

“WE’RE WORSE OFF EVERY YEAR”

The drastic decline in wages and working conditions of workers who were formerly among the best paid. Government figures tell the story

*First of a series
By Rachel Roth*

ON Fifth Avenue smartly dressed ladies stand in front of shop windows admiring the elegant spring suits and cocktail dresses, the Southern resort styles. “Business is good,” crows *Women’s Wear Daily*. “I can’t complain,” says the dress manufacturer, confirming his yearly reservation for Miami Beach.

On Seventh Avenue aging, harassed dressmakers and cloakmakers stand in front of the tall loft building where the elegant garments are made, digesting their gulped cafeteria lunches and discussing conditions. “I made \$1,800 last year,” says a middle-aged operator bitterly. “Thirty years in the industry. I’d be better off a banana pushcart peddler! All season I only worked three-four days a week. Even when I work, the price is no good. The boss says he has to make it cheaper, the union keeps settling for less and less per garment. So I work too fast for health. The boss is making money, why should we be getting worse off every year?”

Drastic Decline in Wages and Conditions

What is happening to the workers in the ladies garment industry? One-time aristocrats of United States manufacturing, they pioneered through their union, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (AFL), in wiping out sweatshops and establishing decent wages, healthy working conditions, vacations and welfare benefits and in fighting for legislative protection for labor. Once they were among the highest paid factory workers in America, with a strong union that protected them every day in the week, a union that had the industry well organized and that the bosses feared; a union that tolerated no trifling with working conditions.

Today the ladies garment workers are among the lowest paid factory workers in the country, far below the average in weekly and hourly earnings. Theirs is the *only* major industry where money wages have actually *fallen* in the last five years, while this country has undergone an unprecedented rise in profits, prices and taxes. Other factory workers can complain that they have suffered a loss in *real* wages because their pay has not risen in proportion to the increase in the cost of living. But only the ladies garment workers can complain of a *loss* in money wages, in hourly, weekly, yearly earnings.

While other workers fought for and won wage increases

to meet the increased cost of living, the ladies garment workers were not only forced year after year to forego such wage increases, but also had to take cuts in their piece rate earnings, along with intensified speedup.

In the first years of the new war economy the garment industry became known as a sick industry. People generally had less and less money to spend for clothing. But garment manufacturers were determined not to let the problems of the industry affect their own profits. It was the workers’ wages that were sacrificed. In the garment industry a booming war economy has meant increased exploitation and hardship for the workers alone.

Once these workers were pioneers in establishing better working conditions: today the ladies garment industry is the only major organized industry in America where the majority of the workers do not even get a full week’s vacation pay or pay for holidays. Once proud of the strength and growth of their organization, now the garment workers see open shops flourishing all around them, weapons used by the jobbers to undercut their wages or put them out of jobs.

Deterioration in Situation

Once this industry was highly centralized in New York City and other major garment centers, which were kept under constant union surveillance. In recent years the industry has become increasingly decentralized. Today more and more bundles are being shipped out of the unionized garment centers, more and more shops are moving out of town to escape union surveillance—into southern, rural and even suburban communities difficult for the union to police.

More than 100,000 workers, over a fifth of the industry, are unorganized. As fast as one shop signs up with the union, another escapes. The turnover in the industry is enormous, with much of it consisting of established union shops going out of business and then starting up again under another name.

Many bosses continue paying substandard wages simply on payment of 5½ per cent of their payroll to the union benefit fund. Growing numbers of shops exist as “unregistered” contractors, acting as sources of rate cuts for the whole industry. In the rush seasons the 35 hour week is ignored—even though strict observance would mean more

jobs for more workers. Garment manufacturers are increasingly ignoring the working conditions specified in union contracts. And racketeering has become notorious again in the garment industry.

Most of the industry is now on piece work. But in the largest part of the industry, dressmaking, the workers do not even know the schedule by which their piece rates are worked out by the business agents and the bosses. All they know is that they must work harder and harder to make the same money or less than they made five years ago. Cloakmakers know how their piece work earnings have been cut—the garments have been regraded as a device to force them to do more work for less pay.

"Section work"—a speedup method of producing garments in sections on an assembly line where formerly the entire garment was made by one skilled operator—has been introduced in many shops with the cooperation of ILGWU's "Management Engineering Department." It is now being used by the manufacturers to cut the piece work rates throughout the industry and to throw old time workers out of jobs. In a period of full employment in America, more and more ladies garment workers are unemployed, working fewer hours a week, fewer weeks a year, and under tremendous speedup when they do work.

