THE RISE OF THE CLOTHING WORKERS

By JOSEPH SCHLOSSBERG
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The following pages constitute the introduction to the Documentary History of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.
The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America has, within six years, extended its influence and jurisdiction throughout the United States and Canada. Its membership now embraces over a score of nationalities. In fact forty languages are spoken in the gatherings of the Amalgamated members. Men and women of different tongues and creeds are working together as one human family.

In this brief sketch of the present clothing workers' organization the writer has attempted to furnish the background, which, he hopes, will help in understanding more fully this great labor drama.

The material for the construction of a complete history of the clothing workers prior to 1914 is still hidden from view, though it is hoped that it will some day be unearthed and used. The writer was, therefore, obliged to draw entirely upon his own experiences. For this reason the discussion is mostly confined to New York, but it is substantially true also of other important clothing centers.

Escaping from Racial Persecution

We shall go back a full generation, to the eighties of the last century.

Czarist Russia had included, among its crimes against mankind, the pale of settlement in which Jews were confined. The assassination of Czar Alexander the Second by Russian Revolutionists resulted in a period
of repression during which were passed the infamous May Laws of Count Ignatiev, Minister of the Interior. These laws, which were particularly anti-Jewish in character, abolished the “privileges” heretofore enjoyed by the victims of the “pale” and intensified their humiliation and misery. Then to complete the persecution, the government organized a series of pogroms against the Jewish population of Russia.

The wandering Jew raised his eyes to the great New World in the West. There hope beckoned to him. With a heavy heart he bade farewell to his home and the sacred graves of his ancestors of many generations and set out on the journey to distant America.

When the great masses of Russian Jews arrived in America in search of economic opportunities and security from pogroms, they were literally transplanted from the dark Middle Ages to Modern Civilization; from the handicraft system of production to the factory system; the mediaeval town to the modern metropolis; political autocracy to political democracy; religious persecution to religious freedom; almost total illiteracy of public education; finally, from complete absence of rights and liberties to a constitutionally guaranteed Bill of Rights. The new arrivals were bewildered by the sudden change and blinded by the bright light. All circumstances combined to render the newcomers excellent objects of exploitation, and the sweat shop received them with open arms.

Those who had the enviable privilege of working in the sweat shop of those days will agree that General Sherman’s definition of war as hell applies with equal force to the sweat shop; to him also will Dante’s “Inferno” be more real.

Many of those immigrants were skilled tailors and they easily found employment in the numerous shops. Most of the others also found places in them and learned how to make men’s and women’s garments.
To those people the sweat shop was America.

The sweater, the owner of the sweat shop, who passed under the perfectly respectable name of contractor, was the middleman between the manufacturer and the worker. The contractor of today is performing the same economic function, but his position has been greatly changed through the activity of the Union. Responsibilities, unknown in the early days, have been imposed by the Union upon the contractor and the most revolting physical and moral condition of the sweatshop have been entirely eliminated.

The sweat shops afforded the manufacturer many advantages. He was in a position to employ on his own premises a minimum of help, which meant a tremendous saving in rent, superintendence and in other items. Thus two classes of shops developed: the “inside” shop, which was the manufacturer’s own factory, and the “outside” shop, which was the sweat shop. Cutting was always done “inside” and tailoring mostly “outside.” That was one big factor in setting the cutter up as an aristocrat among the tailors. That feeling of “superiority,” later fostered by the United Garment Workers, made cooperation between cutters and tailors impossible. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers brought about equalization by raising both the tailors and the cutters to a new, different and higher level of “superiority,” the high dignity of human brotherhood.

The tailors who were fortunate enough to work “inside” enjoyed better sanitary conditions, more or less regular working hours, and above all, security in wages. The sweater frequently absconded with the earnings of the workers. The latter had no redress. They were strangers to the manufacturer. He did not employ them; he employed the contractor only. One of the attractive features of the sweat shop for the manufacturer was his perfect freedom from responsibility to the workers. Today the Union holds the manufacturer
responsible for the workers’ wages and for violations of the workers’ rights by the contractor. If the contractor disappears with the payroll the manufacturer must write another check for the workers. It is his responsibility and it is for him to protect himself from a dishonest contractor. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers, single handed, has brought about this improvement in the contracting system.

The sweatshop made human labor so cheap that there was no incentive for the development of machinery beyond the very simple sewing machine propelled by the power of the human foot. The introduction of new machinery in the clothing industry in New York, where the sweat shop flourished, coincided with the growth of Unionism. As human labor grew more expensive machinery became an economic necessity.

The sweater came from the ranks of the very people whom he was bleeding white in his shop. Frequently there was close intimacy between the sweatshop owner and the sweat shop worker, and they addressed each other by their first names. They may have been playmates in the old country and gone to the same Hebrew school. As a rule the sweater was thoughtful enough to explain to his fellow townsman that five dollars a week really meant ten rubles. In Russia ten rubles was an enormous amount to earn in one week. Usually, in the early years, the sweater had come to this country ahead of the employes. That and his employer-status made him an "American" to the more recently arrived worker.

