

CHAPTER I

WHO ARE THE CLOTHING WORKERS?

THE needle trades workers comprise one of the major industrial armies of the American working class. All branches combined employed more than a million workers in 1929 and about 860,000 in 1933. Those branches under consideration in this book, together with their allied and auxiliary lines, give employment to nearly half a million persons. They were manned by a working force of 520,000 in 1929 which fell to 450,000 in 1933.

Who are these workers? How highly skilled or unskilled a group are they? How many of their number are women? How many are young workers? What is the place and importance of Negro labor in the shops? What are the proportions of native and foreign-born workers?

Skill

The clothing industry is undergoing a deep-seated change in its productive methods. This change leads to the elimination of the old-time, skilled craftsmen. Due to the introduction of various types of machinery, the craftsmen are being displaced by workers trained for a single, easily-learned operation or, at the most, a single group of operations.

Thirty years ago the tailor was a skilled craftsman, able to perform all the operations involved in the manufacture of a garment. His abilities and skills were acquired only after long years of apprenticeship, requiring tedious application to his work, considerable experience in training of hand and eye, deft use of the needle and the acquisition of neatness and exactness of work. In some cities such as Troy, N. Y., where high grade men's shirts were manufactured, the labor

population had been trained for generations in the fine points of the trade. In centers where the highest quality of clothing is being manufactured a few such workers still are indispensable in each shop. Their number is diminishing.

Particularly in the production of cheaper garments the work is at most only semi-skilled and can be quickly picked up by anyone who can sew. The period of apprenticeship necessary for acquiring average ability is often reduced to two or three weeks. Thereafter the only problem is one of speed, which is developed at the workers' expense under the prevailing piecework system of wage payment.

The chief remaining crafts requiring special skill are the designers who create fashions, the pattern makers, who reduce the new designs to outline form, graders who convert the individual patterns into various sizes, and the markers, who lay out the patterns and mark the goods preparatory to cutting. These crafts take years to learn and involve considerable skill. Next in order of difficulty is the work of the cutter, which takes experience to acquire speed and skill.

Such occupations as sorting and operating can be mastered in a few weeks. Finishing, examining and cleaning are easy even for those with no previous experience. Pressing requires chiefly strength and also a certain type of speed and skill which, however, are quickly acquired.

There are, of course, variations in the general trend away from skill, not only in the different branches of the industry but also within a single branch, depending upon the grade and quality of the product. In general, however, it may be said that in the manufacture of such items as work clothing, cheap shirts and wash dresses, an unskilled girl can learn to make a seam, or perform some other single operation, within a few days, whereupon she is ready for regular work. Dress manufacturing occupies a middle position, while the degree of skill is somewhat higher in the cloak and suit trade, where garments generally represent items of greater value than in the case of dresses and many items have to be

carefully tailored. This is usually even truer in the case of men's clothing and furs.

Women Workers

When the men's clothing workers of Baltimore struck in the winter of 1932, an investigation into the industry of that city conducted by Prof. Jacob H. Hollander found that, "The largest proportion of the workers are girls and young women, born and reared in Baltimore." When ten thousand garment workers of Chicago went out on strike in August, 1933, the *Chicago American* found "nine-tenths of them women." In November, 1932, the New England Labor Research Association, investigating the main branches of the clothing industry in and around Boston, found that "about two-thirds of the workers are women."

Clothing manufacturing is one of the very important women-employing industries. This has been true for many years in the United States. In the decades between 1860 and 1880 well over 80% of the total number of workers were women. And in that period, unlike to-day, they were engaged even in such operations as cutting. After the invention of the cutting knife in 1876, young men began to displace women at the cutting tables and also as machine operators. Thereafter, between 1880 and 1890, "the number of women [in the women's clothing industry] increased from 22,253 to 25,913; the number of men increased from 2,594 to 12,963."¹

Not only have women workers been the backbone of the labor force in the needle trades, but they also gave the impetus and the inspiration to modern trade unionism in the industry. It was the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand" shirtwaist makers of New York in November, 1909, that laid the foundation upon which the needle unions were later reared. Out of the 15,000 to 20,000 who went out on strike at that time, 80% were women workers.

In 1930 the number of women enumerated in the census

as working in the clothing industry was 353,486*—a number ranking second only to the number in textile mills. This compared with 272,005 in 1920 and 242,086 in 1910. The total number of women engaged in all types of factory work rose 8.6% in the decade between 1920 and 1930. But in the clothing industries the rise was about 21.2%. In clothing, therefore, the increase was nearly two and a half times as great as in all industry.

Of the total number of workers enumerated in the occupational statistics of the 1930 census as employed in the "clothing industries," 52.7% were female. Approximately 10% of these were under 17 years of age; 11% were 18 and 19 years old; 20% were 20 to 24; 22% were 25 to 34; 18% were between 35 and 44; 11% were 45 to 54 years of age, and the remainder were 55 and over.

