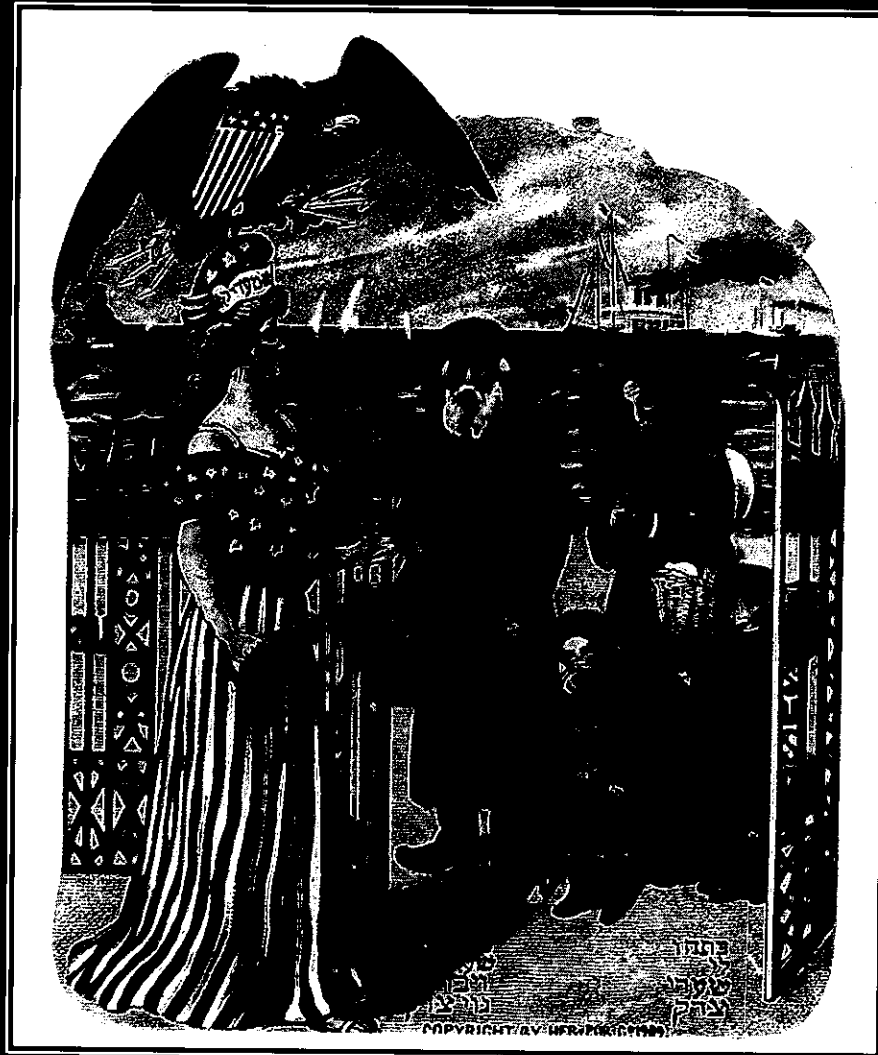


THE AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE



JONATHAN D. SARNA

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may have had even more impact, since the New Deal made many of them standard employee benefits, available nationwide, and sponsored in some cases by the government. Of course, the Jewish labor movement itself declined with the widespread entry of Jews into the middle class. But while it lasted it embodied something of American Jewry's ideals: offering a way for immigrant Jews to help themselves, their countrymen, and humanity, even as they remained rooted in a thoroughly Jewish environment, open to the wide world beyond.

The Jewishness of the Jewish Labor Movement in the United States

Lucy S. Dawidowicz

According to the findings of the National Jewish Population Study, nearly 90 percent of American Jews in the labor force in 1971 were white-collar workers, whereas fewer than 10 percent were blue-collar craftsmen and operatives. But half a century ago the proportions were different. Not only did Jewish blue-collar workers preponderate over Jewish white-collar workers, but in centers of Jewish immigrant concentration, Jewish workers were actually a plurality in the total industrial labor force.

Over 1,500,000 Jews were part of the great stream of immigrants that expanded and transformed the industrial and commercial structure of the United States. For the most part they came from the towns and villages of the Russian Pale of Settlement, from the Galician backwaters of the Hapsburg empire, and from the Moldavian heartland of Rumania. In the old country they had been artisans or merchants, but in America most of them became shopworkers, primarily in the clothing industry. (In the 1880s German Jews owned 234 of 241 clothing factories in New York City. The statistic facilitated the influx of the Russian Jews in tailoring.)