In the last dozen years thousands of Puerto Rican, Negro and Latin American workers have entered the garment industry and have been concentrated by the employers in unskilled jobs, in section shops, and in the low-priced lines—where wages are drastically lower than in the rest of the industry. Garment manufacturers are increasingly using these victims of wage discrimination in America as sources of cheap labor, depressing the wage standards of all the garment workers.

Listen to the Workers

You won't find this story of garment workers' conditions in the commercial newspapers or magazines. From Hearst to Henry Luce they are constantly praising the garment industry for its "model labor relations," crowning ILGWU's President David Dubinsky as "the model American labor leader," the "labor statesman" who conceives workers' progress in terms of industry's profits. The Voice of America recently staged a special world broadcast from the ILG resort, Unity House, depicting happy, prosperous, secure garment workers on peaceful terms with their bosses as the best fruits of the free enterprise system.

To get the true story of the ladies garment workers, you must talk to the workers themselves, as we did over many weeks last winter, in the crowded lofts and cafeterias and streets of the garment center. You can also find the real story in official government statistics. Hear it first from the workers themselves.

Hear Dora, who has grown up in the dress industry, a shop chairlady in her first strike at the age of 16, nearly 40 years ago: "I'm a fast worker, working on a good line, but last year I made \$1,275. Three years ago I was making

\$2,700. Back in '45 I made close to \$4,000. The work is harder and I make less every year. I am not so young anymore. I have no one to support me but myself. Another year like this and all my savings will be gone. And it is not so easy for the older workers like me to get jobs now. The bosses don't want us, we know too much, they can't push us around like they can the young ones."

Listen to Maria, a finisher, a handsome Italian woman swallowing a hasty sandwich under the racks of dresses in a higher-price dress shop. She reached for her container of coffee. Her finger is swollen and scaly from the needle. "I showed it to the man from the union office," she said. "I told him the work is harder now, the union should get us more money. He says, I can't do anything for you, it's union scale, get it yourself if you want more. But piece prices stayed the same the last ten years. We got a raise in pay three years ago, but I don't make any more than I did before."

"You Have to be a Slave . . ."

Hear Juanita, a younger Puerto Rican finisher in a section work factory where they have replaced the old skilled tailoring system with assembly line methods, turning out finished dresses every seven minutes: "They said you could make a lot of money in the garment industry. But you have to be a slave to make any money on this section work, the price is so cheap. Before one dress is out of your hands, another is in. You don't leave your seat, you can't even take time to drink water or go to the toilet or eat lunch. If you want to make out, you swallow a sandwich and go back to work. You have to kill yourself to make \$40 a week."

Or Sarah, a skilled dress operator for 35 years, working in a contracting shop that still uses the single garment tailor system. But she also makes only \$40 a week now! "We used to make a lot more but they pay us now on the basis of section work. We don't do section work, we make the entire garment, but the jobber fixes the price on the basis of shops that do section work. We complained to the business agent that the price was too low. He said we should be overjoyed to get it, the boss could hire 100 new workers and go on section work and get the same dress at half the price. So on the dresses we previously made \$47 a week, now we can't even make \$40."

Listen to Rebecca, a skilled operator for 20 years, who was making \$80 a week until her boss went out of business (he started up again later under a new name, with new workers, paying minimum wages). She had to go to work for \$25 less in a new shop: "We don't get paid for overtime, it's just another dress," said Rebecca. "We don't even have a first aid kit or drinking water in the shop. A woman fell in the shop and got hurt. The boss handed me a peroxide bottle with the top all rusted to clean the blood away from the wound."

Finally, listen to Max, working 35 years in the garment industry, still standing outside the loft building although

the lunch hour is over. He isn't working today. He hasn't worked this week or last but he comes down to the garment center at noon to *shmoos* with his brother cloak-makers—it's hard to break the habits of a lifetime, and maybe he'll hear of work tomorrow.

"The cloakmakers are beginning to feel hopeless," he said. "I make \$1,000 less this year than last, I only work three-four days a week all season. And they say business is good now. For the workers the future looks bad. The union is losing control over the industry. The bosses are wiping out everything we fought for and won. They hire new workers who don't know their rights. The union leaders say we got to do everything to keep the bosses in business. Years ago the union leaders helped the workers to fight the bosses. That's how we got the only good things we ever did get in this industry."

What Government Figures Say

These are the workers talking. Study official government statistics on the garment industry for the last five years and you see that their stories are typical for the industry as a whole.

