

A SHORT HISTORY OF JEWS IN THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

By Bennett Muraskin

German-speaking Jews who arrived in the United States in the mid-19th century spread across the U.S. and tended to be merchants and shopkeepers. Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe who arrived in the U.S. beginning in the 1880s settled in the big cities and tended to be workers.

The conditions they faced were daunting. Low wages, long hours, unsafe workplaces and overcrowded and unsanitary tenement housing were the norm. Most of these Jewish immigrants came from small towns and were not prepared for the noise, dirt, congestion, disease and crime rampant in the great American cities of that period. Some even turned to crime and prostitution. However, they were free of the anti-Semitic laws and violence that plagued them in Eastern Europe. Their children were entitled to a free public education and once they became citizens, they could vote and participate in the political process.

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

However, before going any further, it is necessary to recognize one of the most important Jewish personalities in the history of the American labor movement, Samuel Gompers.

Gompers came to US from England in 1863. His parents came from Holland, with ancestry dating back to Spain. In other words, he was a Sephardic Jew. Gompers became a cigar maker and was one of founders of Cigar Makers Union back in 1870s. He was integral to the founding of the American Federation of Labor in the 1880s and led it until 1924, but he did not share language, culture or politics of East European Jews. Gompers is considered a conservative influence because of his devotion to craft unionism, hostility toward socialism and opposition to immigration.

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

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

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

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

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

Another early Jewish labor leader who was also of Sephardic origin - Daniel DeLeon - was the dominant figure in the first major socialist organization in the U.S. - the Socialist Labor Party (SLP). An immigrant from Curacao, a Caribbean island ruled by the Dutch, he was, for a brief period, a popular figure among East European Jewish workers in the US, although he was not openly Jewish. In the 1890s there were 25 Yiddish-speaking branches of the SLP and in New York City, over 30 percent of the Jewish vote went to SLP candidates.

Who were Jewish labor leaders' role models and their mentors? Not other Jews, but German American anarchists and socialists who came to the US in the mid-19th century and the German Social Democratic Party, then the largest socialist party in the world. Many Jewish immigrants who arrived in the late 1880s or early 1890s were radicalized by the famous Haymarket Affair (1886) in Chicago, which resulted in the hanging of four anarchists all but one German immigrants, for allegedly throwing a bomb that killed police who were breaking up a rally in favor of the eight hour day.

Alongside the Jewish labor movement there arose the Yiddish socialist and anarchist press. Not just journalists, but poets, novelists and short story writers, who worked by day and wrote by night and whose creative work ardently reflected their support for the Jewish labor movement. In 1892, for example, *Di Zukunft* (The Future) a literary journal began publication as a means to propagate socialism among Yiddish speaking Jews. Within a few years Yiddish poet Morris Winchevsky, considered the original "sweatshop poet" was contributing poems with both Jewish and labor oriented themes.

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

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

Not only were poems like this widely read, they were put to music and sung by Jewish workers.

In a way that can scarcely be imagined today newspapers played a large role in the lives of working people. Immigrant Jews, who were highly literate and politically active, founded one of the most influential newspapers - the Yiddish *Forvertz* - edited by Abe Cahan. It began publication around the turn of the 20th century and attained a

peak daily circulation of 250,000 in the 1920s. The *Forvertz* building on the Lower East Side featured engravings of Marx and Engels and the phrase “Workers of the World Unite” appeared on its masthead. The two other most influential labor-oriented newspapers were the *Frei Arbeter Shtimme*, with an anarchist perspective, and the *Freiheit*, the Yiddish Communist paper, a rival to the *Forvertz*, that emerged in the early 1920s.

In addition to advocating for socialism, unionism and Jewish secularism, the *Forvertz* featured human interest stories and its famous advice column known as “bintl brief.” Short stories by Yiddish writers appeared in serial form.

