



15. Women and the New Deal: *Gaining Ground in Politics and Public Life*

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt eats a five-cent meal—the typical fare of families on tight budgets—with a mother receiving New Deal relief, Mrs. Hughes Easley of St. Louis, Missouri, and her three-year-old daughter, 1940. Easley and other women on federal relief had gathered in Washington, DC, as Congress considered that year's relief appropriations. Here, as on many other occasions, ER used her high profile to call attention to how poverty affected women and children. LOC

In the first decades of the twentieth century, American women began to throw off some of the constraints under which they had labored for generations. Urbanization and the absence of men during World War I allowed them to enter paid employment. They got involved in unions and the movement for female suffrage, at last winning the vote in 1920. Opportunities for higher education increased. Middle-class women joined the reform work of the Progressive movement, volunteering in community organizations called settlement houses to help the poor and study such issues as housing and work conditions. Social mores grew more flexible. Wearing clothes that permitted freer range of motion than the long skirts and corsets of the nineteenth century, women increasingly entered the public arena to speak their minds and earn a living.

As president, Franklin D. Roosevelt hired these educated, politically astute, activist women in unprecedented numbers. One of his gifts as a leader had always been an ability to recognize talent in different kinds of people and tap it. Women were no exception. Perhaps due to the influence of his famously strong-minded mother, Sara Roosevelt, FDR seems to have found it quite natural to treat women as peers. He was unfazed by the controversy that, despite advances for women, still attended their assumption of high-profile public roles. The stream of letters objecting to his appointment of Frances

Perkins to such an important job as secretary of labor did not trouble FDR. Nor did he bat an eye at his wife, Eleanor's initiative in carving out an utterly new role for herself as First Lady, holding press conferences, speaking and writing on the most controversial issues of the day, and occasionally even publicly disagreeing with the president.

Female New Dealers created a fresh image of American women as leaders, and they actively advocated for other women, both as colleagues and in the everyday life of the nation. They revolutionized the role of women in electoral politics, particularly in the Democratic Party. But their advocacy was hardly confined to women's issues; on the contrary, their passion for reform was the driving force behind some of the New Deal's most far-reaching accomplishments, including Social Security and child labor laws.

At the same time, women faced discrimination in New Deal programs that would not be considered acceptable in the twenty-first century. They were excluded from jobs programs, paid less in many new industry-wide wage codes, and in many cases deemed ineligible for benefits like Social Security. But females in positions of influence spared no



effort in fighting for better treatment of women. They didn't win every battle, but they pressed the country to have the conversation. In so doing they raised awareness of women's vital role in the nation's social and economic life.

In the coming years of world war, America would need its women more than ever—not just to tend the home fires but also to take over in the factory and on the farm. Women's work in the New Deal helped open the way for the iconic figure of munitions plant worker Rosie the Riveter, building confidence in her slogan: "We can do it!"

Above, left: Frances Perkins before a joint committee of the House and Senate, promoting legislation to establish a minimum wage and maximum work hours, June 4, 1937. A groundbreaker as a woman in government, Perkins was a private person whose main passion was to give American workers—including typically low-paid women workers—protections and rights that would allow them to earn a living wage in safe, healthy conditions. LOC

Above, right: This poster exalts in a new image of American womanhood—a muscular, can-do blue collar worker, May 1944. In the early twentieth century, women had pressed for workplace rights, reproductive rights, and voting rights. In the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt tapped these activist women to help shape the New Deal. By the wartime years of the 1940s, the Victorian sensibilities of the late nineteenth century were fading fast. LOC



Bernice Stevens of Braddock, Pennsylvania, cleans a locomotive at the Pitcairn, Pennsylvania, engine house of the Pennsylvania Railroad; May 1943. LOC



Mary Ankrom, mother of six, works on a locomotive at the engine house of the Pennsylvania Railroad in Pitcairn, Pennsylvania; May 1943. While New Deal laws of the 1930s establishing a minimum wage and the right to unionize especially helped women in low-paying industries like garment manufacturing, the war years saw sharply increased demand for women's labor and produced better-paying jobs. Ankrom made fifty-eight cents an hour, nearly twice the minimum wage. LOC



Women workers lunch in the women's locker room at the yards of the Pennsylvania Railroad in Pitcairn, Pennsylvania; May 1943. LOC



Woman Leaders of the New Deal

Franklin D. Roosevelt's hiring of women to top jobs was extraordinary in its day. Aside from the groundbreaking appointment of Frances Perkins to his cabinet as secretary of labor—a position that was especially critical given the country's dire economic crisis—FDR named twenty-two women to senior administrative posts, many previously held by men. He treated them as he would any male colleague, neither shortchanging their contributions nor sparing them the bruising competition of ideas that sometimes characterized top-level debates.

