

Writing the Worlds of Our Fathers and Mothers: The Fall and Rise of American Jewish Labor History

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Abstract

American Jewish labor history stands out as a place where labor, immigration, Jewish, and other specialties meet and interact – often uneasily. The changing fortunes of this area of study have not always coincided with those of American Jewish history, which was established as a field well in advance of the rise of the new social history. As a result, American Jewish labor history became marginalized just as American Jewish history as a field had become mainstream enough to become comfortably critical as opposed to self-consciously celebratory. Part of the reason for this has been a relatively narrow geographic and chronological focus, as well as an emphasis on institutions and lack of attention to (or even dismissiveness) of gender issues. Additionally, the focus has traditionally been more celebratory and memoiristic than critical, due to the fact that most of the earliest published histories have been written by former activists. In addition, the general narrative, popularized by Irving Howe's *The World of our Fathers* has made the Lower East Side tailor the symbol and stereotype of the Jewish worker. In the last decade, however, more critical approaches, as well as crossover scholarship from the fields of women's, immigration, and labor history, have resulted in the study themes and topics that have been previously ignored or slighted, as well as new approaches that incorporate gender, social history, and comparative perspectives and challenge long-accepted conventional wisdom.

Introduction: American Jewish History and American Jewish Labor History

American Jewish labor history has for several decades inhabited a prominent, if often uneasy space in historical scholarship. Serving as a subset of American Jewish history, labor history, and immigration history, it occupies a place where these and other specialties meet and interact, often uneasily. Frequently influenced by radical and Marxist political theory, it has also been subject to the whiggishness and hagiography of American Jewish history, a field whose original purpose was in part to celebrate the Jewish role in American history in an American society characterized by anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant prejudice. More significantly, it also became increasingly narrowed to focus on the 'master story' of the early 20th-century Jewish garment workers in New York City, limiting the potential for more creative focuses and approaches.

Given that the immigrant Jewish working class traditionally encountered suspicion, contempt, and prejudice, in part for the radical politics of the 19th and early-20th century Jewish labor movement, it is not surprising that telling the stor(ies) of the Jewish labor movement has always been a politicized effort. What is more surprising has been that in the early 21st century, the study of American Jewish labor history has been slow to move beyond the mythologized and stereotyped 'master narrative' that had originally begun as an effort to counter myth and stereotype. This stagnation, in turn, has been why, in recent decades, the trends and fortunes of this area of history have not matched those of the larger field of American Jewish history.¹

At the turn of the 21st century, the field of American Jewish history is a large, well-established one that continues to grow. Influenced by the new social history, feminism, multiculturalism, and comparative and interdisciplinary approaches, new scholarship continues to explore previously neglected topics and themes, and to more critically examine those that have been accepted as received wisdom. Yet until very recently, the study of American Jewish labor history did not keep up with these trends. Spatially and chronologically, it remained tightly focused on the New York City region and garment industry and the years between 1905 and 1920, the peak period of Jewish labor unrest in North America. Gender considerations were slowly introduced, but a continued lack of attention to comparative approaches, either geographically or occupationally, made it easy to assume that Jewish labor history has been 'done', with relatively little new to discover.²

In a scholarly forum on Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*, the monograph that did the most to both bring American Jewish labor history into popular consciousness and to consign it to popular history, historian Tony Michels has lamented that this complacency and marginalization has been taking place just as the larger field of American Jewish history had become mainstream enough to push its own boundaries.³ Since the publication of this forum, however, there have been a growing number of scholars whose work has finally begun to move American Jewish labor history scholarship beyond this place of stagnation, employing gender, religion, and comparative approaches. Yet Michels, who has himself advanced the study of the American Jewish labor movement through his groundbreaking cultural history, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York*, remains critical of the unwillingness of academic scholars of this topic to treat the American Jewish working-class experience as something other than a transitional phase, or to seriously consider the role of socialism (something Howe had done).⁴

The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to trace the arc of the development of scholarship in American Jewish labor history from the 1920s to the present, while emphasizing the ways in which recent scholarly trends have moved this topic beyond its comparatively narrow focus to become a fuller and deeper area of study, and the implications for future scholarship. Highlighting major as well as some lesser-known works in this area, it will examine how and why the writing of this history went from being the province of labor activists to a celebrated area of popular history that was in danger of losing its place as an area of serious scholarship. It will then explain how it became a rediscovered area of historical inquiry that has inspired unprecedented approaches and focuses. Because trends in scholarship rarely occur in a vacuum, this essay will also give some attention to the historical background of the earlier scholarship through the 1970s.

