

JEWISH LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from  
THE AMERICAN FEDERATIONIST,  
October, 1955

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# 19761

The Jewish labor movement arose in this country some seventy-five years ago as a movement of recent immigrants who found themselves alone, helpless and bewildered in a new world. And yet, surprisingly, in this land of great surprises, before many decades had passed, this movement emerged as a thoroughly American institution, a pioneer in modern industrial relations and a powerful force in the Americanization of the scores of thousands of immigrant Jews who passed through its ranks. The Jewish labor movement became one of the most influential institutions in American Jewish life and a significant factor in linking American Jews with the larger community in which they found themselves.

As we look back upon 300 years of Jewish life in this country, we catch something of a glimpse of what the Jewish labor movement has meant to the Jewish working people of America, to the American labor movement and to the American nation generally.

The Jewish labor movement in the United States was a product of the "new" immigration that brought millions of East European Jews to American shores within a few decades after 1870. Jews had, of course, reached the New World long before, and in the early part of the Nineteenth Century they had begun to arrive in considerable numbers. But, although individuals from the earlier immigration came to play a distinguished role in it, the foundations of the Jewish labor movement were laid by the East Europeans who came to this country during the last three decades of the Nineteenth Century and the first two or three decades of the Twentieth Century.

These Jewish immigrants were predominantly town dwellers, a big proportion having been employed as artisans or laborers. Most of them landed at New York and either remained there or moved on to other large cities. The great majority tended to gravitate toward occupations involved in the production of consumer goods and services. They sought work in fields where friends and fellow-countrymen were already employed, and before long a number of "Jewish trades" began to appear. Some of these were closely connected with traditional Jewish religious observances and immigrant culture; others beckoned the Jews by reason of their previous training and handicraft skills.

At any rate, as the Nineteenth Century was drawing to a close, the great mass of recent Jewish immigrants were to be found in various trades in half a dozen large cities of the country. By 1890, over 13,000 Jews were employed in the garment trades on the East Side of New York, and their numbers increased by leaps and bounds in the course of the next two decades.

The conditions under which the recent immigrants worked were indescribably bad. Low wages, long hours, protracted slack seasons, home work, contracting and subcontracting, and absence of even the most elementary safeguards of health and decency made the garment trades notorious and added

the term "sweatshop" to the common vocabulary. Attempts at organization began almost at once, inspired in part by young intellectuals among the immigrants.

The Jewish workers, at the beginning, did not prove particularly organizable; indeed, there were those who predicted that they would never be organized at all. They were easily aroused, quick to strike, enthusiastic and determined, ready to join a union in the heat of struggle; but once the strike was over, no matter what the outcome, very few retained any interest in organization. It was a most discouraging time for those who saw farther into the future and realized that without stable labor organization nothing could be accomplished.

But the young labore-minded agitators did not despair. Workers' educational and cultural societies arose, and by 1885 a Jewish Workers Union was established, which definitely set about organizing the masses of Jewish workers. The older German labor men played an important part in this pioneer venture.

It was on the model of the United German Trades, one of a number of "national" foreign-language labor federations to spring up in the United States in the second half of the Nineteenth Century, that the first of the really enduring Jewish labor organizations was formed. In October, 1888, in New York City, the United Hebrew Trades came into being under the leadership of Bernard Weinstein, Jacob Magidoff, Morris Hillquit and Henry Miller, and with the direct assistance of Samuel Gompers. The new group declared its main purpose to be the organization of immigrant Jewish workers into unions. The United Hebrew Trades had only three affiliates at the time of its formation, but it grew rapidly and within four years had twenty-eight member unions, mostly organized through its own efforts.

The establishment of the United Hebrew Trades brought to the fore a problem that gave some concern to American labor leaders, Jewish and non-Jewish alike -- the problem of whether it was right and proper to organize "separate" Jewish unions. Samuel Gompers, who in general did not believe in organizing workers along any but trade lines, wisely saw that (as he put it) "to organize Hebrew trade unions was the first step in getting those immigrants into the American labor movement." In the long run, Gompers proved right. The Jewish unions were indeed the first step in bringing the immigrant Jewish workers into the American labor movement and into the larger American community.

It now became possible to set up national organizations in the various trades. In 1891 the United Garment Workers Union was established in the men's clothing industry. In 1900 the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union came into being. A year later the United Cloth Hat and Cap-makers Union held its founding national convention, and by 1904 a national

furriers' union was in existence. These organizations, and the smaller unions that followed in their wake, led a precarious life for a long time, compelled to fight for survival year after year; but in the end they prevailed and became established institutions with wide influence in their industries and beyond.

