

# Leonora O'Reilly

1870–1927



**WHY SHE MADE HISTORY** Leonora O'Reilly was a reform leader who fought for women's labor rights.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Leonora O'Reilly's childhood shaped her perspective on American labor.*

Leonora O'Reilly was born in New York City. Her father was a printer, and her mother was a garment worker. When O'Reilly was one year old, her father died. When she was eleven, she went to work in a shirt-collar factory. She quickly learned how women workers were treated.

When O'Reilly was 16, she joined the Knights of Labor. A few years later, she helped form a women's chapter of the United Garment Workers of America. As she worked with the union, O'Reilly became a reformer. She also became an organizer and a powerful voice for women's causes.

O'Reilly believed strongly in **vocational** education for women. Speaking before the Federal Commission on Vocational Education in 1914, she argued that it was not sensible to “put the girl off in a corner making bows when she might make a much better carpenter than the boy.” From 1902 to 1909 she taught at the Manhattan Trade School for Girls. While she was teaching, O'Reilly helped establish the National Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). This group was formed because the American Federation of Labor would not include women in its union ranks. The WTUL helped provide working women with educational opportunities. It also promoted laws that would protect women's rights in factories.



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## VOCABULARY

**vocational** relating to a skill or trade used as a career

**strike** a temporary stop of normal activity, used as a form of protest

O'Reilly was deeply committed to improving working conditions for women. In 1909 she led a **strike** by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in New York City. The strike lasted five months. It ended when the factory workers were given wage increases. O'Reilly also led an investigation of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. This fire killed 146 women workers who were locked inside the factory.

Later in life, Leonora O'Reilly helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She was also active in the Woman Suffrage Party, working to win the right to vote for women. O'Reilly spent her whole life working as a reformer.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What groups was Leonora O'Reilly associated with?

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2. **Evaluate** How might a strike be an effective way to promote change? Explain your answer.

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### ACTIVITY

Write an epitaph for Leonora O'Reilly. Summarize her accomplishments in one or two sentences.