From 1881 to 1910 nearly eighteen million immigrants arrived in America. These were the "new" immigrants who came from Southern and Eastern Europe—the Italians, Slovaks, Croats, Poles, Ruthenians, Greeks, Hungarians, and Jews. The "old" immigrants who had come before the Civil War from Northwestern Europe—the English, Scotch, Welsh, Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians—had become assimilated into the native population.

The new immigrants began to replace the old immigrants and the native Americans in the coal fields and in the steel mills. They crowded America's great manufacturing and mining centers—New York, Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, bringing their own ethnic flavor, linguistic variety, religious practices, and political traditions, which still linger, giving each urban community its unique character. Each wave of new immigrants fol-

lowed their compatriots into the same neighborhoods of the same cities and the same industries, clinging together for comfort and aid in alien urban America. Tensions multiplied between old immigrants and natives, on the one hand, and the new immigrants, on the other. Old-timers resented newcomers, aliens speaking foreign tongues, who displaced them on the job, underbid them in wages, worked longer hours, and were, to boot, full of dangerous ideologies.

The early labor movement incorporated the prejudices of its members, sharing their nativism, xenophobia, and even anti-Semitism. Narrowly construing its interests, the organized labor movement vociferously opposed free immigration. It was not unexpected, then, that the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, long habituated to exclusion from social institutions and to the separatism of their own institutions, should set about forming their own "Jewish" unions. The United Hebrew Trades, organized in 1888, was a natural outgrowth of the inhospitality on the American labor scene to immigrant Jewish workers. Even a quarter of a century later, the formation of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union as a split-off from the United Garment Workers reflected the unabating tension between Jewish and non-Jewish workers in the men's clothing industry. Among the hat workers, too, the Jewish and non-Jewish unions had developed in mutual hostility for over thirty years, until 1934 when they finally combined, the conflicts between the "old" and "new" immigrants finally having subsided.

These Jewish unions in the garment trades, born in the struggles of the Jewish immigrant workers to find their place in America's industrial society, eventually helped to shape an enlightened trade unionism in America. In addition, they served as a way station on the road to acculturation. Fortuitously these unions became the vehicle through which the Jewish immigrant workers expressed their values and transmitted their traditions. Blending Russian radicalism with Jewish messianism, these unions sounded an alien note on the American labor scene at the turn of the century. They were too radical for the American Federation of Labor and its head, Samuel Gompers—an English Jew—who feared that the Russian Jewish socialists forever chanting about a better world were jeopardizing the here-and-now of pure-and-simple trade unionism. But the ideological vocabulary of the Russian Jewish radical movement, with its thick overlay of German philosophy, French political slogans, and English economic theories, obscured its emotional impulse and fundamental character.

The Jewish revolutionary passion—whether for socialism, anarchism, and even, finally, communism—originated in the Jewish situation. Anti-Semitism, pogroms, discrimination, had alienated the Jews from Russian society. In the revolutionary movement, the Russian Jews protested against Russia's tyranny, its denial of the common humanity of all men and particularly of Jews, and its refusal to grant the basic political rights already

commonplace in most of Western Europe—freedom of speech, press, and assembly, the right to vote and to elect representatives to a legislative assembly, and freedom from arbitrary arrest. The economic goals of the radicals were in fact modest: the right to organize, to work only a twelve-hour day, for a living wage to be paid each week. The Jewish radicals in Russia were not engaged in a class war against a ruthless industrial capitalism, for it did not exist there. They hoped for a revolution that would create a constitutional state and guarantee political equality. These Jewish radicals embraced a liberal-humanitarian utopianism, rational and this-worldly, in contradistinction to the chiliastic utopianism of the *hasidim*, who computed the coming of the messiah by the extent of Jewish suffering.

In America, where they found most of their political utopia already in existence, the Jewish immigrants directed their revolutionary energy toward economic utopia. They talked in class-war terms about redistributing the wealth and taking over the means of production, but in practice they fought on the barricades only for union recognition. That was the American equivalent of the struggle for the dignity of man, the dignity of the worker, and his parity with the boss as a human being. These Russian Jewish immigrants were not really as class-conscious as they sounded and did not perceive their position in the class structure in Marxist terms. Not content to remain proletarians, many "sweated" workers quickly became entrepreneurs—from worker to subcontractor, to contractor, to manufacturer, to jobber, to wholesaler. No group had a more fluid class structure than the immigrant Russian Jews. They soon outranked all other immigrant groups in attaining, in their own generation, a socioeconomic status as high as or higher than third-generation Americans.

