

THE JEWS AND THE POST-WAR REACTION AFTER 1918

By Morris U. Schappes

AFTER World War I the economic rulers of our country were bloated but of course not satiated. The United States had in 1914 been a debtor nation, owing money to foreign investors, but in 1918 it was a creditor to a good part of the capitalist world. War profiteering, as subsequent official investigations revealed, had been rampant and even the ordinary profits were enormous. Real wages however, declined and in many ways, remarks one economic historian, "the immediate effect of the war appeared detrimental to labor."¹

Swollen though these ruling circles were with newly-gorged wealth and power, they were haunted by a new form of the ancient fear of the organized workers and the people aroused, which they suddenly saw triumphantly embodied in the new Russian revolutionary government. While a Siberian Expeditionary Force was dispatched as part of an international endeavor to overthrow that government, the rulers of America let loose against the American people a savage attack on all fronts. As the conservative Frederick Lewis Allen sums it up, "It was an era of lawless and disorderly defense of law and order, of unconstitutional defense of the Constitution, of suspicion and civil conflict—in a very literal sense, a reign of terror."²

The targets of this reign of terror were not new: the worker organized or trying to organize, the Negro, the foreign-born, the Jew. But there was a new element that fused all these traditional ingredients of American reaction into a new amalgam and that new welding element was the International Red Scare and the cry of Bolshevism. Unions were Bolshevism and aliens were Bolshevism and Jews were Bolshevism and they and their defenders must be smashed, deported, imprisoned, terrorized.

The Negro people suffered most from the terror. Under Southern skies the trees rocked with the strange fruit of 239 reported lynched in the years 1919 to 1922. In the summer of 1919 race riots swept the land: in Washington, D. C., for three days, in Knoxville, Tenn., in Tulsa, Okla., in Longview, Texas, in Omaha, Nebraska, in Elaine, Arkansas, in Chicago worst of all. By 1924 the Klan claimed a membership of 4,500,000 and held dominant political

positions in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Indiana, Ohio, California and Oregon. This racism on a rampage of course spilled over into the mounting hostility to the immigrant masses that was being whipped up at the same time. Racist theories of Anglo-Saxon superiority now fused with the new look anti-Bolshevik hysteria and the chairman of the Senate Committee on Immigration, Senator Thomas R. Hardwick, "proposed restricting immigration as a means of keeping out Bolshevism."³

One immediate result that had far-reaching effects upon the Jewish people here and abroad was the immigration law of 1920. The preamble to the law baldly accepted the false premise of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, while the law itself aimed to encourage Anglo-Saxon immigration from Central and Northern Europe, and to discourage immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, specifically Italian and Jewish. Therefore a quota system was devised that would annually admit into the United States no more than three per cent of the total number of immigrants from any country that were already here in 1910.

The effect upon Jewish immigration was drastic. From 1904 to 1914 the average annual Jewish immigration was over 100,000. In 1921, just before the law went into operation, Jewish immigrants numbered 119,036. In 1922 it dropped to 53,524 and then to 49,719 and 49,089 in the next two years. But even such a decline was not enough. Therefore in 1924 the quotas were changed from three per cent to two per cent, not, however, of the number of immigrants from any country that were here in 1910 but in 1890. This new formula cut the Jewish immigration by more than 75 per cent so that in 1925 it was only 10,292 and it hovered around that figure until the late 1930's.

The Red Scare and Anti-Semitism

Those Jews who were already in the country were being subjected to new levels of anti-Semitic attack stoked in the furnace of anti-Bolshevism. In 1919 a Senate committee headed by Senator Overman began public hearings on—the relation between "German brewers and Bolshevism propaganda." In garish color there was planted in the minds of millions the bewhiskered image of the free-loving,

¹ Harold U. Faulkner, *American Economic History*, 5th ed., N. Y., 1943, p. 600-601; Labor Research Association, *Labor Fact Book II*, N. Y., 1934, p. 193.

² Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday*, N. Y., 1931, Bantam Edition, 1946 p. 62.

³ Frederick Lewis Allen, work cited, p. 66.

church-burning, bomb-throwing Bolsheviks—a name soon reduced to headline slang as Bolshies. The commercial press was less interested in the truth than in the wild tales about the so-called “nationalization of women.”

