some less than five years old, working long days in suffocating factories, and the men of that time playing golf only a stone's throw away, the poem presented a poignant picture of the injustice of the times.

The commission's tactic of "organization leading to legislation" slowly began to pay off. By 1913, a number of their recommendations became law, including prohibition of night work for women, fire prevention, and regulations for health safety. In fact, there would be a total of 33 laws passed through the commission's tireless efforts. As Perkins said: *It was, I am convinced, a turning point.*¹²

The year 1913 was also a triumph in another way: it was the year that Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated as President. In order to help workers, he proposed a new cabinet office: the United States Department of Labor, which Congress created that same year.¹³ It would not be long before Perkins would be intimately bound to this new Department, much more than she could have imagined.

The Industrial Commission, the Industrial Board and the Department of Labor

In 1916 she threw herself into her latest mission: campaigning for Al Smith, the vice chair of the Factory Investigation Commission, who ran for governor in 1917. Her passion was

well applied for two reasons: this was the first New York State election in which women could vote, and in November of 1918, Al Smith won the election. His first order of business was to summon Perkins to Albany and ask her to be a member of the Industrial Commission of the State of New York. Recalling her shock at the suddenness of it all later, she later recalls that the invitation was *just like that, with no preliminaries, no dancing up to it, and no ifs, ands, or buts!*¹⁴ No woman had ever served on the Commission. Despite the inevitable opposition that followed his decision, Smith never doubted his choice. He knew that he needed someone with extraordinary energy to shake up the dragging Commission, and that he could trust Perkins to do the right thing. Perkins did not disappoint him—with grit and determination she attacked her job, knowing that the mere fact that she was the sole woman among men would shake things up. After her first serious meeting with fellow commissioners, she noted with exasperation that: *In my observation . . . the habit of prolonged deliberation for no reason at all except that [male commissioners] haven't got the nerve to take action is more on the male side than it is on the female side . . . I remember thinking to myself, "Do men really behave like this?"*¹⁵ Despite resistance and setbacks, however, she set to work reviewing the staff's work, and galvanized the "hardly functioning" commission to be responsible and hold regular meetings.¹⁶

In 1920, a roadblock came that would bring her work with the commission to a screeching halt. Smith ran for reelection and was defeated. Some months later, Perkins' term expired and another commissioner replaced her. She would later describe this time in her life as *a drudgery and a keep-your-nose-to-the-grindstone period* that was difficult to endure, although she was still active with the labor movement.¹⁷ The break in the drudgery came in 1922 when Smith again ran for governor and won by a landslide. In the wake of his election Perkins was appointed to the Industrial Board. By 1926, Smith had appointed her Chairperson. Perkins was

officially dubbed the “First of Her Sex for Office in the Empire State” by the local newspapers that very day. Her fame was spreading, and many were particularly impressed with how she handled workmen’s compensation appeal cases. In response to a reporter’s probing questions following her appointment, she stated: *Doing means digging your nails in and working like a truck horse. We make most of our own opportunities. They seldom make us.*¹⁸

It was two years later, in 1929, that she would begin her long history with a man whose presence and legacy still seems larger than life: Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was elected Governor of New York that year, and going against the adage “men will take *advice* from woman, but it is hard for them to take *orders* from a woman,” he appointed Perkins to the chief post of the New York State Department of Labor.¹⁹ Ever the master deal-maker, she began to pull New York into the forefront of progressive reform. The goal for concrete worker security was still legislation, and the means was still organization. As chief of the Department of Labor she expanded factory investigations, reduced the workweek for women to 48 hours and championed minimum wage and unemployment insurance laws.²⁰ Roosevelt, in turn, supported her efforts and various programs, insisting that she come to him whenever she needed help. The two of them developed a close working relationship during this time. Roosevelt learned to value her opinions, respect her judgment, and rely on her for information and advice; Perkins learned that Roosevelt understood problems better if she described them in “human terms”—not just statistics and charts.²¹

In 1929, devastating disaster struck the country. The stock market crashed, and in a few short weeks more than thirty billion dollars had blown into thin air. The Great Depression had begun, sweeping the country like an epidemic and destroying everything in its path. As President Hoover insisted that the worst was over, people continued to lose jobs and money, and

businesses closed at an incredible rate. In New York, Perkins and Roosevelt began to study ways to put people back to work. Perkins encouraged Roosevelt to appoint a committee to study how to stabilize worker employment, and New York became the first state to formally study the problem of joblessness.²² It was during this time that the idea of unemployment insurance was born.

United States Secretary of Labor

On November 8, 1932, the tides began to turn. Roosevelt was elected President in a landslide victory. It was a vote against depression. It was a vote against rampant chaos. It was, in short, an overwhelming vote for a New Deal for the American people. The culmination of Perkins' efforts and years of fiery outspokenness came three months later, when Roosevelt announced that he was appointing her as his Secretary of Labor. Though she was reluctant at first to take the job, she realized: *the door might not be opened to a woman again for a long, long time, and that [she] had a kind of duty to other women to walk in and sit down . . . and so establish the right of others long hence to sit in the high seat.*²³ With this position, she was not only the first woman ever to hold a cabinet position, but was also, by virtue of her office, the first woman in the presidential line of succession.²⁴

