

## 16 *Victory Among Defeats*

In the second large garment union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, the Communist-Left were defeated earlier. It never won the mass following of the Left in the ILGWU, nor its strategic position. As in the ILGWU, the early oppositional tendency was a unified affair of Left-Wingers, Socialists and anarchists. They were the people on whom Hillman and Schlossberg had leaned in holding the line against the former UGW elements. But the ranks of the opposition were split because of Communist control. And, as had happened elsewhere, the Communist-Left gradually assumed the sole captaincy of the opposition.

The difference in the human element—the men's tailors had always been less articulate—the absence of an able and popular leadership such as those in the ILGWU and the fur workers' union, and the stern measures adopted by Hillman prevented the Left from making any appreciable headway. Of the three young men who headed the opposition, Sam Lipzin, William Abrams and Louis Nelson, only the latter was a skillful tactician. (More about Nelson in Chapter 10.)

The strength of the Left was primarily in the two Jewish locals, 4 and 5, under their control, with a combined membership of about 8,000, and the Pressers' Union Local 3, also Jewish. But these locals were quickly reorganized, and the active Lefts expelled.

In contrast to the ILGWU, the discontent among the men's tailors flowed largely from their fear of technological innovations—new machines and production standards—that aimed to increase

output. The tailors were apprehensive of the basting machine, the pressers of the pressing machines, and the operators of the specialized operating machines. Skilled workers generally are antagonistic to machines that reduce the necessity or value of their skill. Hillman, consenting to their installation to prove to the employers that the union would not stand in the way of higher efficiency, set against him the very people who had helped him to build the union over the resistance of both the employers and the AFL. As to the Communists, they did their utmost to play up the fear of the machine and the opposition to production standards.

### HILLMAN'S NEW ORIENTATION

Parenthetically, Hillman openly advocated the two-lane idea of unionism at a time when the radical one-lane approach still prevailed in the garment trade unions.<sup>+83</sup> An editorial in the ACWA paper, in 1925, during the height of the internal struggle stated this clearly:

A progressive labor union . . . does not limit itself merely to questions of workers' wages and hours. It strives to . . . solve the special problems in the industry, . . . the abolition of waste, the quality of production, the conditions of marketing. . . .

Wages and hours themselves will not lead the workers to the social paradise. . . . Steady employment is necessary. . . . The workers are vitally interested in the welfare of the industry. This is true as much for capitalist America as for Socialist Russia.\*<sup>129</sup>

The opposition, the ACWA Joint Action Committee, called a stoppage and tried to hit the union by urging the workers not to pay dues until the ousted and expelled would be reinstated. They did manage to inflict great harm, but were checked by Abraham Beckerman, the new general manager of the joint board. Beckerman, previously a Socialist soap-box orator, who had migrated here from England, threw into the fray what B. Charney-Vladek appropriately termed "Beckerman's knuckles."

Beckerman became the chief of the Committee to Save the Unions, set up to mobilize support for the Right Wing battling the Communists in the unions. And the opposition in the ACWA was beaten in 1926, though it did not really die until 1929.

As to the economic motives for the opposition, later experience

proved the fear of the machine groundless. The introduction of piece rates, of specialized machines and the section system—a sort of assembly line—have benefited both the market and the union in New York.<sup>+34</sup>

#### STUBBORN FIGHTING IN HEADGEAR INDUSTRY

The fighting in the headgear industry was on a formidable scale. In capmaking, the oldest immigrant trade, there were strong Daniel De Leon traditions, which made the workers more susceptible to the Left talk against “class collaboration.” In the millinery trade, the girls, similar to those in the dress trade, were swayed by social romanticism. The girls were the shock troops of the Communist opposition, and, for a time, took over the large Local Union 24. The Communists also controlled some cap locals in Boston, St. Paul and other cities.

The national office reorganized the millinery union, expelled the active Communists, and demanded from every worker a registration card of the new union as a condition for remaining in the shop. But a considerable number of the girls stuck to the Communist group to the very end. They fought in the shops against the registration and resisted the police with a fervor and abandon peculiar to young girls. The party emissary, a young woman who went by the name of June Crowl, a fiery and reckless speaker, contributed greatly to the stubborn fighting raging in the millinery market.

