

SERVANTS OF TWO MASTERS: THE DILEMMA OF GRASSROOTS COMMUNIST LEADERS IN THE CLOAKMAKERS' STRIKE OF 1926.¹

On September 18, 1926 Charles Zimmerman, Joseph Boruchowitz, and Rose Wortis, Communist leaders within the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, met at party headquarters at 114 East 14th Street with Benjamin Gitlow, William Weinstone, and Joseph Zack, representatives of the Needle Trades Committee, that organ of the Workers' (Communist) Party that dealt with union affairs. They met to get Party approval for a favorable settlement the union leaders had negotiated—against all odds and after eleven weeks of a hard fought strike—with leading employers in the women's garment industry. All those at the meeting hoped that this success would be merely a step toward Communist control of one of the nation's largest trade unions.

A long discussion of “what is more dangerous to true Leninism, a left wing or a right wing deviation” preceded consideration of the issues at hand, but then they got down to business, the union leaders made their case and the party leaders gave the proposed settlement their stamp of approval. Final approval was now required from the union “leading fraction” of the Workers’ Party, the 150-200 Communist or Communist-allied shop chairmen from the ILGWU strike halls who were simultaneously having their own meeting on another floor of the same building. This was a formality, a rubber stamp really, since as historian Melech Epstein, a party member at the time and present at the event, noted, “It was a foregone conclusion that the leading fraction would accept a decision handed down by the party.” Together with the leaders of the Workers’ Party, the strike leaders went to meet this group. Zimmerman spoke, explaining the agreement and reporting the acquiescence of the higher Workers’ Party officials. Then Boruchowitz—

“something of a nudnick” in Epstein’s estimation—rose to speak. He defended the agreement at length, but, as Zimmerman recalled, Boruchowitz had a “Yiddish way of expressing himself, like a rabbi or a judge weighing all the issues” and so, when he concluded, rather than driving home the benefits of the settlement, he said deprecatingly, “Maybe we could have gotten more, but we think on balance this is the best package.”²

Maybe we could have gotten more: These words, spoken in innocent affectation, intended merely to convey a judicious modesty, unwittingly triggered a chain reaction that led to the unraveling of the entire agreement and, ultimately, to the defeat of the Communists in their quest for control of the ILGWU. The unraveling began with William Weinstone who, though a high-ranking member of the dominant group associated with General Secretary Charles Ruthenberg in the faction-ridden Workers’ Party, was secretly building a following of his own, hoping to displace both Ruthenberg and his arch-rival, William Z. Foster, head of the party’s Industrial Department. In the Byzantine world of American Communist power struggles, Weinstone was so well known for his factional inconstancy that he had earned the nickname of “Wobbly” Weinstone. No sooner had Boruchowitz finished than Weinstone leapt to his feet, shouting “in his booming voice” that if they could have gotten more, then they should go get it. Boruchowitz’s unhappy phrase had left an opening to create a split from which Weinstone hoped his infant faction might benefit.

Gitlow immediately realized that he and the Ruthenberg faction that he represented were in danger of being outdone in militancy; this could leave them vulnerable to accusations of opportunism which in turn could undermine their standing with the Comintern which in turn would definitely undermine their standing in the Workers’ Party relative to Foster’s group. Gitlow rose to reverse his endorsement of the strike settlement. Foster’s representatives at the

meeting, New York district organizer Charles Krumbein and Zack, also could not afford to be “outBolsheviked” by their opponents, and so they joined the stampede against the proposed agreement. Zimmerman, Hyman, and Wortis, recently pilloried for “right wing” deviation during the Party’s domestic version of the war against Trotsky, the crusade against “Loreism” (see below) and not eager to repeat the experience, stayed silent, not daring to speak up to clarify matters lest once again they become scapegoats in the unreasoning atmosphere of factional struggle. The union leading fraction of shop chairmen, completely in the dark about the undercurrents running through this meeting, was now convinced that somehow better terms could be secured; it fell into line behind the national party leaders and instructed the union negotiators to go back and “get more.”³

The problem was that there was no more to be gotten. The whole settlement had disintegrated. Ultimately the strike lasted six months, involved more than 36,000 people and 2,150 manufacturing plants, and caused the loss of some 5,613,430 working days. The ILGWU was left a shambles: about 15,000 workers had been on strike, their families and themselves deprived of their regular incomes, for 20 weeks, while another 15,000 had lost some part of the season’s earnings. The International itself was \$2,000,000 in debt and, while hitherto it had been one of the A.F. of L.’s ten largest unions, now it had lost over two-thirds of its original membership (down to 60,000 from a total of 190,000 when the strike began). Almost all the hard-earned union influence over industrial conditions was gone.⁴

How could a victory that was virtually assured turn so suddenly into defeat? Depending on the political preferences of the writers, existing accounts of the Cloakmakers’ Strike have tended to stress as the cause of failure either factionalism among the Communists or else the alleged iniquities of their opponents in the union, the Socialists. There is little evidence to support the

view that the Socialists undermined the strike effort but it is certainly true that an important part of the strike's failure arose from the fact that the leaders of the Workers' party gave precedence to factional advantage over concrete gains for the cloakmakers. However, to stop with the phenomenon of factionalism and go no further is to underplay a more complex relationship between grass-roots American Communists, American Communist leaders, and contemporary developments in the Soviet Union, a relationship involving a specific interplay between the choices and actions of individual agents and structural considerations. The extant scholarship has not examined the role of the structures—institutional, group, and interpersonal—that defined the parameters within which specific developments would or could take shape.⁵

Even though differences between individuals or groups of individuals in any group are inevitable, the prevalence of factionalism—the unstructured, and therefore uncontrolled, jockeying for power among groups—does not “just happen.” It can only become a *dominant* factor in the presence of an incompletely articulated or incompletely applied (as in the case of someone who has authority but is unwilling to use it) hierarchical structure. In particular, transitional periods, when power passes from one leader to another, are generally critical tests of the stability of any form of government. Traditional governments like monarchies bridge the juncture through the (extremely vulnerable) mechanism of heredity; governments based on legal authority, operating through a binding system of uniformly applied normative rules, have institutional mechanisms that, given a political culture that respects legality, work fairly smoothly and predictably as one person moves out of office and another moves in.

However, as will be argued below, legal authority did not shape the dynamics of the Communist movement. Rather, what tied Communists around the world together and determined their actions was charismatic authority, which flowed from the supposed unique possession by

the Bolsheviks of what they put forward as the final truth of human existence, the correct interpretation of Marxian socialism. Charismatic authority is inherently structureless and contains no mechanism to bridge changes in leadership. Moreover, while legal systems have the ability to accommodate diverse opinions by institutionalizing dissent, charisma with its dependence on absolute authority can only offer a simple yes or no—you’re right; you’re wrong; you’re in; you’re out. For these reasons, when charisma—which plays a role in all political systems—is the *central* principle holding a group together, conditions will be particularly ripe for factionalism to emerge in a virulent form, especially during uncertain transitional periods such as the one between Lenin’s final illness and Stalin’s rise to absolute power. Once Stalin’s power was firmly established through the eradication of possible rivals, a combination of his (carefully nurtured) personal charisma plus the liberal application of coercive force (within the Soviet Union) were able to keep factionalism in check, both in Russia and abroad.

A new account, then, of the problem of legitimacy in Communism (which includes differences between the problem of legitimacy in Soviet Russia and the problem of legitimacy in a non-national ideological movement) adds an important dimension in understanding the failure of Communism in the ILGWU and in the United States more generally (in truth, it seems that its failure in America was pre-ordained but that in the ILG much less so). The key to that enhanced understanding is seeing the relation between radically contingent events (like the crisis produced by Boruchowitz’s poorly-chosen words) and the deeper structures that make them possible and consequential.

Institutional Contradictions in the Workers’ Party.

In the early 1920s Leninists the world over were in a state of ideological flux and uncertainty. The original Bolshevik doctrine—the very justification for the takeover of a Russian state that

was in the infant stage of industrialization—was that a workers' revolution in Russia would spark a series of worker revolts internationally that would bring about the advent of worldwide socialism. However, in the wake of the suppression of the Spartacus uprising in Germany, the short-lived Hungarian and Bavarian People's Republics of 1919, and other failures, there was little to support Bolshevik internationalist hopes.

The Communists of the United States had, after a period of existing as two separate parties, joined to form the Workers' Party. Weak, disorganized, and outcast in American society, American Communists leaned heavily on the Communist International for support and legitimacy. As the Communist leader William Z. Foster told radical journalist Max Eastman, “[The Russians] have the prestige, and you can't build a revolutionary movement without them.”⁶ And Benjamin Gitlow, a high-ranking member of the Workers' Party, wrote: “We believed that the Communist International knew what was best for us and that to disobey its decisions was tantamount to treason. We who were the leaders did everything to build up this attitude. We did not have to do it hypocritically, because in the main we believed as did the rank and file.”⁷ This deferential attitude was not lip service but rather a central characteristic of the Party leadership (with the important exception of Ludwig Lore, editor of the party's German organ, *New Yorker Volkszeitung* [see below]): so, when Foster was attacked by Socialist Eugene V. Debs for accepting the dictates of the “Vatican in Moscow,” he responded that “[w]e make no apology for accepting the guidance of the Third International. On the contrary, we glory in it” and Foster's ally James Cannon described the Communist party's obedience to the Comintern “not as a formal affair, but as an inseparable part of its being, which shapes and colors all of its activities, something that penetrates into the very marrow of its bones [...] the word of the Communist International is decisive in all party questions.”⁸ The Comintern, then, as the

institutional embodiment of the working class of the world, was the ultimate source of legitimization within the Workers' Party, particularly as the party's domestic leaders discovered that the American rank-and-file would not follow anyone whose leadership did not have the International's sanction. Consequently, when differences and rivalries sprang up among American Communist leaders, the chief weapon they wielded against each other was the demand for ideological purity as defined in Moscow.

