

WORKERS' RIGHTS: A SUMMARY

I have always felt that it was important that everyone who was a worker join a labor organization

Eleanor Roosevelt used her position as First Lady to support labor. In 1941 when electrical workers went on strike in New York because their employer refused to bargain in good faith, she lent her considerable support to their picket line, telling them that she “always felt” that “labor organizations” were important for workers. As a teacher, columnist, author, advocate, political activist, and member of The Newspaper Guild for over 25 years, Eleanor Roosevelt led by example. Whether at home or abroad, she championed workers and carried this commitment with her to the United Nations where she played a key role in defining workers’ rights as human rights.

When the UN was established in 1945, President Truman appointed ER to the first American delegation. In 1946, when the UN established the Human Rights Commission to address the horrors confronting a war-scarred world, ER was asked to represent the U.S. Because of her commitment to refugees and other displaced people, the members of the Commission elected her to chair their effort to draft a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Throughout the drafting process, ER worked with union leaders to help define workers’ rights as human rights. Nowhere is this collaboration more evident than in Article 23, summarized here:

1. Everyone has the right to work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration.
4. Everyone has the right to form and join trade unions.

The General Assembly adopted the resulting Declaration on December 10, 1948. But that was just the beginning. ER crossed the country and traveled the world, frequently meeting with union leaders, speaking at union conventions, and talking with union members and their families about their rights and responsibilities. She asked then, as we must ask today:

Where after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home...the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works...without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.