

## Rose Schneiderman<sup>1</sup>

### **Trade unionist leader, feminist socialist, suffragist, women's rights advocate**

*Schneiderman was a trade unionist leader, suffragist and social reformer who dedicated her life to improving the lives of American working people. She organized women workers' fight for equitable pay, safety standards, better working conditions and social welfare provisions. Her vision of labor justice shaped many of the groundbreaking legislative measures of the New Deal: the National Labor Relations Act (1935), the Social Security Act (1935), and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938).*

**Born:** April 6, 1882, Saven, Poland

**Died:** August 11, 1972, New York

**Also known as:** Rachel Rose Schneiderman

**Areas of achievement:** labor movement, suffrage, women's rights, labor legislation

### **Early Life**

Rose Schneiderman (ʃnaɪdərˈmæn) was born in 1882, to an Orthodox Jewish family from Saven, a small town in Poland. Pushed by poverty and discrimination, the Schneiderman family migrated in 1890 to the United States. They rented a place in the impoverished working class neighborhood of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Rose's father, Samuel Schneiderman, found work as a tailor in the growing garment industries of New York City. Two years later, his unexpected death from meningitis left his spouse, Deborah, in great economic difficulty having to provide for three small children and expecting a fourth. Deborah took in boarders and had a night job outside the home so that Rose could attend school. In 1885, Deborah lost her night job and Rose had to eventually leave school and find paid employment (Orleck 1998, 387, 2009, Kessler-Harris 1987, 72). Back in Poland, where traditionalist parents still adhered to the idea that women should not receive either religious or secular education, Debora Schneiderman insisted that her daughter learn Hebrew in order to understand the teachings from the synagogue. Upon the family's relocation from Saven to the city of Khelm, Rose Schneiderman started attending public school and learned to speak, read, and write Russian. In NYC her education was interrupted by childcare responsibilities brought about by the aftermath of her father's death. Under dire conditions in the struggle with poverty, and despite her irregular attendance, Schneiderman still managed to finish nine grades of school over the course of four years (McGuire 2009, 999-1000). By the age of thirteen, her family's financial difficulties forced her into paid employment. However, her mother insisted on finding "respectable" employment, so she first took a job as a sales girl in a department store at the recommendation of United Hebrew Charities, an organization coordinating the relief and charitable work of several groups of middle-class Jews from New York City. After three years, bitterly dissatisfied with her meager

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<sup>1</sup> This has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska Curie Grant Agreement No. 658870.

pay, Schneiderman left the department store and took on work sewing linings in a cap factory. With the help of a friend she learned the skills of sample making. As a skilled cap maker, she earned higher wages and faced a lesser risk of losing her job. The Lower East Side of Manhattan was not only the site of garment manufacturing but also the center of trade union and socialist activity. Observant of the privileges men seized for themselves on the factory floor, Schneiderman found herself in conversation with women-workers whose socialist and feminist ideas and trade unionist experiences left an indelible mark on her life and work (Orleck 2009). By the time she turned 20, she joined the labor movement and added organizing to her waged employment as a factory cap maker and milliner. The realization that unionized men held greater bargaining power with employers in comparison to women-workers solidified Schneiderman's life long political goal of getting women to unionize. This goal thus formed at the confluence of her socialist convictions, which she shared with a vibrant community of politicized Eastern European and Jewish immigrants, her intimate knowledge of the injustices that women factory workers were subjected to, as well as the sexism of trade unionism. In 1903 Schneiderman helped organize her shop for the New York City Local of the United Cloth and Cap Makers. The twenty-five women-workers from her shop were granted the first charter for women in the union. As union speakers, agitators, organizers and walking delegates they challenged their subordination and its patriarchal underpinnings at work on the shop floor, in their communities and at home. Schneiderman's determined energy, masterful oratory, and strategic vision led to her swift ascent to the General Executive Board of the union in 1904, which made her the first woman elected to national office in an US labor union. The following year Schneiderman took a leading role in organizing the first successful strike of cap makers and during this process she became aware of the critical role that cross-class alliances played in the struggles for labor justice.

### **Life's Work**

During the organizing of the 13-week cap makers strike Schneiderman came in touch with the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a national organization created by wealthy progressive social reformers committed to promoting women's unions. The New York chapter of the WTUL offered their financial support to the 1905 strike, and Schneiderman, who joined the organization in the same year, soon became one of NYWTUL's most active members, raising strike funds and recruiting women to join the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) (Kessler-Harris 1987, 74, Maffi 1995, 182, McGuire 2009, 1002). In recognition of her organizing brilliance, she was elected vice president of the NYWTUL in 1908, and shortly after, NYWTUL's chief organizer. Her initial involvement with the organization resolved some of the internal tensions between the WTUL's middle-class reformers and the constituency of working-class women that they intended to help. Schneiderman stayed with WTUL for forty-five years, an impressive term which nevertheless was not without its strains.

