

CHAPTER IV

ORGANIZATION AMONG THE MEN'S CLOTHING WORKERS

THE beginnings of the manufacture of men's ready-made clothing in this country date back more than a century. One of the pioneer manufacturers was George Opdyke, one-time Mayor of New York, who established a clothing manufacturing shop on Hudson Street, New York City, in 1831. However, up to the Civil War "factory clothing" was not in general use save by slaves and agricultural workers. Custom tailors owned and operated shops in most localities, employing apprentices and tailors in considerable numbers.

The Civil War created a demand for large scale production of military uniforms. It fostered a tremendous increase in the use of sewing machines and laid the basis of the great after-war demand for civilian clothing.

By the seventies, men's clothing factories were beginning to spring up, which, in 1889, employed over 248,000 wage earners who produced an output valued at over \$411 million. Moreover, by the seventies labor saving devices were already beginning to be introduced. The long knife, for example, was substituted for the shears and enabled the worker to cut through 18 thicknesses of cloth.

Throughout this entire period there were isolated efforts at organization. The journeymen tailors, working in the custom tailor shops of Baltimore, had a successful strike as early as 1795 and there was another strike in the same city in 1805. By 1806 there were three additional journeymen tailors unions in Philadelphia, New York and Boston. Thenceforth, there were similar movements in scattered centers which laid the basis for the formation of a national organization in the summer of 1865.

The Journeymen Tailors' Union

In August, 1865, representatives from seven cities met in Philadelphia and organized "The Journeymen Tailors National Trade Union" which existed until 1877, when the national body dissolved. However, the locals continued to function independently.

Between 1881 and 1883 there were strikes among the custom tailors in ten cities, and organizations sprang up in 51 centers. Expansion of business during this period encouraged organization and, in August, 1883, the local unions formed the second "National Union of Tailors" at Philadelphia. In 1884 the union joined the A. F. of L. It is still in existence, although in 1899 its name was changed to "Journeymen Tailors' Union of America."

Twenty-seven locals with a membership of 2,511 were affiliated with the new organization in 1887. It had 12,000 members in 1920 and 9,300 in 1925. In presenting its position at the NRA code hearings for the merchant tailoring industry in January, 1934, it claimed to represent a membership of 6,000. However, its voting strength at the 1933 convention of the A. F. of L. was based upon an average membership of only 1,700.

The history of the Journeymen Tailors' Union illustrates most of the treacherous policies of the A. F. of L. officialdom. Seeing that the trend of the trade was away from custom tailoring and feeling strongly the need for industrial unionism, the Journeymen Tailors was among the first organizations to press for the amalgamation of all needle trades unions. In 1910 it elected a progressive, Eugene J. Brais, general secretary. Three years later, under a new name "Tailors Industrial Union," jurisdiction was extended to include all needle workers.

Here the United Garment Workers found its jurisdiction being infringed upon. An appeal was made to the A. F. of L. which declared the extension of jurisdiction illegal,

once again striving to thwart working class unity in the interests of petty jurisdictional considerations.

In 1914 the then virile Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America seceded from the impotent and ineffectual United Garment Workers and in the new group the journeymen tailors saw real hope of industrial unionism. The two executive boards met in 1915 and laid the basis for amalgamation but no sooner had the proposed merger been effected than the old guard sprang into action. An opposition was nurtured against affiliation with an "outlaw" organization and a majority vote was secured against joining the A.C.W.

The officials thereupon managed to effect a change of administration and elected Thomas Sweeney general secretary in place of the progressive Brais. The union then fell back into all of its old conservative policies which, in the face of the heavy inroads being made by the ready-made trade, led to isolation, weakness and defeat.

The membership, however, retained its fighting spirit and in 1925 the 300 members of the New York local decided to stake all upon a militant general strike. The local executive board sanctioned the strike and notified the employers to that effect. But at the last minute President Sweeney rushed to New York, and, in order to avoid paying strike benefits, vetoed the strike call. Mass resentment was such that members turned their backs on the platform from which Sweeney was talking and stormed out of the hall.

The officers of the union have been interested primarily in preserving their jobs—even at the expense of the workers' interests. In the 1931 strike of the Chicago Local No. 5, for example, they withheld strike benefits on the ground that they could not deplete the treasury (from which their salaries were paid), dissolved the rank and file strike committee on the ground that it was unconstitutional, spread alarmist sentiment among the workers and after nine weeks sent them back in defeat. As a result the local was all but destroyed.