One problem for the leadership, however, was that the contours of "ideological purity" kept shifting unpredictably. From war communism to the New Economic Program to the confrontation in 1923 – 1924 between Trotsky and the troika of Comintern chairman Grigory Zinoviev, Communist Party General Secretary Joseph Stalin and Politburo chairman Lev Kamenev, Stalin's turn against Zinoviev and Kamenev (the New Opposition) in 1925, and then Zinoviev and Kamenev's alignment with Trotsky against Stalin (the United Opposition) in 1926, the line kept shifting, and, especially after Lenin's death, personal power struggles were clothed in ideological clothing. The changes in the definition of orthodoxy emerging from Moscow translated to American soil as ideological and organizational incoherence (a marked example being first the American party's commitment first to dual unionism, then "boring from within" and then dual unionism again), a pervasive sense of uncertainty about what constituted allowable positions at any given time, and a tendency to use accusations of ideological error as weapons against factional opponents.⁹

The resulting confusion and weakness were compounded by the Comintern's attempt in 1925 to balance American political realities (a weak proletarian party's need to develop strength in the labor movement) with bureaucratic rationality. The arrangement that emerged was neither fish nor fowl and became a key cause of the Communist failure in the ILGWU. The Comintern's

intervention was a response to the American party's weakness in that area that represented Communists' most logical entrée into the realm of power, the labor movement.

In the wake of the publication of Lenin's *Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Delusion* (1920) with its demand that Communists renounce what now appeared to be an unrealistic purism in favor of temporary and expedient compromises with existing socio-economic forms, the Comintern had dictated a worldwide change in labor strategy from the creation of exclusively Communist dual unions to a policy of "boring from within," i.e., the infiltration of existing unions with a view to dominating them. The American party, however, lacked experienced union leaders, and so Comintern officials sought to facilitate the change by courting the syndicalist labor organizer William Z. Foster—already a prestigious proponent of working within existing unions to radicalize them—to bring him into the party. Foster was lured with the promise of his own sphere of influence; he would be in charge of Communist trade-union activities which he would direct from Chicago through an organization that he had started before becoming a Communist, the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL). Meanwhile the Comintern put Charles Ruthenberg, the most prominent leader in the American party, in charge of the party's political activities (with headquarters in New York City). Problems arose, however, because the terms of the settlement did not precisely define the real-life distinctions between the two areas , and the ambiguity of the arrangement left room for continuing turf wars between the two leaders. By 1924, intense factional rivalry had developed between Ruthenberg and Foster and their respective supporters over a variety of issues; at the root lay a conflict over who was to lead the American Communists.

Early party documents make it clear that the very Communist leaders who were engaged in factional warfare were perplexed as to how or why they had come to be embroiled in these

rivalries; they were engaged in what they understood to be a destructive process, yet they could not seem to control it even though they themselves were the actors in this drama. In February 1927, shortly before Charles Ruthenberg's death on March 2, 1927, he, along with his lieutenants Jay Lovestone and Max Bedacht, met with former Foster adherent William Cannon to discuss the possibility of putting an end to factionalism within the party.

During the discussion, Bedacht tried to analyze the problem. He acknowledged the existence of "groupings" within the party but he could find no "fundamental or basic" differences among these groups. It seemed to him that the factions emerged from a "tendency to go into a struggle for power over every difference of opinion." Further, he noted that there was a "tendency to exaggerate differences under such conditions," pointing out that in the American party there was no real right or left-wing tendency and no leaders with such leanings. Having disposed of the notion that actual doctrinal differences were at the heart of factionalism, he finished by saying, "When we discuss leadership, we must discuss the question of the hegemony in any collective leadership. . . . Will it be those comrades whose line is generally symbolized by Foster or will it be those generally symbolized by Ruthenberg? . . . We should have a frank discussion in the CEC and Polcom. This is the question." And with this the discussion comes back to the question of "who is to have the power" without having established any basis for answering it, especially given the fact that the actual answer would always in the end come from Moscow. It was clear in any case that the rank and file would have nothing to do with the outcome.

Although the leaders within the CPUSA were not aware of it, the roots of the factionalism that kept them at each other's throats were systemic. Institutionally the CPUSA functioned within a context (the Third International) whose guiding influences (Lenin, then Zinoviev—formally until his deposition in 1926, actually until after the fifth plenum of the Comintern

Executive in early 1925—and then increasingly, Stalin through his unconscious instrument Bukharin) were not committed to pursuing their goals within boundaries dictated by principles of legality and rationality. Rather, the fundamental and binding principle of authority within the Communist world was the charisma of the Soviet Union's Communist party.

Lenin's contempt for the procedural and institutional restrictions imposed by legality is well known; he demonstrated it decisively when he gave the order to disperse the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. If an election would deny power to the Bolsheviks, then the results of that election must be overturned. Having rejected legal authority, having no claim to traditional authority, all that was left to the Bolsheviks was charismatic authority. The basis of their charisma was their supposed unique connection to the ultimate truth represented by Karl Marx's teachings—they, and they alone, had the correct understanding of Marx. All variant interpretations were the result of error or malice, usually a combination of both. And though the Bolsheviks set up all the trappings of legal authority—a constitution, courts, etc.—, they did not bind themselves in any meaningful way to be limited in their actions by those institutions in the pursuit of their goal: a classless society. That meant that all the patterns of human and institutional relationship expressed by legal instruments in the Communist world functioned only at the arbitrary will of those who controlled the Party.

What I would like to stress here is that legal and traditional authority constitute *systems* of human relationships, relationships that are defined and mediated at every level from the household to the state through legal or traditional institutions and practices. Thus law or else custom and tradition, as the case may be, constitutes the ultimate expression of legitimacy. Systemic rules, be they legal or traditional, give order and predictability to relationships and to transitions; under most circumstances one knows who must be obeyed and who must obey. All

goals must be pursued within the confines of what is prescribed by law or of tradition. If there is a change, it takes place through the application of more or less orderly rules in a more or less orderly way.

Under charismatic authority, on the other hand, the ultimate source of legitimacy is the will of the charismatic leader based on his or her (or, in this case, the CPUSSR's) claim to a special connection to absolute truth and the followers' acceptance of that claim. For the followers to legitimate their own actions, they must claim that those actions accurately reflect the leader's will. To the extent that this will is unstable or changeable, that instability or changeability will translate to and permeate the entire group as group members constantly and anxiously shift to adjust to any changes in the leader's will. Beyond this, there is no principle of order to shape relationships within the group.

After Lenin's death, the dominant figures in the still infant Soviet regime faced the pointed challenge of their own lack of commitment to a system of rules. There was no institutional pattern in place to give order to the succession; an essentially chaotic process must work itself out. Because American Communist leaders performed based their own authority on their connection to the Russian-dominated Comintern and responded powerfully to every ideological and political breeze that emerged from it, the chaos at the Russian center inevitably spread to the American periphery. American Communists viewed the Comintern not as an institution with divisions based on individual beliefs and interests but rather as the embodiment of the unified (through the mechanism of democratic centralism) will of the world's proletarians. In a class-based analysis, the class is the basic unit, not merely analytically but also ontologically. In this context, it is a real thing with an essential and unitary nature. This means that no division within it is possible or tolerable. In the Leninist-Marxist worldview, the interest of the proletarian class

is absolute and absolutely good. To stand on the wrong side of any issue, then, is not merely to be mistaken but to be aligned with evil; the malefactor must confess and change or be cast out as an enemy—and as Communists were soon to discover, confession and repentance might not constitute sufficient expiation. This accounts for the annihilatory nature of the language that Communists aimed at each other in their doctrinal debates and for the fact that they felt compelled to enunciate every difference in doctrinal terms. This also explains the intense personalization of discourse (Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, Stalinism, Loreism) within a system of thought that purports to be supremely impersonal: every trend of thought, whether approved or disapproved, was credited to or blamed on someone despite the Marxist contention that the wheels of historical determinism were impersonally rolling on in one inexorable direction, whether humanity understood or approved of this direction or not; every individual associated with a particular line of logic was either sainted or demonized according to their supposed orthodoxy or heterodoxy.

Despite all this, the immediate and particular problem of American factionalism could have been resolved: in 1924 – 25 the Comintern under Zinoviev’s leadership started its “Bolshevization” campaign, issuing instructions for the reorganization, rationalization, and centralization of the institutional structures of the Communist parties of Europe and the United States. The American party was reorganized accordingly and the new formal hierarchy connecting the Workers’ Party to the needle trades was as follows:

1. The Political Committee of the Party’s Central Executive Committee, which carried out policies approved by the Comintern and the Comintern’s international trade union organization, the Red International of Labor Unions (or Profintern).

2. The Needle Trades Committee of the Central Executive (of which Gitlow was the Chairman), centered in New York City.
3. The National Committee of the Trade Union Educational League in Chicago, headed by Foster.
4. The District Committee of the New York District of the Party, which carried out the orders of the Central Executive Committee's Needle Trades Committee.
5. The Leading Fraction of the Needle Trades (hereafter, for the sake of clarity, to be designated the "top fraction"), composed of the most important Communist leaders of the needle trades unions.
6. The National Needle Trades Committee of the Trade Union Educational League.
7. The leading fractions of each one of the unions, including "not only the leaders of the unions but also the Communist members on the joint Boards and all Communist officials plus the Communist leaders of the opposition, if they had no official place in the unions" (hereafter to be called the "leading fraction").'

Within each local union, a Party fraction divided into a small leading fraction and the all embracing fraction of all the Party members in that local union.¹⁰

The top fraction in the garment trades included Zimmerman, Rose Wortis, Joseph Boruchowitz (all of the ILGWU), Ben Gold, and Gross (both of the Furriers' Joint Board); these were in direct contact with William Z. Foster and the political committee of the party through the Needle Trades Committee. Once they became members of the New York Cloak and Dress Joint Board of the ILGWU, Zimmerman, Boruchowitz, and Wortis functioned on several different levels within this scheme.