The manufacturer was of the same race as the sweater and the worker, but he was "superior" to both. He usually hailed from Western Europe mainly from Germany, where he had enjoyed advantages and acquired modern business experience.

The intimate personal relations between the sweater and his employes, the only redeeming feature of the
sweat shop, were entirely absent in the relations between those two and the manufacturer. The social chasm that separated them, was even wider than the economic one. The manufacturer looked down upon the workers with contempt; the workers looked up to the manufacturer with an animosity born of deeply felt wrongs. The sociologist will find valuable material in this remarkable fact of economic class cleavage running parallel with caste lines in the race which for thousands of years has been persecuted and oppressed.

It is different today. From the ranks of the lowly workers many have climbed to the high positions of large employers. Frequently they have been more successful among the exploiters than their former "superiors" and dislodged them. The caste lines are today faithfully following the dollar sign.

The early class struggles in the modern clothing industry in New York were Jewish class struggles; both masters and men were of the Hebrew race. The class struggle in Israel was fought in the clothing industry of the New World.

The Stranger in a Strange World.

At Castle Garden (the landing place for immigrants at New York before Ellis Island was opened) the Russian subjects found an open gate. There were no immigration restriction laws to keep it closed. The country was in need of workers and people came from the other side of the Atlantic to meet that need. They were allowed to shift for themselves as best they knew how in their efforts to adjust themselves in the new and strange scheme of life.

The industry that was to absorb them was so situated—it would be a mistake to call it organized—that it depended entirely upon the labor of those newcomers. The leaders of the industry did everything in their
powr to encourage the immigrants to leave their old homes and seek new ones, but they did nothing at all to befriend them when they arrived in America.

Those immigrants were helpless strangers. They came empty handed. But they brought with them physical and spiritual vigor, and they took up the battle of life under the new, strange and unintelligible conditions.

At that time there was a well organized Labor Movement in this country. The Knights of Labor, though on the decline, was still powerful and influential. The American Federation of Labor was then in its vigorous youth and rapidly gaining ascendancy over the Knights of Labor. But no helping hand was extended to the increasing number of toilers in the clothing trades. Thus the Labor Movement, too, allowed us to shift for ourselves. To the Labor Movement, as to all others, we were just human rubbish, trash. We were cheap labor from Eastern Europe come here to reduce the American standard of living. But the American standard of living that we found here, made for us not by us, was the sweat shop with its health and life destroying unsanitary conditions, long hours, short pay and all their evil accompaniments. In our souls we rebelled but we saw no road open to us. We did not understand the technique of organization and organized struggle. The country we came from had no Labor Movement, no freedom of assembly or speech or press; no public life as it is known in civilized and democratic countries. We had the will to act but, lacking knowledge, we did not have the power. The Labor Movement could not understand us and did not realize that we belonged to it. Ours alone was the task of working out our salvation.

But strength came to us from a source that was peculiarly our own.

* * *

We came from a part of the world where the people had no rights. We had dreamt about them but never
had enjoyed them. The dream of rights and freedom was sacred to us, not because of the prospective material advantages, but because of the high ideals in the terms of which we always spoke of them. In this country we found those wonderful things. Those who were born to rights and freedom considered them as natural as the air they breathed, but we, who had just emerged from political slavery, looked upon them as among the most precious possessions. We lived them, we felt them, we visualized them.

We did not know how to organize and secure improvements in our conditions, but the law of modern industrial relations, which places a distinct and separate class of workers on one side and a distinct and separate class of employers on the other, is irresistible. Conceivably or unconsciously the workers are at times forced by this law to band together and fight for their own class interest. That was what happened with us.

At first spontaneous skirmishes were fought by individual groups either against reductions in wages or for wage increases.

Those skirmishes, however, had a different meaning for us then they had for most American workers. When we formed an organization and gathered at a meeting and freely discussed grievances we were conscious not only of the immediate economic purpose of our movement but still more so of the fact that we were actually exercising and enjoying rights which we had never known before. Our organization and our meeting had the sanction of Law and our speakers were not thrown into jail because they had formulated our complaints. It was a thrilling experience. We were happy and grateful to our adopted country while we were complaining of our employers.

The Labor Movement did not know us nor did it wish to know us. The spokesmen, the interpreters of our grievances, were therefore drafted from our own
ranks. They had left Russia because of the same racial and political persecution that had driven out the rest of us. They were as inexperienced and helpless as the rest of us in matters of organization and tactics, but they brought with them from the land of persecution high idealism and youthful enthusiasm. They were Socialists. The foundation and background of their Socialism was the struggle against Czaristic autocracy in Russia. We were all filled with the spirit of that sacred struggle though we had not all participated in it. Those people spoke of us, wrote for us and worked with us. Thus each one of our gatherings, whatever the immediate object, was an occasion for spirited propaganda for social justice in the broadest sense. In that atmosphere our industrial organization was born. We argued out great social theories of the future before we discussed the “small” shop grievances of the day.... All our work was done in the broad and ennobling social spirit instead of a narrow craft spirit. Fortunately, neither we nor our leaders understood the situation. Had we known “better” probably we also, as a matter of momentary expediency, would have hewed close to the craft line. In fact, the craft divisions that later asserted themselves in our organizations and were subsequently eliminated by the Amalgamated, were the product of the “Americanizing” influence of the general Labor Movement. The Socialists were the only ones who helped us. None other came to us. Yet we have been denounced for the Socialist sympathies of our organizations. If it is wrong for our Union to have a Socialist education the blame for that must be laid at the door of those who had cruelly estranged us, while the Socialists gave us the best that they had to offer.

