CHAPTER II

ORGANIZING THE WOMEN'S CLOTHING WORKERS

Earliest Beginnings

MANUFACTURE of women's ready-to-wear clothing did not get a firm foothold on the factory basis until the eighties of the last century. Before that most of the cloaks, suits, skirts, dresses and waists were made by the women in the home, while to meet the demands of the wealthier and middle classes, tailors, tailoresses and dressmakers either opened their own custom shops or worked in their customers' homes.

The sewing machine was invented in 1846 and the 1860 census reported on the manufacture of women's clothing, listing 188 shops, with 5,739 workers. By 1880 this number had grown to 562 shops and 25,192 workers, so that the industry may be said to have been launched in this period.

Manufacture of women's garments in this period was characterized primarily by sweatshop conditions and out of this sprang all the seeds of revolt. In the spring of 1883 these burst forth in a strike of 750 men and women organized as the Dress and Cloak Makers Union. The demands for $2.50 a day and hours from 8 A.M to 6 P.M. were largely won. The union, however, soon fell apart.

In the spring of 1885 "from three to five thousand" workers joined in a general cloak strike in New York City and organized still another short-lived union.[1] About the same time the strike wave swept Chicago.[2] Thereafter shop strikes became a common occurrence in all women's garment centers but all efforts at permanent organization were failures.

The first real cloakmakers' union was organized in New York during 1889-90. With the aid of the United Hebrew

Trades some three thousand workers who were engaged in individual shop strikes were merged into one organization with headquarters at 92 Hester Street. A united strike ended in victory and union recognition, its strength being symbolized by the fact that Meyer Jonasson, the largest cloak manufacturer in the country, personally appeared at the Hester Street headquarters and signed a union agreement. The union was called Operators' and Cloak Makers' Union No. 1. By May, 1890, it had a membership of over 3,000. At about the same time smaller movements were progressing in Chicago, Boston, Baltimore and Philadelphia.

When cloakmakers and cutters of the New York market entered into an alliance and agreed to coöperate with each other, the employers, sensing new and permanent workers' power, locked out the active union members in May, 1890. For the first time the organized cutters stood by their less skilled fellow workers. The strike which followed was the largest and longest that had been waged in the needle trades up to that time. Cutters, trimmers, operators and others—4,000 in all—were involved. An extremely bitter struggle ensued lasting about 15 weeks and ending finally in victory.

There followed a period of police terror and jailings, while the cloakmakers became further entangled in the factional disagreements which developed between the A. F. of L. and the Knights of Labor on the one hand and the Socialists and Anarchists on the other. This tended to hinder and forestall national organization but through all of the vicissitudes of the period organization in one form or another was maintained. The International Cloak Makers Union of America, organized in May, 1892, by representatives of the five centers mentioned above, existed side by side with rival organizations which sprang out of the factional situation, until it too went out of existence in September, 1895, rent asunder by the combined forces of factional struggle and hard times. The United Brotherhood of Cloak Makers Union No. 1 of New York and Vicinity, organized in September, 1896,

under the influence of members of the newly formed Social Democracy of America, was its immediate successor. From a membership of 28 in October, 1896, it grew to about ten thousand in 1897-99. This strength in turn ebbed, by 1900, due to a severe depression plus factional differences between followers of the Social Democracy of America and the Socialist Labor Party.

Rank and File Militancy

Sorely exploited and overworked and unable to speak English in the New World, the immigrant worker desperately needed a spokesman. He could fight militantly on the picket line, but when it came to settlements and agreements he was lost. Not enough time had as yet elapsed for a rank and file leadership to develop.

This gap was filled by the early Socialist movement of this country whose leaders went into the garment trades and exercised so powerful an influence that these unions soon came to be known as "Socialist Unions."

However, at no time did these workers take a "leave it to the leadership" attitude toward the problems of their trade. When occasion demanded they were thoroughly articulate. Their enthusiasm, militancy and attitude toward strike action has been recorded by A. Rosenberg, an early president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. He tells how, in 1890, 10 years before the formation of that organization, a "triple alliance" of the Operators' and Cloak Makers' Union No. 1, the United Cloak and Suit Cutters' Association and the Contractors' Union was formed for the purpose of uniting all forces in New York against the manufacturers. They formed an "Amalgamated Board of Delegates" which on May 19, 1890, assumed the leadership over what became a mixed form of lockout and strike. The newspapers of the period record scenes of misery and actual starvation which one reporter recorded as "beyond description," but throughout it all continual parades, mass meetings

and demonstrations were held which, despite the "pinch of hunger," never even gave thought to surrender.

On July 16, 1890, the newspapers carried the news that the strike was over. The workers assembled to hear the terms of settlement agreed to by the strike leadership. Their suffering at the moment was intense but the strikers, dissatisfied with the terms, rejected the agreement by 1,536 to 20:

> After the audience had cooled off a little, the chairman of the meeting declared that though everybody voted for the continuation of the strike, but the thing most needed was money and that was lacking, and he would advise the people to reconsider their decision. But he had hardly concluded his sentence, when one of the people walked up to the chairman's table and taking off a ring from his finger handed it over to the chairman with the request to sell it or pawn it and give the money to the strikers. In less time than it takes to tell it, the chairman's table became covered with rings, watches, earrings, brooches and other pieces of jewelry.[8]

The strike was thereupon continued. Despite adverse newspaper publicity and police provocation, the strikers stood solid. Chief Police Inspector Byrnes threatened to "shake them as I would a lot of rats," but in the end the strikers scored a significant victory.

