

# The Promise: Communist Organizing in the Needle Trades, the Dressmakers' Campaign, 1928-1937

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The Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers was more democratic [than the ILGWU] because we used to have local [Executive] meetings set up twice a month. Twice a month we would meet, regardless of for what, and then we used to have shop meetings. With the problems in the shop, we used to call the entire shop together and discuss the problem that's facing them, and so on. There used to be fights between the working people in the shops. We used to call a shop meeting to straighten it out ... The industrial union was different because a meeting of the shop takes in all the pressers, cutters, finishers and operators, you know.

Max Dolgoy.<sup>1</sup>

THE INDUSTRIAL UNION of Needle Trades Workers (IUNTW), led by the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), was the first union to succeed in organizing large numbers of women workers in the dress trade. While its success can be explained by the lack of any concerted effort on the part of the other unions, another explanation, which will be advanced here, is that the shop-focused structure of the Communist unions, which allowed rank and file control over shop issues, was more accessible to women than that of any other union. It is possible that the form of unionism espoused by the IUNTW offered a more active role to women workers than did the craft-dominated International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).

The bureaucratization of the union movement in the late 1930s and 1940s was not gender neutral, according to American social historian Elizabeth Fae. In her examination of the union movement in Minneapolis she argues that a community-based union movement allowed for a high degree of women's participation,

<sup>1</sup>Interview with Max Dolgoy, former President of the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers, Toronto, April 1986.

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whereas the shift toward a bureaucratic, workplace-oriented unionism reinforced the marginality of women in the union movement:

The relationship between gender and unionism took new forms in the 1930s. In the community-based, grass-roots labor militancy that prevailed through 1937, both men and women played major roles. Further, the labour movement embraced an egalitarian rhetoric that was gender neutral in its implications. Despite the masculinist tone of the press, poster and prose within the labor movement, it was understood that women as well as men were vital to the movement's survival. By the late 1930s, the base of the labor movement had shifted away from the community to the workplace. Concomitant with this shift was the marginalization of women within the labor unions.<sup>2</sup>

The ILGWU administration and union drives were directed from New York and the developments in the United States were easily exported to Canada. While the bureaucratization of the garment unions in Canada was certainly not as advanced in the 1930s as it was in the United States, and forms of community-based unionism certainly flourished in Canada into the 1940s and 1950s, Faue's sensitivity to the gendered nature of trade union structure is important to recognize. Her observation raises the question of whether the erosion of shop-floor labour militancy through the increasing bureaucratization of the labour movement might have gender consequences for Canadian union building.

This article focuses on the communist-led unionization of the dressmakers.<sup>3</sup> By comparing this drive to similar efforts mounted by the ILGWU, we have an opportunity to study the gendered nature of union building in the womens' clothing sector. The study focuses on the CPC's organization of the dressmakers in Montréal and Toronto into the IUNTW during the inter-war years and examines these undertakings for evidence of their effect on women's participation in the union. The need to explore the relationship between forms of trade union structures and labour process is particularly necessary in an industry where jobs were clearly defined by gender. I will argue that sharp gender divisions of labour in the dress shops isolated men from women in the production process and influenced the method of wage payment. In turn, these differences shaped men's and women's particular interests and activism in the trade unions. To understand how union structures served to recreate gender hierarchies, we need to explore how union issues were defined in

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Faue, "Paths of Unionization: Community, Bureaucracy, and Gender in the Minneapolis Labor Movement of the 1930s," in Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered, Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca 1991), 296-319.

<sup>3</sup>See also Evelyn Dumas, *The Bitter Thirties in Québec* (Montréal 1975), which has a chapter on the IUNTW and ILGWU strikes in Montréal in the 1930s, and C. McLeod, "Women in Production: The Toronto Dressmakers Strikes of 1931," in J. Acton, ed., *Women at Work: Ontario 1850-1930* (Women's Press 1974). Both are useful studies of the conflict between the two unions.

ways that sometimes enhanced, but too often limited, women's participation, thereby allowing men a more dominant position.

Two quite different trade union ideologies offer us the occasion to examine the potential of each union structure to be more inclusive of women, and also to see how each union was shaped by the gender and ethnic differences of their members and leaders.<sup>4</sup> This article first examines the economic climate for union organizing in the needle trades during the Depression years, then turns to outline the labour process in the dress shops before taking up the issue of the inclusiveness of the forms of trade union organization espoused by the two unions, the ILGWU and the IUNTW. Part two of the article describes the success of each unions' organization attempts among the dressmakers and evaluates their endeavour. However, evidence on the activities of the IUNTW can only be gleaned from limited sources. The Department of Labour was unable to keep accurate statistical records of the IUNTW numbers, and evidence of their union membership can only be derived from CPC documentation, oral reports from participants and from newspaper accounts of their strike activity. As a result, much of the argument put forward here is speculative in nature.

#### *The Effect of the Depression on Organizing the Needle Workers*

IN THE 1920S, the garment industry experienced growth and an intensification of competition because of the rise and popularity of off-the-rack clothing. The increase in the number of contract shops, the rise of mass buyers, and the rapid increase in the numbers of small dress shops, all challenged the unions and manufacturers hold on the trade. Toronto manufacturers moved to Québec to take advantage of the depressed labour market there.<sup>5</sup> But more than anything else, the growth of an unorganized dress sector epitomized exploitation in the trade.

The economic collapse of 1929 caused a major disruption among the Canadian working class. Western farmers, marginal small businessmen and working-class people with limited skills suffered the most. The economic decline reached its height in 1932-33 when more people were out of work than at any time previously.

<sup>4</sup>These questions are now the focus of much of the current American work of the new feminist social and labour history. I have found the work of Patricia Cooper, Ava Baron, and Elizabeth Faue particularly useful here. See Patricia Cooper, *Once A Cigar Maker: Men, Women, and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900-1919* (Urbana 1987); Ava Baron, "Gender and Labor History, Learning From the Past, Looking to the Future," in Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered*; Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill 1991).

<sup>5</sup>In 1928 there were 6,419 waged workers in the Québec women's clothing industry and 9,135 in Ontario. Ten years later, there were 13,320 waged workers in Québec's women's clothing industry and 5,410 in Ontario. Canada, Royal Commission on Price Spreads and Mass Buying, *Principal Statistics, 1928-1932*; Canada, Department of Trade and Commerce, *Report on the Women's Factory Clothing Industry*, (Ottawa, select years).

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As the unemployed did not put the little money they had into consumer goods, the markets for such goods as clothing collapsed.

By the 1930s, women workers outnumbered men more than two to one in the Canadian women's clothing industry, but in Québec, where dress manufacturing dominated women's clothing production, women workers outnumbered men more than three to one.<sup>6</sup> By 1932, when the campaigns to organize the dressmakers were finally gaining support, Québec's garment workers had increased substantially, while Ontario continued to lose jobs in the women's clothing sector. When the decade closed, the women's garment factory workforce in Montréal had reached 13,357 and Toronto's had been reduced to 4,986.<sup>7</sup>

The 1930s provide an exemplary study of clothing manufacturers' skill in cutting labour costs. They increased their use of contractors, subdivided the labour process, changed the grade of garment they produced, sought nonunion labour in the countryside, and hired more women workers when they could. Under these conditions collective agreements disintegrated almost as soon as they were signed. Capital investment fell after 1933 as small nonunion shops reliant on poorly paid women workers became the norm. As the dress sector grew, manufacturers' search for cheaper nonunion labour increasingly drew them to Québec. The loss of work in Ontario made the unionized sectors of the needle trades fearful of action that could jeopardize their already fragile collective agreements. In Manitoba, where the main section of the needle trades produced work clothes and uniforms, depressed conditions in the trade resulted in more than twenty strikes between 1930 and 1935.<sup>8</sup>

Making a living wage in the clothing trades had never been easy, but the Depression years saw a steep decline in wages. Between 1931 and 1932, they fell by 24.1 per cent in the men's clothing industry.<sup>9</sup> In the women's clothing sector, between 1931 and 1935, the loss of wages was seventeen per cent in Québec, and fifteen per cent in Ontario. In the Ontario men's clothing sector over the same period wages fell by 24 per cent. In Manitoba, wages were slashed to approximately 50 per cent of their pre-1929 levels. Those who managed to hold on to their jobs in the Québec women's clothing industry had their wages cut by fifteen per cent.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup>These figures represent only nonsalaried workers. *Report on the Women's Factory Clothing Industry in Canada, 1930.*

<sup>7</sup>The figures include all employees on wages and salaries. *Report on the Women's Clothing Industry in Canada, 1940.*

<sup>8</sup>Donna Webber and James D. Morchoruk, "Women in the Winnipeg Garment Trade, 1929-45," in Mary Kinnear, *First Days, Fighting Days, Women in Manitoba History* (Regina 1987), 135.

<sup>9</sup>*Reports on the Men's Factory Clothing Industry in Canada, 1932.*

<sup>10</sup>Canada, Royal Commission on Price Spreads and Mass Buying, vol. 155, *Principal Statistics, 1923-1932*, RG33/18, National Archives of Canada. (Hereafter NAC.)

Work was available for less than six months a year,<sup>11</sup> and weekly wages, already low (reportedly less than \$7 a week for women and under \$10 a week for men in Montréal's men's clothing shops),<sup>12</sup> could no longer keep workers off the welfare rolls.

The Depression years were difficult for the unions. They had difficulty fighting against "runaway shops," erosion of wages, and the introduction of piece-work rates into men's clothing and women's cloakmaking. Also, with so many of their members out of work and unable to pay their union dues, in the dress industry there was no money left to pay organizers. In the ILGWU by 1931, 90 per cent of the union members were working only two days a week and as a result union revenues dropped to one-third of the amount collected in 1930.<sup>13</sup> The ILGWU was barely able to hold on to its union membership in the male-dominated sectors of the clothing trades, and in the dress sector matters were much worse. On 28 March 1932, the Toronto Joint Board of the ILGWU wrote to President David Dubinsky in the New York head office reporting that of the 1,173 members of the recently formed dressmakers Local 72, 775 of them currently owed more than 52 weeks of union dues.<sup>14</sup> The Toronto ILGWU hired local union activist Hyman Langer as business agent for the dressmakers, but as there was little financial support from the New York office, they could not afford to pay his wages.<sup>15</sup> The ILGWU made little headway in their organizing drive.<sup>16</sup> Both manufacturers and trade unionists were

<sup>11</sup>In 1932 two Toronto union shops reported to the Price Spreads Commission that "out of 115 men ... 57 earned for the year less than \$800; 88 less than \$1,000; and only 2 over \$1,600." Canada, Royal Commission on Price Spreads and Mass Buying, *Final Report*, 110. In 1929 yearly wage in textiles was \$818.

<sup>12</sup>Calculations from F.R. Scott and H.M. Cassidy, *Labour Conditions in the Men's Clothing Industry* (Toronto 1935), 97-9. Toronto wage rates in 1931: cutters, \$25 and \$35 a week; operators and pressers, \$20 to \$30 a week; and finishers, \$12 to \$18 a week. Multicultural Society of Ontario, ILGWU, "Statement of the Cloakmakers Union of Toronto," 1931. Public Archives of Ontario. (Hereafter PAO.)

<sup>13</sup>Supervisor, Toronto ILGWU to David Dubinsky, 14 August 1931, ILGWU Papers, David Dubinsky Correspondence, 1931-32, Cornell University.

<sup>14</sup>Secretary, Toronto Joint Board, Cloakmakers Union to David Dubinsky, President, ILGWU, 28 March 1932, ILGWU Papers, Dubinsky Correspondence. By 1929 the Toronto Joint Board owed the International over \$4,000 and Montréal owed nearly \$3,000; they were in no position to offer assistance to their own membership without continued assistance from New York, but this was not forthcoming. ILGWU, *Report and Proceedings of the 21st Convention*, Philadelphia, May 2-6, 1932, 97.