With all of our idealism and enthusiasm we did not know how to do our work. Nevertheless we were determined to find our way. We groped in the dark. We bungled and blundered and met one disaster after
another. Despite every failure we always had the courage to begin anew. Every time we were thrust to the ground, apparently crushed, we renewed the struggle to stand upright. The flame of light and hope in our torch were never entirely extinguished. We managed to keep it burning even in the severest storms.

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In 1888 the then existing Jewish labor organizations in New York, industrial and otherwise, formed the United Hebrew Trades, which is the central body of Jewish Unions to this day. That organization coordinated and directed the activities of the movement. It has never been officially identified with the American Federation of Labor.

In 1890 the same organizations established the first labor paper in Yiddish, an event of tremendous historic importance for this movement. With the establishment of the weekly paper, Arbeiter Zeitung, the movement seemed to have more reality. The Arbeiter Zeitung carried its working class message every week to the Jewish workers. The message was not only in the contents of the paper but perhaps more so in the very fact of the paper’s existence. For the pogromed and rightless Russian Jewish worker to publish a paper, free and untrammeled, in their own language, giving expression to their own grievances and aspirations, was almost incredible.

Our own paper, written by ourselves and for ourselves! And not censored!

Not only the message of the journal but the very paper and ink on and with which the message was printed were dear and sacred to us.

Blessed America! How grateful we were for the freedom of the press!

In 1894 the daily Abend Blatt was added to the weekly paper. Both continued until 1902.

In 1897 the Forward made its appearance.
The First Real Class Struggle.

The year 1890 was the beginning of a new era in which the movement, powerfully stimulated by its own press, began to assume more definite form.

That year saw the first clash in the clothing industries of the United States.

The manufacturers of ladies' cloaks and suits in New York did not relish the progress which the tailors were making in the science and art of organizing; they therefore attempted to strike a death blow at the undesirable movement by declaring a lockout. Eight thousand workers, all there were in the industry, were locked out from employment. This was an entirely new and very sensational item on our list of experiences. At first we were dazed. We had known of strikes but had never made the acquaintance of such an animal as a lockout. That lockout has left an indelible impression upon the writer, who was among the locked out workers. It was the first and the strongest link in the chain that has attached him to the Labor Movement for the rest of his life.

The struggle lasted three long months, in some factories four months and more. There were the terrific heat and humidity of the New York summer, the policemen's clubs, arrests, convictions, and, above all, starvation. Our new training was both extensive and intensive.

We won.

We should have lost, according to all laws of scientific organization and warfare. We won by the sheer force of our burning indignation against a crying injustice. Perhaps we would have lost if we had understood the situation better. Our ignorance was our fortune.

Our victory surprised us and amazed the employers. A new consciousness was born in us,—the consciousness
We had learned how to organize, fight and win, but of power. Heretofore we were aspiring for it; now it was ours.

That first great and sweeping victory electrified the workers in the other clothing trades and gave the movement for organization tremendous impetus. It was so contagious that it soon assumed the appearance of a religious revival. “Old” Unions were strengthened and new Unions were organized with the fervor of religious fanaticism. Unionism, in its most ideal form, took hold of the people. We were sure that the millenium was at hand, and that we must organize hastily, feverishly, enthusiastically. We were in ecstasy.

There was a large group of old men, engaged at rebuilding cast off clothing, either sold by housewives or collected from rubbish heaps. They worked at the “homes” of their employers. They were loyal to the old orthodox customs and stopped work three times a day to chant their prayers. That was one of the privileges that kept them at the otherwise very unattractive occupation. They were outrageously exploited even for those days. Those oldest, most backward and docile of all clothing workers were also caught by the spirit of the time. They, too, formed a Union and held enthusiastic mass-meetings.

We had not yet learned how to retain our victory. The other side was clever enough to cheat us of our success and nullify our triumph. The proud Cloakmakers’ Union soon lost its power, and the other Unions vanished almost as quickly as they had come. It was exasperating; it was heartrending. It was like a young and fruitful mother losing her children as fast as she gave them birth.

But we, those of us who felt the responsibility of continuing the work, never gave up. By the skin of our teeth we held on to all we could and kept on build-
ing and building anew, regardless of how many times we were obliged to start from the beginning.

The Great Disillusionment.

About that time (1891) the United Garment Workers of America was formed. We did not know then that this organization was the child of a feud, within the Knights of Labor. We only learned latter that the faction that was unable to retain its position in the Knights of Labor conveniently discovered that the American Federation of Labor was the right organization to join.