Early Histories: Celebration and Justification

The 1920s in America have been labeled the 'tribal twenties' with good reason. During this period, nativist movements gained enough political influence for Congress to pass the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and National Origins Act of 1927, both of which shut off most European immigration, but did not end anti-immigrant prejudice.⁵ The 1920s were also characterized by hostility to political radicalism, forcing the American labor movement to make an increasingly rearguard effort to hold onto the hard-won gains of the previous decades in the face of political conservatism and the promotion of the open shop as the 'American Plan'.⁶ In addition, the Jewish labor movement in the 1920s was struggling with the threat of destruction from within, from both gangsterism and efforts at Communist takeover of its major and minor unions.⁷

All these factors undoubtedly influenced the creation of the first published English-language historical accounts of the Jewish labor movement, the majority of which were either written by union activists, commissioned by labor organizations, or both. Although most of these works maintained a geographical focus on the New York era, with token attention to developments in other cities, there were notable exceptions, such as Leo Wolman's *The Clothing Workers of Chicago: 1910–1922*. Wolman's work also stands out in that it is presented as a serious piece of critical research, despite its obvious union sponsorship.⁸ One of the first monographs on the American Jewish labor movement that could be considered a genuine scholarly, as opposed to institutional or commemorative history, began as the doctoral dissertation of Louis Levine.⁹ Levine's *The Women's Garment Workers* was the first comprehensive history of the movement that became the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. Published in 1924, this monograph not surprisingly places a lot of emphasis on the early history, but in noted contrast to later works, includes judicious treatment of struggles and strikes in cities other than New York, including a chapter devoted to the Cleveland Strike of 1911.¹⁰

For the next two decades, Jews became Americanized and part of the American economic mainstream, but remained socially on the defensive against the anti-Semitism that only began to lose its acceptability with the uncovering of the Holocaust.¹¹ During this period, the literature on the Jewish labor movement continued along in two major tracks – scholarly institutional histories and biographies, and union-commissioned commemorative accounts. These approaches were influenced by social conditions and by the need to shake off the Jewish labor movement's declining reputation during a time of growing gangsterism and the Communist-driven 'Labor Wars'.¹² By the 1940s, however, the Jewish labor movement became fully integrated into the larger American labor movement, through the New Deal and the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. As a result, the scholarship began to capitalize on this growing acceptance that accompanied the rising prominence of Sidney Hillman, the founding President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, and the rare labor leader to enjoy widespread public regard beyond the labor movement.¹³

Major works from this period included institutional histories built on Levine's model, beginning with Charles Zaretsky's 1934 monograph, *The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America: A Study in Progressive Trade-Unionism*, which examines the central role of the ACWA in the reshaping of labor relations within the garment industry. Other monographs of note include one comparative work, Joel Seidman's *The Needle Trades*, which not only outlines the histories of the ILGWU and ACWA (and various smaller garment workers' unions), but also examines their larger contribution to industrial democracy and modern industrial unionism.¹⁴ While some of these histories were still union-sponsored, by this time, the line between celebratory and scholarly accounts had become increasingly blurred. The late 1940s and early 1950s therefore also saw the emergence of some of the earliest 'general' histories of the American Jewish labor movement, such as Abraham Meyer Rogoff's, *Formative Years of the Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, the first in-depth look at the early history of the Jewish labor movement since Levine.¹⁵ These works all had several key features in common.

The first was a geographical focus that remained centered on New York, although some gave attention to developments in other cities. The notable exception to the New York focus was again a history of clothing unionism in Chicago, Wilfred Carsel's *A History of the Chicago Ladies' Garment Workers' Union*. In this study, Carsel chronicled the chaotic early history of the Chicago branch of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, emphasizing the special problems the Chicago union faced, emerging as it

did far from the center of the action in New York.¹⁶ Geography aside, these works were also similar in that they were essentially institutional and political in focus, and gave little if any attention to the lives of the workers themselves. Although it is no surprise that these histories also gave scant attention to either interethnic or gender issues, Benjamin Stolberg's partially reminiscent account of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the 'men'¹⁷ who made it, *Tailor's Progress*, stands out in its contempt for the women who also played a long under-recognized role in making the union. Stolberg pointedly dismisses the female activists of the early 20th century as 'the romantics' for whom union activism was 'only an affair of the heart', but who seemed to win public sympathy disproportionate to the importance that the author and his male colleagues assigned them.¹⁸