The women came with impressive résumés and their own progressive agendas. Perkins, for example, on being offered the job of secretary of labor, ticked off a list of goals: a minimum wage, maximum workweek, old-age pensions, and unemployment insurance. It was an extraordinarily ambitious program, and she accomplished it. Scrupulously private and leery of the press, she was all the while her own family's sole breadwinner, responsible for a daughter and husband who suffered from chronic mental illness.

Molly Dewson, meanwhile, was a crack political operative, valuable to FDR for her ability, proven in his own gubernatorial and presidential campaigns, to round up votes—especially the female votes that, as FDR recognized, could now be a major factor in elections. After FDR's inauguration, Eleanor Roosevelt lobbied for Dewson to helm the Women's Division of the National Democratic Committee. From this perch Dewson in turn tirelessly promoted women in politics, having already pushed for Perkins's appointment to the cabinet. Dewson also blazed a fresh trail in her private life, living for half a century with her female partner.

Josephine Roche, FDR's assistant secretary of the Treasury, was a Vassar- and Columbia-trained social worker who



had served as Denver's first female police officer, run her father's coal mining company with pro-union sensibilities, and made a bid for the governorship of Colorado. And Mary McLeod Bethune, who as director of Negro Affairs for the National Youth Administration would assemble a "Black Cabinet" to advise on issues concerning African Americans, had been born to former slaves on a cotton farm in South Carolina. She had sought out learning and become a noted educator of African American girls. Bethune successfully pressed for the inclusion of black youth in the New Deal and developed a close friendship with ER, inspiring her to increasingly bold actions on behalf of civil rights.

FDR also broke ground by appointing Ohio Supreme Court Justice Florence Allen to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, the highest judicial position held by a woman to date. He sent Florence Jaffray Harriman to Norway and Ruth Bryan Owen to Denmark as U.S. ministers.

Few individuals, male or female, could claim more influence in FDR's administration than the indomitable and deeply compassionate First Lady. ER had overcome youthful insecurities to become a powerful speaker whose winning way with people rivaled FDR's own. In 1933, for example, she went alone to chat and reminisce with



Born in 1875, the fifteenth child of former slaves in South Carolina, Mary McLeod Bethune became an accomplished educator and civil rights activist. She had a committed ally in Eleanor Roosevelt, and served during much of Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency as his special adviser on minority affairs.

Top: Bethune, second from left, and Eleanor Roosevelt at the opening of Midway Hall, a residence for black women government workers in Washington, DC, May 1943. National Archives and Records Admin

Above: Bethune at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida, the liberal arts college she founded in 1904 as a small school for African American girls, January 1943. LOC

veterans camped near Washington, DC, to demonstrate for benefits—a repeat of a 1932 march that had ended in eviction by the military. “Hoover sent the army,” one veteran observed, “and Roosevelt sent his wife.” ER’s pull with FDR was strong, and she sometimes played the gadfly, urging him to take on such politically inconvenient causes as ending tolerance for lynching in the South. As the president’s advisor Rexford Tugwell would recall, “No one who ever saw Eleanor Roosevelt sit down facing her husband, and, holding his eye firmly, say to him, ‘Franklin, I think you should . . .’ or, ‘Franklin, surely you will not . . .’ will ever forget the experience.” Nationally syndicated political columnist Raymond Clapper put it more bluntly, naming ER one of the ten most powerful people in Washington.



