

Letters to the Editor of The Times

Frances Perkins's Career Memorialized

To the Editor:

When President Franklin Roosevelt appointed Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor, Justice Brandeis said no one was better qualified. Yet most observers regarded her as not so much distinguished as distinctive. They saw only the first woman Cabinet member; the first Secretary of Labor not drawn from union ranks; the companion of Gov. Alfred E. Smith and Senator Wagner in sponsoring safety measures, and the honest reporter of ever-mounting unemployment.

Assessment of Secretary

Newspapers reported her firm determination to shield her husband and daughter from intrusive questions. Congressmen saw her as a blue-stocking reformer. The public asked why the President kept her in office. Was the President reluctant to choose between the A.F.L. and the C.I.O. in naming a successor? Was the clue that she understood how to present to the President plans (and people to execute them) so as ultimately to persuade him to make what retrospectively he recognized as sound decisions? Or did F.D.R. realize that in character Miss Perkins had no superior?

Few equaled Frances Perkins in firm adherence to principles and unswerving loyalty to su-

periors, associates and subordinates. With them she was always sympathetic, encouragingly gay and charmingly unselfish.

Miss Perkins's first New-Deal action supported Senator [Hugo] Black's 30-hour bill—the first step toward the unfortunate N.R.A. and the far more successful Wage and Hour Act. Even then, she was sensibly seeking persons with integrity, industry and independence to formulate and administer labor affairs.

What a splendid roster she recruited: Lloyd Garrison, Francis Biddle, John G. Winant, Chief Justice Stacy, Isador Lubin, Arthur Altmeyer, Thomas H. Eliot, Charles O. Gregory, Gerard D. Reilly, Henry M. Hart, Grace Abbott, Kathryn Lenroot, Mary La Dame, Frances Jurkowitz. The roll challenges comparison with any department of government in our history.

Miss Perkins was not at her best in collective bargaining controversies. There she had insufficient experience. Moreover, her conviction was that official regulation succeeded better than voluntary associations in raising standards.

Her greatest achievements were in promoting Federal action and state cooperation in establishing a Social Security system to protect the unemployed, the aged and the dependent. She led the drafting of and lobbying for the Social Security Act of 1935—her greatest single contribution to American society.

I.L.O. Joined

Secretary Perkins persuaded the United States to join the International Labor Organization, which attracted administrators and delegates of highest quality and set patterns for technical aid to underdeveloped countries.

Frances Perkins drew moral strength from her Yankee an-

cestry. She was supported by friends who shared her practical idealism: Eleanor Roosevelt, Felix Frankfurter, Robert Bruce, William H. Davis, Sidney Hillman, Jacob Potofsky, Mary Harriman Rumsey, Molly Dewson, C. C. Burlingham.

Never deflected by public misunderstanding of her high purposes, she was not panicky when the House of Representatives threatened to impeach her because she would not order Harry Bridges deported. She (like the Supreme Court) found no evidence that he was deportable; and she would not save her political head at his expense.

Bridges Case

She followed duty—stern daughter of the voice of God. None seduced her by applause or appeal to vanities which govern so many. She was straight and true as a yardstick—and we cherish her memory to measure not only others, but ourselves.

CHARLES E. WYZANSKI Jr.
Boston, May 15, 1965

The writer, United States District Judge for Massachusetts, was from 1933 to 1935 Solicitor of the U.S. Department of Labor.