

IRVING WEISSBERG: LABOR LEADER

*The life and work of a militant leader of needle trades workers.
He offers an example to those who would fight for labor's rights*

By Rose Wortis

A deep sense of loss was felt by thousands of dressmakers, needle-trades workers and the progressive movement in general when they learned of the death of Isadore Weissberg on November 19, 1952. Weissberg had been a constructive, devoted builder of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. In the stormy twenties, when the basic policies and direction of the American labor movement were being fought out and most sharply expressed among the advanced workers in the ILGWU, Weissberg emerged and continued in unbroken service as a progressive leader in the union.

The labor leader was born 55 years ago in the small Ukrainian ghetto town of Zukoff. He was the son of a *melamed*, a lay teacher, who eked out a meager existence by his teaching. His family was very poor. From early childhood Weissberg knew the deep cleavage between those who toil and sweat in order to live and those who live on the toil of others.

In 1913, at the age of sixteen, he came to this country, where he lived for a short time in Philadelphia with an uncle, a clothing contractor who had hoped to make his nephew a successful businessman. Because of labor difficulties that developed between the workers and his uncle, the youth left his adopted home and came to New York. Like many immigrants of the time he entered the ladies' garment industry and joined the Skirtmakers local 23 of the ILGWU.

Only four years after his arrival in this country, the United States entered World War I and the slight young man was drafted into the army, which he left at the end of the war as a sergeant. He returned to the ladies' garment industry as a member of Dressmakers Local 22. His war experience, the war's useless slaughter of millions and the Russian Revolution made an ardent socialist of him with a hatred for the exploitation of workers. At the same time, the birth of the Soviet Union and the lessons it brought to the labor and socialist movement of the world profoundly affected the membership of the ILGWU, the majority of whom had come from Russia and many of whom had actively participated in the revolutionary movement there. This membership rebelled against the union's top leadership, which was gradually drifting away from its earlier policy of class struggle and its socialist viewpoint

ROSE WORTIS is a veteran labor leader in the needle trades who played a part in the struggles of which she writes here.

and was joining the capitalist chorus in denunciation of the Soviet Union.

Against strenuous opposition from its members, the union leaders were abandoning the policies of class struggle in daily practice as well as in general political activities. Under the false slogans of "practicality," "adjustment to American conditions" the leaders were conducting the union along lines of class collaboration, that is, capitulation to the interests of the employers. Struggle for better conditions was replaced by a policy of leaving disputed issues in the hands of government commissions. Strikes were declared old-fashioned and the right to strike was given up in collective agreements. While the leadership of the ILGWU had in the past openly fought "pure and simple trade unionism" (limited concern with immediate economic issues) and dependence on the old-line parties on the AFL convention floor, the leaders now gave up the policy of independent working class political action and followed conservative AFL policies. As a result, the conditions won by the ladies' garment workers through great sacrifice deteriorated rapidly. To force their policies on a reluctant membership, the leaders began systematically to wipe out the democratic practices and traditions of the union. Thus was precipitated a struggle between leadership and membership that was to last for many years.

Making of a Labor Leader

Weissberg threw himself into these struggles and matured in the process. He fought along with the rank and file and joined the Communist Party. He was a courageous and well-informed spokesman of the rank and file and won leadership, not through any push on his own part or influence of those in power, but as a chosen spokesman of the workers. In 1923, the left wing began to win leadership in the executive board of the powerful Dressmakers Local 22. An attempt was made to break the monopoly of the top union leadership built up by the right wing by electing active shop workers as both paid and unpaid officers. When these recommendations were discussed at shop meetings, the first to be proposed for such a leading post was Isadore Weissberg. Many shops endorsed his candidacy and in 1923 he was elected business agent of Local 22, by a very large vote and thereby he became an officer of the Dressmakers' Joint Board. In 1925, he was appointed assistant manager of the dress department of the ILGWU.



