

FIVE  
WHO LED



Jewish Labor Committee

## JEWISH LABOR COMMITTEE

**T**he Jewish Labor Committee was formed in 1934 in response to a growing concern among a group of Jewish labor leaders for the fate of Jews living under totalitarian terror, and as an expression of solidarity with the imperiled trade union and democratic movements in Europe. From its inception, JLC enlisted the support of organized labor and other interested groups to relieve the suffering of the Nazi victims. This shared concern has since been broadened to include all forms of discrimination and injustice abroad and in the United States.

# A Tribute To Five Jewish Labor Leaders

by Jacob Sheinkman

We live in an age of change . . . Principles which were once unquestioned have lost ground . . . Yet as I stand before you, in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, a symbol of freedom to people all over the world, in this, our Bicentennial year, I wish to state that we in the American labor movement have not lost sight of these principles. — George Meany, President of the AFL-CIO.

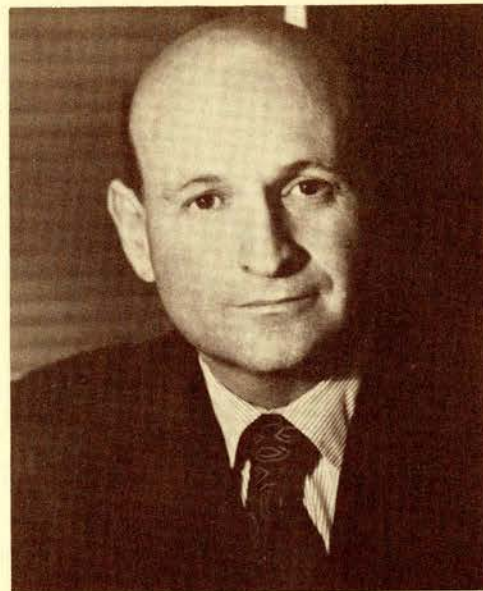
The transformation of these principles of freedom and equality into reality forms the common thread which runs through the lives of Samuel Gompers, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman, Abraham Cahan and B. Charney Vladeck. We have chosen to honor these men, not only because of their lasting importance to the American labor movement, but also because they represent the significant contributions of the Jewish labor movement which left its mark on succeeding generations of Americans.

Arriving on our shores, after experiencing oppression and deprivation, these extraordinary men perceived those conditions which violated their sense of justice and their conception of America as a land of freedom and opportunity. They joined the labor movement because they believed its ideals were those which could improve and reform the lot of the American worker.

As newcomers, they braved many obstacles in this struggle. They cleared a path through anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant barriers, a path which enabled their fellow newcomers to realize that the economic and educational opportunities that had been denied them in the Old World could be fulfilled in America.

Samuel Gompers, often regarded as the father of the modern American labor movement, was one of the first of these leaders to meet the challenge of labor's formative years. His early years of deprivation in the slums of London had left him with the burning conviction that workers must organize. As the first president of the American Federation of Labor, he built an enduring labor organization. Gompers succeeded in his efforts at securing material benefits for union members after many battles with hostile employers, the courts and the general anti-labor sentiment of the public at that time.

As Gompers, the English-speaking immigrant organized the American workers around the immediate issue of wages and working conditions, so Abraham



JACOB SHEINKMAN

Cahan created an instrument in the *Jewish Daily Forward* to awaken and nurture the social consciousness of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Discerning the pressing needs of the Jewish immigrants, he articulated their immediate concerns and led them to identify with the cause of labor and its broader goals for social justice. As editor of the *Forward* he transformed it into the primary organ of influence in the immigrant Jewish community.

With thousands of other newcomers, David Dubinsky joined the ranks of the needle trades workers. When he assumed a leadership role, the garment industry and the union were at their lowest ebb. Spurred by his socialist ideals, Dubinsky dedicated himself to revitalizing the union. Not only did he succeed in overcoming obstacles both from within and without but, by the numerous innovations which he pioneered, he broadened the concept of unionism. His concern for bettering the quality of the worker's life went beyond "bread-and-butter" issues to include union health centers, educational and recreational facilities, employer-contributed vacation and retirement benefits and other social and cultural services. When he was asked to what he attributed his wide range of social concerns, Dubinsky answered: "The Jews have suffered for centuries from all kinds of persecution and injustice and they know what it means to suffer . . ."

During World War II, Dubinsky appealed to Washington for visas for anti-Nazis fleeing from certain death: "Lend-lease us an advance quota of sunshine, of free air, of free humanity, a loan that will afford these escapees from hell a chance to regain human dignity among their fellow men."

In large measure he expressed his Jewish concern through the Jewish Labor Committee of which he is a founder and in which he played a leading role.

Sidney Hillman arrived in America after experiencing persecution in Eastern Europe for his political beliefs and joined the ranks of the men's apparel workers. It was not too long before his ability to lead was recognized by his fellow workers and by management as well. As the first president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Hillman forged a strong union, built new concepts of union involvement, such as unemployment insurance, cooperative housing, union health and welfare centers, labor banks and other social and cultural services which served as models for the entire labor movement.

With the advent of the New Deal, Hillman became one of President Roosevelt's key advisers. As labor's respected and influential spokesman, he recognized the need for labor to engage in the political life of our nation, clearly demonstrating the importance of labor to the entire country. And he succeeded in making labor's gains regarded by the nation as gains for all Americans.

B. Charney Vladeck, a victim of Czarist oppression, came to America imbued with socialist ideals. As Hillman continued to extend the sphere of labor's influence on the national scene, Vladeck set out to merge the humanitarian causes of the Jewish community with the social concerns of labor.

