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## Another look at the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union: Women, industry structure and collective action

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*The 1909–10 New York City shirtwaist-workers' strike, the famous 'Uprising of the 20,000,' is a classic example of female industrial militancy, and has figured prominently in the debates about women workers' relationship to unionism in the early twentieth century. This dramatic strike led to the transformation of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) from a craft union into a massive industrial union which, from 1910 through the 1930s, included more women workers than any other single union in the country – this despite large fluctuations in membership levels in the ILGWU over the years. In this essay, Roger Waldinger situates the unionization of female garment-workers in its broader context, analyzing the social and demographic characteristics of the workforce, changes in production technology and shifts in the structure of the industry over the first three decades of the twentieth century. He argues that while strike activity was always endemic among women garment-workers, a precondition for the creation of the durable industrial unionism which emerged in 1910 was the relative stability of industrial conditions – a stability which was subsequently undermined, with severe consequences for the ILGWU. Waldinger also explores the reasons for women's underrepresentation within the union's leadership structure, despite their vast numbers among the membership, pointing to exclusionism in the power centers of the union, on the one hand, and the cultural and structural constraints on women's activism, on the other.*

What is the hidden history of women workers? Historians have tended to concentrate on one question: did employment prove emancipatory, leading women to protest and, through protest, to question fundamental values – or did it simply reinforce the prevailing definition of women's place and role in the sexual division of labor? Those working in the field of women's labor history often write as if either perspective – conflict or subordination – provides a satisfactory explanation for the ambiguous experience of early-twentieth-century women workers. On the one hand, some historians seek to recover women's roles in the prominent labor conflicts of the period, arguing, as does Barbara Wertheimer in her popular account of women's labor struggles, that 'We Were There' A more sophisticated treatment is offered by Alice Kessler-Harris. She notes that cultural patterns, the hostility of male workers, and the indifference (if not antagonism) of established unions impeded organizing among women workers, but contends that 'despite reluctance, women still could be devoted and successful union members' who 'often outdid men in militancy.'<sup>2</sup> Similarly, David Montgomery acknowledges that activist women often departed from the life-styles typical of the turn-of-the-century rank and file. Yet he maintains that it is 'misleading to distinguish categorically between representative passive women and exceptional activists,' given the high level of conflict that characterized the labor scene during the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Altogether different is the interpretation offered by Leslie Tentler, who accents the limited potential for organization among turn-of-the-century women workers.<sup>4</sup> Tentler argues that the subordination of women to men was more sharply defined at work than in any other aspect of life. In this view, the demographic characteristics of the female labor force and the prevailing division of labor so sharply constrained the potential for protest that work exercised a deeply conservative effect on the thought and action of working-class women.

Both these perspectives elide the crucial issues: the *conditions* under which women's participation in collective action will be more or less successful. Neither approach elucidates the variations in women workers' experiences – across industries or occupations, or over time. Those who, like Tentler, emphasize women's acquiescence in conditions of work, dismiss organization and militancy as

epiphenomenal – but without providing any criteria for determining the relative importance of work and familial concerns, or for assessing differences in the organizability of women in various trades. On the other hand, those scholars highlighting the conflictual aspects of women's work experiences often presume an immanent tendency toward militancy, and fail to specify the structural opportunities for protest, or to acknowledge any constraints on organizing. And while Montgomery, in a critical response to Tentler, contends that historians should not see popular life-styles and leaders as mutually exclusive, his conception of studying the interaction between life-styles, struggles and organizational movements still neglects the social structure within which collective action necessarily takes place.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter attempts to specify the circumstances under which turn-of-the-century women workers engaged in successful collective action. Through a case study of the New York women's garment industry between 1900 and 1930, I argue that the trajectory of protest activity in the industry fundamentally diverged from the patterns associated with models of conflict or subordination. To be sure, the characteristics of the garment industry labor force and the antagonism of male unionists limited the potential for mass mobilization and for the institutionalization of women's interests within the trade union context. However, I will demonstrate that the ebb and flow of women's unionism in the garment trades was most closely linked to changes in the social technology of production and in the structure of the industry.

Though my evidence for this argument is drawn from the analysis of a single industry, the implications are of broader significance. The garment industry is a critical case for the analysis of women's labor-movement activity at the turn of the century, and has figured prominently on both sides of the debate about the capacities and limits of women's protest in this period.<sup>6</sup> Competitive in structure, offering employment conditions of little stability, and dominated by a youthful labor force, the garment industry exemplifies the social and economic conditions characteristic of women's labor at the time. In contrast to other women's industries – whether still more atomistic, as in the case of millinery or in the manufacture of artificial flowers, or more capital intensive, as with textiles or meatpacking – the garment industry also gave birth to a durable form of trade unionism in the early twentieth century. Consequently, it is possible to assess

the strengths and limitations of women's trade union activity, as well as the various factors – both internal to the female labor force and generated by the wider environment – that affected the organizational outcomes of women's protest activities.

