

CHAPTER TWO  
THE FIRST EXPULSIONS: COMMUNISM, SOCIALISM, AND THE  
INTERNATIONAL LADIES GARMENT WORKERS' UNION

The Dubinskys, the Hillquits, the Thomases  
By the workers are making false promises.  
They preach socialism but they practice fascism  
To save capitalism by the bosses.  
Song of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union<sup>1</sup>

The League for Industrial Democracy was dominated by "trade-unionists from the New York needle trades who had been through the Communist fight of the 1920's when it was fought with guns and clubs, and who do not kid about these things."  
Michael Harrington, chairman of the Socialist Party<sup>2</sup>

A clear picture of the Socialist-Communist conflict in the New York needle trades, and particularly in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU),<sup>3</sup> is crucial for an understanding of

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Stanley Aronowitz, False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), xiii.

<sup>2</sup>Harrington is quoted in Kirkpatrick Sale, SDS (New York: Random House, 1973), 177. Harrington was explaining why the LID was so opposed to its youth affiliate working with Communists. The remark is interesting, because it reveals the almost heroic image which present-day Socialists have of the internal struggle in the garment industry.

<sup>3</sup>One could choose virtually any of the New York needle trades to illustrate the conflict between the Socialists and the Communists since there were intense factional struggles in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), the United Cloth, Hat and Cap Makers, the International Fur Workers Union (IFWU), as well as the ILGWU. In each union, Communists and their supporters were elected as local officers, mainly but not exclusively in New York locals, and were then removed from office by the national leaders. The unions differed more in the relative balance of forces than in the general outlines of the conflict. In the ACWA, Communists were weaker than they were in the ILGWU, and in the IFWU, they were considerably stronger. Since the two factions were most evenly balanced in the ILGWU, it seemed the best union to study.

the complex currents within the American Left and the labor movement in the period following the First World War. Most accounts picture pragmatic, tough-minded, democratic Socialists combatting dogmatic, undemocratic Soviet agents,<sup>1</sup> a view which explains little about the struggle itself or the broader context within which it was waged. These accounts obscure the growing conservatism of the Socialist Party, particularly in its trade union work, the strong popular appeal of the Communist-led oppositions in the Socialist-led trade unions, and, most important, the willingness of Socialists to resort to grossly undemocratic tactics and, for Socialists, surprising alliances to defeat Communists. The intense anti-Communist feeling on the Left which one associates with the period following the Second World War had perhaps its earliest—certainly its most intense—expression in the struggle in the garment industry.

## I

The character of the pre-war Socialist Party remains one of the most debated issues in American radical historiography. To some, the Socialist Party was impeccably revolutionary;<sup>2</sup> to others,

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Benjamin Stolberg, Tailors' Progress: The Story of a Famous Union and the Men Who Made It (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1944); Melech Epstein, Jewish Labor in U. S. A., 1914-1952: An Industrial, Political, and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1953).

<sup>2</sup>James Weinstein, The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925 (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). See also Weinstein, "The Left, Old and New," Socialist Revolution, II (July-August 1972), and "The IWW and American Socialism," ibid., I (September 1970).

it was hopelessly reformist;<sup>1</sup> to still others, it was composed of unworldly utopians.<sup>2</sup> But whatever one might say about the party, it was the center of the radical movement in the pre-war years. Insofar as an opposition existed within the American Federation of Labor, it was led by the Socialist Party. Insofar as there was an electoral alternative to the progressive movement, it was represented by the Socialist Party. Insofar as any political party had ties with the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World, that party was the Socialist Party. But after the First World War, with the rise of a competing radicalism in the Communist movement, and the defection of numerous Socialists to Communism, the Socialist Party is more concerned with defeating the Communist opposition than with presenting a radical alternative in the trade unions and in American politics.

Internal developments in the Socialist Party in 1919 were symbolic of new trends on the Left. In the winter and spring of 1919, the left-wing of the Socialist Party formally organized to take leadership of the party. It issued the *New York Communist*, edited by John Reed, and published a manifesto which was quickly endorsed throughout the country. In April, the left won a decisive majority of the National Executive Committee. Using tactics which would later become familiar in the labor movement, the incumbent leadership set aside the results and began to systematically suspend or expel those

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<sup>1</sup>Ira Kipnis, The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1952, 1972).

<sup>2</sup>Daniel Bell, Marxian Socialism in the United States (Princeton University Press, 1952, 1967).

sections of the party which supported the left-wing. As Daniel Bell has noted, "the right wing had saved its hold on the party name and machinery, but had lost two-thirds of its membership." When the Socialist Party convention opened in the fall of 1919, left-wing delegates were barred from the convention by right-wing Socialists assisted by the Chicago Police Department.<sup>1</sup> The alliance with the Chicago police against the left symbolized the profound transformation of the party. Expulsions and secessions continued to deplete Socialist ranks. Dues paying membership dropped from 104,822 in 1919 to 11,019 in 1922. The Ohio, Michigan, and Massachusetts federations were expelled, and the Russian, Polish, South Slav, Hungarian, and Lettish federations were suspended. The Jewish and Finnish federations voted to leave the party; many members later joined the Communists.<sup>2</sup>

In a study prepared for the Socialist-affiliated Rand School of Social Science, David J. Saposs analyzed the shift in the party with considerable perception. He noted that the Socialists had "completely reversed" their earlier policies. Earlier they had acted as the "initiators of new issues for the labour movement," but now "they aim to sue for the confidence and good will of the entrenched labour leaders." Saposs concluded that "this new political alignment of the socialists with the administration forces marks the end of their

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party: A Critical History (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957, 1962), 34-38. Bell's statement is quoted by Howe and Coser.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

leadership of the opposition in the labour movement."<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, radical workers, once drawn to the Socialist movement, turned instead to the Communists. And the Socialists, once in the vanguard of the opposition, became the allies of those whom they had once vigorously opposed.

## II

William Z. Foster joined the Socialist Party in 1901 and was expelled as part of the Washington left-wing in 1909. After leaving the Socialist Party, he joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Following a trip to Europe, where he observed the success of French syndicalists inside, and the weakness of German syndicalists outside the dominant labor movement, Foster became convinced that radicals should work inside existing labor organizations. This view contrasted sharply with the IWW strategy of building an alternative to the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The tension between these two views, known as "boring from within" and "dual unionism," has been a recurring one in labor and radical history. Foster's advocacy of boring from within cost him influence in the IWW, and he left that organization to form the Syndicalist League of North America and later the International Trade Union Educational League. Both were primarily propaganda organizations, designed to win the IWW and its supporters away from dual unionism, and the AFL to industrial

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Saposs, Left-Wing Unionism: A Study of Radical Policies and Tactics (New York: International Publishers, 1926), 36-39.

unionism.

In 1917, Foster, then a delegate to the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) from the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen, proposed a massive organizing campaign in Chicago's meat-packing industry. With Foster as secretary (and prime director of the drive) and John Fitzpatrick, president of the CFL as chairman, the drive organized 200,000 workers in six months. Then Foster moved to steel. Again as secretary, this time with AFL president Samuel Gompers as the nominal chairman, Foster led a drive which organized 250,000 steel workers and led to a major strike. The strike, one of the most important in American labor history, was defeated, bringing labor's post-war offensive to a halt.<sup>1</sup> Several years after the strike, Foster wrote that the defeat was "a tremendous disaster" not merely because it destroyed the steel unions but because it thwarted a "much greater plan." Had the strike been a success, Foster would have proposed "the formation of a great organization committee with branches in each of the big industries, to sweep the masses into the unions."<sup>2</sup> In this way, he planned to transform the AFL into a federation of industrial as well as craft unions embracing the majority of the American working class.

After the defeat of the steel strike, Foster worked as the

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<sup>1</sup> Solon DeLeon, ed., The American Labor Who's Who (New York: Hanford Press, 1925), 77; Theodore Draper, The Roots of American Communism (New York: The Viking Press, 1957, 1963), 311-15; William Z. Foster, American Trade Unionism (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 9-57.

<sup>2</sup> "An Open Letter to John Fitzpatrick," The Labor Herald, (January, 1924), 6.

business manager of the newspaper of the CFL for several months, leaving in November, 1920, to form the Trade Union Educational League.<sup>1</sup> The League attracted some of Foster's associates in the CFL, but few others. The left-wing of the Socialist Party and the newly formed Communist parties<sup>2</sup> were all committed to dual unionism and opposed to Foster's work in the AFL. That same year, however, Lenin published his famous pamphlet, "Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder," in which he noted that "to refuse to work in the reactionary trade unions means leaving . . . masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders" and vigorously condemned attempts to "create an absolutely brand-new, immaculate 'Workers' Union.'"<sup>3</sup> In 1921, Foster attended congresses of the Communist International and the Red International of Labor Unions as an observer; by the end of his three month stay Foster was a Communist. The Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) was accepted as the American branch of the Red International of Labor Unions, and Foster was named the leader of the party's trade union work. The Communists gained a working-class leader of tremendous prestige, and Foster gained the allies he needed to make the TUEL a genuine force in the labor movement.

The basis of the early TUEL was a coalition of Communists

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<sup>1</sup>The New Majority (Chicago), July 31, November 20, 1920.

<sup>2</sup>There was, as yet, no single, unified Communist Party. Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 41-95.

<sup>3</sup>V. I. Lenin, Selected Works in Two Volumes, Vol. II (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952), 373-78.

and progressives, widely supported throughout the working class movement. Eugene V. Debs wrote in the second issue of the TUEL journal that "the Trade Union Educational League is in my opinion the one rightly-directed movement for the industrial unification of the American workers."<sup>1</sup> Alexander Howat, rebel leader of Kansas miners, and J. G. Brown, national chairman of the Chicago-based Labor Party, both joined the TUEL, and the leadership of the CFL "looked upon the organization with a friendly eye."<sup>2</sup> But political conflicts over the issue of a Labor Party destroyed the alliance between the TUEL and the CFL.

