FURTHER READING

Kelley, Florence
• Education: Cornell University, B.A., 1882; Northwestern University, LL.B., 1895
• Accomplishments: factory inspector, state of Illinois (1891–97), general secretary, National Consumers’ League (1899–1912)

Florence Kelley was a national leader of the Progressive Era consumer movement. The daughter of a prominent Pennsylvania congressman, she was one of the first women to attend Cornell University. Failing to get into the University of Pennsylvania for graduate work because she was a woman, she eventually made her way to the University of Zurich in Switzerland. There she studied law and government, became a socialist, and married a medical student from Poland.

Upon her return to the United States with three children, her marriage fell apart. In 1891, Jane Addams accepted her as a resident of Hull House, a social settlement located in Chicago, and recommended her to the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics as an investigator of tenement sweatshops in the neighborhood. Kelley uncovered children of all ages sewing garments in horrible conditions. The work rooms were so unsanitary that an official brought in to witness them refused to enter, fearing he would get sick. In 1893, largely through Kelley’s efforts, Illinois passed a law prohibiting child labor, limiting working hours for women, and controlling sweatshop conditions. Governor John Peter Altgeld put Kelley in charge of enforcing the law. Frustrated by the district attorney’s refusal to prosecute cases against factory owners, Kelley earned a law degree in order to take legal action herself. Her successes were limited. In 1895 the Illinois Supreme Court struck down part of the factory inspection law, and when Governor Altgeld lost his bid for reelection in 1896 Kelley was not reappointed.

In 1899, the National Consumers’ League, which investigated working conditions and worked for their improvement, invited Kelley to become its general secretary. In this role she spoke and published widely on the need to improve conditions for all wage-earners. She became a major force behind the passage of minimum wage legislation, which by 1913 had been adopted in nine states. In 1912, a federal Children’s Bureau, designed in part by Kelley, became an agency in the Department of Commerce and Labor. The first federal agency to concern itself with children’s welfare, the

Bureau spearheaded the national campaign against child labor and for the improvement of maternal and child health. In 1918, when the Supreme Court struck down the nation’s first prohibition against child labor (Keating–McFadden Act), Kelley asked in despair, why are “seals, bears, reindeer, fish, wild game in the national parks, buffalo, [and] migratory birds all found suitable for federal protection, but not the children of our race and their mothers?” A powerful advocate for the just treatment of the weak and underprivileged, she persisted in her quest for a child labor amendment to the U.S. Constitution but was never able to achieve this goal.

SEE ALSO
Child labor; Children’s Bureau, U.S.; Hull House; National Consumers’ League

FURTHER READING

Knights of Labor

STARTED IN 1869 under the leadership of Uriah Stevens, the Knights of Labor was originally a brotherhood of workers united by secrecy and rituals. By the late 1870s, however, the Knights had abandoned secrecy and begun to organize both skilled and unskilled workers across entire industries. Idealistic and egalitarian in philosophy, the Knights stressed cooperation and inclusiveness. By the mid-1880s, they were welcoming women workers, African Americans, and even some employers to membership in their national organization. They excluded bankers, lawyers, and gamblers, however.

The Knights organized and facilitated a number of important boycotts and strikes, especially those involving the railroads. They sought equal pay for equal work, an eight-hour workday, and the abolition of child labor and convict labor. A primary goal was to educate both their own members and the American public about the dignity and worth of ordinary workers.

The organization reached its peak in the mid-1880s under the leadership of Terence Powderly, a master machinist and passionate labor organizer. In those years, it had more than 700,000 dues-paying members. The Knights’ motto was "An injury to one is the concern of all."

The Knights of Labor founded over internal disputes, mismanagement, and the loss of funds during unsuccessful strikes. Its reputation was severely damaged when the public blamed the Knights for the 1886 Chicago Haymarket riot, when policemen died in a bombing for which the Knights were not responsible. By 1900, membership had dropped to almost nothing, and the labor union movement had become closely identified with a powerful rival organization, the American Federation of Labor.

SEE ALSO
American Federation of Labor; Haymarket Square riot (1886); Labor; Labor unions; Railroads; Strikes

FURTHER READING