10. Frances Perkins: Advocate for Working People, at FDR’s Right Hand

No one can claim a longer history working with Franklin D. Roosevelt than Frances Perkins. When FDR became governor of New York in 1929, he asked her to head the state labor department. In 1933 President-elect Roosevelt pushed her to serve as United States secretary of labor, a position she held throughout FDR’s presidency. Together, they implemented policies that set a new standard for how the nation would treat its workers—not as “industrial cannon fodder,” as FDR once put it, but as men and women whose humanity demands consideration.

Yet in 1911, when politics first brought FDR and Perkins into contact in New York’s state capital, the idea that the two would collaborate so intensely in a common purpose would have stunned them both.

Perkins was an utterly devoted activist for workers, inspired by her youthful years in Chicago working with Jane Addams, founder of one of the country’s first settlement houses, community centers that brought middle-class reformers to live and work among the urban poor. Perkins now represented a leading reform group in New York City, and was outraged by working conditions there. She had personally witnessed young employees of the city’s Triangle...

Frances Perkins, U.S. secretary of labor, meets with U.S. Steel workers in Homestead, Pennsylvania, to answer questions about New Deal labor policy, 1933. The mayor of Homestead had thrown the meeting out of the town hall when Perkins insisted on admitting men he considered “undesirable Reds.” FDRL.
II. Hope, Recovery, Reform: The Great Depression and FDR’s New Deal

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Shirtwaist Factory leap from windows to their deaths to escape burning in the fire that consumed their negligently unsafe sweatshop, and she was determined to secure laws that would protect workers. When she lobbied FDR, a young state senator in Albany, she left the conversation convinced he was “a spoiled aristocrat” with little interest in social issues. FDR, in turn, found Perkins to be a self-righteous idealist poorly suited for political work.

And yet nearly twenty years later, in 1929, a newly elected Governor Roosevelt would appoint Perkins as New York State’s highest labor administrator. At nearly fifty, Perkins was by then a seasoned professional who’d worked inside and outside of government, while FDR, in Perkins’s view, had developed empathy and patience through his long struggle with polio.

Despite their collaboration in New York, Perkins at first did not want to follow FDR to Washington, DC, to become secretary of labor—the nation’s first female cabinet official. Soon after the president-elect issued his invitation, she brought him a list of “demands.” She would accept the position, she told FDR, only if he agreed to support old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, and maximum hours and minimum wages for all workers; to outlaw child labor; and to implement a large federal public-works program.

She assumed he would reject some of her demands and find another labor secretary. But FDR accepted her conditions and she took the job. All the items on her list would become law. Together, FDR and Perkins would start a revolution, developing, along the way, a deep regard for each other.

As Perkins later observed, “I came to Washington to work for God, FDR, and the millions of forgotten, plain common working men.”
After spending years in the role of social worker and activist, Frances Perkins began her government career working for Franklin D. Roosevelt’s predecessor as New York governor, Al Smith, whom she’d first met when investigating the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Smith, impressed with her attention to detail and unstinting work ethic, appointed Perkins to the New York State Industrial Commission in 1919.

When FDR succeeded Smith as governor ten years later, Smith recommended that FDR replace the commission’s inefficient chief. FDR said he wanted to appoint Perkins to the post, to which Smith reportedly replied, “I have always thought that, as a rule, men will take advice from a woman, but it is hard for them to take orders from a woman.” FDR reported this remark to Perkins with a chuckle, remarking, “I’ve got more nerve about women and their status in the world than Al has.” FDR appointed Perkins, who managed the labor department with little difficulty.

The Great Depression intensified throughout FDR and Perkins’s four years in Albany. Perkins’s determination to address unemployment impressed FDR—even when she created controversy by spontaneously and publicly assailing President Herbert Hoover’s claim that the worst of the Depression was over. This made her the most well-known state labor official in the nation.

FDR could have fired her for speaking out of turn, but he appreciated her courage. He encouraged Perkins to explore ways to increase employment and help the jobless. She held hearings across the state, urged increased funds for public works, and convinced FDR to consider the merits of “unemployment insurance” for workers. In June 1930, when FDR became the first governor to support the concept of unemployment insurance, he made it a national issue. In 1932 it would become a major part of his presidential campaign.
Defending the Constitution: The Harry Bridges Case

In 1934 Harry Bridges, an Australian-born longshoreman working on the San Francisco docks, helped lead a crippling longshoremen’s strike and negotiate its successful resolution. Anti-labor leaders promptly called him a Communist and demanded that he be deported, as required by U.S. immigration law.