The events leading to the break are easy to trace. In March, 1923, Fitzpatrick called for a convention of the Farmer-Labor Party (FLP) "to which all labor, farmer, and political groups" would be invited to discuss the formation of a national labor party.<sup>3</sup> Previously, the FLP had withdrawn from the Committee for Progressive Political Action (CPPA), because the CPPA would not endorse the formation of an independent labor party. Communists quickly accepted the invitation, and mobilized those community organizations and local unions in which they were influential to attend in force. The Socialists, however, refused to attend, arguing that since "few of the great unions are yet ready to take the decisive step of launching a

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<sup>1</sup>Labor Herald, April, 1922.

<sup>2</sup>William Z. Foster, History of the Communist Party of the United States (New York: International Publishers, 1952), 204; The New Majority, December 24, 1921, March 25, April 22, 1922.

<sup>3</sup>The New Majority, March 17, 1923.

working-class party on a national scale," the conference was premature. The refusal of Socialists to attend widened the breach between them and the Farmer-Laborites. The FLP noted that the Socialist reply was not mailed until thirty days after the invitation and was published in the party press. More to the point, the FLP asked why Socialists could not first attend the conference to see how many unions were present before rejecting it out of hand.<sup>1</sup>

When the convention opened on July 3, 1923, the delegates from the FLP found themselves in a tiny minority. The vast majority of the delegates were not Communists, but they had been recruited by Communists or had come from groups in which Communists were influential. Most favored the immediate formation of a labor party. Fitzpatrick and the FLP delegates, however, were having second thoughts. They believed that the convention represented far too narrow a base for a successful labor party.<sup>2</sup> They proposed that the convention adjourn into a non-binding conference which would discuss "the vital problem of political unity" and lay plans for a

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<sup>1</sup>The New Majority, June 30, 1923.

<sup>2</sup>Foster claimed that the FLP and the Communists had agreed prior to the convention that if half a million workers were represented, a new party would be formed. Communists made a determined effort to mobilize people to come to the convention in order to obtain that figure. According to Foster, 600,000 workers and farmers were represented by the delegates. While this may be literally true, it represented a serious over-estimation of the actual strength of the movement. A worker in a local union might propose that the local send a delegate to the conference and win election as the local's representative, thereby representing several thousand workers who may or may not actually favor a labor party. Fitzpatrick was impressed not by the number of workers the delegates claimed to represent, but by the narrowness of the spectrum: of the organized radical movement, only the Communists responded to the FLP call. Foster, History, 215.

convention the following year.<sup>1</sup> When that proposal was rejected, the FLP decided to leave the convention. It issued a statement saying that the FLP could not work with "any organization which advocates other than lawful means to bring about political change" or which is affiliated with the Third International.<sup>2</sup> The convention rejected the statement and voted overwhelmingly to organize the Federated Farmer-Labor Party (FFLP).

The FLP charged that Communists had "seized control by packing the meeting and imposing their own program by ruthless force."<sup>3</sup> While denying that charge, Foster later admitted that "it was unwise for the Communist to insist upon setting up the FFLP at that time" since "there was as yet no solid basis for the new labor party." The split with Fitzpatrick, Foster noted, "was particularly harmful" in that it "largely divorced the Communists from their center group allies, breaking up the political combination which had carried through the amalgamation and labor party campaigns."<sup>4</sup> The split was not healed. When William F. Dunne was denied his seat at the 1923 AFL convention because of his membership in the Communist Party, the CFL supported Dunne's expulsion.<sup>5</sup> The AFL convention

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<sup>1</sup>The text of the proposal can be found in National Secretary J. G. Brown's report, The New Majority, July 7, 1923.

<sup>2</sup>The New Majority, July 14, 1923.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Foster, History, 220-21.

<sup>5</sup>Report of Proceedings of the Forty-Third Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor (Portland, 1923), 256-59.

had defeated a number of TUEL proposals which the CFL had previously endorsed, and so Foster urged repudiation of the AFL's decisions at a meeting of the CFL. Instead, the CFL turned to the man who had led its campaigns to organize the steel and meat-packing industries and asked him to give up his union card.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear from Foster's subsequent writing that he viewed the period prior to the break with Fitzpatrick as the high point of the TUEL. In Foster's view, the bloc with progressive unionists like Fitzpatrick, and the drive for amalgamation and a labor party, could have transformed the American Labor movement.<sup>2</sup> After the break with Fitzpatrick, Communists were forced into opposition throughout the labor movement. Beginning in 1923, expulsions and other repressive measures became more and more common against Communists. Communists faced the most intense repression, interestingly enough, in unions led by Socialists.<sup>3</sup> The ILGWU was no exception.

### III

At first, radicals in the ILGWU worked together in the TUEL, but at the 1922 ILGWU convention, anarchists and Socialists broke the remaining TUEL members. The precise reason for the break is

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<sup>1</sup>The New Majority, October 13, 1923.

<sup>2</sup>Foster, "Open Letter to Fitzpatrick," 6; Foster, History, 220-21; Foster, "Twenty Years of Communist Trade Union Policy," The Communist, XVIII (September 1939), 805-809.

<sup>3</sup>Saposs, Left-Wing Unionism, 55-58.

unclear. An anti-Communist stated that "the immediate cause was a resolution introduced by the right wing demanding the release of Socialist prisoners in Soviet Russia." Communists opposed the resolution, while Socialists and anarchists supported it.<sup>1</sup> A pro-Communist offered another explanation. Communists refused to support Benjamin Schlesinger for union president unless Schlesinger agreed to support certain democratic reforms. Socialists and anarchists "split from the opposition on this issue and made possible Schlesinger's re-election."<sup>2</sup> Both explanations are plausible. It is likely that Communists viewed Socialists and anarchists as insufficiently militant and anti-Soviet, while Socialists and anarchists probably viewed Communists as insensitive to the rights of Soviet Socialists and anarchists and overly disruptive in internal union politics.

Nationally, the TUEL called for amalgamation of craft unions into industrial unions, formation of a labor party, and recognition of Soviet Russia.<sup>3</sup> The issues raised by the TUEL, however, soon were overshadowed by issues raised by the union leadership's effort to destroy the organization. The first steps against the league were taken in Philadelphia and Chicago. An article in Justice, the ILGWU newspaper, in the summer of 1923 commented that "thanks to the

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<sup>1</sup>Epstein, Jewish Labor in USA, 132. Note the use of the term "right wing" to describe the grouping which included Socialists and which opposed Communists.

<sup>2</sup>Jack Hardy, The Clothing Workers (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 39-40.

<sup>3</sup>Foster, History, 205.

energetic interference of President [Morris] Sigman, an end has now practically come to the orgy of 'leftism' in the Philadelphia cloak trade."<sup>1</sup> Later that summer two members of the Chicago Joint Board were charged with belonging to the TUEL and with an attempt to "direct the affairs of the union . . . through caucus meetings planned and carried out by this league, directed by persons not belonging to our union." A trial committee appointed by the Joint Board brought in a majority report of not guilty and a minority report of guilty. The Board approved the minority report.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of the summer, the ILGWU leadership was referring to the TUEL as a "group of disruptionists" who "will be driven out of the union." An editorial in Justice noted that "our International will not allow these reptiles to stay in the union and to undermine it from within."<sup>3</sup> The rationale for the attack on the TUEL was that it constituted dual unionism, and the ILGWU constitution prohibited membership in a dual union. The needle trades section of the TUEL, argued ILGWU vice-president Meyer Perlstein, "is an organization built almost on the same model as our International," consisting of workers in the industry dealing with "the same questions that the union does." Perlstein claimed that "there is really no difference between the work performed by them [TUEL sections] and by any of the local unions of our International" except that the TUEL "does not

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<sup>1</sup>S. Yanovsky, "What the Fifth Quarterly Meeting Has Accomplished," Justice (New York), June 29, 1923.

<sup>2</sup>Justice, August 10, 1923.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., August 17, 1923.

have as yet the full power of administration." In the Chicago case, Perlstein stated that the two expelled officers attended secret caucus meetings which selected a slate of business agents to run in local elections, and which discussed union business. To Perlstein, this constituted dual unionism, and, therefore, sufficient grounds for expulsion.<sup>1</sup>

It was a weak argument. Dual unions call on workers to leave the old unions and join their organization, and they attempt to negotiate wages and working conditions. But, as the TUEL pointed out, it "makes no demands directly upon the employers, it carries on no negotiations with them, [and] it signs no agreements with them."<sup>2</sup> It collected no dues, chartered no locals, and called no strikes. Moreover, "the Trade Union Educational League is flatly opposed to dual unionism." Radicals should prevent, rather than encourage, splits in the labor movement. Even when the left is expelled from labor organizations, "they shall not set themselves up as dual unions and begin to war against the parent bodies," but should instead "fight their way back into the old organizations."<sup>3</sup> The League was exactly what it claimed to be: an opposition movement within established unions. As an opposition, it naturally

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer Perlstein, "The Trade Union 'Educational' League: The Role It Plays and Its True Character," Justice, August 17, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> "The League Not A Dual Union," resolution passed at the Second General Conference of the Trade Union Educational League, published in The Labor Herald, II (October 1923), 4-7.

<sup>3</sup> "The TUEL and the Independent Unions," Statement by National Committee, TUEL, ibid., (April 1923), 23.

discussed union business and endorsed candidates for union office.

On August 16, 1923, the General Executive Board (GEB) of the union issued a statement ordering all members to "immediately cease all activities" in the TUEL and the Shop Delegate League.<sup>1</sup> The order provoked considerable opposition. A meeting of one local was adjourned by the chairman when workers demanded that the order be discussed. Although the ILGWU leadership insisted that only "a few disrupters" wanted to talk about the order, an editorial conceded that "had the majority of those union members . . . firmly supported their chairman, the wreckers of the meeting could not have carried out their scheme."<sup>2</sup> The union leadership, apparently, was prepared to adjourn a meeting rather than allow workers the right to discuss its directives.

Implementation quickly followed. The GEB removed nineteen members of the executive board of local 22 from office.<sup>3</sup> Local 9 voted to reject the ultimatum, prompting Justice to suggest that since "officially Local 9 has declared itself in a state of mutiny against the International," the GEB would have to consider the "expulsion of the entire local."<sup>4</sup> A week later, an even more drastic suggestion was raised: stop organizing dress-makers:

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<sup>1</sup>"To All Locals and Joint Boards: A Statement by the General Executive Board," Justice, August 24, 1923. For a discussion of the Shop Delegate League, see Epstein, Jewish Labor in USA,

<sup>2</sup>Justice, September 14, 1923.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., October 12, 1923.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., October 19, 1923.

