

JEWS IN THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

by Bennett Muraskin

INTRODUCTION

Think of the greatest strikes in US labor history. Apart from the garment workers' strikes in New York and Chicago before World War One, none come to mind in which Jews played a major role. The railroad workers' strike in 1877, the strikes for the eight-hour day in 1886, the Homestead Strike in 1892, the Pullman strike in 1894, the coalminers' strike in 1902, the steelworkers' strike in 1919, the general strike in San Francisco in 1934 and autoworkers' sit-down strike in 1936-1937 all occurred either before Jews immigrated to the US in large numbers or in industries where few Jews were employed. Among the "industrial proletariat" considered by Marxists to be the agency of social revolution, Jews were under-represented. Furthermore, apart from the WASP elite, only Jews, among all European immigrants to the US, have been over-represented in the world of business. But if you look a little closer, you will find Jews as the ferment for a great deal of radical labor activism.

The only two Socialist Party candidates elected to the US Congress were Victor Berger and Meyer London. Bernie Sanders is the only US Senator to call himself a "socialist." All three were Jews. (Ronald Dellums, a non-Jewish Black man who represented Berkeley CA in Congress as Democrat from 1970 to 1997, is the only other person to so identify.) The Jewish garment workers' unions pioneered social unionism and were among the founders of the CIO. Sidney Hillman became a top advisor to FDR. The role Jewish women have played in the American labor movement is even more remarkable in comparison to their Gentile counterparts. Jewish-led unions had close ties with Martin Luther King and were heavily involved in the civil rights movement. Jews have also stood out as advocates of labor in related forums, including mutual aid societies, educational institutions, law, scholarship and music, film and theater.

How did all this happen?

IN THE BEGINNING....

German-speaking Jews who arrived in the US in the mid-19th century spread across the continent and tended to be merchants and shop keepers. If they became workers, they identified more as Germans than Jews. On the other hand, Yiddish speaking Jews from Eastern Europe who arrived in the US beginning in the 1880s settled in the big cities, tended to be workers and had a strong ethnic identity.

The conditions faced by East European Jews were daunting. Low wages, long hours, unsafe workplaces and overcrowded and unsanitary tenement housing were the norm. Most of these

Jewish immigrants came from small towns and were not prepared for the noise, dirt, congestion, disease and crime rampant in the great American cities of that period. Some even turned to crime and prostitution. However, they were free of the anti-Semitic laws and violence that plagued them in Eastern Europe. Their children were entitled to a free public education and once they became citizens, they could vote and participate in the political process.

At first, many were pre-occupied with earning enough money to send for relatives left behind in Europe. From the beginning, Jews gravitated to the garment industry in part because they had experience as tailors in Eastern Europe. It did not take long before they began to see trade unions as the path their economic and social progress.

However, before going any further, it is necessary to recognize one of the most important personalities in the history of the American labor movement, Samuel Gompers, who served as the president of the American Federation of Labor for nearly 40 years.

Gompers was a Sephardic Jew. He came to US from England in 1863, but his parents came from Holland, with ancestry dating back to Spain. Gompers became a cigar maker and was one of founders of Cigar Makers Union back in the 1870s. He was integral to the founding of the American Federation of Labor in the 1880s and led it until 1924, but he did not share the language, culture or politics of East European Jews. Nor did he identify as a Jew. Gompers is considered a conservative influence because of his devotion to craft unionism, hostility toward socialism and opposition to immigration.

By 1888 there was already a Jewish labor organization called the United Hebrew Trades, originally conceived by Russian-speaking Jewish intellectuals and revolutionaries who frowned on Yiddish as an inferior language of the *shtetl*. Some actually came to the US to establish farms run on a socialist basis--a "back to the land" movement. But these projects soon fizzled and they moved to the big cities among other Jewish immigrants. As committed anarchists and socialists, they sought to organize the Jewish working class, but in order to do so, they first had to master Yiddish.

At this early stage, Yiddish was a means to an end, not an instrument for cultural development. In their propaganda the stridently secular early Jewish labor leaders used religious imagery to inspire the workers--passages from the Prophets on social justice, references to modern day Pharaohs and to the Israelites' liberation from Egyptian slavery.

Abraham Cahan, later the editor of the Yiddish newspaper, the socialist daily *Forverts*, was one of these early revolutionaries and was the first to use Yiddish to reach Jewish workers. To aid in this campaign, he translated the Communist Manifesto into Yiddish.

The earliest Jewish unions were, of course, in the garment industry, but also among cigar makers, bakers, printers, painters---and surprisingly, actors. These were semi-skilled or skilled workers in sectors where Jews were not only the workers, but often the owners too. The owners were typically German Jews who had arrived in the US a few generations earlier and who had become successful businessmen--by exploiting the East European Jews who came after them.

In 1886, even before the formation of the United Hebrew Trades, Jewish labor unions, while very small at this time, participated in a nation-wide general strike to achieve the eight-hour day. They also supported the campaign to elect social reformer Henry George mayor of NYC. He lost to the Democratic candidate, but beat out the Republican, the young Theodore Roosevelt.

Another early Jewish labor leader who was also of Sephardic origin---Daniel DeLeon—was the dominant figure in the first major socialist organization in the US--the Socialist Labor Party (SLP). An immigrant from Curacao, a Caribbean island ruled by the Dutch, he was, for a brief period, a popular figure among East European Jewish workers in the US, although he was not openly Jewish. In the 1890s there were 25 Yiddish-speaking branches of the SLP and in NYC over thirty percent of the Jewish vote went to SLP candidates.

Who were Jewish labor leaders' role models and mentors? German American anarchists and socialists who came to the US in the mid-19th century, primarily non-Jewish, and the German Social Democratic Party, then the largest socialist party in the world. Many East European Jewish immigrants who arrived in the late 1880s or early 1890s were radicalized by the famous Haymarket Affair (1886) in Chicago, which resulted in the hanging of four anarchists, all but one German immigrants, and the imprisonment of others for allegedly throwing a bomb that killed police who were breaking up a rally in favor of the eight-hour day.

YIDDISH PRESS AND LITERATURE

Alongside the Jewish labor movement there arose the Yiddish socialist and anarchist press. The writers were not merely journalists, but poets, novelists and short story writers, who worked by day and wrote by night and whose creative work ardently reflected their support for the Jewish labor movement. For example, in 1892, *Di Tsukunft* (The Future) began publication with the goal of propagating socialism among Yiddish-speaking Jews. By 1912, it became a literary journal. Yiddish poet Morris Winchevsky, considered the original "sweatshop poet," contributed poems with both Jewish and labor themes.

The best known "sweatshop poet" Morris Rosenfeld, who grew up in Poland and arrived in this country from London in 1886, wrote this verse:

The sweatshop at midday--I will draw you a picture;
A battlefield bloody; the conflict at rest;
Around and about me the corpses are lying;
The blood cries aloud from the earth's gory breast.
A moment...and hark! The loud signal is sounded,
And dead rise again and renewed in their fight...
They struggle, these corpses; for strangers, for strangers!
They struggle, they fall and sink into the night.

Not only were poems like this widely read, they were put to music and sung by Jewish workers at their rallies and mass meetings. The most popular may have been Dovid Edelstadt's "Vakht Oyf" or "Awake," a fiery call for worker resistance to capitalist oppression. (I recall singing it in Yiddish in the *linke* or left wing secular Yiddish schools I attended as a child and a teenager.)

Workers' rights were also the subject of Yiddish prose, most notably Sholem Asch's short story, "A Union for Shabbos," in which orthodox Jews go on strike to stop their Jewish employer from forcing them to work on the Sabbath. There are other examples. The lead character in Asch's novel *Uncle Moses* is an abusive factory boss. Avrom Reisen wrote a short story, "Chewing Gum," about a strike among "shopgirls" for basic human dignity, provoked by a seemingly trivial incident. In Isaac Raboy's short story "Solomon," the daughter of a factory owner takes a job at her father's company in order to organize its workers into a union.

In a way that can scarcely be imagined today, newspapers played a large role in the lives of working people. Literate and politically active immigrant Jews founded one of the most influential newspapers--the Yiddish *Forverts* (Forward)--edited by Abraham Cahan. It began publication around the turn of the 20th century and attained a peak daily circulation of 250,000 in the 1920s. The phrase "Workers of the World Unite" appeared on its masthead. The *Forverts* building on the Lower East Side featured engravings of Marx, Engels and two other European socialist heroes. Cahan described it as the "temple of the workers' religion," whose tenets were "freedom, equality and brotherhood." The two other most influential labor-oriented newspapers were the *Freie Arbeter Shtimme* (Free Voice of Labor), with an anarchist perspective and the *Freiheit* (Freedom), the Yiddish communist paper, a rival to the *Forverts* that emerged in the early 1920s.

The *Forverts* covered strikes by non-Jewish workers for its Yiddish readership, not only for their news value, but to encourage labor solidarity. Lynchings of Blacks in the South were denounced as "*pogroms*." In addition to advocating for socialism, unionism and Jewish secularism, the *Forverts* featured human interest stories and its famous advice column known as "*bintl brief*." Short stories and novels by Yiddish writers appeared in serial form.