The “Jew-Bolshevik” was also proclaimed from the platform of the Overman hearings, with a Dr. George S. Simons giving testimony under oath on February 13, 1919 that the Bolsheviks were Jews and that the conspiracy to overthrow the tsar was hatched in New York’s lower East Side ghetto. No less grimly humorous than this malicious attack was the craven “defense” of the Jews advanced by the American Jewish Committee in a statement that appeared in the *New York Times* of February 15 under these headlines: “Says Mass of Jews Oppose Bolsheviks” and the perhaps unintentionally comic sub-headline: “East Side Not A Hotbed.” President Louis Marshall of the Committee did not even dare to assert the elementary democratic principle that Jews had as much right as anybody else to be Bolsheviks or communists. Instead he apologetically argued the obvious that the Jews were as patriotic as other people, loved law and order like everybody else and so forth. And then, without having asked the Jewish masses for their views, Marshall presumed to end with the announcement, “Attack Bolshevism as much as you please and the Jews of America are with you.” This kind of reply, of course, did not even prevent Louis Marshall himself from being called “a Bolshevik orator” on June 5, 1920 by Ford’s Dearborn Publishing Company.⁴ All it did was publicly to commit the Jewish plutocracy represented by the American Jewish Committee to the one element in its program to which it has been more faithful than any other.

Having softened up the people by this propaganda barrage, our government later in 1919 started mass raids in which thousands of persons were arrested in a hunt for “alien radicals” to be deported. This violent marauding was ordered by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and executed under the direction of his Special Assistant J. Edgar Hoover. A trial run on November 7, 1919, second anniversary of the Soviet Revolution, netted 452 arrests in 11 cities. But the big play came on New Year’s Day, 1920, when 2,758 were arrested in 33 cities.

The fears that Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson, a former trade unionist, had expressed to Palmer on the eve of these raids that they were unconstitutional and would cause “injury to innocent parties” were more than confirmed. A blow for sanity and constitutional rights was struck on January 12, 1920 when Francis Fisher Kane, United States attorney in Philadelphia, resigned his post with a public letter to Palmer and President Woodrow Wilson. “Is it necessary,” he asked Palmer, “to protect our American workingmen . . . from the influence of a handful of Russians and Russian Jews. . . .?” He pointed to the case of a “Russian Jew barber” arrested in Philadelphia and thought “it is not only foolish but an outrage to take him from his wife and [six] children” by deporting him.

⁴ *American Jewish Year Book*, 5682 (1921-1922), p. 316.

“I cannot regard him as a menace to society just because he was a member of the Communist Party.” Despite these and other protests the Palmer raids continued until about 10,000 had been arrested, most of them unjustly, for only some 300 were deported. The International Red Scare, terrorism, anti-Semitism were taking their toll.⁵

And while the Red Scare was crimson in the sky, Congressman Victor Berger of Milwaukee was denied his seat in the House on January 11, 1920, five New York State assemblymen, a couple of them Jewish, had their seats challenged on January 7 and were finally excluded in April 1920; on May 5, the frame-up of Sacco and Vanzetti began.