If the dressmakers consider their union as a mere vehicle for the carrying out of the wildest schemes and idiosyncrasies—why all these sacrifices and this waste of effort by the International: Wouldn't it be wiser to postpone the campaign until the dressmakers of Chicago had regained their senses and come to realize that, first and last, they are union men and women?

When yet another local refused to endorse the statement, Justice announced that "Local 2 will soon be reorganized."<sup>2</sup> Eleven left-wing leaders in Chicago were expelled from the union.<sup>3</sup>

The 1924 ILGWU convention denied seating to elected delegates said to be members of the TUEL and a constitutional amendment was adopted barring from membership anyone "holding membership or office in a dual union or in any other organization not constituted or functioning within this constitution."<sup>4</sup> That formulation side-stepped the thorny problem of whether the TUEL affiliates constituted dual unions. By 1924, the GEB had eliminated most of the left-wing strength in the outlying districts—Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago—by removing elected local leaders. Despite running attacks on the TUEL and the Communists,<sup>5</sup> the GEB was unable to destroy the strong base of the TUEL in the New York locals. Prior to the elections in locals 2, 9, and 22—the large, New York locals—the

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<sup>1</sup> Justice, October 26, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., November 2, 1923.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John H. M. Laslett, Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924 (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 129.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, "What Our Rank and File Members Think of the Red Scab Agents," and "Chicago Joint Board Condemns Communist Calumny," Justice, August 1, 29, 1924.

GEB demanded that all candidates sign a pledge stating their non-membership in and opposition to the TUEL, and their willingness to abide by the decisions and "interpretations of the constitution made by the General Executive Board."<sup>1</sup> TUEL members signed the pledges, and TUEL supporters were again elected to leadership in the three locals. The first round of expulsions, then, ended inconclusively: the GEB had won constitutional sanction for its drive against the TUEL and had severely weakened TUEL strength in numerous districts outside of New York, but the TUEL was still strong in the crucial New York locals.

The expulsions appear to have affected the sexual composition of local leadership. There is evidence that most of the removed leaders were women. Usually, the GEB appointed men to take their place. Everyone of the expelled left-wing leaders in Philadelphia, for example, was female.<sup>2</sup> In Chicago, no list of the expelled members is available, but the leader of the left-wing was a woman.<sup>3</sup> Even when the left retained leadership, the sexual composition sometimes shifted. In local 22, for example, the GEB removed fourteen women and five men from leadership. The new left-wing officers were predominantly male: eighteen men and three women.<sup>4</sup> Two editorials in Justice commented on female support for the left-wing.

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<sup>1</sup> For the text of the pledge, see Report of the General Executive Board of the Eighteenth Convention of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (Philadelphia, 1925), 44.

<sup>2</sup> The Daily Worker, May 23, 1924.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., February 11, 1924.

<sup>4</sup> Justice, October 12, 1923.

The first noted sadly that "the demagogue in the labor union, so it would seem, has a more fertile field for his machinations in those locals where the woman element is large." The second complained that "we have to begin with among us, a large number of women, an easily excitable and emotional element, which is at all times quicker influenced by a fiery tempestuous phrase than by a quietly spoken truth."<sup>1</sup>

#### IV

In the second round of expulsions, the GEB moved against the core of TUEL strength—the New York locals. Because of the constitutional and organizational structure of the ILGWU, two grossly under-represented locals comprised close to a majority of the workers in the industry. Although the ILGWU was an industrial union in that it organized workers in all branches of the industry, internally it was organized around craft and, sometimes, ethnic lines. For example, all New York dressmakers belonged to local 22, and all New York cloakmakers belonged to local 2, except for Italian dressmakers and cloakmakers who belonged to locals 89 and 48. The more highly paid cutters belonged to local 10, and pressers were members of local 9. The membership-delegate scale was as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>Justice, October 26, 1923, August 14, 1925.

Table 5  
Member-Delegate Ratio in the ILGWU

Members of Local	Delegates at Union Convention
7-200	2
200-500	3
500-1, 000	4
1, 000-5, 000	4 for first 1, 000; 1 for each additional 1, 000
5, 000-11, 000	3 for first 5, 000; 1 for each additional 2, 000
11, 000-on up	11 delegates for first 11, 000; 1 for each additional 5, 000

A local union of 21, 000 members, then, would receive 13 delegates, while 7 locals of 7 members each, 49 people, would receive 14 delegates.<sup>1</sup>

As the 1925 May Day demonstrations approached, the GEB suggested that "this May Day in particular should be utilized as a great protest against the contemporary autocrats in Russia who had squelched every trace of independent thought . . . and crowded their jails with thousands of Socialists, trade unionists, and anarchists."<sup>2</sup> The large locals rejected this advice, and included M. J. Olgin, editor of the Yiddish Communist daily Freiheit, in their speakers' list for a May Day meeting. Olgin closed a vigorous speech with "Long live a Soviet America."<sup>3</sup> Using the May Day meeting as a

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Larkin, "The Left-Wing in the Garment Unions," Daily Worker, May 27, 1927.

<sup>2</sup>Justice, May 1, 1925. Justice had moved from mild support of the Russian Revolution to the position that Soviet workers were "worse off" under the Communists than they had been under the Czar. The Soviet revolution was described as "more hysteria than wisdom," but when the British Labour Party was elected, Justice stated that "the working class is now the ruling class in Great Britain." Ibid., December 20, 1921, February 1, 1924.

<sup>3</sup>Epstein, Jewish Labor in USA, 138.

justification, the GEB suspended the executive boards of locals 2, 9, and 22, and seized the headquarters of locals 2 and 9 in the night. Local 22, defended by "the left-wing garment workers" as well as "scores of young Communists from the city colleges, Bronx housewives, party members from the entire city," and sympathetic workers from other unions, became the headquarters of the three expelled locals.<sup>1</sup>

With the suspension of the entire elected executive boards of locals which, taken together, comprised approximately one-half of the union's membership, simply because those locals were addressed by a Communist speaker, the left-wing faced crucial strategic decisions. Communists fought against dual unionism which Foster described as "the crude, instinctive reaction of goaded workers against union bureaucrats who have betrayed them." Instead, the locals established a Joint Action Committee (JAC) which collected dues while continually stressing its strong opposition to dual unionism and its commitment to fighting for full reinstatement in the ILGWU. Another problem faced by the left, according to Foster, was preventing the administration "from breaking the united front between the Communists and the progressives." Communists maintained the united front by making "the issue of the elimination of Sigmanism, with all the corruption, gangsterism, and reaction which Sigman implies, the center of the struggle."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 246-47.

<sup>2</sup>William Z. Foster, "The Left-Wing in the Needle Trades," The Workers' Monthly, V (November 1925), 26.

The left's strategy is important in light of subsequent developments. Communists did not organize around the national demands of the TUEL or even around the TUEL program in the garment industry. Little was said, for example, about the TUEL demand that all garment unions be amalgamated into a single, industrial union. Nor did Communists attempt to use the expulsion to bring workers into an avowedly Communist union. Instead, they focused on the issues of union democracy involved in the suspensions, attacked Sigman for his alliances with gangsters, and pressed for proportional representation and other democratic reforms. This brought a number of workers and union leaders not particularly sympathetic to Communists into the struggle against the GEB. In the course of working closely with Communists, many of these men and women undoubtedly became more friendly to the Communists and some probably joined the Party. Many workers were sympathetic to Communists before the struggle began. But one should remember that Communists appealed to workers primarily on the basis that the suspensions must be defeated so that a strong, democratic, and unified union could be built.

In what Foster described as "one of the most important victories over . . . the dual union tendency,"<sup>1</sup> TUEL members decided against boycotting their hearing before the Joint Board. Not surprisingly, the Joint Board trial committee found them guilty; surprisingly, the only specific act which the committee mentioned was the May Day meeting. The committee denied any intention of

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<sup>1</sup>Foster, "Left-Wing in Needle Trades," 26.

prohibiting the expression of political dissent, but it argued that "a definite line of demarcation . . . must be drawn between the mere expression of political views . . . and activities which have for their object to commit the union to an outside organization."<sup>1</sup> Even if one assumed that the purpose of the rally was to commit union members to the Communist Party, the GEB argument was not particularly convincing. The board would have had no objection if the rally had attempted to commit the union to the Socialist Party. The GEB later noted that "of course, the simple act of inviting to any meeting of this kind a Communist amounted in itself to little, but the circumstances under which it was done and the fact that they ignored their own representatives showed clearly the trend of their thinking and the spiteful attitude they exhibited on every occasion."<sup>2</sup> This explanation raised another question: should democratically-elected local leaders be removed from office for "the trend of their thinking" or even for a "spiteful attitude" toward the union's national officers?

In the sixteen week struggle for reinstatement of the suspended executive boards, there is little doubt that the TUEL enjoyed the support of most of New York's garment workers.<sup>3</sup> As a demonstration of support, the JAC asked workers to down tools at three o'clock

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<sup>1</sup>Justice, July 17, 1925.

<sup>2</sup>Report to the Eighteenth Convention, 45.

<sup>3</sup>Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 247; Epstein, Jewish Labor in USA, 139; Stolberg, Tailor's Progress, 128-29; David M. Schneider, The Workers' (Communist) Party and the Trade Unions (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1928), 93. All of these books are strongly anti-Communist; yet all admit that the JAC enjoyed the support of New York's clothing workers.

and attend a JAC rally. Sigman issued an "Appeal and a Warning" to the workers:

And I therefore call upon you:

If your Union means anything to you; if your livelihood and the existence of those who are dependent upon you mean anything to you, smother any such insane craving, if it ever affected you, to join their meeting or to break up your organization.

Such an act would be nothing short of scabbing.

