

## CHAPTER VI

### FURRIERS' ORGANIZATION

#### *The International Fur Workers' Union*

THE first of the regularly established furriers' unions was the International Fur Workers' Union of the United States and Canada, organized in 1913. Before that year many separate locals had existed. As early as 1882 a club of German furriers, consisting mostly of cutters, had been organized on a social and fraternal basis. This organization lasted until 1913. Attempts to form full-fledged unions had failed in 1882, 1893 and 1902. An international union, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, was organized in 1904, but it did not thrive and in 1911 its charter was relinquished.

New York furriers tried to organize a union in 1907 but the bosses smashed the movement by a lockout. The effort was revived in 1910, however, and by 1912 there were 600 workers in the organization. In that year this nucleus called a general strike which the strong rank and file carried through to a complete victory in 12 weeks. The following year the union became affiliated with the A. F. of L.

The 1912 agreement was used as a springboard to better conditions. Each succeeding agreement, in 1914, 1917 and in 1919, frequently after strikes, represented an improvement in wages and conditions. By 1919 the union had established the closed shop and the 44-hour week, with wage scales averaging from \$28 to \$43 for various crafts. It had a membership of nearly 12,000, about 80% of the workers in the fur goods and dressed fur trade.

In 1920 the employers sought to take advantage of the prevailing unemployment and refused to carry out the agreement of 1919 which was supposed to last for two years and

provided for equal distribution of work during slack seasons. The union therefore called a strike which lasted for 30 weeks and ended in defeat. The membership dropped to about 4,500 by the middle of 1921.

#### *Industrial Policies*

The furriers have always been a militant group of workers. Their rank-and-file have never accepted the class-collaborationist policies common in other sections of the needle industry. Certain reactionary leaders have attempted to introduce such practices but, except for a brief period, they have failed to carry along with them the mass of fur workers.

During the 1912 strike the furriers had rallied to the leadership of Isadore Cohen. During this same strike Morris Kauffman, who later became president of the union, was brought down from one of the shops and forced to join the union. A bitter feud immediately developed between these two.

Kauffman correctly pointed out that Cohen, after the launching of the union, began to "go easy" on the bosses and, as a substitute for militant organization effort, began to hire gangsters to force workers into the union and otherwise serve his purpose. Cohen had even written an article in the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, an anarchist paper, supporting the thesis that without gangsters the Jewish needle trades could not be effectively organized. The Cohen-Kauffman fight continued for several years. Kauffman's anti-gangster policies became increasingly popular. Cohen was finally compelled to resign as manager of the Joint Board and Kauffman came to power in 1916-17.

Kauffman was elected as a militant. But he immediately struck the comparatively prosperous war-time years when improvements were easy to achieve. And during this period Kauffman, too, began to grow "soft" and to subscribe to a policy of class collaboration and leniency toward the bosses. Moreover, he also began to surround himself with gangsters.

Times were good, however, and he maintained his hold on the furriers by "radical" talk. At the time of the 1918 convention of the A. F. of L., for example, he went so far as to attack Schlesinger for supporting Gompers. The *Forward* refused to print his articles at the time and they appeared, instead, in the *Day*, a liberal Jewish daily.

At the time of the disastrous 1920 strike, Kauffman's picketing committee consisted of 40 to 50 gangsters, some members of the union and some not, whose salaries ranged from \$15 to \$25 a day. The utter futility of this line of activity, instead of rank-and-file mass action, was never better demonstrated than during this very strike. The gangsters double-crossed Kauffman. As mercenaries, they did not scruple to "cash in" on the manufacturers and instead of forcing down the scabs they would make deals with the bosses to leave them alone. They also pilfered goods from the shops they were supposed to be picketing. They frequently warned the bosses in advance of the approach of a picketing committee.

Kauffman's class collaborationist theories also began to bear fruit during this strike. During the more prosperous years he had introduced the impartial chairman system. But when the "pinch" came, the chairman showed his true colors and, although a procedure for distribution of work during slack periods was specifically provided for in the existing agreement, he sided with the employers, ruled that the issue was outside his province and refused to render a decision.

By this time Kauffman was also using gunmen to break up meetings of the progressives in the union. But the New York furriers had had enough of him and all he stood for. In 1921 he was forced out of the Joint Board. But he "knew the ropes" and soon had himself installed in another well-paying berth. While manager of the New York Joint Board he had also held the office of president of the International, an unpaid position. Consequently, when deposed from the

Joint Board managership he still retained the position of International president, and changed the latter into a paid office.

#### *Reaction and Revolt*

During the next five years the right-wing leadership, through "trained hands," which were used to fill the ballot boxes, retained an iron hold upon the organization. At the same time organization work came to a virtual standstill. Contractors operating little sweatshops with unorganized, cheap labor were busy, while union workers walked the streets unemployed and starving.

President Kauffman and Manager Braunstein set up a despotic régime. They effected unscrupulous "agreements" with employers, proclaiming each defeat as a "great victory." They accepted wage reductions, overtime work without extra pay, increased hours and other unnecessary concessions. They failed to attend to the duties and responsibilities of their offices. Braunstein, as a matter of fact, became so notorious that he had to be removed from office in 1926 for "dishonesty" and for "disorder" in the financial books of the organization.<sup>1</sup>

The few sincere delegates to the New York Joint Board (the backbone of the organization) made no headway with their efforts to mold the union into a weapon of offense in the interests of the workers. The leading militants were expelled on trumped up charges produced by Manager Braunstein. Opponents were removed from the ballot, and elections were placed in the hands of "election and objection" committees composed of hired sluggers. Rank-and-file committees which undertook to do volunteer organizational work were declared illegal and forbidden to carry on their activity.

Demoralization and complete collapse threatened when the workers took matters into their own hands and decided upon facing the issue at any risk. They became so militant that Braunstein, in the early part of 1925, was compelled to permit meetings of the members. Unemployed furriers stormed



the union offices with their protests. The shameless treachery of the officials was torn wide open and ruthlessly exposed. In the elections of May, 1925, for the New York Joint Board, the masses voted solidly. Despite all obstacles and countless types of fraud, they elected an opposition administration, with Ben Gold at its head. Among the other tactics of Morris Kauffman during this struggle was an attack of strong-arm men upon Ben Gold as a result of which Gold spent several weeks in the hospital.

