



This entry is from the book *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990, A Biographical Dictionary*, edited by Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast, Indiana University Press, 2001.

The Chicago Women's History Center holds the copyright to this book. The excerpt is for personal and/or academic use. Please do not reproduce any part of it without permission from CWHC.

To properly credit this entry, use the citation, below:

Hirsch, Susan E., "Agnes Nestor," *Women Building Chicago 1790 - 1990, A Biographical Dictionary*, edited by Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. Accessed online www.chicagowomenshistory.org/suffrage-mural-biographies [researcher inserts date] pdf.

NESTOR, AGNES

June 24, 1880–December 28, 1948

TRADE UNION ORGANIZER, POLITICAL ACTIVIST

Agnes Nestor was a founder and officer of the International Glove Workers' Union of America and president of the Chicago Women's Trade Union League for three decades. She made significant contributions to the lives of working women in Chicago, Illinois, and the nation through union organizing, lobbying for protective labor legislation for women and children, and serving on state and national advisory bodies.

Nestor was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to Thomas and Anna (McEwen) Nestor. She was their third child and second daughter. Her mother had been born in upstate New York and her father in Maryland. The Nestors were Roman Catholics who identified strongly with their Irish heritage. Nestor attended both public and parochial grammar schools, but not continuously, as her health was often poor. In Grand Rapids, her father worked as a machinist, later owned a grocery store, and was elected alderman for two terms, then city marshal. Thomas Nestor served as assistant city treasurer but was defeated when he ran for sheriff. Out of political office and without his store, he could not find work at his craft during the depression of the 1890s. Searching for greater opportunity, he moved his family to Chicago in 1897.

This move ended Agnes Nestor's schooling at the eighth grade, and she began her life as a working woman. When they arrived in Chicago, Nestor, aged seventeen, and her older sister, Mary, went to work to help out the family. The family settled on the North Side of Chicago, and the young women found jobs near home at the Eisendrath Glove Company. Nestor was proud of her skill as a glove maker, and this ability became the basis of her trade union philosophy. She championed craft unions, not industry-wide ones.

During her twentieth year Nestor kept a diary that revealed the tenor of her daily life as a Chicago working girl. Nestor had a close circle of friends and loved the theater and shopping. Her work was exhausting, but the young women socialized and

This space left blank.



FIG. 83. *Agnes Nestor, president of the Chicago Women's Trade Union League for three decades.*

helped each other produce their quotas. They worked at least ten hours a day for piece rates. They also had to pay for the power for their machines and any needles that broke. The women often protested against wage cuts and unfair policies by going on strike. By 1898 Agnes Nestor was leading those strikes and, by 1901, along with some men glove makers, seeking to organize a union.

Agnes Nestor's militancy was not simply a reaction to the loss of a comfortable childhood but was grounded in her parents' experiences and beliefs. Anna Nestor's health was ruined by child labor; by age ten she was orphaned and working in a cotton textile mill. Thomas Nestor was a member of the Knights of Labor and a machinist's union. He was on strike several times during the year his daughter kept her diary. Both parents encouraged and supported Nestor's activities, and she credited her father with helping her to understand parliamentary procedure.

Chicago's glove makers formed Glove Makers Local No. 1 in 1901 after a successful strike during which Nestor led the women operators. The latter wanted their local, however, and

the next year they formed Local No. 2 under Nestor's leadership. Nestor saw separate locals as necessary not only because women and men did different jobs but also because in mixed locals men dominated the leadership positions and decision-making. Although she worked in many organizations with men, Nestor believed that women's voices and influence could prevail only in their own institutions.

In 1902 Nestor was a delegate from Local No. 2 to the founding convention of the International Glove Workers' Union of America (IGWU). Because of her talents as an organizer and negotiator, she became one of the few women in national leadership of the trade union. She was third vice-president and a member of the executive board of the IGWU from 1903 to 1906; secretary-treasurer, a paid, full-time position, 1906-13; and president from 1913 to 1916. Thereafter, she remained vice-president until 1939. The union brought improvements for all glove workers through higher piece rates, the abolition of extra charges for power and needles, and special rates for overtime work. Nestor believed that the higher overtime rates were particularly important, as they virtually abolished overly long hours that destroyed women's health. Nestor's own health was weakened by overwork, and she suffered periodically from physical breakdowns.