This constituted the "appeal." The warning followed shortly. What would happen if a worker was discharged by the employer for missing work? "How could you, then, expect the Union to defend you after you had demonstrated to the bosses that the Union has not sufficient influence over you?"<sup>1</sup> Despite both the appeal and the warning, an estimated thirty thousand workers walked off their jobs that afternoon.<sup>2</sup>

Following this impressive demonstration by the JAC, the GEB called a meeting of those shop stewards still recognized by the GEB-controlled Joint Board. When none of the stewards was allowed to speak (the only speakers were Sigman and David Dubinsky, from the cutters local), there was considerable booing, and the GEB scheduled a second meeting at which there was to be a full discussion from the floor.<sup>3</sup> The GEB was in a weak position. Justice was forced to admit that the shop stewards displayed an "eager, burning desire for peace in the Union" just two weeks after an editorial stating categorically that "our Union does not, of course, intend to, and

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<sup>1</sup>Justice, August 21, 1925.

<sup>2</sup>Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 247; Epstein, Jewish Labor in USA, 139.

<sup>3</sup>Justice, September 11, 1925.

never will, make peace with the professional union-wreckers."<sup>1</sup> The second meeting of the shop chairmen elected a committee, which Foster characterized as "dominated by left sentiment,"<sup>2</sup> to negotiate a settlement between the GEB and the JAC. At a mass meeting on September 24, 1925, the negotiated settlement was adopted unanimously.

This agreement was a major victory for the expelled locals. The first point stated that "it is agreed unanimously by the conferring parties that tolerance be recognized as a basic principle in the Union and that all discrimination for political opinion be abolished."<sup>3</sup> The parties also agreed to settle the question of proportional representation at the upcoming convention. To make sure the settlement would be acceptable to the majority of the membership, the agreement stated that "to settle this matter in an adequate and satisfactory manner, it is, in our opinion, necessary that the next convention refer the final solution of it to a general vote of the membership of our International Union, and that both majority and minority viewpoints

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<sup>1</sup>Justice, September 4, 18, 1925.

<sup>2</sup>Foster, "Left-wing in Needle Trades," 26.

<sup>3</sup>For the complete text of the agreement, see Report to the Eighteenth Convention, 53-54. Despite its self-serving character, this is an excellent survey of the conflict in the union. An interesting interpretation of the plank on tolerance was given by the editor of the union newspaper: "it is common knowledge that within recent days there has arisen in our midst an element which appears to have lost sight entirely of the fact that tolerance is a fundamental condition . . . and has sought to impose its dogma on the rest of the membership. The leaders of the Union, quick to realize the menace of this unyielding intolerance, declared war upon it." Justice, October 2, 1925. In fact, of course, the plank was a repudiation of the GEB's political expulsions.

be submitted in this referendum vote." Communists, then, had secured two crucial concessions from the GEB: first, that political discrimination against Communist workers would cease, and second, that the workers would be allowed to vote on establishing proportional representation.

The agreement, however, was not a total victory, since the Communists in the out-of-town locals were not returned to their pre-expulsion status. Although suspended members of the New York locals were immediately reinstated and allowed to participate in new elections (invariably they defeated the officers appointed by the GEB), expelled leaders outside of New York had to apply individually to the GEB for reinstatement, and no new elections were held in those locals. The GEB, then, by virtue of its domination of the out-of-town locals, would retain its convention majority at the upcoming 1925 convention. If it honored its pledge to grant a referendum on proportional representation, however, it would soon be led by the leaders of the large New York locals. It appeared that Communists were on the verge of winning leadership of the largest union in the needle trades.

## V

The 1925 ILGWU convention was the last convention at which the ILGWU left-wing was represented. The extensive and often bitter debate on a wide variety of issues provides an excellent introduction to the divergent strategies and tactics advocated by the left and right, and indicates some of the basic philosophical differences which lay behind the strategic and tactical disputes.

Central to the right-wing's position was President Sigman's assertion that "the deterioration of our industry is entirely due to certain industrial changes, for which no human being can be held responsible."<sup>1</sup> Sigman was referring primarily to the dramatic rise of the jobber-submanufacturer system and the decline of the inside shops. To understand the effect of these changes on garment workers, it is necessary to examine the character of the industry.

There were three basic types of employers: the inside manufacturers, the sub-manufacturers, and the jobbers. Inside manufacturers, organized in the Industrial Council, owned regular shops which produced finished goods for the market. These were large, financially stable, firms. Sub-manufacturers, or contractors, maintained small, sometimes fly-by-night, shops with a few machines. Originally, sub-manufacturers handled overflow work from the inside shops, receiving pre-cut material to be sewn into finished garments. Later, however, inside shops supplied sub-manufacturers with uncut material and samples, so that virtually all the labor was performed in outside shops, where labor standards were considerably lower than in the inside shops. Inside manufacturers, having created this system of cheap labor, were then challenged by jobbers, who maintained no shops and supplied material and samples to sub-manufacturers. Jobbers operated with virtually no overhead, and they sought out sub-manufacturers who would produce the garments very cheaply. . By 1925, the shops of the

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<sup>1</sup>International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, Proceedings of the Eighteenth Convention (Philadelphia, 1925), 236.

Industrial Council employed less than seven thousand of an estimated thirty-five thousand New York cloak and dressmakers; the rest were under some sort of contracting system.<sup>1</sup>

Wages and working conditions were considerably worse in the outside shops. Average per capita earnings, according to a 1925 survey, were \$36 per week and \$1,750 per year in the inside shops, and only \$26.50 and \$1,374.90 in the outside shops.<sup>2</sup> It was simply impossible, the ILGWU leadership insisted, to control working conditions in the outside shops through strikes. Strikes against the small shops did not seriously inhibit the jobber, who was generally about to find some non-union shop still operating. The solution to the industry's problems, the right-wing maintained, was rationalization of the industry, not class struggle. The right-wing was willing to grant concessions to the inside shops, and sought a limitation on the number of sub-manufacturers a jobber could employ. The right-wing leaders believed that this program could win acceptance from the employers: even the jobbing business was "overexpanded and is already suffering from violent competition . . . which . . . no doubt the jobbers as well should very much like to see regularized."<sup>3</sup> At the request of the union, Governor Al Smith appointed a Special Advisory Commission to make recommendations to the employers and

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<sup>1</sup>Dwight Edwards Robinson, Collecting Bargaining and Market Control in the New York Coak and Suit Industry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 43-48; Hardy, Clothing Workers, 151-59.

<sup>2</sup>Robinson, Collective Bargaining, 52.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted ibid., 49.

the union when the two groups were unable to reach an agreement in 1924. Although the commission could only make recommendations, the leadership was relying heavily upon a favorable report. At the 1925 convention, the commission's report was still pending.

The left-wing heartily denied that "no human being can be held responsible" for the reverses which the union suffered. They placed the blame on the Sigman administration. While union standards were deteriorating and membership was falling, the right-wing diverted much of the union's energy in an attempt to expel its opposition. Arbitration was no solution. The Governor's Commission was likely to reject the union's demands, but even if it accepted them, the employers would not. In either case, a strike would be necessary. Why, then, did the right-wing seek arbitration? "It was impossible," the left answered, "to fight the membership and the employers at the same time; therefore, our demands were turned over to commissions." The solution to the proliferating small shops was a massive organizing campaign and an aggressive insistence upon the maintenance of union conditions in all shops. Let the bosses worry about how to organize the industry. If the union organized all the workers, it could demand higher wages and better working conditions. In short, class struggle, not rationalization, was the key to workers' victory.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eighteenth ILGWU Proceedings, 281-88. The membership figures cited were:  
1920: 85,778  
1922: 73,789  
1924: 61,207

The right-wing had a comfortable majority of the convention delegates, if not of the union membership. According to Foster, the 114 delegates supporting the left represented 34,762 workers, while the 146 delegates supporting the right represented only 15,852 workers.<sup>1</sup> Louis Hyman, president of the dressmakers local, general manager of the New York Joint Board, and the leading non-Communist member of the TUEL, alluded to the right's "artificial majority" in his aggressive opening speech.<sup>2</sup> When the administration excluded the left from important committee assignments, Charles Zimmerman, president of the cloakmakers local, member of the Communist Party, and TUEL leader, announced that the left would boycott the

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<sup>1</sup>Foster, History, 253-54. This tremendous imbalance between membership support and convention representation made proportional representation a crucial demand for the left-wing. All students of the ILGWU realize that, as David Schneider pointed out, "the anti-administration forces, though out-voted at the convention, actually represented a majority of the International." Yet Schneider is the only one to state this clearly. Laslett noted only that the administration retained the presidency "in a relatively close contest," and Howe and Coser wrote that the administration won by the "unimpressive margin of 158 to 110." Actually, 158 to 110 is a fairly impressive margin, unless one is aware that the 158 delegate votes represent fewer union members than the 110 delegate votes. Epstein stated that the "left delegates . . . came from a majority of the important locals," but were out-voted "largely by delegates from small locals—many of them in semi-existence—garnered throughout the country." Stolberg, without going into much detail, admitted that "Sigman's power rested—much against his own democratic convictions—on the rotten borough system which still prevailed in the union." Thus, all accounts admit that the left was under-represented at the 1925 convention, but fail to make the key point: in 1925, a Communist-led opposition had won the support of the majority of garment workers organized by the ILGWU. Schneider, Workers' Party, 95; Laslett, Labor and the Left, 129; Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 248; Epstein, Jewish Labor, 110; Stolberg, Tailor's Progress, 123-26.

● South ILGWU Proceedings, 19.

committees.<sup>1</sup> Communist strategists outside of the union criticized this decision as "an objectively splitting policy" and won a reversal of the boycott in TUEL caucus meetings.<sup>2</sup>

As the convention drew to a close, the constitution committee presented its long-awaited report on proportional representation. The recommendation fell far short of proportional representation, and, more important, made no mention of any membership referendum. What about the agreement, Zimmerman angrily demanded. The convention chairman David Dubinsky smoothly replied that no agreement could bind a democratically-elected, sovereign convention. After all, the officers could not dictate policy to the delegates. If the delegates failed to authorize a referendum, then there would be no referendum. As Hyman realized that the right-wing had no intention of allowing a referendum on proportional representation, he called for a walkout of "everybody . . . in sympathy with the people who have been fighting with the Joint Action Committee."<sup>3</sup>

Communist leaders strongly opposed the walkout and urged that the delegates return to the convention. They made two arguments. First, since "the left wing in the ILGWU had been built up largely as the result of the struggle against the expulsion policy of the machine," there was serious doubt as "to whether workers who

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<sup>1</sup> Eighteenth ILGWU Proceedings, 124.