The left wing was elected in a united front of opposition forces on a program calling for enforcement of the agreement with the manufacturers, elimination of gangsterism from the union, and the establishment of workers' control within their respective locals. Meanwhile, the right wing remained in control of the national office of the union at Long Island City, where it carried on its intrigues against the left wing in New York. During the same period, many locals outside of New York also elected left-wing administrations.

One of the first acts of the new administration was to set up a department through which it successfully organized the Greek fur workers. This was the first time in the history of the industry that this group of workers had been organized. They were regarded by all previous administrations as "scab elements" and as unorganizable. The success of the left wing in bringing them into the union laid the basis for the victory of the 1926 strike.

#### *The 1926 General Strike*

The new administration of the New York Joint Board determined to restore the lost conditions of the furriers through militant strike action. In 1926 a 17-week strike was successful. It completely tied up the fur industry and involved about 12,000 workers.

For the first time in the fur industry the workers struck under left-wing leadership and for a left-wing program. A 40-hour week without reduction in wages was the chief de-

mand. The demoralized former leaders smiled silently and cynically. They predicted the early downfall of the "fanatics." They could not imagine such a thing as the "babyish method of picketing." They could not conceive of such a departure from their accepted methods as a strike without gangsters and termed the workers "coffee and cake pickets" in contrast to their own professional thugs. They expected such pickets to take flight before the manufacturers' gorillas. They rubbed their hands in anticipation of the time when they could launch their attack and show that they were the only logical leaders of the furriers.

But the hopes and prophecies of the right wingers were rudely shattered. For the first time in the fur industry mass picketing was successfully introduced and it proved an incomparable method of keeping the scabs out of the shops. The entire 12,000 furriers registered the first week. All committees were formed from the rank-and-file. They took their posts loyally and regularly—and stuck to the end with loyalty and discipline. The workers met the bosses in open combat and after 17 stubborn and bitter weeks they were completely victorious.

#### *A. F. of L. Interference*

During the course of the strike, however, the fur workers were forced to oppose not only the bosses but also the right-wing bureaucracy, the Socialist Party and the A. F. of L. officialdom.

Although the furriers were fast approaching victory, the A. F. of L. leaders showed that they would far rather have workers' interests sacrificed than permit a demonstration of the effectiveness of left-wing strategy and tactics.

In the seventh week of the strike it became known that independently, and without the knowledge of the strike committee, A. F. of L. and right-wing International officials were negotiating with the employers. They had met in Washington and a secret agreement had been concluded on

April 7, 1926, between William Green, president of the A. F. of L., Meyer London, Socialist attorney of the International, and the president of the Associated Fur Manufacturers. This understanding, entered into without the knowledge of the strikers or their elected strike committee, called for the termination of the strike, the abandonment of the basic demands of the workers—the 40-hour week, equal division of work and an unemployment fund—and the compromising of other demands.

This plan had also as its purpose the elimination of the legally elected strike leaders. It was, moreover, concluded at a time when the employers' association had already begun negotiating a settlement with the New York Joint Board on the basis of the 40-hour week.

Following the secret conference in Washington, Hugh Frayne, A. F. of L. organizer, announced a meeting of the fur strikers at Carnegie Hall, New York City, on April 15, 1926, at which the new proposals would be submitted. William Green was announced as the main speaker.

On the day of the meeting, the hall was surrounded by police, detectives and well-known gangsters. Workers had to enter in a single line. Each one was carefully scrutinized by right-wing representatives and thousands known to be militants were turned away. The strike committee was barred from the hall. Ben Gold was likewise not admitted.

The treacherous secret agreement was unanimously repudiated in an unmistakable manner. The assembled workers refused to permit the meeting to start without Gold. When news that he had not been admitted circulated inside the hall, the entire group of 4,000 furriers present took up the cry, "We want Gold." Without him they refused even to listen to the Federation officials who sat on the platform. Hugh Frayne, John Coughlin, secretary of the New York Central Trades and Labor Council, Oscar Schachtman, then president of the International Fur Workers' Union, and others were

jeered and hissed while the workers roared: "We Want Gold!"<sup>2</sup>

After two hours of such demonstration attempts to hold the meeting were abandoned. Green was notified that it was useless for him to appear. The workers in the hall thereupon joined the thousands outside who had been refused admittance and together they paraded down Broadway to a strike hall where the entire secret agreement was unanimously rejected and a decision passed to continue the strike.

Soon after this William Green himself was compelled to negotiate with Ben Gold and the strike committee. At these meetings Green demanded in the name of the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. that the 40-hour demand be withdrawn and that the strike be called off. When confronted, however, with indisputable evidence that it was only his interference which encouraged the manufacturers to refrain from granting the demand, he was compelled by mass pressure and fear of exposure of his rôle to proclaim officially his retirement from the negotiations and to address a meeting of strikers, together with Ben Gold and the strike committee, at the 69th Regiment Armory.

Having disposed of the A. F. of L. bureaucrats and right-wing sabotage, the workers were able to continue the strike for their just demands which they finally won in the seventeenth week of the struggle.

The concrete gains for the workers were: the 40-hour week (five days work, two days rest); increases in the minimum wage scales; abolition of the sub-contracting system; abolition of the practice of discharging workers a week before a holiday; regulation of the foremanship system and many other points of importance.

Union shops were reorganized and open shops were unionized. Moreover, inspired by the example set in New York, almost all locals in the International obtained the 40-hour week and similar gains. The entire labor movement



was inspired and even the reactionary A. F. of L. officials were forced to recognize and publicly praise the victory.

*The A. F. of L. Again*

But the A. F. of L. leaders were not yet through with their disruptive work. At a time when their own practices were allowing the capitalists to depress workers' standards everywhere, the New York Furriers' Joint Board was blazing new trails toward increasing gains. This was looked upon as a direct challenge which could not be permitted to develop into a "disturbing" influence upon the entire organized labor movement.