Foster's TUEL, already in decline in the mid-1920s, was under attack by the Ruthenberg faction and since he controlled the CEC, the hierarchical lines outlined above should have put final authority into the hands of Ruthenberg, leaving an unambiguous situation.¹¹ However, at the Sixth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, held from February 17 to March 15, 1926, an American Commission had convened in Moscow and, to save the face of the most important labor leader in the American Communist movement, had decreed that the Foster group should retain control of the Workers Party's trade-union work even though the Ruthenberg faction had the majority on the party's Central Executive Committee. As Theodore Draper notes

The leadership of the central committee ordinarily implied the leadership of all subordinate committees in order to ensure a single source of authority in the party. It was most unusual for the Comintern to give the majority of the central committee to one faction and the majority of the important trade-union committee to another faction. *Yet this is exactly what the Comintern decided to do on this occasion. It ordered the Fosterites to get a majority on the Trade-Union Committee, and advised Ruthenberg's majority on the Central Executive Committee not to exercise "petty control."* [Emphasis added.]¹²

In short, Moscow had established no clear source of authority in the hierarchical structure of the party, the rivalry between the two factions was left unresolved, and the leading fraction of the ILGWU found itself accountable to two mutually antagonistic masters, Foster and Ruthenberg. This is a point that has not been connected to the outcome of the 1926 strike in any previous accounts, but it was a critical and defining circumstance. This was the Comintern's decisive opportunity to end factionalism within the Workers' Party by enforcing the adoption of a bureaucratically rationalized and centralized power structure; one result of the failure to do so would be that at the crucial moment of the 1926 strike, the people who were the experts concerning the strike and its conduct (the ILGWU radicals of the leading fraction members of the joint Cloakmakers' Board), and who, as we will see, had already been psychologically savaged by both factions, abandoned their own successful settlement lest they be caught in the crossfire of an internecine political war. Had Bolshevization represented a commitment to a fully

rationalized organizational structure, institutional means would have been included for resolving power struggles in the USA and the party officials and members would have proceeded with reference to those rules. However, in the absence of such a rationalized power structure, an ongoing uncertainty prevailed, an uncertainty augmented by the fact that this was a transitional period as Zinoviev was losing his control of the Comintern as Bukharin took an increasingly prominent role.

The Communists and the Garment Industry

During the 1920s, the garment unions were particularly open to radical political influence since the Jewish workers who constituted the largest single ethnic group in the industry tended to be not only poor and exploited but also intellectually lively and politically left-wing.¹³ Radical impulses received reinforcement from the fact that the garment industry was in the throes of a long-lasting slump; the general recovery of the American economy after the post-war depression of 1920-1921 could not extend to an industry populated by too many firms and far too many workers. Many of the latter blamed their incumbent Socialist leaders for ills that actually arose from these larger forces. Radical garment workers also pointed out—and many who were not as radical agreed—that even their own socialist-dominated organization, the ILGWU, was somehow becoming more like the American institutions that many garment workers had grown to distrust; ILGWU leaders seemed too cozy in their positions of influence, and there were some who had been corrupted and had become racketeers.¹⁴

What made matters worse in radical eyes was that those same leaders seemed willing to make their peace with an exploitative economic system, working with it and through it rather than against it, relying on third party arbitration even though Socialists and Communists alike agreed that capitalism was a system explicitly designed to rob workers of the fruits of their labor. To a

Communist in those early years “class collaboration” was among the worst of sins, and the list of prohibited collaborative activities included serving in bourgeois parliamentary institutions, participating in collective bargaining, and using the police power of the state to further the interests of the workers (not usually a problem).

The ILGWU had taken controversial steps toward a cooperative owner/worker relationship, most notably in the Protocol of Peace of 1910. Even the Socialist Schlesinger administration had quickly come to realize after its installation in 1914 that in so chaotic an industry, where cutthroat competition was the norm, on bread-and-butter issues the workers would benefit most from an imposition of order on the entire industry. The employers all being at each other’s throats, it seemed that only the union was sufficiently disinterested to take steps to rationalize the system that produced ladies’ garments. This required the abandonment of the black-and-white industrial worldview espoused by militants in favor of a more modulated accommodation to the needs of the industry as a whole. This, in turn, left the ILGWU leaders open to accusations of class collaboration.¹⁵ Finally, many workers were unhappy that the procedures and institutions of the ILGWU (like those of most unions) were in many respects undemocratic, most egregiously in the system of representation at national conventions, a system which gave undue power to numerous small, centrist locals at the expense of the more radical majority that was concentrated in large, big-city locals.¹⁶ And so, in disgust, many were willing to follow the lead of the best organized radical group among them, the Communists.

The number of actual Workers’ Party members in the ILGWU was only 455¹⁷, but their influence went far beyond their numbers and they had important allies in the union. The most important of these was Louis Hyman, the popular radical manager of the Tailors’ and Finishers’ Local 9 and leader of the ILGWU radicals. Hyman was not a member of the Workers’ party and

he frequently offered resistance to the party's demands; yet, in the end, he almost always surrendered and followed the party line until the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939 precipitated his split with the Communists. He wrote for the *Freiheit* (the Communist Yiddish newspaper) and became president of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, the dual union set up by the Communist party in 1929.¹⁸

The Communist garment workers and their allies publicly vowed that should they be elected to power in the ILGWU, in addition to instituting more democratic union procedures, they would never compromise with the “class enemies;” moreover, they promised to negotiate better contracts than the Socialists. By 1925, the Communist program had won the support of a clear majority of the membership of the ILGWU, establishing strongholds in the large New York Locals 1 (Cloak and Suit Operators), 9 (Cloak Finishers), and 22 (Dressmakers); however, the absence of proportional representation at the national conventions enabled the Socialists and their allies to use their control of the numerous smaller, more conservative locals to retain control of the all-important General Executive Board (GEB).

The ILGWU had accommodated a host of radical affiliations ranging from the IWW to Democratic Socialism without apparent discomfort. However, as journalist Benjamin Stolberg noted at the time, “The Communists differ from all previous left wings in that they are avowedly under the strict discipline of an outside political party” which in turn was “admittedly under the direction of the Communist International and the Red Trade Union International.”¹⁹ With an increasingly discontented and radicalized constituency, the members of the GEB found themselves in a delicate position: they viewed Communism as an anti-democratic force that paradoxically commanded a democratic majority within the ILGWU. Believing that the Communists would use democracy to destroy democracy, the GEB’s socialists, led by union

president Morris Sigman, resorted to a policy of expelling Communist leaders on the ground that, in clear violation of the union's constitution, they owed their primary allegiance to an outside organization (the TUEL) which, the GEB asserted, was a dual union. These expulsions continued to be a focal point of conflict between the ILGWU administration and the radicals until they were rescinded following the 1925 national convention.

The Communist goal at this time—based on instructions from the Comintern—was to capture control of existing American unions, not replace them. Though, as Foster's most recent biographer has noted, “it was apparent [...] that the league was building an alternative structure within the unions it targeted” with “the explicit aim of replacing the existing union leadership and completely reorganizing the individual unions,”²⁰ this goal did not violate the ILGWU's constitution. Where Communist members and some of their close allies were unequivocally transgressing, however, was in regularly violating Article 8, Section 17 of the constitution which stated that “[n]o member shall disclose to an employer or to any person other than a fellow-member any of the decisions or proceedings of the local union unless specially authorized by a vote of the local union.” The left-wing leaders were in regular contact with the national leadership of the Workers' Party, both in the TUEL and in the Needle Trades Committee of the Workers' Party. This was a serious violation since the ILGWU radicals were not only informing the Party leaders of developments within the ILGWU but were also receiving instructions from them about how to proceed in carrying out union affairs.²¹

Justified or not, the tactics of the GEB were so repressive that they alienated even “right” socialists like Jennie Matyas who noted that “I belonged to the group that found it very difficult to accept the theory that stupid as anyone was, he could not be allowed to express his opinion . . . to fight a fellow worker was emotionally impossible for me.”²² All those who later wrote on the

subject, including hard-line anticommunists like Benjamin Stolberg and David Dubinsky, agree that Sigman's expulsion policy drove many union members over to the other side, playing into the hands of the radicals. Dubinsky emphasizes that he was opposed to the expulsion of the Communists, but was unable to use his considerable influence to prevent it since he was out of the country visiting his parents at the time that Sigman acted.²³ When special elections were called in 1925 after a "peace agreement" had finally been reached between the GEB and the radicals, the backlash that resulted from the expulsions brought Locals 22, 1, 9, and 35, as well as the extremely important New York Cloak and Dress Joint Board, all under left-wing control.²⁴ The Joint Board immediately became the radicals' main vehicle for the exercise of power in the ILGWU as well as their launching pad in their bid to control the union. Louis Hyman became general manager of the joint Board with Communist Charles Zimmerman from Dressmakers' Local 22 as manager of the joint Board's Dress Department, and the Communist Isidor Stenzor as chairman of the board of directors. Most of the Joint Board's business agents also were radicals.

On July 1, 1926, the contract between the 60,000 workers in the cloak and suit industry and the manufacturers was due to expire. The new Joint Board would be responsible for the negotiation of a new contract, and after all their ferocious criticism of the Schlesinger (1903–1905, 1914–1924, and 1928–1932) and Sigman (1924–1928) administrations,²⁵ it was particularly important for the Communists to prove that their stewardship would prove more fruitful for workers than that of the Social Democrats.