At practically every meeting of either the Executive Board or other leading union bodies delegations of workers would appear to express their wishes and to make demands upon the organization for action. Such workers' committees would frequently be required to wait at the doors of the Executive Board for hours before they could obtain admittance to state their grievances. At this the workers' wrath frequently knew no bounds, whereupon:

> It would often happen that the [workers'] committees would lose patience and break in the doors. One can imagine what would take place on such occasions. Chairs and tables would fly through the air and collide with heads, and the delegates would have to turn out the gas and escape by way of the fire-escape balconies. . . . Almost after every meeting of the executive board, the delegates would have to be fitted out with new hats.

. . . The executive board found itself compelled to hold its meetings in Brooklyn or somewhere in a basement up-town where they could not be discovered.[4]

The official historian of the International tersely summarizes the general situation which developed as follows:

The members of the union [The United Brotherhood] regarded the paid officers with suspicion as "job holders." On the other hand the officials were not too respectful of the "rank and file." In the spring of 1899 this gave rise to a struggle within the union. . . .[5]

The stronger the union grew in numbers the harder it was for the leaders to restrain their members.

Birth of the International

In the meantime the women's clothing industry had grown with great rapidity. By 1900 there were establishments in 32 states employing 83,739 workers including in addition to the original Jewish immigrants large numbers of Italians, Bohemians, Poles, Russians, Syrians and others. A national, well-integrated union was badly needed. Initiative for such a movement came from the already organized local unions of cloakmakers.

On June 3, 1900, the first convention of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union was held in the Labor Lyceum in New York City. It was called by the New York group and consisted of only 11 delegates from New York, Brooklyn, Newark, Philadelphia and Baltimore, representing a combined membership of 2,000 in seven locals. On June 23, 1900, the union obtained its charter from the American Federation of Labor.

The new organization made progress until about 1904, when it consisted of 66 locals in 27 cities and included representatives of the other women's trades in addition to the previously organized cloakmakers. It was a period of plodding progress, assisted considerably by the relative industrial prosperity of the period. But the basic policies of the union were ill-suited to the period of depression and

reaction which followed. "There was a definite desire to restrain the workers from striking often. . . . Above all, faith was pinned on the union label." [6] Accordingly, when the employers waged an open-shop offensive following 1904 the union was ill-prepared to meet it and underwent a struggle for its very existence. The 1906 convention was actually faced with a resolution from a Philadelphia local for liquidation of the national body.

Secretary Dyche complained at the 1905 convention:

The members who invariably are new recruits expect great results at the beginning and are in a hurry for the union to "do something." They assume a bellicose attitude in their dealings with their employers. The result is that as soon as a local is organized it enters upon a series of strikes and disputes with the employers. . . . The lack of diplomatic skill in negotiating terms with the manufacturers is another great cause of many useless and avoidable strikes. . . . To many the word "union" seems to have such occult power that they entirely neglect the business part of the movement.

With such an attitude on the part of the officials it is not surprising that the workers became disillusioned with the International. Consequently when the Industrial Workers of the World appeared as an effective fighting factor in the period following 1904 their appeal to the membership met with quick response. I.W.W. unions appeared in various branches of the industry and succeeded in organizing many shops which had never been reached before.

The International went into a period of eclipse. Although in 1907 the cloakmakers of Boston waged an unsuccessful but heroic general strike "in disregard of the express orders of John Dyche," [7] and although the New York reefer makers waged a victorious struggle, the situation was not much improved. By 1908 the organization was in a precarious state.

The Uprising of the Twenty Thousand

For a while the I.L.G.W.U. was even unable to pay its office rent. Then, in 1909, came a renaissance—born of

struggle for which the workers had clamored from the beginning.

On November 22, 1909, the Shirtwaist Makers Local 25 of New York City, numbering about 100 members and with $4 in its treasury, initiated a general strike movement which spread rapidly through the shirtwaist industry. At a meeting held that day at Cooper Union, a shop girl, Clara Lemlich, made her way to the platform, told of being "tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms" and concluded, "I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared—now."

Within a few days 20,000 workers, mostly immigrants speaking different languages, 80% of them women and young girls, had left the shops and were on the picket lines. Over 500 shops walked out. Despite inadequate preparations and financial bankruptcy they struck—and won.

This strike is one of the epics of the American labor movement. Through rain and the cold and snow of mid-winter, the workers picketed daily. They were beaten, slugged, arrested, fined and jailed. But with a fervor and devotion which was the equal of anything ever witnessed anywhere in the labor movement they carried on until February 15, 1910, when 300 firms settled on the union's terms, 19 shops compromised and 13 shops employing 1,100 workers remained out.

The union emerged from this struggle with 10,000 members. Moreover, all other branches of the trade were awakened and inspired. They saw the tremendous possibilities of effective strike struggle properly and militantly conducted. The I.L.G.W.U. became a permanent force.

The Great Revolt

The wonderful fight of the waistmakers was the forerunner of an even more important struggle of the cloakmakers in 1910. Known in the history of the union as the "Great Revolt," it was a mass uprising against the sweating

and subcontracting systems at their worst. Wages averaged from $14 to $18 a week during the busy season. Hours during such periods were 14 to 16 a day, supplemented by home work. Under these conditions, after the success of the shirtwaistmakers, the strike spirit spread rapidly.

Officials of the International again employed their customary procedure. It is told how,

> Hundreds of workers beleaguered the officers of the unions clamoring that the strike be called at once. Many workers even accused the officials of trickery, of having exploited the idea of a general strike to collect dues from the workers. But the men in charge of the campaign told the workers that they must wait until the convention of the International.[8]

The convention, by a vote of 55 to 10, endorsed the idea of a general strike and after a period of elaborate preparations the strike was called, July 7, 1910. Again the leaders were filled with doubt and worry but the response to the strike call was overwhelming. Between 50,000 and 60,000 workers walked out.