The Chicago fiasco occurred under the direction of the

conservative secretary, Soderberg. About the same time very successful organization progress was being made in the New York market, under the direction of a militant general organizer, Emil Alleva. The latter had infused new life into the dying spirit of the discouraged custom tailors who had had such a disastrous experience in 1925. He was making rapid headway in the market when letters were received from Soderberg calling off the organization campaign on the grounds that the tailors would not respond and that the national office could not continue to bear the expense. With the dismissal of Alleva, the New York custom tailors were through with the Journeymen Tailors Union and sought other organization channels.

They thereupon entered into a united front with the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union and prepared for genuine strike action. The possibilities of such activity were demonstrated by the successful 1933 strike of the custom tailors, which was led by the N.T.W.I.U. The entire trade in New York was tied up and 2,500 tailors were successfully organized.

Faced with the presence of the N.T.W.I.U., the very bosses who had fought the Journeymen Tailors' Union for years attempted to revive the dying embers of that organization and about 150 tailors went back into it, with the employers' blessings. The mass of the rank and file had had enough of it, however, and became loyal and fighting members of the Industrial Union. As a result of the recent merger of the two groups they again have high hopes of steering their old organization back along militant lines.

The Cloth Hat and Cap Makers

One of the oldest of the needle trade unions is the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers—since 1934 (as a result of a merger with the United Hatters of North America) a section of the United Hatters, Millinery and Capmakers International Union.

Cap Cutters Local 2 was organized in 1880 and in 1901 the United was formed constituting an amalgamation of nine existing locals from New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Baltimore and San Francisco.

From the beginning the union was both radical and militant. It was for years a thorn in the side of the A. F. of L., which it joined in 1902, its radicalism causing it to stand in constant opposition to the Federation until recent years. It was expelled from the A. F. of L. in 1917 in a jurisdictional dispute with the United Hatters and remained outside of the Federation until 1924 when it made its peace with the parent body, came to an agreement with the hatters on jurisdiction, and returned to the fold.

The cap makers was the only needle union to achieve 100% organization and, after bitterly fought strikes and lockouts, it won a completely closed shop in the cap and cloth hat trade.

From early in its history the cap makers had actively organized the millinery trade. In 1924 the combined crafts took the name Cloth Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers International Union. Subsequently Max Zaritsky became head of the new organization and Samuel Hershkowitz became manager of the New York cap maker's local.

By 1924 most of the locals outside of New York had elected an outspoken left-wing leadership, while in New York there was a substantial left-wing bloc which at one point controlled a majority on the Executive Board.

Zaritsky, in league with the other right-wing needle trades leaders, became one of the most vicious of this entire clique. He set out to smash the militants at any cost.

In the face of dwindling business and in a declining trade a series of strikes were called by the locals outside of New York. Zaritsky seized the occasion to drive home a telling blow against the militants in the union. He smashed their strikes and broke up the locals by revoking their charters. They have since been unable to regain what was then de-

stroyed. To-day, outside of New York City, the trade is virtually unorganized.

While New York City's market is still about 90% organized, the bulk of the trade has been rapidly leaving that city. In addition, the policies of Hershkowitz in that market have abandoned workers' interests at every turn. So-called "strikes," which are called periodically, are mere devices to help the contractors to demand higher prices from the jobbers. Wage increases are won on paper, but these are purely nominal. No attempt at enforcement is made by the union and the employers violate agreements at will. Complaints are not given consideration by the union office and workers who become too insistent that their grievances be heard are branded as "reds" or "Communists."

Under the reign of Hershkowitz and Zaritsky, the New York local is to-day a shadow of its former self. The six capmakers locals which remained in the city as late as 1932 were in that year merged into one—Cap Makers Union No. 1. The membership contends that the 1934 election for executive board members was an out-and-out fraud; that in spite of the coercive methods used by Hershkowitz the workers had rightfully elected several left-wing candidates. He refused to heed their protests, however, or permit a recount of the vote.

At the beginning of 1935 this branch of the trade was largely unorganized throughout the country. Wages and conditions were demoralized and the union was failing to enforce even its own official scales.

The United Garment Workers

In 1891 a group of dissatisfied officers of the Knights of Labor (which formed the first nation union of men's tailors) organized the United Garment Workers of America. The first convention of the new organization was held in New York on April 18, 1891, with 36 delegates from 20 locals in New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Chicago. Various other

tailors' organizations affiliated later. The following year the union joined with the American Federation of Labor.