It should be remembered that these trade union organizations were not the first to be formed by Jewish workers in America. In line with European traditions, the first organizations that came into being were radical educational and political groups, which were then felt by many to be the "real" labor movement, much superior to the humdrum trade unions with their limited goals and objectives.

The American labor movement, like the British, emerged as and remained typically a trade union movement; moreover, it developed from the bottom up, from the self-organization of groups of workers in their trades. Jewish trade unionism in the United States, on the other hand, was built from the top down, largely under the tutelage of ideological radicals who undertook the hard task of organizing workers as part of their radical program. But the realities of American life soon asserted themselves. The Jewish labor unions, whatever their origin, quickly adapted themselves to the general American pattern and became trade unions in the full American sense.

Before long they became the Jewish labor movement; indeed, of all the other organizations that once overshadowed the trade unions in the family of Jewish labor, only the Workmen's Circle, a labor fraternal society formed in 1892, has survived as a significant force, and the Workmen's Circle has always been closely connected with the Jewish unions.

The great advance in the Jewish labor movement in America came after 1905, in the wake of a sudden and sustained rise in immigration. All sorts of Jewish organizations flourished, but for the Jewish unions it was the period of spectacular achievement. Great strikes punctuated the decade that preceded the First World War, particularly after the economic recovery of 1909. Indeed, the five years from 1909 to 1914 set off the greatest upsurge of trade unionism that Jewish labor in America was to experience until the New Deal.

First came the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," the memorable mass strike of the girls in the shirtwaist industry in New York in 1909; following hard upon it, the great revolt, a carefully organized general strike in the metropolitan coat and suit industry in 1910. Similar movements in other industries and other parts of the country followed.

All in all, these years proved decisive not only in establishing the Jewish unions as a significant force in their industries but also in

transforming the Jewish labor movement into a thoroughly American institution, operating along essentially American lines.

The Jewish labor movement emerged into the 1920's in many ways strengthened but compelled to face the two greatest perils in its history -- the Communist onslaught throughout the decade and then the devastating economic crisis at the end of it.

Through the 1920's the Jewish unions were the scene of the best-planned and most nearly victorious drive for control on the part of the Communists that American labor history has to record. The Jewish labor organizations were, in the end, able to beat back the Communist offensive and save themselves from Communist control, but only after a long and bitter struggle that left them shattered and at the brink of ruin. However, the unions that escaped Communist entrapment have developed into some of the most respected and powerful labor organizations in this country.

The desperate fight against communism meant a great deal for the maturing of Jewish labor in this country. It brought the Jewish unions closer to the American labor movement; it helped dissipate much of the earlier ideological radicalism that had become irrelevant to American life; it encouraged a consolidation of loyal labor forces without regard to political background. But, above all, it made the Jewish labor leaders and active unionists very much aware of the Communist peril and very effective in fighting it.

The American labor movement and the American people generally owe a great deal to these men and women who were the first to bear the brunt of Communist infiltration and attack, and were likewise the first to alert the labor movement and the nation generally to the real meaning of communism.

Hardly had the Jewish labor movement emerged from the decade of devastating civil war when it was overwhelmed by the great depression. Even the strongest unions were seriously affected; for the garment unions, weak, demoralized and impoverished as they were, the depression proved disastrous. The Ladies' Garment Workers were reduced to a skeleton and other unions in the Jewish labor movement were in little better shape. But they resolutely refused to give up hope.

Efforts to regain lost ground began even before the New Deal, but it was the New Deal that really made the historical "rebirth" of unionism possible. Despite everything they had undergone, the Jewish unions were not unprepared for the magnificent opportunities that the inauguration of the New Deal and the passage of the NRA with its Section 7a (guaranteeing the right of self-organization and collective bargaining) presented to the labor

movement. All unions in this country profited by the opportunity, but it is a matter of record that the major garment workers' organizations made most spectacular gains.

As important perhaps in the long run as the "rebirth" of the unions was the entry of Jewish labor into American politics under the New Deal. In the middle 1930's, Jewish labor began to assume an active part in the various organizations that the American labor movement was setting up to mobilize support for Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal administration. This venture into politics was something very different from the radical agitation that had been passing under that name among Jewish workers. This was politics in the American sense, in and through the old parties. The new departure proved a big success and met with an enthusiastic response among the masses of Jewish workers. It was an experience that virtually completed the long process of the Americanization of the Jewish labor movement in this country.