While almost all these accounts of the Jewish labor movement written between the 1920s and 1940s are now out of print, the stories and themes they emphasized influenced nearly all subsequent research in the next couple of decades. Research trends from this period were also shaped by the 'consensus' school of history, and as well as by the post-war golden ages both of American Jewry and American labor.¹⁹ These trends helped maintain both the institutional focus of scholarship in American Jewish labor history and the celebratory approach. Celebration and institutional focuses were reflected in both the published official union histories into the 1960s and in the growing number of scholarly accounts. In the case of the latter, by 1961, readers had access to the Aaron Antonovsky's translation of Elias Tcherikower's *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the U.S.A.*, as well as accounts by former activists such as Abraham Menes and J. B. S. Hardman that now appeared in scholarly journals.²⁰

The most comprehensive work of this period was Melech Epstein's, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.* Epstein, who had previously been on the staff of the Yiddish Communist newspaper *Freiheit*, ended up resigning over the paper's slant on the Hitler-Stalin Pact, a break that undoubtedly influenced his scholarship.²¹ His two volume 'industrial, political, and cultural history', although commissioned by the New York Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, was a surprisingly balanced account of the American Jewish labor movement, from its immigrant socialist origins through its later efforts to distance itself from Communism in the post-World War II years.²² Joining this effort to distance the Jewish labor movement from its leftist origins was none other than the University of Wisconsin economist Selig Perlman. In a set of essays for the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*,²³ Perlman and his colleague Nathan Reich argued that to succeed, the Jewish labor movement had to adapt to the ways of the American labor movement, but once it did so, it 'enriched the general labor movement', by creating an alternative to business unionism that nonetheless rejected Marxism.²⁴ Jewish labor, in this climate, was now increasingly incorporated into the larger narrative of American labor history.

Ethnic Pride and the 'New Social History'

A combination of social and intellectual changes in the late 1960s through the 1970s had a profound effect on the scholarship in American Jewish labor history. The social changes included an upsurge in Jewish identification following Israel's stunning victory in the Six-Day War.²⁵ In the academy, there was a major break from the established consensus history spurred by the rise of the initially controversial New Social History, and with it the New Labor History that began with E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, and of immigration and ethnic history.²⁶ These new approaches quickly spread to

the writing American Jewish labor history, which for the first time began to move away from institutional histories and give more attention to the roles of socialism and Yiddish culture in shaping the early 20th-century Jewish labor movement.²⁷

The first scholarly work of note to fully integrate this labor narrative into its immigrant socio-cultural context is Moses Rischin's *The Promised City*. Although Rischin presents this work first and foremost as an account of Eastern European Jewish migration to New York City between 1870 and 1914, he also broadens the labor story to closely examine the cultural factors that affected the formation of the immigrant Jewish labor movement. In it, Rischin provides one of the first accounts of the influence of non-Jewish German radicals on the formation of the American Jewish radical and labor movements and explains *why* New York City's very geography made it a center of the garment and other light (as opposed to heavy) industries to which immigrant Jews then gravitated.²⁸ Taking a contrasting approach, Melvyn Dubofsky sought with some success to do the opposite – integrate the story of New York's Jewish labor movement into the larger story of New York's labor movement during the Progressive Era. Dubofsky's monograph, *When Workers Organize*, showcases the struggle going on within the early Jewish garment workers' movement between Gompersian craft-oriented unionism and radical unionism. It also examines the complex relationship between the immigrant Jewish activists and their non-Jewish progressive allies, and the unions' progression from needing the support of allies to maintaining a degree of independence from them.²⁹