In general, about half of the workers in the men's clothing industry are women, although in some establishments and in some sections of the country (notably Baltimore, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Cleveland and northeastern New Jersey outside of Newark) the number runs as high as 80%. In the dress industry about three-fourths are women and girls. In cloth hat and caps the majority are women, while in the cloak and suit trade and in the fur industry they constitute less than 15%. In the lighter branches, such as shirts and work clothing, women are the overwhelming majority of the working force. The shirt industry, for example, consists of over 90% women and girls.

Women work, for the most part, in the most highly sweated trades, such as throughout the dress industry and in the "Gypsy" and "runaway" shirt and work clothing sections. In most branches, cutting, fitting and trimming, busheling, coat shaping and nearly all tailoring are performed by men. Operating, felling, finishing, button sewing, button hole making, tacking and other needle work is largely the work

* After deducting non-factory employees engaged in the industry.

of women. Occupations such as pressing, requiring great strength and endurance, are mostly allotted to men.

There are, of course, exceptions throughout. In the strike of the Baltimore men's clothing workers in the winter of 1932, for example, women strikers were found to have been engaged in virtually every occupation of the trade—even as operators of pressing machines.

For all occupations and branches of the industry in the country as a whole, the census showed in 1930 that 44% of the women were listed as married, widowed or divorced. The percentage was considerably higher among the foreign-born women and much lower among the native-born. Thus it was found by the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor in a special study, *The Employment of Women in the Sewing Trades of Connecticut*, 1932, that among the foreign-born women "almost four-fifths were married or widowed," while, "In contrast to these were the native American employees, only about one-fourth of whom were married or widowed." Among the native-born, a considerable proportion are young workers.

The married women for the most part are forced to carry the double burden of home making and wage earning. After a hard day in the factory, they must rush home to cook, clean and attend to the countless needs of children and a family. It is small wonder that, as one worker in the trade said to the writer, "We women are old at thirty."*

Child Labor

The needle trades industries have long presented one of the most sinister pages in the history of child labor. Not content with drastic exploitation of women and young workers, the employers' quest after cheaper and ever cheaper labor power has caused them to turn to the weakest and most easily exploited section of the working population, the chil-

* For a study of the position and conditions of women in industry see Grace Hutchins, *Women Who Work*, 1934.

dren who through inexperience are virtually helpless in the face of inhuman exploitation. Many of the "new sweatshops" and the so-called "runaway shops," have been reared on the backs of child labor. Some of the stories that have come from various parts of the country of the tragic degradation of the workingclass child in the sewing trades would be almost unbelievable were they not backed by documentary evidence gathered by unimpeachable investigators.

During the 1932 Baltimore strike all observers, as well as the press, agreed that the vast majority of the strikers were extremely young. Many of them were mere slips of girls, of an age when they should have been at play or in school. The State Industrial Board of the Pennsylvania Department of Labor openly admitted in April, 1933, that shirt factories of that state were employing "children between 14 and 16" while a writer in the *Nation*² revealed that in the Adkins Shirt Company in Allentown, "only three girls in the place were over fourteen."

When in the spring of 1933, a strike wave spread throughout the needle trades areas of Allentown and Northampton, Pa., the strikers were all found to be of such tender years that the press invariably referred to them as the "child strikers" or as "the baby strikers." One investigator for the *Philadelphia Record*³ declared that their presence in the shops was due to the fact that "their elders, reduced to a state of poverty by the shutdown of industry, have encouraged the children to enter the shirt and clothing factories."

Wherever honest investigation is conducted, supporting evidence of this state of affairs is found. When, for example, the Women's Bureau of the U. S. Department of Labor investigated the employment of women in the sewing trades of Connecticut in 1932, it was found that out of 4,800 women who reported their age, one-fifth were not yet 18 and 155 "reported" their ages as under 16—a number admitted to be "probably an understatement, as records for this group were not obtained during the first part of the

study." Similarly, the *New Haven Times*, in a series of front page articles, appearing in the editions of May 17 to May 21, 1932, revealed that in the shops of the small garment manufacturers in that city, children between the ages of 14 and 16, driven by the whip of hunger, were working 68 to 70 hours a week, including Sundays and holidays. Some 40% of New Haven garment employees were found to be under 16 years of age. Affidavits made in Youngstown, Ohio, disclosed that young girls were compelled to work under sweatshop conditions in plants engaged on government military contracts.

A large part of the exploitation of children is carried on in violation of even the inadequate state laws. Even where some effort is made at enforcement the penalties imposed by the courts are so ludicrously insufficient that they serve as no deterrent whatever. An example was the case of Solomon Rosenbloom, owner of two clothing factories in Baltimore. Convicted on two charges of violating the child labor laws of Maryland, Judge Robert F. Stanton fined him \$10.⁴ Any such laws, as well as agreements with workers' representatives, are regarded by the employers as "only scraps of paper."⁵ The net effect of the laws is to cause employers to falsify ages, time-card records and other information.