Nestor thought all working women deserved a decent standard of living and respect as workers. Achieving these goals depended on equal pay for equal work for women and men, a living wage for an eight-hour day, and leisure for education and enjoyment. This vision led her to the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), founded in 1903 to bring trade union women and allies from the middle and upper classes together to promote trade union organization among women workers. Early WTUL members included leading settlement house head residents JANE ADDAMS and MARY McDOWELL as well as trade unionists MARY KENNEY O'SULLIVAN and Leonora O'Reilly. Nestor joined the Chicago branch in its first year, 1904. She was elected to the executive board of the national WTUL in 1906 and became the first president of the Chicago branch from the ranks of the working class in 1913, following the presidencies of McDowell and social reformer MARGARET DREIER ROBINS. Nestor retained both positions until her death. With WTUL and union responsibilities, she gave up working as a glove maker in 1906.

Nestor organized working women in many localities and industries, including garment makers, clerks, and hospital workers. In Chicago in 1911, Nestor aided Margaret Dreier Robins, then president of the Chicago WTUL, and union organizers Sidney Hillman and Bessie Abramowitz (see BESSIE ABRAMOWITZ HILLMAN), in leading the first large strike of garment workers. The resulting contract with the firm of Hart, Schaffner and Marx became the basis for union-employer bargaining in the industry.

Nestor also became a champion of legislation to help working women. She campaigned for woman suffrage in Illinois from 1909 to 1913 to advance the cause of working women. In her article, "The Working Girl's Need for Suffrage," Nestor explained that working women needed the ballot to make full use of their citizenship and to improve their conditions of work, securing proper laws for their health and safety. "A new spirit for

work and an added sense of power to bring about justice will come to every woman through full enfranchisement" (quoted in Mason, 188). In 1909 she joined other Chicago union women lobbying the Illinois state legislature to limit working hours for women to eight hours a day. Despite strenuous opposition from manufacturers, the lobbyists succeeded in getting a compromise ten-hour law for women factory workers.

Two years later, lobbyists were able to broaden the law's coverage to women in mercantile and service work. Nestor's reputation for being politically very shrewd arose from this successful lobbying effort, but the shorter hours movement lost momentum thereafter. Nestor and her Chicago League allies never gave up lobbying in each session of the state legislature until an eight-hour law for women passed in 1937.

One of the most important goals of the WTUL was the education of the woman worker in two related ways: teaching women to be activists in the work place and teaching women English. The Chicago WTUL had inaugurated English classes for immigrant women workers in 1908. These were taught by volunteers from the Chicago Federation of Teachers. After the garment strikes from 1909 to 1911, the league heightened its efforts to teach women English in their own homes. When Agnes Nestor became president of the Chicago branch, the labor situation called for more trained women organizers. Working with the national WTUL, whose headquarters had been moved permanently to Chicago, Nestor established a new Training School for Women Organizers in 1914, dividing the student's time between class time and fieldwork. There were two students enrolled for the first year and they attended courses on trade union organizing, industrial organization, labor history, public speaking, bookkeeping, and writing. Agnes Nestor and MARY ANDERSON directed their fieldwork, which consisted of participating in union meetings and learning from union leaders about the process of grievances, strikes, initiating new members, and negotiating with employers. The school was the first full-time labor school in the United States. As head of the Chicago Federation of Labor's Committee for its Chicago Trade Union College, Nestor expanded this program to men as well as women.

Nestor's interest in public school education led to her first appointment to a national advisory body; in 1909 she served on a committee of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to consider the place of vocational education in the public schools. Like other AFL leaders, Nestor rejected the German system of separate vocational and liberal education, because she believed that it led to rigid class distinctions. Locally, in 1913, the Commercial Club of Chicago, an association of leading manufacturers and businessmen, proposed that the Chicago Board of Education implement a program whereby 90 percent of the city's children after the eighth grade would study only vocational subjects. Agnes Nestor opposed the plan, explaining that it would deny "all opportunity for cultural development" (quoted in Payne, 85). In 1914 President Woodrow Wilson named her to the federal Commission on Vocational Education that shaped the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, providing the first federal aid to vocational education. Nestor countered conservatives on the commission who sought to exclude women from industry and assured that the act included support for women's education in fields other than domestic science.