Howe and the Perils of Popularization

These more critical looks at the American Jewish labor movement, however, were largely buried by the runaway success of Irving Howe's now classic *The World of Our Fathers*, which, in turn, may have contributed to the decline in scholarly interest in the American Jewish labor movement in subsequent decades. Howe's book, published in 1976, was a tour de force account of the entire gamut of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant experience in America that in many ways updated the 'master narrative' of Eastern European Jewish immigrant history from Hutchins Hapgood's seminal (and uniquely sympathetic) *The Spirit of the Ghetto*.³⁰ Although Howe's work was not, strictly speaking, a history of the Jewish labor movement, it created and upheld certain assumptions concerning the growth and development of the Jewish labor movement. One was the role of the women of the Jewish labor movement, which Howe respected more than Stolberg, but still tokenized as a relatively small part of the male-led movement.³¹ The other was that the New York experience could be extrapolated to speak to the experiences of all Jewish immigrant communities in America during the period covered.³² Beyond the problems created by these assumptions, Michels has noted that for decades, Howe's work was neither fully embraced nor genuinely challenged by other scholars, who tended to dismiss the very socialism that Howe emphasized as central to the development of the American immigrant Jewish working class. As a result, according to Michels, 'most of the original research on the Jewish labor movement has been published by specialists in the history of labor, women, radicalism and other fields', even though 'their work too often suffers from a weak knowledge of Jewish history and the absence of Yiddish sources'. Yet Michels elsewhere highlighted a possible reason for this particular appropriation of American Jewish labor history – Jewish history and Jewish studies scholars have traditionally tended to be European-focused and even dismissive of the significance of the American Jewish experience, referencing a handful of leading scholars in American Jewish history, and citing both Jonathan Sarna's experience with contempt for the very idea of the study of

American Jewish history and Todd Endelman's description of the American Jewish experience as 'uninstructive or irrelevant or unchallenging'.³³

Neither this state of affairs, nor the problems that Michels outlines, however, meant that scholarly attention to American Jewish labor history had declined to nothing following the publication of *The World of Our Fathers*. Rather, new approaches to this history that incorporate focuses ranging from gender to transnationalism to religion have moved the study of the American Jewish labor movement far beyond the familiar 'master narrative'. But as Michels has aptly pointed out, the newer approaches, to be outlined below, also have the potential to further divide scholars who use Yiddish sources and those who do not. This in turn influences whether authors in each category regarded Jewish labor history as a subset of Jewish history or of labor history.

Gendered and Interethnic Approaches

One of the most significant of these scholarly trends, almost self-evidently in hindsight, has been the rise of women's (and later gender) history, which both rescued women activists in the Jewish labor movement from decades of scorn, marginalization, and oblivion, and chronicled the effect of work and union activity on immigrant women's lives. Some of the earliest examples of close scholarly attention to women activists in the Jewish labor movement take readers beyond New York, by highlighting the predominance of women workers in the Chicago garment trades and their under-recognized roles in the Strike of 1910 that resulted in the founding of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.³⁴ Then, more expansively, Susan Glenn brings together the factors of class, ethnicity, and gender to explain the distinctive feminism of immigrant Jewish women in the labor movement, which rejected traditional gender roles, but did not emphasize the female solidarity that middle-class female activists emphasized.³⁵ This broader focus has also been reflected in the more 'general' accounts of the lives of immigrant Jewish working-class women and their American-born daughters who treat work and workplace issues as part of the totality of immigrant working-class life in the early 20th century. A key example is Sydney Stahl Weinberg's *The World of Our Mothers*, whose very title reflects and parodies Howe, and which gives an almost unprecedented attention to the lives of immigrant Jewish women in 'the old country'. It also provides a broader perspective on the early Jewish working-class experience by discussing sometimes under-addressed issues such as the effects of birth order as well as gender on immigrant children's lives. It also brings out traditionally unmentionable issues such as sexual harassment in these women's working lives.³⁶

The other, less considered, factor is the rise of immigration history, which in many ways pushed American Jewish history out of its hagiographic niche by adding interethnic comparative perspectives.³⁷ Although Steven Fraser is now best known for his biography of Sidney Hillman, he had previously authored one of the earliest studies of Americanization in the multiethnic Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, an issue that Youngsoo Bae has given even more extensive treatment in his study of the men's clothing workers in Chicago.³⁸ Another outstanding example that also brings in gender issues is Elizabeth Ewen's *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, which provides a comparative perspective of the lives and work of immigrant Jewish and Italian women on the Lower East Side. Using this approach, Ewen reminds readers that while the Jewish immigrant experience has become emblematic of the urban immigrant history of early 20th-century America, it still does not represent its totality.³⁹ Beyond interethnic comparative approaches, recent trends toward transnational and approaches to US history have

brought out an increased appreciation for the shaping of role of the 'old country', and for the dialectic between continuity and disruption in the immigrant experience.