Shortly after the conclusion of the 1926 settlement, the Joint Board received a letter from Pres. Green, declaring that the Executive Council had "authorized and instructed the President of the American Federation of Labor to appoint a committee representing the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor for the purpose of making an investigation into the internal affairs of the International Fur Workers Union, the recent strike of the New York membership of the Union, the developments which took place in the working out of the new wage agreement and the general policy pursued by the Strike Committee which directed the strike in New York City."

"The Executive Council desires to know," continued the communication, "whether those in charge of the recent strike in New York City were conforming to the laws, usages and administrative policies of the American Federation of Labor, in their management and conduct of the strike." The "investigation" committee consisted of Matthew Woll, Vice-President of the A. F. of L.; Hugh Frayne, New York A. F. of L. organizer; John Sullivan, President of the New York State Federation of Labor; Joseph Ryan, President of the New York City Central Trades and Labor Council; and Edward F. McGrady, general organizer and head of the Federation's Legislative Committee who has since become a

government official. To this committee, every one of whom was an avowed enemy of militant unionism the Joint Board was instructed to submit all communications, records, statements, financial records and other material concerning the strike.

The Joint Board immediately recognized this maneuver as an attempt to throw the union into receivership. It protested vigorously to the Federation that "you neither state the grounds upon which the investigation was ordered nor upon whose initiative it is being undertaken." And it demanded to know, "What are we accused of?" It pointed out, further, that the entire action was in violation of the constitution of the union which guaranteed local unions their autonomy. It demanded public hearings instead of the secret ones insisted upon by the A. F. of L. Executive Council. It pointed out also in telling fashion that the Joint Board's only crime was "the highly successful nature of our strike" and the fact that "Our great 17-week struggle won not only the plaudits and support of the entire mass of needle workers, but of the wide ranks of the general labor movement as well." At the same time, the workers of the trade packed Cooper Union on August 12, 1926, passing a resolution reading, in part, "we express our fullest confidence in those who served us on the General Strike Committee and in our present militant leadership of the Joint Board" and demanding that "the hearings of the investigation committee be public and above-board, and that they be open to the press representatives and to the workers."

All demands for specific statement of charges and all requests of open hearings were denied. Under protest the Joint Board submitted all of the documents and records demanded, the strike leaders appeared before the star-chamber hearings whenever called and all questions were answered unhesitatingly and exhaustively. However, as the "investigation" proceeded, it soon became clear to the Joint Board that it was being conducted not on an impartial, fact-finding basis,

but as part of a pre-arranged plan to "reorganize" the union and oust the lefts.

The expected came to pass in January, 1927, when the A. F. of L. Executive Council made public its "charges" against the Joint Board. The latter were accused of: (1) being Communists and agents of the Soviet Union; (2) mis-using union funds; (3) brutality during the strike; (4) bribing the police and court officials in order to secure protection of strikers and (5) eliminating right-wing officials from the leadership of the strike. In March, 1927, the Joint Board and all of its officials were declared expelled, the four locals constituting the Joint Board were declared dissolved and a new union called the Furriers Joint Council was established, under the supervision and direction of the A. F. of L. "A. F. of L. to Rescue the Fur Workers," ran the headline in the organ of the International.<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Mineola Trial*

During the course of these attacks on the Joint Board, eleven active workers and strike leaders, including Ben Gold, were arrested and tried for felonious assault in Mineola, Long Island, in connection with the picketing of a small scab shop in Rockville Center, Long Island, which took place during the 1926 strike. The reactionary forces concentrated their efforts on this trail as a means of getting these "troublesome" people out of the way once and for all.

Prominent attorneys, such as Frank P. Walsh, who studied the records of this case, pointed out that the frame-up was more patent than in the Sacco-Vanzetti case. The accused were at first held without bail in the Nassau County Jail. The trial was held in Mineola, well-known center of the Ku Klux Klan, where hatred for Jews, unionists and Communists was prevalent. The prejudice of the judge was so manifest that Justice Mitchel May of the Supreme Court was forced later to grant a certificate of reasonable doubt in the case on the grounds that a most cursory examination of the case

records revealed an atmosphere at the trial which, it was "readily apparent," was created by the presiding judge "to influence the minds of the jury against these defendants."

During the trial the employers, the A. F. of L., and the International officials were in constant touch with the District Attorney, furnishing him with all of his "evidence" against the defendants. Detective Evans who testified against the fur workers admitted that he had obtained from the Joint Council, set up by the A. F. of L., the information which had enabled him to make up the case. Dozens of professional strike-breakers, known to have been scabbing during the 1926 strike, were called as witnesses. Throughout the case the Jewish Daily *Forward*, the Socialist Party organ, fabricated stories about "Communist gorillas," "grafters," and the like.

The manifest frame-up character of the charge was revealed in the case of Ben Gold. Although he was readily "identified" by willing witnesses, a commissioned officer of the New York National Guard was subpoenaed by the defense who testified that on the precise day and hour when the alleged attack took place, Gold and others were in his office in New York negotiating the rental of an armory for a furriers' mass meeting.

At the conclusion of the trial, two defendants, Gold and Shapiro, were acquitted and nine were found guilty and sentenced to from two and one-half to five years in prison. After two years of legal appeals in the courts and mass pressure, seven of the nine were finally acquitted and the other two were imprisoned for two and one-half years.

#### *The Police-Bribe Investigation*

The next step of the A. F. of L. leaders, the Socialists and the fur employers, was to attempt to imprison all of the militant furriers' leaders on fabricated charges that during the 1926 strike they had bribed the police into partiality for the strikers. It was alleged that \$100,000 in graft was



paid in this manner, in order to "buy" members of the police department, the district attorney's office, the industrial squad, court officials, and even all the officers in at least two police stations, and that as a result of this type of corruption all of the authorities were partial to the strikers.

Before the opening of the official court investigation into these charges, Pres. Green and Matthew Woll held a conference with Mayor Walker, at which all of the plans were carefully laid. At the hearing Green, Woll and the entire A. F. of L. Executive Council pressed the charges and served as the chief witnesses.