<sup>15</sup>Supervisor, Toronto Joint Board to D. Dubinsky 14 August 1931, ILGWU Papers, Dubinsky Correspondence, 1931-32.

<sup>16</sup>In 1938 the ILGWU dressmakers, Montréal local, reported 4,368 members, the largest membership in any Canadian local at that time. By 1939 the ILGWU membership in its Montréal locals had dropped to 3,900 and Toronto ILGWU reported a union membership of 1,450. At the same time, women working for wages in 1940 outnumbered men three to one in Québec's clothing industry and six to one in Ontario's industry. Canada, Department of Labour, *Twenty Ninth Annual Report on Labour Organizations, 1939* (Ottawa 1940), 207, 217.

fighting among themselves. There were no permanent trade associations in the cloak or dress sectors and few trade union locals were powerful enough to control conditions in their own sector of the trade. Of the three unions prominent before World War II, only the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) remained a significant force during the interwar years. The United Garment Workers of America (UGWA) was reduced to less than 1,000 members in shops producing work clothing.

These years acted as a stimulus to the extension of co-operation between the manufacturers and the traditional unions. Economic insecurity, an inability to control competition in the trade, and a growing public awareness of conditions in the needle trade also made the move toward government intervention more acceptable to both parties. With the third party mechanism in place prior to the Depression, it was a logical extension for the unions to seek government assistance in their fight to stabilize the trade, and by the mid-1930s the provincial governments were there to assist them. This economic climate provided the backdrop for the organizational drive among the dressmakers in the late 1930s and set the stage for the battle between the two forms of unionism — shop-floor unionism espoused by the IUNTW and the business unionism of the ILGWU. To examine the gender implications of this battle it is necessary to look at the labour process inside the dress shops.

#### *Womens' Position in the Labour Process*

JOBS IN THE NEEDLE TRADES were clearly delineated by gender. Production was divided among cutters and trimmers, machine operators, finishers and pressers, and in the dress industry women worked mainly as operators while men worked as cutters and pressers.<sup>17</sup> The pace of work was set by the cutters in each shop. Both cutters and pressers tended to be paid by the week, while operators were paid by the piece.<sup>18</sup> Conditions in the dress shops were characterized by low wages, piece-work, little sectioning of work, speed-ups, arbitrary distribution of work, and long and irregular hours, all of which made for tension and short tempers.

<sup>17</sup>The 1931 census does a rough breakdown of job classifications in womens' factory clothing production for Ontario and Québec: 385 men in Ontario and 291 men in Québec worked as cutters while 63 women in Ontario and 8 in Québec were listed as cutters; Ontario had 705 men listed as sewing machine operators and 2,101 women; Québec had 337 men and 4,470 women classified as sewing machine operators. Table 58, Canada, *Census*, Table 58: Occupations and Industry (Ottawa 1931).

<sup>18</sup>In the women's clothing industry cutting was a man's job while much of the operating was done by women. In the men's clothing industry men did both cutting and operating while women were employed as finishers. As jobs in the industry were increasingly fragmented through sectioning of work, women were employed more frequently in both sectors. See also Ontario, Department of Labour, "Vocational Opportunities in the Industries of Ontario: A Survey," *Bulletin #4, Garment Making* (Toronto 1920).

In the dress shops, where several different styles were made every day, each style had a different price, and as the machine operators were paid by the piece they had little control over how much they could earn. As a result, price negotiations and work distribution became a crucial aspect of workers' control over the production process and a way of easing tensions in the shop. Conflicts were frequent, particularly among piece-workers. The piece-work system ensured that the cost of labour was central to the manufacturers' attempt to reduce costs, and consequently, employers encouraged competition among the workers. Disputes often took on ethnic overtones, as one French Canadian dressmaker suggests: "But these are feelings we had, and they were justified because we weren't always treated equally, especially in the cloak garment. If you were a woman or a man French Canadian you had the last job, you know. We had the smallest bundles; the bundles were so many colours you had to change threads all the time, so it was taking more time to do."<sup>19</sup>

The speed at which the women had to work when rates were set too low led to their frustration and exhaustion, and wages often failed to reach even the minimum required by law. In 1934, when the National Council of the YWCA prepared a report on working women in the garment industry, Winnifred Hutchinson observed: "We were very much struck by the signs of strain and fatigue in the faces and attitudes of the factory workers with whom we came in contact." She continued, "It was an exception to find a factory where this was not the first impression. This is particularly sad considering the youth of most of the girls."<sup>20</sup> In the end she concluded that piece-work was central to the oppressive conditions she had observed. She stated:

The power of piece-rates over the wage, happiness and health of the workers was a recurring note in our investigations. ... The setting of piece rates is an important matter, especially for garments which are not standardized. ... From many employees, especially operators, we heard of the unfair way in which these rates were set. The method adopted is to time some girl, usually the fastest, sometimes more than one girl, making them do it competitively. Sometimes the sample maker is timed, and employees claim that she is a picked worker and very fast. The time she takes to make up a garment will be less than the average girl will take, and the resulting piece rate is thus too low.<sup>21</sup>

It was essential for women workers to have some say in these rates, for low piece rates not only affected their wages, but were used as a whip for speed-up. Consequently, the rates increased the importance of the way in which work was distributed. The amount earned depended upon the type of fabric and the style of the dress; some dresses were easier to make up than others, some bundles larger

<sup>19</sup>Interview with dressmaker, Montréal, 1990.

<sup>20</sup>Canada. Royal Commission on Price Spreads, *Exhibit 412*, 51.

<sup>21</sup>Canada. Royal Commission on Price Spreads, RG33/18, vol. 93, Exhibit 412, Report on Labour Conditions in Industries in Toronto Employing Women Needle Workers, 1935, NAC.

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than others (which meant that the operators worked on the same style of dress for a longer period of time and were able to pick-up speed). When work distribution was set exclusively by management, workers had no control over their wage rates. Changing from one operation to another, for example from hemming to operating, reduced the pace of work, which in turn affected wages. In addition, as piece-workers were not paid for waiting time, slack periods cost them. "When there was a little bit [of work], let's say the boss wanted you to come in for one dress, you had to come in."<sup>22</sup> For women in the dress trade, some control over these conditions was desperately needed.

The men's position in the labour process was quite different. Cutters were the aristocrats of the trade. They were paid by the week, and because of their level of skill they were not easily replaced. So, while all other sectors of the workforce inside a dress shop had to argue with the boss over piece-work rates, the cutters did not. Issy Shanoff recalled, "In a big shop where I worked, no matter how slow it was, the cutters were there. They used to hang around the shop and get paid for it. And now, when you work piece-work, if you don't have a dress to make you don't get paid."<sup>23</sup> Cutters set the pace of work for the rest of the shop, and this further increased their status in the social community of the shop.

The possibility that piece-work would be applied to skilled jobs in the shops was a central union concern as ILGWU President Sigman explained: "Under piece-work the labor item in the shop was the most important element of competition. In other words, an employer relied almost exclusively on the cheapness of labor in his shop to be able to compete against other employers in the market."<sup>24</sup> The unions' strategy to limit the spread of piece-work was to stabilize piece-work rates by standardizing prices for specific tasks in industry-wide negotiations. This effort met with limited success, as collective agreements in the dress sector were extremely fragile during the interwar years.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Interview with Eva Shanoff, Toronto, 1984.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with Issy Shanoff, Toronto, 1984.

<sup>24</sup>In 1928 the ILGWU convention discussed in detail the question of wage payment stating, "we do not believe that the week-work system in its present form is as effective as it should be...competition between shops instead of being on the basis of greater efficiency of management, is on the basis of lower labor costs, at the expense of the workers." The General Executive Board recommended a joint control and adjustment board, under the supervision of the Impartial Chairman, be formed in the industry to regulate wages and raise the standards in inferior shops to those in the better shops. *ILGWU Report and Proceedings of the 19th Convention, 1928, 165-71.*

<sup>25</sup>By the mid 1930s the ILGWU dress sector was still trying to set up a unified system for the settlement of piece rates in its American shops. In Canada, the ILGWU had not managed to maintain agreements in dresses, but by the mid-1930s they had established agreements in womens coats and suits. The unionized dress sector operated on two systems of piece rate: the minimum flat rate set for all dresses which wholesaled at \$3.75 or below, and the bargaining system. In the minimum flat rate system an agreement is made between the union



All women worked as piece-workers, it came with the gendered division of labour. Consequently, the possibility that piece-work wage rates would be introduced into skilled jobs did not directly affect them. The women were more concerned with the process of settling piece-work prices and in the fair distribution of work. Both the ILGWU and the CPC-led IUNTW tried to fight the introduction of piece-work. Women in the union movement focused mainly on the day-to-day issues that arose in the shops — their position in the labour process determined it.

As women had little political power in the union hierarchy, their concerns were seldom addressed. Only a union that was effective inside each shop had the opportunity to deal with the immediate concerns of the sewing machine operators, and while both unions tried to address the problems of exploitation in the dress shops, their notions of trade unionism were radically different. The IUNTW promised a shop-floor union. The ILGWU promised control over the production process through a joint committee of employers and union representatives under the supervision of an impartial chairman. While these different solutions were tied to ideological differences and structural consequences of their conceptions of trade unionism, they may also be a factor to consider when we examine the question of womens' participation in the union.

### *Two Forms of Unionism*

TWO FORMS OF UNIONISM vied for support among needle workers during the inter-war period: shop floor unionism espoused by the radicals and Communists on the one hand and a "new unionism" espoused by the international unions on the other.<sup>26</sup> The CPC held a vision of rank-and-file industrial unionism that challenged both traditional craft unionism and the hierarchical organizational structure espoused by the leadership of the ILGWU. The Communist-led unionists sought to establish local control over collective bargaining, whereas international unions thought it more efficient to run things from their New York offices, even though ILGWU efforts in this regard was resisted by its Canadian locals.<sup>27</sup>

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and the manufacturers' association that certain flat rates are to be paid. Under the bargaining system the shop chairman and the price committee look over each garment and estimate how much time it would take an operator to make the dress. "What Every Dress Maker Should Know," *Justice*, 1 March 1935, 5.

<sup>26</sup>For a discussion of the new unionism see Steve Fraser, "Dress Rehearsal for the New Deal: Shop Floor Insurgents, Political Elites and Industrial Democracy in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers," in M. Frisch and D. Walkowitz (eds.), *Working Class America* (Urbana 1983), 212-255. See also G. Soule, *Sidney Hillman, Labor Statesman* (New York 1939).

<sup>27</sup>Local leaders wanted more control to remain in Canada and called for Canadian autonomy, a position which received strong support from the leftist forces in the union. American colonization of the Canadian needle trades unions was an issue for the unions in this period. Dissatisfaction with the New York office grew during the Depression years as the International office didn't have the funds to provide services for its Canadian locals. As a result,

These forms of unionism not only offered the workers two different ideological positions, they also offered different structural relationships to the rank and file. An examination of the differences in union attitudes toward employers, the role of the business agent, the handling of shop disputes, and the structure of shop committees, all provide points of comparison.

The difference in union attitude to employers is best seen in the manner in which the two forms of unionism responded to the economic pressures of the depression years. The ILGWU responded bureaucratically to the structural shifts of the garment industry. The need to co-ordinate efforts to fight the movement of factories to small towns, to control the increasing numbers of small shops and the contracting out of work to even smaller shops led the ILGWU to push for standardization of work, a centralization of union decision-making and an increasing reliance on arbitration in the trade by setting up impartial machinery for dispute resolution.