Social Security Board member Molly Dewson, left, with Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, January 22, 1938. Dewson, an astute Democratic Party operative whom Franklin D. Roosevelt nicknamed “the little general,” had lobbied FDR to appoint Perkins as the first woman ever to hold a cabinet post. LOC



Josephine Roche, center, with public health officials and doctors, opening a U.S. Public Health Service conference on “venereal”—i.e., sexually transmitted—diseases, January 1936. Roche, who as assistant secretary of the treasury oversaw the Public Health Service, had advocated for funding for public health clinics in the Social Security Act of 1935, testifying that of the 750,000 cases of syphilis in America each year, more than half did not get treatment within the first two years. LOC

Florence Allen (holding the flag) and other activists for women’s suffrage in Cleveland, Ohio, 1912. Allen would be the first woman to serve on a state supreme court—Ohio’s—and in 1934, Franklin D. Roosevelt would make her a federal judge. Allen would serve on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit until 1959. LOC





B

Women and the New Deal Democratic Party

The New Deal had the greatest women's political tag team the nation had ever seen—Eleanor Roosevelt and Molly Dewson. Both women understood issue-oriented grassroots politics, had Franklin D. Roosevelt's respect, and were determined to build a strong, effective Women's Division of the Democratic National Committee.

In late 1932, as FDR began to form his first administration, they focused their efforts on securing federal appointments for qualified women. By mid-1933, FDR had assigned more than twenty women to high-level posts. As the New Deal took shape, ER and Dewson recruited and trained a corps of sixty thousand female party

workers both to promote New Deal policies in their communities and to report back with an honest assessment of the comments they heard. Dewson fought for and won more representation for women on party committees, and she sought to reward women's faithful legwork as it had long been rewarded among party men—with jobs.

After women won the right to vote in 1920, female Democrats had organized into a separate unit within the party—the Women's Division—that gained in power and prestige during FDR's administration. In 1935 Dewson and ER managed to persuade Democratic National Committee head James Farley that Women's Division activities would be central

Molly Dewson in Washington, DC, 1937. Dewson did valuable work on Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1932 and 1936 presidential campaigns and headed the Women's Division of the Democratic National Committee from 1933 to 1936, when she withdrew due to poor health. In 1937, she joined the Social Security Board. LOC

to FDR's reelection and deserved a fixed line in the party budget. Farley was a tough political operative who, more than twenty years later, would proclaim that no female would ever be president, in part because of women's tendency to be "emotional and subjective." It was FDR's hearty support for the women's arguments that made the difference. The president recognized Dewson's steely perseverance in the nickname "the little general," and he conveyed respect for her policymaking skills by appointing her in 1935 to the committee that shaped Social Security legislation, and in 1937 to the three-person board set to administer the ambitious new federal program.



Working Women and the New Deal

In 1930s America, the general expectation was that men were the true breadwinners. A husband and father was responsible for supporting his family while a wife and mother tended the home. If women worked, it was to earn supplemental pin money or simply to pursue a personal interest. So it was seen as natural and harmless that women be paid less than men and enjoy fewer safeguards against the grinding exploitation known as “sweating.”

The truth, of course, was otherwise. Leaving aside the social desirability of women bringing their abilities to the workplace, many women needed to work to help their families put food on the table; plenty were heads of households and sole breadwinners. As the Depression threw men out of industrial and professional jobs, many women experienced an even more urgent need for gainful work. Unequal treatment in the workplace was a threat to survival.

New Dealers—especially the women’s network Franklin D. Roosevelt brought into the government—were alert to this problem and tried to help. But they faced potent opposition, and the prevailing social bias against women workers persisted in the programs they launched.

The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), for example, prompted the establishment of industry-wide minimum wage and maximum workday regulations—standards progressive women had championed for decades. Although the wage codes did raise pay and limit work hours for many women, a quarter of participating industries adopted separate and unequal codes for women. The codes also did not cover women working in retail and on farms.

In 1935, after the Supreme Court invalidated NIRA and the hour and wage laws it established, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins drafted a bill that set a federal minimum wage and a forty-hour work week and outlawed child labor in



A Jewish garment worker at the N.M. dress shop in New York City making blouses for the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, January 1943. New Deal legislation guaranteeing a minimum wage and overtime pay helped women in traditionally low-paying mass production industries like the garment trade. So did laws enshrining the right to bargain with employers through unions—in this worker’s case, Local 89 of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union. LOC

industries engaged in interstate commerce. It took three years for her bill, the Fair Labor Standards Act, to become law. Yet southern Democrats and anti-New Deal Republicans would only support the bill if it did not apply to farmworkers or domestics, the latter category made up mostly of women working very hard for little pay without the benefit of alliance with fellow workers. Congress yielded.