But the whole accusation was too shallow and ridiculous to hold any water. Never before in the history of the union had there been so many arrests and prosecutions of workers during a strike. About 1,500 strikers were arrested and many were brutally beaten by the police. The right to picket had been denied, hostile judges had passed sentences totaling over a thousand days in jail; certain workers received sentences of from two to three years; both chairmen of the picket committees had been arrested and served in jail; Ben Gold had been beaten up and arrested and at the time was still under charges arising out of his strike activities; throughout the entire strike vigorous protests had been lodged against the brutal attack on the strikers by the police, and these attacks had been brought to the attention of the Central Trades and Labor Council of New York which elected a special committee to investigate the police outrages.

The Joint Board readily submitted for examination of the court all records of income as well as financial accounts, vouchers for money paid out and other records. The investigation lasted for about two weeks, and the court finally declared that there was no evidence to substantiate the charges of the A. F. of L. officials. Another effort to frame up and imprison the militant furriers had proved unsuccessful.

*The Woll-McGrady "Reorganization"*

In setting up the Joint Council, Special Organizer Edward F. McGrady had announced that he had the "full coöperation of the police department" and this assurance immediately began to bear fruit in the form of attacks by members of the Industrial Squad upon left-wing furriers in the fur district. At the same time gangsters hired by the so-called "reorganization committee" were left free to attack those who were hostile to the efforts of A. F. of L. officials and manufacturers to force them into the Joint Council. Underworld characters cruised about the fur district in expensive automobiles with blackjacks and iron bars in a veritable reign of terror against left-wing workers and pickets.<sup>4</sup>

By such methods it was hoped that the fur workers would be forced to register with the A. F. of L. "union." But despite all these attempts at terrorization, the overwhelming majority of the workers remained loyal to the left-wing union and the Joint Council did not succeed in obtaining more than a handful of registrations.

As usual, however, the workers paid the penalty of the chaos created by the machinations of Green, Woll, McGrady, and their gang. Between the election of the left wing in May, 1925, and February, 1927, wages of cutters had increased 32% as compared with the 1924 scale; the wages of operators increased 30%; those of nailers 35%, and those of finishers 48%. Then came the Woll-McGrady "reorganization." While the A. F. of L. officials and the bosses were waging war on the Joint Board, while the Mineola and police bribe charges were being framed, and while the workers were being terrorized and slugged in an effort to get them to register in the new "union," working standards collapsed. The situation in a typical Seventh Avenue shop, J. Meiselman, illustrates what happened. Cutters who in 1926 averaged \$130 a week came to average \$34; operators were cut from \$57 to \$30; nailers from \$60 to \$33; finishers from \$45 to



\$20. The total weekly payroll in this shop for the same number of workers fell from \$685 in 1926 to \$300 in 1927.

Another concession granted by the right wing to the employers in return for support in the form of forced registrations, was the abandonment of the 40-hour week in those shops which the right wing controlled. Work hours were increased to 44 and 46 a week and, when work piled up, many were forced to work 50, 60 and 70 hours a week at straight rates for overtime instead of the time-and-a-half provided for in the 1926 agreement. In addition the sweatshop returned. There was a noticeable increase in the number of outlaw contract shops, in home work, piece work and the speed-up system with consequent mass unemployment. Such were the achievements of the A. F. of L. officials' "reorganization" in the Furriers' Union.

#### *The 1927 Strike*

Through the loyalty of the workers to their union, the Fur Trimming Manufacturers' Assn., shops employing 3,500 workers, was forced to sign a new agreement with the Joint Board. While standards elsewhere were collapsing, this new agreement preserved all the gains of the 1926 strike with only one modification permitting 10 hours of overtime during the busy season for which the workers were to be paid at a time-and-a-half rate. The shops of the trimming association plus a number of independents brought approximately 600 establishments into contractual relations with the Joint Board.

The Associated Fur Manufacturers, Inc., however, was adamant. It ordered all workers discharged unless they had cards issued by the right-wing group.<sup>5</sup> The reply of the Joint Board was that "an arrangement with the American Federation of Labor is one thing and the production of coats is another."<sup>6</sup> On June 3, 1927, a mass meeting of workers that crowded Cooper Union unanimously voted to strike against the Associated for a restoration of their fast dwindling wages and conditions and for recognition of their

union. Within a few days after the strike was called, thousands who had previously been forced under the threat of the blackjack, knife and discharge to register with the Joint Council had registered at the strike headquarters and joined the picket line.

The bosses and the A. F. of L. became panicky. Pres. Green and Matthew Woll again rushed to the scene. Squads of gangsters patrolled the fur market and assaulted the pickets. Green and Woll again made speeches about Moscow agents and Communism. Green, in a speech at the Central Trades and Labor Council, went so far as to urge that the government break the strike on the ground that civil government was in danger. The furriers' delegates to that body were expelled without trial; Woll asked the New York police commissioner and the courts to prevent mass picketing and demanded the deportation of non-naturalized pickets. But in spite of all these attacks the strikers remained firm.

In the sixth week of the strike economic conditions in the industry became so bad as to cause even the discharge of scabs and made it inadvisable any longer to continue the strike. Formal recognition by the Associated did not result, but many individual shops agreed not to compel their workers to register with the A. F. of L. Joint Council and the prestige of the latter was shattered. The overwhelming majority of the fur workers remained loyal to the Joint Board and although up to the very time of the merger of the left and right-wing groups in the Summer of 1935, the Associated had a paper agreement with the International, it was without force and effect. The left-wing forces had no formal agreement with this manufacturers' association but all save a very small minority of these employers had verbal understandings with the Fur Workers Industrial Union. In recent years they recognized its business agents on their premises and paid on the basis of their payroll to its unemployment insurance fund.



*The Struggle for Unity*

During the period 1925 to 1928 the left wing refused to recognize the legality of the A. F. of L. officials' "reorganization," maintaining that it was the rightfully elected New York Joint Board of the International Fur Workers Union (A. F. of L.).

In June, 1927, the International called a convention at Washington, D. C. The New York Joint Board locals 1, 5, 10 and 15 elected representatives to attend this convention in order to attempt to obtain a reconsideration of the facts in the case and put an end to the union warfare and re-establish *one* union in the industry. But the delegates of the Joint Board were not seated or even admitted to the sessions. Such official delegations from other centers as were known to disapprove of the A. F. of L. tactics were similarly refused recognition and seats.