The Old Country: Making Transnational Approaches Real

The transnational comparative approach has in many ways rightly begun with studies of the Jewish working class in Russia. One early notable work on this aspect of Jewish labor history is Ezra Mendelsohn's *Class Struggle in the Pale: The Formative Years of the Jewish Worker's Movement in Tsarist Russia*, which charts and analyzes the roles of geographical and occupational restrictions (including formal and informal exclusion from the rising Russian industrial economy) on the formation of the pre-1905 Russian Jewish working class. He also recounts how Jewish socialist intelligentsia 'forged an alliance with the Jewish masses' to create the often competing old country Jewish working-class movements and traces a transition from a traditional (and paternalistic) guild system to the development of more genuine trade unions. Mendelsohn also demonstrates the importance of a transnational comparative perspective, noting the similarities between the problematic roles of Jewish employers and the successes of the 'half-intellectuals' (the widely used term for working intellectuals who held no formal degrees) contrasted with the failures or the nonworking intelligentsia in reaching the Jewish working masses.⁴⁰

Publishing almost two decades later, Yoav Peled takes a more sociologically and politically focused approach to the formation of Jewish working-class identities in pre-Revolutionary Russia. His monograph *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale: The Political Economy of Jewish Workers' Nationalism in Late Imperial Russia*, which as the title suggests, emphasizes the formation of the Bund and the development of cultural, if not political nationalism. Peled's work also highlights the key role of Lithuanian Jewry in the formation of what was never, strictly speaking, a *Russian* Jewish working class.⁴¹ Most recently, Mendelsohn has published an edited collection, *Essential Papers on Jews and the Left*, which includes a selection of essays that more deeply probe the significance of the changing and at times competing emphases of the Jewish socialist movement. These include Jonathan Frankel's reinterpretation of the historical development of Jewish socialism that suggests both that radical activists' practical use of Yiddish predated any Jewish-specific working-class consciousness and that 'Jewish socialism' was really an Anglo-American development that was then transferred back to Russia. Another essay of note is Moshe Mishinsky's 'Regional Factors in the Jewish Labor Movement', which more fully examines the significance of the contributions of Lithuanian and even Polish Jewry to the 'Russian' Jewish working-class movement. A third essay that bears highlighting is Anita Shapira's examination of the sometimes uneasy relationship between the Palestinian labor movement⁴² and the development of the early Soviet Union, which reminds the reader regarding how sincerely Jewish labor activists believed that the Soviet Union would be the first fulfillment of the better and more just world they sought.⁴³

One of the earliest examples of this increasingly transnational approach is Hadassa Kosak's *Cultures of Opposition*, which challenges the accepted notion that pre-1905 migrants were less politicized than their post-Revolutionary counterparts and demonstrates that these early migrants, contrary to popular image, had plenty of experience challenging entrenched power structures, even if it was 'only' within the old country 'kahal', and over its tight control of communal affairs.⁴⁴ Michels has also played a major role in reintroducing the significance of the 'old country', and with it the genuinely transatlantic process of creating the Yiddish culture that became one of the most familiar outgrowths of the early 20th-century American Jewish labor movement. His 2005 monograph, *A Fire*

in *Their Hearts* demonstrates that far from being an import from Europe, the Yiddish radical culture that was central to the labor movement was an all-American creation. It advances Mendelsohn's earlier emphasis on the role of German Socialists in shaping American Jewish socialism. But Michels devotes the bulk of the book to the history of what he terms the 'Yidishe Kultur', which was intended to serve as a temporary way to reach and then Americanize immigrant Jewish workers but became a lasting, vital cultural force.⁴⁵

Kosak's and Michels' efforts to push beyond traditional assumptions regarding Eastern European Jewish migration and migrants have been echoed and advanced over the years, most recently and impressively by Eli Lederhendler, who in many ways hearkens back to the scholarship of Mendelsohn and Peled. Lederhendler takes an even closer look at the pre-migration lives of the Russian Jews who played such a big role in forming the American Jewish labor movement, to conclude that the Jewish working class as popularly understood was essentially an American creation. The reason for this situation is that Jews were largely shut out of the industrialization in Russia and, as a result, constituted not so much a working class as an underclass. Lederhendler then questions, whether the movement these immigrants created can truly be considered a 'Jewish labor movement', if, as he suggests 'their major undertaking and eventual achievement was to integrate Jewish immigrant workers into the pan-ethnic, broadly class-based social arena known as American labor?' This question becomes especially salient, when he then compares this situation with that of immigrant Jewish workers in London during the same period, who never broke the bounds of their ethnic community to achieve the same influence.⁴⁶