During the course of the long negotiations which followed, the strikers denounced and rejected every settlement proposal short of the closed shop. They demonstrated against their own Joint Board, which was involved in negotiations in which this issue was being compromised, and there were wild reactions in the strike ranks against the proposed "sell out"—as the "preferential" * instead of the closed union shop proposal was termed. However, after considerable maneuvering, the union's negotiators, finding themselves unable to get the membership to ratify their terms of settlement, hurriedly called a meeting of some 200 shop chairmen, and on September 2, 1910, obtained authorization from that group to conclude the strike on the basis of what came to be called "The Protocol of Peace"—including the previously rejected preferential union shop. The strike was

* The "preferential shop" plan gave preference in order of hiring to union members, but did not require their exclusive employment.

thus ended after nine weeks on the basis of a compromise. Its terms of settlement were suggested to the union officials by Louis D. Brandeis, then a well-known Boston lawyer, who in January, 1916, was appointed a justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

Period of the Protocol

The Protocol of Peace, signed on September 6, 1910, lasted about six years. It was based on the class-collaborationist theory that there is sufficient community of interest between employers and employees to make permanent peace achievable and that all matters in dispute could be peacefully adjusted through resort to impartial arbitrators. "Protocols" were extended in 1913 to the dress and waist industry, the housedress and kimono industry, the white-goods industry and the children's and misses' dress industry —so that virtually the entire structure of the I.L.G.W.U. was committed to this basic philosophy.

Besides laying down minimum wages, hours and conditions, establishing a Board of Sanitary Control to deal with matters of health and sanitation in the shops and establishing the preferential shop, the protocol made a basic departure from trade union philosophy and practice. The most powerful weapon of the workers—the right to strike—was forfeited and provision was made instead for the adjustment of grievances through an apparatus of arbitration and conciliation.

Minor disputes were referred to a "Committee on Grievances." More important matters were referred to a "Board of Arbitration" whose findings, orders and decisions were made "final and conclusive." Thus was "permanent industrial peace" to be achieved.

Such an agreement was, of course, beneficial to the employers who thus gained protection against strikes. But the workers were bound by the decisions of "impartial" arbitration boards. The union officials had a large dues-paying

membership * and freedom from the "troubles" attendant upon militant class struggle for workers' interests. They had become weary of what they termed "continuous and futile strikes."

The workers soon began to see how little they could rely upon employers' good faith in dealing with labor. On every hand their bosses began evading the wage and hour terms of the protocol by rushing work to out-of-town contractors.

The outstanding leader of the union during this period was Secretary-Treasurer Dyche, a Tammany politician. In 1911 the shirtwaist makers of New York, disgusted with the policies of such official leaders, organized to replace them. Immediately there arose a widespread sentiment for a general strike in the trade and after considerable agitation a strike vote was taken in January, 1913, which stood 11,873 for, to 542 against.

In order to satisfy the clamor of the workers and to let the membership "work off steam" the top I.L.G.W.U. officers accepted the vote. But those union officials were already committed to a no-strike policy, and this walk-out was one of a long series of pre-arranged stoppages managed by the union officials and the employers. Even before the strike vote was taken, an agreement embodying all the basic tenets of protocolism had been entered into with the bosses. The union agreed to inform the employers 24 hours before the workers were called down and to send back to their shops within two days after the strike began those who worked for members of the manufacturers' association. Even strike hall arrangements were made with the employers' collaboration. The *New York Times* editorially commended the movement at the time as "An Intelligent Strike," conducted on a "live and let live" basis.

The birth of an organized opposition within the Interna-

* The N. Y. Joint Board had an affiliated membership of 50,000 by 1912. Between July, 1910, and April, 1911, the International issued 40 charters to new locals throughout the country.

tional dates from the time of this stoppage. Organized under the name of the "Welfare League," the opposition was able to keep the workers out on strike for 48 hours after they were ordered back to work by the International officials. There had been previous oppositions in the history of the organization, but they were sporadic and decentralized. Henceforth, the left-wing forces became organized.

Strikes in other branches of the trade during the course of the year were conducted on a more or less similar basis —with the full sympathy of city and other public officials. One of the speakers at the strike hall of the wrapper and kimono workers on January 22, 1913, was ex-President Theodore Roosevelt.

In the so-called "women's trades," 60,000 workers in New York and Boston were brought under the influence of protocols during the year 1913. All of these agreements were basically similar to the protocol which ended the cloakmakers' strike of 1910. By 1913 the national membership in the I.L.G.W.U. was around 90,000, of whom about 80% were under protocol agreements.

Rank and File Opposition

The workers, as we have seen, had been more or less tricked into the adventure with protocolism. Rank and file opposition to the entire principle involved was immediate. However, as long as industrial conditions were on the upswing, the fears and suspicions of many were somewhat allayed through concessions granted by the employers who were then willing to pay "strike insurance" in the form of slight wage and hour improvements rather than risk a standstill in their shops at a time when business was booming.

But when the union became an open agency of class peace rather than an instrument of struggle, it rendered itself impotent for the day when the pinch would come. The winter of 1913 brought with it armies of unemployed tramping the streets. In the garment shops, the bosses began to bear

down on protocol conditions and to send work to out-of-town shops or to non-union contractors. The mechanism of the protocol failed to rectify the workers' grievances while the International forbade strikes as a medium of correction.

In dealing with the manufacturers' association under the protocol the office of Chief Clerk of the Joint Board was of major strategic importance. This officer represented the interests of the workers before the Chief Clerk of the manufacturers. He represented the union before the Board of Grievances. He was the general spokesman for the workers.

For this position the union selected A. Bisno, who had spent many years as a worker in cloak shops and who was at the time manager of the Chicago Cloak Makers Union. A man devoted to the interests of the workers and long noted for his honesty and straightforwardness, he immediately met face to face the issues afflicting the workers, the chief of which was the contracting evil. Contractors were busy under sub-standard conditions while the "inside" factories had little to do. Bisno took the strong stand that sending out production to sub-standard "outside" contractors was "stealing"—a mere ruse to avoid compliance with established scales. He demanded that the "inside" manufacturers accept responsibility for conditions in all of the shops of contractors working for them.