Ford’s Anti-Semitic Campaign

It was precisely at this time, however, that Henry Ford began his mass campaign of unbridled anti-Semitism. And the International Red Scare was at the bottom of that too. For the man who was instrumental in converting Ford to militant anti-Semitism was one Boris Brasol, an agent of the tsar’s secret police and an expatriate from revolutionary Russia. Employed here by the United States Secret Service, Brasol had the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* translated into English and placed in the Secret Service files as a document to “explain the Russian Revolution.” Then Brasol got the *Protocols* to Ford, who was promptly convinced that this “international Jewish conspiracy” was the cause of the ills of the world and of Henry Ford. Thus from May 1920, for seven years, Ford’s weekly, *The Dearborn Independent*, poured out an uninterrupted stream of uninhibited anti-Semitism into millions of American homes throughout the country.⁶ The International Red Scare had spawned the myth of the International Jewish Banker. On February 8, 1923, the *New York Times* reported that Ford was already financing—Hitler! In our own country discrimination against Jews in employment, housing, social contacts and admission to colleges sharpened. A protest movement, however, mounted rapidly, involving not only all of Jewish organized life but many non-Jewish elements. On January 16, 1921, 119 eminent non-Jewish Americans headed by President Wilson issued a statement in defense of the Jews. The film magnate, William Fox, was able to get Ford to stop the publication of a scheduled “exposé” and smear of Fox by threatening him with a news-reel campaign demonstrating that Ford cars get into more accidents than any others on the roads. Decisive, however, was the mass boycott of Ford cars which led to a great slump in the sale of the Model T car, especially in the East. Finally on June 30, 1927 Ford addressed to Louis Marshall an evasive apology and promised to stop the circulation of the slanders against the Jews. That Ford did not do so is evidenced by the fact that *The International Jew*, a compilation of the vicious stuff in the *Dear-*

⁵ “Political Deportations in the United States,” *Lawyers Guild Review*, Fall, 1954, p. 98, 111; *William B. Wilson Papers* (Hist. Soc. of Pa.), Official Correspondence, 1913-1921, Series 16, Folder 60, Wilson to Palmer, Dec. 30, 1919; Francis Fisher Kane, untitled brochure, p. 7-8; Robert W. Dunn, ed. *The Palmer Raids*, New York, 1948, p. 13-32.

⁶ Michael Sayers and Albert E. Kahn, *The Great Conspiracy*, Boston, 1946, p. 143-148.

born *Independent*, has continued to circulate, both here and abroad, down to the present time. What the Palmer Raids and the Overman Hearings and the Klan and Henry Ford sowed is still bearing poisonous fruit today.⁷

The Red Scare and Labor

The International Red Scare was also used, of course and primarily, as a weapon to attack the labor movement. The big employers attacked all along the line. In 1920 they launched The American Plan which, as Professors Perlman and Taft note, "purported to abolish the 'un-American' closed shop but as in previous open shop crusades, the destruction of unionism was the real objective." The bureaucratic leadership of the American Federation of Labor was itself embarked upon an "anti-Bolshevik" drive. Right in the depth of the post-war economic crisis of 1920-1921, the AFL Executive Council on February 23, 1921 called a meeting of union officials "to combat the problems arising from unemployment, reaction and Bolshevism."⁸

The working masses, however, fought back hard. Between 1919 and 1922 about 10,000,000 workers went on strike. More than 4,160,000 were on strike in 1919, with 411,000 coal miners led by John L. Lewis and, the most important strike of the time, 367,000 steel workers led by William Z. Foster. The Jewish workers particularly saw the significance of that Great Steel Strike. Of the total of \$418,141 in financial contributions received by the strike committee, \$20,000 came from the International Fur Workers' Union, \$60,000 from the I.L.G.W.U. and \$100,000 from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the last being up to that time "the largest gift of its kind ever made by any union in this country." The Jewish workers also struck back. The New York cloakmakers won a general strike involving 55,000 that began on November 14, 1921 and lasted nine hard weeks. The men's clothing workers won a two-week strike of 40,000 for the maintaining of union conditions in June-July 1922. Yet the overall picture was bad. From its peak of 4,078,740 members in 1920, the AFL dropped 30 per cent to 2,865,979 in 1924. The great strikes, despite some economic concessions, writes Foster, "were all beaten to a greater or lesser extent. . . . Organized labor lost much hard-won ground. . . . It was the most serious defeat ever suffered by the American labor movement."⁹ The AFL leaders could not hold on to more than a million members but at the 1923 convention they did have the power to expel one of the delegates for being a Communist and to order Communists out of the unions.

The war against the left in the labor movement was a reflection of the pressure of the International Red Scare, siphoned into the ranks of the workers through the lead-

ership of the AFL and the Socialist Party. The split in the Socialist Party, which had deepened on the issue of our government's war program, reached the breaking point in 1919. Beginning in May the National Executive Committee, led by Morris Hillquit, began a series of expulsions of entire state, city and national group socialist federations that in a few weeks drove 55,000 members out of the party, while others left in disgust. From a membership of 108,504 in 1919 the S. P. dropped to 26,766 in 1920 and to 13,484 in 1921.

