

Frances Perkins

Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor and the first woman to serve as a cabinet secretary, was the principal architect of the New Deal, credited with formulating policies to shore up the national economy following the nation's most serious economic crisis and helping to create the modern middle class. She was in every respect a self-made woman who rose from humble New England origins to become America's leading advocate for industrial safety and workers' rights.



While living in Chicago, Frances Perkins spent her free time and vacations working at Chicago Commons and Hull House, two of the oldest and most well known settlement houses in the country.

Working with the poor and the unemployed, she became convinced of her vocation. "I had to do something about unnecessary hazards to life, unnecessary poverty. It was sort of up to me."

On March 25, 1911, Frances Perkins was having tea with friends in New York City's Washington Square when the group heard fire engines. Running to the scene of the fire, Frances Perkins witnessed in horror as 47 workers – mostly young women – jumped from the eighth and ninth floors of the building to their deaths on the street below. The fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was, she later proclaimed, "the day the New Deal was born." In response to the fire, a citizen's Committee on Safety was established to recommend practices to prevent a further tragedy in the city's factories.

As her career evolved she would go on to work for a number of labor and safety committees in and around New York City and State. The new laws and regulations she was a part of became a model for other states and the federal government. In the election of 1928, the new Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Perkins to become the state's Industrial Commissioner, with oversight responsibilities for the entire labor department. Soon, she became the most prominent state labor official in the nation, as she and Roosevelt searched for new ways to deal with rising unemployment. With her encouragement, Roosevelt became the first public official in the country to commit himself to unemployment insurance.



Frances Perkins became the first woman in the nation to serve in a Presidential Cabinet.

With the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President in 1932, the policies and programs Frances Perkins had advanced for the State of New York were about to be tested for all the nation. In February

1933, when FDR asked Frances Perkins to serve in his Cabinet as Secretary of Labor, she outlined for him a set of policy priorities she would pursue: a 40-hour work week; a minimum wage; unemployment compensation; worker's compensation; abolition of child labor; direct federal aid to the states for unemployment relief; Social Security; a revitalized federal employment service; and universal health insurance. Over the course of her career, all but universal health care would be passed.

- *"What was the New Deal anyhow? Was it a political plot? Was it just a name for a period in history? Was it a revolution? To all of these questions I answer "No." It was something quite different... It was, I think, basically an attitude. An attitude that found voice in expressions like "the people are what matter to government," and "a government should aim to give all the people under its jurisdiction the best possible life."*
- Perkins on the New Deal

- *"There is always a large horizon.... There is much to be doneI am not going to be doing it! It is up to you to contribute some small part to a program of human betterment for all time."*

- [Frances Perkins Explains the New Deal](#)



As an individual, not as a Cabinet member, Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor, received first hand information on the Golden Gate Bridge Project when she surveyed the work while in San Francisco, California