

THE HEROIC PERIOD OF JEWISH LABOR, 1909-1914

By Morris U. Schappes

THE five-year period before the First World War was for the Jewish workers a period of unprecedented mass struggle and radiant mass heroism that won the sympathy of middle class liberal elements and the admiration of the entire American labor movement. Unions that came out of the crisis of 1907-1908 as little more than skin and skeleton quickly took on muscle and flesh as they sparked general strikes of many tens of thousands of workers in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Cleveland and other cities. Not only did the strikers wrest from the grinding, grasping employers some form of union recognition and concessions in the matter of filthy shops, unbearably long hours, starvation wages, and the personal indignities heaped upon them by foremen and bosses. The unions also emerged, for the first time, with mass memberships that could hold on to the gains made and prepare for new advances. The United Hebrew Trades of New York in 1910 had 61 unions with 65,000 members; in 1914 it was 104 unions with almost 250,000 members. Between 1910 and 1913, unions in the garment trades increased their membership by 66,000, a 68 per cent increase in these few years, constituting the greatest percentage of growth in the entire labor movement at the time, the American Federation of Labor having grown by only 28 per cent. Only the miners, with a 60 per cent increase, approached this pace.¹

In addition to those in the garment trades, other Jewish workers swung into the strike movement, improved their conditions and established or consolidated unions. The Jewish butchers, who had been getting \$12 to \$18 a month plus room and board in the boss's household, won a scale of \$12 to \$18 a week and the right to live where they pleased. The doll-makers had to strike bitterly to force employers to put in exhausts to draw the sawdust out of the workshops so it would not clog their lungs. The retail clerks, the laundry workers and the tinsmiths won concessions in strike struggles. But it was the Jewish bakers, the most downtrodden of the Jewish workers, who made really decisive gains. They had been working 18 hours a day six days a week for wages of \$8 to \$11 when, led by Local 100 of the Bakery and Confectionary Workers' International

Union, they struck on May 1, 1909 against the smaller bakeries, 1,000 workers participating. After seven weeks, they won a 10-hour day, recognition of the union and the union label, wage raises to \$12 to \$16, and the right of the unemployed to get one night's work a week. At the same time, by having conducted a boycott against the big three among the bakeries, they won from them too the recognition of the union and label. Most important of all, when the strike ended, almost all the bakers were unionized in six locals, with Local 100 itself having 1600 members.²

20,000 Shirt-waist Makers' Strike

Yet it was the garment workers that by their sheer numbers held the center of the stage. The first to erupt were the ladies' shirt-waist makers, 20,000 immigrants, mostly 16 to 25 years old, two-thirds of them Jewish and a couple of thousand Italians, fighting spectacularly from November 22, 1909 to February 15, 1910 against hunger, cold and callous employers who did not hesitate to use strikebreakers, thugs and police to attack the workers. The conditions of employment included 56 hours a week, low wages, charges for the electricity they used at work, the chairs they sat on and the lockers in the shops, filthy work-places, insulting and tyrannical bosses—reasons enough to rouse indignation, militancy and solidarity among these women.

Local 25, the Waistmakers' Local of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, had about 100 members and \$4 in the treasury in July 1909, when the first rumbles of the eruption were heard in a strike of 200 workers in one big shop. Victory here led to other single shop strikes. The United Hebrew Trades assigned a committee to help the local conduct an organizing drive which speedily built the membership to about 1,000. Obviously the workers were aching for action, so that when the fiery little Clara Lemlich, at that historic, packed meeting at Cooper Union on November 22, made her passionate call for a general strike, the avalanche followed. Next day 500 of the 600 shops in the trade were emptied of their workers, and the union leadership was almost overwhelmed by the response.

Mass picketing became the order of the day. Thugs, prostitutes and the police were turned savagely on these

¹ Hertz Burgin, *Di Geschichte fun der Idisher Arbeiter Bewegung in Amerika, Russland un England*, New York, 1915, p. 750-754; Selig Perlman and Philip Taft, *History of Labor in the United States, 1896-1932*, New York, 1935, p. 289.

² Burgin, work cited, p. 705-706, 698-699.

young women workers. By December 25th, 723 strikers had been arrested and 19 sent to the workhouse. Two days later the undaunted strikers *turned down* an agreement which made many concessions but which maintained the open shop. By then the strike had spread to Philadelphia, where 12-year-old girl strikers were among the pickets.