In the Jewish Socialist Federation the process by which the left majority turned its back on the entrenched right leadership lasted until September 1921. Early in 1919 the first split took place at a convention in Boston, with Alexander Bittelman leading 30 of 100 delegates out of the Federation. In March, *Der Kampf* (The Fight), became the organ of this Jewish left movement. By the fall of 1921 left wing forces still in the Jewish Socialist Federation had grown to the point where, as a majority led by a group the best-known figure of which was Moissaye J. Olgin, they broke with the Socialist Party, while the minority remained as a shell calling itself the Jewish Socialist Farband. By that time the communist movement, having weathered the blows of the Palmer Raids and the police persecutions, was ready to emerge to found the Workers (later to be called the Communist) Party. The left Jewish Federation therefore participated as a constituent body at the first convention of the Workers Party opening December 23, 1921, with the Left Poale Zion, incidentally, represented by fraternal delegates.

The Jewish Federation of the Workers Party immediately got to work on a historic and ambitious project, to publish a daily newspaper. On April 22, 1922 there appeared the first issue of the *Freiheit* and around it rallied all the left Yiddish speaking workers, communist and non-communist. In 1925, when the membership of the Jewish Federation was only 1447 out of a total Workers Party membership of 16,325, the circulation of the *Freiheit* was already 22,000, larger than any other left paper.¹⁰

Expulsions of Labor Left Wing

Now the right-wing Socialists, who had not hesitated to expel tens of thousands of members of the S.P., were also in the leadership of the large Jewish unions and of the Workmen's Circle and they carried their war against the left into these organizations. The struggle was sharpest in the garment industry. Even anti-communist writers are compelled to concede that the right wing socialist office-holders were callous, ruthless and dictatorial to the extreme in their attacks on the *majorities* that followed the left, and that the "successes" of the right wing prostrated the unions and drove workers' conditions down. Joel Seidman observes that "the failure of some of the old union leaders to solve these industrial problems provided

¹⁰ Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1828*, New York, 1928, p. 326, 330; Foster, work cited, p. 189-191.

⁷ Upton Sinclair *Presents William Fox*, Los Angeles, 1933, p. 215-216; Bernard G. Richards, "History Is Not 'Bunk,'" *Congress Weekly*, January 28, 1952, p. 10-14; *American Jewish Year Book*, 5688, p. 383-89.

⁸ Selig Perlman and Philip Taft, *History of Labor in the United States, 1896-1932*, New York, 1935, p. 491; Lewis L. Lorwin, *The American Federation of Labor*, Washington, D. C., 1933, p. 204.

⁹ Matthew Josephson, *Sidney Hillman, Statesman of American Labor*, New York, 1952, p. 189; *American Labor Year Book, 1925*, New York, p. 50; W. Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party of the United States*, New York, 1952, p. 199-201.

an opportunity for an opposition group to win support from the dissatisfied and restless masses. . . . The policy of mass expulsions and revocations of charters followed by the I.L.G.W.U. national leadership, far from having the desired effect, instead solidified large sections of the rank and file behind left leadership. . . . The movement that the Communists led won wide support in union ranks partly because, unlike the I.W.W., it long opposed dual unionism."

These expulsions were no trifling matters. They began on a small scale in 1923 in New York and Chicago but in 1925 it was about 30,000 workers who were expelled in June when the duly elected leaderships of Locals 2, 9 and 22 were removed, the offices of two of the locals seized during the night and the third, Local 22, held on to its office only by dint of a continual emergency membership guard. Their jobs, conditions and the very union at stake, the workers rallied to the support of a Joint Action Committee of the three locals, 40,000 of them coming to a Yankee Stadium meeting on July 10 and 30,000 responding to a call for a work stoppage on August 10, 1925. As the cynical and red-baiting Benjamin Stolberg has to admit, "obviously the vast majority of the workers were with the left wing and not with the International. But that didn't seem to faze Morris Sigman," the International president. Sigman retreated a bit and the expulsions were rescinded. But "Sigman's power rested," Stolberg admits, "on the rotten borough system. . . . A small local of a few hundred buttonhole makers, for instance, had five delegates on the Joint Board and so did the huge dress-makers Local 22 . . . the small unions had a disproportionately large number of delegates in the national conventions. Since most of them were mainly right-wing, they made up a Sigman majority in the conventions."