In the last five years ladies garment workers have seen their wages fall from 18 cents an hour above the average United States factory wage to 18 cents an hour below the average factory worker's wage.

According to the official *United States Bureau of Labor Statistics* (BLS), average hourly earnings for women's outerwear workers in 1947 were \$1.42, compared to \$1.24 for factory workers as a whole. By July, 1952, the average for all factory workers had risen to \$1.65; women's outerwear still averaged \$1.47. Thus, while the average factory worker saw his *hourly earnings* over five years increase by 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ per cent, the garment worker's total increase averaged only 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ per cent.

The same picture of *falling wage standards* is revealed by BLS figures on *weekly earnings*. In the last five years the average weekly wage in women's outerwear virtually stood still while the average wage for all factory workers increased from \$49.97 in 1947 to \$64.88 in 1951. In 1947 the average in women's outerwear was \$49.60, just under the average factory wage. In 1951, the women's outerwear average of \$51.31 was 20 per cent below the average wage for factory workers. Five cents an hour increase for ladies garment workers in five years time—while all factory workers increased their earnings 41 cents an hour. Only \$1.98 a week increase in weekly earnings for ladies garment workers, while factory workers generally increased their earnings \$15.83 a week.

These BLS statistics show that the garment workers are now among the *lowest paid* of all factory workers. Their average weekly earnings are now from \$15 to \$25 a week below coal miners', meat packers', steel and electrical and auto workers'. In the last five years the garment workers in the United States as a whole have also dropped behind leather and furniture workers, and are now even falling

behind the low-paid textile workers. Yet, these were five years of post World War II boom and unprecedented profits for manufacturers, unprecedented price increases and tremendous increases in taxes on workers' pay-checks to pay the bill for the war program. If those years have meant increased financial hardship, lowered living standards and drained savings for factory workers generally as higher prices and taxes erased their wage increases, how much worse is the situation of the garment workers, whose money earnings have not increased as much as other workers' have?

Since 1947, the *taxes* on workers' paychecks have increased by 21 per cent, the *prices* of food, clothing and other necessities of life have increased by 21 per cent—but the garment workers' money earnings have increased by only three per cent. *This means that the real wages of ladies garment workers have actually decreased by more than 16 per cent since 1947.* Deduct taxes taken from the pay-check and adjust the remainder in terms of what today's dollar will buy as compared with 1947, and you find that the ladies garment worker makes only \$35.62 a week in real wages!

Situation in New York

The fall in garment wage standards is even more drastic in New York. There, in the hub of the industry, where the majority of United States garment workers are employed and account for most of the garment output, the long years of union organization have theoretically resulted in the industry's highest wages and best working conditions.

New York garment workers' average weekly earnings have actually *dropped* from \$66.46 in 1946 to \$63.34 in 1951, a *wage cut of \$3.12 a week*, or 4 per cent. Other New York workers won wage increases averaging \$15.50 a week, or 30 per cent. Furthermore, in 1946, the women's outerwear workers' wage was \$17.06 more than the average for all factory workers in the state. Today the New York women's outerwear wage is \$1.66 *less* than the average factory wage in the state. In these postwar boom years the *New York garment workers have fallen from 34 per cent above the average factory wage to 3 per cent below the average.* The New York garment workers are changing from aristocrats of industry to substandard factory workers.

Since the war, wages of New York City dressmakers have virtually stood still—from \$62.48 in 1946 to \$65.38 in 1952, a rise of 4.6 per cent. But the BLS consumer price index went up 36.8 per cent in the same period, and when the increase in taxes since 1946 is added, the cost of living has increased a total of over 50 per cent. This means that real wages of New York dressmakers have fallen by \$23.60 a week or 36 per cent since the war. Put differently, workers in the New York dress industry would need a wage increase of \$23.60 a week to bring the purchasing power of their take-home pay up to the 1946 level.

In the New York coat, suit and skirt industry, the highest

paid section of the garment industry, money wages fell from \$83.56 in 1946 to \$79.85 in 1952, a wage cut of \$3.71 or 4.4 per cent. Take out taxes and translate their take-home pay into dollars of 1946 purchasing power, and you find that the New York City cloakmakers have suffered a decline of almost 50 per cent in their real wages since the war. Cloakmakers would need an increase of \$39.60 a week to get back to 1946 standards.

It is obvious that the tradition of high paid New York dress and cloakmakers is no longer true. For since 1946, while factory workers all over the United States won wage increases averaging \$24.40 a week, dressmakers earnings virtually stagnated, cloakmakers earnings actually decreased.