Schneiderman continued her militant organizing throughout the garment shops of lower Manhattan. In 1909-1910 she aligned her organizing energies with the National League's support of the labor strikes of the working women in New York's shirtwaist factories. The great Uprising of the New York's shirtwaist makers was at the time the largest US strike of women-workers and propelled NYWTUL and ILGWU onto the national stage of labor politics. At the same time, the Uprising revealed multiple axes of tension in both organizations: between the affluent Christian

women and the working-class Jews of the NYWTUL, and in the case of the ILGWU, between Jewish women and men. Within a context of emerging national panic over communist influences, Schneiderman's positionality as a Jewish immigrant and declared socialist was a cause of alarm in the political milieu of the 1910s. During 1911 and 1912, the anti-immigrant sentiments of some NYWTUL members who insisted that the organization's resources should be channeled toward only supporting American-born not immigrant women frustrated Schneiderman to a point of severe dissatisfaction.

Schneiderman left the league at the end of 1914. For the following two years she joined the ILGWU as general organizer. The disinterest that the male leadership showed to organizing women determined Schneiderman to leave ILGWU and take on the chair position of the Industrial Wing of the New York Suffrage Party (Orleck 2009, Kessler Harris 1987, 77). By that time she had already demonstrated her commitment to the cause of suffrage, having had interspersed her organizing and independent labor activism with work on suffrage campaigns in Ohio and New York. Schneiderman believed that women's right to vote was a natural right derived from their shared humanity not from their special roles as women. Moreover, in her view political democracy and industrial democracy were intimately linked as she expected women's right to vote to lead to cross-class efforts to humanize industry (Harris-Keller 1987, 78). Schneiderman was among the promoters of the suffrage drives that enfranchised New York State women in 1917. The following year, she organized women to fight against anti-labor initiatives of the conservative members of the state legislature (Orleck 2009). Her affirmative experience in the suffrage campaign contrasted with the realization that a labor movement controlled by male-dominated organizations does not make for a dependable vehicle for advancing the concerns of wage-earning women.

In 1920 Schneiderman ran for the Senate on the NY State Labor Party ticket. Though unsuccessful, by campaigning on issues such as affordable housing for workers, resources for schools, the socialization of power utilities and state-funded health and unemployment insurance, she nevertheless demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the gendered inequalities endemic to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century US industrialization and urbanization. In the early 1920s Schneiderman became concerned with the labor injustices and the difficulties in unionization faced by African American women workers in the northern industrial cities of the US. With the help of the Urban League, Schneiderman endeavored organizing wage-earning women of color in domestic service and the laundry industry by setting up meetings with black women workers in neighborhood centers across New York City. Following her reconnection with WTUL, the NY league started including women of color in their skill building organizing forums. Faced with the reluctance of ILGWU, AFL and NYWTUL to provide adequate resources to unionize the African American laundry workers, Schneiderman admitted defeat in 1925 and reoriented all her efforts towards passing minim-wage legislation for all working women (McGuire 2009, 1008-1010).

Schneiderman was elected president of the National WTUL in 1926—position that she retained until 1950, when she retired from public life and politics. Schneiderman, however, made enduring and influential ties during her active years. The friendship between Schneiderman and Eleanor Roosevelt started in the early 1920s, when Roosevelt got involved with the NYWTUL's reformers interested in policy-making and labor legislation. Over the next decade, as their friendship deepened, Schneiderman became a regular guest of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt at their Hyde Park residence. Her experiences in the trade-union movement and her keen understanding of the role of government in protecting workers influenced Franklin D.

Roosevelt's vision for many of the policies he developed as president (Orleck 2000, 396). Schneiderman believed that legislative solutions are predicated on administrations, which promote legislative reforms. Her work for Roosevelt's election to governorship, and later on to presidency, was crucial to boosting his legitimacy among labor leaders and to securing their support. Shortly after his presidential inauguration in 1933, Roosevelt appointed Schneiderman as the only woman on the National Recovery Administration's (NRA) labor advisory board (Kessler-Harris 1987, 86). She created the NRA codes for the industries that were predominantly employing women workers. Schneiderman called the codes "the Magna Charta of the working women" and proudly described them as "the most thrilling thing that happened in her life" (Kessler-Harris 1987, 86). From Washington she returned to New York as New York State Department Secretary of Labor and continued campaigning for pay equity between women and men and the inclusion of household employees and domestic workers under minimum-wage provisions and in the workmen's compensation law (Kessler-Harris 86-87). She mobilized state legislation to support union drives among the New York state's expanding service workforce, i.e. hotel, restaurant and beauty parlor workers (Orleck 2009). At WTUL Schneiderman reoriented a significant part of the organization's resources and activities towards education.

