

Working for Equality: Women in Labor and Business



Women have long participated in the paid labor force and operated businesses. When wages were low and conditions poor, women leaders emerged who organized and called for change. At the other end of the spectrum, women often challenged societal norms to run their own successful companies. Women fought hard to be seen as equals. These are only some of the women who helped pave the way for future generations.



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Image courtesy of the Kheel Center, Cornell University

Pauline Newman

The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) appointed Pauline Newman its first female general organizer. Newman was born in Kovno, Lithuania. Her family immigrated to the United States when she was about nine. Newman worked in several factories. In 1907, at age 16, she helped lead New York City's largest rent strike to date. Newman was named a general organizer for the ILGWU for her work. Newman worked for the ILGWU for more than 70 years, as an organizer, labor journalist, health organizer, and an official union government liaison. Newman also served as vice president of the National Women's Trade Union League.

Dolores Huerta

Dolores Huerta became an activist in 1955, fighting for Latinos' economic improvement and civil rights. Huerta co-founded the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) with Cesar Chavez in 1965. During the same year, Huerta organized a strike of over 5,000 grape workers and a wine company boycott. This led to a three-year contract between California and the UFW. Huerta has continued to represent workers for decades by advocating for workers' unemployment and healthcare benefits, protesting the use of harmful pesticides, and bargaining for improved working conditions.



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courtesy US Department of Labor

Addie Wyatt

Addie Wyatt has fought for workers' rights for decades. She joined the United Packinghouse Workers of America after learning it did not discriminate. In the early 1950s, Wyatt was elected vice president of the local union and became the first Black woman to hold a senior office in an American labor union. Wyatt marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. multiple times. Eleanor Roosevelt appointed her to serve on the Protective Labor Legislation Committee of the Commission on the Status of Women. Wyatt co-founded the Coalition of Labor Union Women in 1974, the country's only national organization for union women. Wyatt is also a founding member of the National Organization of Women.

Lucy Gonzalez Parsons

Lucy Gonzalez Parsons was a leader in the radical labor movement. She and her husband moved to Chicago and in 1886 helped to organize the first May Day parade. Eighty thousand individuals marched in favor of an eight-hour work day. Parsons called for change and led picket lines the rest of her life. She was one of only two women at the Industrial Workers of the World convention in 1905 and the only one to address the audience.



Courtesy Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University



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Courtesy National Park Service, Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site

Maggie Lena Walker

Maggie Lena Walker was the first African American woman to found a bank. While working as a teacher, Walker joined the Independent Order of St. Luke, a fraternal burial society that helped the ill and elderly and encouraged self-help. Walker was elected to lead the organization in 1899 and did so for the rest of her life. She started a newspaper in 1902 to help connect the organization with the public. The following year, Walker founded the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank and served as its first president. Walker fought for African American women's rights and served on the Board of Trustees for the National Association of Colored Women and the Virginia Industrial School for Girls.

Brownie Wise

Brownie Wise was a guiding force behind Tupperware® company's innovative party marketing system. Following a divorce in 1942, Wise looked for ways to earn a living. She worked as a secretary and sold Stanley Home Products at home demonstration parties. Wise was a talented saleswoman and quickly became a top seller. In the late 1940s, Wise saw Tupperware—a new product—being sold without much success in department stores. Wise started her own company, Tupperware Patio Parties, in 1950. It was so successful Wise became the vice president of Tupperware's home party division and sales exploded.



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Margaret Rudkin

Margaret Rudkin began baking her own bread in the 1930s for her young son, who was allergic to most commercially processed foods. The bread so improved her son's health that his doctor prescribed it to other patients. Rudkin asked the local grocer to carry her bread, and after a taste he quickly agreed. Rudkin lived on "Pepperidge Farm," and so the company's name was born. The company grew quickly to keep up with the large demand. In 1961, Rudkin sold Pepperidge Farm to the Campbell Soup company and became the first woman to sit on the Campbell Soup Board of Directors.

Sarah Walker

Sarah Walker, better known as Madam C.J. Walker, was one of the first African American woman to become a self-made millionaire. As a young woman, Walker developed a scalp disorder, which caused her hair to fall out. She eventually perfected her own hair care treatments for African American women. Her husband, Charles J. Walker, encouraged her to use the name "Madam C.J. Walker" when promoting her products. Walker employed thousands of saleswomen to sell her products. Walker became known as a generous philanthropist and activist until her death in 1919.



Women have played an active role in labor and business since the nation's founding. They worked as laborers and established a wide variety of businesses, reaching for financial independence. Women fought for equal pay, better working conditions, and increased options. While the fight continues, today's women and girls owe their opportunities to the efforts of past generations.



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