While conventional treatments of the role of women in the early garment industry focus on the dramatic events of 1909–10, this chapter includes analysis of the subsequent decades as well, adding a new dimension to our understanding of women's role in the development of needle trades unionism. Unionism among women garment-workers went into sharp eclipse after World War I, which raises questions about the factors that precipitated the earlier and successful attempts at mobilization. Furthermore, the industry underwent important structural and demographic changes during the period examined here, and the resulting variations help to override the limits of a single case study.

### Workforce characteristics and labor-market structure

The modern women's garment industry was a product of urbanization and the development of a national market. Still an item of household production in the 1880s, women's clothing rapidly became a factory-made good in the two decades that followed. As the demand for factory-made clothing grew, so did the industrial labor force: employing 39,000 workers in 1889, the industry grew to over 150,000 by 1905.

The upsurge of the American market coincided with large-scale immigration, first from Russia, and then from Italy. As a result, the industry grew up where the largest number of immigrants landed: New York City. In 1889, almost 65 percent of the fledgling industry's total output was produced in New York. By 1921, after thirty years of almost continuous growth, nearly three-quarters of national output was made in New York.

Although the emergent industry drew heavily on the rapidly expanding immigrant labor force, it incorporated male and female immigrants in different labor-market roles, largely in response to technological and market factors. The first items to be mass produced were coats and suits. The rapid growth of this branch of the industry in the 1880s and 1890s coincided with the influx of large

numbers of male Jewish workers, who were drawn into the industry by the presence of German-Jewish employers and by common experience in tailoring prior to emigration from Europe. Though Jewish males crowded out female cutters and operators, male labor was generally restricted to jobs in the mechanized phases of production. In the remaining segments, operations were carried out by female handworkers. As output increased, the overall demand for handworkers in the complementary jobs grew as well.<sup>7</sup>

The uneven application of machinery in coats and suits and the emergence of markets for new products subsequently heightened the demand for semi-skilled female machine operators. New industries—the manufacture of dresses, shirtwaists, undergarments ('white-goods') and children's wear—developed after 1900. These were more heavily mechanized than coats and suits, fostering a different sexual division of labor: men filled only the relatively narrow tier of skilled jobs, while women were recruited for operating tasks, which had been deskilled, and for the traditional finishing jobs as well.<sup>8</sup>

Demand for female labor was further intensified by the seasonal character of the garment industry. The industry alternated between bursts of intense production, when demand strained even the amply available labor supply, and sharp declines that reduced peak employment by more than half. Because they were less skilled and often confined to jobs for which no training was required, women ideally fulfilled the industry's seasonal requirements, while their exclusion from the core jobs for which labor was relatively dear made them easily expendable in terms of slack demand.<sup>9</sup>

Women's clothing was only one of a group of closely related consumer goods industries in New York that relied on unskilled female labor. Although smaller, the men's clothing, artificial flower, tobacco and millinery trades all grew rapidly around the turn of the century, accounting for an increasingly large share of New York's swelling manufacturing labor force.<sup>10</sup> In 1910, these four industries employed 27 percent of New York's female blue-collar labor force, with women's garments accounting for a comparable share. Equally prone to seasonal variations and even more reliant on low-skilled handworkers, these industries contributed significantly to the increasing demand for female labor.<sup>11</sup>

At the turn of the century, young single workers furnished the bulk of the female labor force, greatly outnumbering married women

with children. After 1890, the proportion of women workers aged 25–44 increased, but in manufacturing this barely changed the basic pattern. As late as 1920, almost 52 percent of the female operatives in manufacturing were under twenty-five years of age; by contrast, young workers comprised only 39 percent of females in all occupations.<sup>12</sup> Even more than other manufacturing, clothing was an industry of the young. Sixty-seven percent of the women workers surveyed in a 1908 US Bureau of Labor study of the men's clothing industry were under twenty-five, and workers aged seventeen and eighteen were the most numerous of all.<sup>13</sup> The Joint Board of Sanitary Control estimated that 50 percent of the women in the dress and waist industry were under twenty,<sup>14</sup> and the smaller garment and ancillary industries recruited even more heavily from the youth labor force.<sup>15</sup>

