PAGE
116
149
166
187
201
220
244
251
253

INTRODUCTION

Not long before the outbreak of the European War, the needle trades were characterized by all of the worst evils of private enterprise operating for profit. "The clothing industry," testified the President of the New York Consumers' League, early in the twentieth century, "is one of the most degraded, if not the most degraded of all the industries."

The industry has always been highly seasonal and unemployment and part-time work has characterized it from its beginnings. Men and women commonly toiled for 70 hours a week. They worked for a mere pittance and lived in filthy, overcrowded tenements. Their "shops" were lofts of the most antiquated type, with the workers herded so closely together that movement was scarcely possible. Investigators grieved that so many of these work places lacked even the elements of decent ventilation and light, that great proportions of them were utterly filthy and were not even provided with such elementary needs as toilet facilities or drinking water.

The workers were for the most part recently arrived foreigners, many of whom did not speak English. All of them were faced with the immediate necessity of finding work under any circumstances. Fierce competition for employment was therefore the rule.

Homework made regulation and enforcement of wage rates a virtual impossibility. Much of the work was unskilled and newly arrived immigrants quickly learned the trade. Women, long considered virtually impossible to organize, were employed in clothing in greater numbers than in any other industry. The fluctuation in employment, from overtime without limit to slack seasons or total unemployment, was not conducive to labor solidarity; while small shops, combined

with the jobber-contractor system, which predominated in the trade, placed tremendous obstacles in the way of both union supervision and control. Words like unemployment, contractor, sub-manufacturer, homework and sweatshop became needle trade symbols.

But in the years following the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand" shirtwaist makers and dressmakers in 1909, the "Great Revolt" of the cloakmakers in 1910 and the uprisings of the men's clothing workers in the years following 1912, the needle trades workers wrote new labor history. Every tradition of the unorganizability of these industries was shattered. Tens of thousands of workers, men and women, stood in solid phalanx on the picket lines. Policemen's clubs, armed thugs, wholesale arrests and imprisonments failed to break their militant spirit. Side by side, they poured out of hundreds of small shops by the thousands. Many of them were girls in their teens. Practically all were recently arrived immigrants. Through their boundless courage and idealism they forged a strong union control over the conditions in their trade.

Hours of work were progressively reduced until they reached 40 a week. By 1925 the New York State Governor's Advisory Commission found wages of some workers reaching as high as $80 a week during the "seasons" when the shops operated. Among operators in the cloak industry in New York City, for example, the number receiving under $50 a week during the years 1924 and 1925 was only about 6 to 8% of the total number employed. The average wage for the group ranged between $50 and $70 with around 40 weeks of full-time employment per year in the "inside" shops and an average of 31.5 weeks per year in the submanufacturing shops.

The sweatshop, moreover, was largely replaced in time by large, modern plants where conditions of work were much better. The protection of these conditions was in the hands of the workers themselves. They had won them by years

of organization, effort and self-sacrifice. They had learned one basic lesson—that they could get from the employers only what they were able to wrest through their organized power. And so they jealously stood guard over every achievement. At any serious threat to their hard won gains they would down tools and not a wheel moved in the shop until the grievance had been redressed.

Then came a big change. The unions had been built on the platform of the class struggle. But the attitude of the union leadership became transformed into one of class conciliation and class peace. Simultaneously conditions in the shops began to grow worse.

Gradually a deep chasm developed between the union membership and the leadership. A strong and powerful left-wing opposition crystallized and warfare developed between "lefts" and "rights." As the official leadership veered further away from the class struggle policy and toward collaboration with employers, depending ever more not on the organized power of the workers but upon mediation and arbitration, the membership broke out in open rebellion. With wages moving downward the situation dictated, it was argued, a policy of more solid organization and intense struggle, rather than one of quiet and gradual submission.

There followed a period of wholesale expulsion from the unions of those who had determinedly opposed the officialdom. When they found themselves outside of the established organizations and saw thwarted at every turn the likelihood of transforming these back during that period into organs of mass struggle, the insurgents determined that the time for drastic action had arrived. Accordingly there was organized at the end of December, 1928, the militant Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, which maintained a separate existence until 1935 when merger with the A. F. of L. unions was again effected.

We shall see how policies of the furriers' section of the new union, at the depth of the economic crisis in 1932,

actually won increases for its members when wages and conditions elsewhere were tobogganing. The Industrial Union workers are now uniting with the A. F. of L. unions in order that there may be organizational unity in the trade based upon militant policies.

Now, 25 years after the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," the greatest body of the clothing workers are again sliding back to scratch—to the place from which they started. Their hard won standards are gradually slipping until the return of the sweatshop is a stark reality. Arrested by the valiant strike movements of 1933, the retrogression is again becoming marked.

Workers' statements and official investigations alike testify to hideous working conditions, long hours, unbelievably low wages, increasing speed-up and growing unemployment. Partly as a result of rationalization and a terrific speed-up system, seasons are growing shorter. The worker's job is more insecure than ever. The worker is more tired than ever after a day's work. The older workers find they cannot stand the pace. The younger ones find themselves old and broken in a comparatively short time.

But the clothing workers are made of stern stuff. Their militant tradition extends too far back, their lives' lessons have been too deeply ingrained, the experiences acquired as a result of long years of struggle are too much a part of their very being for them to take all this lying down. They are already fighting back. Large sections of them who were organized in the Industrial Union are forging unity with the older bodies and entering those organizations in a spirit of determined militancy. They are girding their loins for sharper class battles ahead. They face the future with heads held high and with courage, determination and hope.