In the years of cost of living increase since the outbreak of the war in Korea, New York factory workers generally won wage increases averaging about 22 cents an hour, or 15 per cent. The New York garment workers increased their wages three cents in three years, or 1.5 per cent. *Even the low paid textile workers won wage increases averaging 21 cents an hour in these three years while New York fur workers increased wages 28 cents an hour and leather workers 31 cents.*

High Unemployment

But falling wages are only half the garment worker's problem today. He is also faced with lack of job security and mounting unemployment. Average employment of production workers in women's outerwear industry in the United States has dropped from 308,700 in 1948, to 268,700 in July 1952. That means a loss of 40,000 jobs in the industry as a whole. At the same time, average weekly hours have dropped from 35.1 to 34.9. Since 40,000 garment workers haven't dropped dead, this means that all garment workers are employed fewer weeks per year and fewer hours per week.

In New York the number of jobs in the garment industry has been falling year by year, as is shown by these average monthly employment figures from the New York State Department of Labor: 1948—172,308; 1949—168,525; 1950 (July)—151,200; 1951 (July)—148,300; 1952 (July)—144,500.

In June 1952, 100,000 workers applied for unemployment insurance from the New York needle trades. *Three-fourths of all the factory workers in the state applying for unemployment insurance were from the clothing and garment industries.* At the height of the seasonal upswing, in October 1952, with employment at a record peak in industry generally, there were still nearly 50,000 applicants for unemployment insurance from the apparel trades and they still constituted over half of all the factory unemployed in the state.

The number of garment and clothing workers collecting unemployment insurance annually has been steadily climbing each year, from 74,704 in 1946-47, to 245,350 in 1949-50, the last year for which such figures are available. The average duration of unemployment benefits of needle trades workers hit a record peak of 12.5 weeks—three months.

This is an increase from 8.2 weeks in 1947. This means that *five out of every eight workers in the industry were unemployed an average of three months, and many more than three months.*

Garment work has always been seasonal. Hence wages earned during the peak of the season must tide the worker over the slack periods. Now, with a drop in the number of jobs, in addition to the seasonal factor, and with a drop in wage standards even during the busy periods, the garment workers are not even earning a minimal subsistence income over the year. The *Census of Manufacturers* shows a drop in annual earnings for women's outerwear workers from \$2,406 in 1947 to \$2,312 in 1950. This averages out to less than \$40 a week—for ladies garment workers to feed and clothe their families at today's high prices.

In coming articles we shall analyze the causes of the garment workers' plight. Are their problems the inevitable result of a "sick industry" or a "return to normalcy," as the manufacturers and ILGWU leaders claim? Or are the wages and working conditions of the garment workers being sacrificed to help the garment manufacturers solve their own problems?

(To be continued)

Violence on the East Side

ONE of the most serious fascist-like attacks of violence since Peekskill against a peaceful assemblage took place on New York's East Side on March 16. The attackers, as in previous instances reported in the past year (see *JEWISH LIFE*, September 1952 and January 1953) were apparently Ukrainian "nationalists," Polish fascists and Russian White Guardists, many of whom have come to this country as "DP's" in the past few years. Virulent anti-Semitism was also manifested at this latest outbreak.

A memorial meeting for Stalin was scheduled by the Ukrainian-Russian Committee to take place March 16 at Manhattan Plaza, 68 East 4 Street. The previous Saturday afternoon two "nationalist" Ukrainian language broadcasts urged a mass counter demonstration in front of the hall. Police assured the sponsors of the meeting that adequate police protection would be provided. While 35 persons waited for the meeting to start inside the hall, hundreds of persons picketed outside. Then about a hundred young men marched out of an adjoining hall in semi-military fashion, brushed past one policeman at the entrance and stamped up to the meeting hall. They wielded blackjacks, broke chairs, tore up decorations. Several of the audience were injured. Stone throwing was in evidence.

Eye-witnesses said that among the shouts of the pickets were, "Jew bastard . . . Jew murderers . . . Jew communists." Passing Jews were taunted.

The committee organizing the meeting has charged that police apparently cooperated with the storm-trooper hoodlums. The Ukrainian "nationalist" organ *Svoboda* said that detectives avoided attack by showing their badges. It was reported that Julian Revay, former government minister in the Quisling Carpatho-Ukrainian government under Hitler, was active in the "Protest Committee."

There were no arrests!