Lederhendler's work also reflects a transition to an increasingly comparative approach, one that has resulted in a plethora of studies of Jewish working classes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries outside of the United States. One scholar who has played a key role in promoting this transnational comparative perspective is Nancy L. Green, who wrote in 1998, that out of a fairly diverse Jewish working class, only the tailor is generally remembered as 'an emblematic if somewhat folkloric figure of a Jewish working class'. Her anthology, *Jewish Workers in the Modern Diaspora*, then introduces profiles of Jewish working-class history in cities as diverse as London, Paris, and Buenos Aires, and calls for other the inclusion of other world cities ranging from Jerusalem to Johannesburg to Chicago.⁴⁷ As if in response to Green's challenge, other works have followed, in English and French, that have offered transnational comparative perspectives on historic Jewish working classes from Europe to Mandatory Palestine.⁴⁸ While transnationalism offers exciting possibilities, though, the comparative perspective it provides has been relatively slow to filter back into a regional comparative study of the North American immigrant Jewish working classes (including Canadian), but there are a slowly growing number, with more yet to be published.⁴⁹

That (Not So) Old Religion

The next significant trend, whose previous absence has probably limited the study of the American Jewish working class more than realized, is the increased attention to the role of religion. This approach forms part of a larger movement to integrate the study of religion into American labor history. One immediate result of this scholarly trend is the undermining of long-held assumptions regarding easy abandonment of religious observance and the wholly secular basis of the Jewish labor movement.⁵⁰ One recent and promising example of this scholarship is Annie Pollard's 2009 essay, 'Working for the Sabbath: Sabbath in the Jewish Immigrant Neighborhoods of New York', which

appeared in a special issue of the journal *Labor: Studies in the Working Class History of the Americas* on labor and religion. She demonstrates that the immigrant Jewish responses to the dilemmas between traditional Sabbath observance and the demands of making a living in America were more likely to involve compromises and partial observances rather than strict adherence or all-out rejection. Pollard also gives unprecedented attention to the significance of women's roles in preparing for the Sabbath – the pre-Sabbath cooking and cleaning that often had been an under-recognized element of the traditional Jewish Sabbath and remained an integral part of family Sabbath observances regardless of whether the family otherwise observed the traditional Sabbath restrictions.⁵¹ Similarly, Eli Lederhendler addresses the issue of work and Sabbath observance as part of the post-immigration process of a trying to maintain religious observances to some degree, even while increasingly compartmentalizing it from the rest of daily life.⁵²

The Limits of Synthesis

Although all these new focuses signal great potential for the future direction of scholarship in American Jewish labor history, perhaps the biggest sign of the maturation of the field is a return to the traditional focuses that include biographies and institutional histories, but with more inclusiveness of social, cultural, ethnic, and gender history than ever previously. One example is longtime labor activist Gus Tyler's *Look for the Union Label: A History of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union*, which brings the story of the ILGWU up to the present.⁵³ Another is Bae's *Labor in Retreat*, a history of the ACWA in Chicago that fully integrates the ethnic and immigration history with the history of the union itself, first to explain first the union's growth and then to account for the taming of its radical edge.⁵⁴

Biographies of the leaders of the American Jewish labor movement have experienced a similar revival since the publication of Steven Fraser's *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* in 1991, an unprecedentedly comprehensive look at Hillman's life and career that includes a full treatment of his pre-migration activism as a rabbi manqué and Bundist from Zagare, Lithuania, and the lasting effect of this intellectual heritage.⁵⁵ One example is the new biography of David Dubinsky by Robert Parnet, *The Master of Seventh Avenue*, which moves beyond the 'great man' approach to biography to unsparingly reveal Dubinsky's ruthless effort to stamp out Communism within the ILGWU. Other recent biographical studies include those that finally give previously neglected women leaders their due, most notably *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, Annelise Orleck's collective account of the lives of Fania Cohn, Clara Lemlich Shavelson, Pauline Newman, and Rose Schneiderman, and their struggles as female leaders in a male-dominated labor movement.⁵⁶