The purpose of the U.S. Department of Labor was to foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners of the United States, to improve their working conditions, and to advance their opportunities for profitable employment. To Perkins' dismay, however, *the offices were dirty, files and papers were missing, there was no program or plan of work, there was an internal spy system, and everyone was scared of everyone else.*²⁵ Not to be discouraged or deterred, she got to work without delay. She drew on her New York State experience as the model for new federal programs. Her ultimate goal was to bring the labor movement right into

Roosevelt's New Deal, and make it the business of the federal government.²⁶ In her new seat as Cabinet Member, she put every ounce of her formidable energy into new programs and legislation, which would secure such things as the abolition of child labor, a minimum wage and unemployment insurance. With fiery resolve and methodical planning, she began weaving a safety net for a Depression-scarred society.²⁷ Her diligence was rewarded as her vision found concrete expression in new legislation, such as the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Wagner Act (1935). The former established a minimum wage and maximum workweek, and the latter gave workers the right to organize unions and bargain collectively.²⁸ Also, 1933 was the year that Perkins announced she had created a nationwide system of free employment agencies, soon known as the United States Employment Service. Through this service, jobless people could seek assistance in finding jobs.²⁹

Yet despite these victories, the bleak face of the Depression still stared the American people wanly in the face. Banks were still closing. Crime was rising. Food riots were becoming more common. Yet Perkins, ever unafraid, was determined to deal with the crisis. *It is there to be done, so I do it*, she stated simply.³⁰ Undaunted, she worked closely with Roosevelt to develop many relief programs, including the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and the National Industrial Recovery Act. These various programs worked to give young men and women jobs, the basics of life, and also provide grants so the states could provide these basic necessities for unemployed people.

One especially strong step forward for the labor movement was the creation of the National Recovery Administration. This agency was responsible for stabilizing wages and prices and reviving production. For this purpose, it had the power to work with both industries and workers to develop codes that set standards for wages, prices, working conditions, and other

issues. With her persuasiveness and strong advocacy for government intervention for the good of the public, every venture Perkins began led to victory.³¹ She was soon dubbed “Fearless Frances” by local newspapers and magazines.³²

She would need to be fearless for the task yet to come. In 1934, Roosevelt finally appointed the Committee on Economic Security. This committee was composed of cabinet members, and their job was to develop a social security program that would include both unemployment and old-age insurance. At his insistence, Perkins was appointed head of the committee. He knew that this idea had been hers from the start, and that she would *put [her] back to it more than anyone else, and drive it through.*³³ The legislation that was developed and drafted by the committee was radical at the time, to say the least. The most insurmountable problem, however, was the question of how to pay for the social security system in a way that would not be declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Perkins’ answer to this quandary came from a very unlikely source: Harlan Stone, who was actually a Supreme Court justice at the time. He told her: *The taxing power of the Federal Government, my dear; the taxing power is sufficient for everything you want and need.*³⁴

On August 10, 1935, Congress finally approved the Social Security Act. Not only did it provide insurance to the elderly and unemployed, but it also included programs to aid people with disabilities, and children under the age of eighteen in single-parent families. Although viewed as a radical departure at the time, the passing of this legislature is to this day known as Perkins’ most important contribution as chairwoman of the Committee on Economic Security.³⁵

Although tweaks to the program were still needed, Perkins savored the victory of achieving her lifelong goal of providing old age and unemployment insurance to American workers. Despite this victory, she did not forget that spark which had lit her life with passion.

With her life's work, she had indeed turned the tragic flames of the Triangle Factory fire into a torch that had begun to illuminate the plight of the industrial worker for all to see.

Endnotes

- 1) Perkins, Frances. "Remembering the Triangle Factory Fire, 100 Years Later." *Cornell University, Kheel Center*. <<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/primary/lectures/FrancesPerkinsLecture.html>>.
- 2) Murray, Frances. "The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: The Legal Legacy." *The Historical Society of the Courts of the State of New York*. <http://www.courts.state.ny.us/history/essay/2011/Triangle_Shirtwaist_Factory_Fire_article.pdf>.
- 3) "Frances Perkins (1880-1965)." *AFL-CIO America's Union Movement*. <<http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/history/history/perkins.cfm>>.
- 4) Murray
- 5) "Frances Perkins (1880-1965)."
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- 7) Perkins
- 8) "The New York Factory Investigating Commission." *United States Department of Labor*. <<http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/mono-regsafepart07.htm>>.
- 9) Perkins
- 10) Murray
- 11) Colman, Penny. *A Woman Unafraid: The Achievements of Frances Perkins*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993.
- 12) Murray
- 13) Colman, pg 33
- 14) *Ibid*, pg 35
- 15) *Ibid*, pg 39
- 16) *Ibid*, pg 38

- 17) *Ibid*, pg 43
- 18) *Ibid*, pg 44
- 19) *Ibid*, pg 47
- 20) “Frances Perkins (1880-1965).”
- 21) Colman, pg 51
- 22) *Ibid*, pg 53
- 23) *Ibid*, pg 60
- 24) Murray
- 25) Colman, pg 63
- 26) “Frances Perkins (1880-1965).”
- 27) Murray
- 28) “Politics and Public Service, 1882-1965.” *Frances Perkins, United States History*.
<<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1603.html>>.
- 29) Colman, pg 65
- 30) *Ibid*, pg 67
- 31) “Politics and Public Service, 1882-1965.”
- 32) Colman, pg 83
- 33) *Ibid*, pg 84
- 34) Murray
- 35) “Politics and Public Service, 1882-1965.”

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