Bisno immediately began to experience difficulties. His various ideas upon the subject of union supervision and control called down upon his head the wrath not only of the employers but of those officers in the International, such as John Dyche, its secretary-treasurer, who "had little faith in the capacity of the workers in the industry to 'stick' to their union . . . [believing] that a strong union could be maintained only with the aid of a strong manufacturers' association . . . [and] that the workers would gain more by 'going easy'." [9] Dyche, as the spokesman for this group within the union, accused Bisno and those who were of a mind with him of "ignorance and dogmatism plus demagogy"

because of their determined stand toward the employers.

The Dyche faction and the manufacturers' association launched a determined campaign to get rid of Bisno. But they soon encountered considerable difficulty in achieving this end, for he had in the meantime become the idol of the workers. Whereupon the officials resorted to every manner of petty persecution. For example, when he arrived at work one Monday morning he found the walls of his partition office in the Joint Board headquarters taken down and completely removed.

Though an honest and militant trade unionist, Bisno gave way before such tactics as these. In October, 1912, he consented to be relegated to another position and the Joint Board appointed Dyche temporary Chief Clerk in his place.

On taking office, Dyche promised the bosses that he would put an end to all stoppages. But the workers were extremely discontented and were growing increasingly bitter. "Illegal" shop strikes spread like an epidemic, two or three breaking out every week in the New York cloak industry alone. Dyche, with his sympathetic attitude toward the employers, determined that these should cease. When, for example, the workers in the shop of J. C. Stratton went out on strike and refused to obey his order to return to work without a previous settlement of their grievances, he sent up scabs to fill their places. For all practical purposes the workers found themselves arrayed against not only the bosses but their own International officials. When the organ of the Joint Board, the *New Post,* became strongly partisan toward the workers on most of the issues in controversy, President Rosenberg assured the manufacturers that the periodical "merely represented the spirit of a few idiots and fools."

But these "idiots and fools" refused to be guided by their president's policies or judgments. They fought militantly and even went on strike—while the union officials sent up "scabs with union books" to fill their places. The Joint Board, which had hitherto been lukewarm as between the

workers and the International, in turn became scared at the rising tide of anti-protocolism. It clamped down on the rank and file, censured the editor of the *New Post* for his editorials which had characterized the workers as "slaves to the protocol," appointed a committee of five to supervise the future policies of the paper and entered into alliance with the officers of the International, whose peace-at-any-price policy was driving the rank and file to distraction.

Meanwhile, Dyche was having troubles of his own. His policies were signally successful with the employers but the workers' wrath was becoming unmanageable. Within a few months his system collapsed and on January 11, 1913, the Joint Board in turn appointed Dr. Isaac Hourwich, a lawyer, economist and writer, to the pivotal position of Chief Clerk.

Hourwich soon found himself in a position analogous to that of Bisno. Piecework prevailed in the shops and the workers in the larger plants had worked out a system of shop committees to deal with the employers in settling rates which experience had taught them operated in their best interests. Hourwich backed the workers who, he insisted, might conduct their shop affairs as they saw fit without interference from the employers as to the manner in which their representatives were to be chosen. Other issues arose and on each the new Chief Clerk adopted a policy in the workers' interests. Moreover, Hourwich worked very closely with Louis Hyman, a man who had long been active in the labor movement of England and, coming to New York in 1911, soon became a leader among the left-wing workers.

Soon Dyche was denouncing Hourwich as an "impossible" person, an opinion which was echoed by President Rosenberg and other officers of the International. In November, 1913, the Joint Board denied him reappointment to his office, whereupon the struggle flared out more openly than ever. Local 1 withdrew its delegates from the Joint Board. Other locals called mass meetings of protest against the machine

and under pressure from below the Joint Board was forced to put the matter to a referendum vote. Hourwich was reappointed by a vote of 6,553 to 1,948.

But the bosses refused to have any further dealings with Hourwich, and the General Executive Board and the Joint Board, obedient as ever to their masters' voice, persuaded him that his continuance in office would mean the end of the International. They urged him to resign and in a weak moment he complied—in the face of the pressure which the machine knew so well how to apply. The cloakmakers were indignant at his forced withdrawal from the union and expressed some measure of their rage by invading the offices of the Joint Board and the International and smashing some furniture. They also descended upon the International headquarters where only the threat of the officials to call the police prevented them from going to even further extremes.

The entire "Hourwich affair" symbolized the class struggle in the needle trades, with the International officers lining up solidly with capital and the rank and file militantly demanding a fighting policy from those organs which they had erected for the protection of their class interests. It made clear that the bosses, rather than the workers, were dictating to the International.

End of the Protocol

Conditions outside of New York as well as in the various trades in the metropolis were meanwhile going from bad to worse. The employers almost completely disregarded the protocol wage scales and other conditions, and throughout the country open shop markets again came to prevail. Whatever remaining faith any workers may have had in protocolism was completely swept away as the employers took advantage of the industrial conditions prevailing during 1913-14 to undermine all existing standards. The union officials stood by, impotent because of their class-peace policies. Workers continued to walk out and call stoppages. The

Joint Board continued to disavow such actions. A virtual stalemate prevailed.

When in April and May, 1915, a series of "illegal stoppages" again broke out, the employers, realizing that the rank and file was out of hand and that the International could not prevent militant activity, notified the Joint Board and the International that they had "lost faith in the efficacy of your organization" and abrogated the protocol. But the International, still anxious to avoid a fight, patched together another agreement along the lines of the protocol.* The near dissolution of the International was avoided during this period only by virtue of a series of arrests and indictments of union leaders—eight of whom were accused of murder in connection with the death of a scab. In the face of these police attacks the workers rallied behind the officials.