Female participation in the labor force reflected the income dynamics and life-cycle patterns of the immigrant family. The economic and physical vulnerability of the immigrant workingman impelled young immigrant women into the labor force; the large size of the immigrant family pushed them out shortly after marriage and no later than first childbirth. Jewish immigrant women remained homebound after marriage,<sup>16</sup> while among Italians, where family income was lower still and the pressures to work correspondingly greater, the burdens imposed by family-care and housework often permitted only intermittent employment.<sup>17</sup>

Frequently, married women immigrants adapted to the dual pressures of providing and homemaking by taking in work. Those who sewed at home did so to compensate for the low and unstable earnings of their mates. Over 48 percent of the home-sewers surveyed in the US Bureau of Labor study were married to men employed as day laborers in construction; 87 percent were married to men who had been jobless for part of the previous year.<sup>18</sup> As late as 1922, the situation of homeworkers and their husbands remained substantially unaltered. Fifty-five percent of the homeworkers surveyed that year by a special New York State Commission were married to unskilled workers, and their husbands had experienced an average of four months' unemployment in 1922.<sup>19</sup>

Given the seasonal, unstable nature of the industry, the virtual inexhaustibility of the labor supply and the short span of female working careers made for an unstructured labor market. The elas-

ticity of supply offered employers no inducement to regularize production, and the pattern of female labor-force participation reinforced the resistance to rationalizing employment practices. In large measure, clothing was a casual labor market because it was a youth labor market. Girls typically began to work in early adolescence, generally starting at age fourteen. Fifty-nine percent of the Italian working women surveyed by Louise Odencrantz, for instance, had begun working at that age. Moreover, large numbers of girls were undeterred by child-labor laws and truancy codes, and under-age employment was common in the years between 1900 and 1920. One-fifth of the 252 millinery-workers surveyed by Mary Van Kleeck in 1913 had begun work at age thirteen, and one-sixth of the Italian working women questioned by Odencrantz had been similarly successful in evading mandatory schooling laws.<sup>20</sup> For the adolescent girls who thus entered the labor market, work was motivated by the prospect of immediate, short-term rewards. Envisaging limited career horizons, they sought work without regard to long-term earnings or employment possibilities.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, recurrent family crises conflicted with the burdens of family-care to create a pattern of intermittent employment among married women. For these workers, labor-force activity did not involve a process of occupational selection. Rather, as Katherine Anthony concluded in her study of women workers on New York's West Side, "The mother who must earn . . . is willing to 'take anything' from the start."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the ties that bound immigrant women to their jobs were tenuous, at best. A committee of the New York State legislature investigating the garment industry in 1895 found that many women workers in small shops knew their employees only by sight, not by name, and that many employers did not even have records of their employees' names.<sup>23</sup>

The seasonal nature of work bore down heavily upon the immigrant workers. Busy seasons in women's clothing fell into two predictable, although all too short, periods: three to four months during the spring and another burst of between two and three months in late summer and fall. The intervening periods were characterized by month-long build-ups and declines, and four- to eight-week periods when virtually no work was available. Employment fluctuated wildly: during 1914, the workforce employed in the coat and suit industry swelled to 164 percent of its average size in

February, and sank to 50 percent in late May. In dress- and waist-manufacturing, the workforce employed during the active spring season of 1913 fell to 38 percent of its size during the inter-seasonal lull.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, relatively few women workers enjoyed a lengthy period of uninterrupted wage-earning. According to Odencrantz's study of Italian women workers, the minimum span of unemployment for those in the needle trades was eight to twelve weeks a year.<sup>25</sup>

Seasonality naturally produced overcrowding in the apparel labor market. In the absence of restrictions on the labor supply, the intensified demand for workers at seasonal peaks of production tended to retain surplus workers who might otherwise have been driven into other forms of employment. Variations in earnings, moreover, considerably exceeded the fluctuations in employment, so that many of the workers employed during the inter-seasonal period were in effect only working part-time. The reason was that firms used piecework as a device to retain workers during slack periods, thereby maintaining a capacity to respond instantaneously to sudden or momentary changes in demand.<sup>26</sup>

The multiple entries and withdrawals of young working women and their mothers combined with the churning effects of seasonality to make turnover levels extremely high. Under these conditions, firms had little to gain from insulating the workforce from the ebb and flow of demand. Indeed, employers kept overhead and training costs low by organizing production in ways that facilitated the integration of new unskilled workers. Yet most machine jobs retained a certain component of skill, and high levels of turnover and the shortness of seasons made employers reluctant to hire and train inexperienced workers. In addition, young girls were often inadequate sewers, and the constant variation in styles made it difficult to master a job. One solution was to take on new hires for the least-skilled jobs demanding no machine work, or for the simple and repetitive operations which could easily be learned. When employers did hire new workers, they were often forced to absorb the learning costs themselves. Young women were frequently hired as 'learners' or 'apprentices,' jobs for which they received substantially lower pay. In 1914, for example, over a quarter of the women workers in the New York waist and dress industry earned less than the union minimum because the employers claimed that they were learners.<sup>27</sup>