HARD FOUGHT VICTORIES

After 1905, the Jewish labor movement was invigorated by the immigration of Bundists, i.e. Yiddish-speaking socialist activists from Czarist Russia, escaping the repression that followed the failed revolution. They wasted no time in rising to the leadership in the unions, the Socialist Party, the fraternal orders, the socialist press and kindred organizations.

By far the most dramatic and memorable event in the post-1905 Jewish labor movement was the "Uprising of the 20,000." For four months over the winter of 1909-1910, Jewish and Italian women, and a few men involved in the manufacturing of women's "shirtwaists" in NYC, led by the International Ladies Garment Worker Union (ILGWU), conducted a general strike against sweatshop conditions. These included long hours, piece work, abusive supervisors, poor ventilation, and no job security.

Strikes had already broken out in various shops. At a mass meeting, Clara Lemlich, a young Jewish woman who had already been arrested many times and beaten up by thugs came to the platform and called for a general strike. Benjamin Feigenbaum, the chairperson of the meeting and a well-known Jewish atheist, took Lemlich's hand and held it up. He asked if the crowd was ready to take the old Jewish oath, which says, "If I forget thee O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither from the arm I raise." But he changed a few key words. Instead he said, "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may my right hand wither from the arm I raise." Every arm in the hall went up, launching the general strike began. Four months later--four winter months later--after many arrests and picket line violence, the union won. (Clara Lemlich, by then Clara Lemlich Shavelson, became a founding member of the Communist Party in 1919.)

The "Uprising of the 20,000" pitted East European Yiddish-speaking workers against German Jewish employers. But many of the wives of the German Jewish employers and upper class and middle class Gentile women involved in the Women's Trade Union League supported the strike against their husbands' wishes. In joining the picket lines, they acted as a deterrent to police violence. The big *makhers* in the Jewish community were so disturbed that they eventually pressured the manufacturers to agree to mediation by a young lawyer Louis Brandeis, who later became the first Jewish Supreme Court Justice and America's most prominent Zionist.

In a document called the “Protocols of Peace” covering 339 shops, the ILGWU won a 50-hour week, a union shop, an end to piecework, equal division of work during slack season, a limit on forced overtime, paid holidays and the arbitration of grievances.

A series of strikes of tens of thousands of garment workers in the men’s clothing industry roiled Chicago and New York between 1910 and 1913, with mixed results due to the conservative (and non-Jewish) leadership of the United Garment Workers. Finally, in 1914 the more militant Jewish workers seceded to form the Amalgamated Clothing Workers under the leadership of a young Sidney Hillman. Bessie Abramowitz, a key strike leader, soon became his wife. In short order, most of the industry was organized.

In the midst of this strike wave, there occurred a great man-made tragedy---The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. On March 25, 1911, 146 mostly Jewish and Italian "girls" lost their lives in a shop that had managed to resist the union tide. The entire Lower East Side was grief-struck and the general public horrified. After the fire, impartial investigations were conducted and the New York State legislature enacted various safety codes. The garment workers' unions took advantage of the justified hostility toward the manufacturers to renew their organizing drives.

These strikes made the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers into powerful unions, socialist to the core, with deep roots in the Jewish community in major cities in the East and North Central states—and labor standards that other industrial unions did not attain until the New Deal.

Other unions with high Jewish membership and leadership formed among furriers, hat and cap makers, bakers, butchers and printers. Within the building trades, the painters’ union became a Jewish stronghold and heavily Jewish locals existed during this period within the plumbers’, sheet metal workers’ and carpenters’ unions.

It did not happen all at once and there were setbacks along the way, but the big garment workers’ unions pioneered what became known as SOCIAL UNIONISM.

This movement's notable achievements included:

- health clinics
- sanatoriums for tuberculosis (TB) patients
- pensions
- day care centers
- cooperative housing, like the Amalgamated Houses (founded by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers) and Penn South (founded by the ILGWU)
- vacation resorts/summer camps
- adult education and lectures

- cultural activities, first in Yiddish, later in English
- banks (the Amalgamated Bank still exists in NYC)
- labor solidarity and support for industrial unionism

Jewish workers took pride in their craftsmanship, not so much for its own sake, but for the sake of the consumer. As a Jewish garment worker declared, “It is not the way of a Jew to do his [sic] work like there is not a human being to suffer when it’s done badly. A coat is not just a piece of cloth. The tailor is connected to the one who wears it and he should not forget it.”

The Jewish-dominated labor unions constituted a major share of the left wing of the American Federation of Labor. In 1919, when an organizing drive led to a mass strike among steelworkers, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers donated nearly 40 percent of the funds raised by the entire labor movement. This, even though the number of Jewish steelworkers was miniscule.

There was, of course, anti-Semitism in the labor movement among some of the leaders of the AFL craft unions and its members, but it was muted compared to the rest of society and mingled with tensions based on differences in ideology, language, culture and the fear of cheaper Jewish labor. The major bone of contention was immigration, opposed by craft union leaders who dominated the AFL and favored by the Jewish unions. For the most part, there was cooperation between non-Jewish and Jewish unions, based on mutual interests and respect.

FRATERNAL/MUTUAL AID ORGANIZATIONS

Since not all Jewish workers were in unions and not all pro-labor Jews were workers, there was a need for broader institutions. The same generation of left-leaning immigrant working class Jews who founded the Jewish labor unions, also founded the *Arbeter Ring*/Workmen's Circle, known for its life insurance plans, burial societies, health care programs, old age homes, Yiddish schools, summer camps, sports teams, women’s clubs, reading circles, choruses, orchestras and much more--all with a strong emphasis on Yiddish, socialism and labor solidarity across ethnic lines. In its prime in the 1920s, it had 750 branches and 85,000 members. Labor Zionists and, later, Jewish communists established parallel institutions for their followers.

ELECTORAL POLITICS

A pivotal event in the history of the Jewish labor movement was the election of Meyer London to Congress from the Lower East Side in 1914. He was a Jewish labor lawyer, an immigrant fluent in Yiddish and English, who ran as a candidate for the Socialist Party---the *majority* party among Jewish workers in those years. His election was a great source of pride for the

immigrant Jewish working class of NYC. He served two more terms until 1922 and joined another Socialist Party member of Congress, Victor Berger, an immigrant from the Austro-Hungarian empire who settled in Milwaukee, then a socialist stronghold due to the German population, more Gentile than Jewish. Other immigrant Jews were elected on the Socialist Party ticket to the New York City council and State legislature.

Jews in the labor movement voted Socialist on the federal level too, most notably for Eugene Victor Debs before WWI and for Norman Thomas in the 1920s and early 1930s. Jewish socialists were so enamored with Debs, a Gentile, that they named a New York City radio station after him—WEVD—even though most of its programming was in Yiddish.

The third most prominent Jewish candidate for public office was Morris Hillquit, the number two man in the Socialist Party next to Debs. Hillquit, an immigrant from Russia who became a labor lawyer, won 22 percent of the vote running for mayor of NYC in 1917 and 33 percent in 1932, during the depths of the Depression.

THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD (IWW)

The most radical union in the period between 1905 and the US entrance into World War One in 1917, was the Industrial Workers of the World aka "the Wobblies" whose philosophy can be described as anarcho-syndicalist. It did not have many Jewish members because the IWW did most of its organizing among workers in heavy industry, agricultural workers, miners, maritime workers and lumberjacks---jobs with few Jewish workers. But in the IWW's forays into the East, most notably the 1912 Lawrence, Mass. textile workers' strike and the 1913 Paterson, NJ silk workers' strike, thousands of Jewish workers participated. These included Hannah Silverman, a Paterson mill worker, who became an important strike leader and Mathilda Robbins, born Tatiana Rabinowitz, who led a strike of textile workers in Little Falls, NY in 1912 and was hired by the IWW as one of two paid female organizers.

There were at least five IWW victims of the 1916 "Everett Massacre" in Everett, Washington. One was Abraham Rabinowitz (whether he was related to Tatiana is unknown). He joined hundreds of Wobblies who hired a boat in Seattle to make their way to Everett to launch a free speech fight demanding the right to organize. They were met with police gunfire as the boat attempted to dock. Some were shot, others drowned. The IWW press eulogized Rabinowitz as one who was "born of a race without a flag, a race oppressed by the intolerance and superstition of the ages, and died fighting for the brotherhood of man."

The best known Jewish Wobbly was Frank Tannenbaum, who organized unemployed workers in New York City to demand food and shelter from churches during the bitter cold winter of 1913-14. He was falsely accused of incitement to riot and served a year in a notorious city prison

where he organized a strike of inmates against harsh conditions. Tannenbaum later dropped out of the labor movement to pursue a higher education. He earned a PhD from Columbia University and became a scholar specializing in race relations, criminology and Latin American history.

Irving Abrams joined the IWW in Rochester NY as a teenager, where he met Emma Goldman. Moving to Chicago, he found work in the garment industry, where he participated in a general strike led by Amalgamated Clothing Workers in 1915, in which he was arrested 39 times. In 1920, he became an attorney specializing in civil liberties cases. He is best known for his role in the association that preserved the monument in a Chicago cemetery honoring the Haymarket martyrs and provided support to their families, a duty he diligently carried out until 1971. His Jewish affiliations included the Workmen's Circle, the Jewish Labor Committee and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). Abrams wrote a memoir, *Haymarket Heritage* (1989).