Finally the right wing saw its "opportunity," towards the end of a bitter strike of 40,000 cloakmakers that had begun on July 1, 1926. On December 9, two days before a compromise agreement covering about one-third of the workers was signed, the United Hebrew Trades, according to Morris C. Feinstone, "took the initiative. It sent out a call to all affiliated unions and internationals and to the American Federation of Labor inviting delegates to convene and discuss the organization of a counter-movement against the Communist penetration of the trade union movement." On December 13, Sigman removed the officers of the New York Joint Board conducting the strike and settled the strike over the heads of the locals and the Cloakmakers Joint Board, liquidated the existing locals—and invited the members individually to re-register with the International or else lose their jobs in union shops! At Madison Square Garden on December 18th, 18,000 workers rallied in wrath at such tactics and mobilized to fight them. But on December 21 the conference called by the U.H.T. was held with 500 delegates and with Feinstone as secretary. He continues to boast: "They organized a Committee for the Preservation of Trade Unions. . . . Its success was enormous, since the whole labor movement

co-operated with it. Great numbers of Communists were driven from cover and forced to start opposition unions. . . ."—and, it might be added, then the right-wingers denounced the left as "dual unionists." Of course it was not the bureaucrats but the workers who suffered. For, as the anti-communist Melech Epstein sums it up, "The right had won the battle, but the union lay wrecked." Whatever the weaknesses and mistakes of the left may have been, there is no question that the responsibility for the disasters that came down upon the workers lay with the right wing Socialist bureaucrats and the AFL top leadership that spurred them on.¹¹

Where Left and Center Held Fast

It was only in the furriers' union that the workers under left leadership were able to defeat the splitting attack of the right wing. Mass expulsions by the Socialist bureaucrats did not work here because the left-led locals and Joint Board had the workers so solidly behind them and had organized the entire trade so thoroughly, that employers could hire workers only by dealing with the left-led locals. The brilliant and resourceful Ben Gold, surrounded by a more homogeneous leadership than seems to have existed in other branches of the garment trades, was able to defeat the coalition of AFL and Socialist bureaucrats by uniting the workers and dividing the opposition, which resorted to gangsterism and invoked the aid of the police against the left, but in vain. Here the battles were fully as sharp as in the I.L.G.W.U., but the victors were the workers, as their union conditions demonstrated.

In the headgear and men's clothing trades the fight was not so intense, although attacks against the left were not uncommon. Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, however, was not part of the *Jewish Daily Forward* red-baiting clique. Although there were occasional expulsions and suspensions of officers, Hillman, perhaps learning from the results of the I.L.G.W.U. conflict, rejected a policy of mass expulsions. He was also, as Foster notes, "inclined to follow some elements of a progressive political policy, A.C.W. conventions commonly adopting left resolutions on non-economic questions."¹²

Nevertheless, the International Red Scare, as it was forced upon the Jewish trade unionists by the right wing, weakened the Jewish labor movement all along the line. When the crisis hit the country in 1929, the state of the Jewish labor movement, except for the furriers, was low indeed, and it was only from the militant left elements that there came the clarity, the courage, the will to fight and the organizational leadership to mobilize the masses to defend themselves against the worst ravages of the crisis.

¹¹ Joel Seidman, *The Needle Trades*, New York, 1942, p. 156, 158; Perlman and Taft, work cited, 546-47; Benjamin Stolberg, *Tailor's Progress*, Garden City, N. Y., 1944, p. 129-130, and a detailed review of this book by Rose Wortis, a leader of the Joint Action Committee in *Political Affairs*, January 1945, p. 78-89; Foster, work cited, p. 253; Morris C. Feinstone, "A Brief History of the United Hebrew Trades," in *Gewerkschaften*, New York, 1938, p. 21; Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.*, 1914-1952, New York, 1953, p. 155.

¹² Foster, work cited, p. 254-55.