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

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

Strikes had already broken out in various shops. At a mass meeting, Clara Lemlich, a young Jewish woman who had already been arrested many times by the police and beaten up by thugs came to the platform and called for a general strike. Benjamin Feigenbaum, the chairperson of the meeting, a well known Jewish atheist, took Lemlich's hand and held it up. He asked if the crowd was ready to take the old Jewish oath, which says “If I forget thee O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither from the arm I raise”. But he changed a few key words. Instead he said, “If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may my right hand wither from the arm I raise.” Every arm in the hall went up and this is how the general strike began. Four months later - four winter months later - after many arrests and picket line violence, the union won. A general strike of tens of thousands more workers in the cloak and suit industry, most of whom were men, followed in 1910 which was also successful. A similar victory was achieved in Chicago in 1912-13, in a mass strike led by a young Sidney Hillman and Bessie Abramowitz, who later became his wife.

Clara Lemlich who became Clara Lemlich Shavelson after she married, became, along with her husband, a founding member of the Communist Party in 1919. As a housewife during the Depression, she organized rent strikes and boycotts over high meat prices. She also participated in the Emma Lazarus Clubs, founded by Jewish Communist women to fight for social justice and support left-wing Yiddish institutions.

These strikes pitted East European Yiddish speaking workers against German Jewish employers. But many of the wives of the German Jewish employers and other upper class and middle class gentile women were involved in the Women’s Trade Union League and as such, supported the strike and actually joined the picket lines. The big *makhers* in the Jewish community were so disturbed that they eventually pressured the employers to agree to mediation by a young Louis Brandeis, later the first Jewish Supreme Court justice appointed by President Woodrow Wilson in 1916 and a prominent Zionist.

In a document called the “Protocols of Peace,” covering 339 shops, workers won a 50-hour work-week, a union shop, and end to piecework, equal division of work during slack season, a limit on forced overtime, paid holidays and the arbitration of grievances. An even larger strike of cloakmakers in New York and Chicago in 1910 was also successful. Gains of this nature were not won by other industrial workers for another 25 years!

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

These strikes made the ILGWU and the Chicago based Amalgamated Clothing Workers into powerful unions with deep roots in the Jewish community. Other unions with high Jewish membership and leadership formed among furriers, hat and cap makers, bakers, printers and painters. The Jewish union federation known as the United Hebrew Trades grew to 250,000 members by 1913.

It did not happen all at once, but the big garment workers union's pioneered what became known as SOCIAL UNIONISM.

Some of its features were:

- health clinics
- sanatoriums for TB
- pensions
- day care centers
- cooperative housing like the Amalgamated Houses and Penn South in NYC
- vacation resorts/summer camps (e.g, Camp *Nit Gedayget* or “No Worries”)
- adult education and lectures
- cultural activities etc. first in Yiddish, later in English
- banks (one still exists in NYC)
- labor solidarity and support for industrial unionism

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

Another pivotal event in the history of the Jewish labor movement was the election of Meyer London to the U.S. Congress from the Lower East Side in 1914 who served two more terms until 1922. He was a Jewish labor lawyer, an immigrant fluent in Yiddish and English, who ran as a candidate for the Socialist Party, which was the majority party among Jewish workers in these years. His election was a great source of pride for the immigrant Jewish working class of NYC. He joined another Socialist member of Congress, Victor Berger, a German Jew from Milwaukee, then a socialist stronghold due to the German population, more Gentile than Jewish. Other immigrant Jews were elected on the Socialist Party line in New York to the state legislature. On the federal level, Jews in the labor movement voted Socialist too, most notably for Eugene Victor Debs before World War I, and, to a lesser extent, for Norman Thomas in the 1920s and early 1930s. Jewish socialists were so enamored with Debs, a gentile,

that they named a New York City radio station after him - WEVD - even though most of its programming was in Yiddish.

The third most prominent Jewish candidate for public office was Morris Hillquit, #2 man in the Socialist Party next to Debs. Hillquit, who was also a labor lawyer, won 22 percent of the vote running for mayor of NYC in 1917 and 33 percent in 1932, during the depths of the Depression.