Such determination in such a cryingly just cause won for the strikers the support of liberal middle class groups. The Women's Trade Union League, founded in 1904, made its first real contact with the Jewish labor movement in this struggle and gave valuable aid on the picket line, in hostile courtrooms, in raising funds and in molding public opinion. The Political Equality Association, headed by Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont, arranged a protest meeting at the Hippodrome where over 7,000 persons expressed their sympathy, with Rev. John Howard Melish in the chair. Society women at the Colony Club heard the story of their conditions from girl strikers and contributed \$1,008 to help them. Educators, social workers and writers sent letters to the newspapers in support of the workers. At Carnegie Hall, a rally heard Rev. Stephen S. Wise call for justice for the workers.

The results were not uniform but more than 300 firms settled on the union's terms, which included a 52-hour week, higher wages, and union recognition. And Local 25 emerged with a membership of 10,000.³

Over 50,000 Cloakmakers Strike

The pace, the vigor and the victory of these young women workers stepped up the tempo of the organizing of another general strike of even greater magnitude, this time in the New York cloakmaking trades. Preparations here were slow but thorough. Agitation for a general strike among workers so exploited that half of the 50,000 still had to bring their own sewing machines into the shops had begun in August 1908, under the auspices of the New York Joint Board of Cloak and Skirt Makers Unions, affiliated with the I.L.G.W.U. An appeal by the union to the Workmen's Circle led to a drive within that organization that recruited about 2,000 members of the Workmen's Circle into the union in the spring of 1909. By November 1909, the conservative Cutters' Local 10 was won over to the Joint Board. The inspiration of the Waistmakers' struggle brought the preparations to the final lap. In April 1910, the Joint Board began to issue *Di Neie Post* to build the union for the strike and by June the locals of the Joint Board had about 10,000 members. That month, the Boston national convention of the I.L.G.W.U. endorsed the proposed strike by a vote of 55 to 10, and the A. F. of L. assigned an advisor to the strike. A secret ballot on July 2 and 3 showed 18,771 for striking and 615 against. In response to the special red-paper edition of the *Neie Post* with the strike call on July 7, more than 50,000 workers left

³ Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, New York, 1924, Ch. 21; *New York Times*, December 4, 1909; [F. E. Sheldon], *Souvenir History of the Strike of the Ladies Waist Makers' Union*, New York, 1910, p. 7; Fannia M. Cohn, "Uprising of Dressmakers," *American Federationist*, November 1929, p. 1324-1327; William Mailly, "The Working Girls' Strike," *Independents*, November 23, 1909, p. 1419; Burgin, work cited, p. 699n; "Clara Lemlich Shavelson," by Paula Scheier, *JEWISH LIFE*, November 1954, p. 7-9.

1500 shops in the biggest strike yet seen in New York.

After initial efforts at mediation had failed and 350 small manufacturers had signed the union's agreement in the first three weeks, Louis D. Brandeis was brought into the picture as a mediator. Brandeis had in 1903 advocated the incorporation of unions in a debate with Gompers in Boston. In 1907, as counsel for the Boston cloak and suit manufacturers association, Brandeis had helped break a general strike after four months by obtaining injunctions against the union leaders. Now he appeared as a friend of labor but as an enemy of the closed shop, one of the main union demands. Persuasively he put forward the formula of the "preferential union shop," which would bind the employer to give preference to an available union member in hiring, but also permit him to hire non-union members and retain scabs.⁴ Sensing that this would be a major breach in the protective wall of the closed shop, the workers rejected this compromise. The employers responded with a temporary injunction, which the workers promptly defied by mass picketing, despite the violence and clubbing of the police and the special guards hired by the bosses.

On August 26 another mediation effort brought new compromise appeals to the Executive Board of the General Strike Committee, including the preferential shop, but the following day the militant workers again decisively rejected them. The injunction was then made permanent, the *New York Times* describing it as "the strongest decision ever handed down against labor." When a third set of proposals with new concessions came from the manufacturers on September 2, the Strike Committee, with the support of only 200 hurriedly assembled shop chairmen, finally assented to the first collective bargaining agreement in the industry. The Protocol of Peace, as the agreement was called, won for the workers, after nine weeks of mass struggle, a 50-hour week, ten legal holidays, free electric power installation for the machines, no home work, weekly pay in cash, not checks, limitations on overtime, a joint board of sanitary control to help clean up the filthy shops, a committee on grievances and compulsory arbitration with no strike or lockouts permitted before arbitration, and price settlements to be made in each shop by negotiation. But instead of the closed shop there was the "preferential union shop." Furthermore, unlike the usual collective bargaining agreement, this Protocol had no time limit; it could run indefinitely but could be terminated by either side at will, and was in fact so ended by the manufacturers in 1915.