As the first leader of the Jewish Labor Committee, Vladeck embodied that rare blend, the poetic and pragmatic, which enabled his American audience to perceive the plight of the persecuted under Fascism and the Nazi tyranny.

He brought together people of different economic interests and nationalities in order to achieve a universal understanding of those human concerns that were being crushed in the Hitler era.

With Vladeck's death at an early age, we were deprived of a man of rare qualities who remains in our memories as one who never lost his vision of the individual amidst the tumultuous upheavals of world events.

In retrospect, then, these five men represent something greater than their individual accomplishments. Each of them, in his own way, harnessed his energies and particular beliefs to the greater vision of the working man as a full participant in the social and political life of the United States.

Much of that which we celebrated in our Bicentennial last year may be appreciated as a result of their life's work. Their ideas, which most Americans once thought of as exceptional, are now accepted norms. That their struggles for employment, universal health care, decent housing and full collective bargaining are not yet over, serves only to emphasize the breadth of their beliefs and the depth of their commitment to all Americans.

Samuel Gompers, Abraham Cahan, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman and B. Charney Vladeck envisioned the house of labor as a home for all workers. They stand as the steadfast beacon for the current generation of leaders who continue the fight to broaden the role of labor as a full partner in the democratic process. They stand not as a collective monument to the past, but as a living source of inspiration to an America still striving to bring to full realization the "inalienable rights" set forth in the Declaration of Independence, the rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

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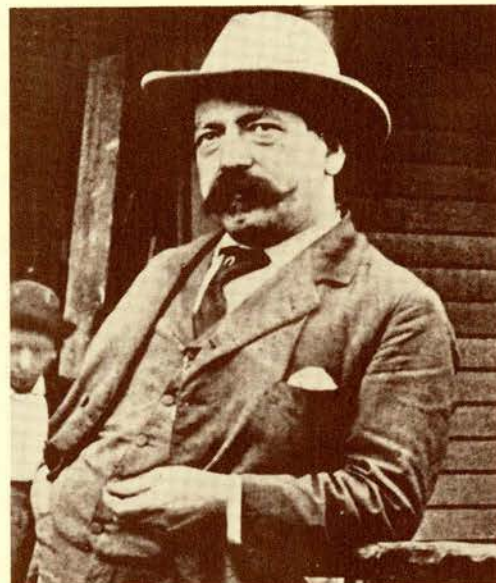
# Samuel Gompers: Pioneer of American Labor

by Will Chasan

In a sense, Samuel Gompers, the founder and first President of the American Federation of Labor, was not a Jewish labor leader at all. He was not produced by the Jewish labor movement. He emerged on the American scene before a Jewish labor movement of any significance had taken shape. But, of course, he was Jewish. As a boy in London, where he was born in 1850, he attended Jewish day school. He was taken out at the age of ten to apprentice first to a shoemaker, and then to a cigarmaker. He found the second far more congenial. Later, as a young man in New York, he was a member of the Hand-in-Hand Society, a Hebrew mutual aid organization. Gompers was to make the clasped hands symbol of that society, the symbol of the American Federation of Labor. Today, it is the symbol of the AFL-CIO. But Gompers never made much of his Jewishness. "You say that it is your chief glory that you are a Jew," he replied to one correspondent. "Mine is that I have a heart, a mind, and a conscience, that I have struggled with my fellow men and yearn to struggle for a better day when the ridiculous divisions, which make man an enemy to man instead of a brother, shall be eliminated."

His contributions to that struggle were magnificent. One can best gauge them by visualizing the AFL as it was at the beginning. Its headquarters were a shed, borrowed from the Cigarmakers' Union, on East Eighth Street in Manhattan. It measured eight feet by ten. A battered kitchen table, taken from the Gompers home, served as his desk; his chair was a box; his filing cabinets were tomato crates donated by a friendly grocer. The AFL started with few members and \$160.52 in its treasury. Gompers had been voted a salary of \$1,000 a year, about as much as he had been earning as a cigarmaker. He had accepted it reluctantly. He knew the "poverty of the wage earner," he said, and he "did not like to think of accepting any money" for his services. It was a while before he received any. Often, even on wintry mornings, he had to walk a distance of three miles from his home to his office. Carfare was an indulgence he regarded as beyond his means.

His title was a lofty one. The reality was less so. He was the Federation's only full-time officer. He had to function as its organizer, strategist, and spokesman; also as its clerk and errand boy. "My job as president," he



SAMUEL GOMPERS

noted, "was coveted by no one. There was much work, little pay, and very little honor."

The Federation was little more than a name at the start. In 1886, when it was founded, there were additional difficulties. Efforts by working people to assert rights for themselves were commonly regarded as gross impudence or as seditious. It was the practice of newspaper cartoonists to depict union organizers either as bearded anarchists, armed with bombs or knives, or as bloated parasites. Private armies of spies and thugs often were employed to disrupt and destroy the struggling young unions. The unions had to contend with implacably hostile courts, and police, state militias, and even federal troops were brought into the battle against them.

In 1886, this situation was further aggravated by the Haymarket Square bombing, in Chicago, which had whipped up a wave of anti-labor hysteria. Eight anarchists were indicted for murder, and seven of them were convicted although the only evidence against them, as the judge conceded, was the nature of the statements they had made. Gompers had only recently become AFL president. He went to Chicago to intervene with Governor Ogelsby on behalf of the convicted anarchists. It is interesting that Terence V. Powderly, leader of the supposedly more militant Knights of Labor, balked at doing so. It would be "better that seven times seven men hang," he said, "than to hang the millstone of odium around the standard of this Order in affiliating in any way with this element of destruction." That was not Gompers' view. "I abhor anarchy," he wrote to a friend, "but I also abhor injustice when it is meted out even to the most despicable being on earth." He was determined, he said, to "maintain the dignity and honor of our organization and withal, to be manly and not cringing."