<sup>2</sup> William F. Dunne, "The ILGWU Convention," Workers' Monthly, VI (February 1926), 174. Despite this reversal, Dunne claimed that few attended committee meetings.

<sup>3</sup> Eighteenth ILGWU Proceedings, 308-311.

fought for the right of militants to stay in the union would follow them out with the same loyalty into a secessionist movement." The struggle in the ILGWU had been around the slogan of a united, democratic union. No base had been built for independent unionism. Second, Dunne argued that "a left wing which appears in this period of the development of the American labor movement as the advocate of unity of the American labor movement . . . cannot carry out a secessionist policy . . . without bring disaster on itself and the entire left-wing."<sup>1</sup> This argument carried with it the disturbing implication that the overall strategy of the Communists prohibited an independent union no matter how favorable the prospects for such a union might be in a particular industry.

When the delegation returned, Zimmerman explained that they walked out because the administration abrogated the peace agreement. Administration spokesmen denied that the treaty had been abrogated, and repeated their contention that they could not be held responsible for the decisions of a convention.<sup>2</sup> After some discussion, Dubinsky proposed a substitute amendment which granted increased representation for the large locals on the New York Joint Board, but said nothing about proportional representation at union conventions or on other Joint Boards. Dubinsky stated that he would withdraw the substitute if the left continued to press for full, proportional representation. Knowing that they did not have the votes to force a referendum, the

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<sup>1</sup>Dunne, "ILGWU Convention," 174.

<sup>2</sup>Eighteenth ILGWU Proceedings, 318-26.

left agreed to the substitute.<sup>1</sup> At the close of the convention, then, the left, representing a majority of the union's members, had failed to win leadership of the union, but still had a firm base in New York. When the New York Joint Board was reapportioned, Louis Hyman was elected chairman.<sup>2</sup>

## VI

From February to June, 1926, the Furriers Union conducted a strike which shaped the patterns of unionism in both fur and garment. The strike was led by the New York Joint Board, chaired by Communist leader Ben Gold, rather than the national officers. The national leadership of the AFL and the IFWU intervened in the strike to advocate a compromise settlement, but Communists mobilized strikers to defeat the compromise and win a decisive victory. Furriers won the first forty-hour work week in the garment industry as well as a ten per cent wage increase.<sup>3</sup> The success of the furriers left-wing must have influenced the ILGWU left, since the situations in the two unions were so similar. Both unions were led by Socialists who had frequently expelled Communists and had been forced to reinstate them by rank and file pressure. In both unions, Communists and their allies, due to their overwhelming strength in New York, were supported by a

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<sup>1</sup>Eighteenth ILGWU Proceedings, 327-33.

<sup>2</sup>Justice, February 5, 1926.

<sup>3</sup>The most extensive treatment of the 1926 Fur strike can be found in Philip S. Foner, The Fur and Leather Workers Union: A Story of Dramatic Struggles and Achievements (Newark: Nordan Press, 1950), 179-244.

majority of the union's members, but, due to the lack of proportional representation, not by a majority of the union's officers and convention delegates. Moreover, relations between the two groups of workers were close. When the Joint Action Committee was fighting for reinstatement into the ILGWU, furriers helped the JAC defend its headquarters. Both furriers and garment workers attended meetings of the Needle Trades Section of the Communist Party. The victory of the furriers inspired all garment workers, but particularly those who agreed politically with the left.

While the ILGWU left was anxious to strike, the leadership of the union hoped to avoid a strike. The Governor's Commission report was expected in the spring of 1926. ILGWU leaders hoped the report would recommend a shorter work week and, more important, measures to curb the importance of jobbers. If those provisions appeared in the commission report, the GEB planned to avoid a strike, or at least to strike solely against the jobbers.

When the commission report was made public, however, the GEB did not endorse it, and the left organized against it. Justice noted that, at a meeting called to discuss the report, "the majority of the delegates who took part in the discussion reached the conclusion that the report, in its final form, is not acceptable to the Union." It was not simply that the report rejected the forty-hour week, or granted employers the right to "reorganize" their shops by discharging, without cause and despite seniority, up to ten per cent of the workers. More serious to the GEB was the failure of the report to

really restrict the jobbers.<sup>1</sup> An editorial entitled "A Job Half Done" endorsed criticisms of the commission report.<sup>2</sup> The Council of Shop Chairmen voted unanimously to support the Joint Board's rejection of the report.<sup>3</sup> At no time in 1926 did the GEB indicate any support for the report.

And yet a year and a half later, the GEB made the following assessment of the Governor's Commission's recommendations:

These recommendations upheld the main points for which the Union had struggled. They did include some unfavorable aspects—the granting of the right of one reorganization in two years and the refusal of the forty-hour week. But President Sigman urged its acceptance as the basis for continued negotiations. He foresaw the acceptance of this report for negotiations by the inside manufacturers and by the sub-manufacturers, and outlined the opportunity this would leave for a full concentration on the jobbers who most likely would reject the recommendations.

This suggestion of President Sigman was rejected after a series of political maneuverings which took the power of decision away from the Board of Directors on the Joint Board.<sup>4</sup>

If the leadership wishes to accept the report, and the reluctant tone of their criticisms suggests that they did, why did they fail to make a public statement? There can be only one answer: the unpopularity of the recommendations among the rank and file made it politically impossible for the right-wing to endorse them. The strategy which

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<sup>1</sup>Justice, June 4, 1926. Hardy added that "the one demand reported upon favorably, limitation of the number of sub-manufacturers working for one jobber, was rejected by the jobbers." Hardy, Clothing Workers, 45.

<sup>2</sup>Justice, June 4, 1926.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., June 11, 1926.

<sup>4</sup>Report of the General Executive Board to the Nineteenth Convention of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (Boston, 1928), 61.

Sigman retrospectively suggested would have meant giving up the fight against reorganization and for the forty-hour week in the inside shops, while still having to strike against the jobbers. Workers could see no reason to give up two key demands before the struggle even began.

On June 29, 1926, the New York Joint Board called a mass meeting at Madison Square Garden. Speakers for the meeting included Sigman, Hugh Frayne of the AFL, Ben Gold of the Furriers, Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and Hyman. All spoke in favor of a general strike. A resolution proclaiming a general strike in the cloak industry passed unanimously. The GEB reported that forty thousand cloakmakers walked off their jobs when the strike began on July 1, 1926. In the face of considerable police harassment,<sup>1</sup> workers conducted a militant and bitter strike. Hyman was elected chairman of the strike committee, and the left assumed most, but not all, leadership positions in the strike.

After several months, strike leaders were presented with an opportunity to settle the walkout. That missed opportunity, in view of the strike's ultimate defeat, has been the subject of intense controversy. Most historians have drawn their interpretations from a book by Benjamin Gitlow, a leading Communist at the time, written

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<sup>1</sup>The Daily Worker reported a series of mass arrests during the strike. All told, the Worker reported the arrest of 1797 workers. While the strike was in progress most workers received light sentences, but after the strike extremely harsh sentences were common. Daily Worker, July 20, August 9, 17, 21, September 17, 25, October 22, November 11, 1926.

a decade after Gitlow's expulsion from the party:

A tentative basis upon which the manufacturers were ready to settle the strike was handed to the union. It included acceptance of the forty-hour week, an increase in wages, and a modified form of reorganization. . . . [Zimmerman] indicated that the terms embodied a compromise settlement which could get the approval of the workers, the obnoxious feature being that, if it were made, the Left Wing would have to take responsibility for inaugurating the principle of reorganization in the industry. . . . The discussion went on for hours, but during the entire discussion not one of the strike leaders dared to propose that the strike be settled. They wanted the party leaders to take the responsibility for the settlement.<sup>1</sup>

Although Gitlow generally paints an extremely favorable picture of himself throughout his book, his conduct here is not at all admirable. While he favored accepting the offer, he failed to make his position known out of fear that Foster's faction would accuse his faction, led by Jay Lovestone, of being insufficiently militant. The results of the party decision to maintain the strike, according to two anti-Communist authors, was that "thousands of garment workers, who cared nothing for either Lovestone or Foster, would suffer for years to come."<sup>2</sup> Actually, the issue is not quite so clear-cut.

Although the intense factionalism in the party might have affected the outcome of the decision, it should be remembered that Communists faced an enormously complex problem. To accept the settlement would mean abandoning the long struggle against reorganization. Allowing manufacturers to discharge up to ten per cent of the work force without cause would place the union's most dedicated and militant members in jeopardy. It is difficult to see how

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Gitlow, I Confess: The Truth About American Communism (New York: E. P. Dutton, and Co., 1939), 361-62.

<sup>2</sup> Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 250.

the left could have accepted reorganization in any form.

This is not to say, however, that the left handled the offer correctly. In October, the Daily Worker reported that the union and the employers had each made "substantial mutual concessions," but that "the employers flatly refused the essentially vital demands of the union guaranteeing 36 hours of work per year, and the bosses insisted upon a provision allowing them to discharge 10 per cent of the shop personnel."<sup>1</sup> This description of the offer was highly manipulative, since it ignored the concessions which the employers had made and mentioned only the ones which they refused to grant. It was impossible for workers to judge the settlement for themselves on the basis of the information conveyed in the Daily Worker. What the left probably should have done was announce the offer of the manufacturers and call for a referendum on the proposal. This policy had its dangers. If the left endorsed rejection of the offer, and it was accepted (presumably the national officers would have urged acceptance), the left's credibility would have been weakened. Or if the workers had followed the left in rejecting the settlement only to suffer a worse

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<sup>1</sup>Daily Worker, October 20, 1926. Gitlow stated that the offer was made in September, rather than October, but this description almost certainly refers to the offer Gitlow discussed. Since his account was written thirteen years after the events, a one month error is not serious. However, Howe and Coser, citing Gitlow, wrote that the settlement was offered in the "eighth week of the strike." They simply assume that Gitlow meant September 1. As we can see, it was actually closer to the 15th than the 8th week. Howe and Coser have a political reason for their assumption: the quicker the strike could have been settled, the more critical one can be of Communists for letting the strike drag on. These techniques make Howe and Coser most persuasive when they are least accurate. Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 250.

settlement later, the left could also have been discredited. A third danger was that reorganization, if accepted, would lead to the steady erosion of left leadership by the firing of militants.