Again the most important of the victories was that the union emerged with tremendous strength, and by January 1912 had over 50,000 members in New York, and contracts with 1796 of 1829 shops in the area. Mass struggle and

⁴ Brandeis, of course, did not invent the "preferential union shop," which had been put forward even as a union demand in the 1892 strike of the A. F. of L. teamsters, scalemen and packers in New Orleans (Philip S. Foner, "The Early AFL and the Negro," *Looking Forward*, New York, 1954, p. 47-50). When the A. F. of L. was weak and fighting against the open-shop drive, it put forward the preferential union shop as a step toward the closed shop; by 1910, when the closed shop had been won in many places, the preferential union shop marked a retreat.



"THE TURNING POINT": A panorama of the garment industry, 1909-1911

Painting by Philip Reisman

The left side of this panel portrays the conditions that new immigrants were confronted with, contrary to the promise symbolized by the Statue of Liberty—"A haven of freedom, where all can pursue the good life." Instead, the prevailing conditions were for them a life dogged by child labor, sweatshops, home-work, starvation wages and bad housing.

The center of the panel is dominated by the "Turning Point"—that historic meeting at Cooper Union in New York City, on November 22, 1909 which, sparked by young Clara

Lemlich (the "Joan of Arc of the garment workers"), voted a general strike and took the Hebrew oath as portrayed, "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise."

The right portion shows the strike movement which followed, with an indication of the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of 1911 in the background. This general strike won wide public support and was a great victory, firmly establishing trade unionism in the needle trades.—Philip Reisman.

militancy had again led to stability and a mass union.⁵

Over 40,000 Workers Strike in Chicago

Inspired by these two great strikes in New York, the men's clothing workers of Chicago began to stir, first in Hart, Schaffner and Marx's factory, the world's largest, with over 8,000 workers, and then in the industry as a whole, until more than 40,000 were involved. The walk-out began because of a wage-cut in one department at Hart, Schaffner and Marx on September 22, 1910, tied up that factory completely by October 15, and became a general strike on October 27, spurred on by calls for such action by the *Chicago Daily Socialist*. The local leadership of the United Garment Workers of America (A. F. of L.) appealed for aid to the national officers, headed by the ultra-conservative Thomas E. Rickert. When Rickert appeared in Chicago, he proposed to the workers that they return

to work without union recognition and on the promise of Hart, Schaffner and Marx to consider their grievances. The workers rejected such an agreement, and two days later the general strike was on.

On November 5 the agreeable Rickert reached an agreement with Hart, Schaffner and Marx for arbitration of all issues without union recognition. Again the workers rejected the proposal, so angrily that Rickert had to get out of the hall quickly by a back door. Now the strikers appealed to the Chicago Federation of Labor for leadership and a Joint Strike Committee was set up with representation from the U.G.W., the C.F.L., the Women's Trade Union League, and the non-unionized tailors. Despite mounting violence against them (the final score was 374 strikers arrested and seven killed), the workers on December 8 again rejected an agreement that would have sent them back without union recognition or any other guarantees. It took another five weeks of hunger, cold, and violence before the workers at Hart, Schaffner and Marx on January 14, 1911 reluctantly agreed to go back to work and

⁵ Levine, work cited, chapter 22 and p. 128, 204, 205-6; *American Federationist*, February 1903, p. 103-4; Julius Henry Cohen, *Law and Order in Industry*, New York, 1916, p. 243-248 for text of Protocol; Isaac A. Hourwich, "Termination of the 'Protocol,'" *New Review*, June 15, 1915, p. 76-79.

refer all issues to an arbitration committee.

What of the other 30,000 strikers? They maintained their ranks solidly until on February 3, as Perlman and Taft describe it, "the strike was summarily ended by the leaders of the United Garment Workers of America, without consultation with the local leaders and the co-operating labor groups, sending these workers back to work without any guarantees whatever."

The 23-year-old Sidney Hillman, who with Frank Rosenblum, Bessie Abramowitz (the later Mrs. Hillman) and Sam Levin had risen to leadership among the workers during the strike, recorded that the great majority "were forced to return to their old miserable conditions, through the back door; and happy were those who were taken back. Many . . . were victimized for months afterwards. . . ."

Thus the Chicago workers learned bitterly what national misleadership was. Nevertheless at Hart, Schaffner and Marx 8,000 workers did because of their proved militancy win from the arbitrators a ten per cent wage increase, a 54-hour week, time and a half for overtime, and a grievance mechanism and arbitration apparatus. When in 1913 the agreement was renewed, it recognized the preferential union shop.