The Jewish labor movement as it was "reborn" under the New Deal was something very different from what it had been a decade or two before. The transformation had been going on beneath the surface almost from the very beginning, but it required the sensational developments of the 1930's -- the Roosevelt "revolution" on the one side and the Hitler terror on the other -- to bring the hidden processes out into the open and reveal the new face of the Jewish labor movement.

What was the Jewish labor movement in its older form? Basically, it was a fairly compact group of unions of Jewish membership and leadership, using Yiddish as a means of communication, surrounded by a constellation of Yiddish-language cultural, political and fraternal groups. Clearly, that is not what the Jewish labor movement is today. What has happened?

Almost at the beginning, a double process had set in. On the one hand, the immigrant Jews and their children were becoming Americanized, so that Yiddish was fast giving way to English as a vehicle of communication and expression. On the other hand, Jewish workers strained all their resources to send their sons, and later their daughters, to school to equip them for white-collar and professional occupations. In these respects the immigrant Jews were falling in with what was already becoming the established American pattern of cultural and social advance.

For the Jewish labor movement, this double process meant that, particularly on its trade union side, it was becoming less and less Jewish in composition and less and less Yiddish in language and culture. When Jewish immigration was brought to an abrupt halt by the outbreak of world war in 1914, and later greatly reduced by the quota legislation in the 1920's, the trend emerged clearly enough.

By the middle 1930's there was no longer a Jewish labor movement in the older sense in this country. The great "Jewish unions" were no longer overwhelmingly Jewish in composition; they were "mixed" unions in the general American sense. What Samuel Gompers had foreseen would happen had actually occurred.

And yet in another sense the Jewish labor movement was becoming more "Jewish" than it had ever been before. The earlier Jewish labor movement had felt itself alien to the general Jewish community and had adopted a rather hostile attitude to Jewish religion and tradition. With the increasing integration of the Jewish workers into American life, this radical negativism began to dissipate. On the other side, the demonic resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe under Hitler greatly stimulated a new sense of Jewish identification and solidarity. The Jewish labor movement grew more Jewish in the breadth and intensity of its Jewish concern as it became less Jewish in composition.

The old-time Jewish unions drew closer to the general Jewish community and threw themselves vigorously into all sorts of Jewish causes and activities, as they did into the causes and activities that interested other sections of their membership. Their Jewish concern was primarily directed toward aiding the victims of war and political terrorism abroad, toward supporting the newly established State of Israel and toward fighting intolerance at home.

Just as the United Hebrew Trades symbolized the Jewish labor movement in its older form, so agencies like the Jewish Labor Committee characterize Jewish labor in its newer phase. The "Jewishness" of the Jewish labor movement today is primarily a matter not of composition, language or culture but of identification, concern and interest.

This transformation in the character of the Jewish labor movement was already obvious in the years immediately preceding the Second World War, but the war years greatly stimulated the process. The Jewish labor movement emerged from the Second World War more Jewish and yet more American, more Jewish because more American, than anyone could conceivably have foreseen at the time of its birth.

What has been the enduring significance of the Jewish labor movement on the larger American scene? What have been its basic contributions to American labor, to American democracy and to American Jewish life?

The Jewish labor movement, next to the public school, has been the primary factor in the Americanization of the immigrant Jews who came to these shores in the decades of the great immigration. That the Jewish immigrants did not fall into a state of demoralization in the face of the disappointments and difficulties of life in the sweatshops and tenements, that

they indeed soon came to appreciate the fundamental values of American democracy and to feel themselves part of the larger America, was to an incalculable degree the work of the Jewish labor movement.

The Jewish labor movement lifted the immigrants out of their material misery and slowly improved the conditions of their life and work. But more, the Jewish labor movement brought to the immigrants, strange and forlorn in a new world, a real sense of belonging. Through the Jewish labor movement the immigrant workers were brought into contact with American labor men whom they felt they could trust and even understand, despite all differences of culture and language. Through the Jewish labor movement, the immigrant workers were introduced to American politics, not very realistically, perhaps, from the present-day standpoint, but effectively nevertheless.

The unions, the Workmen's Circle, the various political and cultural groups served as a laboratory and training ground in the practice of collective self-government through the democratic process. Union meetings, debates, conventions and elections taught the politically inexperienced immigrants how public affairs could be run by free discussion, the ballot and mutual tolerance.