The presence of a large pool of untrained workers and potential homeworkers also retarded mechanization, thereby lessening the pressure to regularize production. Despite refinements in the basic single-needle sewing machine and the introduction of special machines for button-holing and other tasks, numerous operations – particularly those involved in finishing garments – proved resistant to mechanization until well into the 1920s. At least 33 percent of the 25,000 women workers employed in the waist and dress industry in 1913 were engaged in hand operations. A similar proportion of the 32,000 coat- and suit-workers were basting, lining and finishing garments by hand as late as 1921.<sup>28</sup> Reliance on handworkers was comparable in the men's clothing industry, and greater still in industries like millinery and artificial flower-making.<sup>29</sup> Since seasons tended to converge, demand for handworkers in the various trades peaked simultaneously and then bottomed-out abruptly, further enlarging the surplus labor pool.

Though operations requiring hand labor were frequently performed in the factory, there were few impediments to the removal of these jobs from the plant. The work could readily be done at home, and the articles were easily transportable from the factory to home and back again. Moreover, employing homeworkers was a technique for expanding production capacity during periods of peak activity: it rose and fell with the seasons, plummeting to near zero when the pace of factory activity declined. Thus, the availability of homeworkers further diminished the pressures to regularize employment – a pattern that remained unchanged from the turn of the century through the 1920s.<sup>30</sup>

### Industrial change and the growth of the ILGWU

In contrast to other branches of manufacturing, the industrialization of the garment trades did not proceed by way of the centralized factory. Rather, clothing was principally made by home-sewers or by workers employed in small shops owned by contractors, who worked up goods for much larger distributors or manufacturers. The prevalence of contracting was a response to both market and organizational imperatives. While the demands of selling and distribution diverted potential manufacturers from production responsibilities,

production could easily be expanded through contracting. In addition, contracting minimized and spread the risk, allowing manufacturers to react swiftly to each contraction or expansion of demand. Most importantly, contracting provided an ideal system of labor recruitment. Unlike the larger manufacturer – who, until 1914, was likely to be a first- or second-generation German-Jewish immigrant – the contractor shared religious, ethnic and home-town links with his Russian-Jewish and Italian employees.<sup>31</sup> These ties enabled the contractor to mobilize a workforce in response to seasonal swings in demand and – perhaps even more crucial – to maintain a grip on his labor force when intense seasonal activity sharpened the competition for labor.<sup>32</sup>

By 1900, however, changes in demand and marketing disrupted this set of arrangements. The new industries that developed shortly after the turn of the century – the manufacture of dresses, shirt-waists, white goods, children's wear, kimonos, wrappers – placed greater reliance on power-driven than on foot-driven machinery and employed less skilled labor.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, selling and buying practices altered: the rapid development of department stores and mail-order houses, both buying directly from manufacturers, undercut the role that wholesalers and distributors had played during the previous period.<sup>34</sup>

These developments impelled production back toward the factory as the number of contractors declined and establishment-size increased. The changes were particularly noticeable in the new industries that principally employed women. In 1913, for example, 56 percent of the dress- and waist-workers worked in factories with 75 or more employees, and 27 percent were in establishments of 100–200 workers.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the smaller coat factories and contracting shops where workers produced full garments, these factories fragmented garment-making into twenty or more operations performed by separate individuals.<sup>36</sup>

These changes in industrial structure provided fertile ground for successful organizing efforts. Larger units of production made for a more cohesive and concentrated workforce, mitigating the destabilizing effects of youth and compressed working careers. The emergence of large firms with relatively large capital investments also dampened competitive pressures. Most importantly, profits did not hinge on the primitive techniques of 'driving' or 'sweating' that

prevailed among the contractors, so that the large firms had an interest in standardizing both employment conditions and wage rates.