No one ever had any reason, not the slightest, to accuse him of being less than manly or of cringing. He was only five feet, four inches in height, but he was thick-chested, he had a big jaw, and, as a young man, a luxuriant, black handlebar mustache. One could easily have mistaken him for a river-barge fighter or a frontier adventurer. Later, his contemporaries referred to his magnetism. One said that he resembled a "Persian potentate" and that his eyes were those of a man who saw great visions. His associates referred to him as "the Chief." "I always remained a little awed by him," one of them said. "Most of us were. He had that effect."

During the early years of the Federation, Gompers traveled back and forth across the country, often on cattle boats and freight cars, to help organize unions and bind them together in the Federation. He was, as he put it, a "seeker of men," those for whom the trade union movement was "a great ideal and who were willing to spend and be spent in its services." The "seeking" was not always a safe enterprise. The anthracite fields, for example, were thick with company gunmen. But working with awesome diligence, he found the men he wanted. He helped to organize a total of 28 national unions, and his advice helped many others to stay alive and flourish. "Do not strike in haste and repent at your leisure," he advised one union. "It may be galling to wait for victory but defeat is worse."

He had his critics, left and right, but they never deflected him from his purpose. He loved men, he wrote, and a "sort of passion" surged through him when he saw them treated "unjustly." He regarded trade unions as

the "natural, orderly, and democratic" means by which working people could escape the degradation in which an industrial society had imprisoned them. Even in his later years, when he had become something close to a folk hero in American life and industrialists and politicians, including Presidents, sought him out, he never departed from that bed-rock purpose. Once, when industrialist Mark Hanna, complained that workers, in striking his blast furnaces in Buffalo, had been "undiplomatic," Gompers replied, "We don't raise diplomats on thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen cents an hour." In the White House one day, Theodore Roosevelt tried to end a dispute with him by saying imperiously, "But I am President of the United States." And Gompers replied, "But I am President of the American Federation of Labor, and I shall protect the interests of the workers, be the consequences what they may." "Mr. Gompers," an Attorney General of the United States said to him, "I regard you as the spokesman for the underdog of the world."

No one, before or since, has served that cause with greater dedication or greater effect. After he died in 1924, historian Mary Beard wrote that he had left a "great estate built by decades of tireless endeavor." The estate was, she said, "a giant machine" and a program that have "withstood the batteries of radical fire . . . a machine with a mind operating American fashion."

And perhaps behind that achievement was the social idealism usually associated with the Jewish tradition.

Will Chasan, the author of a biography of Samuel Gompers, has published articles in many national magazines.

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# The Forward Look of Abraham Cahan

by Jacob C. Rich

*The Jewish Daily Forward* was cherished by its readers as their guide to the New World. As the voice of labor, it had an idealistic concern for the principles of liberty and equality. The one man who forged this Yiddish paper into an instrument of Americanization for the Jewish immigrants and into a primary organ of influence in the American community was Abraham Cahan. He was its first editor and his genius, to this day, is indelibly imprinted on every page of the *Forward*.

Abraham Cahan is best known as the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the most widely read Yiddish paper in the world and the largest foreign language newspaper in the United States. His absorption with the work and welfare of this paper diverted him from a number of other interests and strivings in his life. One of them was his gift as a talented English novelist. *The Rise of David Levinsky* is an American classic still in print and presently being translated into Yiddish and dramatized for the Yiddish stage.

Cahan's major devotion was to the advancement of working people and in particular to the creation of effective trade unions. Indeed, even before the *Forward* was founded, Cahan had helped organize pioneering unions among the Jewish immigrants in New York. Instilling confidence in labor's cause, teaching the moral values of labor unity and the human dignity that trade unionism grants, became a main task with Cahan during his entire lifetime. The needle trades unions, model labor organizations, took shape and developed largely with the aid of the *Jewish Daily Forward* under Cahan's direction.

Born in 1860, Cahan, a refugee from Tsarist Russia, arrived in this country in 1882. He was graduated from a teachers' seminary in Russia and had been granted a teaching position but was forced to flee after he joined an anti-Tsarist revolutionary circle. He traveled to the United States with a group of young idealists in the *Am Olam* (Eternal People) movement. Most of them settled in farm communes but Cahan chose New York and became engrossed in the labor-oriented movements among the radicals of those days. More quickly than most immigrants he acquired familiarity and skill in the English language.



ABRAHAM CAHAN

Among the radicals of the time, Cahan's first inclination was to align himself with the Anarchist movement. The Anarchists seemed clothed with a more "revolutionary" solution of the woes of mankind than were the Socialists and others who preached social salvation through common effort. He veered away from the Anarchist philosophy when he realized that the people already had the vote in America and could therefore effect changes in the form of government without suicidal violence. He turned to Socialism as a more feasible form of idealistic society.