It becomes difficult, under such circumstances, to gather any reliable statistics upon the exact number of children engaged in garment manufacturing. In the very inadequate enumeration in the occupation statistics of the 1930 census, slightly over 53,000 between the ages of 10 and 17 are recorded as employed in the clothing industry. But this does not include the many thousands of children employed in homework, and is also, as indicated, a decided understatement of those actually at work in the shops.

In the face of a virtual breakdown of the enforcement of state laws designed to protect these children, attempts at Federal protective laws have also been in vain. The Supreme Court killed the Federal Child Labor Act, and the

minimum wage law for the District of Columbia, designed to give a modicum of protection to women and children in that territory, was similarly annulled by the court in 1923 in response to employer pressure. It was ruled unconstitutional as a violation of "freedom of contract" and of the "due process of law" principle of the Constitution.

N.R.A. regulatory measures were designed to limit the employment of children in shops. However, J. C. Atchison, writing in the *Daily News Record* (December 13, 1934), stated that reports received in Washington "and talked of in private are that the employment of children in certain industries goes on despite prohibition in codes of fair competition." The needle trades were no exception. The extent to which they apparently adhered to the restriction was dictated by their interest in preventing permanent federal legislation on the subject. In the absence of federal legislation they felt that the temporary and transitory code limitations could easily be changed to suit their interests. Moreover, much of the labor of children has been merely transferred from the shops into the homes where homework is as rampant as ever. And, of course, after the U. S. Supreme Court ruling in the *Schechter* case, even the limitations set up against child labor in the codes lost their legal sanction.

Young Workers

In all recent needle trades strikes, an unprecedented example of militancy has been shown by the youth. In overwhelmingly large numbers young workers, between the ages of 17 and 24, have come into the industry. Enthusiastic, courageous and militant, they are adding one of the brightest pages in the struggle of the needle workers for better working conditions and decent wage and hour standards.

Employers of the trade regard these young workers, especially in unorganized sections, as the most fertile field for uninterrupted exploitation. For one thing, they are not covered by child labor laws, and the need of resorting to

troublesome devices to evade such legislation is thus obviated. In all clothing communities the young worker is on a par with the adult, as far as protective legislation is concerned.

Moreover, employers regard this group as "unspoiled" by the higher wages and better working conditions of previous years. The older workers tend to retain memories of "better days" and to strive for their return. Yet the bosses are rapidly learning, to their sorrow, that such considerations serve as a boomerang. There is no more militant group of garment workers than the youth.

Greater impetus than ever is being given to the influx of young workers into the trade by the sectionalization of work processes and by the increase of speed-up in the shops. Section work makes for decreased skill and a consequent elimination of the long years of training formerly required of the old-time tailor. Moreover, the young worker is much better adapted to the speed-up process. Children often cannot keep up with the increased tempo of speed required in the modern factory, while workers over 45 are found to be subject to the same disability. This applies particularly to machine operating and finishing processes, and it is here that young workers are found in greatest numbers.

In the 1930 census over 175,000 persons "18 and 19 years old" and "20 to 24 years old" are recorded as working in clothing factories. Of these 48,623 are listed as male and 125,987 as female. These figures include all clothing industries, the census headings being so general in nature as to make it impossible to separate those sections of the trade covered in this book.

The Foreign-Born

The working force of the clothing trades in the past was overwhelmingly foreign-born. In the earliest days of the industry, it was largely organized on a custom tailoring basis and the custom tailors were for the most part of German, English or Irish origin. The period of the greatest expansion

and the heyday of the ready-made clothing business, however, coincided with the mass immigration of Italians and Jews from southern and eastern Europe which began in the eighties.

Many of these were tailors before they left Europe. Others gravitated to the industry after their arrival. In any event, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century in both men's and women's clothing the backbone of the industry were these Jewish and Italian immigrants—the Jews predominating in the women's lines, with the Italians constituting a slightly larger proportion in the men's wear. Together, these groups constituted about 90% of the labor force of the industry. To these major groups must be added large numbers of Germans, Poles, Bohemians, Slovenians, Finns, Lithuanians and other nationalities. Union officials reported that they found some 20 different nationalities among men's clothing operatives. The industry in this period was centered in a few large cities, where the foreign-born tended to concentrate.