Thus, collective action – initially episodic, isolated and unsuccessful – grew to industry-wide dimensions and enjoyed considerable success. Between 1906 and 1909, disputes over wage and piece-rate reductions, excessively strict discipline, and sexual harassment sparked walkouts among women white-goods-workers, waist-makers and wrapper-makers.<sup>37</sup> The strikes were largely spontaneous and the organizations shortlived. Typically, tentative stabs toward unionism emerged out of the specific grievances of individual work groups separated from one another by locality and trade: ‘a group of girls working on wrappers somewhere in Brooklyn assembled in a room and began to discuss conditions . . . An idea came to their mind that it would be a mighty good thing to organize the workers into a union.’<sup>38</sup>

When earnings took a sustained fall in 1909, simmering discontent over arbitrary fines, discipline and requirements that workers pay for needle and thread boiled over into a series of spontaneous strikes among waist-makers that subsequently mushroomed into the famous ‘Uprising of the 20,000.’ The strike demonstrated that young, largely immigrant women possessed a tenacity and militancy that would keep thousands on the picket lines for several months. But the walkout culminated in a hollow victory, for the large manufacturers continued to resist organization. The waist-makers’ union proved no more successful in developing mechanisms for standardizing rates among the plethora of small, independent shops or for enforcing the original agreement. Given the constant turnover of firms and the limited strength of the union, membership sank from 20,000 in 1910 to 7,000 a year later.<sup>39</sup>

Reorganization of the waist trade did not occur until 1913, and then under drastically different auspices. By this time the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union had succeeded in organizing the male-dominated cloak and suit trade. In contrast to the previous waist strike, toward which the ILGWU leadership had assumed a rather distant stance, the union now sought to control organizing at the highest levels, divesting local officials of much responsibility. More importantly, the relationship that the ILGWU established with the employers in the cloak and suit trade –

embedded in the agreement known as the ‘Protocols of Peace’ – provided a framework for organizing the industry to which management was willing to assent. The large waist manufacturers, who had formed an association during the 1910 strike, revived their organization – this time not in order to quell unionization, but rather to develop a mechanism for bargaining with the ILGWU. By this time, the manufacturers wanted to stabilize the industry through the establishment and extension of standardized rates: in this way, they reasoned, competition from small producers with low overheads and more flexible labor arrangements could be controlled. Although the two sides came to terms after seven weeks’ bargaining, the manufacturers withheld agreement, seeking instead to force the union into an industry-wide strike that would demonstrate the ILGWU’s ability to organize the entire trade, including the small producers. What ensued was a successful strike from which the shops of the large, organized manufacturers were largely exempted. At its conclusion, a pre-arranged contract was presented to the largely female strikers who, in the words of the union’s official historian, ‘accepted [it] as a *fait accompli*, with some surprise, but without much animation.’<sup>40</sup>

### Organizational resources and women’s trade union roles

Though conditions proved conducive to unionism during the 1910s, the paucity of organizational resources dampened the potential for collective action and limited the autonomy of women’s organizing efforts. In contrast to other unions, the ILGWU sought to organize women workers; shortly after its formation in 1910, it chartered locals in several of the women’s trades. These fledgling locals, however, were shortlived, and the union proved unwilling to invest resources in organizing waist-makers or white-goods-workers. Instead, the ILGWU sought to enlist the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) – to no avail in the case of the waist-makers, but successfully in the case of the white-goods-workers, where WTUL funds nurtured a small number of unionists through the difficult years of 1908–12.<sup>41</sup> Even after the organization of the cloak trade put the union on a sure footing, the ILGWU remained reluctant to involve itself fully in organizing the women’s trades. Activity among the largely female waist-makers, wrapper- and kimono-makers, and

white-goods-workers intensified in 1911, leading these locals to appeal for authorization for a general strike in November of that year. But the ILGWU withheld its sanction, not giving the go-ahead until 1913. At that time, as we have seen, control over organizing activity was withdrawn from local activists in the large waist and blouse trade. In the white-goods industry, where organizing was largely self-directed, the union leadership gave minimal assistance and almost withdrew endorsement on the eve of the general strike planned by locals in the white-goods industry.<sup>42</sup>

Resistance to organizing women in the garment trades stemmed from a variety of sources. According to Abraham Rosenberg, one of the early ILGWU presidents, most of the active male rank and file saw the women's 'locals as a drag on the International.'<sup>43</sup> Competition between male and female workers contributed to the indifference and antagonism that male unionists exhibited. When skirt firms, previously dependent on male operators, branched out into dresses and then recruited cheaper and apparently more tractable women dress-makers, the male skirt-makers sought to protect their jurisdiction, rather than organize the new group of women workers.<sup>44</sup> Even those male unionists who supported the organization of women were often ambivalent about the role of women in the industry, seeing them as a source of indirect competition. As one union official argued:

so long as these women and girls work terribly long hours for incredibly low wages, they are sooner or later destined to leave their present employment and seek work in skirt or dress shops, or as finishers at cloaks, and thus still more increase the number of unemployed among our members.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, the male-dominated character of the union hampered the integration of female rank-and-file leaders. In the predominantly male cloak industry, it proved necessary to organize the 4,000 women cloak finishers into a separate, all-female local. 'We all know,' wrote Pauline Newman, commenting on this development, 'that girls feel more at home among themselves than among men. Then again, when they meet together with men, they hardly get a chance to express their opinions on questions that concern them.'<sup>46</sup> Though men also predominated in the children's cloak industry, 600 of the 2,700 union members in that trade were women. But male

indifference to the concerns of their sisters left heavily female factories unorganized, and deterred women members from any form of participation in union affairs. 'It seems almost a tradition in the children's cloak local,' noted Catherine Denmark, 'that women are confined to the condition of "being organized."<sup>47</sup> Women leaders coming out of organizing activities found little place for themselves in the union hierarchy. Rose Schneiderman, for example, did yeoman work organizing white-goods-workers on a virtually solo basis at a time when the ILGWU expressed little interest in this chiefly female trade. But when the fledgling white-goods local grew large enough to be embraced by the ILGWU, the union went outside the trade to install Samuel Shore at its head, a man whom Schneiderman later described as none 'too energetic, a bit pompous, and inclined to promise everything in the world.'<sup>48</sup> Some rank-and-file activists – Pauline Newman or Fannia Cohn, for instance – were absorbed into official positions, only to be sent on out-of-town organizing drives, rather than receiving leadership positions in the largely women's locals.<sup>49</sup> Others still – such as Clara Lemlich, a firebrand who ignited the 1909 waist-makers' strike – moved on to organizing for the WTUL and then drifted out of the trade altogether.<sup>50</sup> Thus, despite the emergence of large, female-dominated locals, women were excluded from positions of any importance. Between 1910 and 1920, the New York City ILGWU locals elected 450 delegates, of whom only twenty-five were women, to the six conventions held during that period. And of these twenty-five, few repeated the experience more than once: only one delegate attended as many as four conventions and four others were each elected to only two conventions.<sup>51</sup>

The size of the locals in the women's trades and the characteristics of the membership further limited the organizational resources available to women garment-workers. In contrast to the male-dominated sectors of the industry, where smaller locals were organized according to craft principles and then brought under the administrative umbrella of a large joint board, workers in the women's trades were combined into large, unwieldy units that brought together as many as 25,000 workers in a single local. Size was a source of considerable membership apathy, leading feminist and ILGWU leader Fannia Cohn to argue that 'the waistmakers need a better appreciation of the trade union movement.'<sup>52</sup> Problems of

size were aggravated by the instability of the membership: almost a quarter of the Waistmakers' local's membership (Local 25) turned over each year. 'For girls,' complained the union's journal, 'the marriage license is an automatic withdrawal from the union.'<sup>53</sup> The constant churning in union ranks made it both necessary and difficult to reorganize the already organized firms. The *Ladies' Garment Worker* noted that the 'newcomers do not always realize their obligations to the union or to their sister workers – at any rate, not until the Union has gone to considerable expense of money and energy to impress union truths on them and get them into line.'<sup>54</sup>

Such patterns of participation reflected family-income dynamics and cultural patterns, and these in turn worked quite differently among the two immigrant groups – Jews and Italians – that made up the union's base. Jewish women, rather than their Italian counterparts, provided the instigators and shock troops for the strikes of the period. They did so because the greater prosperity of Jewish immigrant families both permitted Jewish women temporarily to forgo wages and released them from time-consuming family responsibilities.<sup>55</sup> But Jewish women's militancy, if conducive to agitation and compatible with extensive stints on the picket line, flagged in the face of pressures for marriage and home. 'Girls will go to the limit to obtain better conditions,' noted Pauline Newman in the union's official journal, 'but as soon as the fight is over, [they] remain absolutely indifferent to the organization they so much fought for.'<sup>56</sup> And Newman voiced the same frustration in her private correspondence with Rose Schneiderman: 'Now you and I know that the [Jewish] East Side element is the hardest to work with, that is, hardest to keep . . . within the organization.'<sup>57</sup>