Nestor's effectiveness in dealing with politicians and the general public was enhanced by her physical appearance, which conformed to the popular image of the working woman as a young, and hence unthreatening, girl. She was five feet tall, slim, blue-eyed, and fair. An admiring article by Octavia Roberts in *American Magazine* in 1912 described her as "a gray-eyed sweet faced little working girl," after the thirty-one-year-old labor leader had successfully countered lobbying by Illinois Manufacturers Association and the Chamber of Commerce in the state legislature. Nestor was quite aware of how her appearance belied her competence and allowed this image to go uncontested.

Nestor never married, but she left no record of the reasons for her choice. Her diary, autobiography, and correspondence revealed little of her emotions or motivation. She lived with her parents and siblings until the former died and then continued to make a home with her sister Mary, who was her best friend, and her younger brother, Owen. Their Irish Catholic heritage supported celibacy as an option, and all remained single. Nestor had made many women friends in her work, including ELISABETH CHRISTMAN, Margaret Dreier Robins, Mary McDowell, ELIZABETH MALONEY, and Mary Anderson, but her family was most important to her. Upon her death, a close family friend wrote to her sister and brother, "Agnes led an exemplary Christian life, her God and you two were her genuine loves" (Edward Flanigan, December 29, 1948, 2).

As a Roman Catholic, Agnes Nestor also worked on labor issues through church-affiliated groups. She was chair of the Committee on Women in Industry of the National Council of Catholic Women and vice-president of the Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems. In Chicago she encouraged the founding of the De Paul Day Nursery and Social Center in 1915 to provide day care for children of working mothers and arranged the donation of a suitable building to the Daughters of Charity, who staffed the service. In recognition of her achievements for working women and because her life was "animated by the highest Christian idealism" ("Agnes Nestor" Candidates for the Degree of Laws, *Commencement Program*, 18), Nestor was awarded an honorary degree of doctor of laws by Loyola University Chicago in 1929.

Unlike many women reformers who were from middle-class Protestant and Republican backgrounds, Nestor's working-class Irish Catholic parents bequeathed to her a loyalty to the Democratic Party. She refused to join other reformers supporting Republican Theodore Roosevelt as the Progressive Party candidate for president in 1912. She explained in her autobiography that she "was not so sure the Progressives would protest against industrial conditions" (*Woman's Labor Leader*, 135). As one of the few women who was a national-level union official and a loyal Democrat, Nestor was appointed to governmental advisory boards whenever the Democrats were in power.

During World War I, when the government encouraged women to take new jobs in industry, Nestor was called to Washington and served on several commissions to coordinate the war effort, most notably as the only woman on a seven-member advisory council to the Secretary of Labor to establish the wartime labor boards that structured labor-management relations. After the war, she worked to create the Women's Bureau in the De-

partment of Labor in 1920 and to appoint as its head Mary Anderson, longtime WTUL activist whose position on women's issues reflected Nestor's. The Bureau took the lead in investigating and encouraging women's participation in the paid labor force.

Since 1910 Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL, had been forming alliances with anti-socialist elements in the labor community. Nestor's connections with moderate Roman Catholic labor leaders made her a useful ally, and Gompers enlisted Nestor in this campaign during the war, appointing her to the 1918 American labor mission to England and France. This group attempted to rally the noncommunist international labor movement on the basis of President Wilson's program for post-war peace. Nestor had working meetings with heads of state and European labor leaders and also enjoyed sightseeing and visits to American troops in France.

At the end of the war Nestor returned to Chicago and continued her work organizing, lobbying, and educating. When the city's leading glove manufacturers joined the open shop campaign and abrogated union contracts, Nestor formed a Cooperative Glove Association of Chicago among workers in the trade. She headed the cooperative from 1921 to 1925, but it could not compete successfully with older firms and failed. Nestor was assistant director of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in 1922 and 1923. She even entered politics in support of the eight-hour law for women workers. In 1928 she ran unsuccessfully in the Democratic primary for the state legislature against an incumbent who refused to support the protective law.