Abrams was the product of an improbably marriage—both his parents were converts to Judaism who met in Europe, before immigrating to the US. Ironically he may have been the most Jewish of Jewish Wobblies.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

After the Triangle Fire, Jewish immigrant Rose Schneiderman, representing the Women's Trade Union League, addressed a memorial meeting where she called for a strong working class movement to protect garment workers from unsafe conditions. In another speech, she eloquently declared that "the worker must have bread, but she must have roses too"--in other words, the good things in life, both material and spiritual. (Inspired by Schneiderman, James Oppenheim, an American-born Jewish poet, wrote a poem "Bread and Roses" which was later put to music and became a popular anthem to the struggles and sacrifices of women workers.) Rose Schneiderman wrote a memoir, *All For One* (1967).

Jewish women, including Schneiderman, Clara Lemlich, Rose Pesotta, Fania Cohn, Pauline Newman, Bessie Abramowitz (spouse of Sidney Hillman) and many others became garment worker organizers and in some cases, union officials. Abramowitz proudly asserted "I was Bessie Abramowitz before he was Sidney Hillman."

On the shop floor Jewish women had a reputation of being more militant than the men and more eager to organize non-Jewish workers, including minorities. However, women in the union shops did not receive equal pay for equal work or the better jobs, and were generally excluded from union leadership. Pesotta resigned from a leadership position in the ILGWU to protest such discrimination.

During the years before World War One, Jewish working-class women, acting as consumers and tenants, organized boycotts of kosher butchers to force down prices and conducted militant rent strikes, a pattern that was repeated in the Great Depression.

Before World War Two, Jews also began to enter the public school system as teachers in large American cities, a trend that greatly accelerated after the war. Lillian Herstein was a pioneer in this profession.

Overcoming anti-Semitism, Herstein became a high school teacher in Chicago in 1912, before World War One, and joined an early teachers' union. By 1917, she was teaching at a public junior college. Arthur Goldberg, future Supreme Court Justice, and radio personality and oral historian Studs Terkel (also Jewish) were among her students. As a leader of the Chicago Teachers Union and the Women's Trade Union League, she served as the only woman on the Chicago Federation of Labor's Executive Board. Devoted to worker education, she helped form the Chicago Labor College, a night school, and became its director in 1934. She also taught at the Bryn Mawr summer school for working women and wrote for the *American Teacher*, the journal of the American Federation of Teachers.

In 1932 Herstein ran for Congress on the Farmer Labor Party ticket, but with the election of FDR, she became a New Dealer. During World War Two, she served on the War Production Board, where she was responsible for establishing housing and day care centers for female defense workers. Among her other causes were organizing industrial workers and promoting child labor laws.

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF THE 1920S AND EARLY 1930S

The notorious Palmer raids associated with the post-World War One Red Scare caused the arrest, and in some cases deportation of non-citizen radicals, many of them Jewish. Social activism and union membership shrunk in the 1920s due to government repression, but some of the harm done to the Jewish labor unions was self-inflicted. A schism in the Jewish labor movement developed in the early--mid-1920s after the communists seceded from the Socialist Party. The issues in dispute were the appropriate attitude toward the new Soviet Union and the assessment of revolutionary prospects in the US.

The pro-Soviet Jewish communists and the anti-Soviet Jewish socialists went to war over control of the ILGWU and became bitter rivals throughout the Jewish labor movement. In some cases, gangsters were engaged to tip the scales. The communists lost after a very nasty battle,

but gained control over the Furriers Union. Under the effective leadership of Ben Gold, this small union withstood police violence, rid itself of gangsters and won excellent contracts.

The split went far beyond the labor movement. Jewish communists established a new newspaper, the *Freiheit*, to rival the *Forverts*. By the late 1920s, Jewish communists had formed their own radical mutual aid, cultural and educational organization, later known as the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order (JPFO), to compete with the *Arbeter Ring/Workman's Circle*. The JPFO began as the Jewish branch of pro-communist ethnic constituencies united in International Workers Order (IWO), and was always the largest. The JPFO's devotion to the Stalinist Soviet Union knew no bounds and in its early years its posture was sectarian.

The *linke* (left wing) and *rekhte* (right wing) *Yidn* (Jews) battled it out in their press, the unions and their meeting halls, and in the streets. According to Irving Howe, author of *World of Our Fathers*, there was nothing in the whole Jewish immigrant experience to match the civil war between the Jewish left for "sheer ugliness." There was no doubt that the communists were *linke* or "left wing," but only in the context of bitter factional rivalry could the socialists be described as "*rekhte*."

Although the entire labor movement took a beating in the 1920s and through the early years of the Great Depression, Jewish labor activism still existed. One of the few major labor struggles of this decade took place in Passaic, NJ, where twenty thousand textile workers went on strike led by Albert Weisbord, a young Jewish communist. Although not a communist, Justine Wise, the daughter of the prominent Reform rabbi, Zionist and social reformer Stephen Wise, went to work in the Passaic textile mills incognito. When her identity was discovered, the mill owners fired her and placed her on a blacklist. This did not stop her from returning to Passaic when the strike broke out. Her fiery pro-worker speeches led the *New York Herald* to dub her the "Joan of Arc of the Mills." She later became a family court judge and in the post-World War Two era she joined with her husband Shad Polier, a constitutional lawyer, in leading the American Jewish Congress' powerful campaign for civil rights legislation.

Amy Schechter, the daughter of the famous Jewish scholar Solomon Schechter, took an active role in another major strike: the 1929 Loray Mill Strike among textile workers in Gastonia, North Carolina. She was sent there by the Communist Party, as a representative of its Workers International Relief, to help the strikers' families. She and eight others were arrested and charged with murder over the shooting of the local police chief. The charges against her were later dismissed.

In 1932, Harry Simms (born Harry Hersh), a young communist from Massachusetts, was murdered by thugs hired by mine owners while attempting to organize coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky.

LABOR ORGANIZING DURING THE NEW DEAL

Revival of union organizing in all industries and trades came with the New Deal. In 1935, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) began to emerge from the AFL with a mission to organize millions of “industrial workers” in the mining, auto, steel, rubber, electrical and maritime industries. These were not Jewish workers, but three out of the eight American Federation of Labor unions that split away to form the CIO were the Jewish unions: the ILGWU (led by Dubinsky,) the ACW (led by Hillman) and the United Hatters, Cap and Milliners Workers Union (led by Max Zaritsky.) As organizers, Jewish anarchists, socialists, communists and Trotskyists—both men and women--played a significant role in organizing, including the militant strikes, that the CIO conducted in basic industry. (With a few years both the ILGWU and the Hatters rejoined the AFL.)

But they did not neglect their own backyards. Garment industry organizing resumed and new retail workers’ unions with significant Jewish membership won contracts from major department stores, supermarkets and chain restaurants. In 1935, Jewish women, including Clara Lemlich Shavelson, were highly visible in big-city coalitions that organized meat boycotts and picketed meatpacking plants to protest high prices. These activists raised other issues affecting working class life including high rents and utility rates, inferior housing and regressive taxes.

By the mid-late 1930s, the IWO’s Jewish section, in response to the rise of Nazism in Germany, began to pay more attention to Yiddish culture and Jewish continuity. But labor militancy was always a priority. In 1940, a group of JPFO *mitshul* (high school) students joined a picket line of workers on strike against the Yiddish newspaper, *Der Tog* (The Day) in 1940, chanting *Der Tog iz finster; finster iz Der Tog* (The Day is dark, dark is The Day).

A small CIO union called Local 1199, led by Jewish communist Leon Davis organized mostly Jewish pharmacists and other drug store employees in New York City during the Depression and World War Two.

Leftist Jews were also prominent as attorneys for the CIO unions. Lee Pressman was general counsel to the CIO during the late 30s and 40s; Maurice Sugar, general counsel to the United Auto Workers from 1937 to 1946; John Apt was general counsel to the Amalgamated Clothing

Workers from 1938 to 1946 and a top advisor to its president, Sidney Hillman. Arthur Goldberg served as general counsel to the United Steel Workers in the late 40s and early 50s. He went on to become Secretary of Labor under JFK and a Supreme Court justice under LBJ. In 1939, Morris Ernst represented the CIO in a landmark civil liberties case before the US Supreme Court that established its right to freedom of assembly in Jersey City, NJ. As an attorney for the American Newspaper Guild, an AFL union with substantial Jewish membership, Ernst also won a case before the US Supreme Court guaranteeing the right of newspaper employees to organize under the National Labor Relations Act.

Although one step removed from the labor movement, Jews were also prominent in the newly-created National Labor Relations Board and among labor arbitrators who shaped labor law as it developed from 1935 to the passage of the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act in 1947.

Saul Alinsky, the son of orthodox Jews, who attained national prominence as a community organizer after World War Two, started out as a CIO organizer in Chicago in the 1930s. He worked with John L. Lewis, the first president of the CIO and wrote a biography of him, published in 1949.