Background of the Strike

Since 1910, the structure of the garment industry had been changing as "inside" manufacturers (those who ran shops in which complete garments were manufactured) gradually

gave way to “jobbers” who ran “outside” shops. Jobbers did not own factories; they hired designers, bought raw materials, presided over the cutting and final selling of the garments, and then farmed out the actual sewing to contractors (also called “sub-manufacturers”). The GEB’s primary goal in 1926 was to make the jobbers, represented by the Merchants’ Association, take responsibility for conditions in the shops of the contractors who worked for them. The inside manufacturers, however, were also a source of difficulty since, to gain the control over overhead that (they hoped) would allow them to compete more successfully with the stiff competition from the outside shops, they were demanding “reorganization rights,” i.e., the right to discharge up to ten per cent of their workers per year at established intervals. In the past, the union had been successful in gaining a certain amount of job security for its members; a new worker was subject to a two-week probationary period during which he or she might be fired at any time, but after that they could not be discharged without proven cause. Furthermore, the inside manufacturers had been obligated to divide work equally among workers during slack periods among their regular employees. The inside manufacturers now complained that these provisions had made it almost impossible for them to control their work forces; the worker could quit at will, but discharge was almost impossible no matter how slow or insubordinate a worker might be.²⁶

ILGWU President Morris Sigman solicited the help of New York’s Governor Alfred E. Smith who in 1923, under similar circumstances, had established a five-member commission under the leadership of lawyer George Gordon Battle, which had recommended policies that limited the freedom of the jobbers to “beat down” the prices paid to the contractors. This, in turn, had relieved the pressure on contractors to beat down workers’ wages. In 1926, at Sigman’s request, Smith reactivated the same commission.

The Commission's final report, issued on May 20, 1926, recognized the deleterious effect of the jobbers on the garment industry, endorsing most of the ILGWU's demands in this area. The Commission portrayed the inside manufacturers as the best element among the employers since they employed only union workers and offered better wages, longer employment and better conditions than the outside shops; therefore, it was held that "greater encouragement [should] be given to the inside system of production and to larger production units throughout the industry." Consequently, the Commission endorsed the inside manufacturers' demand for reorganization rights in shops employing thirty-five or more workers. A discharged worker was to receive either a week's notice or a week's pay. Any worker claiming to have been unfairly discriminated against would be allowed to bring his or her complaint to the Impartial Chairman for adjudication. If upheld, the worker would be reinstated in his or her job. The Commission also approved the union's request that the employers' books be open to inspection by a joint committee as well as an increase of minimum wage scales ranging from \$2 to \$6.²⁷

Based on these recommendations, the ILGWU quickly came to terms with virtually all the independent employers and with the American Cloak and Suit Sub-Manufacturers' Association (contractors). However, an impasse developed with the Industrial Council of Cloak, Suit, and Skirt Manufacturers (inside manufacturers) over the reorganization issue. Although it presented a public front of solidarity, the union's leadership split over its negotiating position on this question. Sigman and David Dubinsky (manager of the powerful Cutters' Local 10 and a formidable opponent of the left in the ILGWU) favored the union's accepting the Battle Commission's report as a basis for negotiations. They believed that if they could reach a favorable agreement with the inside manufacturers, they would then be in a strong position to pressure the jobbers (who controlled a full 75 per cent of the industry) into important

concessions. They argued that the proposed regulation of jobbers and contractors was crucial to halting the further deterioration of the position of the garment workers and that reorganization though highly objectionable, was happening anyway; at least under the terms proposed by the Commission, the layoffs would be limited and regulated. Sigman and Dubinsky also maintained that should the situation come to an impasse, it would be tactically advantageous to put the onus of a rejection of the Commission's proposals on the employers.²⁸

The radical leaders of the joint Board, Hyman, and Zimmerman, endorsed regulating the jobbers, but after all their militant denunciation of class collaborators, they feared that if they accepted reorganization, they would damage their credibility with their rank-and-file supporters. Also, the radicals had already taken the position that any acceptable agreement would need to include the forty-hour week and a guarantee of a minimum of 36 weeks of employment per year, union demands on which the Commission had remained silent.²⁹ The New York City Communist leaders who were most directly involved in the ILGWU met to hammer out a position on the report. As Zimmerman later wrote,

there was division in our own ranks. A number of us favored the employment guarantee and other major provisions, but some thought that parts of the Battle report were bad. The worst was the one which gave the employer the right once a year to "reorganize" his shop in the interest of efficiency. That meant that the boss would be free unilaterally to fire 10 percent of the people [...]. The Communists as a party found that clause objectionable—class collaboration at its worst.³⁰

Actually, the most important decisions regarding the ILG's response to the Commission's proposals came, not from the union leadership, but from the officials of the Workers' Party. Benjamin Gitlow recalls that the Central Executive Committee's Needles Trades Committee of the Workers' Party had met a full month and a half before the strike was called and two days (May 18) before the Commission's final report was issued to decide on the personnel of the strike committees for a strike which the Communists had already decided was to take place. The Committee decided to make Hyman Chairman of the General Strike Committee, Zimmerman,

Secretary; and David Dubinsky Chairman of the Settlement Committee. The idea of including Dubinsky and a few other of their opponents in official positions was “to make them share responsibility.”³¹

A unanimous vote of the shop chairmen to reject the proposed conditions gave important reinforcement to the radical position. Zimmerman, speaking for the radicals, set out made a statement of principle:

We are opposed to arbitration as a weapon. Our weapon is the general strike. Your weapon is arbitration as was proved by the fact that you submitted the demands to the Governor’s Commission before you called the workers out on strike. We want the future policy to be that when workers decide by referendum to go out on strike, they first be called out on strike, and then, after four or five weeks when the time comes that we cannot strike any longer and we must find a way out of it and the proposition of arbitration is made we should accept it.³²

In the end, the radical leaders rejected the Battle report, deciding to organize a strike to begin on July 1, 1926. When the Joint Board met on June 1, it followed the advice of Hyman and Zimmerman, rejecting the “Final Recommendations” of the Battle Commission. To bolster their position with a show of democratic procedure, on June 8, the radicals called an informal meeting of 2,000 ILGWU shop chairmen and members of shop committees at Cooper Union, which voted unanimously to reject the Battle Commission’s proposals. Meanwhile the inside manufacturers announced their acceptance of the Commission’s recommendations but refused to consider any proposals beyond those contained in the report. Negotiations broke off. The jobbers’ organization continued to refuse to negotiate altogether.³³

Gitlow, responsible to the Workers’ Party for activities in the needle trades, was apprehensive about the approaching test. The radicals’ fight for readmission to the ILGWU had been expensive, depleting the coffers of the left-wing locals. He wrote to Ruthenberg:

We are on the eve of a general strike...Our position in the union is not a pleasant one. . . . The New York Joint Board of the International is bankrupt, heavily in debt...There are serious division in our own forces. Hyman is wavering. He is afraid of the struggle. He is prepared to give the struggle over to Sigman. . .With Hyman as Chairman of the General Strike Committee, the strike will be in danger of being compromised at any time. Hyman is also in favor of arbitration...If Hyman had his way, he would have adopted a policy of dealing most

intimately with the Governor's Commission...We also lack a dynamic personality like Comrade [Ben] Gold in the International. In fact, we are hard pressed for persons with ability. The strike will involve about forty thousand workers. I am fearful of the situation. It is not a good one.³⁴

Gitlow's worries were compounded by the fact that the Party's resources were already committed to ongoing strikes by Passaic textile workers and the furriers. As he later wrote, "For a small Party like ours, with a membership of approximately fifteen thousand, a third strike involving an additional forty thousand workers would have been a great strain upon our organization even under the most favorable circumstances, while in this case all circumstances were unfavorable. To go into the strike was sheer folly. I personally believed this, and so did a number of other Party leaders. I definitely knew, as did they, that all the important leaders of the Left Wing, the Communist and non-Communist alike, did not favor the calling of a strike." Why then push for a strike at such an inopportune moment? Gitlow lays the responsibility on Foster whom he accuses of pushing for militant action "for purely factional reasons." This was the period of the TUEL's decline and Ruthenberg's ascendancy. With Ruthenberg actively seeking ways to hasten the TUEL's lingering decline, Foster was eager to find ways to reassert his importance to the party. Gitlow points out that in favoring a strike, Foster "could speak in a militant manner for uncompromising action against the bosses and could brand those who opposed strike action as cowardly opportunists who were afraid to fight."³⁵ In recalling that the ILGWU Communist leaders, Hyman and Zimmerman (who, as New Yorkers, were more closely affiliated with Gitlow and the Ruthenberg faction than with Foster), favored acceptance of the Battle Commission's "Final Recommendations" as a basis for negotiations, Dubinsky gives indirect support to the view that Foster was alone in his championing of militant action at this time. Zimmerman's failure to contradict Dubinsky on this point lends yet more support to this assertion.