Irving Weissberg, 1897-1952

In the midst of the cloak makers' strike of 1926, the right wing leaders defied the peace agreement with the left wing unanimously adopted at the Philadelphia convention. In cooperation with the employers they took over the strike and made a settlement over the heads of the elected local leadership and without consulting the workers. After an unsuccessful fight to unite the union, the Needle Trades Industrial Union was formed in 1928. Weissberg was manager of the dress department of this union throughout its existence. He combined thorough knowledge of the industry with militant defense of the workers' interests before representatives of the bosses' associations and boards of arbitration. He won the confidence of all workers irrespective of political opinions as well as the respect and hatred of the bosses, who knew that they could not "do business" with Weissberg.

In 1932, he was framed on a charge of felonious assault by an employer against whom the Industrial Union was striking. Three thousand workers signed a petition to the judge asking for acquittal. Before sending the case to the jury, the judge read a letter sent to him by Julius Hochman, vice president of the ILGWU, which called Weissberg and another worker on trial on the same charge "cutthroats, gangsters, a danger to the highways and byways of the community." A sentence to an indefinite term in the penitentiary was passed. As a result of a mass amnesty campaign Weissberg and his fellow worker were released after serving 11 months.

When the Industrial Union was dissolved, its members rejoined the ILGWU in 1935 and the workers received Weissberg with open arms. As soon as the two-year ban imposed by the leadership against his running for office was over, he became a candidate for manager of Local 22. Close to 6,000 votes were cast for him even though the entire election machinery was in the hands of the hostile administration.

In all the battles of the rank and file, Weissberg was a recognized leader of the dress workers. He exposed the Hochman efficiency plan—a modernized speed-up scheme—and similar plans aimed at increasing the exploitation and

reducing the standards of the dressmakers. He led the fight to open all crafts to the Negro workers. He fought for the unity of all workers irrespective of political differences and for closer relations among Italian, Spanish, Negro and Jewish workers.

Close to the Workers

Whether he was serving the union as a paid officer or working in a shop, Weissberg's advice was always sought by the workers on their union and shop problems. Until he was bedridden by cancer, workers would wait in front of his shop or at the cafeteria or at his home to consult him on some difficult problem. He was close to the rank and file. No problem was too small to merit his attention if it contributed to the welfare of the workers. Once a dressmaker told Weissberg that his wife had just gone through an operation and that the doctor had recommended a country vacation which he could not afford. Weissberg invited the woman to share a small room in the country with his own family. Weissberg not only studied the problems of the workers, he also wrote leaflets and articles and passed out leaflets side by side with rank and file workers on the streets of the garment center.

Weissberg knew and taught others that the trade union is the economic arm of the working class. He was an active builder of the garment center club of the American Labor Party as the mass political organization of the workers. He was an active builder of the International Workers' Order and was for more than ten years the president of his lodge. In the thirties he was a fighter against war and fascism and acted with his fellow-workers to force the union leadership to undertake measures in support of Loyalist Spain and for collective security. He worked to help maintain and build the working class press, the *Morning Freiheit* and *Daily Worker*. He was a great admirer of *JEWISH LIFE*, whose articles he often used in discussions with right wing workers.

As a loyal and proud son of the Jewish people, he actively participated in their manifold struggles against anti-Semitism and in support of an independent and peaceful Israel. At the historic parade of March 11, 1948 to press for the establishment of the state of Israel when the United States and Great Britain were working in the United Nations to delay such action, Weissberg proudly led the largest contingent.

In his last few years he was an unceasing fighter against war hysteria and the systematic violation of our civil liberties. He helped to organize the Ladies' Garment Workers Peace Committee and the Committee for the Repeal of the Smith Act.

The official leadership of the ILGWU will not write any obituaries to Isidore Weissberg. They may not even take notice of his passing in the union press. But the warm place that Weissberg occupied in the hearts of the dressmakers, whom he had served so loyally throughout his adult life, was attested by the thousands of workers who left their shops to attend his funeral.