The American Labor Movement was still a sealed book to us. When we were asked to participate in a convention in New York, where a national organization of clothing makers was to be formed, the idea was inspiring to us and fired our imagination.

* * *

We were strangers to politics, especially labor politics. When the cutters, Americans, were ready to assume the responsibilities of officering the organization we were grateful to them and happy in the thought that the new born clothing workers' body would be led by Americans—Americans with experience and idealism.

We could conceive of people without experience being interested in the Labor Movement, which was our own case, but people without idealism? Never! What was there to hold them in the Labor Movement except the ideal?

We found that we were heartlessly deceived. Our loyalty and enthusiasm were exploited for the purpose of building up a corrupt labor union bureaucracy. From that time until 1914, nearly twenty-four years, the story of the men's clothing workers is the story of corruption, betrayal, sold strikes, broken faith, crushed hopes.

We had rejoiced prematurely because the cutters be-
came our fellow workers by joining the same organization. The cutter's sense of "superiority" was carefully cultivated by the officials, whose efforts in this direction were facilitated because of the fact that the cutters and tailors did not work in the same factory and did not speak the same language. It remained for the Amalgamated to correct this evil.

Whatever little organization work was done by the general officers was confined to the cutters. The tailors were completely neglected; aye, the promotion of their organization, except to the point required by the "union label," was intentionally discouraged, hampered and obstructed for fear of their aggressive spirit. It happened that Union officials secured from employers wage increases for cutters on the "friendly advice" that the employer take the increase out from the wages of the tailors. The tailors being many in number and the cutters few the employer profited greatly by the bargain while the officials of the Union were under obligation to him. Wherever tailors did attempt to organize it was in spite of, and not because of the activity of the International organization.

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The attitude of the general officers was that of private owners. The organization was their private property and they perpetuated themselves in office by "elections" from which the members were excluded. The shrewd politicians managed to impose their authority upon the unsophisticated and helpless rank and file, but there was no cooperation, no solidarity.

As stated, the officers' interest in organizing the tailors did not go beyond the so called "union label" which we soon learned was a fraud upon the workers and a source of corruption for the officials. The "union label" fettered the "organized" workers and made them infinitely more helpless than were the unorganized. Frequently "union label" workers were compelled to scab
upon their striking brethren in non-label shops. Where “union label” slaves refused to betray their struggling fellow toilers they were expelled by the general officers. The loyalty of the trade unionist who demanded the “union label” gave the employer and the faithless official a stranglehold upon the “union label” workers.

Far from being a guaranty that the garment bearing it is made under union conditions the much heralded “union label” may represent the worst kind of working conditions, not even barring prison labor. The most bitter enemy of the “union label” was the worker who was compelled to sew it on the garment. He knew that by this act he was deceiving those who were demanding the label with the idea that they were thus safeguarding his interests.

The dishonest and indifferent leadership of the United Garment Workers made effective organization work impossible. The energetic efforts of the young enthusiasts were mainly directed to fighting corruption and crookedness in the unions. Many turned away with disgust from the industrial organization. Giving up the industrial struggle as hopeless, and intimately associating Unionism with corruption, they dedicated themselves to the other branches of the Labor Movement; the socialist political organization, educational clubs and mutual aid societies. It was in this period that the now powerful Workmen’s Circle was organized.

In New York an organization of plug uglies, known as “The Boys of London,” fought the physical battles of the leaders against the members and bloodshed was of rather frequent occurrence.

Exploiting the Workers’ Misery.

A hideous situation developed in New York in the nineties and lasted for several years. A gang, under the leadership of a notorious character of those days, hit
upon the idea of manufacturing strikes. It proved a profitable enterprise.

Working conditions were miserable. The task system of work, which still sends a shiver down the backs of those who knew it at that time, was in full bloom. Under that system, which consisted in the task of making a certain number of garments a day, the employer was in the happy position of not reducing wages. He only kept on piling up coats while wages remained stationary. It developed into the most savage speeding up system. Frequently one would work hard a full and long-hour week and have only three or four days’ wages to his credit. To remind a New York tailor today of the task system means to remind him of tortures which he is glad to forget.

The workers had many serious grievances and no organization worth speaking of to remedy them. The plotters seized an opportunity when industry was active and called upon the workers for a strike at a time when they were entirely unprepared. The psychology proved sound. Anybody could have thrown a burning match into the powder keg and set it off. The plotters did it. The workers, having ample cause for a strike, responded. They had not been consulted, but that did not matter. There was no effective organization to call the culprits to account. Whatever organization there was the conspirators were in a position to control by means of terror. Besides, who would dare raise such issues while the strike was on, and lay himself open to the charge of helping to break the strike in the interests of the employers? For the same reason those who understood and condemned the conspiracy did not dare remain at work. As a matter of fact, such strikes were frequently resorted to as a means of silencing annoying opposition. It served that purpose admirably.