Yet the left had but one source of strength: the militance of the garment workers. If garment workers were ready to settle, there was nothing that the left could do to win greater concessions. The task of the left then would be to conclude the best possible agreement. But if garment workers were still bitterly opposed to reorganization, committed to the forty-hour week, and willing to maintain their strike to win those objectives, an indication of what concessions had been offered might have sparked further struggle. In any case, there was a fundamental principle at stake: the right of workers to know the offer and make their own decision.

Several weeks later, the Joint Board was forced to settle with the manufacturers on terms similar to those they had rejected earlier. The Daily Worker tried to put the best face on the settlement. It reported that the settlement included "a three year agreement on hours, which provides a basis of 42 hours a week for the first two years, and a forty hour week for the third year; a guarantee of 32 weeks work a year, and an increase in wages." But it granted reorganization. The Daily Worker claimed that even the reorganization clause was a victory, but its argument was feeble:

In the matter of reorganization of the personnel of the manufacturers shop, which involves the rights of the bosses to discharge workers, the union also won a victory, according to the information. The governor's commission allowed the bosses to discharge ten per cent a year, but did not specify a time. The union incorporated in the agreement that the discharging should take place only in slack months, so that the workers would not lose out and could find another job before the season opened.

It was, of course, during the slack season that manufacturers would be most anxious to reduce their work force; militants could be singled out as easily then as during the busy season. The agreement covered only the inside shops; the jobbers still would not settle.<sup>1</sup>

As the strike dragged on, the socialist leaders of the garment unions launched a major offensive against the left. The ILGWU GEB issued a statement bitterly denouncing the leaders of the cloakmakers strike and taking over "the exclusive management and direction of the pending strike of the cloakmakers union of New York and of all negotiations" with the jobbers. Morris Hillquit was dispatched to negotiate a settlement. The GEB also took over the functions of the New York Joint Board.<sup>2</sup> That same month, socialists in all the garment unions formed the Committee for the Preservation of the Trade Unions which, in its convention call, demanded "war upon Communist disruption" and called for "the workers in all unions to unite against the internal enemy, the Communists."<sup>3</sup> The dissolution of the New York Joint Board began the final stage of the ILGWU conflict.

## VII

After Hillquit concluded negotiations with the jobbers, he received a letter from Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas giving Thomas' assessment of the situation in the needle trades unions.

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<sup>1</sup>Daily Worker, November 13, 1926.

<sup>2</sup>The full text of the statement can be found in Report to the Nineteenth Convention, 97-99.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 345.

This extremely frank letter, together with a subsequent letter from Thomas six months later, explains more about the position of the Socialist Party in the labor movement in the 1920's than any other single document. The letters must be quoted at length, since the tone is as important as the specific content:

Let me congratulate you for the notable part you have played in clearing up the mess in this cloakmakers strike. . . .

As I see it, the right wing has got another chance rather sooner than I thought to show what it can do. What concerns me is that the right wing shall not degenerate into an acceptance of the Matthew Woll type of leadership. I am extremely anxious in this connection about the attitude of the Socialist Party. . . . It is thoroughly unhealthy that the one issue on which a great many of our comrades tend to arouse themselves, the one thing that brings into their eyes the old light of battle, is their hatred of Communism. . . . A purely negative anti-Communist position will ultimately kill the Socialist Party body and soul. If the main duty of labor is to be anti-Communist why not go over to Matthew Woll and Co. all the way? . . .

There was a time when any crook, any incompetent in power in the ILGWU or the Furriers who shouted right wing slogans got the support of the Forward and of a considerable element in the Party. I had thought that that time was over but I am not sure. . . .

Is there to be no alternative in the United States between the crazy leadership from which the cloakmakers have suffered and the selfishly calculating, plotting, unidealistic leadership of the average AFL union? . . .

Would it be any help if we could get together a small group of people on your call to discuss the situation and what can be done within the Socialist Party and through the Socialist Party to remedy it?<sup>1</sup>

In his reply, Hillquit praised Thomas' "keen perception of some of the vital problems which confront . . . practically all of the Needle Trades Unions" and suggested that "some of the leaders of the Committee to Preserve the Trade Unions should be asked to participate" in the conference.<sup>2</sup> These were precisely the individuals about

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<sup>1</sup>Norman Thomas to Morris Hillquit, December 21, 1926, Morris Hillquit Papers (microform edition), State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1969.

<sup>2</sup>Hillquit to Thomas, December 29, 1926, Hillquit Papers.

whom Thomas had reservations; to include them in the conference was to sabotage it.

Perhaps even more important was the letter Thomas wrote the following summer. In that letter, Thomas began by noting that he had always thought a strong Socialist campaign for Alderman in the sixth or eighth district was important, and that he had planned to run.

Now I am doubtful about it. . . . From all appearances the political campaign next fall cannot be separated from internal labor controversy. Now as between the right and the left wing I am decidedly a right . . . It is not occasional Communist hecklers that I mind but the general feeling of the district. I have no heart at all for a campaign in which directly or by implication I shall be expected to defend the policies and utterances of Matthew Woll or even of Abe Beckerman. I have a good deal of respect for Beckerman and know the difficulties that he has faced. In his own union he has had considerable success but he has not yet succeeded in breaking down gangsterism, if he so desires, and in the minds of the workers he is associated with strong armed methods of labor organization which are absolutely fatal in the long run to the Socialist idealism to which we must appeal to defeat Tammany Hall.

. . . Since I am not in a position to do anything very effective about the underlying labor situation here in New York I think I might find better use for my time and energy than by fighting through a campaign in which I should either have to stand in the minds of the people for the whole right wing program—which I cannot honestly do—or offend our natural allies by criticizing their policy in part, in which case there is the further risk that my public criticisms would tend to play into the hands of the lefts who are worse.

The ambivalent references to Abraham Beckerman are particularly important, since Beckerman's career was symbolic of the new direction of the Socialist Party. As the general manager of the New York Joint Board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, he had led the assault against the left-wing in that union. His methods were very successful, and very rough. He appeared to be willing to ally with gangsters to defeat the left, and had no

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas to Hillquit, June 14, 1927, Hillquit Papers.

compunctions about ordering physical violence against his opponents. None of this bothered his most ardent supporters. The socialist Jewish Daily Forward, in response to criticism of Beckerman's brutal methods, proclaimed, "Blessed be Beckerman's knuckles!"<sup>1</sup> Beckerman was a respected, local leader of the Socialist Party, and had been a Socialist since 1913. When Sidney Hillman finally moved against gangsters in New York (after the left had been decimated), Beckerman defended the gangsters. He was finally expelled from the union on charges of graft and corruption.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas' attitude toward Beckerman reflected the tension between Thomas' socialist ideas and the requirements of anti-Communism. On the one hand, he appeared to find Beckerman totally repugnant. He expressed doubts about Beckerman's attitude toward gangsters and was adamantly opposed to his "strong armed methods." On the other hand, he had "a good deal of respect for Beckerman." Beckerman was engaged in a difficult struggle against the left, and, in any case, any "public criticisms would tend to play into the hands of the lefts who are worse." But it is difficult to see in what way the lefts (or anyone else, for that matter) could be worse than a leader who allied himself with gangsters and who would later be expelled for graft and corruption. Thomas knew that similar charges could be leveled against the leaders of the ILGWU. He implied that previous

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Epstein, Jewish Labor in USA, 166.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew Josephson, Sidney Hillman: Statesman of American Labor (Garden City: Doubleday, 1952), 336-39; Solon De Leon, ed., The American Labor Who's Who (New York: Hanford Press, 1925), 14; Foner, Fur and Leather, 397.

right-wing ILGWU leaders were crooks and incompetents supported by a large section of the Socialist Party and, he might have added, opposed in silence by the rest of the party.

### VIII

The left, adopting the strategy which had proven successful after the 1925 expulsions, refused to recognize the GEB order dissolving the New York Joint Board and removing the leaders of the cloakmakers local. The GEB then demanded that all cloakmakers register with the newly-constituted Joint Board. The order placed cloakmakers in an extremely difficult position. If they registered with the new Joint Board, they were, in effect, ratifying the removal of their elected leaders. If they refused to register, they were, in the eyes of the GEB, withdrawing from the union. The GEB extended its logic by decreeing that workers who failed to register with the GEB-backed Joint Board would have to be fired in any union shop. The left followed suit with a similar decision: a meeting of 1500 shop chairmen in garment factories affiliated with the left-wing voted to require workers in their shops to register with the Joint Board.<sup>1</sup>

It soon became apparent that the issues involved in the cloakmakers strike were not the only ones at stake in the GEB order; involved instead was yet another attempt by the GEB to expel its opponents. The registration order was soon extended to the dressmakers, another stronghold of the left, although the dressmakers had

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<sup>1</sup>New York Times, January 26, 1927.

not been involved in the 1926 strike. As the GEB put it later, "registration, therefore, became necessary as a test of the loyalty and affiliation of all members."<sup>1</sup> The GEB, then, was determined to drive the left out of the union.

The decision to ask employers to discharge unregistered workers pitted workers against one another. When non-registered workers were discharged, usually at the request of the International, those workers would call strikes to defend their jobs. Registered workers who went to work were labeled scabs. If registered workers opposed the firings and refused to cross the picket line, the International provided strike-breakers to take their places. In some cases, it appears that the GEB hired thugs to break up picket lines of non-registered workers. One of the more notorious was Max Richter, who described himself as a "loan broker" when arrested and who disclaimed any connection with the garment industry. Richter was arrested for shooting one picket (he fired the shots from a passing car) and for stabbing another. In the stabbing case, Richter was allowed to plead guilty to disorderly conduct, and was fined \$10. His attorney was paid by the International, which also provided his bail. Richter never went to jail for any of his assaults on left-wing garment workers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Report to the Nineteenth Convention, 105.