The protocol machinery finally came to an end in 1916. In that year the New York cloak and suit manufacturers refused to accept the principle that under the terms of the agreement a worker, to be employed, must be a "unionist in good standing." The Protective Association accordingly locked out 25,000 workers and in order to prevent them from having their work done by sub-manufacturers or contractors the union called out these shops also, so that about 60,000 in all were involved in the movement. The collective agreement which ended this conflict scrapped the protocol machinery. Protocol agreements in other centers were soon abrogated and gave way to collective agreements of the traditional type.

Neither the employers nor the workers had ever taken the protocol seriously, for both groups recognized the reality of the class struggle. The employers had attempted to use the protocol against the workers and when this proved unworkable they cast the entire mechanism into the discard. The

*A revised protocol was also effected in the dress and waist trade in 1916.

workers had never accepted any of the implications of the arrangement and had struck repeatedly.

The Governor's Commission

Following the abrogation of the protocol, the International entered upon a period of prosperity and growth. War-time conditions brought about a shortage of labor. It was easy for the workers to compel the employers to pay higher wages and the union rode on the crest of the wave. During 1919 alone the International signed 25 agreements with employers' organizations in nine cities. In addition to wage and hour concessions, the "right to the job" was established with a two-week trial period for the newly hired worker and permanent tenure thereafter. For settling disputes under the agreements, however, organized strength was not relied upon. Instead boards representative of both sides with "impartial chairmen" at their head were set up as final arbiters.

At the fifteenth convention, held in Chicago in May, 1920, the International had more than 105,000 members in good standing. As already indicated, this rising tide reflected merely the war-time prosperity, not the organizing ability of the union leaders. In the anti-union revival which followed the war they were, as usual, caught unprepared. All of their class-collaborationist policies were then exposed. In November, 1920, the union leaders decided to refrain from strikes wherever possible, and in June, 1921, signed a "Supplemental Agreement" with the New York cloak manufacturers in which they agreed to "bring up the productivity of the workers to a point fair and proper to both sides"—in other words, to sanction speed-up. Similar arrangements were entered into in other cities. And when the New York Protective Association violated the existing agreement, the International, forced into a strike of 55,000 workers, abandoned the picket line for the law courts. In order "to vindicate the principle that there is one law for the rich and the poor" they obtained an injunction on November 29, 1921. It enjoined the employers from violating "the agreement between the union and the association which has until June 1, 1922, to run." [10]

When in 1922 the cloakmakers were called out on strike, this was merely another pre-arranged stoppage, agreements having been entered into with the employers before a single worker was ordered out. This was the first time this had occurred in the cloak trade. It was a familiar phenomenon in other women's trades, but never before experienced by the cloakmakers.

In 1922 also came a further crystallization of the left-wing opposition within the International. At the 1922 Cleveland Convention the opposition had 72 delegates—mostly Communists, Communist sympathizers, Socialists and anarchists. Abraham Cahan, Morris Sigman and several General Executive Board members, in the presence of John J. Leary, of the New York *World,* caucused with this opposition—proposing that the reëlection of Benjamin Schlesinger as International President be the subject of discussion.

Schlesinger could have been reëlected without left-wing support, but he was in the position of having been repudiated by his own local (No. 1 of New York) which had sent a progressive delegation to the convention. Schlesinger himself was not a delegate, although as president of the organization he participated in the convention. However, he refused to be a candidate for reëlection without the support of his own local.

Around this issue the opposition split. The Communists and Communist sympathizers, led by Joseph Boruchowitz, until this day an outstanding miltant leader among the cloakmakers, refused to discuss the presidency unless vital issues in the union (such as proportional representation to Joint Boards and conventions, the right to referendum on union taxes and assessments, recall of officers, etc.) were settled first. Forty of the opposition delegates—mostly anarchists and Socialists, including the Local 1 delegates—split from the opposition on this issue and made possible Schlesinger's

reëlection. The remaining 32 refused to depart from their position that principles and issues come first.

When Morris Sigman was elected president of the I.L.G.W.U. in 1923, he entered office with many grandiose ideas for putting the industry in "healthy" condition. He believed that it was the union's function to weed out the small shops and to accept the responsibility for technical and business reforms in the remainder. And when the union and the employers' associations came to a deadlock in the cloak trade in 1924, the International again suggested arbitration. At this point Governor Alfred E. Smith, at Sigman's behest, entered the picture and appointed a commission of five members to which Sigman, over the bitter protest of the Left Wing, submitted all of the issues and proposals in dispute.

The agreement in the cloakmaking industry was about to expire when this took place and when the employers refused to comply with the union's demands the membership, by an overwhelming referendum vote, decided to strike. But instead of obeying this order to strike, President Sigman submitted the workers' demands to the Commission and pledged the union to abide by its findings. The Commission began its hearings on June 17th; on June 27th it issued its first report. This proposed to eliminate small contractors and provided that organized jobbers might send work only to shops having 14 or more machines. On other points the Commission waited for two years and finally made recommendations of such a nature that they could not be accepted by the union. Then, as a result of these dilatory tactics of the union leadership, the strike was called in 1926 when the situation was much less favorable for the union than it had been in 1924.

The Joint Action Committee

These events brought to a climax many years of struggle between the rank-and-file and the officialdom of the I.L.G.W.U. We have seen that resistance to protocolism was continuous but it had been loosely organized, with the result that the reactionary officials had beaten down the workers' opposition. But since the basic causes of rank-and-file discontent had never been removed, the opposition persisted and, in the course of time, became better organized and more articulate.

To counteract opposition the officials had followed a policy of reorganizations, persecutions and expulsions. When, in 1917, the members of Local 1 elected a progressive Executive Board, the International seized control of that local, "reorganized" it and expelled many members. Similarly, in 1920, Local 25 which had been actively agitating and organizing for a shop delegate system (as a medium of rank-and-file expression) was split into three locals and nine members were expelled.