Schneiderman retired in 1950, but she maintained her relationships with labor unions and continued to accept invitations to radio shows, while devoting most of her time to writing her memoirs. She never married and outlived her life companion Maude Schwartz as well as most of their movement friends and colleagues. She died in NYC on August 11, 1972 at the age of ninety.

### **Significance**

The legislation that Schneiderman envisioned, fought for, and ultimately created changed the working conditions of millions of women workers and provided a legislative model for fair labor relations that would subsequently benefit generations of US wage-earning women and men. Her famous line, "The woman worker needs bread, but she needs roses too," encapsulates her lifelong endeavor to improve remuneration, hours of work and safety standards as well as to ensure that trade unions enable women's access to education, recreation, and professional networking. Schneiderman's critiques of the limits imposed on the agency of wage-earning women by the gender and racial segregation of trade unionism laid the foundation of industrial feminism. Her strategies for empowering women workers alongside her arguments for gender pay equity and the importance of governmental protections for workers continue to inspire labor unionists, policy-makers, immigrant-rights activists and progressive teachers.

### **Boxed text**

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire is deemed as the deadliest industrial disaster in the history of New York City. In the late afternoon of March 25, 1911, 146 garment workers, mostly recent immigrant women from Eastern and Southern Europe, died in the fire that destroyed the factory. Initially, Schneiderman denounced all those implicated in the Triangle fire and rejected recommendations for remedial legislation, vehemently stating that NYC workers know how to take care of themselves. Her involvement with the aftermath of the Triangle fire had eventually reoriented her labor justice politics toward legislative strategies that sought the elaboration and enforcement of health and safety regulations as well as of the creation of protective legislation

for women. She joined social reformers in their efforts to investigate the conditions that led to the fire and worked closely with state committees fighting to implement standards for sanitation, dressing rooms, washing and toilet facilities, and drinking water. In her testimony before the commission investigating the Triangle fire, Schneiderman argued that a new industrial code is necessary to eliminate fire and health hazards in factories. While remaining loyal to the labor movement, she pragmatically endorsed the vehicle of protective legislation arguing that women's socioeconomic realities, their family care commitments, relatively lesser bargaining power and lower skill levels, require safeguarding from the part of the state. Legislative intervention would thus enable women to earn wages and continue tending to biological and social reproductive responsibilities. Schneiderman later fought to achieve minimum-wage provisions, state-funded unemployment insurance and pensions.

### References:

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McGuire, John Thomas. "From Socialism to Social Justice Feminism: Rose Schneiderman and the Quest for Urban Equity, 1911-1933." *Journal of Urban History* vol. 35 no. 7, 2009. Pp. 998-1019.

Orleck, Annelise. "Rose Schneiderman (1902-1972)." In *Portraits of American Women From Settlement to the Present*, edited by G.J. Barker-Benfield and Catherine Clinton. 1991.

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### Further Reading

Dye, Nancy Schrom. *As Equals and As Sisters: feminism, Unionism, and the Women's Trade Unions League of New York*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980. This book is a detailed study of political transformations undergone Women's Trade Union League of New York during its most critical years of activity from its beginnings in 1903 through the 1920. Schneiderman's contributions to labor justice are placed within larger political contexts of women's collective action.

Endelman, Gary Edward. *Solidarity Forever, Rose Schneiderman and The Women Trade Union League*. Arno Press, 1982. This book is a full-length biography that positions Schneiderman as a

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social reformer, who believed the problems faced by wage-earning women are most effectively addressed by governmental legislative solutions.

McGuire, John Thomas. "From Socialism to Social Justice Feminism: Rose Schenriderman and the Quest for Urban Equity, 1911-1933," *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 35 no. 7, 2009. Pp. 998-1019. This is a recent article that looks at Schneiderman's labor activism from 1911 through 1933, paying particular attention to the partnerships she established between social justice feminism and New York's Democratic Party and the assistance she provided to the NYC African American laundry workers from 1924 onwards.

Orleck, Annelise. *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965*. University of North Carolina, 1995. The book looks at the lives of four women who emigrated from Eastern Europe and became leaders of the turn of the twentieth century US labor movement. The examination of the social, economic and political opportunities encountered by Pauline Newman, Rose Schneiderman, Fannia Cohn and Clara Lemlich Shavelson is central to Orleck's historical explorations.

Schneiderman, Rose, with Lucy Goldthawaite. *All for One*. New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967. Schneiderman's biography written with Lucy Goldthawaite is criticized by labor movement historians for its simplifying treatment of her profound philosophical and ideological conflicts.