

# Year of Left Wing Among Fifth Ave. Needle Workers

By JOSEPH ZACK

UP in the heart of New York's Fifth Avenue and further on near Riverside Drive on up-town Broadway, conveniently located near the residence and palatial hotels of the upper 5,000, are the couturier establishments that produce the women's, men's, and children's wear of Wall Street's millionaire households. Princely establishments those are, Henry Bendell's eighteen stories high, Hickson's, Inc., fourteen stories high, and many others of similar rank, tucked away in the side streets of this aristocratic Fifth Avenue district.

Within this area are located nearly 20,000 needle workers of various trades—costume dressmakers, ladies' tailors, furriers, millinery, men's custom tailors, fine children's clothing, fine lingerie and whitegoods, theatrical costumes, etc. Of all these, only Local 38, with its 1300 members, and a few hundred furriers organized since the left wing assumed office in the Furriers' union, have any organization with shop control. Otherwise, this is an unorganized open-shop territory.

## Replacing Hand Workers.

About fifteen years ago these same trades located in this territory employed a much larger number of needle workers, of ladies' tailors alone there were about 6,000, while now there are only about 1500. Industrial evolution has brought about many changes.

The wholesale trade downtown, which at first produced only popular-priced garments, due to the changes of style and simplification of high-

priced garments has adapted itself and is producing many of the high-priced garments which the millionaire ladies are made to believe have been hand-made in the uptown couturier establishments.

## Cheating Customers.

In millinery and costume dresses, even, parts of the product that are measure made and fitted on the premises are made in factories and only the adornments, finishings, and tight fittings are handmade. Even inside the workrooms of these aristocratic establishments the production methods have changed considerably. As against the former methods, where a worker had to be a mechanic capable of producing a high class garment in its entirety, we now have in some of the big shops, operators, finishers, cutters, and in dress shops highly divided section work of such a nature that girls from the Y. W. C. A., orphan asylums, etc., can be inducted into the shops, and the down-town dressmaker, draper, operator, etc., can also find a place.

## Industry Sicken.

It is a sick industry, one that is going thru a profound transformation in the course of which the number of workers employed in some of the trades has been reduced to less than half and is being reduced still more. This transformation has a double effect upon the composition of the human material employed in the trade. There is a large influx and exchange of young semi-skilled and unskilled female workers into the unorganized trades where the boss can hire and fire at will.

## Petty Bourgeois Ambitions.

In organized shops manned by highly skilled mechanics, where the staffs must be reduced, the union either loses the shop in the course of struggle against the bosses, as at Milgrom Bros., or there is only short-season employment, and usually the younger element drops out or the union yields to a reduction of forces and changes in production methods in one form or another.

Thus there remain in the old organized shops the old-time mechanics, each grown into old habits and traditions, fearful that he may be the next one to be thrown out of employment as a result of these changes in industry, and having some savings, not caring for the future of the union as long as his immediate job is not endangered. Another few years and he may have enough saved to go into some small business, some have investments in various kinds of business even now. This is the predominant type amongst the organized mechanics, the old-timers in the trade.

## About Three-Quarters Lost.

There are only about 800 of them in the trade out of about 3,000 once in the tailors' union, and out of these there are about 300 that work in modernized shops. It was for years the habit of this union, whose members work in establishments full of unorganized needle workers of the same trade, working on wraps, gowns, dresses, to get conditions for themselves at the expense of these unorganized highly exploited female workers, on the promise that they would not attempt to organize them.

In the last few years, however, due to the extraordinary simplification of styles, the female workers at \$20 per week became strong competitors, and were used by the employers to do the very work the proud ladies' tailors thought could only be done by them at \$55 per week. This went so far that several firms practically cut out their tailoring departments or cut them down to only a few tailors.

The fur trade also invaded the winter season of the ladies' tailors by the change in styles towards rich fur coats instead of winter coats made of cloth.

## Left Wing Arrives.

This is the situation the left wing found when it started to work among these fashionable garment workers. The first step was to bring the remaining locals of ladies tailors and costume dressmakers together, which was done through the team-work of the T. U. E. L. groups in both locals. The two locals amalgamated, having a combined membership of about one thousand. In the ensuing elections in the combined local, the left wing won out by about 50 votes supported by the majority of the Italians who are organized in a separate section. The program on the basis of which the left slate went into office was:

1. Aggressive drive to organize the trade, particularly the costume dressmakers.

2. Affiliation with the joint board on the basis of recognition of separate agreement for couturiers' trade.

3. Forty-hour week, increase in wages, and other left wing demands.

However, as soon as we went into office, we found that our Italian al-

lies did not support this program. They obstructed the engagement of a women organizer to start the organization drive among the dressmakers, and insisted on having an Italian organizer for their 300 Italian members instead, at the expense of the combined local, which meant at the expense of the dressmakers, thousands of whom were unorganized. We lost considerable time haggling over this question, which involved our entire program.

Finally our allies went to Ninfo, their "enemy", and got his support in the name of the G. E. B., for their proposition. A thoroughly incompetent and lazy "ally" of ours became the Italian organizer. From that time on, the leaders of the Italian, our former allies, began to work in the sneakiest fashion, ala Antonini, with the right wing. This delayed our organization program considerably.

Finally, about six weeks before the expiration of the agreement, having secured Juliet Stuart Poyntz as organizer, we started a smashing organization drive, open air meetings, new leaflets every three or four days, "boring from within" by rank and file organizers in the unorganized shops, special publicity, shop meetings of the unorganized, etc.

It was a drive with the punch that only a left wing leadership could give. There never was such a thing in this territory. The drive was conducted in the name of three big needle trades unions at a joint drive, and altho these unions only lent their names, we gave it an appearance of great struggle.

(To be Continued To-morrow)