Frances Perkins’s Department of Labor was responsible for immigration activities, so she ordered an investigation of Bridges. When neither the FBI nor the San Francisco Police Department found any indication that the union activist was a Communist Party affiliate—he spent his evenings in his room playing a mandolin—Perkins refused to deport him. Vicious criticism flooded the airwaves and filled her mailbox.

That fall, immigration offices in Washington State forwarded testimony from four dubious witnesses (one had a previous conviction for perjury) who swore they had seen Bridges at Communist Party events. Perkins, although suspicious, scheduled a hearing. Before the hearing date, however, an appellate court ruled in favor of an alien who faced similar allegations. Perkins postponed the Bridges hearing, knowing the Supreme Court would eventually rule on the case.

She met with Franklin D. Roosevelt to discuss her actions. He stood with Perkins.

Pressure to move against Bridges mounted when the newly formed House Un-American Activities Committee targeted Perkins for coddling Communist organizers. Its chair called for her resignation. In early 1939 another committee member launched an impeachment attempt against Perkins.

FDR continued to back his controversial labor secretary, and Perkins still refused to hold deportation hearings until reliable evidence could be assembled. She hired James Landis, dean of the Harvard Law School, to investigate the charges against Bridges. Landis was the examiner in hearings held the summer of 1939; he ruled that there was insufficient evidence to deport Bridges.

Attacks on Perkins and FDR increased. But FDR never considered removing Perkins from his cabinet.
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Frances Perkins and Social Security

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s most significant domestic achievement—establishing, with the Social Security Act of 1935, a federal social safety net—could not have happened without Frances Perkins.

As industrial commissioner of New York State, Perkins had tutored Governor Roosevelt on the concept of “social insurance.” Workers were insured against accidents on the job, she said. They should also be insured against destitution in old age and sudden job loss. Her arguments helped FDR leave Albany with a bold legacy: state old-age pensions and unemployment insurance financed by contributions from workers, businesses, and the state.

As president, FDR trusted Perkins to manage the arduous legislative process that would make every American eligible for federal old-age pensions and unemployment insurance, provide health care for the disabled, and give financial support to dependent children. Perkins understood what was at stake in developing a federal social insurance program—she had seen the suffering of the unemployed and of the impoverished elderly. She also had a firm grasp of the complex policy, logistical, political, and legal challenges involved in establishing such a program.

FDR signed the historic Social Security Act into law on August 14, 1935. Perkins stood directly behind him. When he realized that Perkins had provided pens for him to give to congressional leaders but he did not have one for her, he asked his secretary for “a first-class pen for Frances.” “And,” she later wrote, “he insisted upon holding me responsible and thanking me personally in very appreciative terms.”

Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins stands behind Roosevelt as he signs the Social Security Act into law, March 14, 1935. After signing the bill—one of the most important legislative achievements of the New Deal—FDR made sure his hardworking labor secretary got “a first-class pen” as a memento. As Perkins later wrote, “He insisted upon holding me responsible and thanking me personally in very appreciative terms.”
Frances Perkins and the Fair Labor Standards Act

In Franklin D. Roosevelt’s bid to hire longtime colleague Frances Perkins as his secretary of labor in 1933, he promised her that he would support legislation guaranteeing a minimum wage, setting the maximum hours employers could require their employees to work, and outlawing child labor for all involved in interstate commerce.

He understood how controversial these measures would be, especially after May 1935, when the Supreme Court struck down the New Deal’s National Industrial Recovery Act, invalidating its industry-wide wage and hour codes as unconstitutional. FDR asked Perkins to prepare legislation that could withstand the court’s scrutiny. They agreed it would be best to introduce a bill after voters reelected him in 1936.

FDR sent Perkins’s draft bill to Congress on May 24, 1937. Fourteen months of legislative wrangling and intense union and industrial lobbying followed. After the House of Representatives sent the bill back to committee near the end of 1937, FDR tried to defuse criticism in his January 1938 State of the Union address. “We are seeking only, of course, to end starvation wages and intolerable hours,” he said. “More desirable wages are, and should continue to be, the product of collective bargaining.” Perkins hired a young lawyer to track all discussion of the bill in Congress and elsewhere.