The program of the strike manufacturers was carried out to perfection. Large numbers of people came into
the halls and paid initiation fees as told. That established a handsome treasury to start with. A call to the good and generous public for aid brought more funds. When all was collected that the traffic would bear “settlements” were made with sweat shop contractors and the people “victoriously” sent back to work upon the pre-strike conditions. All of the collected funds remained with the clique and sustained them until the next “harvest.” That tragic spectacle was repeated several times during that decade. As the workers awoke to the fact that they were deceived and sold out the task of manufacturing strikes became increasingly difficult. Various ruses were resorted to.

The writer recalls one of them. The workers were strongly resisting the calling of a strike though there were good and sufficient seasons to warrant one. Mass meetings were called simultaneously for New York and Brooklyn. Suddenly a “telegram” turned up at the New York meeting with the information that the workers at the Brooklyn meeting had decided to strike. That determined the matter. New York would not scab on Brooklyn. The Brooklyn meeting was then informed of the strike action taken in New York whereupon it adopted a strike resolution. Thus a strike was created officially and “democratically.” Their solidarity made the workers an easy prey to the conspirators, whose dastardly crime remained unpunished.

The struggle for a clean and honest organization began shortly after the formation of the United Garment Workers. From that time until the change was finally affected in 1914 there was consistent opposition to the officials’ misrule, opposition that refused to be downed. While the dissatisfaction with the United Garment Workers’ administration was general, the active struggle was confined to a small number of persons. The rank and file remained passively indifferent. With no confidence in the organization they refused to join it;
refused to come in and attempt to rescue the organization for the people. A task of this sort is always left to small, militant groups. The masses come when conditions mature for them to act. Pioneering is done only by individuals.

All efforts for an honest organization were frustrated; sometimes by physical force, and at other times by bribing away vulnerable leaders, and by various other means. But the struggle never ceased.

- Interest in the General Labor Movement.

During all those trying years, and in spite of our own melancholy experiences with the general Labor Movement, we were intensely interested in its progress.

The first great struggle which we tried to understand was the universal movement for the eight hour day, including the bloody tragedy in Chicago in 1886. The first Yiddish pamphlet circulated among the Jewish workers was on the Eight Hour Day.

In 1892 Homestead fascinated us. We followed that remarkable struggle of the steel workers with rapt attention. Their defeat was as painful to us as if it had been our own.

Hazleton, where striking miners were shot down, was another name in Pennsylvania which came to mean much to us.

In 1894 the magnificent American Railway Union strike won our fullest sympathy. When Eugene V. Debs, its leader, called upon all friends of the striking railwaymen to wear white ribbons we all decorated our coat lapels with those white little bows.

It might be of interest to note, at this juncture, that the American Railway Union strike was the immediate cause of the establishment of our daily paper, the Abend Blatt. We were provoked by the antagonistic strike reports in the capitalist Yiddish press into hastening our
plans for a daily paper. We started it on the solid basis of several hundred dollars in cash and some more in pledges.

We followed carefully the brave struggles of the Western Federation of Miners, with their raids, bullpens and deportations. We became intimately familiar with such names as Cripple Creek and Coeur d'Alene.

The great miners' strikes of 1902 and later years had no more sympathetic and interested followers than those unfortunate clothing workers who were unable to build up an organization for themselves.

And so all along the line.

There has been no event of any importance in the Labor Movement generally, down to this day, that did not arouse our sympathetic interest.

The Labor Movement did not wish to know us but we were anxious to know the Labor Movement.

Our horizon was not limited by our own clothing trades movement nor by the American Labor Movement generally; it included the labor movements of the world. The British dockers' strike, under the leadership of John Burns, was of no less interest to us than the American miners' strike led by John Mitchell, or a very interesting capmakers' strike in New York in the early nineties, when the Jewish unions gave the strikes employment by having them make special May Day caps for the First of May parade. The "passive strikes" of railroad workers in Austria and the Italian government's method of breaking a railway strike by calling the strikers to the colors were subjects which we were anxious to understand.

Needless to say that we had a very deep interest in the then illegal and underground labor movement in Russia.

The Russian revolution of 1905 stirred our souls by the vision of the world in motion. Russia in revolution was to us a new birth for all life; a people coming into
its own. To us the Russian revolution meant more than freedom for the country of our birth. It must be remembered that we had been worse than stepchildren to Russia. Much as the Russians had suffered at the hands of a cruel ruling class it was but one part of the misery which was the lot of the subject nationalities. To the Jews particularly Russia was hell on earth. The "pale" was our "country." There we were allowed to live in constant fear of pogroms. We established our homes in this New World and had no thought of returning to the old one. Our interest in Russia's freedom was, therefore, due entirely to our interest in the people's freedom, in the world's freedom. Every feeling of chauvinism or national selfishness was completely absent. If we did have a more immediate and live interest in the regeneration of Russia than in other countries it was because we knew and understood that country and its people better than we did others. It will, therefore, be easily seen why the Russian revolution found such a powerful response in our hearts.

Judged by accepted standards the revolution of 1905 was a failure. In reality it was the first lap of the revolution which in 1917 made Russia free.