A similar struggle took place over Social Security. Perkins took the lead here, too. After meeting with FDR and conferring with Katherine Lenroot of the Children’s Bureau, Perkins shepherded Social Security legislation through the drafting process, making sure it included support for the unemployed, the aged, and widows, but also programs for maternal and child welfare and federal aid to public health clinics. Once it reached the Senate, however, southern Democrats demanded that farmworkers and domestics be excluded from its main benefits. Perkins could not combat their legislative power, and the coverage she had hoped to extend was stripped from the bill.

The same year Social Security passed, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935



Top: Women workers waiting to punch their timecards give the “V” sign for victory at the Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company, a supercharger plant in the Midwest, October 1942. The Japanese had brought America into World War II with the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. With war production in full swing, Franklin D. Roosevelt urged employers to abandon prejudices related to gender, race, and age to keep their factories fully staffed. LOC

Above: Textile workers at the Mary-Leila Cotton Mill in Greensboro, Georgia, picket for a contract and higher wages, May 1942. The Congress of Industrial Unions, created in 1935 and galvanized by federal support and pro-union legislation, organized these and other mill workers, many of them women, across the union-resistant South. In this union action, some of the picketers carried signs reading “The U.S. government is behind us 100%” and “C.I.O. is here to stay!” LOC

guaranteed workers of both sexes the right to organize into unions. It helped many women reap the higher wages and workplace protections associated with union contracts. By the late 1930s, eight hundred thousand women had joined unions—a 300 percent increase in less than a decade.

Determined to establish a federal minimum wage and maximum workweek, Perkins, once again, led the campaign to draft and adopt the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. While this time she was able to win coverage for women in retail, southern Democratic congressional leadership continued to insist that domestics and farmworkers be left to fend for themselves.

D

Unemployed Women and the New Deal

The conventional perspective in 1930s America held that women's paid work was of only marginal importance; it followed that joblessness among women was not a high-priority problem. On the contrary, during the Depression, a common view saw working women as themselves part of the problem, taking jobs that might have gone to unemployed male breadwinners. Married women in particular were urged to withdraw from the workplace. Franklin D. Roosevelt's budget-cutting Economy Act of 1933 even forced federally employed women married to another federal worker to resign their posts—a provision adopted over Eleanor Roosevelt's strong protest.

Also despite the persistent urgings of female New Dealers, out-of-work women across America received less-than-equal treatment in New Deal work-relief programs. The Civil Conservation Corps (CCC) paid urban men to do conservation work while living in government-established camps; it excluded women. Only after insistent pressure from ER and others—"Where's the she-she-she?" they asked—did administrators open camps for women. Women lucky enough to enroll in the camps received an allowance rather than a wage, could stay only one month, and received training in hygiene and housekeeping. More than 2.5 million men enrolled, but the CCC had spots for only 8,500 women. As administrator Hilda Smith noted, "As is so often the case, the boys get the breaks, the girls are neglected."

Women fared much better under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Former Mississippi state legislator Ellen Woodward managed all WPA nonconstruction projects and strove to assist as many unemployed women as possible. At the outset, while millions of unskilled men were being put to work on building projects, there were no projects geared to unskilled women. But within a few months, the WPA transformed empty warehouse space into sewing centers



and hired two hundred thousand women to make mattresses, clothes, and blankets for the needy. Others canned fruits and vegetables. The WPA sent skilled women to teach school, staff libraries, conduct research, and lead adult education programs. Thousands of unemployed women artists, writers, and performers working for the WPA's arts programs entertained communities; gave music, art, and singing lessons; and helped produce the WPA travel guides.

Woodward forcefully defended the usefulness of the WPA women's work against occasional charges that it was silly or insignificant. In one speech she noted that the press had dismissed WPA "housekeepers'



Top, left: A worker dresses and packs dolls at the Paragon Rubber Company and American Character Doll in Easthampton, Massachusetts, 1936. In the Depression, many Americans felt that female workers, especially married ones, undercut the more critical employment of male breadwinners. But to sustain themselves and their families through the 1930s, many women had to bring in whatever earnings they could, as well as practice strict economies at home. National Archives

Top, right: Spanish American women weaving rag rugs in a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project in Costilla, New Mexico, September 1939. Under the creative leadership of Ellen Woodward, manager of women's WPA projects, hundreds of thousands of jobless American women went to work teaching, sewing, writing books, and canning vegetables. LOC

Left: A poster advertising a Boston exhibition of work by women painters in the arts program of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA work-relief program spent only 12 percent of its budget on jobless women, in part because it focused on hiring workers for heavy construction projects. LOC

assistants" as mere "government meddlers in the proper business of the mothers of the land." But this program, she said, had sent destitute widows into the homes of poor people to, for example, nurse a sick mother and help with her children so her husband wouldn't lose time on the job. "Every time a man is taken from the demoralizing ranks of the jobless," said Woodward, "every time a woman is removed from the humiliation of a breadline, and given work to do, a home somewhere becomes more secure."

