



WOMEN'S LEAGUE

FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Women's League Shabbat 2017/5777

P'ri Yadehah - The Fruit of Her Hands

Women Labor Leaders

When we talk about the American Labor Movement, we don't often think of the many Jewish women who were involved with its formation.

We have heard of men like Samuel Gompers and David Dubinsky, but how many of us have heard Dorothy Jacobs? The 15-year old native of Latvia spent two years as a \$3.00 a week Baltimore buttonhole maker before organizing the women of her men's coat shop into Local 170 of the United Garment Workers of America. In Chicago, another 15-year old, Bessie Abramowitz, newly arrived from Lithuania, tried to organize the shop where she worked sewing buttons 60 hours a week for a scanty wage. Unsuccessful she was fired as an agitator and blacklisted. She needed an alias to get work at Hart Schaffner Marx, a Jewish owned store (think Harry Hart, Joseph Schaffner, and Marcus Marx). When the giant firm cut a quarter of a cent from the four-penny piece rate it paid its button sewers, Bessie, by then 20, led 15 of her co-workers in a walkout. At first, the company's workforce laughed at her, but within a month most of Hart, Schaffner and Marx was on strike. A landmark agreement ended the walkout.

Young Jewish women in Chicago, Baltimore and other cities led many dramatic labor actions, but it was in New York, center of the nation's garment trade, that Jewish factory girls made their greatest impact. When 21-year old Rose Schneiderman, born in Poland, brought her shop into the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers Union, she was already a veteran of eight years as a worker. Her success in signing up members and delivering fiery speeches won her the first national office held by a woman in any US labor union.

In 1909, factory owners tried to resist the scattered strikes that these young women were championing. The Jewish owned Triangle Shirtwaist Company (where a devastating fire would break out two years later) decided to undercut the unions' appeals by starting its own Triangle Benevolent Association, a workers group beholden to management and closed to union supporters. As Jews prepared for the High Holidays of 1909, the Association voted grants of 10 dollars each to all of its Jewish workers who were the needy breadwinners for their families. But the Triangle's bosses balked, insisting the Association give the ten dollars as loans rather than as gifts. Angry Triangle Benevolent Association members consulted with the United Hebrew Trades. The Triangle

475 Riverside Drive, Suite 820, New York, New York 10115
phone 212.870.1260 email womensleague@wlcj.org website www.wlcj.org

owners retaliated by laying off suspected dissidents claiming a lack of work even while advertising job openings. Local 25, with six Jewish women on its 15 member executive board, accused Triangle owners of perpetrating a lockout. Local 25 called a strike and threw up picket lines.

After months and months, Local 25 member Mollie Schepps proclaimed that “women workers cannot play the simple idiot and worship men as heroes. We refuse to play the silent partner any more.” At this turning point in 1909, the Jewish immigrant community began to realize the strength and bravery of its young women who stepped forward to carry the messages of work place inequities and difficulties to anyone who would listen, and ultimately through the fruit of their hands, *pri yadeha*, began the fight for labor protection in the United States.