This treatment of the militant locals led many delegates to leave the convention in disgust. Together with the expelled New Yorkers these protesting delegates formed a Unity Conference Committee. It issued a statement which read in part as follows:

The Unity Conference Committee calls upon every local of the International for immediate concrete assistance in accomplishing its purpose. Our aim is unity in our union. The internal strife broke the backbone of the union which it took years to build up. . . . The conditions of the fur workers throughout the International are intolerable. . . . The Unity Conference Committee has now turned to William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor, with a request that he use his office to the end of terminating the internal union war. . . . We demand an end to this bloody game. We demand unity in the ranks of the workers. We demand that the union should be rebuilt to serve the needs and the interests of the fur workers. . . . We turn to the locals of the International to rally behind the Unity Conference Committee and support it in the campaign for unity in the International.

The Unity Committee, through its chairman, H. Englander, communicated with and personally conferred with President Green, but to no avail. Boston Local No. 30, which adopted resolutions favoring unity and a referendum in order that "the New York fur workers exercise their democratic rights to choose their own officers," was censured by the International and threatened with suspension. Meanwhile, the Unity Conference Committee organized its forces all over the United States and Canada.

Although the top forces of the A. F. of L. rejected every proposal to unify ranks, this end was achieved in another way. A group within the A. F. of L. Joint Council, led by Sorkin and Winnick, demanded after the 1927 convention of the International that serious consideration be given to the matter of unity with the Joint Board. On April 5, 1928, this group entered into a united front with the latter supporting the program of one union in the trade. For this action they too were expelled.

This completed the disintegration of the Joint Council. The Joint Board shortly thereafter initiated a campaign and, when the trade began to pick up, called a number of shop strikes for July wage increases. The movement was eminently successful and the militant policies of the Joint Board were again vindicated by events. The A. F. of L. union was broken and the Joint Council ceased to function. The Joint Board became the only union recognized by the workers.

The A. F. of L. union-smashers had to admit their defeat. "As you know," wrote Edward McGrady to A. Shiplacoff, "a large number of the disgruntled, and I might say dishonest, members of the fur workers have been suspended from membership for the good and welfare of the organization. They have joined with the Communist forces of the city in a last desperate attempt to smash the Fur Workers Union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. The committee representing the American Federation of Labor feels very much discouraged over this situation and . . . I

have conferred with President Green on this situation. . . . The American Federation of Labor will surrender its control of the situation."

*The Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union*

During the course of the struggle for unity, it became obvious that, regardless of the well-being of the workers in the trade, the right wing would not depart from its union-splitting tactics. When all avenues of approach to these officials had been exhausted, a conference was held on August 12, 1928, and workers' representatives from all the markets in the country decided to build a new union.

A huge and enthusiastic mass meeting held three days later unanimously endorsed this policy and laid plans for calling a convention to organize the new venture. A National Executive Committee was empowered to make all arrangements. After a period of intensive mobilization, including many strike struggles in New York, Boston, Chicago, Newark and other centers, the N.E.C. called a convention and since "the trimming of cloth coats with fur has . . . made the fur industry organically bound up with the cloak industry" the call further proposed "that the amalgamation of the cloak and dressmakers and furriers' unions shall be the first step in the direction of the organization of one industrial union in the entire needle industry."

The convention was held in New York from December 29, 1928, to January 1, 1929.\* The new union was officially launched at this time, amalgamation with the other needle trades was endorsed and the new body became the Furriers' Section of the Needle Trade Workers Industrial Union.

*Renewed A. F. of L. Activity*

The threat of a powerful revolutionary needle trades union spurred on the employers to give new aid and encouragement to the defunct A. F. of L. union. They therefore re-

\* See above, pp. 52-54.

newed their public declarations of loyalty to the defunct Joint Council and pledged support to that corrupt body.

The fur trimming manufacturers were offered every concession to abrogate their agreement with the left wing. They entered into a deal with the Associated for the recognition of the A. F. of L. Joint Council on the basis of a complete annihilation of established standards. The organization convention of the N.T.W.I.U. therefore endorsed the calling of a general strike at the opportune time.

The strike was called early in 1929 but it failed to meet with sufficient response chiefly because of the extraordinary police activity in the fur market. Pickets were met by a reign of terror. On the initiative of the bosses and the A. F. of L. Joint Council, the police department assigned special squads to the buildings housing fur shops. Hundreds of workers were slugged, slashed, beaten and arrested. As a result of police and gangster intimidation the majority of the workers were forced to register with the Joint Council which was able to establish control in most of the fur shops during 1929, 1930 and the first half of 1931.

But this situation did not last long. The partnership of the A. F. of L. union and the employers was based upon collusion for the worsening of standards and conditions. Forced to register, under threat of discharge, the workers nevertheless remained loyal to the Industrial Union, retained their membership books in it and prepared for later struggle.

The Industrial Union similarly prepared for another offensive. It announced as its slogan "Furriers will continue the struggle," raised an "Organize and Strike" fund and prepared the workers to fight back.

*The N.T.W.I.U. and the Crisis*

Meanwhile the full force of the capitalist crisis was striking the fur industry. Without the fighting Industrial Union in the shops to protect them, every gain achieved by the workers in the 1926 strike was wiped out. Piece work be-



came general; wholesale discharges took place; sub-contracting infested the industry; legal holidays were not paid for; overtime was no longer reimbursed at time-and-a-half rates; minimum scales were wiped out; and fly-by-night contractors and "bed room" shops sprang up in great numbers. In these shops the desperate fur workers were forced to accept employment for as little as \$15 a week.

As in other sections of the needle trades, the right-wing leaders excused their own ineptitude and their betrayals by blaming all upon "the depression." They advanced the deceptive theory that during a crisis it is impossible to obtain higher wages or even to maintain existing ones—so why try for the impossible? In line with this theory, workers who brought complaints to the union office were insulted or ignored. If they became insistent they were frequently victimized and fired. Soon workers ceased even bringing in such complaints. The Joint Council was doing the bosses' work well.

The Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union flatly rejected this theory that workers cannot win improvements in periods of crisis. Through a militant offensive, it insisted, workers can win concessions—even in "unfavorable" economic periods. Through such unmistakable challenges as the following it hurled back in the face of the class enemy every effort to compel it to mitigate its demands:

The only way to smash all conspiracies of the bosses and defeat the beasts hired by the bosses against the workers is that the furriers unite their ranks and with united strength answer the bosses' challenge. . . .

