

Legal Notes: August 2018

Clara Lemlich Shavelson. Not a name you're probably familiar with, few would be. But she was one of the many unheralded pioneers in labor history. The New York Times has been running obituaries of women who went unmentioned in years past (because the large majority of obituaries were for white guys), and Mrs. Shavelson was one of them.

One hundred years ago the labor movement was not only physically dangerous but for men only, despite the rapid influx of women in the workforce since the Civil War. Naturally, women did come to the forefront, and Clara Shavelson was one of them.

In 1909, Shavelson was 23 years old and had already been arrested at least 17 times for union activities. She was beaten not only by police but company guards as well. At the Cooper Union that year, she spoke in favor of a general strike, an action not favored by the male union leadership. Her speech is credited with moving the body to action, a body of women and immigrants that many in labor thought could not be organized.

This strike became known as the "Uprising of 20,000" a milestone in the labor movement. The strike ended with many of the shops recognizing a 52 hour work week, higher wages and recognition of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union ( a union that lasted until 1995, when it was merged into UNITE ).

Not all shops agreed to the demands. One of the shops was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. A year after the strike an infamous fire at the factory killed 146 workers.

Shavelson married and had three children, but her activism never waned. According to the article, "She pursued a vision of motherhood that was almost unheard of at the time, bringing her children with her to Socialist meetings as soon as they were old enough to walk and organizing rent strikes that got her family evicted from at least one home." One of the actions her group took was to pour boiling water from teakettles on those who arrived to carry out evictions (talk about a real tea party!)

An activist to the end, she died in a nursing home in California in 1982, at the age of 96. At the home, she organized the nurses and orderlies. "How much worse could these conditions get?" Shavelson, then 83, asked hesitant staffers before they successfully unionized. "You'd be crazy not to join a union."