The splitting of Local 25 did not end the shop delegate movement. On the contrary, this spread to other locals and many shop delegate leagues were organized to agitate for the system.

The shop delegate plan sought to replace the craft local by the shop as the basic unit of organization. The workers of each shop, in turn, would elect two delegates to a general committee which would become the governing body of the local union. It was pointed out that such a system would give workers direct control over all matters relating to the industry as well as direct management over all union affairs.

Members who were known to favor the shop delegate movement were not permitted to run for office. In 1923, 19 officers of Local 22 elected by the membership with the endorsement of the Shop Delegates League were expelled from the executive board of the union. The situation was further sharpened by the organization in 1923 of the Trade Union Educational League, which advocated almagamation of all needle trades unions and their democratization either through the shop delegate plan or a similar method. President Sigman embarked upon a holy crusade against the

T.U.E.L., attempted falsely to brand it as a dual union, and declared that there was no room in the International for anybody belonging to it. The fact that many of its leaders were Communists enabled him to raise the "Red" scare. With the support of the General Executive Board he issued orders expelling T.U.E.L. members from the union.

This order resulted in an upheaval throughout the International. In Chicago, Philadelphia, New York and other centers entire joint boards as well as locals were expelled and "reorganized." At the 1924 convention the largest New York locals were denied representation, their members being unseated on the pretext of belonging to the League.

The growing left wing took up the fight against the expulsion policy and led the mass revolt which followed. By 1925 the lefts controlled the largest locals in the International, such as locals 2, 9 and 22 of New York, and on June 11, 1925, these three locals, representing about 70% of the New York Joint Board, were expelled. Although the real basis of this action was their opposition to administration policies, the stated pretext was that the leaders were Communists and that a May First union meeting at the Metropolitan Opera House had been turned into a Communist demonstration with M. Olgin of the *Freiheit* (New York Communist daily paper) as one of the speakers.

At the end of June, 1925, the three expelled locals formed a "Joint Action Committee," with Louis Hyman as chairman, which embarked upon a successful 16-week fight for reinstatement. This committee called a meeting at the Yankee Stadium at which 30,000 enthusiastic cloak and dressmakers of New York pledged to continue the struggle until victory was achieved. This was accompanied by a two-hour stoppage of the entire industry and overflow meetings in 17 halls.

Throughout this struggle the International attempted to divert attention from the main issues involved by raising the cry of "Americanism *vs.* Communism" and by characterizing the Joint Action Committee as a "dual union." The committee was unswerving, however, pointing out to the workers that on the contrary its efforts were directed toward reinstating those expelled and in this manner keeping the union united.

The "Rotten Borough" System

During this period the masses followed the opposition leadership but the officials maintained control of the apparatus. This was made possible through a thoroughly undemocratic system of representation, similar to the "rotten borough" system in England.

Under the constitution of the International a local might be established with seven members, which might in turn send two delegates to the convention. The greater numbers of delegates allotted to larger locals were not proportionate to their size. Thus, for example, a local having 500 to 1000 members received four delegates; one of 5,000 to 11,000 received eight delegates for the first 5,000 and one for each additional 2,000; one of 11,000 or more received eleven delegates for the first 11,000 and one for each additional 5,000.

Locals needed only three months' existence to be entitled to representation, so before each successive convention small newly organized locals would be set up to assure the administration a majority. In this manner Morris Sigman was reëlected President of the International at the 1925 Convention by a majority of the delegates. However, the minority of delegates who supported Louis Hyman represented 75% of the membership. The demand for proportional representation was a major plank in the left-wing struggle.

The Pact of Peace

At the end of 16 weeks of conflict following the expulsion campaign, the left wing, as a result of its mass support, emerged victorious. In August, 1925, the International officials signed a peace treaty with the three expelled locals.

In this agreement the International officials reinstated the ousted locals and officers to their places in the union, agreed

that "tolerance be recognized as a basic principle in the Union and that all discrimination for political opinion be abolished" and that at a special convention to be held in December, 1925, the question of proportional representation "be taken up and decided."

Following this agreement elections were held in New York. The left wing gained control of the New York Joint Board and elected Louis Hyman manager. It likewise acquired leadership of the Chicago Joint Board and of many locals throughout the country.

At the Philadelphia convention the following December, Sigman, again in control through the "rotten borough" system, sought to break the peace pact and save himself from being overthrown by evading the issue of proportional representation. The left-wing delegates, representing about 75% of the membership of the International, bolted the convention in protest at this point. Had they stayed out they would have had a majority of the union, but for the sake of unity they returned on a compromise basis. Under a new system of representation, the make-up of the New York Joint Board was to be more nearly proportional to the size of the conflicting groups within the New York membership. On the subject of proportional representation in conventions, a referendum was to be conducted within six months. When the six months had elapsed, Sigman again stalled on the excuse that the cloak strike was impending and that the "Reds" had to be "cleaned out" before the referendum could be held.

Meanwhile, the left wing administration was making remarkable progress in the New York market. The organization which they had taken over was bankrupt and demoralized. Work standards had completely broken down. The union was gangster-ridden. With the aid of the rank-and-file, professional gangsters were eliminated and organizational committees of workers were substituted. In Local 22 alone the membership was increased from 7,000 to nearly 11,000 in only a few months. And the employers began to

feel the power of the union, for standards were rigidly enforced.

The 1926 Cloak Strike

When the Governor's Commission reported after two years of deliberation, it recommended slight wage increases but ignored the demand for a 40-hour week and granted the bosses the right to discharge 10% of the workers each year without cause. The wage recommendations for the underpaid crafts were entirely unsatisfactory. The one union demand reported upon favorably, limitation of the number of sub-manufacturers working for one jobber, was rejected by the jobbers. This made the calling of a strike inevitable.