The Right Wing of the Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers Union was headed by a number of energetic and determined men.<sup>+35</sup> After a few years of division and confusion, the Right was able to eradicate Communist influence by the same old method, reorganization of locals.

#### COMMUNIST VICTORY AMONG FURRIERS

Only in the fur industry did the Communists defeat their Right opponents. The reasons were:

1. The smaller size and compactness of the industry, occupying a short strip of a few blocks in the upper 20's, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues.
2. A large number of young people, *landslite* from Bessarabia, who stuck together.

3. Ben Gold and Aaron Gross were a pair who complemented each other. Both entered the shop in their teens and knew the trade intimately. Gold, a fervent speaker with a hysterical tone in his voice, was a master at arousing the emotions and prejudices of his listeners, while Gross, always in the background, was the quiet, shrewd planner. Gold was excellent in frontal attacks, Gross skillfully applied the old formula of divide and rule. The latter was an expert in the art of nibbling away at an enemy while concluding peace treaties with them. Gross was behind the temporary appeasement of William Green during the strike of 1926, and the unscrupulous unity deals with individual Right-Wingers that demoralized and scattered the ranks of the adversary and saved the situation for the Left. Gold, the prima donna, would never unbend sufficiently to strike a compromise with the enemy, even for a short while.

Another factor was that the Gold-Gross team never let the party interfere in their strategy. Loyal Communists, they displayed the proper piety to all party doctrines. But they drew one borderline, the conduct of their union. Gold resisted the party's meddling adamantly; Gross did the same politely, with a friendly and knowing smile.

(Aaron Gross was seriously injured by thugs during the Left-Right fight. He joined the Lovestonites break with the party in 1929, and was vilified as a renegade by his former close comrades in the union. Gross never recovered from his injuries and died in Los Angeles in the early 30's.)

The party, anxious to fortify Gold's Communism and its own grip on the union, sent in Irving Potash, a staunch Communist, as a sort of political adviser and commissar. But, instead of exercising political supervision, the mild Potash became Gold's shadow; no one could have escaped this role if he wanted to function in Gold's union.

#### THE FREIHEIT PASSES THE AMMUNITION

The picture of the fighting in the unions—and, for that matter, in the Workmen's Circle—would not be complete without touching on the vital part played by the daily press. The printed word had always been a weighty factor in all the moves and struggles of Jew-

ish labor. The labor press was a trumpeter calling for action, a teacher and an organizer. These, essentially, were the roles of the organs of the two rival camps in the 20's, the *Forward* and the *Freiheit*. Their job was not merely to indulge in polemics, carrying the fight into the other camp, but to supply ammunition—arguments—and bring encouragement to their own followers. And though neither of the papers ever admitted a setback, a keen reader could penetrate the propaganda clouds and judge for himself who had the upper hand that day.

Of course, no one could for a moment compare the *Forward* with the *Freiheit*. The former in the 20's reached a circulation of nearly 200,000, while the *Freiheit* at the peak of the struggle never went beyond a paid circulation of 14,000 throughout the country, including 1,800 in Canada. Still, this circulation did not prevent it from becoming the mouthpiece of a turbulent and exciting fight involving masses of people.

(The *Freiheit* began without an ABC check, and the management, wishing to hide the deeply disappointing circulation, greatly inflated it in the first post office report. As the paper had to show a steady growth, the subsequent reports could but tell of a proportionate climb in the number of readers; standing still would have reflected badly on the entire movement.<sup>+80</sup>)

The effectiveness of the *Freiheit*, and the Communist opposition generally, did not depend on numbers. The total strength of the Communists in all the party fractions in the needle trade unions was somewhat less than 1,500. And the TUEL sections in these unions did not exceed that figure.<sup>\*130</sup> Yet, these less than three thousand people carried with them a great number of workers. The *Freiheit* was the voice of this small but highly articulate and disciplined minority and their close followers. It conveyed the daily slogans of the struggle to its few readers in every shop. It took up and answered the challenges in the *Forward*, and, in the heat of the struggle, delighted its readers—and through them the larger mass of the opposition—with indiscriminate invectives against the leading Right-Wingers. Not that the *Forward* was more restrained in its treatment of the Left, but no one could outdo the *Freiheit* in the resourcefulness of its abuse.