The WPA spent 12 percent of its budget on women and hired 372,000 of the nation's three million unemployed women.

E

African American Women and the New Deal

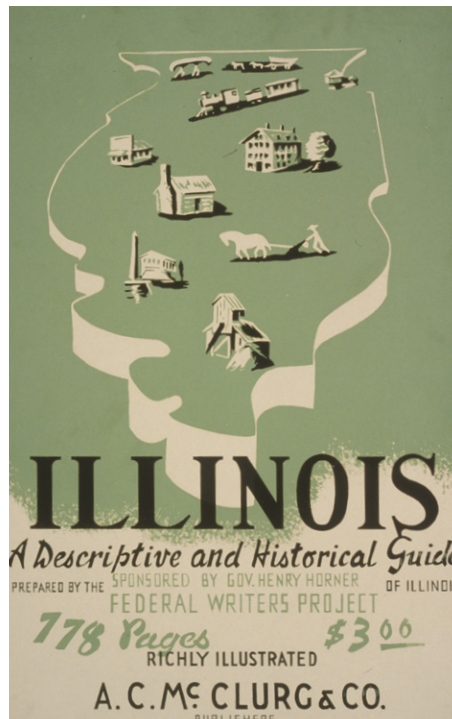
African American women suffered disproportionately in the Depression. More than half lost their jobs, often plunging their families into destitution. While the New Deal did offer some relief, it helped African American women the least.

During the New Deal's first one hundred days, avid New Deal southern Democrats, who controlled the legislative and appropriations process in Congress, amended White House proposals to require local administration of New Deal farm, conservation, and relief policies. This placed Jim Crow segregationists in charge of New Deal programs across the South. By 1935, as Congress grappled with Social Security, the southern block and anti-New Deal Republicans joined forces to deny domestics and farmworkers Social Security coverage—thus excluding 90 percent of African American women workers from coverage.

Although guidelines of the New Deal's biggest work-relief program (the Works Progress Administration, or WPA) forbade discrimination, local control of relief efforts meant that Jim Crow policies continued to dominate the hiring process.

There were bright spots. Some smaller programs, which had Eleanor Roosevelt's strong support, refused to follow local custom and offered unemployed African American women opportunities. The WPA arts program known as Federal Project Number One also hired black women visual artists, musicians, writers, poets, secretaries, clerks, and teachers, providing income that allowed a lucky few, such as the novelist Zora Neale Hurston, to produce some of their greatest works. Mary McLeod Bethune's oversight of the National Youth Administration ensured that young African American women would benefit from work programs that helped them stay in school and prepare for the workplace.

Just as important, Bethune's close relationship with ER gave black women a



Above: Novelist Zora Neale Hurston, April 1938. Hurston worked for the Federal Writers' Project in Florida, collecting personal histories from rural Floridians that informed her celebrated 1937 work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. LOC



powerful ally in the White House. To bring black women's issues to the fore, Bethune, as founder and president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), united with ER to organize the 1938 White House Conference on Governmental Cooperation in the Approach to the Problems of Negro Women and Children. The conference raised the profile of the NCNW and inaugurated regular visits to the White House by its representatives.

Top, left: The cover of a Federal Writers' Project (FWP) travel guide to Illinois. The Chicago unit of the FWP employed a number of prominent black writers, including the Harlem Renaissance poet Arna Bontemps, who co-headed a project to document and describe African American life in Illinois. LOC

Above: An African American domestic worker feeds a child in her charge in Atlanta, Georgia, 1939. Household workers often labored long hours for low pay in relative isolation. Their exclusion from many of the New Deal's worker benefits, from Social Security to the minimum wage, was a serious shortcoming that disproportionately affected black women. Social Security was extended to these workers in 1954. In 1974, domestics came under the minimum-wage and overtime rules first established in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. LOC