Three issues best exemplify how the "new unionism" handled disputes in the industry: enforcement of production standards, union control of hiring practices, and introduction of piece-work. The ILGWU attempts to push manufacturers into co-operation in the running of the industry met with limited success during the inter-war years. The union had great difficulty maintaining any semblance of a collective agreement for long, and as a result they tried several different approaches to the problem of regulation and control of hours and wages of work in the trade. Their attempted resolutions of these issues became the foundation stones of the "new unionism."<sup>28</sup> Sigman, the President of ILGWU prior to Dubinsky, recalled that when he came to New York to assume the management of the Joint Board, "I began, in my own simple way, to solve this problem [of piece-work wage differences]. I devised a scheme of price committees to settle prices for every shop in the industry. That was my first attempt ... After this experiment had failed [due to lack of support from the manufacturers], I came to the Joint Board and suggested that we might try week-work. I advised that a machinery be established to take care of the worker as he moves from one shop to another."<sup>29</sup> However, manufacturers were unwilling to co-operate with these plans. By the late 1920s, the advocates of the new unionism had moved toward a form of business unionism that no longer saw manufacturers

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many union men who were critical of ILGWU for that reason found themselves sympathetic to the CPC call for Canadian autonomy.

<sup>28</sup>Sidney Hillman of the ACWA was the leading proponent of these views. See J.T. Carpenter, *Collective Bargaining in the Needle Trades 1910 to 1967* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1972), 99. Hillman won the support of manufacturers in the Toronto men's clothing industry. In 1930 Thomas Learie of W.R. Johnson and Company, Toronto, addressed the ACWA convention saying, "I believe the greater efficiency coming into the Toronto market, generally is a result of a definite understanding. While workers had to be educated to law and order the same applied to manufacturers, and perhaps more so." "Clothing Workers Adopt Insurance Policy and Greater Efficiency in Toronto Market," *Globe*, 16 May 1930.

<sup>29</sup>*ILGWU Report and Proceedings of the 19th Convention, 1928*, 168-9.

and workers as adversaries, but as partners working together for the betterment of the trade.<sup>30</sup> In 1928, under Sigmans' leadership, the ILGWU Joint Board recommended that a joint committee with the employers, under the supervision of the impartial chairman, be instituted to regulate wages for the trade as a whole.

With the introduction of arbitration machinery and third-party arbitration into collective agreements (the Toronto cloakmakers in the ILGWU set up this collective bargaining protocol in 1919),<sup>31</sup> the unions would be better able to diffuse conflict by moving it away from the shop floor and into the hands of a third party.<sup>32</sup> Because these committees were outside the shop and therefore beyond the reach of women, they became a partnership of men. The arbitration machinery did not receive the co-operation of the manufacturers' association for long, but after the general strike in 1924 the Toronto ILGWU again set up impartial machinery under the chairmanship of Dr. J.M.W. McMillan, Chairman of the Minimum Wage Board.<sup>33</sup> This structure not only altered the workers' relationship to manufacturers, allowing manufacturers to introduce labour process changes in their shops, but it also reduced their prerogative to set wages, hire labour, and set production standards.

Putting the theory of new unionism into practice was no simple matter. Few collective agreements remained firm during the 1920s. In the women's clothing

<sup>30</sup>In an effort to stop full-scale introduction of piece-work in the 1920s, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers introduced standards of production. In 1920, ACWA President Hillman had told the union convention, "I feel it is my duty to say we believe in production standards ... We have no quarrel with industry. We are for production. The greatest enemy of our organization would be opposition to production". As quoted in Carpenter, *Collective Bargaining in the Needle Trades*, 99. See also "Standardized Production Approved by Garment Workers," *The Labour Gazette*, September 1920, 1208. By 1925 the union was co-operating with the manufacturers in the introduction of section work "wherever such sectionalizing will prove advantageous in reducing costs" and assisting manufacturers to install piece-work systems in their shops. ACWA, Toronto Joint Board, *Minutes*, 20 August 1925.

<sup>31</sup>After a bitter eleven-week strike in the Toronto market in 1919, the cloakmakers and the manufacturers' association set up a board of arbitration with an impartial chair to resolve disputes in the shops which could not be resolved by the shop committees. ILGWU *Report and Proceedings of the 15th Convention, 1920*, 22-23. This early attempt to introduce arbitration machinery and third party arbitration into the collective agreement soon fell apart and was only re-established after a general strike in both the Montréal and Toronto cloak trades in 1924. ILGWU, *Report and Proceedings of the 18th Convention, 1925*, 102-107.

<sup>32</sup>Arbitration machinery had been introduced into the needle trades after the Hart, Shaffner and Marx agreement in 1910, when Hillman was representative for the UGWA. Third party arbitration came in several years later with the introduction of an impartial chairman who had the right to cast a final decision in all cases brought before arbitration. For a full discussion of this in the Canadian men's clothing industry see M. Brecher, "Patterns of Accommodation in the Men's Garment Industry in Quebec, 1914 to 1944," in H.D. Woods, ed., *Patterns of Industrial Dispute Settlements in Five Canadian Industries* (Montréal 1958).

<sup>33</sup>Ontario, Department of Labour, Clipping Files, 1925.

industry only the Toronto cloak trade was able to maintain a collective agreement during the 1920s and a general strike in 1925 was necessary to keep that in place.<sup>34</sup> Unions in the women's clothing industry in Toronto, Montréal and Winnipeg struggled to maintain collective agreements with their respective manufacturers' associations; agreements were usually abandoned before the year was out, and it usually took a general strike in the trade to re-establish union conditions. Toronto cloakmaker Issy Fine described the struggle during those years: "We went out on strike to get a raise. If we won they would have an agreement for so much, then when we came to the shop to go back to work the manufacturer would say, 'no we didn't agree to that,' and it would start all over again."<sup>35</sup> There was no consistent tripartite structure during those troubled years; however, the ILGWU remained committed to the structural framework of the new unionism.

In the ILGWU shops the union established price committees for each craft elected from among the workers in each: for pressers, for operators and one for finishers. Each met separately and established new prices every time the style of garment changed. The ILGWU saw the price committee's role as simply the setting of prices. Collective agreements in both the cloakmaking and dress sectors stated that workers "at a regular meeting, convened at the insistence of the UNION, but not during business hours, elect a shop chairman, who shall deal and negotiate with the employer on behalf of the employees, and a price committee, who, with the shop chairman, will settle prices with the employer on behalf of his employees."<sup>36</sup> When the shop chair was unable to resolve disputes, they passed to the business agent who made recommendations to the Joint Conference Board, composed of three union and three employer representatives, for final decision.<sup>37</sup>

This procedure emphasized the role of the business agent and reaffirmed craft divisions in the shops. Henceforth, decisions on wages, systems of work, and conditions in the shops were made for the industry as a whole, rather than as a resolution of conflict between a single manufacturer and his workers. The shop

<sup>34</sup>The ILGWU in the Toronto women's cloak market appears to have been fairly aggressive during the 1930s. They called general strikes in that trade in 1930, 1933 and again in 1934 before they were able to get a collective agreement that held. Neither Montréal or Winnipeg were as aggressive until the late 1930s.

<sup>35</sup>Interview with Issy Fine, Toronto, 5 May 1993.

<sup>36</sup>*Collective Labor Agreement, Amalgamated Garment Manufacturers Council and ILGWU, Toronto, 7 February 1930. NAC, MC30, A94, vol. 2, file 24.* In 1931 the Toronto dress contract specified the election of a shop chair "who shall deal with and negotiate with the employer on behalf of the employees." It specified setting up price committees who, with the shop chair, negotiated with the employer to settle piece-work prices. These early agreements did not specify the unions' right to divide and distribute work in the shop. It remained an employers' right. ILGWU collective agreements, Jewish Records, Multicultural Society of Ontario, PAO.

<sup>37</sup>The operation of this shop structure was gleaned from interviews with various union members in Toronto and Montréal. See also *Labour Gazette*, April 1931, 477.

chairs' job was to act as liaison between the boss and the union, but they had limited power.

This new reliance on a hierarchical form of decision making made womens' involvement in the dispute process more difficult. The individual shop chairs were now empowered to collect dues and to receive complaints, but all other union duties were handled by business agents — always men — appointed by the union. Such shop floor concerns as distribution of work and rates of pay were handled by the Joint Conference Board. Its governing principles were described by Michael Brecher in his review of arbitration decisions in Montréal's men's clothing industries as:

The emphasis on workers' discipline, the union's responsibility for the actions of its own members in violation of the agreement, the sanctity of the contract, the overriding importance of stability and uninterrupted production during the life of a contract, and the central role of collective bargaining in the maintenance of a mutually beneficial relationship between labour and management.<sup>38</sup>

Within this structure, wage decisions no longer directly involved workers in the shop. The ILGWU changed the resolution of shop conflicts from a social interaction in each shop to a bureaucratic process under the supervision of senior union officials, making shop-floor resistance less effective. Shop disputes and price negotiations moved into the hands of hired business agents, men hired by the union. Women held few paid or elected positions, and the further removed the committee was from the shop floor, the more unlikely it was that women would be represented on issues that concerned them.<sup>39</sup>

### *Shop-floor Unionism*

THE CPC-LED IUNTW were advocates of shop-floor unionism, seeing unions as defensive organizations to protect workers from manufacturers' exploitative practices. In a 1934 article, J. Warren outlined the Communist position on revolutionary trade unionism. He explained, "They accept the premise of class struggle. That is,

<sup>38</sup>M. Brecher, "Pattern of Accommodation in the Men's Garment Industry in Quebec, 1914-1954," in H.D. Woods, ed. *Patterns of Industrial Disputes — Settlements in Five Canadian Industries* (Montréal 1958), 135.

<sup>39</sup>By 1920 none of the unions in Canada had women on their staff, their executive members were largely male and their business agents were all men. During the inter-war years the number of women union activists improved somewhat. In the ACWA women organizers were hired to work in Montréal and Toronto, yet in 1934 Dorothy Bellanca remained the lone female on the General Executive Board (GEB). ACWA, *Report and Proceedings of the 10th Convention, 1930-34, Rochester, May 14-19, 1934*, 12. In 1936, Toronto and Montréal delegates to the convention were all male despite the fact that women made up over half the workforce. In the ILGWU women were hired as local organizers for short periods of time in 1925 and again in 1932 and 1936-7. ILGWU, *Report and Proceedings of the 19th and 21st Convention, Philadelphia, May, 1928, and 1932*.

they hold that the workers can improve their lot only at the expense of the profits of the capitalist class and therefore must organize the mass strength of the workers in militant struggle against the organized strength of the bosses to win concessions from them."<sup>40</sup> The Party's attitude was crystallized in the doctrine of shop-floor unionism, the cornerstone of the Workers Unity League policy. Tom Ewen explained in *The Worker*, February 1931 issue:

The old legalistic conceptions of trade unionism that emanated from and developed with the reformist unions must be scrapped. The sanctity of the local meeting and the will of the bureaucrat must no longer be regarded as supreme. The activity of the revolutionary must be transferred from the floor of the local to the shop.<sup>41</sup>

Their union bureaucracy would be centred in the individual shops. A resolution on shop delegate organization presented to the first convention of the IUNTW in May 1929, explained their motive:

Experience has demonstrated that the most effective form of organization to ensure the drawing in of all interested workers into the active life and work of the union, while at the same time providing the machinery through which to secure both unity of action of all workers and effective functioning in the interests of the workers in the everyday settling grievances, etc., and providing protection in the shop, is the shop delegate form of organization, with the basic unit of the union shop.<sup>42</sup>

The IUNTW was the only union in the WUL that was able to develop the shop-floor union structure, and even then it took several more years for them to implement their programme.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup>J. Warren, "Communists and the Trade Union Movement, a Burning Issue Today," *The Worker*, 17 November 1934. For a more nuanced discussion of this period of CPC history see Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism, the Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto 1988).

<sup>41</sup>Tom Ewen, "Build the Workers Unity League," *The Worker*, 28 February 1931.

<sup>42</sup>*Resolution on Shop Delegate Form of Organization*, Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers of Canada, no date, Communist Party of Canada Papers, NAC. See also *General and Financial Report of the National Provisional Committee of the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers of Canada*, August 1928-May 1929, Industrial Department, Communist Party of Canada Papers, PAC.