Cahan attended meetings and lectures of Socialists where the immigrant adherents mainly spoke German, sometimes English, and the more recent Jewish arrivals from Russia, the language of intellectuals, Russian. Yiddish, the language spoken by practically all the Jews arriving from Russia and other East European countries, was considered too "common" for the creation of an "ideal" society. Cahan did not share this prejudice. He held that if you wanted to reach people and persuade them to your point of view you must talk to them in a language that is familiar to them. The first Socialist lecture in Yiddish in this country was delivered by Cahan and it was a great success. The dominant figure in the Socialist Labor Party in the last decade of the past century was Daniel De Leon. However, he had little in common with the immigrant idealists in the Socialist movement. He failed in his efforts to capture control of the burgeoning trade unions of the time when he attempted to take over the Knights of Labor and to win against Samuel Gompers in the American Federation of Labor. The internal bickering and division with De Leon came to a head in January 1897 at a meeting of the Publishing Association of the Yiddish socialist newspapers. Although those opposing De Leon's clique

arrived in time, they were disqualified and excluded after a series of parliamentary maneuvers. The oppositionists then marched out of the meeting and established a group that would publish the union-oriented Socialist daily. At a meeting later that month and at the urging of Cahan's friend, Louis Miller, the name chosen for the paper was *Forverts* because the most successful Socialist daily was the *Vorwärts* of Berlin. Cahan was unanimously elected editor of the prospective paper.

Four months of intensive effort followed to raise money for the new publication. Just enough money was gathered for a precarious start and the first issue of the *Jewish Daily Forward* appeared April 22, 1897. With the exception of occasional lapses, it has appeared ever since as the one labor daily in the United States and Canada.

Cahan's special contribution, as editor of the *Forward*, was to create a newspaper of wide reader appeal. He introduced light reading matter involving human interest subjects from the shop and the home. Above all, he put a ban on articles involving Socialist Party polemics and quarrels. He insisted that these intramural bickerings were of no real interest to the general reader and would eventually alienate them from the *Forward* and injure the paper. Finally, after being nagged and harassed by his own friends and *Forward* associates, who did not accept this point of view, Cahan resigned his post.

In this long interlude, Cahan served an apprenticeship in journalism on English-language newspapers. The experience and maturity he acquired in those years from his work with his friend, Lincoln Steffens, news editor of the *Commercial Advertiser*, was to serve the *Forward* well. When the daily grind of newspapering palled on him, he again turned to creative literary work. With the publishing of several short stories in English magazines, his career seemed set in the English field. Again, old friends appealed to Cahan to return to the *Forward*. They assured him that he would have full authority over the content of the paper and that he would be given time to continue his literary work. Cahan acceded to their requests and returned as editor in 1902.

Cahan's first task, on his return as editor, was to make the paper readable to the new readers streaming into the country from Eastern Europe. Deprived of a formal education in their former homelands by the economic and political restrictions against Jews, many had never acquired the habit of reading newspapers or had ever seen a newspaper in their own language. On their arrival in this country, many, eager for self-improvement, took advantage of night schools, lectures and concerts.

However, long hours of toil left little time for formal education and the Jewish immigrants came to rely on the Yiddish paper, in their mother tongue, for their knowledge in the New World. With his emphasis on simplicity of language and subject matter which touched on their immediate concerns, Abraham Cahan succeeded in making the reading of the *Forward* a must in the Jewish immigrant's home. In further discerning his readers' needs, Cahan invited them to share their daily trials and troubles with him in the popular feature known as the *Bintel Brief*. It was also no coincidence that good theater and creative literature arrived on the scene with the *Forward*. In large measure, through Cahan's efforts, the Yiddish theater reached prestige and artistic fulfillment. Cahan also encouraged men of superior literary talent to join the *Forward* staff.

No brief account of Cahan's life can give a full exposition of the impact he made on the Jewish or American community. The needle trades unions came into being largely as a result of the agitation of Cahan's *Forward*. Through the many difficult years of their struggle they depended on the *Forward* for their moral and for their financial sustenance. It was generously granted them. Similar aid and support were extended by the *Forward* and its readers to all labor, as in the case of the coal miners' strikes, textile strikes and other contests.

Of historic import is the struggle against Communism conducted by the *Forward* initially under Cahan's direction. Because of the hatred of the Tsarist system in Russia, many Jewish workers were at first inclined to be sympathetic toward the Bolshevik accession to power. They considered it a normal extension of the revolution against the Tsarist tyranny. It was the *Forward* that exposed the real meaning of the Communist dictatorship and its debasement of truth and honesty.

Long before the welfare of Israel became the Jewish community's most absorbing interest, Abraham Cahan made two visits to Palestine. A non-Zionist, he returned as a devoted friend and supporter of the Jewish settlement there. Since the establishment of the State of Israel the *Forward's* coverage has been the most intensive to be found anywhere.

Cahan died in 1951. Times changed greatly during the long span of his life but, throughout, he continued his work in behalf of freedom of the spirit, equality and justice for all mankind.

Jacob C. Rich, a member of the *Forward* editorial staff since 1922, has contributed to various national publications and was editor of the *Hat Worker*, publication of the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers International Union, AFL-CIO.

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# Baruch Charney Vladeck

by May V. Bromberg and Stephen C. Vladeck

No supercilious intellectual, no prophet of dictatorship can tell me that democracy is a sham. For, like so many millions of other Americans by choice, I was born and brought up under a tyranny and I tasted of its bitter fruit. Education was denied to everybody but a few, freedom of movement was restricted, opportunities were destroyed, lives were stunted. Many of us went to jail at an age when your children here go to high school, not because of preaching violence, or championing anarchy, but because we wanted to think and educate ourselves. Just listen to the terrible deadening silence that is falling upon a great part of the world today like a sinister shroud of death. Italy, Germany, Austria, Russia — for how many decades have their best sons fought for the right of self-expression, for liberty of thought, of meeting, or organization. Today nearly half of the world has lost its voice. What you hear is not the happy full-throated articulation of people awakening to the joy of creation, but the sharp, terrible voice of the whip cutting the air with fateful force to fall upon the backs of bleeding nations.