Let the gentlemen manufacturers know that they will never succeed in forcing the Industrial Union to sign an agreement with the Associated which will not guarantee to better the conditions of the workers. Let the bosses hire the whole New York underworld. Let them hire all professional scabs who are found in the fur industry. Let them mobilize all politicians, the police department. Let them begin anew their frame-ups and their base provocation and savage persecution against the workers—

their devilish plans of enslaving, to starve the workers will not be realized. . . . The picket line will give the bosses their proper answer.<sup>7</sup>

The N.T.W.I.U. exposed the Joint Council of the A. F. of L. as an agent of the bosses. At the same time it carried out the offensive forward against the employing class. Throughout the entire period of the crisis the furriers' section of the N.T.W.I.U. was able to win strikes and achieve decisive gains. In life and in action it gave the lie to the theories of the class collaborationists within the ranks of the working class. And it alone, of all the needle trades unions, continued to grow during the entire period of the crisis.

#### *Victorious Advances*

In the spring of 1931, the N.T.W.I.U. launched its offensive by starting a movement for July wage increases. It called upon workers in the Joint Council to join in a united front movement. It promised that it did not intend to force any one out of the Joint Council but wanted a united front to improve workers' conditions, regardless of union affiliation.

This movement was successful. Oppositions arose within Joint Council locals 101, 105, 110 and 115 which favored joining this movement, even, if necessary, over the heads of their officials. This opposition received majority support in several local meetings.

Beginning with July, 1931, the N.T.W.I.U. called shop strikes involving several thousand workers, including almost 100% of the dogskin trade. Victories were universal. Increases of from \$5 to \$15 a week were won in all shops. In the settlements the Industrial Union provided for the right of the workers to belong to any union they chose.

Workers who belonged to the Joint Council were not discriminated against. However, the Joint Council officialdom had done everything within its power to hamper the drive for the July increases. As a consequence there was an imme-

diate decline in its membership and a sharp rise in the membership of the Industrial Union.

An intense organization campaign followed with hundreds of shop meetings and general agitation for the strict enforcement of union standards. In the Joint Council the left-wing opposition became so strong and so bold that the officials dared not hold an election. Instead the national office appointed Kauffman dictator of the New York union. Despite this, however, the workers conducted an election of their own and elected a Joint Council over the heads of their officials. They called a strike under the jurisdiction of this new body and the A. F. of L. officials ran to court where they received an injunction restraining their own membership from such independent activities.

During 1932 the Industrial Union waged many strikes and obtained many wage increases. The International Fur Workers Union sought an injunction restraining the N.T.W.I.U. from organizing the fur shops on the ground that this constituted an infringement of its contractual relationships with the manufacturers.<sup>8</sup> But the fighting union could not be stopped. Among other accomplishments of the year was the forcing of the Fur Trimming Manufacturers Association, to recognize the Industrial Union officially. This followed a general strike in the trimming section in which the workers insisted on their right to belong to the Industrial Union. The A. F. of L. had promised these employers "no strikes or lockouts," but, with the workers in the Industrial Union, this promise could not be kept and the Association had no alternative in the face of the strike but to sign up with the militant union.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, individual bosses in the Associated were forced to break away and sign individual agreements.

Over 3,000 workers profited by this single strike and halls could not be obtained large enough to hold the throngs who came to hear Ben Gold report the terms of settlement. These terms included the 40-hour, 5-day week, increased wages,

equal division of work and, for the first time in the history of the fur industry, the creation of an unemployment fund contributed to only by the manufacturers and administered exclusively by the workers. The A. F. of L. continued its sniping tactics with Samuel Shore, then manager of the Joint Council, publicly contending that "the agreement does not call for a single improvement of work conditions."<sup>10</sup> To this the Industrial Union replied by printing the names of hundreds of establishments and the specific amounts of increases which had been obtained. These increases ranged from \$3 to \$10 weekly.

Following this campaign, the Industrial Union, in 1932, succeeded in establishing nearly 100% organization among the rabbit dressers, winning increases as high as 40% in many cases and a 3% unemployment insurance fund. Other strike victories of the same year were won by the fur pointers (mostly girls and women) and by the workers in the dog-skin trade who through a 100% strike won further increases over the 1931 standards.

The Industrial Union thus gained complete control of the fur industry and a loyal and enthusiastic membership. By the middle of 1932 the Joint Council, stripped of its membership, stopped functioning. It was recognized by neither workers nor manufacturers, despite certain paper agreements which it maintained with the latter. It even stopped holding meetings and its representatives no longer visited the shops.

In January, 1933, the Industrial Union began a campaign among the fur dyers, a section of the trade which had never been organized. In February the 125-year-old firm of J. B. Williams, which had hitherto repelled all efforts at unionization, surrendered to a strike. By August 90% of the fur dyers had been organized and 1,400 of them joined the union. They received wage increases averaging \$5 a week, a reduction of hours from 55 to 44, and an unemployment insurance fund of 3%, contributed by the employers and administered by the workers. In other fur centers, from Philadelphia to



Los Angeles, similar recognition and improvements were achieved.

### *Counter-Offensive*

The activities of the militant union again struck terror in the hearts of the fur bosses. From September, 1932, to May, 1933, \$31,927.82 was recovered for workers whose employers violated the terms of their agreements. It conducted 396 victorious shop strikes; it compelled the reinstatement of 313 unjustly discharged workers; it put an end to excess overtime in 242 shops; it adjusted 2,179 complaints and held 2,228 shop meetings. Between November, 1932, and May, 1933, it distributed \$6,510.60 to unemployed fur workers and \$11,489.50 to unemployed dressers and dyers from the unemployment insurance fund. In New York alone it had contractual relations with the New York Trimming Manufacturers Association, representing 262 firms, and with 357 additional independent manufacturers.

Further, the union controlled 190 shops of the members of the Associated Fur Coat and Trimming Manufacturers, Inc. As a result of strikes, 46 additional firms, among them the most important members of the Associated, were forced to settle during May, 1933, while 40 of the large firms remained on strike. The Associated was becoming desperate as a result of its inability to force the furriers to register with the non-existent Joint Council.

