



Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965 (Gender and American Culture)

By Annelise Orleck

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Common Sense and a Little Fire# traces the personal and public lives of four immigrant women activists who left a lasting imprint on American politics. Though they have rarely had more than cameo appearances in previous histories, Rose Schneiderman, Fannia Cohn, Clara Lemlich Shavelson, and Pauline Newman played important roles in the emergence of organized labor, the New Deal welfare state, adult education, and the modern women's movement

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The life stories of four Jewish immigrant organizers--Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Clara Lemlich Shavelson and Fannia Cohn--frame Orleck's history of women in U.S. working-class movements. All had energized their communities and garment-factory shop floors, located on New York's Lower East Side, by their early 20s and were lifelong labor leaders. Consummate organizers (Newman conceived and led the largest rent strike New York had ever seen when she was 16), they negotiated the minefields of male labor leaders' sexism, middle- and upper-class feminists' elitism and the country's anti-Semitism and xenophobia to carve out careers, forge friendships and develop a politics Orleck describes as "industrial feminism." Schneiderman's and Newman's most significant intimate relationships were with women. Orleck, an assistant professor of history at Dartmouth and herself the descendant of immigrant Jewish working-class organizers, draws on social history and on primary texts; some of the latter have only recently become accessible to scholars. In the hands of a skilled storyteller, this material would have been gripping, but Orleck's prose is matter-of-fact and often repetitive. Luckily, the rich factual detail and the epic nature of the women's lives sometimes overcome the shortcomings of the writing. Photos not seen by PW.

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Review

Highly recommended. Two thumbs up.

"International Labor and Working Class History"

Orleck's intelligent work reminds readers of a time when workers fought valiantly . . . to be represented by a union.

"Choice"

A major contribution to twentieth-century labor history. . . . Orleck's book is rich in detail and comprehensive in analysis.

"Reviews in American History"

An interesting and important study. "Common Sense and a Little Fire" is worth the read.

"Journal of American History"

Substantially expands our knowledge of twentieth-century working-class women's political activity.

"New York History"

Review

A major contribution to twentieth-century labor history. . . . Orleck's book is rich in detail and comprehensive in analysis.--*Reviews in American History*

An interesting and important study. *Common Sense and a Little Fire* is worth the read.--*Journal of American History*

Annelise Orleck's work made me remember why I wanted to be a historian. I was simply astounded by the artfulness with which she wove together these four women's stories in a narrative that casts half a century of working-class and political history in a fresh new light.--Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

A beautifully rendered collective biography of four activist immigrant women. This book is insightful, original, and dynamic. It makes an important contribution to the fields of labor history, immigrant history, and women's history. And it is a good read as well.--Alice Kessler-Harris, Rutgers University

Substantially expands our knowledge of twentieth-century working-class women's political activity. Readers seeking an accessibly-written introductory work and scholars studying women's labor, working-class feminism, public policy, consumer movements, or the connections between women's (and men's) personal and political choices will find it an interesting and important work."*New York History*

A finely nuanced study of four extraordinary women who campaigned throughout their long lives to make room in the house of labor for working-class women and the activists who serve them.--*Industrial and Labor Relations Review*

Highly recommended. Two thumbs up. . . . Orleck's analyses revise the history of American women, labor, ethnicity, sexuality, and politics.--*International Labor and Working Class History*

Ah, then I had fire in my mouth!--Clara Lemlich Shavelson, looking back on her radical youth

Orleck's intelligent work reminds readers of a time when workers fought valiantly for the right to be represented by a union. Focusing on the lives of four remarkable women--Fannia Cohn, Clara Lemlich Shavelson, Pauline Newman, and Rose Schneiderman--Orleck weaves a complex and compelling story of class and ethnic tensions, the struggles for workers' rights, internecine warfare, and above all, the extremely gendered nature of both politics and work. . . . Their stories, as related in this tightly written, fascinating work, reveal whole new layers to the history of women and the working-class struggle.--*Choice*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lucille Renner:

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