The instability of individual work careers also hastened the process of ethnic succession. In the 1910s, union militancy emerged among young radical Jewish women, many of them veterans of revolutionary work in Russia or Poland.<sup>58</sup> But by the 1920s, young Jewish women were moving into white-collar occupations, while their Italian counterparts – among whom educational levels and family incomes were substantially lower – provided the main source of female labor.<sup>59</sup> Whether Jewish or Italian, many of these new recruits were native-born, in contrast to the male cloak- and suit-workers. The cloak and suit industry had ceased to grow after 1915, and stagnation deterred new entrants; at the same time, the declining

industry retained experienced male workers for the remainder of their working lives. But in industries involved in the manufacture of dresses, blouses and waists, and white goods, the changes in the ethnic composition of the heavily female labor force distanced the women unionists from the radical, immigrant tradition that had provided both ideological and cultural support during the earlier phases of union activity. The Americanized workers proved less susceptible to ideological appeals. Repeatedly, ILGWU organizers complained that 'among the newer element of Italian-American and Jewish-American girls, it is hard to find the necessary leadership for the shop and the local.'<sup>60</sup> Mass organizing and spontaneous strike strategies, on which the union had previously relied, failed to evoke a positive response from the newer, more Americanized workforce that emerged among women in the 1920s.<sup>61</sup> Notwithstanding these difficulties, it was not until the late 1920s that the union's male leadership would look self-critically at its failure to develop women leaders and begin to consider the possibility of granting women greater internal autonomy.

### Industrial change and organizational decline

The successful organizing drives that swept through the various garment trades – coats and suits, in 1911; waists, dresses, white-goods, and other miscellaneous trades, in 1913 – corresponded to the scale and technology of production activities at the time. The collective agreements secured by the ILGWU bound the union to the more established firms ensconced at the top of the market. The agreements embodied the desire of both labor and management to contain changes that would upset the dominance of the large producers and to curb cut-throat competition. But the position of the large firms weakened as the market for apparel altered after World War I. Until then, the garment industry had enjoyed extremely rapid growth as a result of the continuous substitution of ready-made for home- or custom-made clothes. During the second decade of the twentieth century, however, this process was completed, so that by the 1920s, the industry entered a new phase in which growth was determined by the normal changes in the demand and supply for apparel.<sup>62</sup> This transition into a cycle of slower growth altered the



relationship between production and selling. Whereas in the period of rapid expansion, high demand insured an adequate level of profits, competition intensified under conditions of slower growth.<sup>63</sup>

Another major change in the industry in this period was the increased importance of fashion. In a sense, that development was the culmination of the trends that initially sparked the industrialization of clothing: urbanization, the widening of the market, and improved communication networks that created a mass public sensitive to changes in styles.<sup>64</sup> Structural relations within the industry underwent a significant change as marketing practices were transformed by the shift toward greater fashion consciousness. Wholesaling firms that could concentrate on selling and marketing were better positioned than the older manufacturers saddled with sizeable production facilities that demanded close attention. The squeeze on profits, moreover, encouraged a shift to a strategy that emphasized small unit profits on a large volume of sales. Given the investment in textiles and the overhead costs needed to maintain a sufficiently large inventory of styles, firms now strove to unburden themselves of fixed costs involved in plant and machinery.

The large firms began to substitute a plethora of small, outside contractors for their sizeable 'inside shops.' The locus of production decisively shifted out of the larger, more stable factories with the advent of the wholesaler-jobber. Decentralization proceeded expeditiously, because the existence of a large labor pool made small-scale, highly labor-intensive production methods economical – a matter of crucial importance for severely undercapitalized small contractors with high turnover rates. Dispersion also fitted neatly with the predilections of the workers. Conduct in the small shops was more relaxed and workers were not expected to conform to the rigid standards of attendance and punctuality that prevailed in the more established factories.<sup>65</sup> Tied by his experience and origins to the workers' social milieu, the contractor could also manipulate social and ethnic networks to secure a flexible workforce. 'Only comparatively recently [the contractor was] an employee in a shop,' noted a union leader. He 'lives in the district inhabited by the workers. He has friends and acquaintances among them, and he knows how to get help when needed.'<sup>66</sup> The smaller factories were also more apt to be located nearer to workers' homes, and as the immigrant neighborhoods branched out from the lower East Side,

these locational aspects became increasingly important in the recruitment of women workers, for whom short-term stints of employment made it desirable to keep the costs of job-searching low. Small size also obviated the material-handling problems that tended to disrupt production flows in larger factories and consequently reduced piece-rate earnings. This in turn offered workers an opportunity to compensate for the lower prices paid per job.<sup>67</sup>

Shifts in product demand exercised a further destabilizing effect. By 1920, the shirtwaist had virtually disappeared as an item of consumer interest. In the white-goods industry – where almost 95 percent of the workforce was female and most had been employed in large factories – the industry moved from standardized muslin garments to fashion-oriented silk and rayon products better suited to small-scale production methods.<sup>68</sup>