The most radical union in this period, i.e., between 1905 and U.S. entrance into World War I in 1917 was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). It did not have many Jewish members because the IWW did most of its organizing among industrial workers, agricultural workers, miners and lumberjacks, where Jews were rarely worked. But in their forays into the East, most notably the 1912 Lawrence, Mass. textile workers strike and the 1913 Paterson, NJ silk workers strike, thousands of Jewish workers participated, including Hannah Silverman, a Paterson mill worker, who became an important strike leader. Matlida Robbins, born Tatiana Rabinowitz, led a strike of textile workers in Little Falls, NY in 1912 and was hired by the IWW as one of two paid female organizers.

The best known Jewish Wobbly was Frank Tannenbaum, who organized unemployed workers in New York City to demand food and shelter from churches during the bitter cold winter of 1913-14. He was falsely accused of inciting to riot and served a year in a notorious city prison where he organized a strike of inmates against harsh conditions. Tannenbaum later dropped out of the labor movement to pursue a higher education. He earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University, and became a scholar specializing in race relations, criminology and Latin American history.

The Jewish-dominated labor unions constituted the left wing of the AFL, along with a few others unions where Jews were not a factor. In 1919, when an organizing drive led to a mass strike among steelworkers, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America donated nearly 40 percent of the funds raised by the entire labor movement, even though the number of Jewish steelworkers was miniscule. The *Forvertz* covered this and other strikes by non-Jewish workers for its Yiddish readership, not only for their news value, but to encourage labor solidarity.

It was not all great deeds, though. Women in the union shops did not receive equal pay for equal work, or the better jobs, and were also kept out of the union leadership. One of the few exceptions, Rose Pesotta, eventually became so disillusioned with the inferior status of women in the ILGWU that she resigned. Fellow organizer Fania Cohn suffered a similar fate. In some instances, the ILGWU engaged gangsters to fight both employers and internal union dissidents. Corruption and nepotism were not unknown. Nevertheless Jewish women, including Pesotta, Fania Cohn, Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Bessie Abramowitz and Rose Pastor Stokes achieved far greater prominence than their Gentile counterparts.

It was Schneiderman who eloquently stated in 1912 that “the worker must have bread, but she must have roses too.” The phrase “bread and roses” actually comes from a poem written by a Jewish poet James Oppenheim in 1911 honoring the sacrifices and dignity of women workers. Put to music, it has become a labor anthem. (The 1912 Lawrence textile strike has gone down into history as the “bread and roses” strike, because of the reported use of the phrase on picket signs, but some historians dispute this claim.)

The difference that Jewish labor unions and their network of affiliated institutions made in improving lives of the Jewish working class in the material and spiritual sense was outstanding.

A typical Jewish worker in this period could easily belong to a Jewish labor union and/or a mutual aid organization like the Workmen’s Circle, read the Yiddish *Forvertz*, send their child to a socialist/Yiddishist after-school program

and summer camp, live in cooperative housing, attend lectures by Yiddish and socialist speakers and vote for the Socialist Party.

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

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

What was most distinctive about the immigrant Jewish working class, in the broadest sense of the term, was its desire for education. Many immigrants of all nationalities attended night school to learn English, but Jewish labor activists also established study groups, libraries, schools and lecture programs first in Yiddish and later in English, not just to teach the principles of anarchism, socialism, communism, labor unionism etc., but to teach literature, economics, science and civics. A Jewish Workers University connected with the Communist Party existed from 1926 to 1941 teaching a variety of courses, exclusively in Yiddish. The socialist ILGWU had its own "Workers University."

The best known adult schools were the socialist Rand School of Social Science (founded in 1906) and the Communist Jefferson School of Social Science (founded in 1944), both located in New York City. They were non-sectarian, of course, but the majority of their students were Jewish. The Women's Trade Union League sponsored a summer school for women workers at Bryn Mawr College that continued from 1921 to 1938. A preponderance of students were Russian Jewish immigrants.

The children of these radical Jewish workers flocked to public colleges in higher numbers than any other ethnic group and were integrally involved in New Left of the 1960s and 1970s including the civil rights, anti-war, feminist and gay liberation movements.