Because of this remarkable progress, the Associated had been compelled, early in 1933, to commence negotiations with the Industrial Union for a collective contract. These negotiations were almost completed when suddenly—due to pressure from an unrevealed source—the Associated became obdurate. The A. F. of L. was again called in and agreed with the employers to make another attempt at reviving the Joint Council and to renew the offensive against the Industrial Union.

On April 24, 1933, *Women's Wear* announced a renewed

drive of the A. F. of L. in the fur trade in which methods of "strenuous persuasion" would be used. That morning a band of gangsters descended upon the headquarters of the Industrial Union intending to wreck the place and terrorize the occupants. Sixteen innocent workers were seriously wounded, one of the gangsters and a worker were killed, and nine of the attacking gangsters with long criminal records were arrested.\*

There being but few workers left in the Joint Council through whom to build up that union, other agencies were resorted to which were described in the press as follows:

A campaign to rid the fur industry of all Communist and Left Wing labor organizations will be started by the American Federation of Labor with the aid and support of the city administration and the Police Department, it was announced last night at a meeting of the Associated Fur Coat and Trimming Manufacturers Association. . . . A speech by Dudley Field Malone, in which he announced the campaign, promised unanimously to support the A. F. of L. and the International Fur Workers Union of New York, its affiliate. . . .

With the aid of additional uniformed policemen, detectives and members of the industrial squad, which he said had been promised, a distribution of pamphlets will be begun. . . . With the support of the police they expect to "purge" the industry completely.<sup>11</sup>

The next step in the campaign was the granting of a temporary injunction on May 29 "against" the members of the Associated restraining them from violating the paper collective agreement with the International, thereby preventing shop settlements with the N.T.W.I.U. and compelling the discharge of workers not registered in the right-wing union. The sham battle by which the A. F. of L. leaders obtained this injunction without either the Association or any manufacturer appearing in court to oppose it was so evident that the judge on the bench was forced to open up the case again with the N.T.W.I.U. as a party to interpose objection and

\* See below, p. 23

to concede that the Industrial Union controlled the vast majority of the workers in the fur industry.

At about the same time the Fur Trimming Manufacturers Association announced its readiness to help any time that the A. F. of L. "could deliver." Its attorney, Emil Ellis, pointed out:

"We don't welcome the banner under which we are now," indicating quite clearly that if the A. F. of L. could promise—and show by some concrete means that it could keep its promise—that it would enter into an enforceable labor agreement "we would not be remiss in doing that which you all expect of us."<sup>12</sup>

Other forces rallied as allies of the defunct council. The City Central Committee of the Socialist Party voted "complete confidence" in the new venture. The followers of Jay Lovestone, who had been expelled from the Communist Party and whose rôle among the dressmakers we have already seen,\* also aided the bosses, the police and the underworld in the war on the Industrial Union and three of their number, Baretz, Lena Greenberg and Intrator, were elected to a temporary council to "build the union."<sup>13</sup>

How the union was to be "built" by the Joint Council and the employers had been well illustrated a short time before when detectives swooped down upon the office of the Industrial Union and placed Jack Schneider, militant leader, under arrest on a framed-up charge of felonious assault. He was taken out of a shop meeting which he was addressing at the time.

In such ways as these the drive once more began to force the fur workers into the Joint Council. However, gigantic demonstrations and strikes soon showed the bosses and their allies that they were destined to fail again.

#### *The Industrial Union and the NRA*

About this time the National Recovery Act became an important factor in developments. Through it the forces of

\* See above, pp. 67-70.

reaction thought they saw an opportunity to revive the defunct Joint Council in the same manner in which the other reformist needle trades unions had been reanimated by the NRA.

The Industrial Union was under no illusions as to the purposes of the National Industrial Recovery Act and openly branded the "NRA as a measure to assist the employers to increase their exploitation and to force upon the workers a program of starvation and misery."<sup>14</sup> However, it insisted upon its right, as the representative of the overwhelming majority of the fur workers, to participate in all NRA hearings and conferences relating to the furriers in order to prevent any undermining of existing standards through government collaboration with the employers.

Section 7 (a) of the Recovery Act was supposed to guarantee to all workers "the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing." The Furriers Section of the Industrial Union immediately called this bluff and challenged the International Fur Workers to produce even 100 *bona fide* members. This challenge brought no reply. About the same time a "Citizens' Committee to Investigate Conditions in the Fur Industry," consisting of Prof. Horace M. Kallen of the New School for Social Research (chairman), Thyra Samter Winslow, author (secretary), and John Chamberlain, associate editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Kyle Crichton, editor of *Scribner's Magazine*, Lucille Copeland, Conference for Progressive Labor Action, Theodore Dreiser, author, Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein, and others, issued its report. It found, among other things, that:

The great majority of the workers . . . are members of the Fur Department, Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union. . . .

That this union is a strong, effective organization, willing and ready to keep its agreements . . . while the Joint Council has proved in these respects unsatisfactory.

That although this union is customarily called "The Left



Wing" its members belong to all kinds of political parties. . . .

That the charge of "Communism" is being used only to discredit the union in the public mind. . . .

That the present disorder in the fur industry is due to the collusive activity toward this end of the Manufacturers' Association and the Joint Council. . . . [etc.]

The Citizens' Committee made the further very just and logical recommendation that for purposes of recognition by the NRA an impartial tribunal be set up to conduct a referendum among the fur workers "to determine their preference between the unions, and that the National Recovery Administration accept the result."<sup>15</sup>

It was all to no avail, however. The NRA, dominated by Edward F. McGrady and other A. F. of L. officials, long enemies of the militant fur workers, for obvious reasons preferred to deal only with the Joint Council. False and misleading press releases were issued about "The A. F. of L. unions, representing the bulk of the furriers in the industry throughout the United States and Canada."<sup>16</sup> The Industrial Union was not even informed of the preliminary hearings upon the code between "the manufacturing and labor groups,"<sup>17</sup> and at the final hearings the International was accepted as the legitimate spokesman of labor while the Industrial Union had to fight and the furriers had to demonstrate before the latter was even accorded a hearing.\*

Finally Edward F. McGrady, already Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Roosevelt government, was appointed one of the administrators of the Recovery Act. He used his position in every way to outlaw the Industrial Union. He cautioned the employers to withhold a settlement which they were negotiating with the N.T.W.I.U. to succeed (in January, 1934) the existing agreement.

