

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Workmen's Circle Executive Director Ann Toback Presented With Clara Lemlich Award from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Memorial



(New York, N.Y.)—The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Memorial (TSFFM) presented Workmen's Circle Executive Director Ann Toback with the Clara Lemlich Award at its 17th annual scholarship fundraiser on March 15, 2018, noting Ms. Toback's longstanding advocacy to support and strengthen worker rights in New York City.

The Memorial presented a second Clara Lemlich award to Anthony G. Speelman, President of UFCW Local 1500 at the event, held at the Helen Mills Event Space at 137 West 26th Street, Manhattan.

"Clara Lemlich is a great hero of mine," Ms. Toback said. "Her innate organizing skill, her passion, eloquence, and endless courage an ongoing inspiration. To receive an award in Clara Lemlich's name could not be more meaningful or timely today, as the Workmen's Circle, the social justice organization I have the privilege to lead, continues to forward economic justice and labor activism on a continuum that we can trace back to Lemlich's fiery speech in 1909, kicking off the Uprising of the 20,000."

Ann Toback has served as the Executive Director of the Workmen's Circle since June 2008. For more than a century, the Workmen's Circle has been cultivating a proudly

progressive, diverse and inclusive community rooted in Jewish culture and social and economic justice activism. A lifelong progressive activist – whose grandparents met at a union hall – and trained attorney, Ann previously served as the Assistant Executive Director at the Writers Guild of America, East from 1999-2008. A highlight of Ann's union career was successfully directing and organizing the 2007-2008 Writers Guild strike on the East Coast before coming to lead the Workmen's Circle.

During Ann's tenure as the nonprofit's first woman leader, she has led the organization through a reboot process, resulting in today's Workmen's Circle, a social justice organization that powers progressive Jewish identity through Jewish cultural engagement, Yiddish language learning, multigenerational education, and social justice activism.

"Today, the members and friends of the Workmen's Circle find ourselves in the midst of wall-to-wall activism, joining forces with 21st century immigrant communities, and diverse populations of workers, all of us united in our commitment to achieving a 21st century country where all workers can expect a living wage, a safe workplace, and respect," Ms. Toback said.

"It is my honor to stand on the shoulders of great leaders like Clara Lemlich, Rose Schneiderman and Sydney Hillman, and commit to educating, activating, and organizing the next generation of activists to reshape our progressive landscape again."

The following are Ann Toback's full remarks from the ceremony:

I want to thank the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Memorial, its directors, and friends for this award. I am honored to be receiving the Clara Lemlich Public Service Award. An award that is meaningful in so many ways.

Clara Lemlich is a great hero of mine. Her innate organizing skill, her passion, eloquence, and endless courage an ongoing inspiration. To receive an award in Clara Lemlich's name could not be more meaningful or timely today, as the Workmen's Circle, the social justice organization I have the privilege to lead, continues to forward economic justice and labor activism on a continuum that we can trace back to Lemlich's fiery speech in 1909, kicking off the Uprising of the 20,000.

On November 23, 1909, thousands of Yiddish-speaking women gathered in Cooper Union, tired of working in shirtwaist factories for upwards of 60+ hour weeks, in unsafe and punishing worksites, for barely subsistence pay. Wages that was less than half of their male counterparts. They came to Cooper Union ready to act for change. Instead they were subjected to a lineup of union leaders, all men, all cautioning against engagement. It was Clara Lemlich who forcefully took the stage and demanded an end to the talk and called for immediate action. "I am one of those who suffers from the abuses described here, and I move that we go on a general strike." It was perhaps the ultimate "Me Too" moment of the twentieth century.

In 2018, as our gender and work dynamics shift yet again, we should look to those who came before us: the Clara Lemlichs and the Rose Schneidermans and the tens of thousands of immigrant women workers who collectively walked off their jobs in 1909 and in the years that followed. The labor movement historically and today, is fueled by great leaders *and* great members. It is the members who set aside caution and fiercely drove those strikes between 1909 and 1915, courageous acts that resulted in critical safety regulations, workplace

protections, benefits, and ultimately, the National Labor Relations Act. Now, as the labor movement finds itself again under attack, we should look to the great successes of the last century, for inspiration and for emulation. We are all now charged to teach and organize new generations to be great activists, game changers, and leaders who can build on our collective successes and create new strategies for engagement.

The Workmen's Circle was founded in 1900 to support the thousands of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in their transition to American life. We quickly became a backbone to the growing trade union movement, providing support and community to its earliest members, including Clara Lemlich, Sydney Hillman, and the thousands of organizers and workers on the ground.

Today I am proud to lead the new Workmen's Circle, as we resource and grow our tradition as a partner to the union movement by educating and activating new communities around economic justice. We do this both by resourcing on-the-ground campaigns, which in the past years have included the Fight for \$15 movement, the Verizon workers strike, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the Spectrum Workers Strike, and today the March for our Lives, the fight against gun violence being led by courageous students—an amazing example of our next generation of activist leaders. And, we are also committed to teaching new generations to be change-makers.

The strongest pathway to social change has always been through education. It's why it is so important to support organizations like the Triangle Shirtwaist Commemoration who provide scholarships each year, including the recipients being celebrated tonight. And it's why the Workmen's Circle is now building a youth movement which is educating teens and college students around our historic labor roots and empowering them to take leadership roles in social justice campaigns.

I am fortunate in that I work in partnership with leaders of the Workmen's Circle, whose drive and direction has effected the great strides our organization has made in the past years. I owe a great thanks to our President, Peter Pepper, here tonight, whose vision for the Workmen's Circle inspired and brought me into the community a decade ago, and whose partnership has helped launch our revitalized social justice work, reconnecting us with so many historic union partners. And I would like to thank the Workmen's Circle's outstanding board of directors, a number of whom are here today and who I would like to recognize: Edgar Romney— (who couldn't be here tonight, but who has been so key to the annual Triangle Commemoration and the Memorial), Bernice Siegal, and Richard Brook. And to my family, led by my parents, also here tonight, who continued our family's three-generation tradition of labor activism at home and at work, truly leading my sister and I by example, and instilling in us progressive values and compassion.

Today, the members and friends of the Workmen's Circle find ourselves in the midst of wall-to-wall activism, joining forces with 21st century immigrant communities, and diverse populations of workers, all of us united in our commitment to achieving a 21st century country where all workers can expect a living wage, a safe workplace, and respect. It is my honor to stand on the shoulders of great leaders like Clara Lemlich, Rose Schneiderman, and Sydney Hillman, and commit to educating, activating, and organizing the next generation of activists to reshape our progressive landscape again.

At the Workmen's Circle, our mission connects us to our Yiddish activist heritage, and so, I

thought, in the spirit of today's activism and Clara Lemlich's passion: I would end by restating the oath that Clara Lemlich administered in Cooper Union in 1909 to the thousands of women who had just called for a strike: first in its original Yiddish, and then in English.

"Tomer vel ikh nit oysfirn getray dem tsil zol di gehoybene hand fardorbn vern."

"If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may my hand wither from the arm I now raise."

About the Workmen's Circle

The Workmen's Circle powers progressive Jewish identity through Jewish cultural engagement, Yiddish language learning, multigenerational education, and social justice activism. For over a century we have provided this 360-degree approach to Jewish identity-building. Through contemporary cultural programs, joyful holiday celebrations, strategic social justice campaigns, vibrant Yiddish language classes, interactive educational experiences and more, we connect Jewish adults, kids and families of all affiliations with their cultural heritage, working to build a better and more beautiful world for all. Learn more at www.circle.org.

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