The unsuccessful revolution of 1905 sent large numbers of young revolutionists into exile. Naturally enough many landed in this country and the clothing industry received its fair quota. They were a most valuable acquisition. Their influence upon our movement was tremendous. They revitalized our forces. Unlike the earlier immigrants those exiles brought with them excellent training in theory and practice, received in the revolutionary movement.

By that time there were a number of nationalities in the clothing industry in New York. Next to the Jews, in point of numbers, came the Italians. To day there are over a score of nationalities in the various clothing markets.
The Coming of the Crisis.

During all those years there was no point of friendly contact between the international officers of the clothing workers' union and the rank and file; no sympathetic understanding on the part of the former for the latter, and no desire for such understanding. The two belonged to different worlds. However honest some of those officials may have been, their mental attitude, the result of a corrupt atmosphere, was such as to render understanding of and cooperation with the membership impossible. Where the officers are unable to understand the members, cooperation is out of the question.

To the Russian immigrant the situation was a reproduction, in miniature, of Russia with her Czaristic bureaucracy and oppressed people. There was no hope without a fundamental change.

In 1910 the clothing industry in Chicago was tied up by a general strike. The condition of the organization was as deplorable as in New York and some of the other cities. The strike was a spontaneous rebellion against industrial oppression. In spite of disorder, chaos and the open faithlessness of the international officers the struggle was continued for five months. With their remarkable spirit the people would have accomplished wonders if they had been well organized and honestly led.

Let the following incident serve as an illustration of both the cynical irresponsibility of the leaders and the fighting spirit of the betrayed workers: After months of bitter struggle the officers issued relief orders to the amount of thirty-five thousands dollars against an empty treasury. The outraged strikers, learning of the fraud, gathered in large numbers and gave vigorous expression to their burning rage. When the question was then put to the strikers, whether they would accept an invita-
tion to surrender, the response was a unanimous "No." They tore up the relief checks and decided to stay out in the face of continued starvation. Some curious strikers were anxious to interview the "leaders," but could not locate them. They had wisely adjourned to another city.

In time the strike developed its own leadership out of the seething chaos, against the wishes and efforts of the official leaders.

That strike laid the foundation for the present magnificent clothing workers' organization in Chicago and brought to the fore some of its ablest leaders of today. One of them is now General President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

The strike was lost, with the exception of Hart-Schaffner & Marx, with whom an agreement was concluded. However, an organization was won.

During the strike, work was sent from Chicago to New York and the clothing workers in the eastern metropolis constituted one great army of scabs breaking the strike in the western metropolis. Thousands of workers were touched to the quick by the shameful "prosperity" that came to them. They could not remain calm while consciously stabbing their fellow workers in the back. But they were helpless. There was no organization of any consequence. When an appeal was made by the workers to the official leaders of the skeleton organization they were told to be grateful for having plenty of work and "mind their own business."

In scabbing against struggling workers in another city New York was but following an established custom. The workers in other cities, including Chicago, did exactly the same thing when a strike occurred in New York or anywhere else. But now times were changing and a desire arose for new "customs" to replace the old.

Not only did the officers refuse to stop scabbing in unorganized shops in New York against their own mem-
bers in Chicago, but workers in "label shops"—"organized" workers—were enlisted in the strikebreaking activities. When the "label workers" refused to do scab work and walked out, they were promptly ordered back by the officials. The more progressive and self respecting among the "label workers" quit their jobs rather than assassinate their fellow workers on the industrial battlefield.

That Chicago strike experience aroused a large number of enlightened workers and stiffened their determination to begin anew the efforts for organization. It was here that the 1905 spirit exercised its strongest influence. The work was continued with a will and developed remarkable enthusiasm. One result of that agitation was the Tailors' Council, created for the purpose of demanding that the general officers organize the clothing workers.

That agitation led up to the great strike of 1913.

It was in a way the counterpart of the Chicago strike of 1910. The organization was still confined to the front ranks of the workers. But these had succeeded in creating an organization atmosphere. When the strike was called the response was general. From the end of December, 1912, until sometime in March, 1913, the struggle lasted; all through the bitter cold of winter. It was the usual contest between the empty stomach and the full pocketbook. The greatest force in that strike was desperation. The alternatives were "Work and starve" or "Fight and starve." The choice fell on the latter. Appeals were frankly made to the public to help feed the hungry children. Help came from sister organizations who were of our flesh and blood and understood us well.

The general officers remained loyal to their time honored policy of oppressing and antagonizing the rank and file. Not only was no help of any kind, financial or otherwise, given to the strikers, but when the contest was at its bitterest the General President ordered the
strikers to return to work on a "settlement" on which they had not been consulted. The strikers resented both the terms and the method of the "settlement" and refused to accept it. The Mayor of New York City, accepting the authority of the Union's official head, instructed the police not to permit any more picketing. He sent the following letter to Police Commissioner Ralph Waldo, which made picketing impossible:

March 7th, 1913.