Still, another interpretation of Foster's actions is possible. As an old syndicalist, he believed that strikes, won or lost, are "learning experiences" which strengthen the workers in future actions. At a late phase of the strike, he wrote, "To rouse the class consciousness of the workers and to educate them to understand the class struggle and the historic mission of the working class is always a first consideration in strike strategy."³⁶ Gil Green (a former Communist functionary) gave some corroboration to this view when he told Anders Stephanson in an interview published in the early 90s, "Foster had his eyes set in one direction, how to organize the working class into industrial unions."³⁷

In certain ways, the moment favored Foster. As Gitlow notes, "The winds blowing from Moscow were Left winds. The Party was prodded to take leadership in strikes." From 1924 onwards the party leaders were continuously consulting with Lozovsky, the leftist secretary of the Profintern, who, after the Fifth Comintern Congress, increased pressure on the Americans to take a militant trade union line as part of its bolshevization effort.³⁸

Still, the experts on the ground, Zimmerman, Hyman, et al., were against striking; why did they not speak up? To understand the reluctance of the radical leaders to take a stand against a strike that they considered ill timed, it is necessary to consider events that had taken place in 1923. At that time, in addition to the Foster and Ruthenberg factions, there was a third group in the Workers' Party led by Ludwig Lore, leader of the German federation of the Party. Even the normally acid-tongued Gitlow concedes that Lore was "one of the most decent of the Communist leaders in America."³⁹ The dominant components of the "Lore faction" were Jewish garment workers (including Zimmerman and Boruchowitz) and the Finnish Federation.⁴⁰ Lore had dissented from the party line over the Workers' Party's break with onetime ally John Fitzpatrick, chairman of the Chicago Federation of Labor, and also over the party's endorsement of

presidential candidate Robert LaFollette in 1924; Lore was also a friend and defender of Leon Trotsky (although not, apparently, a Trotskyite); and it was well-known that he “had no use for Zinoviev,” the head of the Comintern. In fact, Lore felt no particular veneration for the Comintern itself and criticized it bitterly, writing in March 1924,

The Third International changes its tactics, nay, even its methods, every day, and if need be, even oftener. It utterly disregards its own guiding principles, crushes today the theses it adopted only yesterday, and adapts itself in every country to new situations which may offer themselves. The Communist International is, therefore, opportunistic in its methods to the most extreme degree, but since it keeps in its mind the one and only revolutionary aim, the reformist method works for the revolution and thus loses its opportunistic character.⁴¹

Therefore, a campaign was launched to discredit Lore, which was actually a translation onto American soil of the anti-Trotskyite phase of the process of Stalinization of the international Communist movement. Consequently, Coser and Howe write, “throughout the midtwenties the Comintern kept urging a campaign against the heresies of ‘Loreism,’ and the two dominant factions [...] rushed to stir passions against Lore and his supporters.” Factional leaders now vied to prove their superior orthodoxy by outdoing each other in their repudiations of Lore and his works while Hyman, Zimmerman, and Wortis, having supported Lore on the LaFollette candidacy, were castigated by both the Ruthenberg and Foster factions as “incorrigible Loreites.”

The social glue that bound Communists together was, like all social bonds, sameness in areas which seemed essential to the members of the group; a set of shared core values, aspirations, shared beliefs and a shared mentalité translated into a sense of group identity which, to some extent, transcended individuality. One former member of the Party put it this way:

No one who didn’t live through it can understand what it was like or why it was so hard to give up. People now long for community, they’re dying for lack of it. . . . And we had it. We had it in every conscious as well as unconscious response to ourselves, to each other, to the world we were living in, and the world we were making. . . . We had integration. . . . It wasn’t just good wine in our veins, that life, it was ambrosia.⁴²

The sense of belonging was, if anything, intensified by the extreme social and political hostility of the wider American environment in which they lived and operated. So, if the Party was one’s “greater self” or, at least, a kind of psychic “home” built from bricks made of shared beliefs with

mortar of common attitudes and experiences then the soundness, the safety, the continued existence of that home—and, therefore, the well-being of its inhabitants—would be threatened by a group member who did not share—or was believed not to share—at least a minimum number of the group’s beliefs. And let me re-emphasize, that sense of the Party as one’s greater self was vitally important to many members. Committed members would cut friends or leave spouses who had been expelled from the Party. Transgressions of belief within the Party were met with a response marked by the same heightened emotionality and indignation that charges of being a Communist aroused in what in this respect was the Workers’ Party’s *doppelganger*: the wider anticommunist American society. The Party’s response to transgression—punishment—was less a corrective than a ritual act through which the community simultaneously expressed its abhorrence of deviance *and reaffirmed its own solidarity through its unity in protecting its core values*. In other words, the act of punishment was itself an act of coming together, repairing a breach in the walls, repairing the wholeness of the structure.. In such a group, without access to the coercive powers of the state or the labor market, discipline, of necessity, took limited forms. The ultimate disciplinary action available was mere expulsion from the group, but when that meant being unwillingly propelled into a social environment in which one feels oneself to be a stranger, and a despised one at that, when it meant a radical loss of self, expulsion could be an effective tool. As one woman said in response to a question from Vivian Gornick, “If they’d thrown me out in the Thirties or Forties? Oh, I would have killed myself.”⁴³ However, in a relatively small group, this tool had to be employed sparingly to be effective. Therefore, the explicit or implicit *threat* of expulsion was a more common form of discipline than expulsion itself, and it is this threat that we find behind the castigation of the ILGWU Communists by the party hierarchy.⁴⁴ Lore had been cast out; his adherents might well follow.

The legitimacy of Lore's expulsion did not arise from the fact that his acts or his views were intrinsically offensive to a broad spectrum of American Communists: they were not. Most, even among the leaders, understood little or nothing of the issues that were plaguing the Comintern and they were equally ignorant about any affinity Lore's views might or might not have had with Trotsky's.⁴⁵ Rather, the unstructured nature of charismatic authority had allowed Lore to be simply arbitrarily *defined* out of the party by the leaders as a deviator. In an interesting twist, the very elusiveness of what constituted orthodoxy—a place to take a firm stand with assurance of support from the powers that be—actually contributed to creating a situation in which a most complete obedience could be demanded with reasonable expectations that it would be forthcoming. Regarding transgressions against a group held together by a powerful feelings of shared identity, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim wrote, “We do not condemn it because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we condemn it,” and, though no sociologist, Comintern chief Gregory Zinoviev showed his appreciation of this concept with his aphorism “discipline begins where conviction ends.” Lore, then, had not done anything particularly offensive to any rank-and-file Communist except to have had the misfortune to be labeled a deviator from the Comintern’s line *de jour*. The only abiding principle was that the Comintern was always right. As Foster said when he came under fire for not turning quickly enough on Lore (his former ally), “I am for the Comintern from start to finish. I want to work with the Comintern, and if the Comintern finds itself criss-cross with my opinions, there is only one thing to do and that is to change my opinions to fit the policy of the Comintern.”⁴⁶ Such flexible obedience on the part of party members and allies, directed not toward fundamental principles embodied in established procedures but to an ever-changing, essentially opportunistic policy, while it had its value in

keeping the party in line, contributed to the paralysis of the ILGWU Communists at what proved to be a most critical moment.⁴⁷

Loreism had been branded a “right-wing deviation” and the radical leaders in the needle trades were publicly lashed for yet more “right-wing deviations” because of their past willingness to compromise with the national leadership of the ILGWU. Humiliated and demoralized by being targeted in this way, the ILG radicals—aligned with Ruthenberg’s faction after Lore’s expulsion from the party—became reluctant to take any position that might possibly be controversial in Communist circles.⁴⁸ Therefore, Gitlow claims, in 1926 Hyman, Zimmerman and Wortis, although opposed to a strike by the cloakmakers, did not dare speak out “because they knew that to have done so would have played into the hands of the party leaders of both the Ruthenberg and Foster groups, who would have pounced upon them as horrible examples of opportunist leaders ready to sacrifice the interests of the workers in order to avoid a struggle with the bosses. They did not relish being held up as an example of ‘where Loreism leads to.’”⁴⁹ And so, “[t]he attitude of Moscow, the internal factional situation in the Party, and the fact that the Communist leaders in the I.L.G.W.U. were made the scapegoats for the Lore Group created a combination of circumstances in which no one among the Party leaders wanted to take the responsibility for adopting the only logical position in the Cloakmakers situation—namely to avoid a strike, even though such a move would have meant a partial retreat on the part of the union.”⁵⁰

The Strike

On June 30, the General Strike Committee, consisting of 300 members of the union, met at the Manhattan Lyceum and voted to recommend that the union go on strike. Despite later criticism by the GEB concerning the joint Board’s abrogation of usual procedure (which would

have entailed a referendum of the union to authorize a strike), there seems to be little reason to doubt that the union rank-and-file was solidly in support of this strike. The ILGWU national leaders, resigning themselves to a situation over which they had lost control, publicly committed themselves to the strike's success.

Traditionally the president of the union was chosen as chairman of the general strike committee, but in this case tradition was ignored and Sigman charged that "only shop chairmen who were Communists were included in the General Strike Committee."⁵¹ This body, selected by the Joint Board, was composed of the local managers, executive boards of affiliated locals, general officers of the Joint Board, and the 15 shop chairmen from the block and building committees. Hyman was chairman, Zimmerman was chosen as secretary, Julius Portnoy as treasurer, and Boruchowitz defeated Isidore Nagler, a right-winger, as chairman of the hall committee. Dubinsky had tried to secure a post as chairman of the organization committee but was defeated and relegated to the settlement committee. In the end, three committees were headed by supporters of the Sigman administration, settlement, law and out-of-town. The left was putting its entire prestige on the line; if the strike was successful, all the glory would be theirs; if it failed, all the blame.

The left, under the guidance of the Workers' party, took control of strike funds⁵² and, in accordance with the plans they had made earlier, moved to limit the Socialists' decision-making power. Traditionally, in major strikes the president of the union was made chairman of the strike committee, but appointment to this post was denied to Sigman who then ran for the chairmanship against Hyman, lost and was relegated to the position of vice-chairman. Zimmerman was chosen as secretary, Julius Portnoy (a Communist) as treasurer, and Joseph Boruchowitz defeated Isidore Nagler, a Sigman supporter, as chairman of the Hall Committee. Still, the Joint Board

wanted to create an appearance of broad participation, and in the end three of the nine committees were headed by supporters of the GEB: Settlement, Law, and Out-of-town.⁵³ When Sigman protested what he believed to be blatant partisan domination of the strike machinery, Hyman and Boruchowitz told him “You should be glad to have on the committees those we allow, since we are determined to dominate all committees.”⁵⁴

When the strike was in its sixth week, it appeared that “a number of conspicuous jobbers, large producers, would settle independently with the union and fully grant limitation.” Informed of this possibility, Hyman took a non-committal position while Boruchowitz opposed a settlement on the grounds that “the strike was not yet fully developed.” Then the inside manufacturers let it be known that if the union made concessions on reorganization, the manufacturers would submit to the ILGWU’s terms on the limitation of contractors, hours, and wages. The Joint Board continued to reject reorganization but countered with a compromise offer to maintain only the minimum wage, allowing the employer to bargain on wages above scale according to the efficiency of the individual worker. When the employers turned this down, the Joint Board, rejecting Sigman’s advice to the contrary, broke off negotiations.⁵⁵

By the time the strike had been in progress for two months, however, with the ILGWU’s treasury exhausted, Zimmerman and Hyman were eager to come to terms. The women’s garment industry was seasonal with two busy times, spring and fall. In November or December the firms would get to work on the spring line of apparel, working steadily until Easter Sunday, at which time most workers would be laid off. Then, in early July the shops would get going again, re-employing workers to produce garments for the fall and winter lines. Thus, there were two slack seasons, a short one during the winter and a much longer one in the early summer. The strike had been timed to increase pressure on the manufacturers by starting at the beginning (July 1) of the

busy season. But now the season was well along; if the work of the entire period was lost, the pressure to settle and get back to work would be off the manufacturers.