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

If the CIO became a *cause celebre* among Jewish labor radicals, there was another across the Atlantic that inspired some to a greater sacrifice: the Spanish Civil War. Of the two thousand eight hundred young Americans answered the call to fight fascism in Spain by joining the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, over 40% were Jewish communists and many of them were union activists. They considered Franco a proxy for Hitler, the arch anti-Semite, who provided weapons and soldiers to the Fascist side. Poorly trained and armed, these volunteers fought valiantly. One third did not survive.

LABOR THEMES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND LITERATURE DURING THE NEW DEAL AND WORLD WAR TWO

On the cultural front, the ILGWU sponsored a theatrical production called *Pins and Needles* which ran for three and a half years on Broadway from 1937 to 1940. A review consisting of songs, sketches and satire, with music and lyrics by Jewish composer Harold Rome, its cast included rank and file workers. The most socially conscious of all Broadway musicals, *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), was a product of the New Deal's Federal Theater Project. It told the story of an organizing drive among steelworkers. Both music and lyrics were written by Mark Blitzstein,

an avowed communist.

The epitome of pro-labor theater during the 1930s was Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* (1935). Its final scene consists of New York City taxi drivers chanting "Strike, Strike, Strike!" Odets too was a Jewish communist.

"Proletarian literature" became its own genre during the 1930s and 40s, suffused with radical themes. Among Jewish writers, Michael Gold stands out for his fictionalized autobiography, *Jews Without Money* (1930), about an impoverished child growing up in a Jewish ghetto in Manhattan whose experiences led him to embrace communism. Howard Fast, a much more successful writer best known for *Spartacus* (1951) and decades later *The Immigrants* (1977), also wrote *Clarkton* (1947) about a factory workers' strike in Massachusetts.

LABOR POLITICS IN THE NEW DEAL ERA AND WORLD WAR TWO

On the political front, the more conservative wing of the Socialist Party, whose base was the Jewish labor unions, collaborated with the Communist Party in 1936 to form the American Labor Party (ALP). Despite its name, it was limited to New York State. The ALP supported FDR and other New Deal Democrats, but also ran its own candidates against Tammany Hall, the New York Democratic machine. Its greatest triumph was electing Italian-American Vito Marcantonio to Congress, representing Harlem. He served for six terms and was influential in New York left wing circles from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. The only other candidate that the ALP elected to Congress was a Jewish attorney, Leo Isaacson, who served only one year, (1948-1949). It also elected a number of local and state legislators. The bulk of its funding, until the socialists split in 1944 to form the Liberal Party, came from the Jewish labor unions.

TWO GIANTS: DAVID DUBINSKY AND SIDNEY HILLMAN

Both Dubinsky and Hillman were Bundists in Europe who came to the US as young men. The ILGWU President was a major figure in the Jewish labor movement during the 1930s and 40s, but was overshadowed by Hillman who rose to prominence on the national political scene, as President of the left-wing Amalgamated Clothing Workers and a key player in the leadership of the CIO. Both unions formed the backbone of the American Labor Party, but Hillman was more open to working with communists, who were also an important component.

In the 1940s, Hillman became FDR's top advisor on labor issues and head of the CIO's political action committee. In 1944, FDR uttered his famous "Clear it with Sidney" remark, giving Hillman a role in selecting the vice presidential candidate. His role, however, was limited. The sitting

Vice President Henry Wallace was his and the CIO's first choice, but could not prevent the party bosses from dropping him. Hillman got to choose between two remaining candidates and approved the selection of Harry Truman over a more conservative contender.

Although Hillman died young in 1946, Dubinsky continued to lead the ILGWU until the mid-1960s. The ILGWU attained a peak membership of 450,000 under his leadership and was a force to be reckoned with in New York City politics. Within the AFL, Dubinsky sought to eliminate corrupt practices. However, at the same time, he became more undemocratic and fanatically anti-communist. In 1941, Dubinsky unfairly denounced a wildcat strike of over a thousand workers against the Maidenform Bra company in Bayonne, NJ as communist-inspired. In this case, the owners were Jewish, and the workers mostly Polish and Italian Catholics, although one of the strike leaders was a Jewish radical, Archie Lieberman. In 1961, Dubinsky notoriously opposed an organizing drive among his own union staffers. As noted elsewhere in this survey, serious charges of racial discrimination and collaboration with the CIA were leveled against Dubinsky and the ILGWU.

THE HOLOCAUST AND THE JEWISH LABOR COMMITTEE

Jewish workers (and Jews in general) idolized FDR, despite his failure to take decisive action to rescue the Jews of Europe from Hitler. Most Jewish organizations did not do much themselves, but in 1934, the Jewish socialist unions, together with the Workman's Circle and the Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*, formed the Jewish Labor Committee, led by Baruch Charney Vladeck, to sound the alarm about the rise of Nazism, organize a boycott of German exports and bring endangered trade unionists to the US. Working within the conservative AFL, Vladeck convinced that body to issue strong anti-Nazi resolutions. Here is how he appealed to its non-Jewish labor leaders:

in the torture chambers of fascism, the Jew occupies a conspicuous and painful place...One of the most important reasons why all tyrants hate us is because of our long experience resisting injustice. Over 4000 years ago, a Jew by the name of Moses...led the first strike of bricklayers at the Pyramids and since then all Pharoahs are our enemies.

Vladeck had a storied career. He was the manager of the *Forverts*. Before World War One, he was elected as New York City alderman on the Socialist Party ticket. In 1936, he was elected city councilman as a representative of the American Labor Party and served until his untimely death in 1938.

After the war, the Jewish Labor Committee provided relief for Jewish refugees and pressured Congress to pass legislation admitting them into the US. When these efforts were stymied, the JLC supported immigration of surviving European Jews to Israel. The JLC also marshaled its forces to lobby President Truman to support the UN Partition Plan. Its constituent unions established strong ties with the *Histadrut*, the Israeli labor federation and rendered major financial support to the new Jewish state.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE JEWISH LABOR MOVEMENT

The Jewish labor unions and their network of affiliated institutions made outstanding improvements in the lives of the Jewish working class. Typical Jewish workers in this era could easily belong to a Jewish labor union and/or a mutual aid organization like the Workmen's Circle, read the Yiddish *Forverts*, give their children a socialist/Yiddishist education in an after school program and send them to a related summer camp, live in cooperative housing, attend lectures by Yiddish and socialist or anarchist speakers, vote for the Socialist Party and enjoy themselves at its outings.

The only other immigrant communities to establish comparable networks of labor, social welfare, political, cultural and educational institutions were left-wing German Americans. As previously noted, these were the original role models for the Jewish labor movement and, for that matter, the Workmen's Circle and *Forverts*. But their heyday was in the 19th century. Finnish immigrant socialists, mainly concentrated in Minnesota and Wisconsin, were organized along the same lines, but far less visible than Jews.

Among the bulk of the non-Jewish immigrant populations, the Catholic Church played a comparable role in terms of providing social services and children's education, but with a profoundly conservative philosophy. The Church may have accepted trade unionism of the "bread and butter" variety, but was fiercely opposed to secularism, socialism and a prominent role for women.

In addition to the prominent role played by women, what was perhaps most remarkable about the immigrant Jewish working class, in the broadest sense of the term, was its desire for education. It began in the sweatshops themselves, where many Jewish workers used their lunch hours to read and argue over books and newspapers. Immigrants of all nationalities attended night school to learn English, but Jewish labor activists also established study groups, libraries, schools and lecture programs first in Yiddish and later in English. These were created not just to teach the principles of anarchism, socialism, communism, labor unionism etc., but to teach literature, economics, science and civics. According to one immigrant memoir, "I

remember going once to a meeting at Cooper Union to protest against the use of the militia in breaking a strike somewhere in the West, and then retiring with a crowd of others to the anarchist reading room on Eldridge Street to hear an informal discussion on 'Hamlet versus Don Quixote.'"

The best known adult schools were the socialist Rand School of Social Science (founded in 1906) and the communist Jefferson School of Social Science (founded in 1944), both in New York City. They were non-sectarian, of course, but the majority of their students were Jewish. The Women's Trade Union League sponsored a summer school for women workers at Bryn Mawr College that continued from 1921 to 1938. A preponderance of students were Russian Jewish immigrants. A "Jewish Workers' University" connected with the Communist Party existed from 1926 to 1941 teaching a variety of courses, exclusively in Yiddish. The socialist ILGWU had its own "Workers University."

For children, the socialist Workmen's Circle, the communist Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, the Labor Zionist *Farband* and the smaller Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute established Yiddish schools that met after public schools and on the weekends, as well as summer camps with an educational component, that sought to convey secular and progressive Jewish values. At their peak, between the late 1930s and late 1940s, these schools educated 20,000 students. Its graduates later flocked to public colleges to become educators, professionals and social activists for a new generation.

In essence, the Jewish labor movement, in its broadest sense, created a vibrant sub-culture, independent of, and to a considerable degree, in opposition to the mainstream Jewish community led by the business elite and rabbinate.