Nestor's activities continued to be shaped by the views of women, labor, and society she had formed in her youth. She opposed the National Woman's Party and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) introduced in 1923 because of the threat she believed they posed to protective legislation for working women. Her craft-union philosophy and her ties to the AFL leadership led Nestor to resist Sidney Hillman's call for the glove makers to join the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in the breakaway Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1937. Although a majority of the International Glove Workers' Union (IGWU) voted to join the Amalgamated and her friend Elisabeth Christman sided with the majority, Nestor balked. She contributed to the bitter fight between the AFL and the CIO by forming a dual union, the IGWU-AFL, that had strength in the Midwest.

During the depression of the 1930s, when the Democrats were once more in power, Nestor was again active in governmental bodies. She helped write and enforce codes for the glovemaking industry for the National Recovery Administration and served on many state and local commissions dealing with unemployment. Nestor also took a wider role in city affairs, serving on the Chicago Recreation Commission (1934), the Advisory Committee of the Chicago Planning Commission (1939), and the Board of Trustees of Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition (1933-34).

In the 1940s, as her health deteriorated, Nestor concentrated on writing and education. As director of research and education for the IGWU-AFL, she wrote a *Brief History of the International Glove Workers' Union of America* in 1942. In 1944

she taught at the Institute on Industry sponsored by the National Council of Catholic Women and the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference. She also wrote an autobiography, published in 1954 as *Woman's Labor Leader*. In 1946, Nestor was diagnosed with rheumatic fever, and she had surgery in 1948. After a three-month illness, she died in Chicago and was buried in Mt. Carmel Cemetery.

Agnes Nestor was honored in her lifetime for her achievements for women, working people, and the union movement. Her successful public life was a model of what women could accomplish in the early twentieth century—if they remained single and childless. She supported equality for women in both the civic and economic realms, but, as was common then, she believed these ends necessitated special legislation protecting women as well as women's self-organization.

Sources. Agnes Nestor's papers, including her diary, correspondence to her, and a small number of letters by her, are at the CHS. A letter in the papers from Edward L. Flanigan to Mary and Owen Nestor, December 29, 1948, describes Nestor's personality and praises her work. Other correspondence is scattered in various collections of papers of the Women's Trade Union League. These have been microfilmed as the *Papers of the Women's Trade Union League and Its Principal Leaders* (1981) and are available at the CHS. The *Guide* to the microfilm edition has an excellent biographical note on Nestor, including an extensive bibliography. *The Program of the Fifty-Ninth Annual Commencement of Loyola University of Chicago June 12, 1929* (1929), at the Loyola Univ. of Chicago Archives, includes a description of her achievements. Nestor's autobiography, *Woman's Labor Leader* (1954), is an important source but must be checked for accuracy against earlier documents. Nestor says her father was born in County Galway, Ireland, but her siblings' birth certificates and the manuscript of the 1900 U.S. census list his birthplace as Maryland. Nestor occasionally wrote articles for trade union and social service publications; most useful for her life and ideas is "The Experiences of a Pioneer Woman Trade Unionist," *American Federationist*, March 1929. Nestor's public image during her early years is revealed in Octavia Roberts, "Agnes Nestor," *American Magazine*, vol. 73, 1912, and Stella Franklin, "Agnes Nestor of the Glove Workers: A Leader in the Women's Movement," *Life and Labor*, vol. 3, 1913. Elizabeth Anne Payne's *Reform, Labor and Feminism: Margaret Dreier Robins and the Women's Trade Union League* (1988) situates Nestor in Chicago's social reform movement. The most recent scholarly interpretation is Karen M. Mason's profile of Nestor as one of four successful women of the early twentieth century in "Testing the Boundaries: Women, Politics, and Gender Roles in Chicago, 1890-1930" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1991). Nestor is also discussed in *NAW* (1971).

SUSAN E. HIRSCH