Hyman and Zimmerman contacted George Wishnak of the Brotherhood of Tailors who in turn put them in contact with a widely respected retired cotton goods merchant and philanthropist, Abraham E. Rothstein. Rothstein agreed to use his influence in the Jewish community to help smooth the way to an understanding with the largely Jewish manufacturers. He arranged a meeting between Hyman, Zimmerman, and one of the largest (and least reputable) of the inside manufacturers, Rubin Sadowsky.⁵⁶ Since both sides had hired gangsters either to attack or protect the picket lines, Sadowsky told the Joint Board members that they also would be wise to make an appointment to see Rothstein's son, the gangster, Arnold Rothstein. Zimmerman already knew Arnold, having established a friendly relationship during earlier strike-related contacts.⁵⁷ Rothstein now agreed to help smooth the way to an agreement. He called off the strong-arm men both sides had hired and along with Sadowsky acted as a mediator between the Joint Board and the Industrial Council.

By the eighth week of the strike, Sadowsky and the Joint Board (the Advisory Board of the General Strike Committee was not privy to these negotiations) had hammered out an agreement acceptable to both sides. It called for a 30-week guarantee of employment (up from the Battle Commission's recommended 28-week guarantee), an average wage increase of ten percent, and the halving of the reorganization percentage from ten to five percent. The radical-led strike had pressured employers—eager to salvage the season and also to establish reorganization as an accepted principle—into making an offer that included more substantial gains and fewer losses for the workers than anyone had considered possible.

With the momentum gained from this agreement, Zimmerman and Hyman initiated talks with other large inside manufacturers and obtained similar terms. Although the jobbers had not yet been brought to the table, the agreement along with the resumption of production in the inside shops would isolate them and make them more vulnerable to the combined pressure of the ILGWU, the inside manufacturers, and the contractors. A notable victory for the workers and the radical leaders seemed to be in the offing. The supreme efficacy of the strike as a labor tactic, the inadequacy of arbitration, the superior effectiveness of the Communists over the Socialists: the proposed settlement would confirm all these in the eyes of the union membership. Communist control of the International seemed within easy grasp. All that was left was to get the settlement ratified by the ILGWU and, equally importantly, by the Workers' party. But all these good prospects were to fade in the course of a single afternoon.⁵⁸

The Debacle

It was at this point that the breakdown described at the opening of this article occurred. What is most striking about the collapse of the settlement is the delicate interplay of circumstances required to bring about this particular denouement. There were a variety of contributory causes: the overall reliance of the Communist movement on charismatic authority derived from its claim to the unique possession and guardianship of ultimate truth, the intrinsically chaotic, and therefore unstable, nature of charisma when not contained within a system of either traditional or legal rules, the power struggle in the Soviet Union that arose from this absence of binding rules and procedures, the dominance of factionalism in the CPUSA that arose from the same cause, and the failure of the Comintern to give clear-cut and final authority to either Ruthenberg or Foster. With such an unstable structure in place, it took just one little maladroit sentence to bring about catastrophe. Without Boruchowitz's unfortunate choice of words Weinstone would have

had no opportunity to intervene and the settlement would have gone through as planned; on the basis of that success, it is possible that the Communists could have gone on to establish control over the entire union. Certainly, Zimmerman believed this; years later, during a conversation with David Dubinsky and *New York Times* labor writer A.H. Raskin, Zimmerman commented that “[i]f the original settlement had prevailed, we would have taken over the whole International, just as sure as we’re sitting here.”⁵⁹ And if Dubinsky disagreed, he did not say so at that time. So, if Boruchowitz had been ill in bed that day or had had laryngitis or had been stuck in traffic, it seems very probable that the outcome would have been different in some important ways.

Even so, perhaps the situation could have been saved. Perhaps Boruchowitz could have clarified his meaning or Zimmerman or Wortis could have spoken up forcefully and stemmed the tide. But by all accounts, they said nothing. They had been pushed into insisting on a strike when they believed that the chances for success were slight; they had, nonetheless, carried a hard fought battle to a successful conclusion, and yet, when all their work was collapsing about them and disaster faced them and they *knew* that disaster faced them, they said nothing.

As members of two groups, the Workers’ Party and the union, the ILGWU radical leaders aspired to two visions which they had mistakenly believed to be one. They served two masters, the leaders of the Workers’ Party—divided amongst themselves as they were—and the garment workers of the ILGWU, whose interests were mutually incompatible. Compared to the grandiose, complicated and, in many ways, self-contradictory goals of the Workers’ Party, the aim of the garment workers was simple: to enhance their living conditions. So long as Zimmerman, Hyman et al. could satisfy both masters by winning the strike on realistic terms, their path was clear. But when the settlement broke down and the Communist leadership insisted

on the continuance of a fight for unattainable goals, the interests of the two masters parted ways; if they were going to take positive action, the union leaders could only do so on the basis of a choice between the interests of the Party factionalists or the workers.

The ILGWU radical leaders were in the particularly painful situation of being torn between not only irreconcilable external demands but also two conflicting group allegiances and two conflicting sets of values; loyalty to the Communist movement and loyalty to the interests of their union following. Their moral situation had altered by virtue of their obtaining control of the Joint Board; they no longer enjoyed the relatively carefree irresponsibility of an opposition. And, although before Weinstone's mischievous eruption, the top fraction's post-Lorean alignment with Ruthenberg had, in some measure, acted to shelter its members from Foster's partisan sniping, Weinstone's demand to "get more," by pressuring the rival factions reluctantly and momentarily to join ranks, had unexpectedly placed the Joint Board negotiators in an isolated position where their alternatives were either to defy one superordinate, a momentarily united Communist leadership, or to betray the interests of another superordinate, the union constituents to whom they were responsible and whose confidence had placed them in power. Their own convictions and success in keeping their union following required that the ILGWU radical leaders bring concrete bread-and-butter gains to the garment workers. Moreover, they were acutely aware of the fact that cloakmakers were poor people who could not afford to place their own and their families' livelihoods in jeopardy for less than urgent reasons. And it has already been pointed out that nobody, including the Communists themselves, ever claimed that the mass of their supporters in the ILGWU were committed Communists, willing to sacrifice livelihood, family, and self to the cause. However, the Workers' party leadership and the Comintern viewed

workers' immediate hardships and working conditions as a secondary issue, less important than cultivating revolutionary conditions and, as it transpired, attaining factional advantage.

Beaten down by the Communist leadership both for their connection with Lore and their pragmatic tendencies in dealing with the Sigman administration and under immense pressure from the ILGWU to bring in a favorable contract, the members of the top fraction faced a situation which allowed no compromise but where a definite stand would bring them into conflict with one of two inflexibly contradictory claims, each carrying the same moral weight. Although it is impossible to know with certainty the hearts of men and women who are dead and gone, one cannot help but suspect that caught between their commitment to their fellow workers on the one hand and the leadership of the Comintern as embodied in the American Communist leadership on the other, between the logic that told them that this settlement was good for the workers and the party and the logic that urged the necessity of party solidarity, between the urge to salvage their good work and the fear of further chastisement by one or another of the Communists' feuding leaders, the union leaders maintained a silence that, although it constituted a practical acquiescence to the party's vagaries, embodied a moral paralysis. They did not join the stampede; they did not resist it; rather, they said nothing because they faced a choice that they simply could not make.

The instructions of the Workers' party leaders to "get more" were utterly unrealistic; the radicals had won a favorable settlement only because of the manufacturers' eagerness to salvage the fall season. The manufacturers—as Zimmerman and Hyman knew—had made their best offer, better than anyone had expected, so all that could happen was a fruitless resumption of a strike now doomed to failure. Zimmerman remembered, "I had to start negotiating all over again, but I couldn't get another thing. Furthermore, Sadowsky felt he had been double-crossed and

didn't trust our good faith any more. It was hopeless."⁶⁰ Now, with the whole season lost, there was no pressure on the manufacturers to settle while there was every incentive for them to give the ILGWU a thorough and crippling drubbing which would leave the employers free to dictate terms.