CHANGES IN THE POST WORLD WAR TWO JEWISH LABOR MOVEMENT

During the 1950s, the role of Jews in the labor movement was diminished by the post-war economic boom that lifted many of them into the middle class. With the decline of the strong immigrant-based urban communities that sustained and nurtured a specifically "Jewish labor movement," the transition began to "Jews in the labor movement."

While the number of Jewish garment workers dropped dramatically beginning in the 1950s, the ILGWU leadership remained Jewish, raising allegations that it had become an entrenched bureaucracy discriminating against the new minorities in the union ranks. Puerto Rican and Black workers picketed ILGWU headquarters as far back as the late 1950s and were later joined by Asian workers in the 1970s in protesting discrimination in union shops and in a union-owned

housing project. The NAACP, after conducting an investigation, directly charged the ILGWU with racist practices.

As the garment industry departed the urban north for low-wage havens in the south and abroad, the ILGWU—and its successor organization UNITE, sought to stem the tide by keeping wages in union shops low and tolerating inferior conditions. Mob control became a serious problem in a few ILGWU locals.

A fascinating chapter in Jewish labor history was written by the New York-based Bagel Makers Union Local 338, a virtually all-Jewish union that was a throwback to the pre-war era. Membership was handed down from father to son or other relatives. Until World War Two, its business was conducted in Yiddish. In an industry where bagels were hand-made, the skilled nature of this work gave these workers extraordinary power. Local 338 waged successful strikes that won excellent wages and benefits. A strike in 1951 caused what *The New York Times* called a "bagel famine." However Local 338 was ultimately wiped out by automation---the invention of the Thompson Bagel Machine in 1962. The union fought a rearguard battle to preserve its status, finally dissolving into the Bakery and Confectionary Workers Union in 1971.

If the typical Jewish unionist was the New York City garment worker in the first half of the 20th century, by the second, it was the New York City school teacher.

The nastiest episode in the post-WW II history of the Jewish labor movement was the 1968 NYC teachers strike, led by the United Federation of Teachers and its high-profile president, Albert Shanker. In 1967 the Board of Education, with funding from the Ford Foundation, chose a predominantly Black "Ocean Hill-Brownsville" school district in Brooklyn for an experiment in "community control." The UFT and the elected school board clashed over UFT demands to remove disruptive students, the board's appointment of a principal not on the approved civil service list and, especially, the board's decision to transfer 19 teachers and administrators it considered ineffective. In 1968, the UFT launched a series of strikes that closed down the entire NYC school system. The community board accused the Union of racism; the Union accused the community board of union-busting--and anti-Semitism, since the bulk of the teachers it removed were Jewish. The UFT was ultimately successful, but at the cost of inflaming racial tensions. Nevertheless, the UFT was later successful in organizing mostly minority para-professionals in the NYC school system.

On the brighter side, Local 1199 (led by Leon Davis), representing drug store and hospital employees; the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), (led by Jerry Wurf), representing public employees, and District 65 Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union (RWDSU), led by David Livingston, representing retail, warehouse and light

manufacturing employees, were among the few labor unions that opposed the Vietnam War. The United Auto Workers, led by the non-Jewish Walter Reuther, was another.

District 65, in its post WW II prime, had a capacious approach to membership services. In addition to sports teams and social events, it sponsored a photography club, theater parties and a nightclub that often featured entertainers who were blacklisted during the McCarthy era.

Strikes were common in New York City during the 1960s and 70s. Theodore Kheel was widely known as the mediator of choice, credited for settling the lengthy newspaper workers strike of 1962-63.

MCCARTHYISM AND THE COLD WAR

The post-World War Two anti-communist hysteria aka the McCarthy era, lasting from the late 1940s to the late 1950s, caused the AFL and CIO to purge communists from its ranks, including a high proportion of Jews. This had a chilling effect on all forms of labor radicalism. Left-wing unions that survived were raided by AFL and CIO unions and hounded by the federal government under the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act. Ben Gold resigned under pressure as president from the Furriers Union in 1955 to ease its merger with a larger AFL union. In 1951, the Jewish Peoples' Fraternal Order, along with the entire International Workers Order, fell victim to political persecution.

Another of the eleven unions expelled from the CIO as communist-dominated was the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, the successor to the Western Federation of Miners, the union that was originally the backbone of the IWW. In 1954, Jewish screen writer Herbert Biberman's film, *The Salt of the Earth*, appeared, based on a bitter 1951 strike conducted by this union among Mexican American miners in New Mexico. Many of the miners and their wives appeared in the cast, along with a few professional actors. Biberman was one of the Hollywood Ten, writers and directors who were blacklisted and jailed for contempt of Congress in the late 1940s. *The Salt of the Earth* suffered a similar fate--it was denounced as communist propaganda and boycotted by theaters owned by the major studios. As a direct result, the film was rarely viewed until the late 1960s. Since then it has become an underground classic in progressive circles.

Jay Lovestone was among the most influential cold warriors. After over a decade as a leading Communist Party official and a communist dissent, he became an acolyte of his former enemy, David Dubinsky. In 1943, Lovestone was appointed director of the ILGWU's International Affairs Department. After World War Two, he was appointed to direct the American Institute for Free Labor Development, an organization sponsored by the AFL that spearheaded a concerted

campaign to unions with real or perceived communist connections, first in Western Europe and later in Latin America. The AIFLT collaborated with the CIA in this undertaking. Lovestone continued to wage the Cold War as director of the AFL-CIO's International Affairs Department until 1974, when he was fired by AFL-CIO President George Meany, after its CIA connections (including funding) were exposed. This did not affect the AFL-CIO's ardent support for the Vietnam War.

In 1987, AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, supported by AFT President Albert Shanker, condemned union participation in a mass demonstration in Washington DC against US intervention in Central America undertaken by the Reagan administration. In defiance, AFSCME, Local 1199 Drug and Hospital Workers and other unions turned out thousands of tens of thousands of workers. The AFL-CIO's collaboration with the CIA (via the AIFLT) did not end until John Sweeney became President in 1995.

FOLK MUSIC AND CULTURAL ARTS

Music was an integral part of the left wing of the labor movement. Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger (non-Jews) began singing in union halls and picket lines across the country in the late 1930s. After World War Two, Seeger, Lee Hays and two Jewish performers--Ronnie Gilbert and Fred Hellerman---formed the *Weavers* and packed concert halls in major venues, singing folk songs and songs of social justice. Although they did not sing in Yiddish, a few Hebrew songs, celebrating the new state of Israel, were part of their repertoire.

Joe Glazer (d. 2006), known as "Labor's Troubadour," and Tom Glazer (d. 2003) contributed to this tradition as composers and performers of labor songs. They were not related and came from different political perspectives. Joe was anti-communist; Tom was more sympathetic. Although The *Weavers* disbanded by the mid-1960s, the two Glazers continued on (separately) until the 1990s.

In June 1979, Joe Glazer invited other labor musicians to the George Meany Center for Labor Studies in Silver Springs, Maryland to share labor and social justice songs and to discuss the effective use of music, song, poetry and chants in labor activism. The three-day event became an annual one, known as the Great Labor Arts Exchange (GLAE). It continues today.

In the field of cultural arts, *Bread and Roses*, founded by Jewish labor activist Moe Foner in 1978 as a project of Local 1199 Drug and Hospital Workers, lives on, sponsoring art exhibits on progressive themes, including labor rights.

Mike Alewitz has been creating impressive public murals on labor and social justice themes for decades, as Artistic Director of the Labor Art and Mural Project. He has worked with a variety of

unions and kindred organizations, including the United Mine Workers, the United Farm Workers, the Teamsters, Jobs with Justice and the IWW. Alewitz is currently on the faculty at Central Connecticut University.

FIGHTING FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Jewish labor unions and labor radicals were intensely involved in supporting equal treatment for Blacks in the workplace and public venues. A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a leading campaigner against employment discrimination, had ties to the Socialist Party and its many Jewish activists. In fact, his newspaper, the *Messenger*, received financial support from Jewish unions including the ILGWU. In the civil rights struggles of the late 1940s, Jewish communists stood out in their tireless efforts to integrate baseball. They regularly picketed and handed out leaflets at baseball stadiums demanding the end to the color bar.

Harold Shapiro was a noteworthy Jewish labor activist who consistently fought for racial equality. In 1948, as a President of a Detroit local of the communist-led Fur and Leather Workers Union, he helped convince the Wayne County CIO to include the UAW's Coleman Young in its leadership. (Young became the first Black mayor of Detroit in 1974). Shapiro was also one of the founders of the National Negro Labor Council. In 1954, he was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) where he refused to name names that would reveal his affiliation or others in his union with the Communist Party. During the next decade, he organized in the South for labor unionism and civil rights, braving arrests and beatings.

Local 1199, Drug and Hospital Workers Union was so involved in the civil rights movement that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, called 1199 "my favorite union." In 1967, King chose Local 1199's "Salute to Freedom" program as his platform to announce his opposition to the Vietnam War. AFSCME (the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees), led by Jerry Wurf, was also a strong civil rights advocate. King was assassinated in Memphis where he came to support a strike of black sanitation workers organized by AFSCME. Other Jewish-led unions including the ILGWU, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the American Federation of Teachers, threw their resources into the campaign for civil rights. One of King's key advisors, Stanley Levison, was Jewish. Because of his earlier ties with the Communist Party, King was pressured to distance himself from Levison, but King continued to consult with him behind the scenes.