<sup>43</sup>See comments by Annie Buller in the 1931 pre-plenum discussion for the 1931 convention of the CPC in *The Worker*, 7 February 1931: "Our structure was the same as the company union [ILGWU] structure. We had locals of dressmakers, cloakmakers, ladies tailors, etc., and a joint board. Our union was only in name an Industrial Union but did not function as such. With such an obsolete structure it was difficult to make our influence in the shops felt. We talked about turning our faces to the factory, but we did not colonize our comrades. The building of shop committees was far from general. Our union has only been re-organized on the shop delegate system a few months ago and while the re-organization injected new life into our work it is difficult to catch up on lost time."

Shop committees were elected from among all members working at all crafts in a shop, and conflicts over work distribution were often settled at a shop meeting, rather than by the business agent. Separate price committees functioned to deal with specific prices for specific tasks, a structure similar to the ILGWU's. Because the union was centred in the individual shops, women were more able to participate in union activities. They acted as shop chairs and served on price committees, and became more actively involved in the union bureaucracy. They were not likely to be involved in union politics beyond the shop committees, so for them it mattered very little that the union had the appearance of being divided into "many smaller organizations," as Sidney Hillman, president of the ACWA, complained. Since they were already employed at piece-work rates, they preferred to see those rates set in the shops, rather than behind closed doors between union officials and manufacturers.

Both trade union structures offered some control over the scale paid to workers. In all unionized shops the women could directly bargain for their wages through the shop or price committees. Eva Shanoff, a dressmaker, explained: "Each dress is a different style and you settle accordingly. You have to go through every style, you have to go through every stitch, what this dress has, what that dress has. You have to bargain — sometimes fight, never mind bargain."<sup>44</sup> In the dress shops where there would often be over a hundred style changes a season, the price committee would set the rate for each style, allowing women a fair degree of control over their work and the prices they received. Once the prices were set then "every one worked for themselves. There was little unity," reported Montréal dressmaker Margo Durocher.<sup>45</sup> It was this characteristic of piece-work that the trade union bureaucracies found so fractious.

Both the IUNTW and the ILGWU officially opposed piece-work. Despite their attempts to set up shop and price committees neither union was able to control the conditions under which piece-work wages were paid. In response the unions developed specific political positions on how to handle the piece-work problem. The ILGWU called for third-party intervention as a way of bringing order and stability into the industry, whereas the IUNTW thought this was class collaboration and instead called for a return to week work.<sup>46</sup> In spite of both unions' rhetoric around the abolition of piece-work, it appears that the issue was not one that could easily be resolved in an industry where collective agreements collapsed before the ink was even dry. For most women in the dressmaker locals, the eradication of

<sup>44</sup>Interview with Eva Shanoff, Toronto, 1984.

<sup>45</sup>Interview with Margo Durocher, ILGWU, Montréal, 1972.

<sup>46</sup>The IUNTW did not have a clear policy on the abolition of piece-work, and evidence of their opposition can be gleaned from their response to specific shops. For example, in an effort to block the introduction of piece-work the IUNTW of Montréal staged a four-hour stoppage at Deckelbaum Bros. dress shop in April 1931. *The Worker*, 11 April 1931. In general, the union dress shops that they organized were already working on piece-work wages.

piece-work was out of the question any way: they had never worked without it. Active union men sought to eliminate piece-work, claiming it degraded their craft, but women employed as unskilled workers were more interested in receiving a decent wage and a fair distribution of the work they did. At conventions, women spoke against the elimination of piece-work.

In the Communist-led IUNTW the business agents' role was descended from the shop, and the shop chair and the shop committee became "the real executive organs of the union."<sup>47</sup> The union proposed that its bureaucracy be restructured to create a shop delegate council as its centre. Members in each shop would elect representatives to the council, which in turn would elect an executive to function as the administrative body for that section of the trade. A joint board of workers from all sections of the needle trades would be elected from each shop delegate council. This joint board would act as the executive body of the union in each city where the IUNTW was established.<sup>48</sup> This organizational structure meant that much of the day-to-day work of a business agent would be carried out by the shop chairs. If bureaucratization was not gender neutral, as Elizabeth Faue suggests, and the above sketch confirms, then it can be argued that the CPC-led union had the potential to allow for greater female participation within the union hierarchy as it was centred inside the individual shop where women's concerns were located.

The next section of the paper examines the unionization efforts of the ILGWU and the IUNTW during the period 1928-1936 to show how the CPC led union fared in this regard.

*Organizing the Dressmakers  
The Workers Unity League: Beginnings*

DURING THE 1920S, CPC opposition to business unionism was articulated through the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), which advocated an industry-wide union based on the shop delegate plan.<sup>49</sup> In this period the Communists were part of the international unions; they put forward their political views of the union structure from within the ILGWU as members of the TUEL. Their efforts met with vehement counterattacks by the ILGWU bureaucracy.

<sup>47</sup>Interview with Max Dolgoy, Toronto, April 1986.

<sup>48</sup>*Resolution on the Shop Delegate Organization*, IUNTW, no date. CPC Papers, MG28, IV4, vol. 51, PAC.

<sup>49</sup>Jack Hardy, *The Clothing Workers, A Study of Conditions and Struggles in the Needle Trades* (New York 1935), 41. See also *General and Financial Report of the Provisional Committee of the Industrial Union of Needle Workers of Canada, August 1928-May 1929*, Industrial Department of the CPC, Communist Party of Canada Papers, NAC, 2. For a discussion of the Communist Party political position during these years see Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism, the Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto 1988), 78-89.



In Canadian locals, the battle resulted in the closing of the local in Montréal and the expelling of those active in the TUEL.<sup>50</sup> From 1925 to 1928 the battle for control of the ILGWU locals in Montréal and Toronto raged until the ILGWU locals there decided to shut their doors rather than allow TUEL activists to gain control. In 1929, the ILGWU executive reported that in Toronto "the factor which contributed most to the weakening of the Union and to the consequent lowering of earnings and union standards in the shops, was the seizure of power in the Joint Board by a few petty communist politicians back in 1925."<sup>51</sup> Montréal also proved to be "fertile soil for the Communists," as internal battles all but destroyed the ILGWU presence there in the latter part of the 1920s.<sup>52</sup> In the ILGWU campaign to centralize union authority, the ILGWU repressed factionalism within their own union, characterizing rank-and-file criticism of the new union model as Communist-inspired and Communist-orchestrated. Eventually these struggles left the advocates of a shop floor union without power. They turned their attention to forming a new union in the needle trades.

The Industrial Union of Needle Trade Workers (IUNTW), formed in 1928, put into practice the CPC's vision of rank-and-file unionism. In April 1929, J.B. Salsberg, national organizer for the needle trades, announced the provisional executive of the IUNTW: Max Shur, Annie Buller, Joshua Gershman and Max Dolgoy, a cloakmaker from Winnipeg.<sup>53</sup> By May 1929, when the IUNTW held its

<sup>50</sup>It is important to note that the CPC move to establish a Canadian union in the needle trades was not just the result of international communist policy, the lack of influence in the international union also played a part in the decision to establish the IUNTW. During the 1920s both the ILGWU and the ACWA had major campaigns to expel members of the TUEL. Where their efforts had been successful, as in Montréal and Toronto, the needle trade activists seemed more willing to embrace the new Canadian union, but in Winnipeg where members of the left had some influence in the ILGWU, they were less enamoured with the idea of a separate union. The challenge to the TUEL began in 1924 with the refusal to sit delegates from the TUEL at the ILGWU convention. "They are organized to get control of the labor movement and their first step is to get control of our international union because we have a few emotional girls who do not think with their heads but with their hearts, and who run away with their sentiments and call themselves 'progressives.'" "Credentials Committee Report," *ILGWU Report and Proceedings of the 17th Convention, 1924*.

<sup>51</sup>ILGWU, *Report and Proceedings of the 20th Convention, 1929*, 98-9.

<sup>52</sup>In 1929 the ILGWU reported that the international had again started to organize the cloakmakers there. *ILGWU Report and Proceedings of the 20th Convention, 1929*, 101. During the 1920s both the ILGWU and the ACWA had major campaigns to expel members of the TUEL. Where their efforts had been successful, as in Montréal and Toronto, the needle trade activists seemed more willing to embrace the new Canadian union, but in Winnipeg, where members of the left had some influence in the ILGWU, they were less enamoured with the idea of a separate union.

<sup>53</sup>Louise Watson, *She Was Not Afraid, The Biography of Annie Buller* (Toronto 1972), 26; *The Worker*, 18 April 1929.

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first convention, locals had been set up in Toronto, Montréal and Winnipeg.<sup>54</sup> By 1930, the Toronto IUNTW dressmakers local had two full-time organizers, Max Shur, from the cloakmakers, and Annie Buller, from the CPC paper, *The Worker*.<sup>55</sup> In Winnipeg, the IUNTW was active between 1931 and 1935 organizing the large cloak shops of Jacob and Crowley.<sup>56</sup>

In 1929 a change in international communist party policy led the CPC to reorganize the TUEL and, in 1930, to establish its own unions under the newly formed umbrella of the Workers Unity League (WUL).<sup>57</sup> At the first WUL convention held in 1931 the IUNTW affiliated with the new federation. Trade unionists from the Lumber Workers Industrial Union and the Mine Workers Union also joined.<sup>58</sup> In 1933 the Department of Labour reported its membership at 21,253.<sup>59</sup>

The WUL argued the importance of organizing women workers, and in April 1931 set up a women's department "to give central leadership among women workers and wives."<sup>60</sup> The WUL pushed to "elect women workers to District Councils, to place a comrade in charge of women's work, to do research work to develop specific demands for a program of women workers, to work among unemployed women workers and to establish a women's section in the newspaper, 'Unemployed Worker,' put out by the Unemployed Workers Association."<sup>61</sup> The WUL called for a "concentrated campaign to organize such industries as the textile, food, etc., where women are in predominant numbers."<sup>62</sup> However, the CPC was in no position to carry out much of this work.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Attorney Generals Office, CPC files, First Annual Convention of the IUNTW, 10-12 May 1929, PAO.

<sup>55</sup>For a brief history of this period, and a biography of Annie Buller see, Watson, *She Was Not Afraid*, 26.

<sup>56</sup>See J. Mochoruk and D. Webber, "Women in the Winnipeg Garment Trade, 1929-45," in *First Days, Fighting Days; Women in Manitoba History* (Regina 1987) 134-148.

<sup>57</sup>CPC, *Canada's Party of Socialism, History of the C.P.C., 1920-1976* (Toronto 1982), 85; *The Worker*, June 1930. See also Tim Buck Papers, vol. 4, CPC, Resolutions of the Enlarged Plenum of the CPC, February 1931, MG 32, G3, NAC.

<sup>58</sup>According to Tim Buck, by then leader of the CPC, the WUL had 40,000 members in its first four years of existence and led 181 of the 233 strikes which took place between 1933 and 1936. Buck, "The Workers Party," Tim Buck Papers, 1965-70, NAC, 87. By 1933, the WUL had locals of furniture and wood workers, food workers, rail workers, fishermen and canning workers, shoe and leather workers and laundry workers.

<sup>59</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, *Report on Labour Organizations in Canada* (Ottawa 1934).

<sup>60</sup>Ontario, Office of the Attorney General, CPC files, "Memo to District Councils," from WUL, National Women's Department, J. Collins, 22 April 1931.

<sup>61</sup>Ontario, Office of the Attorney General, CPC files, "Memo to District Councils," 22 April 1931.

<sup>62</sup>Resolution of the Enlarged Plenum, CPC, February 1931, Tim Buck Papers, MG28, G3, vol. 4, NAC.

<sup>63</sup>Joan Sangster has pointed out that "the party's trade union strategies also tended to exclude women." Joan Sangster, "The Communist Party and the Women Question," 35.