The labor press, too, was a powerful instrument in the Americanization of the immigrant workers. The earlier generations of Jewish workers learned most of what they knew about the United States, American history and the American way of life from the columns of the Forward, which was almost from the beginning the leading Jewish labor newspaper. This work was supplemented by the educational activities that the Jewish unions and the Workmen's Circle set going as soon as they could muster sufficient resources. Looking back now in the perspective of more than half a century, we can see that the Jewish labor movement was, in a very real sense, the making of the Jewish immigrant worker as a trade unionist and as an American.

Although Jewish labor came on the scene relatively late in the development of the American labor movement, it has been a pioneer in industrial relations in the past four decades. The Jewish unions, of course, found a tradition of collective bargaining already in existence when they emerged early in this century. But they did not merely follow in the wake of that tradition. They immediately began to make labor history, and they have continued to do so to the present day.

Unionism in the women's garment industry, it will be remembered, was established by two great strikes conducted by the I.L.G.W.U., the strike of the waistmakers in 1909 and that of the cloakmakers in 1910, both in New York. The celebrated "protocol of peace" was regarded at the time as a great "social invention" of profound significance for the future of industrial relations. This is still the verdict today.

"Protocolism" soon became dominant as a principle of industrial relations in the organized sector of both the women's and the men's garment



industries. Before long, a body of industrial usage and custom arose which, to quote Professor E. D. Howard, "like English common law, grew into a codified system," a "path of constitutionalism in the jungle of American industrial relations." The "important chairman" idea, which came out of protocolism, spread to other industries and trades.

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers, too, served as a trail-blazer for the labor movement. Union-management cooperation, industrial stabilization, inclusion of the health and welfare of the workers in collective agreements as the concern of industry, and other matters that have become standard aspects of collective bargaining, were first brought forward by these unions.

By and large, industrial relations have proved most stable and enduring and have achieved the greatest measure of security in those fields where unions growing out of the old Jewish labor movement have operated. Neither the I.L.C.W.U. nor the A.C.W. has known a real general strike for over two decades, and nowhere is the system of collective industrial relations, industrial democracy in the genuine sense, as extensive, efficient and securely established as in industries in which these two unions and the third of the "big three," the Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers, have jurisdiction. The pioneering of the Jewish unions in the field of collective bargaining and industrial relations undeniably constitutes a great and enduring contribution to American democracy.

To the wider affairs of the labor movement, too, Jewish labor has made a unique contribution. From the earliest days Jewish unions felt themselves close to the general American labor movement, despite all cultural and ideological differences. They felt that the American labor movement was their proper home and made every effort to strengthen their ties with it. Yet they also felt that they were somehow "different" and had something unique to contribute. And they were right. For although their radicalism was largely unreal and irrelevant to American reality, it did give them a perspective beyond the narrow horizons of day-to-day union affairs, and this perspective they brought with them into the councils of American labor. Samuel Gompers, who had little use for their ideology, knew how to appreciate their spirit, and he was always their friend. With increasing experience, and under the impact of historical events, they began to lose their radical externals, but they did not lose their distinctive character.

To the American Jewish community, also, Jewish labor has made its unique contribution. In its earlier days Jewish labor in America had felt itself outside of Jewish community life, and in a sense hostile to it. Today Jewish labor has become an integral part of the American Jewish community. Jewish labor leaders are to be found in the leading councils of the most important Jewish community institutions, and a number of special agencies have been established through which Jewish labor makes its influence directly felt in community affairs. Organized labor has become one of the biggest contributors to Jewish causes. The

schism that began in Europe, and that was transplanted here with the early Jewish immigration, has now at last been overcome.

American Jews not long ago celebrated the 300th anniversary of their first coming to these shores. In America they have found a home more secure and an existence freer and more honorable than anywhere else in the long history of the Diaspora. Organized labor emerged late in American Jewish life; the Jewish labor movement in this country is hardly three-quarters of a century old. And yet in this brief period Jewish labor has proved itself not merely an organic part of American Jewish life, but a power second only to the synagogue in its influence on American Jews, and second only to the public school as a force for Americanization and integration.

Of all aspects of Jewish life, moreover, it has proved itself perhaps the most significant in its contribution to the wider concerns of American society. It is a contribution which is still being made in the everyday activity of the hundreds of thousands of men and women, leaders and rank-and-filers, who constitute the Jewish labor movement in the United States.

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Format: Monograph

ISBN/ISSN:

Author: Herberg, Will.

Title: Jewish labor in the United States /

Pub. Place: New York, N.Y. : Jewish Labor Committee, [1955?]

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