The notorious Palmer Raids associated with the post-World War One Red Scare caused the arrest and in some cases deportation of non-citizen radicals, many of them Jewish. Social activism and union membership shrunk in the 1920s due to government repression, but some of the harm done to the Jewish labor unions was self-inflicted. A schism in the Jewish labor movement developed in the early to mid-1920s after the Communists seceded from the Socialist Party to form the Communist Party. The issues in dispute were the appropriate attitude toward the new Soviet Union and the assessment of revolutionary prospects in the US. The pro-Soviet Jewish communists and anti-Soviet Jewish socialists went to war over control of the ILGWU and became bitter rivals throughout the Jewish labor movement. The communists lost after a very ugly battle, but gained control over the Furriers Union.

The split went far beyond the labor movement. Jewish Communists established a new newspaper, the *Freiheit*, to rival the *Forverts*. By the late 1920s, Jewish Communists had formed their own radical fraternal mutual aid, cultural and educational organization, known as the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, to compete with the Arbeter Ring/Workman's Circle. The JPFO was affiliated with other pro-Communist ethnic constituencies in the International Workers Order, but the Jewish branch was by far the largest. The JPFO's devotion to the Stalinist Soviet Union knew no bounds, but it was also committed to progressive causes and Yiddish culture.

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

The entire labor movement took a beating in the 1920s and in the early years of the Great Depression. Revival in all industries and trades came with the New Deal. In 1937, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was formed to organize millions of “industrial workers” in the mining, auto, steel, rubber, oil, electrical and maritime industries, in which there were very few Jews, but three out of the eight American Federation of Labor unions that split away to form the CIO were the Jewish unions: the ILGWU, the ACWA and the Hat Makers and Milliners Union. As organizers, Jewish socialists and Communists played a significant role in the mass strikes the CIO conducted among largely non-Jewish workers in basic industry.

A small CIO union, called Local 1199, led by Jewish Communist Leon Davis, organized the mostly Jewish pharmacists and other drug store employees in New York City during the Depression and World War II. In the late 1950s, it branched out into organizing Black and Puerto Rican hospital workers in New York City and achieved success by engaging in very militant strikes, first in New York and later in other states.

Jews were also prominent as attorneys for the CIO unions. Lee Pressman was general counsel to the CIO during the late ‘30s and ‘40s; Maurice Sugar general counsel to the United Auto Workers and John Apt was general counsel to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers from 1938 to 1946 and a top advisor to its president Sidney Hillman. Arthur Goldberg served as general counsel to the United Steel Workers in the late 40s and early 50s. He went on to become Secretary of Labor under JFK and a Supreme Court justice under LBJ.

In 1939, Morris Ernst represented the CIO in a landmark civil liberties case before the U.S. Supreme Court that established its right to freedom of assembly in Jersey City, NJ. As an attorney for the American Newspaper Guild, an AFL union, Ernst also won a case before the U.S. Supreme Court guaranteeing the right of newspaper employees to organize under the National Labor Relations Act.

Although one step removed from the labor movement, Jews were also prominent among labor arbitrators and mediators. Theodore Kheel was widely known as the mediator of choice in settling labor disputes in New York City, including the lengthy newspaper workers strike of 1962-63.

On the cultural front, the ILGWU sponsored a theatrical production called *Pins and Needles* which ran for three and a half years on Broadway from 1937 to 1940. It took the form of a review consisting of songs, sketches and satire and included rank and file workers in the cast.

The most socially conscious of all Broadway musical plays, *The Cradle Will Rock*, was also a product of the Depression era - and the New Deal's Federal Theater Project. It told the story of an organizing drive among steelworkers. Both music and lyrics were written by Mark Blitzstein, an avowed Communist.