The 1926 strike failed primarily because a combination of conditions encouraged factionalism in the Workers' Party and the leaders of that party gave precedence to factional advantage over gains for the cloakmakers. All in all, Ruthenberg lieutenant Jay Lovestone later admitted to his closest associates, the garment unions had been "tossed about like a football" between the Ruthenberg and Foster factions.⁶¹ But what of the performance of the Sigman administration through all this? Dubinsky and Stolberg praise Sigman as the man of the hour, Stolberg lauding him as "not the man to be appalled by the ominousness of the struggle." While admitting that Sigman was "almost too inflexible," Stolberg claims Dubinsky added the "tactical acumen" that was missing and that "[u]nder these two men both revolution and reaction were avoided."⁶² The facts as recorded, however, show that neither Sigman nor Dubinsky "saved" the union; the divisions among the Communists did the job for them, though at enormous costs to the ILGWU and the garment workers. All those who wrote on the subject, Stolberg and Dubinsky included, agree that Sigman's ham-fisted tactics drove many union members over to the other side and played into the hands of the radicals. They also all agree that it was the feckless Communist rejection of a good contract and their subsequent decision to try to get "more" that was the cause of their undoing; it is difficult to find any "tactical acumen" on the part of ILGWU administration leaders in all this. In fact, neither Sigman nor his predecessor, Schlesinger, was temperamentally constituted to deal with this problem; the first was too straightforward and crude in his methods, and the second too thin-skinned and worn down by illness to meet the

challenge thrown down by the left-wing. Neither of them was and neither of them wanted to be what the situation required: a politician, outwardly flexible but inwardly unyielding.⁶³

By all that was reasonable, the cloakmakers' strike of 1926 should have been doomed to failure from the outset; throughout the 1920s the cloak industry was increasingly dominated by jobbers whose freedom from union control left the ILGWU in a weak position. The terms that Zimmerman and Hyman had obtained from Sadowsky after two months of being on strike showed that in this instance a measured militancy could have succeeded. If we accept Gitlow's assertion that Foster held primary responsibility for foisting an unwanted strike on the Workers' party and through it on the ILGWU, then we find ourselves in the somewhat strange position of having to accept that Foster alone was right about tactics and everyone else was wrong. But, Foster was right for the wrong reasons; there is no evidence to show that any shrewd appraisal of the conditions in the garment industry informed his actions while there is much to indicate that he was motivated both by the imperatives of factional strife and by beliefs rooted in his syndicalist past. Communist and syndicalist dogma shared the view that strikes were at all times the only proper response to any labor dispute, and at the time of the strike, the Comintern—for reasons unrelated to conditions in the United States, much less the American garment industry—was pressing for militancy within trade unions worldwide; therefore, Foster's rivals could oppose him in this matter only at the risk of being discredited as "opportunists," a risk none were willing to take. Once committed to this strike, Zimmerman and Hyman were effective in their handling of the negotiations with the employers' associations. But the convoluted socio-political processes that dominated the Workers' party at this point in the history of the western world prevented the strike leaders from reaping the rewards of an unexpected shift in power toward the striking cloakmakers. The unfortunate ILGWU radical leaders were in a position of uneasy and often

conflicting dependence on both the Workers' party and the ILGWU rank-and-file; radical union leaders like Louis Hyman and Charles Zimmerman shared and represented the concerns of the union rank-and-file to a far greater degree than did the national leadership of the Workers' party, but they were sometimes caught between their roles as labor leaders and their loyalty to the party which they believed to represent humanity's best hope for a future of prosperity and justice. In this conflict—to the detriment of those who depended on them—party loyalty usually prevailed.

¹ My thanks to Dr. Robert Asher for innumerable helpful comments and suggestions in the preparation of this essay.

² Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.*, 1914-1952, 2 vols. (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1953), vol. 2, p. 145. Zimmerman in David Dubinsky and A. H. Raskin, *David Dubinsky: A Life with Labor*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 99.

³ Zimmerman in Dubinsky and Raskin, *A Life with Labor*, 99-100; Epstein, *Jewish Labor in USA*, vol. 2, 145-146. Also, see Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess. The Truth about American Communism*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1940). Zimmerman and Epstein's accounts of what happened that evening are in general agreement; Gitlow's, however, differs in several important respects. He omits the entire meeting with the union leading fraction along with Boruchowitz's unfortunate locution; he also skirts the issue of his own desire, equal apparently to Weinstone's, to avoid responsibility for a politically difficult decision. Rather, he lays most of the blame on the leading fraction members, who, he charges, merely made a neutral presentation of the proposed settlement terms without actually daring to urge their adoption. According to this version, Gitlow and Weinstone, though both aware that a continuation of the strike was likely to end in disaster, were both unwilling to "take responsibility for a settlement which would become a football of factional Party controversy, a settlement which Foster would brand as a flagrant sellout [because of its acceptance of some reorganization: jm]." Gitlow claims that he "began to prod the strike leaders with questions, in an effort to make them take a definite stand. They circumvented all my questions. They were determined not to take responsibility." As a result, no one acted, and by default the decision was made to continue the strike. The fact that Gitlow's entire account of his career in the Communist party tends to be self-serving in a breast-beating, guilty sort of way, weights the scales of credibility in favor of Epstein and Zimmerman's version of events. However, in its account of the political anxieties which motivated the different factions, Gitlow's story rings true. And certainly neither Zimmerman nor Epstein's versions of the story contradicts Gitlow's assertion that the ILGWU radical leaders, having been savaged in the Lore affair, were reluctant to express themselves forcefully in any matter concerning a compromise of militancy for fear that they would subsequently be used for political target practice.

⁴ A.J. Portenar, "Report of the Division of Mediation and Arbitration" in the Annual Report of the Industrial Commissioner for the Twelve Months Ended June 30, 1927, New York State Department of Labor (Albany, 1927), 319.

⁵ See Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.*, David Gurowsky, "Factional Disputes Within the ILGWU, 1919-1928," unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, SUNY Binghamton, 1978, David Dubinsky and Charles Zimmerman in David Dubinsky and A. H. Raskin *David Dubinsky: A Life with Labor*, (New York: 1977), Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess*, Benjamin Stolberg, *Tailors Progress: The Story of a Famous Union and the Men Who Made It* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1944), Jack Hardy, *The Clothing Workers: A Study of the Conditions and Struggles in the Needle Trades*, (New York: International publishers, 1935), William Weinstone, *The Case Against David Dubinsky* (New York: New Century publishers , 1946), and Stanley Nadel, "Reds Versus Pinks: A Civil War in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union," *New York History*, January 1985, 48-72. Other accounts of the strike include Robert D. Parmet, *The Master of Seventh Avenue: David Dubinsky and the American Labor Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), James Oneal, A

History of Amalgamated Ladies Garment Cutters' Union, Local 10 (New York: [Amalgamated Ladies' Garment Cutters' Union] Local 10, 1927), Joel Seidman, *The Needle Trades*, (New York: Toronto, Farrar & Rhinehart, inc., 1942), and Max Danish, *The World of David Dubinsky*, (Cleveland: Cleveland, World Pub. Co., 1957). For a general history of the ILGWU, see Gus Tyler, *Look for the Union Label: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (Armonk, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1995).

⁶ Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 212.

⁷ Gitlow, 218.

⁸ Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), 123 – 124.

⁹ In fact, the Theses of the Fifth Congress on the Propaganda Activities of the CI and its sections stated, “Struggles within the CI are at the same time ideological crises within the individual parties. Right and left political deviations, deviations from Marxism-Leninism, are connected with the class ideology of the proletariat.” Given this connection, we can appreciate all the more fully the rich irony of Stalin’s condemnation of the American leaders when he asked “What are the main defects in the practice of the leaders of the majority (Lovestone) and the minority (Foster) ? “First, that in their day to day work they, and particularly the leaders of the majority, are guided by motives of unprincipled factionalism and place the interests of their faction higher than the interests of the Party. Secondly, that both groups and particularly the leaders of the majority are so infected with the disease of factionalism that they base their relations with the C. I. not on the principle of confidence but on a policy of rotten diplomacy, a policy of diplomatic intrigue.”

¹⁰ Gitlow, *I Confess*, 340.

¹¹ The arbitrariness of the disposition of power within the party is further brought home by the fact that although Foster had won a strong majority over Ruthenberg at the Fourth Convention in 1925, the Comintern’s representative in the United States, Sergei I. Gusev, had overturned the results by fiat on the grounds that “the Ruthenberg Group is more loyal to decisions of the Communist International and stands closer to its views.” See Draper, *American Communism*, 142 – 148.

¹² Draper, *American Communism*, 228 – 229.

¹³ Writing in 1927, Benjamin Stolberg noted that by 1908 thousands of former members of the *Arbeiter Bund*, the Social Democratic society of Jewish workers in Russia, with hundreds who had joined the Soviets of the uprising of 1905-1906 had joined the ranks of American needleworkers. Benjamin Stolberg, “The Collapse of the Needle Trades,” *The Nation*, v.124, no. 3226, 497.

¹⁴ Epstein, *Jewish Labor in USA*, vol. 2, 128 and Zimmerman in Dubinsky and Raskin, 87 – 88.

¹⁵ See Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.*, vol. 2, 129.

¹⁶ Part of the reason for this was an accident of the union’s history. The ILGWU was peculiar in that its locals were sometimes organized by craft, sometimes by nationality, and sometimes by gender. However, it was an industrial union insofar as the supreme authority of the whole was the entire membership of the union in the United States and Canada. It was a system that was subject to abuse, especially since there were no membership audits of the individual locals. These complaints were voiced by members across the political spectrum, including the editorialists for the official union newspaper, *Justice*. See *Justice*, January 23, 1920, 4. Also see Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in USA*, vol. 2, 128 and Zimmerman in Dubinsky and Raskin, 87 – 88.

¹⁷ *Daily Worker* (January 29, 1926).

¹⁸ The most striking evidence of Hyman’s subservience to the Workers’ party was his reluctant return to the 1925 ILGWU convention after leading a spontaneous walkout of the radical forces. According to Zimmerman, following the walkout, the ILGWU radicals met with Workers’ party officials Benjamin Gitlow and William Dunne. Dunne “barked out an order. ‘You’ll go back to that convention, even if you have to crawl back on your bellies.’” Clearly shocked, Zimmerman later wrote, “That was an expression we never forgot.” Hyman’s meek obedience to a command couched in such a way from a man with no institutional authority over him is strong evidence that he was not acting autonomously but was dominated by a party to which he did not formally belong. See Zimmerman in Dubinsky and Raskin, *A Life with Labor*, 95.

¹⁹ Stolberg, “The Collapse of the Needle Trades,” 498.

²⁰ Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism* , 206.

²¹ *Justice*, October 12, 1923, 9; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 337 – 342.

²² Nancy MacLean, *The Culture of Resistance: Female Institution Building in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, 1905-1925* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Women's Studies Program, University of Michigan, 1982), 105. Also, see Melech Epstein, *The Jew and Communism, 1919-1941* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1959), 124, and Joel Seidman, *The Needle Trades*, 158. The fact that Socialists—dyed with the

brightest of pinks as far as American society as a whole was concerned—were called “right-wingers” even by themselves in the world of the ILGWU gives pointed emphasis to how far removed from the mainstream the premises of this struggle were.