Not all Jewish immigrants succeeded in escaping from the sweatshop. Those who remained concentrated on educating their children for something better than the shop. They formed a one-generation working class, being "neither the sons nor the fathers of workers." For themselves they sought dignity and community in their unions and the institutions associated with Jewish labor. In Russia the Jewish community had been an organic whole, and most Jews, however alienated, found their place within it, whether as upholders of the tradition or as secularists. In America, however, Jewish communal life was atomized and the immigrant had to recreate a community of his own. The Jewish labor movement and its institutions became the secular substitute for the old community. In many ways, the Jewish immigrant workers looked upon the institutions of the Jewish labor movement—the unions; their fraternal order, the Workman's Circle; their Yiddish daily newspaper, the *Forverts*—as their contribution to Jewish continuity. They brought Yiddish into their unions and sustained a Yiddish labor press for many decades. They were the consumers of a "proletarian" literature in Yiddish (largely revolutionary didacticism tempered with self-pity). They

established Yiddish schools with a labor orientation. The labor movement was their vehicle to preserve Jewish values and traditions as they understood them.

François Guizot once wrote that peoples with a long history are influenced by their past and their national traditions at the very moment when they are working to destroy them. In the midst of the most striking transformations, he said, they remain fundamentally what their history has made them, for no revolution, however powerful, can wipe out long-established national traditions. The Jewish revolutionaries who fled Tsarist prisons and Siberian exile were hostile to the Jewish religious tradition, which they rejected as clerical and superstitious. They sought desperately to break out of what to them was its constricting mold. Yet even they had been shaped by that Jewish mold. David Dubinsky, at the convention of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) in May, 1962, when he was re-elected president, conjured up his youthful dreams, in which Jewish messianism and the perfect society had appeared in a Jewish Labor Bundist guise. "I was sent to Siberia," Dubinsky said, "because I dreamt at that time of a better world. I dreamt of being free, of not being under the domination of a czar and dictatorship." He then recalled that his father, a religious man, used to read to him from the Bible on Saturday afternoons. In reading, his father used to stress that "a good name is better than precious oil." He had heard it so often, Dubinsky confessed, that it became part of him and of the movement with which he was identified: "When we saw the labor movement imperilled because of lack of ethics, I realized a good name is better than all the riches and all the offices to which one could aspire." Like many other Jewish labor leaders, Dubinsky had lived only briefly within the Jewish tradition he wistfully recalled, and had rebelled against it. Yet this Jewish tradition, discarded and unacknowledged, significantly affected the way the Jewish labor movement developed.

In America, shortly after World War I, the Jewish unions pioneered with their social welfare programs: medical care, housing, unemployment insurance, health insurance, vacations (and vacation resorts), and retirement benefits. They were the first to develop educational programs and the first to make philanthropy a union practice. Such activities became accepted in the general labor movement only after the New Deal. That welfare, education, and philanthropy became union concerns in Jewish unions demonstrated the ways through which the Jewish workers transferred the social responsibilities of the East European Jewish community to the labor movement. In the Jewish world of Eastern Europe, the community took care of its sick and its poor, its old and needy, and created the institutions to administer this care. This tradition the unions took over. It was only natural, then, that the ILGWU

started the first union health center in 1916 and the Amalgamated started the first *gemilut-hesed* in 1923. The Amalgamated Bank was not the first labor bank; a few labor banks had been established a little earlier, in the hope that banking might yield large profits and make the unions independent. But the Amalgamated Bank was the first to offer union members low-interest loans, without collateral, which they could not get elsewhere. This was the sort of *tsedakah* which Maimonides might have designated as the highest degree.

In 1927 the Amalgamated built the first cooperative houses in New York to provide some of its members with housing that was not only decent but also attractive. Thirty years later other unions followed that example. Probably the most paradoxical episode in union housing occurred in 1957 when the ILGWU lent a corporation headed by Nelson A. Rockefeller \$2.6 millions to help finance a workers' housing development in Puerto Rico.

The Russian immigrant passion for learning had been stilled partly by the revolutionary movement, which had been teacher as well as agitator, publishing popular science and philosophy along with political tracts. In America Jews had more educational opportunities. Hutchins Hapgood wrote in 1902 in *The Spirit of the Ghetto* that "the public schools are filled with little Jews; the night schools of the east side are practically used by no other race. City College, New York University, and Columbia University are graduating Russian Jews in numbers rapidly increasing." Despite classes, lectures, and debates at the settlement houses, at the Americanizing agencies like the Educational Alliance, at Cooper Union and the Rand School, the immigrant workers continued to look to the labor movement for learning, so the Amalgamated and the ILGWU gave courses in English and economics, history and philosophy. They were indeed labor colleges. It took a quarter of a century, during Roosevelt's New Deal, for other unions to sponsor labor education.