In the 1920s the Red International of Labour Unions had encouraged Communists everywhere to work within the established trade unions, but because of the low numbers of unionized women and their marginal status in the labour movement, women were often passed by. Then in 1929, when the international Communist policy called for the organizing of "mass delegate meetings from the factory nuclei" of activists, the CPC policy again wrongly assumed a strong radical women's presence in the shops. The CPC's effort to organize women factory workers was weak, as funds and staff to do the job were not available. In 1931 Becky Buhay, a Montréal activist with the IUNTW, appealed to the party to put more time and energy into organizing women workers. She claimed that "in our Party as a whole there is a serious underestimation of women's work. District Committees that set up Women Departments left these departments to themselves, not understanding that the work among the women was the work of the Party as a whole."<sup>64</sup>

Only in the needle trades, where a decade of organizing in the Women's Labour Leagues had paid off, was women's presence strong. Women made up nearly half of the delegates at the second convention of the IUNTW and served as shop chairs in the shops under the IUNTW banner. Still, the efforts to involve women in the leadership was limited to the few CPC activists who were already in the leadership. In the Toronto IUNTW, Leo Ura noted, "Women served on the Executive Boards, on all committees of the Joint Board, but here in Toronto, there were no paid women officials of the Industrial Union."<sup>65</sup>

The Communist-led union's interest in women workers did not arise from any sensitivity to gender issues in the workplace, but rather from their concern for women workers as members of the working class.<sup>66</sup> "Generally speaking one could say that the very structure of the Workers Unity League, of which the IUNTW was an important part, was class struggle, and we paid attention to the lower paid workers. Of course, here women were the majority," explained Joshua Gershman, national organizer for the IUNTW.<sup>67</sup>

The ILGWU campaigns to organize women workers were half-hearted. From the first days of union organizing in 1905, the union had discussed the need to

<sup>64</sup>B. Buhay, "How to Reach the Masses of Working-Class Women," *The Worker*, 17 January 1931.

<sup>65</sup>Interview with Leo Ura, Toronto, 1973.

<sup>66</sup>See Ruth Frager, "Unclanking Vested Interests," and Irving Abella, "Portrait of a Jewish Revolutionary: The Recollections of Joshua Gershman," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 2 (1977), 185-213.

<sup>67</sup>Interview with Joshua Gershman, Toronto, 1986. See also Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks, the Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montréal 1981), 34. See also CPC, *Canada's Party of Socialism, History of the CPC 1920 to 1976* (Toronto 1982); Watson, *She Was Not Afraid*; John Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class During the Great Depression: The Workers Unity League, 1930-1936," PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1984. Tim Buck, leader of the CPC, estimated that the WUL had led 181 of the 233 strikes that took place between 1933 and 1936. Tim Buck, "The Workers Party," 87.

organize women workers, but despite convention calls to bring in women organizers to do the job, little work was actually done. The Montréal dress trade was described by the ILGWU in 1932:

[It] is a considerable industry, but, at this moment it presents practically an unorganizable field as it is employing nearly exclusively French Canadian women. True enough, we have formed already in Montréal the basis for organizing activity among the French-speaking workers by having organized quite a lively branch of French-speaking men and women in the cloak trade. But from this to a concentrated movement to organize all French-speaking people in the dress trade is still a long distance. A movement of that size would require large means and long educational preparatory activity.<sup>68</sup>

In Toronto, where union funds were low, organizing the dress sector was the last item on the ILGWU agenda even though, by 1928, it comprised some 3,000 workers.<sup>69</sup> What appears to have prompted organizational efforts at that time was the rising threat of the recently formed IUNTW.

#### *Organizing the Toronto Dress Trade*

BY 1930 both the IUNTW and the ILGWU were organizing dress shops. Organization began with the male cutters and pressers. H.D. Langer, business agent for the ILGWU, watched the IUNTW organization of the Toronto dressmakers, "they started with the pressers and organized them into a pressers' club which embraces about 80 per cent of the pressers in the dress trade. They have also branched out into the cutters and have about 25 per cent of them organized into a cutters' club." He then assured ILGWU President David Dubinsky, "that is as far as their organized activity has gone but of course, no beneficial results have been obtained for the dressmakers."<sup>70</sup> This was a traditional strategy for organizing in the garment industry because the men were more likely to have some affiliation with working men's associations, which would make them receptive to the unionization efforts. It is also likely that the organizers felt more comfortable with these workers as they themselves were the skilled craftsmen of the industry.<sup>71</sup>

In 1930 and 1931 the fight for the loyalty of the dressmakers raged between the ILGWU and the IUNTW.<sup>72</sup> By the end of 1930, the ILGWU claimed to have 500 members in a newly formed dressmakers local. In early 1931, the two unions held

<sup>68</sup>ILGWU, *Report and Proceedings, 1932*, 47.

<sup>69</sup>ILGWU, *Report and Proceedings of the 19th Convention, 1928*, 34.

<sup>70</sup>H.D. Langer, business agent, Toronto, ILGWU to David Dubinsky, President, ILGWU, 27 June 1933, *Jewish Papers*, Multicultural Society of Ontario, PAO.

<sup>71</sup>In Toronto the ILGWU set up an organizing committee of three men, under the leadership of staff representative Bernard Shane.

<sup>72</sup>This dispute is well documented by Catherine McLeod, "Women in Production: The Toronto Dressmakers Strike of 1931," in Janice Acton, ed., *Women at Work, Ontario 1850-1930* (Toronto 1974), 309-30.

strikes in the trade, offering a show of force to the rival union. The IUNTW called a strike in their Toronto shops on 13 January 1931. According to *The Worker*, approximately 500 dressmakers heeded the call,<sup>73</sup> however, the *Labour Gazette* put their numbers at 200. The *Labour Gazette* reported that a number of workers went out because they thought the ILGWU had called the strike. The strike lasted only a few days, but several men and women were arrested.<sup>74</sup> On 24 February 1931, approximately 80 per cent of the workers in 70 dressmaking shops answered a ILGWU strike call - 1,200 men and 500 women.<sup>75</sup> Over the nine-week strike, little gain was made by the union. The manufacturers themselves were in disarray. Provincial labour representatives were unable to find a manufacturer to speak for their association,<sup>76</sup> and without the co-operation of a trade association there could be little movement on the issue of work conditions. The ILGWU had hoped to capitalize on the anti-Communist sentiment among the workers and the manufacturers, but they were unsuccessful. By the following year the dressmakers were still largely unorganized.

In an analysis of these 1931 strikes in Toronto (ILGWU and IUNTW), Catherine Macleod concludes:

The ILGWU strike call appears to be more a reaction to the Communist gains made among the unskilled, non-unionized needleworkers than an attempt to defend these workers against the oppressive work conditions of the time. The fact that the Communist demands were adopted by the ILGWU in its strike programme and that it hurriedly organized the previously neglected dressmakers point to that conclusion.<sup>77</sup>

The IUNTW used a similar organizing strategy: they first organized the men. However, rather than call a general strike in the Toronto market, they organized shop by shop. By the mid-1930s the IUNTW had successfully established contracts with several Toronto manufacturers. The Toronto ILGWU hoped a report outlining the IUNTW's success among the pressers and cutters in the dress trade would cause the New York office to move to support their own effort to unionize the dressmakers. Langer expressed his concern, "We have of late become quite

<sup>73</sup>*The Worker*, 17 January 1931.

<sup>74</sup>*Labour Gazette*, February 1931, 130-1; *Globe* 14 January 1931.

<sup>75</sup>Financial support for the ILGWU was significant; over \$2,000 from Toronto fraternal organizations, \$3,500 from New York locals, \$1,100 from the Montréal Joint Board, and staff support from the International. Sadie Reisch, an organizer with the New York branch of the Women's Trade Union League and activist from local 22 of the New York dressmakers, was sent to Toronto.

<sup>76</sup>*Globe*, 27 February 1931. A few Toronto dress manufacturers signed an agreement, 31 January 1931. See also *Labour Gazette*, April 1931, 477.

<sup>77</sup>C. Macleod, "Women in Production: the Toronto Dressmakers Strike of 1931," in J. Acton, ed., *Women at Work*, 324. For a slightly different version of these two strikes see Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks* (Montréal 1981), 282-4.



A gathering of left wing activists and members of the IUNTW in Montreal, Park Avenue, 1930. Newspaper in front row - *The Freiheit*. The Archives identifies this photograph as a meeting of the IUNTW, however, the presence of Tim Buck suggests that it was not exclusively a IUNTW members. Photo courtesy of Multicultural Collection, Ontario Archives. Photo identification places Fischel Goldman, Norman Freed, Diane Meslin in front row; Morris Kogan, Mrs. Levine, Joe Freidman, Chanah Novinsky, Gertie Blugerman, Dave Biderman, Alex Biderman, Moishe Goldstein, Paul Herzog, Cagan, Miller in 2nd row; Harry Levine, Dora Eckel, Norman Koza, Frank Leiberman, Max Shur, Tim Buck in third row; William Sidney, Louis Guberman, Misha Cohen, Louis Hyman (U.S. representative), Sam Leiberman, J.B. Salsberg, Harry Guralnick in 4th row.



*Second Convention of the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers, Toronto, 1931. Photo courtesy of Max Dolgoy. Photographs located in Multicultural Collection, Ontario Archives. Seated left to right: 1. ?, 2. Norman Koza, 3. ?, 4. Louis Shore, 5. Jenny Morgenstern, 6. Annie Buller, 7. Tom Ewen, 8. International representative, 9. Max Dolgoy (President), 10. Meyer Klig (Secretary), 11. Pearl Wedro, (furriers union), 12. Joe Gershman (organizer), 13. Jimmy Blugerman (tailor's union), 14. Louis Goodis; 2nd row: 1. Kiva Goldman, 2. Paula Wolodovsky, 3. Sarah Sniderman, 4. Beckie Luft, 5. Sam Quarter, 6. ?, 7. Joe Snider, 8. ?, 9. ?, 10. ?, 11. Annie Eisner, 12. Oscar Ryan, 13. William Sidney, 14. ?, 15. Sophie Lagoza (New York); 3rd row: 1. ?, 2. ?, 3. Sam Eisner, 4. J.B. Salsberg, 5. Dora Eckel, 6. Sam Carr, 7. Chanah Novinsky, 8. Bessie Klig, 9. ?, 10. Helen Shiff, 11. Louis Guberman, 12. Joe Minster, 13. Sam Kagan, 14. Muni Erlich, 15. ?; 4th row: 1. Leo Robin, 2. Phillip Halpern, 3. Celia Gershman, 4. Bella Eisen, 5. Sarah Nakelski, 6. ?, 7. Mrs. Shur, 8. ?, 9. Sarah Silver, 10. Rae Watson, 11. Joe Meslin, 12. Fanny Kalinsky.*

concerned about the activities of the Pressers' Club, for it has given some prestige to the Industrial Union and it would be a good strategy to have a group that would function as Local 72 to counteract the action by the Industrial Union."<sup>78</sup> But Dubinsky continued to ignore the Toronto office pleas for assistance. By the Fall of 1933 the Toronto ILGWU office reported that, "We are faced with a growing menace of an Industrial Union Movement that will certainly make great inroad into our territory unless checked. The Industrial Union, which has been a paper organization for a number of years, has recently obtained material strength in our market. They have concentrated on the dress trade with some measure of success."<sup>79</sup>

By 1934, when the IUNTW conducted a successful strike in 70 Toronto dress shops, involving 1,500 workers, 60 per cent of them women, the union was fairly well entrenched in the Toronto market. The agreement, with 45 manufacturers, gave wage increases of between 10 per cent and 40 per cent, a reduction of hours work from 50 to 44 hours per week, and the setting up of shop committees to settle piece-work prices with the manufacturers and handle all other disputes with them.<sup>80</sup> The agreement was renewed in 1935, after the IUNTW took 1,450 workers out of the contract shops on 18 January 1935. It won within a few days.<sup>81</sup>

The ILGWU, on the other hand, had neglected any organizational follow-up to its earlier efforts. By March 1932, Toronto ILGWU officials were reporting to New York that of the 1,173 members of the dressmakers local, 775 owed over 52 weeks' union dues and many had "practically only paid for one week, and that is when they took out their book."<sup>82</sup> They warned, "It is up to us then to see what we can do in order not to let the Dressmakers die because they are unable to pay the salary of a business agent."<sup>83</sup> Still the International did nothing. The Canadian locals were frustrated with this lack of response and their anger is plain in the letters Toronto ILGWU unionists Sam Kraisman and Hyman Langer wrote to the head office. They compared the service given by the ACWA to their Canadian members to the ILGWU's lack of interest and attention. "We can not help quoting this difference in attitude. Our membership of necessity construe the lack of attention of the general office as an attitude of indifference and as treatment meted out to stepchildren."<sup>84</sup> While lack of Canadian control over union efforts was certainly part of the organizing problem, the general trade union neglect of sectors where women worked would not be

<sup>78</sup>H.D. Langer to David Dubinsky, President, ILGWU, 27 June 1933. ILGWU Toronto Joint Board, Jewish Papers, Multicultural Society of Ontario, PAO.