In these torture chambers of fascism and tyranny, the Jew occupies a conspicuous and painful place. As workers, we are persecuted for being militant; as traders, for being greedy. If we produce geniuses we are charged with disrupting the world; if we produce criminals we are charged with corrupting it. When we give our lives for liberty, we are contemptible internationalists. When we comply and obey, we are cowards . . . Over four thousand years ago a Jew by the name of Moses, himself an intellectual, led the first great strike of bricklayers at the pyramids, and since then all Pharaohs are our enemies.

Why do the Jews persist? I can assure you that this is no easy burden to carry — this knowledge that the erosion of time has carved your face; that all the storms of history molded your mind; that the injustices of a thousand tyrannies have settled in your soul. Our modern conception of a good American is one who, whether or not he knows the language, whether or not he is externally a conformist, is ready to use his intelligence and his patriotism to make this country a better and a happier one for all. In this fight you are not as much concerned with externals as with real values . . . and irrespective of the language we speak and the appearance we make, the foreign-born workers in this country are among the most intelligent, constructive and militant elements in the American labor movement.

Since the coming of the industrial age, the Jews have been a true barometer for the labor movement. Whatever the name of the country and whatever the location, the equality and the liberty, or the lack of them, enjoyed by Jews is likewise true of labor. This is why organized labor throughout the world, outside of sentimental reasons, is



B. CHARNEY VLADDECK

against anti-Semitism; the first blast against the Jews is only the forerunner of a dark storm against labor; to permit a government to foster anti-Semitism is to strengthen a power that will crush labor. This is why in all countries today conscientious and intelligent Jews march with labor, and why labor is the staunchest defender of Jewish rights . . . With all the earnestness and solemnity that I possess, I swear to you that Jewish labor, both here and throughout the world, will not give up, will not falter or weaken until the last trace of tyranny is wiped off the earth, until labor regains its unions, its cooperatives, its press, its liberty, its industrial, cultural and political power!

**B.** Charney Vladeck spoke these words at a Convention of the American Federation of Labor. So moved were they by his presentation, that the A.F. of L. became the first non-Jewish American organization to give moral and financial support to the beleaguered Jews and unions of Germany.

In this same year, Vladeck further expressed his concern for the Nazi victims by organizing the Jewish Labor Committee.

Who was this man who could speak to these groups and move them to act on behalf of European Jewry and the Jewish labor movement at this early date?

Among the thousands of Jews who came to this country in the early 1900's, was a slim, curly-haired youth of 22 who already was known throughout the Jewish world as an effective revolutionist, organizer and leader of the Jewish Socialist Bund. As a poet and essayist, he was recognized as a new and gifted author by the father of Jewish literature, Peretz, and as an orator he earned the name of the Young LaSalle with his ability to arouse an audience.

Born the fifth of six children in a shtetl near Minsk, he was exposed to those influences that stamped his generation of Russian Jewish leaders with the hallmark of economic poverty and spiritual and mental richness.

With idealistic fervour and devotion to Zionism and Socialism, these leaders sought to achieve justice and salvation for the Jew.

At the age of 17 Vladeck was sent to jail by the Czarist regime for recommending a book by Tolstoy to a reader who frequented a library where the young Baruch was employed. During this first jail term, he received an extensive education, reading the Russian classics and the American writers Emerson, Thoreau and Lincoln.

When he was finally released, he became an active worker and a leader in the Jewish Socialist Bund. Within its ranks he received his other education as a Socialist and he became further convinced of the need for a cohesive labor movement.

In 1908, pursued by Czarist police and facing a fate worse than his previous prison terms, he came to America. He did not become Americanized in the usual sense. In the first years, through his country-wide travels as a Yiddish and Socialist lecturer, he acquired a knowledge of the physical aspects of the country as well as an awareness of the faults and imperfections of the American system. However, he did not despair. Both the physical beauty of the land and the spirit of Lincoln served to guide and inspire him, when he wrote:

One of my first most memorable lessons in Americanization was Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. When I read and reread it and learned it by heart, struck by its noble clearness and sweeping faith in America, I felt as if the whole past of this country had been lit up by a row of warm and beautiful lights; as if some unknown friend had taken me by the hand on a dark uncertain road, saying gently: "Don't doubt and don't despair. This country has a soul and a purpose and if you so wish, you may love it without regrets."

He came to believe there was no other country in the world that offered so great an opportunity for its citizens to become participants in its government and to formulate its social, economic and political policies. He went on to become a spokesman or interpreter of America to others and to imbue them with the need to translate American principles and ideals into practical and communicable ideas.

Inspired by Lincoln, he also learned from Moses and Socrates. In his young days he had written:

The voice that spoke to Socrates and Moses  
In the marts of Athens and on Mt. Sinai's peak,  
That voice speaks to me, too.

Over the years his love and understanding for America merged with his international Jewish identity. He

became, and until his death was, manager of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Besides being an active member of the Boards of HIAS, Joint Distribution Committee, American Jewish Committee, the Socialist Party, the League for Industrial Democracy, he became, first, a pioneer and then, an expert in the field of public housing. He served, first, as an Alderman right after the first World War, and in the last years of his life, as a member of the New York City Council.