More than a year after its introduction in Congress, the Fair Labor Standards bill finally passed, and FDR signed it into law on June 25, 1938. After the hard-won landmark legislation passed, Perkins noted, “Everybody claimed credit for it. . . . I cannot remember whether the president and I claimed credit, but we always thought we had done it. Certainly he gave a sigh of relief as he signed it. ‘That’s that,’” he said.

“We are seeking only, of course, to end starvation wages and intolerable hours...”

Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1938 State of the Union address.
Frances Perkins and Public Works

As the top labor official in New York State, Frances Perkins had championed public works—ambitious government-sponsored building projects that would put the jobless to work and leave the state with structures of lasting value.

She carried that commitment with her to the White House. In the cabinet’s first meeting with Franklin D. Roosevelt, she urged fellow officials to support spending on public works. Undeterred by Budget Director Lewis Douglas’s objections, she continued in the following months to lobby FDR and her fellow secretaries to support public construction.

FDR, Perkins later wrote, “was willing to be ridden and harassed” as long as “his aides [drove] ahead and [developed] their fields.” Perkins did this for public works. She insisted that the major New Deal public-works agency, the Public Works Administration (PWA), be established under its own section (Title II) of the National Industrial Recovery Act—a decision that preserved the PWA when the Supreme Court invalidated other parts of the law in 1935. Perkins also gave sage advice when she argued that public-works programs should be placed in the hands of Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who would run the PWA with scrupulous attention to quality and fairness in the expenditure of government money.

Looking back, Perkins was glad she had fought to get shovels in the ground and people back to work all over the country building visible, useful public structures. Though it was government spending overall that had helped kick-start the economy, she remarked, the PWA in particular “had an enormous amount to do with recovery in psychological terms.”

Workers build a lock on the Mississippi River, a project sponsored by the Public Works Administration (PWA), November 16, 1934. Labor official Frances Perkins promoted public works as a way to ameliorate the Depression. She would later write that the PWA's ambitious public building program "had an enormous amount to do with recovery in psychological terms." National Archives
The Roosevelt I Knew

Frances Perkins was not close to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s vice president, Harry Truman. When FDR died suddenly in April 1945, Perkins knew Truman would want a trusted ally in the post of secretary of labor. She left the White House.

After Perkins resigned, literary agent George Bye encouraged her to write a biography of FDR. She refused. But Bye, who had been Eleanor Roosevelt’s agent since 1935, would not take no for an answer. Perkins ultimately agreed to write the book.

The publisher wanted a manuscript within four months. When Perkins panicked at the short deadline, Bye arranged for her to dictate her recollections to writer Howard Taubman. Together, they crafted a remarkable book: The Roosevelt I Knew.

It is a kind but frank portrait of the man Perkins called “the most complicated human being I ever knew.” She praised FDR’s commitment to average Americans, his mastery “of the levers of government,” and his ability to juggle egos and moderate fractious debates. But she also refused to sugarcoat his shortcomings or the disappointment they inflicted—his failure as a glib young state senator to support her bill to limit work hours, his inability to discuss economics with the erudite John Maynard Keynes, and his ill-advised plan to expand the Supreme Court, for example.

The result, as writer and Roosevelt scholar Adam Cohen observed in a 2011 introduction to the book, is an “admiring but unfailingly clear-eyed portrait” that is “as good a guidebook as we are likely to get to Roosevelt’s many complications.”
Madam Secretary

There had never been a woman in the cabinet before Frances Perkins. Moreover, all previous secretaries of labor had come with strong ties to a specific union. Perkins did not. Political cronies traditionally staffed the labor department. Perkins replaced them and refused to let political or union affiliation define qualifications for employment on her staff.

Like Franklin D. Roosevelt, she appreciated unions but thought the best way to improve workers’ lives was to raise wages, shorten hours, and ensure safe workplaces—often through protective regulation. She wanted working Americans to feel respected and to have the ability to buy what they needed.

This approach—together with her refusal to make politically motivated appointments and her well-known dislike of the press—made Perkins an unusual labor secretary.

Initially, none of the labor leaders, members of the press, or senior labor department staff expected her to last longer than a few months. When they met with her, they stumbled. They could not even agree on how they should address her. Call me “Madam Secretary,” Perkins replied.

Madam Secretary led the department for twelve years and helped FDR revolutionize America’s attitude toward workers and organized labor.