

# Minnesota Labor Advocates Through History

— compiled by Mikki Morrisette, with  
recommendations from historian Karen Sieber

**M**innesota women have been advocating for labor rights and pay equity for more than a century.

In 1888, the “Striking Maidens” walked out of work at the Shotwell factory in Minneapolis. They were supported by the Knights of Labor, which opposed business monopolies and supported cooperatives in order to give workers and local communities more power over their livelihoods.

As Rhoda Gilman of *Workday Magazine* wrote, “At the end of the century, Minneapolis was near the top of the nation in the number of working women living in rented rooms or boardinghouses. The average working day was 10 hours and payment was by the piece. Rows of treadle or steam-driven sewing machines were mounted in lofts or basements, where ventilation and lighting were often poor, talking was usually forbidden, and a pass was needed to leave the room. A fast and skilled worker might earn seven or eight dollars a week (a living wage in those days), but a beginner was lucky to get two or three. Abusive treatment was common.”

After 260 women walked out, the company was forced to close within a few months because of a lack of workers.

The Willmar 8 were eight women employees of a bank in Willmar who went on strike in 1977. Starting on a December day, with a wind chill well below zero, they picketed in front of the bank for two years seeking pay equity. The women were paid \$300 less per week than their male counterparts, expected to work overtime without pay, and asked to train a young man who was to become their supervisor.

The bank saw a significant drop in deposits and was sold.



Nellie Stone Johnson

## The Story of Nellie Stone Johnson

Nellie Stone Johnson was born near Lakeville in 1905 to a family of farmers and educators. She became an organizer, especially for working-class women of color. In 1938, she insisted to the Minneapolis teachers’ union that more teachers of color needed to be hired, especially Black and Jewish women. She set up college-based labor centers throughout the country. In 1943, she worked with trade unionists while serving on a committee to merge the Farmer Labor Party with the Democratic Party in Minnesota.

According to a story by local writer Rebecca Pera on the Community Party USA website, Stone Johnson developed an alliance with former Minnesota Senator and U.S. Vice President Hubert Humphrey, despite having different approaches to politics. As Stone Johnson described it, “He was this intellectual ... and I was this radical farmer. ... I was coming out of the Farmer-Labor Association and the Nonpartisan League, getting rid of racial and gender discrimination, and believed in a lot of collectivism, and maybe Hubert felt that went too far.”

In the late 1940s, the U.S. government started to target associations with the Communist party. Johnson said, “I knew that after the DFL merger some Democrats would try to throw us on the dung heap because we were radicals. I’ve always said you have to be radical to change things in this country. That’s been called socialism, or even communism.”

She added that “red-baiting created divisions between Black and Jewish people. The enemy of both wanted to put something in the mind of the other. Part of what the conservatives, the establishment, was saying was how they wanted to split the labor coalition.”

Before she died at the age of 96 in 2002, Stone Johnson said both political parties were “making rules to give more power to the private sector than the public sector. I can tell you, the private sector is the root of racism, the determining factor on whether people are discriminated against.”

In November 2022, Nellie Stone Johnson became the first woman and the first Black Minnesotan to be memorialized in a statue at the state capitol. **MWP**

[workdaymagazine.org](http://workdaymagazine.org), [mnopedia.org](http://mnopedia.org), [cpusa.org](http://cpusa.org)