On June 29, 1926, the Joint Board called a mass meeting at Madison Square Garden. Morris Sigman, Hugh Frayne of the A. F. of L., Sidney Hillman, President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, and others, feeling the mass pressure from below, all spoke in favor of a strike. A similar telegram from President Green of the A. F. of L. was read. The 20,000 cloakmakers who packed the arena voted to strike,[11] and on July 1 the strike was called. On July 16 the International enthusiastically reported the strike as being "in excellent shape." [12] On September 20th President Sigman swore in an affidavit that "the strike was forced upon the workers in the industry. . . . Our Union, after very careful consideration of the [Governor's] Commission's recommendations, reluctantly reached the conclusion that they were entirely inadequate to remedy the most crying evils under which the workers suffered." [13] Clearly, in the light of this affidavit, the later charges of Sigman that the strike was "illegal" and called by Communists for political objectives are not to be taken seriously.

After six weeks some independent shops settled with the union. At the end of 20 weeks a settlement was effected with the inside manufacturers, the new agreement being signed by Morris Sigman and Morris Hillquit on behalf of

the International and by Louis Hyman for the Joint Board.

The terms of settlement were a compromise but an advance over the recommendations of the Governor's Commission. Wage increases of $4 to $8 a week for the various crafts were won; recognition of examiners which the commission had refused was achieved; and, although the 10% "reorganization" issue could not be won, it was considerably restricted. To exercise the privilege an employer was obliged to have a force of at least 35 workers, to whom he had to guarantee 32 weeks of employment a year. Only those employed for this full period came within the 10% provision and, in addition, discharged workers were to receive a recompense of a week's wages.

The Rôle of the International Officials

Shortly after the strike call was issued, the Joint Board realized that the officers of the International—Dubinsky, Sigman, Ninfo and others—had no intention of giving it their support. On the contrary, they placed their factional interests above those of the workers and carried on secret and open sabotage against the strike.

When during the strike Judge Guy issued a sweeping injunction against the union and thousands of workers were arrested for violating it, a mass protest demonstration was arranged at Madison Square Garden. Invitations to participate were sent to the Central Trades and Labor Council, the State Federation of Labor and William Green, President of the A. F. of L. President Sigman was to arrange for representatives of these bodies to voice their protest at the meeting, but he took no steps to assure their presence. Their failure to appear made many workers feel that the labor movement had deserted them in the midst of their struggle and when the president of the employers' Industrial Council made a public statement to that effect the following day, the International officers left his statement unanswered.

Vice-President Ninfo as chairman of the Settlement Committee, and Vice-President Dubinsky, its secretary, used this most important committee of the strike in the direct service of the employers. As soon as a firm made application for settlement, this information was relayed along to the Industrial Council. The council, in order to hold the employers' ranks unbroken, would immediately exert pressure upon the firm to withdraw its application. It also became known that Ninfo, without the knowledge of the Strike Committee, had secretly conferred with the president of the Industrial Council. He did this in violation of a decision of the Strike Committee that there were to be no conferences with the employers' representatives without the knowledge and consent of the committee.

In a critical financial situation, the Strike Committee faced additional sabotage and indifference. When, for example, a decision was made that workers in settled shops be permitted to work on Saturdays for the benefit of the strike fund, Dubinsky, as head of the cutters' local, prohibited the cutters from working on Saturdays for single pay, thus interfering with the possibility of obtaining the maximum benefit from the day's pay. Dubinsky also insisted upon the right to hold separate meetings of the cutters and he utilized these meetings as a platform from which to spread misleading rumors about the strike and the strike leaders.

The Joint Board had ruled that no officer was to receive any pay for the duration of the strike. Not only did the right wing officials ignore this order and receive their full salaries while the cloakmakers were starving, but they failed even to contribute the 10% of their salaries which was being paid by those workers who were permitted to work temporarily in other trades during the strike.

On the eve of the New York strike the International officers had concluded an agreement in Philadelphia on the old terms. Throughout the entire New York struggle, the Philadelphia office, with the consent of the International leaders, openly scabbed on New York. Members who protested were

fined and otherwise disciplined by the Philadelphia Joint Board.

When negotiations were proceeding with the New York employers, the International officers adopted a conciliatory attitude which encouraged the employers to press for further concessions. In the presence of the mediators, for example, Sigman openly stated that as far as he was concerned he was ready to accept a settlement on the basis of a 42-hour week instead of on the 40-hour week demanded by the strikers. Such tactics more than once encouraged the employers in their refusal to settle.

The Joint Board was aware of many of these tactics of the right-wing leaders and the help the latter were giving the employers. The Joint Board, however, made the fatal mistake (later publicly admitted) of failing to expose the International officials during the course of the strike. Instead they adopted the mistaken policy, "let's deal with the bosses first and take care of the misleaders later."

The 1926 Expulsions

When the agreement was signed with the inside manufacturers, the workers in the shops of members of the American Association (sub-manufacturers) still remained out. Negotiations with this group were well on the way to settlement when the Association abruptly terminated them. They had received an "inside tip" that "big doings" were in the offing.

What these were soon became apparent. On December 13 the General Executive Board of the union issued a statement in which it declared the strike to have been "illegal." As we have noted, the strike was called upon the initiative of the New York Joint Board and with the endorsement of the General Executive Board. Sigman and officials of the A. F. of L. spoke in favor of strike at the Madison Square Garden meeting and a *strike vote was taken by the membership.**

* Moreover, during the strike right-wing officials had headed and dominated four of the leading strike committees—law, finance, settlement and out-of-town. Further, the 1926 convention of the American Federation of Labor had sanctioned and endorsed the strike and urged its support by the entire labor movement. See, *Report of the Proceedings* of the Forty-Sixth Annual Convention, pp. 94-95.