In 1893 the United Garment Workers conducted its first general strike against the then prevailing task system of work. This strike met the united opposition of both the employers and the Knights of Labor. The U.G.W. was successful, however, and won gains which lasted for two years but were liquidated in the ensuing period of unemployment and industrial depression.

A rock-ribbed conservative leadership soon obtained control over the organization. It based itself on the strictest lines of craft unionism and opposed at every turn the spirit of industrial unionism which was spreading among the membership. It never paid serious attention to the organization of men's clothing workers and concentrated on the overall and shirt industry which it soon found easy to exploit and control through the use of the union label. The union became a weak, inefficient and corrupt organization, autocratically controlled by a ruling hierarchy which resisted every effort at democratic control. U.G.W. officers were elected by open ballot, in practice the reelection of President Rickert and Secretary Larger being by acclamation. At the 1912 convention nine resolutions seeking democratic election of officers were reported unfavorably.

A wide rift developed between the members and the officials. As early as 1904 the tailors had charged their general officers with betrayal after an unsuccessful strike. In 1907 the leaders of the New York Brotherhood of Tailors called a general strike to organize tailors. The U.G.W. officers ordered all label shop workers back to their jobs, expelled the striking organization, formed a new one and sent scabs to fill the jobs of strikers. During the following years the U.G.W. consistently refused to send organizers to the tailors, whom they regarded as a troublesome influence.

The U.G.W. was satisfied to sell labels to cooperating employers as a source of income and to do this it needed only

that strategic section of overall and other workers making products purchased by union laborers, who insisted that the label be on any garment they bought.

The membership of U.G.W. has accordingly been concentrated in the overall industry. Its voting strength at the 1934 A. F. of L. convention was based upon a membership of about 37,000.

Even within the work clothing industry the activities of the U.G.W. are confined to that small section which still caters to workers buying garments bearing the union label. In order to obtain this label the manufacturers, mostly organized within the Union Made Garment Manufacturers' Association, have established very amicable relations with the union which they have found "extremely reasonable" and "realistic" at every turn. They have not been troubled with a strike or lockout in over 25 years. Disputes have been settled during this period through friendly conferences, the friendliness of these meetings being always maintained through the union's readiness and "reasonableness" in the acceptance of wage cuts. A wage cut of 20% in April, 1933, for example, followed a similar reduction 15 months earlier. "We understand each other," is the way in which Oscar Berman of Cleveland, a member of the employers' executive board, some years ago explained the prevailing harmony. "We have been doing business with each other for so many years," he added, "that we know each other's method of working."

In the ready made men's clothing industry the main function of the union has been to serve as a buffer for the employers and as a scab-herding outfit whenever the latter set out to break the Amalgamated. Its policy in this respect has been continuous. When, for example, the Amalgamated was on strike in 1919 against Michaels, Stern & Co., of Rochester, that company, in search of a strike-breaking agency, went to the U.G.W. which set up a dummy union in the

Stern shop.* When the Amalgamated struck in the International Tailoring Co. of New York and Chicago, upon the expiration of their agreement with that concern in 1925, the firm advertised that it had decided to sever all connections with the Amalgamated and to work henceforth "under agreement with the United Garment Workers of America in affiliation with the American Federation of Labor." The officials of the U.G.W., after agreeing to accept the company's terms in return for a contract, recruited strikebreakers whom it sent to work in the shops of the International Tailoring Co. under police protection.

Such action continued uninterrupted through 1933 when the United signed with the Park Clothing Co. and the Salvin Tailors, both of Cleveland, after the Amalgamated had called strikes in these shops.

The Birth of the Amalgamated

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America came into existence in December, 1914, as a secession movement from the United Garment Workers. It was a child of revolt born out of a break in the old union.

Dissatisfaction and unrest had characterized the entire experience of the men's tailors in the U.G.W. The 1906 proceedings of that body show the tailors of Chicago, New York, St. Louis and elsewhere unsuccessfully asking for organization help. We have seen how the 1907 general strike in New York was betrayed when U.G.W. officials ordered the men back to work. A strike in Chicago in 1910 which started against the Hart, Schaffner & Marx firm and spread until 45,000 workers were involved, was partially won by fighting the U.G.W. machine as well as the employers. Just as the strike was enthusiastically under way and seemed headed for success, President Rickert signed an agreement

* Previous to this Michaels, Stern had bitterly resisted the U.G.W. for years. In 1915 it issued an ultimatum to its workers that any one caught with a U.G.W. card would be immediately discharged.

with Hart, Schaffner & Marx agreeing that "This instrument shall not be considered as a recognition of the union . . . nor shall the question of open shop be considered as a grievance." The agreement, moreover, completely neglected any consideration of strikers in the city other than those employed by Hart, Schaffner & Marx. The strikers promptly and vehemently rejected such an agreement despite considerable pressure from the union. The final settlement provided for improved conditions, wages and hours and the establishment of arbitration machinery (though not union recognition) in the Hart, Schaffner & Marx shops, which served as a nucleus for further organization work. In many of the other shops the workers suffered defeat.