In order to have Ben Gold out of the way when this matter came to a head, McGrady was directly instrumental in sending this fiery and inspiring leader to jail for 40 days.

\* See below, pp. 239-240.

Gold had been among the leaders of the New York delegation on a Hunger March to Washington in December, 1932. In Wilmington, Del., police attacked the marchers and Gold was beaten unconscious and arrested. After appeal, his case finally came up in January, 1934. The presiding judge was about to release him when a letter was received from McGrady that "Gold is a menace to society and should be behind bars."<sup>18</sup> On this recommendation he was sent to jail for 40 days.

#### *Recent Advances*

The fur workers in the Industrial Union are the living example of the fact that militant, class-conscious working class organization can survive threats and onslaughts—in good times or bad. For despite the combination of forces arrayed against them from every side, the furriers, under the N.T.W.I.U., continued through 1934 not only to hold their own but to march forward to new victories.

In January, 1934, both manufacturing groups, the Associated and the Trimming Manufacturers, hoping that they could accomplish through government aid under the NRA what they had been unable to effect by themselves, again signed agreements with the Joint Council of the International. The Industrial Union wrote to these employer groups warning them that 99% of the fur workers were members of the Industrial Union and that:

The Joint Council is an organization without members . . . a small group of racketeers and underworld types working in conjunction with a handful of Lovestoneites. . . . The Industrial Union will defend to the utmost the basic right of the workers to belong to a union of their own choosing. The Industrial Union will defend the gains of the workers and will see to it that the bosses live up to all the conditions that the furriers have won through their long and heroic struggles.<sup>19</sup>

They meant every word of this. It took a number of months of preparation but by the end of August, 1934, 4,000

workers had the industry at a standstill through a general strike. The picketing was so militant that not a wheel turned. The Joint Council could not muster a single furrier to answer the frantic demands of the bosses to fulfill the conditions of their paper agreement and after only one week the Trimming Manufacturers again signed with the Industrial Union. Among the concessions won this time was strict enforcement of the 35-hour week and continuance of unemployment insurance. The Associated members, with the exception of an insignificant minority, again began to deal with the union on an individual basis.

Repeated demands of the Industrial Union upon the NRA National Labor Board to hold a workers' election upon the subject of union representation and membership proved unavailing. In February, 1934, the Labor Board did agree to hold a referendum but due to employer and A. F. of L. pressure it never took place. Unity, however, was being achieved anyway. Recognizing that the International had some workers in the Rabbit Trade, the Industrial Union proposed to International Locals 85 and 25 of New York a united front strike. The offer was accepted and, despite the efforts and maneuvers of the top officials of the International to break this united front, the two locals and the Industrial Union succeeded in maintaining it. A three-week joint strike followed which resulted in a nearly 100% increase in wages.\*

In June, 1934, a National Furriers' Conference was held with representatives from all important cities and from every strata of workers. It laid the basis for the final welding of an all-powerful, class struggle national union.

In the Spring of 1934 the Trade Union Unity League, to which the Industrial Union was affiliated, dissolved as a separate body on the ground that the need of the hour was

\* For example, the scale for fleshing 100 gray rabbit skins was increased from \$1.10 to \$2.10, with the same proportions for all other occupations, such as pulling white skins, etc. Ten cents for every 100 skins was to be paid by the employers to the unemployment fund.

unity in the labor movement. All of its affiliated unions sought entrance into the A. F. of L. The Fur Workers Industrial Union offered to join the A. F. of L. as a body, on the single condition that there be no discrimination against any of its members and that at a subsequent election the joint membership of the combined union be free to select its own leadership and determine its own policies. This offer was rejected on the grounds that an A. F. of L. affiliate could have no dealings with a "dual union" and that the Industrial Union members might enter only as individuals and without conditions. The Industrial Union thereupon proceeded to lay plans for an independent, unaffiliated International Fur Workers Industrial Union, while continuing the struggle for unity.

Accordingly, two conventions were held simultaneously in May, 1935. One was called in New York by the independent union, which represented about 95% of the New York furriers and 85% of the furriers in the country. The other met at Toronto under the auspices of the small A. F. of L. International. The question of unity was bitterly fought at the latter gathering which, however, ended with the adoption of a resolution calling for one union in the trade and the admittance of all members of the Fur Workers Industrial Union into the A. F. of L. without discrimination and with all rights.

Thereupon representatives of both unions met in conference and terms for the reëntrance of the Industrial Union members and their leaders into the International Fur Workers Union were jointly agreed upon. In the midst of the negotiations Pres. Green of the A. F. of L. announced through Matthew Woll that the successful consummation of the unity efforts would result in the revocation of the union's charter by the Federation. "The American Federation of Labor will not countenance any such action," said Woll, in part. "The Chicago Federation of Labor has recently taken an unequivocal stand against the attempt to put through a



united front of A. F. of L. and Communist fur workers in that city by announcing that no 'united front' organizations would be admitted to the Chicago Federation. That stand was in harmony with the philosophy of the A. F. of L. Mr. Green has now authorized me to say that the same policy will apply in New York and in all other cities." <sup>20</sup>

The right-wing leaders in the International Union, however, had learned that the struggle between the two unions was disastrous to both and despite Mr. Green's threats the unity negotiations were successfully continued. On June 27, 1935, Ben Gold and 14 other leaders of the Industrial Union were reinstated. The rank and file members were similarly readmitted shortly thereafter and the entire body of furriers in the New York market were reunited within the American Federation of Labor.

In August, 1935, elections for officers and business agents in the united union were held. Although they were in the overwhelming majority, the left wingers entered a slate for only half of these posts and recommended the election of right wingers and Socialists to the remainder. Ben Gold was elected manager of the Joint Council over Harold Goldstein, right wing candidate, by a vote of 5,029 against 1,944. The left wing did not contest the posts of assistant manager or secretary-treasurer. All of the candidates nominated by the left wing as business agents were elected by large majorities.