²³ See Dubinsky and Raskin, *A Life with Labor*, 64.

²⁴ Early on the union made a movement toward industrial unionism by the establishment of “joint boards” having local jurisdiction over entire sections of the industry. The oldest of these was the Cloakmakers’ Joint Board in New York City which presided over affairs affecting workers in the ladies’ suit and coat trade irrespective of craft; it represented 10 locals and as of 1920 had a membership of over 40,000. The joint boards carried out all negotiations with the manufacturers concerning collective agreements, supervised all dealings with adjustment boards, grievance committees and impartial chairmen. However, if, as in 1926, all the cloakmakers’ of New York City were to strike against all the manufacturers, the general rule was to hold a union-wide referendum to make the decision. This was conducted by having workers report to specified sites to fill out a ballot form.

²⁵ Schlesinger’s second election as president in 1914 marked the official ascendancy of Social Democracy in the ILGWU. For the next six years, until the aftermath of World War I with the aggressive national anti-unionism associated with the “American Plan” campaign of the capitalists, the ILGWU made steady progress, not only in gaining better working conditions for union members, but also in asserting itself as the most prominent stabilizing influence in the industry. This involved a measure of cooperation with the manufacturers which radicals found objectionable. The post-war depression combined with the rapid growth and personal attacks of the far left taxed both Schlesinger’s health and patience. In 1924 he retired, and the leadership of the union was passed on to Morris Sigman, who, it was believed, would be sufficiently tough to put down the threatening insurgency. See Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.*, vol. 2, 129.

²⁶ As Stanley Nadel has pointed out, arbitrary dismissal was a tool often used to rid the shops of active unionists. Stanley Nadel, “Reds Versus Pinks,” 66.

²⁷ *Justice*, May 21, 1926, 3.

²⁸ *Justice*, December 3, 1926, 3.

²⁹ In the 1920s, a cloakmaker could count on an average of 37.4 weeks of work per year if she or he were fortunate to work in an “inside” shop; the less lucky ones who worked for submanufacturers were likely to get a mere 26.8 weeks of work.

³⁰ Zimmerman in Dubinsky and Raskin, *A Life with Labor*, 98.

³¹ Gitlow, *I Confess*, 360.

³² Charles A. Madison, *American Labor Leaders: Personalities and Forces in the Labor Movement*, (New York: Ungar, 1950), 218.

³³ *New York Times*, June, 9, 1926, 8; Gurowsky, “Factional Disputes Within the ILGWU”, 231-232; Portenar, “Report of the Division of Mediation and Arbitration”, 108.

³⁴ Gitlow, *I Confess*, p. 359.

³⁵ Also, see Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History, 1919 – 1957* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 249. They relate that “for his ‘opportunism’ in hesitating to call a strike, Zimmerman was forced to resign from the national committee of the needle trades section of the Communist Party. Gitlow, *I Confess*, 201.

³⁶ William Z. Foster, *Strike Strategy*, TUEL Labor Herald Library pamphlet, 1926.

³⁷ “Interview with Gil Green” by Anders Stephanson in *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, eds. Michael E. Brown, Randy Martin, Frank Rosengarten, and George Snedeker, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 310.

³⁸ NAC, Comintern Fonds [CF], Reel 1, File 21, National Secretariat for America and Canada, Minutes, 12 January 1927.

³⁹ Gitlow, *I Confess*, 201.

⁴⁰ Gitlow and Epstein concur that the Communists in the needle trades were followers of Lore. However, Zimmerman remembers that in 1925 he and the others were followers of Louis Fraina, a.k.a. Lewis Corey. This hardly seems possible since Fraina had left the Communist movement in the fall of 1922. One can only guess that Zimmerman, remembering events long past, confused the two. See Dubinsky and Raskin, *A Life with Labor*, 97, and Draper 1957, 295.

⁴¹ Draper, *American Communism*, 107.

⁴² Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York:Basic Books, 1977), 116.

⁴³ Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism*, 175.

-
- ⁴⁴ Less drastic means of exerting discipline included various forms of humiliation and ostracism. For vivid examples, see Gornick, pp. 169 – 182 and Richard Wright's *American Hunger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944).
- ⁴⁵ See Coser and Howe, 154, and Draper, 104 – 109.
- ⁴⁶ Coser and Howe, 154.
- ⁴⁷ Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York : Free Press, 1933), 39; Draper, *American Communism*, 125, 149.
- ⁴⁸ Minutes of the District Executive Committee Meeting, April 13, 1925, Zimmerman papers, Collection 14, box 40, file folder 8. Zimmerman's papers at the LMDC also include the resignation of Jack Jampolsky as Industrial Organizer of district 2 in an effort to help "check the demoralization" resulting from "fictitious deviations" as well as an impassioned statement by Juliet Stuart Poyntz (March/April 1925) declaring that "The situation in the needle trades which holds the greatest promise of success for the mobilization of the working masses under Communist leadership at the present time is seriously endangered by the present policy of indiscriminate attack on responsible party bodies, The Left Wing leadership in the unions has been undermined with no resources for repairing the damage."
- ⁴⁹ Howe and Coser, *The American Communist Party*, 153; Gitlow, *I Confess*, 359 – 360.
- ⁵⁰ Gitlow, *I Confess*, 359 – 360.
- ⁵¹ See *Justice*, June 18, 1926, 1 and "Aspects of the Strike Discussed by President Sigman," undated, Sigman papers, LMDC, collection 6, box 5, file folder 6.
- ⁵² The Joint Board appointed seven members to administer the strike fund, one from each of the seven largest of the thirteen locals involved in the strike. Four of these were members of the left-wing. The members of the board of trustees for the fund had accepted their positions with the understanding that the disbursement of funds would require the signatures of all seven trustees; however, the Joint Board then reversed itself and decided that the concurrence of a simple majority would be sufficient to authorize the withdrawal of monies, giving complete control of the fund to the four radicals. The non-Communists protested that "this fund is not being collected by a single group in our Union. It is our joint defense fund, and no opportunity should be given any single faction in the Joint Board to control it to the exclusion of others." Two of the trustees, Vice-Presidents Salvatore Ninfo and Luigi Antonini, who came from the moderate Italian locals, resigned in protest, refusing to share responsibility where they were divested of all power. The Joint Board offered the vacant positions to the managers of the smaller locals, but they also refused to participate on the same grounds. Another step the Communists took to consolidate their control over the strike was to divide the position of Secretary-Treasurer into two weaker offices, secretary and treasurer. Salvatore Ninfo, letter to the Joint Board of the Cloak, Suit, Skirt, Dress and Reefer Makers' Unions, undated LMDC, collection 16, box t, file folder 8.
- ⁵³ The Out-of-town committee was responsible for ensuring that non-union production in the areas surrounding New York City was eliminated
- ⁵⁴ "Aspects of the Strike Discussed by President Sigman." The Communists would later charge the leadership with undermining the strike effort; however, the GEB's efforts to raise funds and to garner support from conservative labor organizations such as the AFL which were suspicious of what they knew to be a Communist controlled strike belies this accusation. See Epstein, *Jewish Labor in USA*, vol. 2, 144.
- ⁵⁵ "Aspects of the Strike Discussed by President Sigman."
- ⁵⁶ In a GEB meeting Sigman described Sadowsky as "one of the employers who always gave the Union unbearable trouble. His shop since 1910 has been organized and disorganized two dozen times and was never a full-fledged union shop." In another statement, Sigman claimed that during the strike Sadowsky's firm was producing a "tremendous amount of non-union work." Zimmerman in Dubinsky and Raskin, *A Life with Labor*, p. 99 and General Executive Board minutes, November 30, 1926, LMDC, collection 16, and "Aspects of the Strike Discussed by President Sigman."
- ⁵⁷ Legs Diamond (John Nolan) and his men had been hired by the employers and Little Augie (Jacob Orgen) by the Joint Board. Albert Fried, taking a shamefully cynical view of human nature, suggests that there may have been something other than disinterested benevolence that led Rothstein (the son) to take a hand in settling the strike. Basing his suppositions on Little Augie's continued association with both manufacturers and unions in the garment industry "long after the strike" and on the subsequent alliance between Little Augie and Legs Diamond, Fried guesses that Rothstein (whose power, apparently, was not sufficient to *order* the other gangsters to back off from their commitments to manufacturers and workers) mediated an arrangement among Little Augie, Legs Diamond, and himself whereby all three would continue to profit on more amicable and less dangerous terms from the garment industry. Sigman was doubly outraged when he learned of Rothstein's participation in the

negotiations, because, although he acknowledged that it was sometimes necessary to hire gangsters to counter the hired forces of the employers, to allow a criminal to participate at such a high level in negotiations was a disgrace to the union as well being an open invitation to criminal infiltration into union affairs. Furthermore, after all the Communist complaints about the GEB's "class collaboration," this seemed to be "class collaboration" of a far more vicious nature. See Albert Fried, *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America*, (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1980), 136 – 141, and GEB minutes, November 30, 1926.

⁵⁸ Zimmerman in Dubinsky and Raskin, *A Life with Labor*, 99; Stolberg, *Tailors Progress*, 141.

⁵⁹ Zimmerman in Dubinsky and Raskin, *A Life with Labor*, 100.

⁶⁰ Zimmerman in Dubinsky and Raskin, 99 – 100.

⁶¹ Epstein, *The Jew and Communism*, 132.

⁶² Stolberg, *Tailors Progress*, 108 – 109.

⁶³ Compare this with Sidney Hillman who, though vilified by many for his willingness to work with the Communists in his union, was actually much more successful in bringing the Amalgamated Clothing Workers through a similar dilemma unscathed by the bitterness and scars of open civil war.