During the last four years of his life the fate of the Jews was his innermost concern. While he continued his newspaper career and his burgeoning political activities at full peak, he worked tirelessly to organize and establish the Jewish Labor Committee.

But the effect of his work always overleapt its boundaries. One looks again to Lincoln as his source when he wrote:

The man who attempts to break it down by sheer power of will, by mere strength of dogma, may be magnificent and inspiring, he may call for our deepest admiration and awe, but he will not break the old order. One must be cunning and patient, slow and persevering, adaptable and easy. One must know how to go around obstacles without arousing the suspicion of the foe, how to start digging in the dark without trumpets and flowing banners. Let the poets sing of the man who dares — their gratitude will go on to the man who works.

On October 31, 1938, he was struck down by a coronary on his way to a campaign meeting.

As a young boy in the Russian pale, Vladeck had often heard the legend that when the Messiah would come, the whole world would assemble on the banks of a broad and tumultuous river across which there spanned two bridges, a massive one of iron, broad and strong, and a wisp of a foot bridge made of gossamer spider threads. The whole world would divide, most choosing the bridge of iron, but the few of great faith would precariously ascend the swaying woven threads. Then the whole world would reach the half-way mark, the iron bridge would explode, its population sinking into the whirling river below, but the few on the gossamer bridge would make their way to the seat of God. On that October 31, 1938, not yet 53 years of age, Baruch Charney Vladeck completed his walk on the bridge of spider webs.

On November 2, his wife and children rose early, dressed carefully, and went to vote as the polls opened.

May V. Bromberg and Stephen C. Vladeck are the children of B. Charney Vladeck.

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# Clear It With Sidney

by Evelyn Becker

**S**idney Hillman, at the 1938 convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, declared:

Having realized our dreams of yesterday, let us dedicate ourselves to new dreams of a future when there will be no unemployment, a future when men and women will be financially secure and politically free . . . and let us . . . dedicate ourselves to make these dreams a reality.

As the convention delegates listened to their president's speech, they did not appear to be the oppressed or frightened people who had first settled on New York's Lower East Side. Although many had lived through strikes, lockouts and other crises, the strains of these struggles were not evident at this moment. Even the prolonged economic depression did not seem to shake their solidarity and confidence in their union, of which Sidney Hillman had been president, since its formation in 1914. As Hillman recalled the gains of earlier decades they thought of their fellow trade unionists in Italy and Germany who could no longer gather in open convention and, indeed pursue democratic trade unionism. As Hillman spoke of the unionization of the steel, automobile and rubber industries and reported on the progress of the Non-Partisan League to Re-elect Roosevelt, the delegates knew they were entering a new frontier of union life.

To see Hillman standing before the more than 1,000 delegates one can scarcely imagine what new role he would play upon the national scene. As one of the foremost labor leaders of his time, he had been instrumental in the conception and adoption of many of the social reforms of the New Deal and, at the outbreak of the war, he would be given principal responsibility for mobilizing labor's support in the national defense program. Later, as a confidant of President Roosevelt, his counsel would often be sought and he would be credited by some with influencing the selection of the next vice-president — a vice-president who would later attain the presidency.

Born in the Lithuanian town of Zagare, Hillman had received the religious upbringing typical of most Jewish boys at that time. At the age of fifteen, Hillman broke with this tradition and moved to a larger city, Kovno, where he received his initiation to the political activism which later proved to be the dominant factor of his life.



SIDNEY HILLMAN

After becoming involved in revolutionary socialist politics he was imprisoned for six months. His imprisonment proved to be fruitful in terms of the education he received from his fellow political prisoners and from his readings of smuggled books by J.S. Mill, Adam Smith, Marx and Tolstoy. Upon his release Hillman faced the harsh realities which awaited revolutionaries at that time — namely exile to Siberia, living an underground existence or emigration.

Choosing emigration, Hillman arrived in the U.S. in 1907 where he obtained his first job as an \$8-a-week stock clerk in Chicago. Shortly thereafter, he became an apprentice cutter at no pay in the men's clothing industry. In 1910, Hillman joined 40,000 other clothing workers in the landmark strike against Hart, Schaffner and Marx. Employers and public-spirited citizens, such as Jane Addams and Clarence Darrow, were impressed by the young Hillman and the arguments he presented to his fellow workers and to management, calling for the establishment of a permanent arbitration board as part of the strike settlement. As an emerging leader, Hillman worked for the next few years to organize the clothing workers and to further develop his concept of union members sharing the responsibilities of administering the industry.

In 1914, after a split within the United Garment Workers, Hillman was elected president of the newly-formed Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. As president, he led the union through a number of strikes and lockouts and in an interview following this period of conflict, Hillman stated:

If anything goes wrong with an industry the workers in that industry are sure to suffer. . . . The employers put in their money, but the workers put in their lives . . .

With this goal in mind, Hillman, in arriving at strike settlements, sought to protect the workers against the economic hazards of illness and seasonal unemployment and to provide for their families through death benefits.

When the Great Depression engulfed the nation, Hillman realized that there was no hope for the worker or the employer unless the economy of the nation could be stabilized. Hillman called upon the federal government to assume a direct role in the economic life of the nation when he said:

The tragic situation in which we are all caught is one from which we need not continue to suffer. I do not share the belief that we must stand by helplessly. . . . We must . . . under government leadership, start the wheels of industry . . .