In this general strike the solidarity of the workers, mostly Jewish but with large numbers of Italians, Poles, Lithuanians and Czechs, did not then produce a powerful union, but it helped lay the base for the emergence of such a union in December 1914, when, as we shall see, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers replaces the U.G.W. as the organization of men's clothing workers.⁶

While the victories and the struggles of that past year were still glowing in their memories, the workers were suddenly dealt a gruesome blow. One of the centers of the shirtwaist makers' strike had been the Triangle Waist Company, employing over 700 workers at its factory on Greene Street and Washington Place in New York. To keep workers from marching out in protest and to curb stealing, the bosses, Harris and Blanck, kept the factory doors locked during working hours and ignored the union's demands for fire escapes. Thus when fire struck on March 25, 1911, the 700 girls, women and men in the Triangle shop were locked in and trapped. The dead numbered 143, the injured were unnumbered, the horror flared high and anguish and indignation roared out over the blood and ashes of Jews and Italians, of exploited workers, sacrificed on the altar of profit. At a funeral procession on April 5, in a heavy rain 50,000 marched in ominous silence, hushed in the solidarity of pain, grief and hatred. The image of the Triangle Fire cut deeply into the Yiddish literature of the period and helped fix it indelibly in the people's memory.

The next major battle was fought by the New York furriers. We have seen that the failure of the national union to organize the Jewish furriers had led to the collapse of that union and to the surrender of its charter early in 1911. At that juncture, however, the United Hebrew

Trades initiated an organizing drive that by the spring of 1912 had brought 3,000 of the 10,000 in the industry into three locals and that led to preparations for a general strike. Having affiliated with the A. F. of L. as federal locals on the advice of the U.H.T., and knowing from a strike vote of 2,135 to 364 that the workers were ready, the fur locals launched the general strike on June 20, 1912. In a few days there were 8,500 workers out, three-fourths of them Jewish. When 1,000 German workers joined the strike on July 23, the strike was solid. The employers let loose gangsters against the workers and the police protected the strikebreakers. Although the number of workers involved in this strike was comparatively small, the arrests numbered over 800 strikers, 54 getting workhouse sentences and 215 suffering serious injuries at the hands and knives of the thugs. But the strike-lines held fast and on August 20 the bosses agreed to begin negotiations with Rabbi Judah L. Magnes acting as conciliator. The victory for the workers was recorded in a two-year agreement reached on September 8 which provided for these main points: a 49 instead of a 56-hour week with a half-day only on Saturdays, ten paid legal holidays, time and a half for overtime in the busy season, a joint sanitary committee, no homework and wages to be paid weekly and in cash. This was the first collective agreement in an industry in which there was not even a national union, for the A. F. of L. charter to the International Fur Workers of the United States and Canada was not issued until July 1, 1913. With the New York furriers organized, a stable union was now possible.⁷

Greatest Strike of All—100,000 Out

But the greatest of all these struggles was the New York general strike of over 100,000 workers in the men's clothing industry in the winter of 1912-1913. Unorganized because of the indifference of the bureaucrats of the United Garment Workers, these workers had worse conditions than any others in the garment trades. While the cost of living was rising in the last five years, their wages had fallen. They were ready to fight and the lessons of the waistmakers, the cloakmakers and the furriers were not lost on them. In the fall of 1912, with the aid of the United Hebrew Trades, a campaign to build the small local union was begun, accompanied by agitation for a general strike. When it was announced that only union members would be able to vote for or against a general strike, they poured into the union in the tens of thousands. Five days of balloting from December 18 to 22, 1912 showed 35,786 for the strike and 2,322 against it. When the strike began on December 30, some 75,000 turned out that day and by the end of the first week there were more than 100,000 workers on strike, 35,000 of them women. Next to the majority of Jewish workers, there were many thousands of Italians, as well as Poles, Russians, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Greeks, Germans, Czechs and others.

⁶ Perlman and Taft, work cited, p. 304-309; Matthew Josephson, *Sidney Hillman, Statesman of American Labor*, Garden City, N. Y., 1952, p. 41-57.

⁷ Philip S. Foner, *The Fur and Leather Workers Union*, Newark, N. J., 1950, p. 39-51; *Jewish Daily Forward*, January 1, 1913.

The Italian workers seemed to be the surprise of this mass action. The heroism of the Jewish workers had already been writ large. Now the Italian workers, men and women, were to show their caliber. "The vitality of the Italian workers," reported the *Jewish Daily Forward* on January 6, "was wonderful, their energy is simply incredible, their devotion exceeds everything." Two days before it had described a parade of 1,000 workers in Skolnik's children's jacket factory to their strike headquarters, marching two in a row. "Here there went arm in arm an old Jew with a young Italian. A little farther on there marched an old Italian worker, gesticulating to the young Jewish worker who was his partner in the line. . . ." The *Forward* on January 11 enjoined the Jewish workers not to "fall behind their Italian brothers" in militancy. But all the nationalities as well as the women fought as for their very lives for demands which included a 20 per cent increase, a 48-hour week, extra pay for overtime, electric power for their machines and the abolition of tenement house work. An offer of a 56-hour week and about \$1 week increase was overwhelmingly rejected by a strikers' ballot on January 27, 1913.