Philanthropy, too, as the Jewish unions practiced it, demonstrated the pervasiveness of Jewish tradition. For many decades, a small portion of union dues has been set aside for donations—to labor organizations, health and welfare agencies, educational and cultural institutions, civic and political causes, and finally to the ethnic beneficiaries—Jewish organizations, Italian, and later, as a consequence of ethnic succession, Negro and Puerto Rican. During the Nazi period and in the immediate postwar era, the unions distributed colossal sums of money for relief and rescue, mostly for Jews, but also for non-Jewish labor leaders and unionists. Jewish causes—the Jewish Labor Committee and the United Jewish Appeal being the top beneficiaries—enjoyed the support of the ILGWU. The Histadrut and many Israeli labor projects have been the richer for gifts from the Jewish labor movement.

The Jewish influence has perhaps been deepest in the realization of industrial peace in the garment industry, though industrial peace was not particularly a

Jewish idea. The National Civic Federation, founded at the turn of the century, had brought together representatives of labor, capital, and the public to head off strikes by mediation and to use conciliation to settle disputes. But the federation had limited success, being accepted, at best, on a temporary basis by some segments of capital and labor, because labor for the most part suspected that cooperation meant sellout, and capital thought conciliation meant surrender. But the situation was different with regard to Jewish labor and capital in the clothing industry.

In 1910 the Protocol of Peace settled the "Great Revolt," an eight-week strike of some sixty thousand cloakmakers in New York. The strike involved mostly Jewish workers (with a substantial minority of Italians) and nearly all Jewish manufacturers. The mediators were Jewish community leaders, many associated with the Ethical Culture Society. The most active in the settlement were Louis D. Brandeis, distinguished Jewish lawyer and political liberal; leading Boston merchant and Ethical Culturist A. Lincoln Filene, who was also a member of the National Civic Federation; pioneer Jewish social workers like Meyer Bloomfield in Boston and Henry Moskowitz in New York; and the most prominent of Jewish community leaders, Jacob Schiff and Louis Marshall, of the American Jewish Committee. The manufacturers and the union alike were torn between the militants and the compromisers. Yet a precedent-setting settlement was reached, which, besides increasing wages and decreasing hours, established a preferential union shop, a union-management joint board of sanitary control in the factories, a grievance committee, and a board of arbitration. The arbitration board was to consist of one representative of the union, one of the manufacturers, and one of the public. To be sure, the protocol broke down, was repaired, and broke down again after some years. But most scholars agree that its influence was lasting.

Several months thereafter, a four-month strike of some eight thousand workers at Hart, Schaffner and Marx, the world's largest men's clothing manufacturer, in Chicago, was settled by establishing a three-man arbitration board. As in New York, most of the workers were Jews and nearly all the manufacturers were Jewish. That settlement started a tradition of such harmonious labor-management relations between Hart, Schaffner and Marx and the Amalgamated that, in 1960, the late Meyer Kestenbaum, then president of the company, spoke at the Amalgamated's convention commemorating fifty years of collective bargaining.

Exceptional in this history of cooperation between labor and capital have been its liberal, humanitarian qualities. The unions did not "sell out" their workers nor did they "compromise" their ideals. On the contrary, they succeeded in enlisting the employers' support for economic and social programs once considered eccentric and visionary, turning these into commonplace realities.

Was Jewishness the determinant? The existential Jewish situation, Jewish

workers and Jewish bosses in a gentile world, must have had an effect, entangling them in one community. They could not extricate themselves, even if they chose, from each other's fate. Nor could they divest themselves of the habits and outlooks of centuries-old traditions. This is not to minimize the specific conditions in the garment industry. Professor Selig Perlman has pointed to its special character—the multitude of small shops in an industry that had not quite reached the factory stage, the cutthroat competition of highly individualistic employers, the industry's seasonal character, in which a strike meant unemployment for the worker and financial calamity for the employer.