With the launching of the New Deal, many of the economic and social reforms that Hillman advocated began to be implemented as national policy. Serving on the Labor Advisory Committee and the National Industrial Recovery Board, he supported the National Industrial Recovery Act — NRA, a cornerstone of this act being the right of workers “to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing.” Later when it was declared to be unconstitutional, he pressed for labor’s rights to be guaranteed by national statute through the passage of the Social Security Act, the Wagner Act, more formally known as the National Labor Relations Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act. Determined to use these acts to strengthen existing unions, he went on to state:

For the first time in our history, the right of labor to organize is provided by legislation. We cannot, however, expect the government to organize the workers. . . . it, therefore, is the duty of organized labor . . . to spread its influence into the unorganized fields.

Thereupon, Hillman led his union to join with other unions in the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations — CIO.

With the approach of World War II, Hillman was called to Washington to help mobilize labor in the nation’s war preparedness program. This experience further impressed upon Hillman the need to broaden labor’s political involvement, stating:

There are those who think that labor organizations exist for the sole purpose of enabling workers to bargain collectively with their employers. . . . But in our complex, modern industrial civilization, labor has a vital interest in government.

Hillman believed that union solidarity, combined with political action, would create a potent force for the achievement of labor’s goals. Hillman then became the national chairman of the PAC (Political Action Committee) whose sole purpose was to exercise political influence in labor’s behalf. The PAC worked in the presidential campaign of 1944 to mobilize labor in

support of Franklin D. Roosevelt and other candidates sympathetic to labor’s interests.

Hillman toured the country, visiting practically every state, and conducted a most vigorous drive to mobilize labor in Roosevelt’s behalf. Following Roosevelt’s reelection little doubt existed concerning the political impact of labor in achieving his victory.

Confirmation of Hillman’s vision may be seen in the growth of PAC into COPE and its successful efforts in the 1976 presidential campaign. As Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers wrote: “. . . in spite of the frequent claim that organized labor is weak, ineffective, divided and therefore can be neglected by those seeking public office — this election proved the very opposite.”

In the spring of 1945, Roosevelt died and Harry S Truman, the man who had been “cleared with Sidney,” became President.

There were those who had questioned the truth of the widely-repeated phrase “Clear It With Sidney” which supposedly had been directed by Roosevelt to his party leaders before deciding on the running mate for the ailing president. A note sent by President Roosevelt sheds light on this phrase:

Dear Sidney:

One thing I want to make perfectly clear to Sidney is my appreciation . . . . It was a great campaign and nobody knows better than I do how much you contributed to its success. I send you no condolences for the licks you took in this campaign. You and I and Fala have seen what happened to the people who gave them.

Very sincerely yours,  
*Franklin D. Roosevelt*

Worn by his tireless efforts over the years and strained by the recent presidential campaign, the delegates to the 15th Biennial Convention of the Amalgamated viewed a sickly Hillman speaking with undiminished fervor.

We want a better America, an America that will give its citizens, first of all, a higher and higher standard of living so that no child will cry for food in the midst of plenty. . . . An America that will have no sense of insecurity and which will make it possible for all groups, regardless of race, creed or color, to live in friendship, to be real neighbors; an America that will carry its mission of helping other countries to help themselves.

On July 10, 1946, Sidney Hillman died. Among the many who mourned his loss was his long-time friend and fellow trade union leader, Jacob Potofsky, who, in his eulogy of Hillman, said:

In his passing we sustained the greatest loss our union has suffered since its inception. But Sidney Hillman was not only ours, he was our country’s, he was the world’s — he was the champion of men and women everywhere.

Evelyn Becker, a member of the Jewish Labor Committee staff, is the co-author of the U.F.T. publication, *Topics in Jewish American Heritage*.

# David Dubinsky: A Glimpse At Greatness

by Gus Tyler

An institution is the elongated shadow of a man, said Emerson. In the case of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, it was the elongated shadow of three men: Benjamin Schlesinger, Morris Sigman, and David Dubinsky, fabled figures who, over a half century, successively gave to the garment workers' organization an elan that is usually reserved for newly proclaimed religions.

The most famous, of course, is David Dubinsky, who became President of the International in 1932, the same year that Roosevelt was elected President of the United States, and who for the next 35 years was Mr. ILGWU. But to write about Dubinsky is very hard, because he is still with us at 85, and he does not like monuments erected in his name while he is alive. The Evil Eye falls on those who make God jealous. Over the years, I have seen him resist "statues" in his name, like a hospital in Beersheba, a seat at Brandeis, a building at the Fashion Institute of Technology, an ILGWU scholarship program for children of members, a union-based foundation. He feels that people should be dead before you honor them for their noble deeds. Otherwise, you may regret it.

When one thinks about how DD came to be the great figure he was, a short man towering over so many taller men, one always thinks about a British Dubinsky by the name of Sir Isaac Newton. He was once asked how he could see so far, in so many directions, with such a grasp of the wide world around him. He answered: "By standing on the shoulders of giants." DD was a giant standing on the shoulders of giants like Schlesinger and Sigman.

Schlesinger and Sigman were two peas who came out of the same pod and were, in almost every way, exactly unlike one another. Because they had different philosophies, the two men ran the union differently.

The International was very lucky to have Sigman and Schlesinger as "fathers," one to worry about the roots of the union, and one to worry about the reasons for the union. Sigman kept his eye on the earth where things grow: the worker, the shop, the garment industry. Schlesinger fixed his eyes on the stars where you look for new worlds: the working class, capitalism, the cooperative commonwealth. Dubinsky figured that if God gave him two eyes it was not to waste one: so he kept



DAVID DUBINSKY

one eye on what was going on here and now and the other eye on what should be going on some day.

