

Women Who Made America

Rose Wortis, Garment Leader

By LENA GOLD

THE HISTORY of our country is rich with accounts of men and women who have courageously fought for the rights of the working people. Among them is Rose Wortis, devoted champion of her class. Born in 1894, she left her family there and joined the tens of thousands of Jewish and other immigrants who fled from oppressive Czarism to seek freedom and work in the new world.

She came with dreams and hopes for a life that would put her childhood's memories of poverty into a forgotten past. Life's reality found her scrubbing dirty floors in a chocolate factory in Williamsburg. For \$3 a week she slaved from 7 in the morning until 6 at night. A harsh and cruel foreman drove her and abused her. Though exhausted, she would still snatch a few hours of reading and studying in order to make the grades at a part-time school she attended eagerly.

From the chocolate factory to the operating machine, she found herself among the thousands emerging from hard fought battles to improve working conditions and to strengthen the Union. She was not yet in the maelstrom of the turbulent life of the East Side's organizations and political activities. Of necessity, she clung to the closely knit family circle, although lonely and missing people of her own age.

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THE TURNING point in her life came when she attended a meeting at which Elizabeth Gurley Flynn spoke. The impression and impact was immediate and lasting. Eloquent and persuasive, the young Miss Flynn pointed the way out of exploitation, out of the enslavement and poverty of the working people; that unions are the essential for a better, freer life.

From then on, never wavering, following and searching for every bit of information about



ROSE WORTIS
An early portrait

unions, she was dedicated to the ideals of freedom and happiness of the working people in this, her beloved land. "Bent over my machine in the daytime," she writes in her yet unpublished autobiography "my mind was busy with a multitude of ideas and activities for the evening. The shop and the union, my political work and work in the women's suffrage movement, all those bits fitted into one picture—a better life for all people."

The years of World War I found her speaking out at this unnecessary tragedy, while organizing against the high cost of living.

The war was the beginning of a war against the working people here. The cost of living soared, and the demands, the strikes for higher pay to meet it were beaten down. The Compers and Greens did nothing on behalf of the workers. The reactionary leaders of the ILGWU took their cut from above, and retreated in face of the employer attempts to destroy the hard-won rights of unions.

To Rose Wortis, this was a great challenge, for not only living standards, the return to sweat-shop conditions but every democratic right was involved.

The workers in the ILGWU were aroused to stop this betrayal. One of the leaders of this movement was Rose Wortis.

Organizing, speaking, and writing she gained recognition

and responsibilities.

"The struggles in the twenties were much more complicated and required much more understanding and class consciousness than the earlier battles," she says. For the enemy was not only the bosses, but the union officials.

No group deserves more recognition than the dressmakers who fought with determination, courage and self-sacrifice. When the whole sordid story of the subterfuge, trickery, expulsions and blacklisting on the part of the Dubinskys, Kahans against the unions is unfolded, the bright spirit of Rose Wortis stands out.

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AS A LEADER in the Joint Action Committee, she participated in negotiations, striving to bring about peace and harmony. Confident and steadfast, she was nevertheless at times hesitant about her own powers as an effective speaker. At a rank and file meeting at the packed Yankee Stadium she became nervous before her appearance on the platform. But like lightning the whole background of decades of working people's struggles and sufferings flashed before her, the issues became real in terms of human beings struggling for air to breathe and she enchanted the audience. She was in demand as a speaker, as an educator and traveled to many cities and towns in the country.

Active in the Trade Union Educational League, as a writer in the Labor Herald, also writing articles in the Freiheit, the Daily Worker and in women's magazines, she brought the issues to the public. The new socialist Soviet State found in her a staunch supporter, for she rejoiced with the Russian workers over their new-found freedom.

In the Needle Trades Industrial League, she was a leading board member. The special training of women for leadership was its concern, as was the unity of the Negro and white workers.

Serious illness keeps Rose Wortis away from direct participation in labor affairs. Her interest and concern, however, are as alive as ever. We hope she will soon be back and continue in her leadership.