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

There was also a genre to “proletarian literature” during the 1930s and ‘40s suffused with radical themes. Among Jewish writers, Michael Gold stands out for his fictionalized autobiography *Jews Without Money* (1930) about an impoverished child growing up in the Jewish ghetto of Manhattan whose experiences led him to embrace

communism. Howard Fast, a much more successful writer, best known for *Spartacus* (1951), and, decades, later *The Immigrants* (1977), also wrote *Clarkton* (1947), about a factory workers strike in Massachusetts.

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

ILGWU President David Dubinsky was an important figure in the Jewish labor movement during the 1930s and 40s, but the most influential on the national political scene during the New Deal and up through World War II was Sidney Hillman, the President of the left-wing Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Along with the ILGWU, it formed the backbone of the American Labor Party. In the 1940s, Hillman became an FDR's top advisor on labor issues and head of the CIO's political action committee. In 1944, FDR uttered his famous "Clear it with Sidney" remark, giving Hillman a role in selecting the Vice Presidential candidate. His role, however, was limited. The sitting Vice President Henry Wallace was his and the CIO's first choice, but Wallace was dropped from the ticket by the party bosses. Hillman got to choose between two remaining candidates and approved the selection of Harry Truman over a more conservative contender.

Although Hillman died young in 1946, Dubinsky continued to lead the ILGWU until the mid-1960s. The ILGWU attained a peak membership of 450,000 under his leadership. But in 1941, he unfairly denounced a wildcat strike of over a thousand workers against the Maidenform Bra company in Bayonne, New Jersey as Communist-inspired. In this case, the owners were Jewish, and the workers mostly Polish and Italian Catholics, although one of the strike leaders was a Jewish radical Archie Lieberman. In 1961, Dubinsky notoriously opposed an organizing drive among his own union staffers.

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

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

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

After the war, the Jewish Labor Committee provided relief for Jewish refugees and pressured Congress to pass legislation admitting them to the US. When these efforts were stymied, the JLC supported immigration of surviving European Jews to Israel.

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

Joe Glazer (d. 2006), known as “Labor's Troubadour,” and Tom Glazer (d. 2003) were also part of this tradition. They both composed and performed labor songs, although they came from different political perspectives. Joe was anti-Communist; Tom was more sympathetic to Communism. The Weavers disbanded in the mid 1950s. The Glazers, who were not related, continued on (separately) until the 1990s.

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

Historically unions led by Jewish socialists and Communists were heavily involved in fighting racism against Blacks. A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a leading campaigner against employment discrimination had ties to the Socialist Party and its many Jewish activists. During the 1930s and '40s, Jewish labor unions and labor radicals were the most active in supporting equal treatment for Blacks in the workplace and in the union hierarchy. In the civil rights struggles of the late 1940s, Jewish Communists stood out in their tireless efforts to integrate baseball. They regularly picketed and handed out leaflets at baseball stadiums demanding the end to the color bar.

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

The post-World War II anti-Communist hysteria, *aka* the McCarthy Era, lasting from the late 1940s to the late 1950s, caused the AFL and CIO to purge Communists from its ranks, including a high proportion of Jewish Communists. This had a chilling effect on all forms of labor radicalism.

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

Coincidentally, 1954 also saw the appearance of *The Pajama Game*, an award-winning musical featuring a strike at a pajama factory (enlivened by a love story), with music by Richard Adler and lyrics by Jerry Ross, both Jews.

After World War II, the role of Jews in the labor movement was further diminished by the post-war economic boom which lifted Jews into the middle class. “Jewish labor movement” transitioned to “Jews in the labor movement.” The Yiddish component and the strong immigrant-based urban communities that sustained and nurtured a specifically Jewish labor movement went into rapid decline.

As the number of Jewish garment workers dropped dramatically beginning in the 1950s, the ILGWU leadership remained Jewish, raising allegations that it had become an entrenched bureaucracy discriminating against the new minorities in the union ranks - Puerto Ricans and Blacks - as well as women. Mob control also became a serious problem in some ILGWU locals.

