Florence Kelley (1859-1932), a major force in American social reform, spent her adult life crusading for protective labor legislation for America’s women and children, fighting for maternal and child health services, and implementing industrial reform through consumer activism.

Born in Philadelphia to a long line of progressives, Florence Molthrop Kelley was the third of eight children and the daughter of United States congressman William D. Kelley. She was educated at Quaker schools in Philadelphia and at Cornell University, which began admitting women in 1874, and from which she graduated in 1882. In 1883, Kelley began graduate studies at the University of Zurich in Switzerland, at which time she became a follower of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and joined the Socialist Party of Zurich. In 1884, Kelley married a fellow student, the Russian socialist Lazare Wischnewetzky. Their first child, Nicholas, was born in 1885, followed by a daughter, Margaret, in 1886, and a son, John, in 1888. Kelley divorced her husband in 1891.

When Kelley and her family returned to the United States in 1886, they settled in New York City, a city in the throes of economic conflict and political upheaval. Kelley was poised to play a significant role in the radical circles of the city. Her first step was translating Engels's *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, which was published in the United States in 1887. After 5 years in New York, throughout which Kelley continued to translate and publish socialist pamphlets and prefaces, she left her husband and moved with her children to Chicago.

When she arrived in Chicago in 1891, Kelley joined fellow reformers at the Hull-House social settlement, and she lived there until 1899. In 1893, Kelley was recruited by the governor of Illinois to be the state’s first chief factory inspector. The next year she achieved her first legislative success: a state law that limited the workday of women and children to a maximum of 8 hours. The law was repealed in 1895.

In 1899, Kelley moved to New York City where she became the first director of the newly formed National Consumers’ League (NCL), a radical pressure group which fought for the manufacture of quality products in healthy working conditions and to be sold at fair prices. She implemented the NCL White Label for products which met the organization's fair labor practices.

Kelley also supported women’s suffrage and African American civil rights, and she helped establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. After the turn of the century, she became a regular speaker on college campuses and published books such as *Modern Industry in Relation to the Family* (1914) and *The Supreme Court and Minimum Wage Legislation* (1925). She wrote her autobiography in 1927 and died in 1932.

See also
- Addams, Jane
- Hull-House
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

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Further Readings and References


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