

Success and optimism inspired Rose Schneiderman to write this editorial about the recent strike victories in the cap making industry of New York. These two victories showed that women could band together to become stronger, which was a notion that varied from the norm and one that she hoped to change with this article. An industrial women worker would not help but feel encouraged and empowered after reading this honest and informative article.

At the turn of the century, the opinion of an industrial woman’s ability and intellect was destitute. This opinion was not just held by industrial employers but also by some of the employees. This is not to say that women felt inferior to men, but their actions – or lack thereof – did not say otherwise. When forced to work at a lower rate, women convinced themselves, and each other, that they could overcome this deficit by working a little harder and tolerating the extra work, but not willing to challenge the boss themselves. This attitude arose from the fact that negotiating one-on-one with the boss was not an option, “no one girl dare stand up for anything alone” (Schneiderman). Schneiderman conveys the fact that individually women cannot hope to attain success in the workplace, but she is careful not to say that success was out of reach. Along this line, she also validates the idea that women do deserve better working conditions and are capable of the same accomplishments that men strive to achieve.

In 1903 a new and inspiring factory worker, Miss Bessie Brout, convinced Schneiderman and another girl to go to the National Board of United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers (a male dominated organization) meeting and ask them to organize the women. The women asserted that a union label would provide better working conditions and as well as leverage against their bosses. At the request of the board, Schneiderman and Brout brought ten other women who were willing join the women’s union to the next board meeting, and the board approved their organization.

Schneiderman puts emphasis on what women can and have accomplished by forming organizations. A short time after the board approved the women organizing, the first women’s organized cap maker’s strike took place. She directly states, “The result was a victory,” (Schneiderman). Five of the biggest factories in New York joined together and achieved a raise of two dollars per week. In her article, she follows up by describing the successes of a second cap maker’s strike, prompted by the anti-union actions of their employers. This one lasted for 13 weeks, but was triumphant nonetheless. She remarks about her union, “our trade is well organized, we have won two victories and are not going backward” (Schneiderman). She boasts the achievements that are possible and realizable for all working class women who organize.

To understand why Schneiderman wrote this article, one must look at the targeted audience. She was writing to other working class women, especially to those who had doubts about being able to organize themselves. She spends the first quarter of the article giving a brief biography of her life to clarify that her actions were not a product of a previous higher standard of living or education, but a product of the same circumstances any other working class women could have had.

The choice of this periodical, “The Independent, A Weekly Journal of Free Opinions,” (The Independent Publications) is noteworthy. Schneiderman reaches out geographically to all of New York, Boston and other larger cities, where this periodical was published. These free papers were the prime sources of information for the working class people, and were key vehicles in the sharing information across distances during this time period.

The importance of this article is not simply the success of the women cap maker’s union, but the prominence of instructing women in ways to organize a union and the importance of doing so. As previously stated, a working class woman could not do much to improve upon her

work situation by herself. Schneiderman said that, “we girls need an organization. The men had organized already, and had gained some advantages” (Schneiderman). She stressed the need to organize throughout her writing. She makes plain that, “each boss does the best he can for himself,” (Schneiderman) and thus is against the workers. The way to fight them is with a strong and united organization.

Schneiderman begins this instruction by providing the basics of how to start a union and covers some of the vicissitudes that union could face. She makes getting started seem very feasible and that any woman could get a group of coworkers together and start a union. The strikes provide the workers with better pay and a sense of camaraderie. She gives a very important tidbit of information about the financial aspects of striking, that the National Board paid the cap makers during the strike. Supporting oneself would be a week-to-week task for some of these workers, and this payment would have been enough security to move to strike for certain workers. She also covers ways to recruit others to join and teaches how to talk to potential union members.

Schneiderman addresses the issues and threats unions will face. She focuses on the open shop policy, “a weapon to break the unions” (Schneiderman) and how they should not be borne. Open shops do not require employees to join a union, as opposed to closed shops which do, “The existence of the closed shops prevents the employers from abusing the advantage which they have in dealing with unorganized [work-person]” (Taussig). A no tolerance policy was implemented by the cap maker’s with success.

Despite imposing disadvantages, Schneiderman gives hope with her encouraging words: “Women have proved in the late strike that they can be faithful to an organization and to each

other. The men give us the credit of winning the strike” (Schneiderman). She suggests several industries where unionizing would work well, such as: sales, waitressing, and domestic service.

The overall message of this article is clear: women can and must stand together if they wish for better working conditions. Women workers are not alone, support and information is available. “So we must stand together to resist, for we will get what we can take – just that and no more” (Schneiderman).

Bibliography

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