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

On the bright side, Local 1199, Drug and Hospital Workers Union and AFSCME (the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) were so active in the civil rights movement that in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called 1199 “my favorite union.” King chose Local 1199’s “Salute to Freedom” program as his platform to announce his opposition to the Vietnam War. Later that year, King was assassinated in Memphis where he came to support a strike of black sanitation workers organized by AFSCME. One of King's top advisors, Stanley Levison, was Jewish. Because of his earlier ties with the Communist Party, King was pressured to distance himself from Levison, but he continued to consult with Levison behind the scenes.

Local 1199 (led by Leon Davis), representing drug store and hospital employees, District 65, (led by David Livingston), representing retail and light manufacturing employees and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) (led by Jerry Wurf), representing public employees, were also among the few labor unions that opposed the Vietnam War.

The children of Jewish workers earned college degrees and went on to become professionals. Many continued their parents’ tradition of social activism in the 1960s by joining the civil rights movement. There was a very large Jewish presence among the Freedom Riders. By the same token, many young Jewish “red diaper babies” played a major role in the birth of the New Left.

Paul Jacobs was one labor activist whose career spanned the pre-war and post-war eras. In the early 1940s, he organized non-Jewish workers in Pennsylvania for the ILGWU in then, in the late 40s and early 50s, represented non-Jewish workers as International Representative for the Oil Workers International Union. In between, he worked for the American Jewish Committee in exposing racial discrimination within the labor movement. To his discredit, he also led a purge of the pro-Communist Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order from the Jewish Community Council in Los Angeles.

During the 1950s Jacobs visited Israel as a guest of the Histadrut, the Israeli labor federation and took trips to Eastern Europe where he toured Auschwitz and educated himself about the Holocaust. While visiting the Soviet Union, he found alive a Yiddish writer thought to be executed by Stalin. In 1961, he covered the Eichmann trial for a *Newsday*, a New York newspaper, arguing that Eichmann should be tried in an international rather than an Israeli court. His last foray into the labor movement was to write a *Harper's* magazine article in 1963 indicting the ILGWU for flouting union democracy, refusing to recognize its staff union and excluding Blacks from leadership. Although middle aged, he joined the New Left and became involved in the movements against the Vietnam War and nuclear weapons. In 1976, he co-founded *Mother Jones* magazine.

In 1965, Jacobs wrote a colorful yet little-known memoir *Is Curly Jewish?* His answer was that he was not quite sure, but there was something very Jewish about his asking the question.

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

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

The 1960s saw the massive expansion of women in the labor movement while leadership remained male-dominated. The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) was founded in 1974 by women unionists affiliated with the AFL-CIO to address women's issues in the workplace. Its goals were and remain to:

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

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

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

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

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

In 1979, *Norma Rae*, a major Hollywood film appeared about a dramatic organizing drive among Southern textile workers that ended in victory for the Union. It was based on the true story of workers, led the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, who fought a protracted struggle to win union recognition and collective bargaining rights at JP Stevens, a North Carolina textile manufacturer. The heroes of the movie were Norma Rae Webster, a scrappy non-Jewish woman who worked in the mill until she was fired for union organizing, played by Sally Field, and a union organizer from the North named Rueben Warshowsky, played by Ron Leibman.

It was certainly true to life that one of the chief union organizers, Bruce Raynor, was Jewish. In fact, it was Sol Stettin, a Jewish immigrant from Poland, who, as president of the Textile Workers Union, began the organizing drive at JP Stevens and engineered a merger with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union during the struggle that is considered to be the key factor in the union victory. Stettin went on to found the American Labor Museum/Botto House in Haledon, NJ, a historic site connected to the 1913 Paterson silk workers strike. He also taught labor studies at William Paterson College and Rutgers University where he was honored as the first “labor leader in residence.”

Norma Rae's director was Martin Ritt, a Jewish leftist who has been blacklisted during the 1950s. Nu? What did you expect?

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

Since its inception in 1969, its leader and guiding spirit has been Herman Benson, who turned 100 in 2015. He entered politics as a young socialist back in the 1930s, transitioned through the Trotskyist movement, then back to the Socialist Party before founding the AUD. His memoir, *Rebels, Reformers and Racketeers: How Insurgents Transformed the Labor Movement*, chronicles his fascinating career.