<sup>79</sup>S. Kraisman and H.D. Langer to D. Dubinsky, 7 September 1933. Jewish papers, Multicultural Society of Ontario, PAO.

<sup>80</sup>*Labour Gazette*, February 1934, 193; *Mail and Empire*, 22 January 1934.

<sup>81</sup>*Labour Gazette*, February 1935, 103, 203; *Evening Telegram*, 19 January 1935.

<sup>82</sup>Secretary, Toronto Joint Board, Cloakmakers Union to David Dubinsky, 28 March 1932, David Dubinsky Correspondence, ILGWU Archives, Cornell University. (Hereafter ILGWU Archives.)

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, Sam Kraisman, Hyman Langer to David Dubinsky, 7 September 1933.



solved by placing "a man in Canada" as the ILGWU had proposed during its earlier efforts to organize women in the cloak trade. So the Canadian locals of the ILGWU were frustrated as they stood by and watched the IUNTW organize the Toronto dressmakers.

### *Organization in Montréal*

IN MONTRÉAL, where most dress shops were located,<sup>85</sup> the situation of the dressmakers presented even more of a challenge to the unions. In 1928, when the organization campaigns began, Québec had 1,375 men and 4,296 women wage workers in the womens' factory clothing industry. The Montréal market grew in leaps and bounds during the 1920s. The work force was primarily French Canadian women and Jewish men and women. (In 1931, 969 of the 1,002 cutters in the Québec garment industry were men, 940 of them were Jewish. Whereas 11,532 of the 12,913 machine operators were women, 9,481 of them were French and 1,248 were Jews. The numbers of workers from other ethnic groups were insignificant by comparison.<sup>86</sup>

The role of the state and the development of Catholic unions in the rural areas posed a problem to the international unions in Québec. Right-wing nationalist control of government made for a harsh climate for Communists to organize in.<sup>87</sup> Québec historian Andrée Lévesque has assessed the conditions in Québec:

Les conséquences de l'anticommunisme ne peuvent être sous-estimées. C'est en tenant compte du climat de clandestinité, de défensive, d'incertitude, qu'il faut examiner la lutte syndicale, l'organisation des chômeurs, les railllements de travailleurs, les conférences publiques organisées par communistes et les sociaux-démocrates.<sup>88</sup>

Neither the ILGWU or the IUNTW had an easy job of organizing ahead of them. Any organizational drive would require trade unionists to be fluent in French, and for the largely Jewish union bureaucracy in both the ILGWU and the IUNTW the task seemed insuperable. Despite appeals from Montréal locals, the ILGWU put off the job until 1936.

The ILGWU reluctance left the field open to the IUNTW who, despite their largely Jewish bureaucracy, took on the task of organizing the French Canadian

<sup>85</sup> *Report on the Womens' Factory Clothing Industry in Canada*, 1928 (Ottawa 1930).

<sup>86</sup> Canada, *Census*, vol. VII, Table 44: Occupations and Industries, 335-8.

<sup>87</sup> See Andrée Lévesque *Virage à Gauche Interdit, les communistes, les socialistes et leur ennemis au Québec, 1929-1939* (Montréal 1984), 52-6, 61-9 for a discussion of CPC activities in Montréal. See also Marcel Fournier, *Communisme et Anticommunisme au Québec, 1920-1950* (Montréal 1979); Allen Gottheil, *Les Juif Progressistes au Québec* (Montréal 1988).

<sup>88</sup> Lévesque, *Virage à Gauche Interdit*, 150.

dressmakers.<sup>89</sup> At the first convention of the IUNTW in Montréal on 10-12 May 1929, reports from Local 4, Montréal dressmakers, suggest that organization began with a small dressmakers' club formed in February 1928 by cutters who were left activists in the ILGWU.<sup>90</sup> By September that year they had formed a local of the IUNTW which appointed Frank Breslow, a cutter, as delegate to the founding convention.<sup>91</sup> In 1929 Joshua Gershman, a furrier and party activist, was sent to Montréal as general organizer for the IUNTW; by 1930 he was secretary general for the union. He recalled, "When I first came to Montréal, I went to ... the Party office. There were unemployed people sleeping all over the office. From them we set up the union. ... In Montréal shops we would form shop committees from sections of the shop. If only operators and pressers were interested then we used to meet. From them we would hope to organize the whole shop."<sup>92</sup>

The IUNTW was active in Montréal from 1928 to 1934, conducting individual shop strikes with limited success, and it was reported as having 1,550 members in 1932.<sup>93</sup> In response to the resistance of the dress manufacturers, the IUNTW developed the tactic of calling out key workers in shops where it had support, thus bringing the whole shop to a halt.<sup>94</sup>

In both the ILGWU and the IUNTW, Jewish workers played active roles. In the IUNTW Jewish women appear to have played an energetic role, perhaps because it offered a social life for many of them. "In Montréal when I first joined the union," recalled Eva Shanoff, "we had meetings, we had parties, we had all kinds of things ... It was a very interesting time for me. I really enjoyed myself."<sup>95</sup> The IUNTW was much smaller than the other unions but most of its members knew one another from other contexts within the Jewish community. In both Montréal and Toronto, Jewish left-wingers were active both in the Communist Party and in the Jewish Labour League. In Erna Paris' study of the Jewish left she describes the world of Jewish communists as a "very special place."<sup>96</sup> Much of that proletarian experience was

<sup>89</sup>Montréal Joint Board to Sam Kraisman, 21 September 1932, Montréal Joint Board, David Dubinsky Correspondence, 1931-34, ILGWU Archives. For an account of these years see E. Dumas, *The Bitter Thirties in Quebec* (Montréal 1975), 43-69.

<sup>90</sup>The pattern of organization beginning with the skilled male workers was common to both the ILGWU and the IUNTW.

<sup>91</sup>*First Annual Convention of the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers, May 10-12, 1929.*

<sup>92</sup>Interview with Joshua Gershman, Toronto, 1986.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup>Interview with Eva Shanoff, Toronto, 1984.

<sup>96</sup>"Many people worked for the Party during the day and socialized only with their communist friends in the evening. They sent their children to special schools (after the regular day in the public-school system), where they were taught the proper "line" on Russia and Jewish history ... The adults sang in their own choir, formed their own brass band, had their own dance company and produced their own theatre, which was usually about their particular

shaped by work in the garment industry. A 1936 study, "Montreal Jews in Industry" by L. Rosenberg, estimated that 28.68 per cent of the clothing industry work force was Jewish. They were concentrated in specific jobs, however 71.7 per cent of the cutters and 50.9 per cent of all tailors and tailoresses were Jewish.<sup>97</sup> Given dominance in the skilled crafts, it is little wonder they played a dominant role in the unions. More problematic however, is the question of the participation of French Canadian women in these unions. Jewish men and women in the social democratic left who were likely to be in the ILGWU had common cultural networks to draw upon, but the French Canadian workers' community base was predominantly Catholic and anti-union. The challenge of the Montréal unions was to move beyond the traditionally receptive left-wing Jewish community to recruit the French *midinettes*, a stumbling block for both the ILGWU and the IUNTW. In 1932, the ILGWU reported, "The Montréal dress trade is a considerable industry, but, at this moment, it presents practically an unorganizable field as it is employing nearly exclusively French Canadian women."<sup>98</sup>

The social aspect of union activities appealed to many of the young single people in the shops, and for some the relationships they established there went beyond the union. Issy Shanoff said of his future wife, "We were both active at that time in the union, weekends and evenings. We used to have meetings till one or two o'clock in the morning. So we used to see each other, then we started courting."<sup>99</sup> During the initial years of the IUNTW's presence much of the social and political activism was limited to the Jewish community.<sup>100</sup> However, during the 1934 general strike in Montréal, French Canadian women did become active. In Winnipeg and in Toronto many needleworkers in the union were Gentiles. It is likely that something more than the attraction of social activities and cultural connections motivated the young women to join.

Like their counterparts in the traditional unions, Communist leaders saw organizing women workers as problematic and particularly so in Montréal where

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proletarian experience." Erna Paris, *Jews; An Account of Their Experience in Canada* (Toronto 1980), 146.

<sup>97</sup>L. Rosenberg, "Montréal Jews in Industry," *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* (Montréal), 17 January 1936, 7. Judith Seidel estimated that in 1938, "labour unions of various branches of the needle trades are largely composed of Jews... In Montreal the ILGWU is made up roughly of 45 percent Jewish members; the AWCA about 60 percent Jewish members." Judith Seidel, "The Development and Social Adjustment of the Jewish Community in Montreal," MA thesis, McGill University, 1939, 178.

<sup>98</sup>ILGWU, *Report and Proceedings of the 21st Convention*, 1932.

<sup>99</sup>Interview Issy Shanoff, Toronto, 1984. Similar stories were told by other informants.

<sup>100</sup>Because many of the workers lived close to the shops, their work, union and cultural lives were integrated. Ruth Frager has shown how the interests of the Jewish working-class community and the socialist vision espoused by the CPC were closely linked during this period. Ruth Frager, "Unclouing Vested Interests: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1986.

the dressmakers were predominantly French speaking. "When I came to Montreal in 1929 as an IUNTW organizer," Gershman recalled, "we didn't have one unified craft union. The operators, finishers, drapers and pressers were women, and we didn't insist that they merge with the cutters, the men. We concentrated our efforts on the women particularly. There were a number of women on the executive and they helped to organize."<sup>101</sup> As a result, the union was able to involve a large number of Jewish women in union activity. Gershman explained why this was possible:

The shop committee was the basis of our organization. This was the medium through which we reached out to the women. We gave them the initiative in forming the union. When everyone in the shop had joined our union we called a shop meeting. We had a shop committee elected, then our executive of the union were representatives from the shops. The shops elected shop chairladies and grievances were reported to her, then she reported it to the union. If it was necessary we called a shop meeting to see what to do.<sup>102</sup>

However, the IUNTW had some difficulty attracting French Canadian workers into the union. In Montréal, IUNTW executive member Fred Labelle, a presser, helped to organize the French women. With the assistance of a French-speaking organizer, they met with some success. "We solidified women into a militant front," recalled Gershman. In an attempt to attract French Canadian women, the IUNTW set up "social clubs" where the women could learn about the union. French Canadian women were paid a dollar less a week than Jewish women, which widened the already large gap between them.<sup>103</sup> The fight for the hearts and minds of the French-Canadian dressmakers was not easy. "The very same women who were militants in the shop were, at home, under the influence of the Church and the priest. In one shop strike, where we won an increase for the finishers, drapers and operators, we got a raise of \$2.50 a week. Then on Monday, the women came back to the office to tell us they were going to give the money back to the manufacturers because the priest had told them at Sunday mass that the money was sinful money. This is the kind of thing we had to fight against."<sup>104</sup>

The ILGWU had been seen as a "Jewish Union" because its head was Jewish, and now the IUNTW reflected this same ethnic bias.<sup>105</sup> However, by the strike in 1934, French-Canadian women were included in the union. The ethnic tensions are described by "Ruth," a Jewish activist in the Montréal clothing trades:

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Joshua Gershman, Toronto, 1986.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Anne Bobb, "Working Among French Canadians is Our Central Task," *Young Worker*, 21 May 1934, as cited in Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class."