As individual firms began to settle, President Rickert of the U.G.W. stepped into the situation. The strike had been led by a committee headed by Max Pine of the U.H.T. and Ben Schweitzer of the U.G.W. But Rickert, as in Chicago, disregarded the strike leadership and the workers and signed an agreement that one of the participating locals described aptly as "a treacherous settlement . . . a shame and an insult. . . ." At this point the *Jewish Daily Forward*, which had helped mobilize and inspire the workers for the strike, suddenly lined up with Rickert and urged them to accept his settlement. The result was that on March 1, 1913 thousands of workers marched in wrath down to the Forward Building and smashed all its windows. Holding their ranks, the workers maintained their strike. On March 12, 1913 they reached an agreement that brought them union recognition, a 52-hour week by 1914 and small wage increases.

Overshadowed by this gigantic struggle but still important were two general strikes easily won in New York by 15,000 whitegoods (underwear) workers who walked out on January 8 and 25,000 waist and dress makers who struck on January 14. For a few days at this time there were about 150,000 garment workers out on strike in this city. Supporting men's clothing workers' strikes also broke out in Rochester, Buffalo and Philadelphia.

Results of the Strike Struggles

The result of the major struggle was decisive in many ways. The New York locals came out of the strike so strong and so militant that Rickert rapidly maneuvered to find ways of excluding their delegates from the next national convention even though they represented already a majority of the total membership. The excluded majority reformed its ranks and with other locals in the big clothing

centers, including Chicago, formed in December 1914 the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Since Gompers sided with Rickert, the Amalgamated remained an independent, unaffiliated union. And since the workers long remembered the support the *Forward* gave to Rickert's proposal, the relations of the new union with the *Forward* were anything but cordial.⁸

The role of the *Forward* in this period was complex. The huge immigration created a mass audience that it cultivated and won. Its circulation grew rapidly: in May 1908, it had 72,353 sales, in May 1909 it had risen to 83,474, and in October 1912 it had leaped to 130,462. In all the New York strikes mentioned it played a powerful part as agitator, organizer, fund-raiser and morale-builder. Yet in a situation like the Rickert betrayal of the men's clothing workers' strike the *Forward* could not be depended upon to give bold leadership to the workers. Actually, the prosperity of the *Forward*, built both on circulation and on large advertising revenues, had made the *Forward*, with the willful Abraham Cahan as editor, independent of the workers and a power over them. This menacing role of the *Forward* is excellently expressed in a letter written by Abraham Rosenberg, president of the I.L.G.W.U., to a former trade-unionist and friend, Joseph Baroness, on August 1, 1912. Discussing a private matter, this union president writes to his comrade-in-arms of the general strike of 1890: "You must not forget the position I am in. The *Forward* people and the genossen [comrades] are practically controlling the trade unions, whether we approve of it or not. The moment they become aware of the fact that some union leader does not dance in accordance with their bagpipe, they are bound to destroy the organization, this party represents, you know it as well as I do. . . ." Thus in 1912 one can see the dual role of the *Forward* as organizer and disorganizer.⁹

In this heroic period, then, the Jewish workers turned the shells of unions into mass movements through their courageous, determined mass struggles. It was this militancy that decided what gains were to be made around negotiating tables and in conferences. Women as well as men, young workers as well as adults were involved in these examples of mass heroism. Jewish workers also learned the heroic qualities of non-Jewish workers with whom they participated in joint struggles. But in this period many of the workers also learned another lesson: that there was a type of union leader, of whom a Rickert was a prime example, who could not be trusted to organize, to lead or to fight, and that the rank and file would have to learn how to cope with such figures in the trade union and labor movement. The workers did not forget how often they had been compelled to reject agreements favored by their leaders and how often they had pressed on to new gains despite these officials. This opportunism in such leadership was going to become a major factor as they faced new problems born of the First World War.

⁸ Perlman and Taft, work cited, p. 309-315; *Jewish Daily Forward*, Nov. 30, Dec. 15, 24, 30, 1912; Jan. 1, 9, 10, 15, 28, 29, 1913.
⁹ Burgin, work cited, p. 634; *Jewish Daily Forward*, October 1, 1912; Baroness Papers, New York Public Library, Carton 2, Folder: Labor Affairs.