Most importantly, the influence of fashion and marketing gave rise to a completely new industry, one less stable than all others and most accessible to new entrants – dress manufacture. 'With \$2,500 a few customers, and a colossal amount of nerve, almost anyone can go into the dress business,' noted *Fortune* at the end of the 1930s.<sup>69</sup> Not a few entrepreneurs were so prompted. In 1929, 709 dress manufacturers began operations; the same year, 478 closed their doors. In 1931, more than one-third of all dress sales were made by firms that had opened within the previous four years; firms that had begun operations between 1923 and 1927 accounted for yet another third.<sup>70</sup> The transformation of the industrial situation undermined the rationale for union regulation.

In the 1920s, these shifts meant that bargaining relationships with the ILGWU were marked by continual attempts to evade the union controls exercised in the larger, more stable units and to relocate production to a welter of small, transient, contracting factories. The ILGWU consistently sought to maintain the importance of the inside shop. But moving as it did against the current of change in the marketplace, this stance proved ineffectual. Small contracting factories multiplied and remained unorganized. The number of factories was too large, the seasonal character of the industry was too accentuated, and the competitive habits of the workers were too strong for the union effectively to reassert control.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, decentralization sufficiently loosened the opportunity structure to lure large numbers of workers into business on

their own in this period. 'My experience,' noted Benjamin Schlesinger, then president of the ILGWU, 'shows that a large number of petty bosses were at one time good union men.'<sup>72</sup> Small cooperatively run shops, jointly owned by a few workers and employing a very limited number of friends and relatives, reappeared after 1915. As conditions turned in favor of small-scale production during the 1920s, the number of such 'corporation shops' (a corruption of 'cooperation') multiplied rapidly.<sup>73</sup>

Under these circumstances, the potential for organizational maintenance and successful collective action diminished. In the dress industry, non-union and independent contracting shops mushroomed in the early 1920s, frustrating the union's repeated efforts to organize new entrants and control the flow of production from jobbers to contractors. In blouses and waists, the once-powerful waist-makers' local fell on hard times, having lost most of its firms and its former cadres to the burgeoning dress industry. Demand for blouses revived after 1922, but this time the industry remained non-unionized, impervious to the local's ineffectual attempts to organize the new, Americanized workers who had entered the trade. Similarly, union strength in the other women's trades found itself at low tide. In the white-goods industry, the large majority of firms were unorganized and the workers proved indifferent to the union's repeated overtures. And in the smaller, miscellaneous trades – all of which had earlier been fertile ground for ILGWU activists – the organizations spawned by the general strike of 1913 had virtually collapsed.<sup>74</sup>

### Conclusion

The history of the women's garment-workers, treated in opposing accounts as an exemplar of either the militant potential or passive conservatism of women workers, involves a more complex trajectory. The demographic make-up of the workforce served as a limiting factor on the potential for mobilization. Dominated by young workers whose work careers were regulated by familiar exigencies, the garment industry had an unstructured labor market. Under conditions of instability in the demand for women's clothing, employers responded to the virtual inexhaustibility of the female

labor force in ways that weakened women's attachment to the job. Despite the volatility of the industry and the churning of workers among firms and in and out of the labor force, conditions in the garment trades triggered repeated bouts of strike activity. The outcomes of such protests, however, hinged on the overall structure of opportunities within the industry. When technology and market conditions favored the products of large-scale producers anxious to contain cut-throat competitive pressures, relative industrial stability facilitated collective activity. Durable organizational outcomes resulted from these circumstances. Subsequent changes in the structure of industrial activity eroded the competitive position of the larger, more stable producers, providing an environment supportive of small, informally organized firms. The destabilization of industrial conditions in the 1920s thus undermined the viability of trade union organization.

While the structure of the industry proved conducive to unionization between 1910 and 1920, the organizational resources available to women workers in the ILGWU limited their ability to institutionalize their interests within the union structure. Their putative external allies among the male unionists of the ILGWU were initially ambivalent about supporting organizing efforts. And, after organizing efforts proved successful, women activists found themselves excluded from positions of power and influence in the union, even though the sex-segregated nature of the industry created predominantly female locals in which women might easily have moved into leadership roles. Tendencies toward female activism were also limited by familial responsibilities and constraints (as in the case of Italian immigrants), or undercut (as with young Jewish unionists influenced by cultural norms emphasizing marriage and home). Most importantly, women's career patterns led to membership instability, increasing demands on the union's organizational resources and weakening the responsiveness of successive groups of women workers to organizing appeals.

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