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Joshua Gershman, Toronto, 1986.

<sup>105</sup> For a discussion of the role of ethnicity in Québec unions see Alexandra Szacka, "Fragmentation du Mouvement Ouvrier: la Situation des Immigrant Juifs au Québec, 1920-1940," MA thesis, Laval University, 1981.

Ça a toujours été comme ça, une nationalité contre une autre. Les gens devraient comprendre que l'ennemi ce n'est jamais un autre travailleur, c'est l'usine, le boss. ... Au début, les filles Canadiennes-Françaises ne me supportaient pas parce que j'étais Juive et le boss était aussi Juif. Moi, je disais: Regardez-moi, je gagne à peine plus que vous, je suis ouvrière comme vous, je suis plus proche de vous que du boss. Lui c'est une autre sorte de Juif. (Je gagnais plus parce que ce n'était pas un travail à la pièce. J'avais beaucoup d'expérience et je changeais souvent de job, et je demandais plus. C'est comme ça que j'avais un peu plus que d'autres) ... Parfois, j'aimais mieux les Canadiennes-Françaises que les Juifs, parce que ces dernières parlaient trop au boss. Parfois, après les réunions d'employés, le lendemain, le boss savait tout. Quel qu'un allait tout lui raconter, ce n'était pas nécessairement les Juifs, ça pouvait être quelqu'un de n'importe quelle nationalité.<sup>106</sup>

Both Jewish bosses and French Canadian workers were suspicious of the active Jewish women, yet friendships between French and Jewish workers did develop.<sup>107</sup> Ethnic conflict was often fuelled by outside interests, as one French Canadian woman described:

It [ethnic prejudice] was on both sides. Because I remember when we were on the picket line during the strike, every day there was a priest passing on the street, telling us "little girls you are in sin working for Jewish people, you know you can have better jobs going to working for madame, for woman, French Canadian who need help in the house." But they ignored them ... yes.<sup>108</sup>

While the ILGWU approached the difficult Montréal situation with great caution,<sup>109</sup> in August of 1934 the IUNTW decided to take some 1,500 dressmakers into the streets.<sup>110</sup> The newspapers estimated strike strength at 3,000 to 4,000 workers, although the IUNTW claimed a membership of only 1,600 workers, 60 per cent of whom were women.<sup>111</sup> After several years of organizing dress shops through individual strikes, they felt they had the support to call a general strike. The IUNTW demanded higher wages (a minimum wage scale ranging from \$12.50 a week for finishers to \$30 a week for cutters), a 40-hour week and union conditions in the

<sup>106</sup> As quoted in A. Szacka, "Fragmentation du Mouvement Ouvrier," 125. See also the comments of Lea Roback in Allan Gottheil, *Les Juifs Progressistes au Québec*, 80-5.

<sup>107</sup> Interviews with Jewish women workers and French Canadian dressmakers show all reported having friends, and even boyfriends, from outside of their own ethnic groups. One Montréal dressmaker reported, "during the strike, one French girl who participated in the strike ... we both got arrested and both stayed in jail together. After the strike we continued our friendship together." Interview, Montréal, 1984.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Montréal dressmaker, 1990.

<sup>109</sup> The ILGWU hoped to take advantage of the Price Spreads Commission publicity. See *Montreal Star*, 29 August 1934; Bernard Shane to David Dubinsky, 14 March 1934, David Dubinsky Correspondence, 1933-34, ILGWU Archives.

<sup>110</sup> This strike is well documented by E. Dumas, *The Bitter Thirties*, 48-55.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Joshua Gershman, Toronto, 1986.

dress shops. The dispute ended with agreements in some of the smaller dress shops; no more than a partial victory could be claimed, and on 25 September, after 20,000 lost working days, the IUNTW called off the strike.<sup>112</sup>

This strike in Montréal took place at the same time as the Québec government, under labour minister Joseph Arcand and under pressure from the Catholic community and from the Catholic-led unions, was drawing up legislation that would ensure that it set conditions in any trade.<sup>113</sup> The Degrees Act became law on 30 April 1934. This legislation pushed many unions to act in a more conciliatory manner, but the CPC-led union viewed such compliance as class collaboration. The union leadership made a tactical error in rejecting the Québec minister of labour's proposal for arbitration early in the strike without consulting the membership. This cost them support. The ILGWU quickly accused the IUNTW of being unrealistic and of not having the workers' interests at heart. The ILGWU's willingness to use arbitration made it a more expedient choice for dress manufacturers.

In a letter to Dubinsky in August 1934, Bernard Shane, Montréal ILGWU staff representative, prefaced his description of the ILGWU's dealings with Greenberg, the arbitrator: "It is bad for me to write in this manner on a strike that is so wholly justified, only that it fell into such hands."<sup>114</sup> It was likely that arbitration would have gone against the Communist-led union, but its visible antagonism to the process of arbitration was used against the membership. The IUNTW was no match for staunch anti-union manufacturers and the ILGWU combined. Again the workers, mainly women, were left in the middle of both the dispute with the manufacturers and the dispute between left-wing and right-wing unionism.<sup>115</sup>

The IUNTW never recovered from its defeat in this strike. "Some 250 cutters lost their jobs, and 300 Jewish pressers were out of work soon after the strike, their places filled by French Canadian women, and over 1,000 Jewish girls have been completely excluded from the trade and the chances are that they shall never be able to come back since the employers blame them for all their troubles," Shane

<sup>112</sup>*Labour Gazette*, October 1934, 905.

<sup>113</sup>On the development of the Degrees Act see, Marie-Louis Beaulieu, *Les Conflits de Droit dans les Rapports Collectifs du Travail*, (Laval 1955), 136-9; Gérard Hébert, "L'extension juridique des conventions collectives dans l'industrie de la construction dans la province de Québec, 1934-1962," PhD thesis, McGill University, 1963, 152, 186-8.

<sup>114</sup>Shane continued:

I was in touch with Mr. Greenberg who acted as impartial chairman at our conferences. He was advisor to the dress employers in their conferences with the cutters. Mr. Greenberg is now the manager of the Silk Mills Credit Association and he has a great influence over the manufacturers of cloaks and dresses. It was on my advice given to Greenberg that the dress manufacturers offered the cutters an increase of 20% for all cutters receiving \$20.00 and less, 10% up to \$30.00 and 5% above that, a union shop for the cutters and all that goes with it.

Shane to Dubinsky, 28 August 1934, David Dubinsky Correspondence, ILGWU Archives.

<sup>115</sup>Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class," 496-501.

reported to Dubinsky.<sup>116</sup> Of the twelve arrests reported on 29 August 1934, eleven were women.<sup>117</sup> Eva Shanoff was one of the women blacklisted after the general strike. "I was in jail for two weeks during the strike. And when I came out, I could not get a job and that is why I came here [to Toronto], because Gershman told me to come here, and I got a job."<sup>118</sup> Many of the blacklisted Jewish women wore crosses around their necks when they went back into the Montréal shops to look for work.<sup>119</sup>

Shane saw his opportunity to move into the dress trade. After the defeat of the strike, the ILGWU pulled the more conservative among the male cutters into the union<sup>120</sup> and then, "with the cutters organized, we now had an 'in' to the dress industry. The skeptics, however, said we had reached the end of the line. You've organized the cutters," they said, "but you'll never organize girls — especially girls in the Province of Québec, (and 90 per cent of the workers in the industry were girls)."<sup>121</sup> But as Lea Roback, an ILGWU organizer, reported, the five years of IUNTW efforts had made the job easier for the union:

The ILGWU came in, it took over from the Workers Unity League, [IUNTW] and although the WUL didn't win the strike, as one considers it, but they did win something. The workers had developed a militancy that they didn't know existed. For the first time there was this militancy of the French girls. In spite of the fact the clergy had gone all out with speeches and the Church! I mean they had Sunday meetings in the Church to convince the girls not to join the union.<sup>122</sup>

### *The IUNTW "Walkover" to the International, 1935-1936*

IN 1935 organizing in the dress industry was further complicated by a change in CPC policy calling for full organizational unity of the Canadian trade union movement. This led to the merger of those industrial unions under the Workers Unity League and the international unions.<sup>123</sup> "The Party wanted we should broaden out and unite with other unions. They didn't want to at the rank and file [level]," reported one

<sup>116</sup>Shane to Dubinsky, 17 September 1934; Shane to Dubinsky, 5 September 1934, David Dubinsky Correspondence, ILGWU Archives.

<sup>117</sup>*Montreal Star*, 29 August 1934.

<sup>118</sup>Interview with Eva Shanoff, Toronto, 1984.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.* See also E. Dumas, *The Bitter Thirties*.

<sup>120</sup>At the 1934 ILGWU convention informal talks were held between Dubinsky and conservative cutters and pressers from Montréal to plan a strategy to take over the dressmakers. The instigators drew their support from the Jewish social democrats in the Bund and The Workman's Circle. Interview with Issy Glouberman, Montréal, 1985.

<sup>121</sup>*Souvenir Album, 1937-1952*, ILGWU Local 262, Montréal.

<sup>122</sup>Interview with Lea Roback, Montréal, 15 December 1972.

<sup>123</sup>See CPC, *Canada's Party of Socialism*, 100. For a discussion of the policy see Buck Papers, "A Democratic Front for Canada," 1938, NAC.

party activist in the IUNTW, "but the party said we had to."<sup>124</sup> It is interesting to note that there is some irony to such a decision, for the IUNTW made much of their shop-floor democratic stand at the same time they followed through on a top-down decision made at the international level, a result of international changes in Communist policy, to amalgamate the separate "red" unions (such as IUNTW) with the international unions (such as ILGWU).

In the needle trades the implementation of the "walkover" depended upon the strength of the local IUNTW relative to the international union, and each city dealt with the decision differently. In Toronto, when the WUL disbanded the IUNTW, the ILGWU had to negotiate a settlement with the IUNTW<sup>125</sup> as the IUNTW had been successful in organizing the Toronto dress trade. But in Montréal, after the defeat of the 1934 strike, Shane and the ILGWU had the Montréal IUNTW in the palm of their hands.<sup>126</sup> Eventually the members of the Dressmakers Union (IUNTW) were forced to join the ILGWU on an individual basis. According to Gershman, "Every member of the IUNTW who went back into the ILGWU couldn't find work because the bosses knew they were Communists. This was particularly true for the Jewish girls who were all in the IUNTW."<sup>127</sup>

Bernard Shane recalled that even after the 1937 organization of the dressmakers into the ILGWU, "the struggle was far from over. There remained the fight to enforce contract terms. The workers overwhelmingly approved the agreement. It was not the Guild<sup>128</sup> so much as the Communists who made reinforcement difficult. They organized groups within the union to foment dissension. It took six months before the union could actually enforce the minimum wage scales set by the impartial chairman and other points in the agreement."<sup>129</sup> A dressmaker in the left of the ILGWU in those years, however, presented a different perspective:

I know that the bosses were Jewish and the union were Jewish and the workers were not Jewish and they were good supporters of the union, even then. I know the communists were the ones who really worked hard to organize that union and, ah, we said that they wanted to destroy the union to work against the union. That's not true, they never did. They were the

<sup>124</sup>Interview with Fagel Dordick, Toronto, December 1983.