Thereafter the cleavage between the tailors and the union leadership widened daily. The outlook, philosophy and tactics of the two became irreconcilable. The workers demanded a fighting organization which would improve their conditions; the officers considered the union a store for the sale of labels, the returns from which were to be used not for organization work but to maintain union office payrolls. Workers saw in the strike their only weapon and, in the words of the general officers to the first convention of the Amalgamated, "each strike won was considered a milestone on the road to a happier life; [whereas] to the officers a strike was a nuisance to be got rid of by hook or crook, by trying to force treacherous settlements upon the strikers, or by inducing the City Mayor to have the police club and arrest the pickets."¹

Faced with the negligence of the U.G.W. officials in organizing the tailors, the New York and Baltimore locals called a conference at Philadelphia on May 12, 1911, at which they formed "The United Tailors Council of U. S. and Canada" to fight for greater organization effort. The officers of the union at first condemned this move but they were forced by mass pressure to recognize the council in the

fall and appointed Max Pine and Ben Schweitzer to begin the job of building an effective tailors' union.

Having thus taken matters into their own hands the tailors conducted widespread and successful strikes during 1912-13 in New York, Rochester, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Boston and Baltimore. Through concerted action they reduced their hours to 50 per week, with 48 for the cutters.* The New York strike (1913) involved about 90,000 workers. Again victory was achieved over the heads of the U.G.W. leaders, who became scared as the strike progressed and hastened to offer settlement terms which were indignantly refused by the strikers.

In his rejected settlements Rickert had the coöperation of Max Pine, Jacob Panken and the Socialist group. The Jewish Daily *Forward* called the unsatisfactory terms a "victory" and urged their acceptance. The reply of the workers was to march in a body on the *Forward's* offices, smash furniture and windows and otherwise express their resentment. The Socialist-*Forward* group then realized which way the wind was blowing and decided it was better to oppose Rickert.

After their experiences of 1913, the growing dissatisfaction of the workers with the union officials came to a head. A new leadership was the only solution. The old officers were insincere and treacherous. They autocratically controlled the organization and resisted every move toward democratic control. In 1914 the progressive elements within the union therefore decided to call for a showdown.

The final break occurred at the Nashville convention of 1914. The membership of a number of local unions, principally located in New York, Chicago, Baltimore and Boston, conducted a campaign against the reelection of the old officials. These officers called the convention to meet at Nashville, Tenn., hundreds of miles from the nearest clothing cen-

*Except in New York where the 1913 settlement provided for 53 hours for tailors and 50 for cutters until January, 1914, and 50 hours and 48 respectively thereafter.

ter, in order to keep the rebellious forces away but at the same time easily accessible to large numbers of small overall locals.* When it became clear that these tactics would not succeed, dues and assessment bills for unheard of amounts (\$75,000 from the New York locals alone) were charged against the rebellious locals. Then, on the ground that they were in arrears, delegates from these locals were barred from the convention floor and sent to the spectators' balcony. As a result, 20 seated delegates as well as 110 in the gallery bolted the convention and reassembled in Duncan Hall, where they proceeded to hold a rump convention of their own. The Duncan Hall convention represented two-thirds of the total U.G.W. membership.

The disfranchised locals next appealed to the A. F. of L., but the insurgents found that body entirely unwilling to consider the case on its merits. Instead the A. F. of L. officials threw their power behind the U.G.W. officers. As Vice-President O'Connell put it, "when any body or number of members seceded from a recognized and affiliated international organization they could not hope to receive any consideration from the A. F. of L."² For years after the Amalgamated had become the only powerful organization of clothing workers, President Gompers persistently held to this position and did everything within his power to crush the A.C.W. through boycotting firms that recognized it, the use of strikebreakers and various other means.

Following the Duncan Hall convention a series of legal skirmishes resulted in the old organization's retention of the official name and the union label. The following December the insurgents met at New York, established a new union, adopted a constitution and took the name "Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America."

* They refused to honor a constitutionally made motion for a referendum on the subject of holding the convention in a more conveniently located center.