Employers, themselves mostly of foreign origin, were quick to pounce upon the advantages they could obtain from this kind of labor. One employer summarized the position of these workers when he said, "These greenhorns, Italian people, Jewish people, all nationalities, they cannot speak English and they don't know where to go and they just come from the old country, and I let them work hard, like the devil, and these I get for less wages." ^o

The World War brought an end to immigration. This meant a labor shortage and a consequent period of relatively high wages for the previously despised "greenhorn." Immediately after the war employers rubbed their hands in anticipation of a new tide of immigration in the hope that the new arrivals would "prove an important factor in bringing down the cost of production. . . . Owners of these [garment] factories welcome them because they are willing to work for lower wages during the time they are learning

the trade and because they have not become imbued with the idea that they can only do a certain amount of work each day and no more. . . . There has been so much suffering in Europe during the past five or six years that the new arrivals will undoubtedly be glad to accept lower wages." ⁷

Restriction of immigration, however, has shut off this reservoir. In the cities the new workers flocking to the trade have been native-born young workers of foreign parentage. In addition, a large part of the industry has "fled" the older established centers and gone to new areas where native labor is in the majority. In the South, for example, workers of native stock predominate. On the other hand, some of the new centers are tapping additional sections of the foreign-born. A California delegate to the 1932 convention of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union reported an influx of Chinese and Mexicans into the trade.

Thus several causes, but primarily the restrictive immigration policy of this country since the war, has led to a decline in the percentage of foreign-born workers in the trade. In spite of this, however, there was still the tremendously large number of 324,000 "foreign-born white" workers enumerated in the 1930 census in the entire clothing industry. This was 41% of the total working force. The category "Native Born of Foreign Parentage," included in previous census occupational reports, was omitted in 1930. The foreign-born, plus their native-born children who are now in the industry, comprise the majority of needle trades workers.

Negro Workers

The 1930 census included 35,400 Negroes in the needle trades of whom 18,400 were men and 17,000 women. The number is growing every year until in 1935 it is estimated on good authority that there are 20,000 Negroes in the garment trades of New York alone. In many other centers, notably Chicago and Philadelphia, the number is also mount-

ing rapidly. In Chicago a whole section of the needle industry, washable dresses, has a majority of Negroes.

Negro women began to enter the dress and waist industries, as well as some minor branches of the garment trades, during the war. The great labor shortage which existed during that period opened to them doors of employment, as against previous discrimination which had amounted to almost total exclusion. They have remained in the trade and increased in number every year since.

Employers have tried to use their presence as a means of undermining standards and splitting the ranks of the workers. They hoped that by pitting Negroes against whites and fostering race hatred they might create a situation which would work to the detriment of both races but be advantageous to employers. Thus one employer, described in the trade press as "a prominent New York manufacturer," openly advocated systematic efforts to bring the Negro into his industry in the belief "that the infusion of 'colored blood' into the cloak and suit trade would permanently do away with all labor troubles in the industry." The Negro worker, this employer asserts, "is loyal and less subject to extremist propaganda."⁸ Employers soon learned to their sorrow that the Negro looked upon the white worker with suspicion only as long as he was discriminated against and abused. His response to expressions and acts of solidarity and comradeship from other workers in the industry was to fight side by side with the whites and to become an active and loyal trade unionist.

Much remains to be done, however, in breaking down the bars of discrimination and segregation. Negroes are still employed almost exclusively as cleaners, examiners, pressers and finishers. Employers strive to pick this racial minority as their favorite target of exploitation. Throughout the industry they are forced to work harder for less money than the white workers and they are discriminated against in the matter of jobs, so that unemployment among them becomes increasingly acute. In southern work clothing

and shirt factories employers will not permit them to work in the same plants as white workers while in many other sections of the country, notably Philadelphia, they are compelled to sit at separate tables. At the 1932 convention of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, delegate after delegate from various sections of the country told stories of wage scales of two, three and four dollars a week on which Negro workers are compelled to live in a seasonal industry.

Considerable distrust still exists among the Negro workers toward the white workers as a result of the official policy of the American Federation of Labor. The continuance of that policy was assured at the 1933 and 1934 conventions. For example, a resolution at the former calling for the removal of all clauses from the constitutions of national and international unions composing the Federation which deny membership to Negroes was shelved, with the comment by the committee on resolutions that the Federation provides for separate Federal Unions for Negroes. Similarly, a resolution introduced at the 1934 convention that the A. F. of L. "go on record for the elimination of the color clause and pledge from the constitutions and rituals of all trade and industrial unions affiliated with it," was defeated on the ground that "The American Federation of Labor . . . cannot interfere with the autonomy of National and International Unions."⁹ The furthest that the body would go was the appointment of a committee "to investigate the conditions of the colored workers in this country and report to the next convention."¹⁰

In direct contrast is the attitude of the left-wing workers. This was well illustrated late in 1933 in one of the shops controlled by the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union. At the Beth Rose Dress Shop in New York City, the employer, Mr. Rosenthal, cursed a Negro girl. The entire shop, the majority of whom were white, downed their tools, stopped their machines and did not return to work until the employer had apologized to the Negro girl.