When Dubinsky took office, the roots of the International were drying up. Each month there were fewer members and the few who were left tried to eat each other up with their isms. Dubinsky's job was to make the union a "union."

To bring anarchists and socialists together was not too hard because they both agreed that they disliked the communists more than they disliked each other. The communists, however, were still a problem, because they had quite a following of people whose backs had felt the Czarist knout. It was "Dubinsky's luck" (a luck he often insisted was custom made for him) that Stalin issued an order to all communists to leave the old unions to make revolutionary unions. In the ILGWU, however, the communists with a mass following, like Sascha Zimmerman of the dressmakers and Louis Hyman of the cloakmakers, refused to listen to the Kremlin. They had philosophic reasons, of course, but personally I think they were afraid that their arm would wither if they raised it against the International. When "the party" expelled these "misleaders," Dubinsky welcomed the lost sheep back into the fold, recalling now and then that as a mere boy he had spent more time in a Czarist prison than most of them.

With a united union in New York and a friendly Roosevelt in Washington, DD felt the time was right to call on garment workers to show their strength. As they walked out in general strikes all over America, the membership rose from 40,000 to 200,000 in two years and the treasury from less than nothing to more than half a million. The International showed the power of the strike, especially under the kindly wings of the Blue Eagle, but DD would not let the union show it off. He

liked to let bosses know he carried a big stick so he wouldn't have to use it.

Once a cab driver scolded Dubinsky for threatening strikes that never took place. "I used to be a cutter once," he complained. "You assessed us for a strike. I paid in ten dollars but there was no strike."

"Is that so," sympathized Dubinsky. "Then I owe you a strike."

Once Roosevelt tried to get Dubinsky's attention away from the "roots" by offering him a post as ambassador. "And what will I do about my union?" demurred Dubinsky. "Don't worry, Dave. They'll soon learn that they can get along without you," FDR advised him. "Sure," retorted Dubinsky, "and that's exactly what I'm afraid of." Although in those days DD was busy flying from country to country and from cause to cause, he was never a *luftmensch*: there was too much of the Sigman in him for that.

But Dubinsky always had that other eye — the eye that could imagine great pieces of theater to enliven his people and to excite the public. Shortly after he returned from Vienna, he decided that what was needed was for the union to turn into a "university" where workers learned how to read, write, think, vote, make music, paint pictures, play basketball, go to concerts, visit museums, make points of order, and to make themselves beautiful.

From this came *Pins and Needles*, a musical revue put on by the International with all the parts played by members of the International. In its time, it broke all records for the longest run on Broadway. But Dubinsky was not satisfied. He made a movie, a story for the new generations about how the old Jewish and Italian tailors suffered to make the union. The U.S. Government translated the movie into all kinds of languages to use overseas.

The long eye of Dubinsky was always looking beyond the garment workers and beyond tomorrow morning. That's why he and a few of his brethren, like Sidney Hillman of the men's clothing workers and Max Zaritsky of the milliners, got together with the miners' John Llewelyn Lewis to make a committee — the CIO — to organize auto workers in Michigan, steel workers in Pennsylvania, rubber workers in Ohio. The idea was successful — almost too successful, making Dubinsky worry about a split in the labor movement that would go on forever. So he began to play a long game to make a "union" out of the "unions" — like he did in the ILGWU. It took almost twenty years to make the merger. But, life doesn't move as fast as the eye of the prophet.

Looking to the future, he knew that Roosevelt was it. But how could he, a socialist, call on his garment workers to lift a finger for anybody on the Tammany ticket, especially since the radical members were always worrying about their arms withering. So he invented a

special ticket in New York, the American Labor Party, to make it kosher for the orthodox to vote for Roosevelt.

When Dubinsky became one of Roosevelt's electors in 1936, the Republicans attacked DD as a "communist" because the International sent help to the Loyalists in Spain. When, just a few years later, DD set up the Liberal Party because he felt that the American Labor Party had fallen into communist hands, the communists called him a "fascist."

Dubinsky has been called many things by many enemies. But for him, the more the merrier. He made a feast out of a fight.

Like Jehovah, he had an Old Testament temperament — ever forgiving his people and never forgetting his foes.

His greatest passion, however, was to be the "first" to do something. Over the years, he claimed many firsts. The first union management-engineering department to teach small employers how to run their shops more efficiently; the first full-time political department; the first year-round staff-school; the first industry-wide employer-financed vacation fund, retirement fund, severance fund for workers whose firms went out of business, health fund, the first union musical on Broadway, the first full-length union movie, the first nation-wide scholarship program for the children of members, the first to print its financial reports in its papers. Dubinsky loved to make history. And whenever he did, he let the whole world know about it.

Once he spelled out his technique to me: "When we vote to contribute a hundred thousand dollars for a good cause, we tell the papers. When we raise the funds, we tell the papers again. When we give the check, we tell the newspapers again. Every time they print an article, so people think we contributed three hundred thousand dollars."

Dubinsky could not resist such theater with built-in curtain calls, because there was too much of the Schlesinger in him.

When he retired at the age of 74, he was at the height of his fame. But he felt he had to step aside. He once confided his philosophy on the subject: "At first, a man does not retire because he thinks he is not old enough. Then, when he is old enough, he is too old to know he is too old." DD's prescription was to retire when you were young enough to know how old you were.

During his years at the head of the International, the union was DD's pedestal. But the shadow he cast from that prominence reached far beyond the garment workers, extending across the entire American labor movement and across the political scene, both here and abroad. But that's another story for another day.

Gus Tyler is the assistant president of the ILGWU.

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