<sup>125</sup>Interview with Max Dolgoy, Toronto, 1983. Max Dolgoy was hired as business agent in Toronto, and later another left winger, Leo Uhra was hired. Interview with Joe Gershman, Toronto, 1986. For the ILGWU account of this process see H. Langer, "How Toronto Dressmakers Rejoined ILGWU," *Justice*, 15 August 1936, 9.

<sup>126</sup>Joshua Gershman to Bernard Shane, Montréal Joint Council, ILGWU, 17 October 1935, Dubinsky Correspondence, 1934-39, ILGWU Archives. See also Jenny Brenner and Mike Kussin to David Dubinsky, 29 November 1935; David Dubinsky to Bernard Shane, Montréal Joint Council, 22 October 1935.

<sup>127</sup>Interview with Joe Gershman, Toronto, 1986.

<sup>128</sup>The Dressmakers Guild was the organization of dress manufacturers who signed the agreement with the ILGWU.

<sup>129</sup>Bernard Shane, *Les Midinettes, 1937-1962* (Montréal 1962), 119.



ones who worked the hardest for the union. Oh, yes. It is false in the history of the union to say that the communists wanted to destroy the union. They were the ones to object to the increase of dues. We were expelled on that because we said there are workers who are not organized, go and get them so you get more money. Don't get it from us."<sup>130</sup>

Many workers who compared their earlier experience in the IUNTW to the ILGWU found the latter less democratic. Nonetheless, the democratic spirit of the IUNTW carried on for several years within the Toronto ILGWU. As Max Dolgoy recalled, "We used to have a mass meeting to elect a delegate to a convention. A mass meeting of the entire industry, of all the shops, to elect a delegate. Today you have no local meetings. It's the elected upper strata, they carry on."<sup>131</sup>

For the women in the IUNTW, who by then identified strongly with the Industrial Union, the top-down decision of the Workers Unity League to disband the Red unions was hard to accept. Even for activists at the centre of IUNTW negotiations with the ILGWU, the decision was hard to swallow. Eva Shanoff recalled the walkover, "It was still the Industrial Union when I came here, [from Montréal], and shortly after, we joined the International. And believe me, that was a black day for me, for ... most of us."<sup>132</sup> Another women activist said, "It was like losing a dream."<sup>133</sup>

Even after the IUNTW walkover to the International, the communist activists continued to fight for shop-floor unionism. Workers were aware of the ongoing conflict between the left and the bureaucrats within the ILGWU as it spilled over into its organizing drive in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Members who criticized the ILGWU were labelled Communists and expelled from the union. A Montréal dressmaker expelled from the ILGWU remembered the times:

They [the communists] wanted to have better conditions, they thought that the contracts coming were, you know, too low, and they thought that the union were making too many compromises to the bosses, and it's true too. It became a union for to protect the bosses. So I work in shop, for the same dress that we make we were paid a dollar twenty, in the other shop we were paid eighty cents, so I raised that. I stood up [at a union meeting] and I said, "Why is this? That in that shop you pay only eighty for the same dress in the other shop you pay one dollar and twenty cents?" "Well," he said, "in the other shop the boss can not afford to pay more." I said, "Well, close his shop! I want to work for a boss who can afford to pay me. I'm not there to make a servitude to the boss."<sup>134</sup>

<sup>130</sup>Interview with Montréal dressmaker, Montréal, 1989.

<sup>131</sup>Interview with Max Dolgoy, Toronto, September 1983.

<sup>132</sup>Interview with Eva Shanoff, Toronto, 1984.

<sup>133</sup>Interview with Joshua Gershman, Toronto, 1986.

<sup>134</sup>Interview with Montréal dressmaker, Montréal, 1989.

*Women and the IUNTW*

IT IS DIFFICULT to get a clear picture of how many women were organized by the IUNTW. At the first national convention of the IUNTW in 1929 the union claimed a membership of approximately 1,200 workers from cloak, dress and related industries, but figures for the years 1930 to 1935 are based on estimates from informants, as the IUNTW never reported their numbers to the Department of Labour. (See table in appendix.) Evidence from newspaper reports at times when the union was on strike suggest support went beyond the small group of Communist activists working in the dress trade in Montréal and Toronto.

If women were more active in the IUNTW it was likely because the union offered women workers a structure that was more responsive to their shop-floor concerns. Women's position in the labour process in the dress shops influenced their union demands, and a union that could speak directly to the issues that directly affected women in the day-to-day work in the shop was the union that would be most effective in organizing the women. Was the IUNTW such a union?

We must examine the possible role of trade union structure to see if the CPC-led union was able to be more responsive to workers on the shop floor. The IUNTW claimed that the core of its structure was the shop committee. This was a revival of the shop-delegate system originally espoused by the TUEL. In July 1930, *The Worker* reported that:

The IUNTW has completely liquidated the old structure that to a large extent retarded the growth and development of our union. The old structure of Locals and Joint Boards do not make the shop the bosses for our union activity. The shop delegate system will initiate activity in the shop, will develop a leadership, will organize shop committees in every shop and the shop delegates council will be the powerful organism of the union and will administrate the affairs of the union. The shop delegate system will be the rank and file leaders of the union.<sup>135</sup>

Was the central role of the shop-delegate system a significant factor in the success of the IUNTW? To accurately answer this question we would need more concrete evidence that the shop-floor structure was in fact in place in the dress shops, but there is contradictory evidence concerning the extent of the shop delegate system in the IUNTW. My informants suggested that much of the early organizing in the IUNTW used cutters' and pressers' clubs, and that union meetings continued to be divided on craft lines. Later, as the union gained members in all of the crafts, union meetings involved the whole shop. The IUNTW shop-committee meetings allowed semiskilled and unskilled workers, mainly women, to have some say in work distribution, prices and speed-up.

How different was this structure from the ILGWU's? The ILGWU claimed to have price committees in place in the shops under their jurisdiction, but they did

<sup>135</sup>*The Worker*, 26 July 1930.

not establish shop committees, and price committees were strictly limited to negotiation of prices for piece-work and much of the day-to-day work of the union was handled by business agents.<sup>136</sup>

The IUNTW was able to organize the dressmakers in both Montréal and Toronto, despite ethnic conflicts which existed in the shops, but not because the IUNTW had a strong policy of organizing women. Its success was more the result of three factors. First, the international unions had made little effort to organize the dressmakers prior to the CPC-led drives. Second, the presence of a strong group of left-wing activists within the Jewish communities of both Montréal and Toronto gave the IUNTW a base from which to begin their unionization drive. Third, the nature of the IUNTW's union structure was likely more effective in drawing women into the union as it was centred in the shop.

### *Conclusion*

AFTER THE WALKOVER of the Communist unions, once again it became hard for left-wing activists to persuade the right of the importance of their programme. The international union moved toward a centralized structure and, although left-wing unionists still had some say in the dress shops in some places, the bureaucrats of the union again held control. In the end, the ideology of business unionism had been strengthened by inter-union rivalry, the decision of the CPC to disband the IUNTW, the experience of extreme exploitation that the Depression brought and by the state's interventionist moves. Perhaps just as important, at least in retrospect, was the timing of the return to the internationals, for it coincided with the move of the state into the affairs of trade union collective bargaining.

From 1933 onwards, the collaboration of the unions with the manufacturers speeded up. The Canadian government's new role as industrial arbitrator made institutionalization of relations in the needle trades possible. The international union again moved to expel left-wing activists, but the events of the period were much more than a simple playing out of left-and right-wing forces in the needle trades unions.

The inter-union struggles of the early 1930s served as a catalyst for organizing women workers in the dress sector, but most of the political manoeuvring went on in a domain that excluded women. Although some effort was made by the traditional unions to organize women, their presence in the union bureaucracy was limited. Because of this, the move away from shop-floor unionism toward industry-wide collective bargaining that occurred during this period has a far-reaching

<sup>136</sup>The ILGWU did not have any organization in the dress shops in Montréal until after the IUNTW disbanded. In Toronto they were not able to keep the dress local going after the 1931 strike. It is not possible to directly compare the dress shops organized by the IUNTW and those organized by the ILGWU and in the cloak shops organized by the ILGWU: the nature of the labour process is quite different from that in the dress shops and the ratio of men to women workers is also different.

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impact on womens' position in the clothing unions. For, despite the promise the IUNTW offered, the end result of the political battles between the Communists and the ILGWU was the assignment of women to a peripheral position in union decision making. The Communist-led unions, such as the IUNTW, which favoured returning control of the labour process and decision-making to the shop floor, was strategically useful to women workers. As a result, the defeat of Communism in the union movement was more than a simple defeat of a political faction: it marked the end of a form of unionism which drew the dressmakers into trade-union activism.

To understand the IUNTW experience of the 1930s in gendered terms is to see how a rank-and-file union structure temporarily offered women an active place in the union movement.<sup>137</sup> With the increased control by the ILGWU in the dress shops, more bureaucratic forms of union structure gained dominance and women were gradually marginalized again. Through sensitizing ourselves to the potential inclusiveness or exclusiveness of trade union structures we can become more aware of their gender assumptions and the effects such assumptions have on exclusion of trade union members from the potential of activism within the union. The portrayal of trade union history must be more than a description of the various party lines of the bureaucrats who lead it. If we want to understand how trade union structures have affected women's participation levels, then we need to pay close attention to the structures implicit or explicit in the ideology of the leadership.

The IUNTW sought to organize workers into a union structure which focused on the shop rather than the craft. While this structure was not consciously developed to make the union more accessible to women workers, it had that effect.

In the dress industry, the nature of the labour process suggested a form of union organization which more adequately appeared in the IUNTW than in the ILGWU, where the union bureaucracy had grown out of an earlier era of craft-based unionism, made up of male workers. By the late 1930s none of the unions had women in key union leadership positions, and shop-floor unionism was too brief an experiment to see if it could have altered this pattern. The ILGWU did not challenge the occupational segregation of work in the trade and its union structures reflected this fact. Male cutters, pressers, and cloakmakers continued to run the union. As a result, when the union negotiated state regulation in the garment industry in the late 1930s, they perpetuated the gender-divided workplaces and union structures which have limited women's participation. Many of the tensions and conflicts we now see in this union can be traced to these formative years of union-building.

<sup>137</sup>There is an interesting discussion of the impact of the 1920s and 1930s on labour in the United States in see Lisabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York 1990) and in the discussion of the book in *Labor History*, 32, 4 (Fall 1991), 562-98.

*I wish to thank Lil Greene and Esther Walsh for their kind assistance in identifying people in the photographs which accompany this article.*

**Appendix**  
**Women in Trade Unions in Canada**

Year	Ontario	Quebec	Manitoba
1930	2,572	1,916	759
1931	1,284	683	233
1937	9,157	6,621	1,507
1938	6,177	10,177	1,415

Note: Figures are only for those unions which reported.

Source: Canada, Department of Labour, *Trade Union Organizations in Canada*, select years.

**Trade Union Membership in Clothing Unions, 1930s**

Year	ILGWU	ACWA	IUNTW
1928	900 (7)	3,500 (13)	820* (5)
1929	1,500 (10)	7,000 (15)	(8)
1930	3,500 (10)	7,000 (15)	NA
1931	3,000 (10)	5,000 (15)	NA
1932			1,500** (10)
1933	1,500 (9)	6,500 (15)	
1934			1,600***
1936	4,830 (13)	7,000 (14)	
1937	8,314 (17)	6,505 (20)	
1938	8,307 (16)	11,155 (20)	

Note: Numbers for IUNTW locals are for Toronto and Montreal only, the IUNTW did not report on its activities in Winnipeg. Figures in parentheses are number of locals.

\* this figure represents the numbers in 3 locals in Winnipeg, 3 locals in Montreal, no data on Toronto available.

\*\* Information on membership numbers are from J. Gershman, there were no official numbers reported to the Department of Labour after 1929. Montreal and Toronto only.

\*\*\* This number refers to IUNTW membership in Montreal in that year. The IUNTW reported 11 locals in Montreal and Toronto.

Source: Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Organizations in Canada*, select years.