However, when affirmative action in employment became an issue in the 1970s, most Jewish labor leaders lined up with their non-Jewish colleagues in opposition. Seniority in hiring and promotion was deemed sacrosanct even though this principle severely disadvantaged Black

workers. Albert Shanker, President of the AFT and its powerful UFT New York City local, was particularly outspoken on this issue. Some Jewish unions also resisted elevating minorities into leadership positions

THE NEW LEFT

The children of the radical Jewish workers of the 1930s and 40s were integrally involved in the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s, including the student, civil rights, anti-war, feminist and gay liberation movements. Young Jews, for example, were heavily represented in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) (e.g. Mark Rudd and Todd Gitlin) and the Yippies (e.g. Jerry Rubin, son of a Teamster and Abbie Hoffman). They made up at least half of the Freedom Riders who traveled to the South to integrate public transportation in 1961 and about the same proportion of the civil rights workers who converged on Mississippi to register Black voters and educate Black children in 1964 during Freedom Summer. Two out of three of the civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi in 1964 were Jewish. Michael Schwerner was the son of a New York City area school teacher and union member; Andrew Goodman the son of a New York City psychologist.

Paul Jacobs and Sidney Lens were two remarkable Jewish labor activists whose careers spanned the Old Left and the New.

Jacobs organized non-Jewish workers into the ILGWU in Pennsylvania in the early 1940s and then became an International Representative for the Oil Workers International Union, representing non-Jewish workers in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In between, he worked for the American Jewish Committee in exposing racial discrimination in the labor movement. To his discredit, he led a purge of the pro-communist Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order from the Jewish Community Council in Los Angeles.

During the 1950s, Jacobs visited Israel as a guest of the *Histadrut*, the Israeli labor federation. He also took trips to Eastern Europe, where he toured Auschwitz and educated himself about the Holocaust. In a 1963 article in *Harper's* magazine, he indicted the ILGWU for flouting union democracy, refusing to recognize its staff union and excluding minorities from leadership posts.

Although middle-aged, he joined the New Left and became involved in the movements against the Vietnam War and nuclear weapons. In 1976, he co-founded *Mother Jones* magazine. In 1965, Jacobs wrote a colorful yet little known memoir *Is Curly Jewish?* His answer was that he was not quite sure, but there was something very Jewish about his posing that question.

Sidney Lens, based in Chicago, began his career as a union organizer before World War Two and served for decades as a progressive labor leader, mainly for retail workers. In the 1960s and 70s, he assumed a leadership role in the anti-Vietnam war movement and became an anti-

nuclear activist. A prolific writer, he was a founder of *Liberation* magazine, a frequent contributor and member of the editorial board of the *Progressive* magazine and the author of many books on the labor movement and the American left. His memoir, *Unrepentant Radical*, appeared in 1980. Unlike Jacobs, he did not reflect on his Jewish identity.

PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZING

Jewish participation in the labor movement received a new lease on life with the expansion of the public sector, associated with LBJ's War on Poverty in the mid-1960s, and similar programs on state and local levels. Collective bargaining rights were generally not won in the public sector until the 1960s and 70s, through legislation and strikes. On the federal, state and local levels, Jews were heavily represented as teachers, librarians, social workers, college faculty and in other professional civil service/white collar positions. Unions such as AFSCME, AFT and some of the postal workers' unions had a significant number of Jews in their rank and file and included an even higher percentage in leadership and as union staffers and lawyers. Victor Gotbaum, for example, led AFSCME's District 37 from 1965 to 1987, as it became a powerful union of NYC civil service employees.

In public higher education, the American Federation of Teachers organized faculty in the New York City college system in the late 1960s, soon to be followed in the state university system. The groundwork was laid by a protracted and ultimately failed strike at the private Catholic St. John's University, led by Israel Kugler over 1966-67. Kugler was also a leader of the Workmen's Circle and it contributed heavily to the strike fund.

LABOR UNION WOMEN

The 1960s saw a massive influx of women in the labor movement while its leadership remained male-dominated. In the ILGWU, for example, where women made up 80% of the membership, only 7% of union officers and board members were women as of 1978. For the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers (ACTWU) another major union with a large majority of female members, women in leadership positions made up only 15% of the total. The proportion for the heavily Jewish AFT was 60:25.

The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) was founded in 1974 by women unionists affiliated with the AFL-CIO to address women's issues in the workplace. Its goals were and remain to:

- Promote affirmative action in the workplace
- Strengthen the role of women in unions
- Organize more women into unions

At its founding convention in Chicago, Myra Wolfgang, secretary-treasurer of the Detroit Joint Executive Board of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union (HERE), brought the delegates to their feet by declaring, "You can call Mr. Meany and tell him there are 3,000 women in Chicago and they didn't come here to swap recipes!" (George Meany was President of the AFL-CIO at this time.)

Wolfgang, a Jewish woman, later rose to the position of International VP and should be considered one of the most influential female labor leaders of her generation. In 1937, at the age 23, she led a sit-down strike of salesclerks and waitresses at one of Detroit's Woolworth "five-and ten-cent" stores. Nicknamed the "battling belle of Detroit," she ran the union's Detroit Joint Council, which represented thousands of cooks, bartenders, food servers, dishwashers, maids, and other hotel and restaurant workers. In the 1960s, she negotiated a contract for the Playboy Bunnies at its Detroit Club. By 1969, HERE had won a national contract covering all Playboy Clubs.

Another founding member of CLUW was Evelyn Dubrow. For decades, she served as chief lobbyist for the ILGWU, working for the passage of minimum wage, family and medical leave, civil rights and fair-trade legislation.

In 1980, ACTWU Vice-President Joyce Miller, a Jewish woman, became the first woman elected to the AFL-CIO's Executive Council. She was also one of CLUW's founders and became its president in 1977. Another Jewish woman, Lenore Miller (no relation), became the first female president of an affiliated union, the Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union (RWDSU), to serve on the Executive Council in 1987.

NEW FIELDS FOR UNION ORGANIZING

In the late 1950s, Local 1199 branched out into organizing Black and Puerto Rican hospital workers in New York City and achieved success by engaging in a series of militant strikes. By the 1960s, it had expanding from New York City metropolitan area to other eastern seaboard states.

Jewish labor leaders also made their mark in professional sports. In 1966, professional baseball players chose Marvin Miller, a labor economist, to represent them. Over the next 16 years, he led the players through a number of successful strikes and negotiated successive collective bargaining agreements. The consensus among players, sports journalists and historians is that Miller belongs in the Baseball Hall of Fame, but opposition from the owners has kept him out. Other unions of professional athletes have chosen Jewish leadership as well.

LABOR THEMES IN POPULAR CULTURE--POST WORLD WAR TWO

Broadway plays and Hollywood movies about labor struggles have often been the creation of Jewish producers, directors, writers and actors.

In 1954 the musical *Pajama Game* opened on Broadway, featuring a strike at a pajama factory (enlivened by a love story), with music by Richard Adler and lyrics by Jerry Ross, both Jews. It won a slew of Tony awards.

The Oscar-winning documentary *Harlan County USA* (1976), about a bitter miners' strike in Kentucky, was produced and directed by Barbara Kopple.

Norma Rae, a major Hollywood movie was released in 1979. It told the story of a dramatic and ultimately successful organizing drive among Southern textile workers. It was based on the JP Stevens strike in North Carolina waged by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, in a protracted struggle for union recognition and collective bargaining rights during the 1970s. The heroes of the movie were Norma Rae Webster, a scrappy woman played by Sally Field who worked in the mill until she was fired for union organizing, and a union organizer from the North named Rueben Warshowsky, played by Ron Leibman.

It was certainly true to life that one of the chief union organizers, Bruce Raynor, was Jewish. In fact, it was Sol Stetin, a Jewish immigrant from Poland, who, as president of the Textile Workers Union, began the organizing drive at JP Stevens. He engineered a merger with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union during that struggle that is considered to be the key factor union victory that finally came in 1980.

Norma Rae's director was Martin Ritt, a Jewish leftist who had been blacklisted in the 1950s. Ritt previously produced and directed the film *Molly Maguires* (1970), about the rise and fall of an early miners' union made up of Irish immigrants working in the Pennsylvania coal fields. The screenplay was by Walter Bernstein, also a victim of the blacklist.

Herb Gardner wrote and directed both the play and movie versions of *I'm Not Rappaport* (1985/1996), a comedy that features an elderly Jew, a former union activist and incurable *kibitzer*, who continues, in his own way, to fight for social justice. It begins with a depiction of the launching of "The Uprising of the 20,000," the great garment workers' strike of 1909-1910, as seen by the elderly Jew when he was a young boy, carried on his father's shoulders.

Walter Matthau played the lead in the movie. His park bench buddy was played by Black actor Ossie Davis, who, along with his wife, actress Ruby Dee, had close ties with the left-wing of the Jewish labor movement. They were also long-time supporters of the progressive Jewish magazine, *Jewish Currents*.