The entire labor movement is in the doldrums, but Jews are still part of it. Not so much in the rank and file as in leadership or in related fields. Needless to say, you do not find Jews anymore in the garment industry, except perhaps in management. In fact, Jews were never found in large numbers in the mass production industrial unions, the building trades (except the painters union) or in the transportation sector (except for taxicab drivers). But Jews can still be found in white collar public sector unions, especially in education or higher education and in unions in the entertainment industry, like Actors' Equity and in the medical field, like the Committee of Interns and Residents. It is perhaps inevitable, that their numbers are diminishing as other minorities move into these fields and young Jews choose different occupations.

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

When I attended a massive labor rally of public employees in Trenton a few years back, I joined Arieh Lebowitz, long time staffer for the Jewish Labor Committee and a few other JLC members in holding up signs. Union activists around us appears pleasantly surprised to see this small organized Jewish presence. Years ago, I think a Jewish presence would have been taken for granted. Now Jews are assumed to be middle or upper class.

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

- Stuart Appelbaum (openly gay) - President of Retail Wholesale Department Store Union now a/w United Food and Commercial Workers and also President of the Jewish Labor Committee
- Randi Weingarten (openly gay) - President of American Federation of Teachers
- Larry Cohen - until very recently, President of Communication Workers of America (CWA)
- Matthew Loeb - President of International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees
- Eric Scherzer - Executive Director of the Committee of Interns and Residents
- Hetty Rosenstein - CWA director for NJ and related to the founders of the progressive Puffin Foundation

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

Prominent Jewish labor leaders in recent years included Bruce Raynor, former president of UNITE-HERE, and Andy Stern, former president of the Service Employees International Union, who attracted a lot of publicity for his success in organizing low wage workers in the 1990s and 2000s and as the prime mover behind the Change to Win labor federation formed in 2005. The Jewish Labor Committee continues in its role as the advocate for labor causes in the Jewish community and Jewish causes in the labor community. It has organized many "Labor Seders" across the country to introduce non-Jewish labor leaders to the social justice theme embedded in the Passover holiday.

In the pursuit of social justice, there a few Jewish organizations worthy of mention, including the New York-based Jews For Racial and Economic Justice (NYC), the Washington D.C. based Jews United For Justice (JUFJ), and a national organization, Bend the Arc (formerly known as Jewish Funds for Justice). Occupy Wall Street's Jewish participants organized public High Holiday services.

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

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

His brother Phil was a major historian of the American labor movement. Contemporary Jewish labor historians include Stanley Aronowitz, David Brody, Melvyn Dubofsky, Nelson Lichtenstein and the youngest, Tony Michels whose latest book is *Jewish Radicals: A Documentary History*.

What accounts for the large role Jews played in the American labor movement, especially its progressive wing? Most of these Jews were immigrants from Czarist Russia. There Jewish men were doubly oppressed as Jews and workers. Jewish women were triply oppressed. Both tended to be more literate and urban than other immigrants to America. As perennial outsiders, Jews were positioned to take a critical of the status quo and more receptive to radical ideas. Although Jewish clergy were conservative, they did not exercise the type of control imposed on Christians by the Russian Orthodox or Catholic Church. Living as minorities in many countries, Jews had a broader and more critical perspective on the world than the Gentiles that surrounded them.

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

It has been suggested that some of the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) that deal with economics and the prophetic teaching of social justice have also played a role in promoting Jewish progressivism. In my opinion, this is wishful thinking. Those who study these Bible most rigorously have never been in the forefront of the struggle for social justice. However, there may be something to the theory that Judaism's emphasis on collective responsibility rather than original sin and individual redemption helps explain Jews' attraction to movements that stress social solidarity and the common good. Finally, the Jewish tradition of arguing with God and debating points of Jewish law, applied to the secular world, may have given Jewish men the *chutzpah* - and the analytic tools - to envision greater possibilities for social progress.