<sup>2</sup>The shooting incident, and the occupations of the men arrested, were described in the New York Times, February 8, 10, 1927. Richter's companions were Samuel Ober, chauffeur, Harry Goldman, salesman, and Michael Friedman, the only man who claimed to be a garment worker. For the stabbing incident, and the role of the International, see Daily Worker, February 18, 25, March 10, 1927.

The Communist press reported a number of similar cases. A worker named Theodore Tirisis was picketing a shop in which "three workers were discharged for refusing to register" with the GEB when he was "beaten to insensibility" by J. Zeurich, a man with three prior felony convictions. Zeurich was out of jail on \$25,000 bail when the assault occurred. Two days before the beating, shots had been fired at the picket line by a passing car.<sup>1</sup> Aaron Wertuns was beaten by three carloads of gangsters. The men arrested for the beating were bailed out by the GEB. Nathan Berman, Angela Vacca, and Anthony Burio were stabbed while picketing.<sup>2</sup> The GEB never criticized the violence used against the left. After Richter was arrested, Sigman issued a statement saying that "deposed left wing and Communist leaders were provoking disorders in the strike zone and giving the impression that a strike was still being waged."<sup>3</sup>

After a year of this carnage, rank and file workers, including some registered with the GEB and others with the Joint Board, banded together to stop the internal dispute. A meeting of 1400 shop chairmen, representing both registered and unregistered shops, issued a statement saying that the "civil war" in the union had caused "open and sweat shop conditions." The meeting passed resolutions

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<sup>1</sup>Daily Worker, February 5, 1927. Some readers will reject out of hand material from the Daily Worker. That is their privilege, but it should be noted that the Worker was avidly read by its enemies, and that none of this material was seriously challenged by the party's opponents.

<sup>2</sup>For the beating of Wertuns and the stabbing of Berman, see ibid., February 25, 28, March 9, 1927; for the stabbing of Vacca and Burio, see New York Times, March 10, 1927.

<sup>3</sup>New York Times, February 10, 1927.

demanding that the GEB and Joint Board "cease strife," and urging that workers accept co-workers regardless of registration. They accused the employers of financing the GEB in an effort to wreck the union.<sup>1</sup> Sigman replied that there was no dissension within the union because Communists were no longer union members.<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to determine how many workers supported each side, but some general assessments can be made. First, there were some locals which had always been led by the right in which the left continued to make little headway. The registration order placed Communist minorities in those locals in an extremely difficult position. As opponents of the expulsions, they recognized the Joint Board led by the left-wing, but if they registered with the Joint Board, they were in essence setting up a dual local union.<sup>3</sup> Second, the left still maintained its following in the large cloakmaker and dressmaker locals. In elections conducted by the Council of Shop Chairmen, in which both sides were urged to participate, there was, according to the New York Times, "heavy balloting," and the left won by overwhelming majorities.<sup>4</sup> Third, throughout the struggle, Communists were consistently able to mobilize large numbers of workers in mass

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<sup>1</sup>New York Times, December 12, 1927.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., December 13, 1927.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, the Daily Worker, February 16, 1927, for an unconvincing refutation of Sigman's charge that the Joint Board had set up a dual organization to locals 48 and 89.

<sup>4</sup>New York Times, February 1, 4, 1927. Joseph Buruchowitz, local 2, received 2300 out of 2500 votes, Abraham Zirlin, local 9, 1344 out of 1400 votes, and Joseph Goetzsky, local 35, 950 out of 1100 votes. Presumably, the right boycotted the elections.

demonstrations. On January 21, 1927, the right-wing, in one of its rare demonstrations, joined with the ACWA to fill two halls with 20,000 workers. The left-wing gathered more than 25,000 workers in seventeen halls.<sup>1</sup> Throughout 1927 and 1928, rallies and meetings called by the Joint Board were extremely well attended.<sup>2</sup>

Although both sides claimed the support of the majority of garment workers, neither succeeded in organizing or retaining most of the membership. By 1928, the GEB reported a membership of 30,300—a far cry from the more than 90,000 reported in 1926.<sup>3</sup> The Joint Board released no membership figures, but internal documents suggest that its membership was even less, probably close to 12,000.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the two sides together had fewer than half of the 1926 membership. Most workers simply dropped out of the union. Non-union standards prevailed in the industry, even in so-called union shops. Raymond V. Ingersoll, who served as Impartial Chairman,<sup>5</sup> reported that the cloak industry, which prior to the internal struggle was 85% organized, was now 50% open shop. Of the remaining 50%, 43% were

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<sup>1</sup>New York Times, January 21, 1927.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., September 11, 1927.

<sup>3</sup>Membership figures are given in the American Labor Year Book (New York: Rand School of Social Science, 1929), 115.

<sup>4</sup>In a report to the party's Political Committee, it was reported that the Joint Board collected dues of \$1200 a week during the season. Assuming low dues (ten cents a week), this would mean that the Joint Board had 12,000 dues paying members. See "Statement on the Present Situation in the ILGWU," April 11, 1928, Attached to PolCom #30, Daniel Bell Collection, Tamiment Institute.

<sup>5</sup>The Impartial Chairman was an arbitrator employed by both union and management on a permanent basis. See Robinson, Collective Bargaining, 65-101.

nominally union shops, and only 7% actually maintained union standards. The dress industry, where there had been no disruptive strike, had formerly been 60% organized, and now was only 15% unionized. Again, very few of those shops maintained union conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Although Communists had not been able to enroll workers into locals recognizing the Joint Board, they were still convinced that a majority of workers supported them against the GEB. In a report submitted to the party's political committee, a Communist leader assessed the situation in the industry:

Because of the lack of recognition from the employers it is difficult to estimate the numerical strength of the Joint Board. . . . Ideologically, however, the Joint Board still has influence over the vast majority of the membership as indicated by the response at mass meetings and the general sentiment of the market. Should a referendum vote be taken today there is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of the workers would vote for the leaders of the Joint Board.

At the meeting of the political committee, a Communist leader stated that "the Communist Party is today the dominating factor in the needle trades as far as the masses are concerned."<sup>3</sup> Before one dismisses these statements as empty boasting, one should remember that Norman Thomas believed that many, if not most, workers in New York supported the Communists rather than the GEB.<sup>4</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>1</sup>Ingersoll is quoted in the "Statement on the Present Situation in the ILGWU."

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>PolComm [Political Committee] Minutes, April 9, 1928, Bell Collection.

<sup>4</sup>See above, page 90.

one can see within these optimistic statements certain admissions of defeat. Clearly, the Joint Board had not compelled employers to deal with it, rather than with the GEB.

The internal discussion in the party revealed certain ideas about the right-wing leadership which later proved to be incorrect. The report to the political committee predicted that since "the bureaucracy realizes that it cannot establish a Union without the participation of the left wing masses," it will make a move "which will appear as a concession to the masses." A possible amnesty for all except Communists was "the greatest danger," since it might isolate the Communists and change "the struggle from one of democracy and economic demands to the issue of Communism." Even at this late date, the report stated that "no steps can be taken at this convention to immediately launch a new Union," since "a number of successive steps must be taken not to isolate ourselves from the masses still remaining in the official locals of the ILGWU." These steps included calling a left-wing conference in the same city at the same time as the ILGWU convention and trying to win those barred from the convention to the conference. The conference, however, would not necessarily lead to a new union: "the success of this program, the extent to which the masses can be actively mobilized and the ensuing developments will determine our future policy."<sup>1</sup> Prior to the 1928 convention, then, Communists resisted the formation of a new union

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<sup>1</sup>"Statement on the Present Situation in the ILGWU"; "Successive Steps To Be Taken In Connection With the Boston Convention of the ILGWU," Attached PolCom #33, Bell Collection.

and expected some concessions from the GEB.

In addition to Communists, the administration was opposed by groups of workers not registered with the Joint Board. The two most important groups were the Committee of Fifty and the Tolerance Group. Sigman derided both of these groups as tools of Communists. Internal Communist documents, however, reveal how inaccurate Sigman's assessment was. Internally, the Tolerance Group was described as "the so-called progressive element which Sigman used as a cloak to cover up his expulsion policy in the early days of the struggle." The Tolerance Group had begun as an opponent of Communists. It was led by anarchists, and opposed the intrusion of any political party into the union. It contended, however, that "internal war has destroyed the Union" and favored restoration of democratic rights for all union members. The Committee of 50 was an organization of shop chairmen in both registered and unregistered shops. It "came into existence under the leadership of [Joseph] Shelley, an unstable type of man who has shifted his position from time to time."<sup>1</sup> Both groups believed that the vendetta pursued by the GEB against the left had harmed the union, but neither group wished to see the union led by the left. Probably both thought that workers would support them if they succeeded in bringing the internal conflict to a halt.

The Tolerance Group, the Committee of Fifty, and the leaders of the Joint Board all were denied admission to the convention. At the Unity Conference, held after these groups were barred from the

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<sup>1</sup>Ben Lifshitz, "Statement to the PolCom," undated but May or June, 1928, Bell collection.

convention, there was still no call for a new union. Instead, a Committee to Re-establish the ILGWU was formed, and the conference pledged itself to conduct a major organizing campaign in the industry.<sup>1</sup> At a meeting of the party's political committee, William Weinstone moved that "our [the party's] definite orientation shall be that at present time the union of cloakmakers can be built only based upon rank and file of left wing outside of ILGWU, and therefore, our policy shall be along lines of economic demands, building of shop committees, with object of calling a national convention at the appropriate moment at which we can definitely establish the new union openly."<sup>2</sup> Weinstone's motion passed unanimously, but a motion in the party's political committee was not immediately transformed into industrial policy. Party leaders in the garment industry wanted to avoid a new union, and still tried to maintain an independent organization that fell short of a full-fledged new union.

## IX

It has generally been argued that the shift in Communist trade union policy had little or nothing to do with internal developments in the American labor movement. This argument is often made through rhetoric, rather than serious analysis. For example, Irving Howe and Lewis Coser wrote:

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<sup>1</sup>Ben Lifshitz, "Report of CEC [Central Executive Committee] Committee on ILGWU Convention and Our Conference," May 16, 1928, Attached PolCom #35, Bell Collection.

<sup>2</sup>PolCom Minutes, May 16, 1928, Theodore Draper Collection, Hoover Institute, Stanford University.