Nevertheless, this G.E.B. statement declared that the left-wing had "precipitated a disastrous general strike in the industry without necessity and without the consent or sanction of the membership" and that the "General Executive Board and the subcommittees hereafter named take over the exclusive management and direction of the pending strike." [14] Further, completely forgetting the guarantee of freedom of political opinion which had been pledged in the peace pact, the cry of "Communism" was again raised. Finally the newly constituted strike authority followed the consistent official tradition and submitted to arbitration the points at issue with the Association.

A veritable orgy of expulsions followed. Without even the preferment of formal charges, without trial or hearing, and on 24-hour notice, the Joint Board, as well as locals 2, 9 and 35, were expelled. Within a short time Local 22 of dressmakers shared the same fate on the false charge of "Communism" and for the high crime of contemplating a strike in the dress trade. A new dress agreement was thereupon signed by Sigman. It surrendered most of the dressmakers' hard won gains. In the pursuance of his rule or ruin policies, Sigman and the International displayed a willingness to make any concessions to the employers in order to obtain their support in the struggle for undisputed control over the union.

Unable to obtain this control by vote of the workers, "higher strategy" was resorted to. The charters of the four locals were revoked, and later the same procedure was followed in connection with the Chicago Joint Board and locals. The International then set up new dual locals and dual Joint Boards and in these "reorganized" bodies began "registering" workers, new books being issued at 50 cents each. When

the masses of the workers refused to submit to these tactics, the aid of the employers was enlisted. The latter readily gave official recognition to the new locals, refused to hire any one not belonging to them and under threat of terror and starvation the workers were gradually forced to register with the Sigman organization.

Thugs were hired and sent into the garment center. Hundreds of workers were beaten. Thousands who refused to register were thrown out of their shops and thus deprived of their livelihood. Finally the International, represented by the Socialist lawyer, Morris Hillquit, went to the courts, and obtained five injunctions against the old Joint Boards of New York, Chicago and Boston. Hillquit also obtained court orders for the evacuation of Joint Board and local buildings. The courts, as well as the police and the employers, thus gave the International and its legal agents the fullest coöperation in smashing the rank-and-file movement.

One of the first fruits of the expulsions was the abolition of week work in the cloak trade. Week work had been established in 1919 but with the militants out of the way the bosses were unhindered in substituting piece rates. For about seven years these were put over on a "bootleg basis" and to-day have finally become "official."

The Struggle for Unity, 1927-29

The expelled officers and workers desired at all costs to preserve the unity of their union. They wished above all else to remain within the established organization if this was humanly achievable. Accordingly, they embarked upon a three-year struggle for unity on the three-fold program of, (1) reinstatement of the expelled members, locals and Joint Boards; (2) general elections of officers; and (3) a referendum vote of the membership on proportional representation in conventions.

It is difficult to describe the heroism and self-sacrifice of the thousands of cloak and dress makers who engaged in

this struggle. In every way they stand out as heroes in the American class struggle. They were arrested, beaten, jailed, fired and starved. But they never flinched for a moment. Meetings of shop chairmen, the Committee of 50 (formed at a mass meeting in Cooper Union) and innumerable mass meetings and shop chairmen conferences made overtures to the International to meet in conference and put an end to the internal struggle. But every effort in this direction was rebuffed.

When the next convention of the International met in Boston in May, 1928, it was clear that the union machine had no intention of submitting the issues in dispute to the membership. The deposed Joint Boards nevertheless sent delegates to this hand picked convention to make still another overture of peace. These workers were met by a squadron of police who prevented them from even entering the hall.

National Organization Committee

Refused seats at the convention, the barred delegates together with the Committee of 50 and delegates from various needle trade centers, met the following day, May 9, 1928, to shape their future policies. This conference, which lasted for three days, decided to reverse tactics and to launch an offensive by building the union over the heads of the International cliques.

The conference then elected a National Organization Committee, representative of a united front of all elements in the industry, which issued a broad appeal addressed to the cloakmakers, dressmakers and all other members of the I.L.G.W.U.:

"We came to Boston because we desired to unite the Union, to propose plans for constructive work, and raise our organization out of the morass into which it was sunk by the Sigman régime," read this statement in part. "The Sigman, Dubinsky, Ninfo and Schlesinger cliques," it continued, "have surrounded themselves with a cordon of several hundred policemen who not only kept

vigil over the union bureaucrats but also served as their credential committee. . . . On Wednesday, May 9, 1928, the foundation was laid for the rebuilding of our union. . . . In every shop the workers must organize themselves immediately and choose shop representatives, shop chairmen and shop committees. . . . The shop chairmen of every city will be united in a shop chairmen's council, which will serve as our direct contact with the workers in the shops. The shop chairmen's councils elected and controlled by the workers themselves must be the foundation on which our organization will rest. In every city we will organize a special organization committee that will take in the largest possible number of rank and filers. The organization committees will work hand in hand with the National Organization Committee. The object of the organization committee will be to immediately get to work in organizing the open cloak and dress shops, and to establish union conditions everywhere."

The National Organization Committee proceeded with the task of carrying out these objectives. On June 2, 1928, a conference of shop chairmen held in New York was attended by close to 1,100 delegates, representing 711 shops employing over 13,000 workers. "We did not begin the struggle," this group pointed out, "and it is not in our interests that the struggle should continue."

Work along these lines was continued and a monster mass meeting was called at the Bronx Stadium on August 8, 1928. At this meeting, which was attended by 15,000 workers, the N.O.C. presented amidst great enthusiasm a proposal for building a new union. A resolution was adopted "that the time has come when the workers of the ladies garment industry must begin building our new union, controlled by the rank and file, which will lead us in struggle against the bosses and the company union." Henceforth, for six years all organization work of the militant rank and file was directed toward this new objective—the building of a new union.