The scope of the mass involvement and the depth of feeling aroused can be gauged by the steady drop in the circulation of the

*Forward*. When the loss reached 26,000 in New York City, in the summer of 1926, a small conference of leading people was called in the *Forward* to take stock of a bad situation. About seven people were present. A few, alarmed by the loss of readers, suggested a milder tone toward the Communist-Left and the Soviet Union. Nathan Chanin opposed any change. He was strongly supported by Ab. Cahan. "The circulation of the *Forward*," the old editor said, "is not of prime importance now. The implacable struggle against Communism must take precedence." Coming from Cahan, to whom the mass circulation of the *Forward* was a crowning achievement, this refusal to retreat from a chosen position was an expression of his strength of will.<sup>\*131</sup>

As for *The Day*, it could not escape being affected by the passion of the struggle. It steered an officially impartial but actually a friendly course toward the opposition. As a result, the paper gained thousands of new readers. Sympathizers of the opposition who found the *Freiheit* unreadable turned to *The Day*.

#### HILLQUIT CAUSES ARREST OF COMMUNIST EDITORS

Two libel suits, one a civil the other a criminal, were brought against the *Freiheit* in the course of the struggle—the *Daily Worker* was involved only in the second. They are fair examples of the recklessness and the utter disregard for the truth in dealing with adversaries that had become the trade mark of the Communist press.

The civil libel case was brought by Morris Sigman, in the midst of the furious conflict, for the stories in the paper implying that his small weekend camp on a lake in Iowa, run by his wife and brother, was an immoral amusement place. Particularly offensive was the "hot mamma" cartoon. Magistrate Brodsky permitted the *Freiheit* lawyer, Joseph Brodsky, to air the entire struggle, its origin and background, in court. The hearing lasted about a week, and the courtroom was jammed with Left-Wingers. The accused were put under a token bail of \$25 each. Sigman immediately realized that at best the punishment would never fit the crime, and that the Communist-Left was taking full advantage of the publicity aroused by the hearings; the case was not pursued.

The Morris Hillquit criminal suit against the two papers grew out of the repeated accusations in the *Freiheit*—echoed in the *Daily*

*Worker*—that Hillquit “stole” or “cheated” shares worth \$140,000 belonging to the former Left-Wing joint board and the three Left local unions.

But Hillquit had misjudged the character of the people running the Communist press. The indictment against Robert Minor, Bill Dunn, M. Olgin and Melech Epstein—the latter had nothing to do with the editorial policy of the paper at that time—did not restrain the papers in the least. Indeed, the indictments were highly welcome to them. Pressed for exciting issues and loaded with heavy deficits, the papers saw in Hillquit’s jailing of their editors an excellent opportunity for propaganda against the Right Wing and for fund-raising among their followers. The arrest of Minor and Olgin, February 28, 1929, was carefully staged. They were allowed to address the crowds assembled in front of the papers on Union Square. The arrests were given the biggest spread; Hillquit, the SP and the ILGWU were vehemently denounced. Minor and Olgin purposely stayed overnight in the Tombs for greater dramatic effect, the ILD holding up the bail until the next day. (Epstein, out of town, was arrested four days later.)

The *Freiheit* put to good use the sensation caused by the arrests. Masterminded by Paul Novick and Paul Yuditz, it opened a new attack on Hillquit in a series of articles that appeared in the first half of March. And to prove the charges of cheating and stealing, the articles contained photostats of the shares and selected excerpts from minutes of the court proceedings. This maneuver worked. The ordinary reader found it hard to orientate himself in the barrage of questions asked by the counsel for the Left, Louis B. Budin. His opinion was formed by the screaming headlines and the “explanations” preceding and following the excerpts.

The true facts of the case could be judged from the excerpts themselves. During the big strike of 1926, the Left joint board and the three Left local unions had placed union shares worth \$140,000 of the International Union Bank with the bank as collateral for a loan. Two years after their expulsion from the ILGWU, they brought suit in the State Supreme Court demanding the return of the shares. But Hillquit, counsel for the union, had already obtained a change in the ownership of the shares, reassigning them to the new officers of the affiliates involved. This was his crime. The

court held that the shares were the property of the unions and not of individuals.

Hillquit, like Sigman before him, had no desire to make the Communist editors martyrs to their people, and the suits were dropped.