Bread and Roses, a 2000 film, was based on the Service Employees International Union's Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles. The workers are undocumented Hispanics, but the union organizer, played by Adrien Brody, is "Sam Shapiro," a Jew, character that may have been inspired by Steven Lerner, a prime architect of the campaign.

The latest tale of labor struggles told on Broadway (2011--2014) was the hit musical *Newsies*, based on an 1899 strike by newsboys against Pulitzer and Hearst newspapers in NYC. It was adapted from a 1992 movie created by three Jews: Harvey Fierstein (playwright), Alan Mencken (music) and Jack Feldman (lyrics).

Within the entertainment industry, actor Theodore Bikel distinguished himself as a leading union activist. He was president of Actors Equity from 1973-1982, helped form the Canadian Actors Equity, served as president of the Associated Actors and Artistes of America for over 25 years until his death and personally held membership in four performing artist unions. Bikel was also deeply committed to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements.

In the musical world, he was one of the founders of the Newport Folk Festival in 1959 and performed there on many occasions. His repertoire included Yiddish folk songs and songs of social justice.

UNION DEMOCRACY

Unions are imperfect organizations. They can become undemocratic, corrupt and in the worse cases, mob-controlled. The single pro-labor organization that has relentlessly campaigned for union democracy is the aptly named Association for Union Democracy (AUD). It has been described as a “civil liberties organization that focuses on the rights of members in their union to free speech, fair elections, due process... and fair hiring.” Through education, legal action and organization, the AUD has defended union dissidents and helped bring democratic reforms to such unions as the Painters, the United Mine Workers, the United Steelworkers and the Teamsters.

Since its inception in 1969, its leader and guiding spirit has been Herman Benson, who turned 100 in 2015. Entering politics as a young socialist back in the 1930s, Benson transitioned through the Trotskyist movement, then back to the Socialist Party before founding the AUD. He also worked as a machinist and toolmaker and held membership at various times in four different industrial unions. He was inspired to take up the cause of union democracy when he perceived that the goals of the 1959 Landrum Griffin Act were being thwarted by the Labor Department and entrenched union bureaucrats. His memoir, *Rebels, Reformers and Racketeers: How Insurgents Transformed the Labor Movement* (2004), chronicles his noble crusade.

Harry Kelber was another crusader for union democracy. His 1990 pamphlet “Why Unions are in Trouble and What They Can Do About It” got him into trouble with the AFL-CIO leadership for exposing it as an entrenched bureaucracy whose conservative policies were contributing labor's decline.

In 1993 and again in 1995, he put himself in the running for vice-president of the AFL-CIO, where there had not been a contested election for 30 years. Although he did not have the ghost of a chance, the first time the bureaucrats ruled him ineligible just make sure, and the second time they manipulated his ballot status in such a way became a chore for anyone to vote for him. In 2003, Kelber was arbitrarily expelled from the Communications Workers of America. He was planning a run against AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka when he died in 2013.

Kelber's long and distinguished career as a labor journalist, union printer, labor educator and labor dissident are chronicled in his autobiography, *My 60 Years as a Labor Activist* (1996) which he supplemented ten years later.

In 2006, the progressive journal *Labor Notes* gave Benson, Kelber and Erwin Baur (a veteran UAW leader) its Lifetime Troublemaker Award at its annual conference. (I do not know if Baur is also Jewish.) Together they had over 160 years' experience in the labor movement.

LABOR HISTORIANS

Jews have been among the most accomplished labor historians. Selig Perlman, an immigrant from Poland, was an influential labor historian in the first half of the 20th century. Herbert Gutman, who attended IWO/JPFO Yiddish schools as a youth, developed a new approach to labor history that emphasized the grass roots rather than the institutions. Between 1947 and 1994, Philip Foner wrote a ten-volume history of the American labor movement.

Contemporary Jewish labor historians include Stanley Aronowitz, David Brody, Lizabeth Cohen, Melvyn Dubofsky, Leon Fink (also the editor of the journal, *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas*), Nelson Lichtenstein and a younger generation consisting of Daniel Katz and Tony Michels, whose latest book is *Jewish Radicals: A Documentary History* (2012).

LABOR EDUCATION

Lillian Herstein was an early labor educator in Chicago. Harry Kelber virtually created the field of labor studies for union workers at Cornell University in the late 1960s and published a newsletter, *The Labor Educator*, for decades. In 1983, Sol Stetin founded the American Labor Museum in Haledon, NJ, a historic site connected to the 1913 Paterson silk workers' strike. He also taught labor studies at William Paterson College and Rutgers University in New Jersey, where he was honored as the first "labor leader in residence."

ZIONISM AND ISRAEL

Zionism was not a significant issue for the Jewish labor movement before the mid-1930s. The Jewish unions did not support the 1917 Balfour Declaration. For the most part Zionism was

perceived as a bourgeois ideology, hardly relevant to the everyday lives of the Jewish working class in America or, for that matter, in the old country. However, the United Hebrew Trades, the 250,00 member strong umbrella group for the Jewish unions, did launch a campaign in the 1920s on behalf of the Jewish labor federation in mandatory Palestine, the *Histadrut*. A major shift in favor of Zionism began during World War Two in reaction to the unfolding Holocaust, as reflected in the trajectory of the Jewish Labor Committee. It is not hard to understand why a Jewish state in Palestine appeared to be a necessary solution to the tragedy of Jewish powerlessness, as well as a compelling humanitarian cause for refugees from Nazi-ravaged Europe.

In 1944, the CIO passed a resolution favoring a Jewish state in Palestine and American labor leaders formed the National Trade Union Emergency Committee on Labor Palestine. It certainly helped solidify labor support for Israel that both the world socialist and communist movements endorsed the UN Partition Resolution in 1947 and backed Israel in its subsequent war for independence in 1948-49.

The critical role played by the *Histadrut*, along with the kibbutz movement, in building the Israeli economy on a quasi-socialist foundation was yet an additional factor that generated support for Israel among Jewish labor activists in the US. To aid in this effort, the ILGWU floated a \$1 million loan to Israel in 1948. Only a few Jewish voices in the wilderness expressed concern for the Arab victims of Israel's success, and they did not come from the labor movement.

With the onset of the Cold War, Jewish labor leaders, including the Jewish Labor Committee, fell in line with the AFL-CIO's anti-communist agenda which included unstinting support for Israel as an American ally. There are, however, some cracks in this edifice. Jewish Voice for Peace emerged in 1996 and Labor for Palestine in 2004. They both advocate a Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions strategy and appear to be uncomfortable with the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. Their supporters are generally radical Jewish youth and graduate student unions. Former AFL-CIO Political Director Karen Ackerman serves on JVP's Board of Directors.

J-Street, established in 2007, takes a middle ground between the Israel lobby represented by the American Israeli Public Affairs Council (AIPAC) and Jewish Voice for Peace. It is the advocacy organization for Jews who believe that the United States government must take stronger action to pressure Israel to negotiate a viable two state solution; one that guarantees Israel's security while recognizing the national rights of the Palestinian people. Stuart Appelbaum, president of the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), sits on its Advisory Council. Randi Weingarten, President of the AFT, the most Jewish of American labor unions, was the keynote speaker at J-Street's 2015 annual conference.

Partners for a Progressive Israel, an organization aligned with the Left Zionist Meretz party in Israel, takes a stronger position than J-Street in favor of ending the occupation and guaranteeing equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel. Arieh Lebowitz, Associate Director of the JLC, is a vice-president.

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

The entire labor movement is in the doldrums, but Jews are still part of it, not in the rank and file so much as in leadership or in related fields. Needless to say, you do not find Jews in the garment industry anymore, except perhaps as owners or management. But Jews can still be found in white-collar public sector unions, especially in education or higher education and remain prevalent in unions in the entertainment industry, such as Actors' Equity and the Screen Actors Guild, and in the medical field, such as the Committee of Interns and Residents. It is perhaps inevitable that their numbers are diminishing as other minorities move into these fields and young Jews choose other occupations.

In 1995, John Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO as a reform candidate. His election was the outcome of a division within the labor federation between the defenders of the status quo and advocates for a greater focus on organizing, political action and coalition-building and greater representation of woman and minorities in leadership positions. The old Jewish unions lined up on the conservative side of the divide, led by Albert Shanker, President of the AFT and Morton Bahr, President of the Communications Workers. The only union with significant Jewish membership that supported Sweeney was AFSCME, led at this time by a non-Jew.

In October 1996 a two-day teach-in was held at Columbia University to forge an alliance between the revamped AFL-CIO and progressive intellectuals. Here Jews were highly visible. Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian, was co-chair of the organizing committee. Eric Foner (nephew of labor historian Philip Foner and labor leaders Moe and Henry Foner) chaired the actual event. About one-third of the speakers were Jewish, including Betty Friedan, who started her career as a labor journalist, Nelson Lichtenstein and fellow labor historian Stanley Aronowitz, New Left activist and sociologist Todd Gitlin, journalist Paul Berman and UNITE's Director of Communications Jo-Ann Mort.

UNITE was the union that resulted from the merger of the ILGWU and the ACTWU--the backbone of the old Jewish labor movement. Mort later edited *Not Your Father's Labor Movement: Inside the New AFL-CIO* (1999). Although the teach-in was well attended and

appeared to offer great promise (as reflected in Mort's book, published three years later), it did little to reverse the long-term decline of the labor movement.