But the Jewish differential remains. Jews in a gentile world, despite class differences, workers and bosses felt responsible for one another. The wealthy Jews may have been more sensitive to the Jewish situation, feeling their position and prestige imperiled by the flow of immigration from Eastern Europe. They were ashamed of the appearance, the language, and the manners of the Russian Jews, aghast at their political ideologies, and terrified lest the world crumble by the mad act of a Jewish radical. (The fear was not entirely unfounded: a crazy Polish anarchist had assassinated President McKinley.) Unhappily and involuntarily identified with the immigrant community, the American Jews sought to restrain and tranquilize the revolutionary temper of the immigrant workers with Americanization programs and traditional Jewish education. Afraid to be accused of burdening the public charities with immigrant Jewish paupers, they contributed to Jewish relief societies and to welfare and educational institutions. But they knew that employment and labor peace were better guarantees against economic hardship than charity. In the long run, it may have been cheaper to pay higher wages than to make bigger donations. Besides, labor unrest was bad for the Jewish name and for the reputation of the Jewish employers. The dignity of man and the dignity of labor were as high in the system of values of the Jewish capitalist as the Jewish worker, for it was Judaism itself that endowed labor with divine attributes ("Israel was charged to do work on the six days, just as they were ordered to rest on the seventh day"). Louis Marshall, who had not much sympathy for radical ideologies, nonetheless had a deep sense of the dignity of labor and the working man. Some months after the Protocol of Peace had been signed, he chided a manufacturer whose workers had struck: "So long as the manufacturer considers his employees as mere serfs and chattels, so long as they are considered as unworthy of being brought into conference or consultation, so long as their feelings and aspirations as human beings are lost sight of, so long will labor troubles be rampant and a feeling of dislike, if not of hatred, will be engendered against the employer in the hearts of the employees."

The practice of Judaism, as well as its principles, helped bridge the gulf

between worker and boss. Sholem Asch's Uncle Moses, who brought his whole *shtetl* over to work in his factory, prayed with his workers at the evening services, if only to encourage them to work overtime. Lillian Wald reported an incident about a Jewish union leader who met Jacob Schiff. At first the union man was uncomfortable about his shabby clothing, but this was forgotten when, arguing an issue, both he and Schiff began to quote Bible and Talmud, trying to outdo each other. This kind of familiarity reduced the workers' awe for the boss and made discussion between them not only possible but even likely.

The Jewish situation had made many wealthy American Jews receptive to liberal and humanitarian ideas. They befriended the pioneering social workers of their day and were willing to learn from them about the conditions of the industrial poor. Lillian Wald in New York City taught Jacob Schiff; Judge Julian W. Mack and Jane Addams educated Julius Rosenwald in Chicago. Little wonder, then, that Schiff used to contribute anonymously, through Lillian Wald, for the relief of striking workers and sometimes even to a union treasury. Back in 1897 during a garment workers' strike, he asked Lillian Wald, "Is it not possible that representatives of workers, contractors, and manufacturers meet to discuss ways and means in which a better condition of affairs could permanently be brought about?"

The question may have seemed novel or naive in those days of labor's unrest and capital's indifference. Yet in a short period radical Jewish unions, conservative Jewish community leaders, and profit-seeking Jewish manufacturers answered Schiff's question affirmatively. Perhaps the most curious milestone on this path was erected in 1929, when three great Jewish financiers and philanthropists—Julius Rosenwald, Herbert H. Lehman, and Felix Warburg—lent the ILGWU \$100,000 to help the union's reconstruction after its locals had been rewon from Communist capture.

The Jewish tradition of arbitration and conciliation had cut a broad swath. Originating in talmudic times, incorporated in the *Shulchan Aruch*, practiced for centuries in all Jewish communities, these principles of compromise, arbitration, and settlement were familiar and venerable to worker and boss alike. The rabbi and *dayanim* decided in the *beth din*, the religious court, but disputants frequently took their case to communal leaders who acted as arbitrators, *borerim*. The procedure must have seemed commonplace to most Jewish workers, not long from the old country and the old culture. As for the manufacturers, they, too, were responsive to the teachings that peaceful compromise was preferable to the humiliation of a court and that Jews should settle their disputes within the Jewish community.

Jewish solidarity and the Jewish tradition, albeit secularized, bred innovations in the institutions of modern American labor. The Jewish situation itself—the Jew poised on the margins of gentile society, in an existential

Galut—created the energy and the impetus for those innovations. Whereas lower-class anti-Semitism had separated Jewish workers from the non-Jews, anxiety among upper-class Jews about anti-Semitism had more securely fixed their solidarity with the Jewish workers. The tension of Jews living in a gentile world has accounted for much of Jewish creativity in modern society. The Jewish labor movement, too, shared in that creativity.