In December, 1927 . . . the TUEL reaffirmed its opposition to dual unionism . . . But then, with bewildering suddenness, a shift of trade union policy was announced in Moscow. Dual unionism was the order of the day.

Howe and Coser believed that the response of rank and file Communists to the shift must have been "simply bewilderment."<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, Jack Barbash explained the shift without mentioning the expulsions and by tying it to the Soviet Union's Five Year Plan.<sup>2</sup> Theodore Draper is the only historian to actually mention the expulsions, and he attempted to minimize their importance. The adoption of dual unionism, according to Draper, had "nothing to do with the expulsion of 'left-wing forces' from the AFL" since "the most notable case of the expulsion of a Communist—that of William F. Dunne—had occurred in 1923, and there were no significant expulsions in 1928 or 1929."<sup>3</sup> But as we have seen, it was only in 1928 that it became clear that the left would not be able to win reinstatement into the union. The 1928 ILGWU convention ratified the expulsion of close to two-thirds of the union's members; no new expulsions were necessary.

In an article published several months before the ILGWU convention, the president of the Red International of Labor Unions, Arnold Lozovsky, sharply criticized the British, German, and American Communist parties for their trade union work. The Americans came in for perhaps the sharpest criticism:

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<sup>1</sup>Howe and Coser, American Communist Party, 253.

<sup>2</sup>Barbash, Practice of Unionism, 327-28.

<sup>3</sup>Theodore Draper, "Communists and Miners, 1928-1933," Dissent, XIX (Spring 1972), 373-74. Draper's comments come in footnote #11, a vigorous attack on Philip S. Foner.

The situation in America is such that it is necessary to form unions in all those branches of industry where there is either no organization or where what exists is practically negligible. Unions must be organized in those branches of industry where the unions are breaking up because of the tactic of the trade union bureaucrats. A stop must be put to this dancing around the A. F. of L. which only comprises 10 per cent of the workers, and it must be understood that a refusal to organize the masses for the sake of a formal principle of unity strikes at the very basis of Bolshevik tactics.

It was, then, both unnecessary and impossible to work solely in the AFL unions—unnecessary, since the AFL had organized only ten per cent of the workers, and impossible, since AFL leaders "refuse to deviate from their policy under pressure from below, and if that pressure should become excessive they would not shrink from calling in the aid of the bourgeoisie to overcome the danger."<sup>1</sup>

These criticisms were not immediately accepted. Although published well in advance of the 1928 ILGWU convention, Lozovsky's speech did not convince Communists in the garment trades of the need to build a new union or even to lay plans for one. But by the summer, Communists were more receptive. The Central Executive Committee (CEC) described Lozovsky's criticisms of past part work as "unjustified" and "manifestly incorrect," but "admitted that our Party has been slow to draw the full implications of the narrowing base of the trade unions . . . by taking aggressive steps for the organization of new unions."<sup>2</sup> In an article explaining the CEC position, William Z. Foster indicated that new unions would soon be

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<sup>1</sup>A. Lozovsky, "Results and Prospects of the United Front," Communist International, V (March 15, 1928), 146, 143.

<sup>2</sup>Central Executive Committee, "Resolution on Trade Union Work," The Communist, VII (July 1928), 397-98.

built in the needle and coal mining industries, and "the development of new union tendencies" in those industries "together with the building of separate unions among the totally unorganized workers shifts all the more decisively our center of gravity to the formation of new unions as our basic trade-union policy."<sup>1</sup> In a separate article, James P. Cannon argued that Lozovsky's criticisms, as well as the new CEC policy, were essentially correct.<sup>2</sup>

The decision to form a new union in the garment trades, then, can be traced to two factors: the objective situation in the ILGWU, and the prodding of the international Communist movement. It can not, however, be viewed as American Communists, bewildered but obedient, responding to an order from Moscow. In the first place, American Communists were quite willing to debate the issue with Lozovsky; there appeared to be no feeling that Americans had to follow his advice. In the second place, American Communists had, by 1928, no real alternative. They could not remain in the ILGWU, nor was there any point in maintaining their existence as a parallel Joint Board. The only possible strategy was to build a new union and organize the industry.

Anti-Communist writers have made two errors by assuming a

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<sup>1</sup>William Z. Foster, "Old Unions and New Unions," *ibid.*, 401-402.

<sup>2</sup>James P. Cannon, "Trade Union Questions," *ibid.*, 409-10. When Cannon became a Trotskyist, he reversed his position on the new unions, as did Arne Swabeck. See Arne Swabeck, "The National Miners' Union: A New Concept of Unionism," *ibid.*, VII (October 1928), 622-27, and "The New Industrial Unions: Mass Organizations of the Workers or Narrow Pact Sects?", *The Militant*, February 1, 1930, for the changing position of a Communist turned Trotskyist.

one-to-one relationship between decisions of the Communist International and American trade union policies. The first error, already discussed, is Howe and Coser's notion that "with bewildering suddenness, a shift of trade union policy was announced in Moscow," and American Communists quickly fell in line without questioning the decision. A second error is Melech Epstein's claim that the Comintern retarded the formation of a new union:

There was a mood of expectancy [at a rally called by the ILGWU left-wing on August 8, 1928] among the embittered adherents of the left that the new union would be proclaimed there and that this was the reason for the gathering. But the directive from Moscow had not yet been changed and the factional struggle made a decisive move impossible.<sup>1</sup>

According to Epstein, Moscow's directive had not been changed as late as the fall of 1928. Yet Lozovsky had criticized American trade union tactics in February, 1928, an article summarizing those criticisms appeared the following month, and the CEC had expressed approval of a shift toward new unions in the summer of 1928. Foster had announced in June, 1928—several months before the rally which Epstein described—that a new union would be built in the needle trades.

The issue here is not Epstein's dates, but his fundamental approach. Moscow's views were clear early in 1928, yet American Communists resisted the formation of a new union. They continued to resist long after the international movement had made its recommendations. Even after the party endorsed the formation of a new union, the leading Communists in the garment industry continued to

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<sup>1</sup>Epstein, Jewish Labor in USA, 151-52.

drag their feet. Many of these men and women broke with the party when Jay Lovestone was expelled, and rejoined the ILGWU as allies of the union leadership.<sup>1</sup> For whatever it is worth, however, the decision to form new unions, at least in garment, was forced on American Communists by expulsions, not Comintern decisions.

X

After this intensive examination of the internal conflict in the ILGWU, it is instructive to return to one of the standard anti-Communist accounts. Benjamin Stolberg admitted that "Sigman's power rested—much against his own democratic convictions—on the rotten borough system which still prevailed in the union." A democratic structure would have been nice, Stolberg noted, but "naturally, the International couldn't tolerate Moscow control at the very center of the union's life." Stolberg admitted that the struggle decimated the union, but he minimized the importance of that decimation: "and though after the struggle the International was almost gone, what was left of it was healthy and progressive."<sup>2</sup> In other words, to Stolberg, the ILGWU leadership was perfectly justified in thwarting the wishes of the membership, expelling men and women in whom the majority of the union's members had expressed enormous confidence, and reducing the union to one-third of its former size.

Some historians would argue that the decimation of the union

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<sup>1</sup>Daily Worker, March 13, 27, 1935; virtually any issue of Revolutionary Age, between 1930 and 1935.

<sup>2</sup>Stolberg, Tailor's Progress, 108-109, 123-26.

can be charged against Communists for poor leadership in the 1926 strike.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to accept that argument. It was the expulsions, not the 1926 strike, that decimated the union. While it is true that the 1926 strike demoralized the cloakmakers, the strike did not affect other locals. The dissolution of the elected New York Joint Board, and the demand that all workers re-register with the GEB-appointed Joint Board, effectively expelled the Joint Board leaders and their adherents. The subsequent demand that workers who remained loyal to their elected leaders be fired wrecked havoc on the union.

One can not even argue that the 1926 strike brought about the expulsions. Attempts to expel Communist opponents began long before the 1926 debacle. In the first round of expulsions in 1923, the GEB removed TUEL adherents from office and demanded that all candidates sign a statement denying TUEL membership. The left did not overtly challenge the order. Left-wingers signed the statements, and won back their offices. In 1925, in the second round of expulsions, the GEB was forced to retreat. In 1926, however, the TUEL leaders refused to recognize, and the ILGWU leaders refused to rescind, the expulsions. The 1926 offered the GEB an opportunity to strike at the left when the left was weak; it was an excuse, perhaps, but not a reason for the expulsions.

There is, moreover, considerable evidence that the ILGWU leadership turned to gangsters to break the strikes called by the Joint Board. Nothing else explains the involvement of Max Richter

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<sup>1</sup>Galenson, "Communists and Union Democracy," 230.

and his associates in the internal ILGWU conflict. Richter, remember, was a self-described loan broker who disclaimed any connection with the garment industry. He was arrested for stabbing one picket, and shooting another from a passing car. It is possible, of course, that Richter was innocent, and that he was picked up by the police only because he was a known gangster. If so, however, why did the GEB provide him with bail and the services of an attorney?

Anti-Communists have charged that the left-wing worked with Arnold Rothstein, one of New York's most notorious gangsters, but they have offered no proof to substantiate the charge.<sup>1</sup> Such a charge, admittedly, is difficult to prove. One need not have enough evidence to convince a jury to be on sound historical grounds. But surely it is reasonable to expect some documentation. There were, for example, hundreds of supporters of the left-wing arrested during the 1926 strike and the internecine warfare in 1927 and 1928. No one has offered any evidence that any of those men and women were underworld mercenaries rather than garment workers.

The internal struggle in the garment unions revealed the effects of anti-Communism on individuals who embraced it. Socialist leaders of the ILGWU repeatedly ignored the desires of the workers, perpetuated a grossly undemocratic system of representation, and followed a policy which led to the loss of two-thirds of the union's members and the virtual disappearance of the union as a force in the industry. They employed gangsters to terrorize fellow workers.

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<sup>1</sup>Epstein, Jewish Labor in USA, 149-51.

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All of these measures were justified, in their view, because Communists represented total evil. One is reminded of the general in Viet Nam who stated that it was necessary to destroy a village in order to save it. Similarly, it was, the Socialists believed, necessary to destroy the union in order to save it. Like the United States Army, the Socialists were equal to the task.