The event was covered in *The New York Times* by its Jewish labor reporter Steven Greenhouse. His most illustrious predecessor at the *Times* was A.H. Raskin, also Jewish, who covered the labor beat for over forty years. In 1977, he collaborated with ILGWU leader David Dubinsky on his memoirs.

On a personal note, I am employed as a staff representative for the Council of New Jersey State College Locals, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers. We represent over 9,000 full time and adjunct faculty, professional staff and librarians in New Jersey's nine state colleges and universities. When I was hired in 1988, six out of the nine local presidents were Jewish. Today, only two out of eleven are. Our union delegates and rank and file have also become less Jewish over the years.

A few years ago I attended a massive labor rally of public employees in Trenton, NJ where I joined Arieh Lebowitz, long time staffer and now Associate Director for the Jewish Labor Committee, and a few other JLC members in holding up signs. Union activists around us appeared pleasantly surprised to see this small organized Jewish presence. Years ago, I think Jews at a labor rally would have been taken for granted. Now Jews are assumed to be among the well-to-do and, therefore, not a natural union constituency.

There are still, however, many Jews among American labor leaders. They include:

Stuart Appelbaum—President of Retail Wholesale Department Store Union now a/w United Food and Commercial Workers and also President of the Jewish Labor Committee

Randi Weingarten—President of American Federation of Teachers

Larry Cohen----until very recently, President of Communication Workers of America (CWA) and then a top advisor to the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign

Matthew Loeb—President of the International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees

Eric Scherzer—Executive Director of the Committee of Interns and Residents

Hetty Rosenstein—CWA director for NJ and related to the founders of the progressive Puffin Foundation

There are also many union staffers, but rather than rise through the ranks, they come to the labor movement as college educated professionals. I am one of them. Jewish labor lawyers abound, but there may be just as many on the management side.

Prominent Jewish labor leaders in recent years included Bruce Raynor, former president of UNITE/HERE and Andy Stern, former president of the Service Employees International Union. Stern attracted a lot of publicity for his success in organizing low wage workers in the 1990s and 2000s, and as the prime mover behind the emergence of the Change to Win labor federation in 2005, in which Raynor also took part. Karen Ackerman served as the Political Director of the AFL-CIO from 2003 to 2011, the first woman to hold that post.

The Jewish Labor Committee continues in its role as the advocate for labor causes in the Jewish community and Jewish causes in the labor community. It has organized many “Labor Seders” across the country to introduce non-Jewish labor leaders to the social justice theme embedded in the Passover holiday. Among its recent causes are a \$15 minimum wage, paid sick leave and humane immigration reform.

There are a few noteworthy Jewish organizations devoted to the pursuit of labor rights and social justice, including the New York-based Jews For Racial and Economic Justice (NYC), the Washington D.C.-based Jews United for Justice, a national organization Bend the Arc (formerly known as Jewish Funds for Justice) and the oldest, the Workmen’s Circle. In 2011, Occupy Wall Street’s Jewish participants organized public High Holiday services.

Social activist rabbis include Jill Jacobs, author of *There Shall Be No Needy* (2009) and director of T’ruah: Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine and Arthur Waskow, founder of the Shalom Center. Lerner and Waskow were active in the New Left before they became rabbis.

WHY THE JEWS?

According to the Biographical Dictionary of American Labor Leaders, there have been twice as many labor leaders of Catholic origin than Jewish origin. But there are eleven times more Catholics in the United States than Jews, a proportion that has not varied very much since the turn of the 20th century. For a group that never made up more than 4% of the American population, Jews have undeniably made their mark on the labor movement and its kindred institutions and emanations.

What accounts for the especially large role Jews played in the *progressive wing* of the American labor movement?

The first generation of Jewish labor leaders were immigrants from Czarist Russia, where Jewish men were doubly oppressed as Jews and workers, and Jewish women were triply oppressed. As perennial outsiders, they were positioned to take a critical view of the status quo and to be more receptive to radical ideas. Although Jewish clergy were conservative, they did not exercise the type of control imposed on Christians by the Russian Orthodox or Catholic church. Furthermore, Jews as a group, tended to be more literate and urban than other immigrants to America. Living as minorities in many countries with these attributes, Jews inevitably had a broader perspective on the world than the Gentiles that surrounded them.

As Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher observed about Jewish revolutionaries:

I do not believe in the exclusive genius of any race. Yet I think that in some ways, they were very Jewish indeed. They had in themselves something of the quintessence of Jewish life and of the Jewish intellect. They were an *a priori* exception, in that as Jews they dwelt on the borderlines of various civilizations, religions and national cultures. They were born and brought up on the borderlines of various epochs. Their minds matured where the most diverse cultural influences crossed and fertilized each other. They lived on the margins or in the nooks and crannies of their respective nations. They were each in society and yet not in it, of it and yet not of it. It was this that enabled them to rise in thought above their societies, above their nations, above their times and generations and to strike out mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future.

Some have suggested that certain of the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) that deal with economics and the prophetic teaching of social justice have played a major role in promoting Jewish progressivism. In my opinion, this is wishful thinking. Those who study the Bible most rigorously have never been in the forefront of the struggle for social justice. The prophets were far more troubled by religious pluralism than social injustice. However, there may be something to the theory that Judaism's emphasis on collective responsibility, rather than original sin and individual redemption, helps explain Jews' attraction to movements that stress social solidarity and the common good.

The Jewish tradition of arguing with God and debating points of Jewish law, applied to the secular world, may have given Jewish men the *chutzpah*---and the analytic tools---to envision greater possibilities for social progress. However, this would not account for the large number of Jewish women who were attracted to radical movements. They were generally excluded from religious study.

How Jewish were Jewish labor leaders? For the Yiddish-speaking immigrant generation, the answer should be obvious. Jewishness or *Yiddishkayt* was in their bones. Yet some were more committed to Jewish causes than others. David Dubinsky and Max Zaritsky were Labor Zionists. Baruch Charney Vladeck founded the Jewish Labor Committee; Clara Lemlich Shavelson was among the founders of the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs; Israel Kugler

was a major leader of the Workmen's Circle; Ben Gold wrote short stories and novels in Yiddish; Irving Abrams was devoted to a host of Jewish causes. For some, like Rose Pesotta, it took the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust to awaken a Jewish commitment. Leon Davis did not want to be known as a Jewish labor leader, yet made regular donations to *Jewish Currents* magazine.

For the American-born and educated Jewish labor activist, the answer may not be so clear. Most were so immersed in labor struggles and radical politics that their Jewishness was not overtly expressed. Frank Tannenbaum was Jewish and a Wobbly, but hardly a "Jewish" Wobbly. I have been unable to find a Jewish connection for Sidney Lens, Myra Wolfgang, Marvin Miller or Harry Kelber. On the other hand, Paul Jacobs worked for the American Jewish Committee and wrote a book exploring his Jewishness.

There can be no doubt that multiple generations of Jewish labor leaders were secular, cultural Jews at a time when Jewish secularism and social radicalism were closely linked. This is no longer the case. Randi Weingarten belongs to a synagogue and considers herself religious. Larry Cohen once contributed a short article, "Central Ideas of Jewish Secularism," to a booklet on Secular Humanistic Judaism published in 1990, but this may be a twenty-six-year-old exception. My friend from high school, who became the president of a large local union representing clerical and technical workers at Harvard University, is a Jewish Buddhist.

Based on my own experience in New Jersey, given the decline of the leftist secular Jewish movement, most Jewish labor leaders have taken the route of synagogue membership--Reform or Reconstructionist--for lack of a better alternative. Yet I venture to guess that what attracts them to Jewish communal life is not religious belief or observance, but a sense that it somehow leads to "*tikkun olam*" or, in the venerable Yiddish phrase, "*a besere un a shenerer velt*"--- the same goal of "a better and more beautiful world" that inspired their radical parents and grandparents to fight for universal social justice.

CONCLUSION

American Jews have come a long way from the sweatshops and the urban ghettos of the Lower East Side and others like it. We are no longer on the margins of society. Three Jews sit on the Supreme Court, one is chair of the Federal Reserve and many more serve on corporate and bank boards and in executive positions in law firms and media companies. Although the poor are still among us, Jews are, in fact, among the wealthiest demographic.

Jews still have advocates for labor in Bernie Sanders and Robert Reich and the living labor leaders cited in this essay, but we also have right-wing anti-labor figures such as Walter Annenberg, Sheldon Adelson and Bernard Marcus. As Jews shrink as a percentage of the US population and right-leaning orthodox Jews grow in number, it is far from certain whether Jews will continue to distinguish themselves as advocates for the labor movement and social justice.

It is encouraging, however, that the Pew Research Center "Portrait on Jewish Americans," released in 2013, reveals that 56% of respondents said that "working for justice/equality" is essential to their Jewish identity.

Is this enough to sustain the Jewish labor tradition, albeit in new forms? To quote a onetime progressive Jew, "The answer is blowin' in the wind."

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This article is also in booklet form, including illustrations, and is available for purchase. Please contact Bennett for details.

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