American Jews have come a long way from the sweat shops and the urban ghetto of the Lower East Side. We are no longer on the margins of society. (Three sit on the Supreme Court and many more in corporate and bank boardrooms and in executive positions in law firms and the media.) Although the poor are still among us, Jews are, in fact, among the wealthiest demographic.

Jews still have their Bernie Sanders and Robert Reichs and the labor leaders cited in this essay, but we also have our Walter Annenbergs, Sheldon Adelsons and Bernard Madoffs. As Jews shrink as a percentage of US population, and right leaning orthodox Jews growing in number, it is uncertain whether Jews will continue to distinguish themselves as advocates for the labor movement and social justice. To quote a quondam progressive Jew, “The answer is blowin’ in the wind.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

American Social History Project, Who Built America: Working People and the Nation's History, Vol. II

Antler, Joyce, The Journey Home: Jewish Women in America

Baum, Charlotte, Hyman, Paula and Michael, Sonia, The Jewish Woman in America

Buhle, Paul, Encyclopedia of the American Left (numerous entries)

Deutscher, Isaac, The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays

Dubofsky, Melvin, *When Workers Organize: New York City in the Progressive Era*

Foner, Henry, *A History of the Labor Movement in the United States*

Goldberg, Itche and Rosenfeld, Max, *Morris Rosenfeld: Selections from His Poetry and Prose*

Howe, Irving, *World of Our Fathers*

Howe, Irving and Greenberg, Eliezer, *Voices from the Yiddish*

Jacobs, Paul, *Is Curly Jewish?*

Jones, Thai, *More Powerful Than Dynamite*

Josephson, Matthew, *Sidney Hillman: Statesman of American Labor*

Laskin, David, *The Family*

Levin, Nora, *While Messiah Tarryed: Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871-1917*

Michels, Tony, *A Fire in their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York*

Moore, Debra Dash and Hyman, Paula, *Jewish Women in America*

Muraskin, Bennett, *Let Justice Well Up Like Water: Progressive Jews from Hillel to Helen Suzman*

Rischin, Murray, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1917*

Sachar, Howard, *A History of Jews in America*

Schappes, Morris, *The Jews in the United States: A Pictorial History*

Sorin, Gerald, *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals 1880-1920*

Stolberg, Benjamin, *Tailor's Progress*

Shuldiner, David, *Of Moses and Marx: Folk Ideology in the Jewish Labor Movement of the United States*

Von Drehle, David, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*

ARTICLES

The "Jewdayo" feature in *Jewish Currents* magazine is an excellent source of information on this subject

Cobble, Dorothy Sue, "The Labor Origins of the Next Women's Movement" *New Politics* (Summer 2005)

Kahn, Mark L, "Profile of A Labor Activist: Harold Shapiro" *Michigan Jewish History*, (Fall 2000, p. 37-42)

Kugler, Israel "The 1966 Strike at St. John's University: A Memoir," *Labor's Heritage*, 9:2 (Fall 1997)

Malmgreen, Gail, "Labor and the Holocaust: The Jewish Labor Committee and the Anti-Nazi Struggle," *Labor's Heritage* 3:4 (October 1991)

Popper, Nathaniel, "New Labor Leaders Take a Page from History," *Forward*, April 23, 2009

Bennett Muraskin, a Jewish Labor Committee member, is a staff representative for the Council of New Jersey State College Locals, AFT. He is Vice President of the Jewish Cultural Society in Montclair, NJ. His books include *Humanist Readings in Jewish Folklore* (2001), *Let Justice Well Up Like Water: Progressive Jews from Hillel to Helen Suzman* (2004), and the Association of Jewish Libraries' *Guide to Yiddish Short Stories* (2011); he co-authored *Celebrating Jewish Holiday: An Introduction for Secular Jewish Families and Their Communities* (2005). He is also a regular columnist for two magazines, *Jewish Currents* and *Outlook* (Canadian) and a frequent contributor to a third, *Humanistic Judaism*.

He can be reached at muraskin@cnijscl.org