Sir:

I call your attention to the acts of lawlessness and violence which need to be put down by the police at all hazards at once. For many weeks there has been a strike in the garment making trade. That strike was settled one week ago by employers and the labor unions. As soon as such settlement was reached, Thomas A. Rickert, General President of the United Garment Workers of America, officially declared the strike at an end, and directed all employees to go back to work. This has been attested by Mr. Rickert and the representative of the employers' side, who have appeared before me. The settlement conceded practically all the demands of the employees. They did thereupon go back to work. But lawless persons have continued to hover around the factories and workshops ever since, and they are indulging in acts of lawlessness and violence. Two places have been shattered by bombs thrown by them, and last evening Mr. Kohn of the Washington Clothing Company, at 10 Astor Place, was knocked down and grievously battered and wounded by these lawless people after leaving his place of business for the day. These people are not engaged in any strike. They are lawless people in the city, who come forward when there are strikes and disorders and commit all sorts of violence. Let them be dispersed. Let them not linger near these factories and places of business on the score that they are peaceful pickets. They are not pickets. The strike is at an end. They are lawless characters to whom no leniency whatever is due. See that they are not permitted to approach any of these factories and places of business. And let them be arrested if they commit any unlawful act.

Very truly yours,

W. J. GAYNOR, Mayor.
The breach between the officers and the members became so wide that it could not be bridged over. The bitter hatred felt by the members for the officers grew into a passion.

Under the circumstances the strike could not yield to the workers all they had hoped for. But it yielded them the most precious of all things—a live organization.

The fact has already been mentioned that in the course of passing years workers from various nationalities joined the Jews in the clothing industry and that the Italians were next to them in numbers. In the strike of 1913 all nationalities united to demonstrate their international solidarity. It was then that the Italians and the Lithuanians for the first time occupied a conspicuous position in the labor movement, particularly the Italians, who were greater in number. Both groups of workers made a splendid showing and have since been excellent union members. It was then, too, that it became clear that the clothing industry in New York was no longer an exclusively Jewish industry, as it had been in former years; it had become a cosmopolitan industry.

*The Turning Point.*

The period of 1910-1913, particularly the year 1913, was a turning point in the history of the clothing workers' organization. Strikes like those in Chicago and New York occurred in various cities. And each city had the same tale of woe: Treason and selling out. New York, Boston, Baltimore, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Chicago—they all had the same story to tell. In many cases the treachery of the officials produced a deep rooted prejudice against unionism, the victims considering corruption and treason as inherent in Union organization. That was particularly the case in Cincinnati, where a strike in 1913,
which began most successfully, was disrupted by a mere telegraphic order from New York to return to work immediately and unconditionally. In such cases it required tremendous efforts and patience to overcome the prejudice and bitter memories.

There was at that time no organic unity among the local unions in the various cities. The logical connection, the general office, through which all local unions are linked together today, was a separator instead of a unifier. Tofill that gap, at least for the purposes of the approaching convention at Nashville, Tenn., 1914, a Conference was created in New York, which was somewhat similar to the Committee of Correspondence of the revolutionary colonists.

From that time on the organization was built and strengthened until it was brought to its present powerful position, where all nationalities are working in harmony and cooperation.

The power that sustained the misruling bureaucracy in the United Garment Workers of America was, and still is, the union label overall industry.

Overalls are bought by workers only. Those who are well organized, and desire to do their duty as organized workers, insist on getting union labels upon their working clothes. They do so in the naive belief that the label stands for what they imagine it should stand: good working conditions. But in the overall industry the label represents slavery for the workers—slavery under the employer and slavery under the union official. The dues from the helpless girls in the overall factories and the sale of labels to the employers, are permanently flowing streams of income to sustain the officialdom. The overall workers do the bidding of their two masters blindly. There was never any recognition of fellow membership as between the clothing workers and the overall workers until the latter began to join the ranks of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.
When we came to “our” convention in Nashville, in the hope of saving the general organization for the membership, we found the overall workers’ delegates under the watchful eye of a representative of the overall manufacturers. They were one hundred per cent safe for both masters.

When we were refused admittance to the convention and practically read out of the organization we were not dismayed. In former years that would have demoralized and disrupted our ranks. This time we were no longer foreigners, strangers, intruders, though we were called such; we were Americans. In the School of Experience by hard knocks we had learned the technique of organization and struggle. If the administration had had been aware that we had acquired that precious skill probably they would have been inclined to grant us concessions. In their ignorance they were uncompromising. We held our line intact and carried our case to the American Federation of Labor at its convention in Philadelphia, November, 1914. There we were told that “whether right or wrong” we could not get a hearing. That burned all bridges behind us. Then and there we determined that there would be no retreat and that we would proceed and take the consequences, whatever they might be. Our course stands vindicated today before the entire Labor Movement. That we have not “seceded” from the Labor Movement, as has been maliciously charged, is amply proven by our attitude towards the Labor Movement, morally and financially.

Where Americanization Means Humanism.

Where all other attacks fail we are charged with un-Americanism and disloyalty to the country. The quality of the cry of “Americanism” and “loyalty” depends entirely upon the source from which it comes. We do not intend to be apologetic or attempt to meet
all brands of "Americanism." We only wish to show what our "Americanism" is, in practice.