#### DEVASTATION IN THE WAKE OF THE INNER FIGHT

The Communists in the garment trade unions were routed. Since that time they never mustered enough strength for a like assault on the Right-Wing leadership. But the devastating fight, also raging in other unions, left the Jewish labor movement emaciated. Often reaching the fury of a civil war, it had been costly in human life—several dead and hundreds injured and maimed—workers thrown out of their shops, many hundreds of court cases and millions of dollars. The rank and file were exhausted, and apathy became widespread.

(The most brutal killings were the bombing of Morris Langer, an organizer for the Left-Wing furriers’ union, and the knifing of Harry Silver, a young member of the Right-Wing Hebrew Butchers’ Union, Local 234, by William Shifren, a Communist furrier strong-arm man. The latter occurred during a fight between the pickets of the Right-Wing union and the “defenders” of the Left opposition union in front of a butcher shop in the Bronx.<sup>+87</sup>)

The violent struggle caused no small damage to the morale of the movement. The comment and warning by Nathan Chanin, during the height of the fighting, are illuminating: “Thanks to the fight led by the Communists during the last five years, plenty of undesirable elements have cuddled up to the Jewish labor movement and have turned it into a business for their own aims and interests. There are plenty of such persons in the fur, cloakmakers, fancy leather goods, painters and other unions. They and the Communists, without collusion, have brought the present disaster to Jewish labor. While we conduct the fight against the Communists, we must at the same time also vigorously fight the so-called Rights which have brought dishonor to the Right Wing movement.”<sup>\*132</sup>

Chaim Kanterowitz, a Marxist intellectual, writing on the same subject in the same weekly, stated: “Both sides use such means that will forever remain stains on the movement. An internal struggle

between tendencies has been turned into a guerrilla fight in the full sense of the word. Now, to ask who are the saints and who the villains is silly. We are convinced that all the villains are to be found among the Communists; they are convinced that all the villains are among us. It will take a long time until the objective historian will be able (if he will be able) to reveal the true history of the present struggle. However, one thing is certain, the Left are guilty for the manner in which the fight is being conducted. . . . They have imposed the guerrilla fighting. . . . They have justified it theoretically and made a principle of it." \*133

There was a marked difference in most of the unions in the treatment by the victorious Right of their defeated Lefts and that meted out by Ben Gold to his defeated Rights. In the former, the Left remained in their shops, their union rights taken away for only a few years. In the furriers' union, the oppositionists were driven out of their shops.

The most important units of the ILGWU retained but a skeleton of their former strength. Benjamin Schlesinger—who again became president of the ILGWU in 1928; David Dubinsky, secretary-treasurer; Isidore Nagler, manager of the Cloak and Dress Joint Board; Julius Hochman, and a host of lesser officials and active people \* had to work hard to restore the confidence of the workers and to rebuild the shattered unions. And when this essential aim was in sight, the crippling paralysis of the great depression, 1930-1933, set in.

In assessing the ceaseless Communist industrial efforts in the first decade, 1919-1929, one must, in all objectivity, draw attention to these two facts:

1. The Communists and the Left sparked organized resistance to spreading bureaucracy in many unions, clothing and coal mining in particular.

2. They were among the first to call public attention to the misery and helplessness of the unorganized and semiskilled. In the East, it was in Passaic, Fall River and New Bedford, 1926-1928; in the South, Gastonia, North Carolina, 1928-1929. The furious strikes

\* To mention a few: Joseph Breslaw, George Rubin, Charles Kreindler, Jacob Halpern, Moe Falikman, Nicholas Kirtzman, Benjamin Kaplan, Rubin Zucker- man, Harry Fisher, Morris Bialis (Chicago) and Louis Stulberg (Midwest).

in textiles were at a time when union leadership, by and large, re- fused to take organizational risks in that "open" industry.

It must be noted, however, that in most cases the initiative came from local Communist members of their respective unions. Moved by the crusading zeal of early Communism, they seized upon any favorable opportunity to forge oppositional groups or to lead un- organized masses. Only when a local situation reached the stage requiring the decision of a party policy-maker was the national office brought in to the scene.

That in the end the CP reaped only the whirlwind has to be attributed mainly to its dogmatism. By subordinating today's needs of the workers to a nebulous tomorrow, the party could but make a mess of the former. The slight gains it did register on the industrial sector were negligible compared with the vast expenditure of men, time and money.