

Clara Lemlich, Labor Activist, International Ladies Garment Workers Union

When the Lemlichs immigrated to New York City in 1903, 17-year-old Clara found work in a garment shop. Infuriated by the poor conditions, she began organizing women into the new [International Ladies Garment Workers Union \(ILGWU\)](#). The male workers who dominated the union resisted her efforts, but Lemlich warned them that their union would never get off the ground until they included women. Over the men's objections, she brought her female coworkers out on strike again and again between 1907 and 1909.

In November 1909, after months of strikes in individual garment shops across New York during which she had been beaten (she'd had 6 broken ribs) and arrested multiple times, Lemlich helped spark the general strike known as the "[Uprising of the 20,000.](#)" Thousands of women came to a meeting at Cooper Union on November 22 to discuss the proposal. After hours of inconclusive speeches from (mostly male) union leaders (including AFL-CIO leader Samuel Gompers), Clara Lemlich--a leader of one of the small walk-outs--demanded to speak and cut through the rhetoric. *"I am a working girl, one of those who are on strike against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here to decide is whether we shall or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared--now."* Her words ignited her fellow workers, and the crowd took the traditional Jewish oath "If I forget thee O Jerusalem..." (replacing "Jerusalem" with "union") to support the general strike.

Between thirty and forty thousand young women garment workers—predominantly Jewish immigrants—walked off their jobs over the next few weeks. It was a bitter, only partially successful strike, but it changed the labor movement by proving the effectiveness of women as union members.

Text adapted from: Clara Lemlich's biography in JWA's Living the Legacy: A Jewish Social Justice Education Project and the November 23, 2009 post entitled "Remembering the Uprising of the 20,000" on JWA's blog Jewesses with Attitude.



Courtesy of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union Archives, Kheel Center Collection, Cornell University.