There are in the clothing industry today many workers who were born in this country. They must be accepted as Americans under all standards, for they cannot even be deported. This discussion must, therefore, be limited to those who were born in other countries.

When we, the foreign born, came to this country we did so as workers. Every cent that passed into our hands was honestly earned by our hard toil. We received nothing unless we worked for it. The country had the full benefit of our labor. We were told to be industrious and we worked unlimited hours; we and our families. We were so thrifty that we lived in dingy, airless and lightless rooms; large families and lodgers in small apartments. We ate the most modest and the cheapest food. We wore the meanest kind of shoddy. We spent no money at all on even the small comforts and pleasures which help to make life sunnier and brighter. By the most painful sort of abnegation we stretched our meagre sweat shop wages for deposits in the savings banks to provide for a rainy day. And while we were thus practicing the teachings of industry and thrift—teachings which we were told were American—we were denounced as cheap labor and reducers of the American standard of living. Were the cheapness of our labor and the lowness of our standard our choice? Did we impose them by force upon the industry? We found them here, "American made" for us. But we, with our toil and our industry and our energy, built up the clothing industry. It is now one of the most important industries in this country. That is entirely due to our labor, the labor of the immigrant workers. It was built with our health and our lives. Many are the premature graves of the sweat shop victims.

We have shown how seriously we have taken the American institutions. We began to Americanize. We
learned eagerly all we could about this country. That we sincerely came to love this country for what it meant to us is amply attested by the fact that we established our homes and raised our families here. We became Americans by deliberate choice. Without any compulsion, but by our own free will, we renounced our allegiance to the rulers of the countries of our birth and became American citizens. We did so because of what American history and institutions meant to us. The thrill that we experienced when receiving our citizenship papers cannot be appreciated by those who have not themselves lived through it. The thrill did not come from the piece of paper. It came from the consciousness of becoming a member of a great democracy; from the consciousness of being welcomed into that democracy. To us the Declaration of Independence is not a historical document; it is a living message. To us Abraham Lincoln is more than a national hero; he is a mighty figure who carried the torch of civilization and progress high and far. His struggle still enthuses us by its wonderful human appeal. We do not shout hurrah for politicians and officials, but we have cheers for American freedom. We have felt it a genuine joy in participating in American institutions because of the high idealism and possibilities for greater democracy that we see in them. That is our Americanism. If there is disloyalty in that we plead guilty. We submit, however, that this is genuine Americanism because it is genuine humanism. And upon this basis we feel justified, aye, we deem it our duty, to defend those rights and liberties which have won our hearts for this country and because of which we have planted our homes here and made our own adopted country the native country of our children.

And as we grew in our Americanism and learned our rights we understood the great American maxim of "He who will be free, himself must strike the blow." Accordingly, we organized and struggled, until we had
built up a strong and powerful organization for our protection. We brought order into the hopelessly chaotic clothing industry, abolished the sweat shop, established a humane standard for the working week and secured for ourselves better wages. Then the cry of un-American "cheap labor" and "reducing the American standard of living" was changed to the cry of un-American "wage profiteering" and "ruining the industry." Our "un-Americanism" today is traced directly back to the raising of our working conditions. We ask: When were we un-American? When we were helpless and downtrodden and unable to take proper care of our children, or today, when we have time for intercourse with our families, thereby giving them a real home atmosphere? Then, when we were compelled to take our children from school and send them into the factory, or today when we are sending them to school properly fed and clothed? Then, when our children grew up in ignorance, or today, when we are helping to make Young America fit to govern this country in the next generation?

Our Attitude Toward the Labor Movement.

We raised ourselves by our own bootstraps to the position we now occupy. We have achieved our success because of our deliverance from faithless leaders and our unshakable confidence in our cause and in ourselves. The rest of the Labor Movement, with very few exceptions, has treated us like outcasts, obstructing our work and injuring us in every possible way. Yet, we have entertained no ill feeling towards our sister organizations, our sense of solidarity of interests being greater than our feeling of injury. The Labor Movement has not understood us. Our great success is now bringing many of them to an understanding.

The fact that we failed for a quarter of a century within the official labor movement and succeeded and tri-
umphed within five years outside of it should be food for much thought.

In 1913 we were entirely unorganized. Today we are fully organized and have a voice in industrial legislation. We have added two hundred thousand men and women to the army of organized workers.

In 1913 our hands were outstretched for alms. In 1919 we gave from our own treasury one hundred thousand dollars for the support of a strike of other workers.

We have humanized and civilized our industry. We have raised hundreds of thousands of souls from social degradation to the high level of human dignity.

In 1913 we asked for charity; today we demand rights.

These are our credentials to the Labor Movement of the World. Though gravely wronged by the general Labor Movement we stand ready to give it, in our common struggle, the full benefit of our power and success.

In our own organization we have one cosmopolitan army of workers who belong to one another. In the Labor Movement generally we see only workers, fellow workers, sisters and brothers, united for the same cause.
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