That said, published individual biographies of women in the Jewish labor movement are still relatively few, but are slowly becoming available.⁵⁷ The most impressive example thus far is Karen Pastorello's 2004 biography of Bessie Abramowitz Hillman, titled *A Power Among Them*. Although Bessie Hillman was long regarded as an important leader and activist in her own right, few accounts of her life recognized that her activism did not stop with marriage or motherhood, but continue throughout her life. The implicit assumption that Bessie Abramowitz was merely Sidney Hillman's wife has been exacerbated by the lack of written primary sources about her life, which is why Pastorello relies heavily on oral history interviews with the Hillmans' daughter Philione Fried to reconstruct Bessie Hillman's life and work.⁵⁸ Given these limitations, Pastorello's work is truly groundbreaking. Its chief limitation is that it is framed primarily as the biography of a

woman labor leader, with scant attention to how Bessie Hillman's Jewish or working-class identity shaped her.⁵⁹ In short, while focuses on women bring a much-needed gender dimension into the study of American Jewish labor history, future scholarship will have to guard against unnecessary distancing from the relevant *Jewish* aspects of this history (or even herstory).

Concerns such as this one notwithstanding, the plethora of scholarship of the last decade or more clearly shows that the study of American Jewish labor history has moved well beyond the 'master narrative' of the Lower East Side Jewish tailor. However, with notable exceptions such as Michels and Lederhendler, there remain relatively few Americanists who approach this scholarship from a primarily *Jewish* angle that emphasizes the use of Yiddish sources, compared to scholars who emphasize class, gender, and other issues and treat the Jewish aspects as more ancillary. How or whether this divide is resolved remains to be seen, but these diverging approaches in themselves can inspire a new look at topics that are assumed to be 'done', as well as areas and approaches yet to be explored.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to thank the *History Compass* editors for their helpful suggestions, and Sheva Zucker for advice on Yiddish transliteration.

Short Biography

Susan Roth Breitzer's research focuses on late 19th and 20th century American labor, social, and political history. She is currently revising her dissertation, 'Jewish Labor's Second City: The Formation of a Jewish Working Class in Chicago, 1886–1928', for publication. Her previous publications include solicited essays for *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies* and *Cogs in the Classroom Factory: The Shifting Identity of American Labor*, as well as previous essay for *History Compass* on the historiography of the CIO anti-Communist purge; and an essay *Hull House and the Chicago garment workers with the Indiana Magazine of History*. Her recent research is on the efforts of African Americans to seek a place in the American labor movement through the adoption of anti-immigrant rhetoric during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. She has taught United States and world history at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina. She holds a BA in American Studies from Grinnell College, a Master of Library Science from the University of Pittsburgh, and an MA in history from Eastern Illinois University. She completed her PhD in history from the University of Iowa in 2007.

Notes

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¹ H. Diner and T. Michels, 'Considering American Jewish History', *OAH Newsletter*, 35 (November, 2007): 9, 18; and T. Michels, 'Socialism and the Writing of American Jewish History: *World of Our Fathers* Revisited', *American Jewish History*, 88/4 (December, 2000): 522–46.

² Portions of this review will also appear in the book review, 'Only in America: A New Look at the Immigrant Jewish Working Class in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era', *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (forthcoming).

³ Michels, 'Socialism and the Writing of American Jewish History', 522–6.

⁴ T. Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialist in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005): 4–7, 16–22.

- ⁵ J. Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*, with a new Afterword (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 264–330; and M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 21–34.
- ⁶ W. Carsel, *A History of the Chicago Ladies Garment Workers' Union*, with an introduction by Paul H. Douglas (Chicago: Normandie House, 1940), 138.
- ⁷ I. Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 325–56.
- ⁸ Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, *The Cincinnati Joint Board, A.C.W.A.: A Record of Struggle and Achievement* (Cincinnati: Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, 1928); F. Cohn, 'Twelve Years Educational Activities – International Ladies Garment Workers' Union', *American Federationist* (January, 1929): 105–11; J. Schlossberg, *The Rise of the Clothing Workers* (New York: Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, 1921); B. Weinstein, *Jewish Unions in America* (New York: United Hebrew Trades, 1929); and L. Wolman, *The Clothing Workers of Chicago, 1910–1922* (Chicago: Chicago Joint Board, 1922).
- ⁹ Most of Levine's subsequent workers were published under the alias of 'Louis Lorwin'.
- ¹⁰ L. Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924), 32–42, 44–8, 56, 64–7, 69, 99–3, 100–1, 111–22, 208–18.
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- ¹² Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 325–56.
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