The Effect of the New Deal on Jewish Labor

By B. Charney Vladeck
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ith the exception of very few minor industries, there is no industry today which employs a majority of Jewish workers. The proverbial needle trades are no exception. In the International Ladies Garment Workers Union which numbers at present nearly 200,000 members, less than 40% are Jewish. The largest local in the International Union with a membership of 40,000 is exclusively Italian. In the men's clothing industry, the percentage of Jews is even lower, my last estimate received at the last convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union being around 15%. However, there are still to my opinion about 350,000 Jews employed in the needle industry, the building trades and some minor industries throughout the United States, and the New Deal as expressed in the National Industrial Recovery Act and in the National Recovery Administration, has had considerable effect on their standing as wage earners.

The most important effect of the New Deal is the impetus it has given to organization. For the last 15 years or so, the greatest problem of unions, particularly in the needle trades, was the problem of out of town shops. Millions of dollars were spent by them on attempts at organization, which on the whole failed rather dismally. The out of town shops were located most of the time in small communities where the wages were much lower than in the cities and where working hours and working conditions were at the lowest possible level. The friendly attitude taken by the President and Section 7-A with the publicity attendant upon the coming of a New Deal have made the workers more receptive to organization, so much so that the International Ladies Garment Workers Union since last year practically quadrupled its membership and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers doubled it. Besides, uniformity of hours and the establishment of a minimum scale have resulted in more uniform prices of production and have made it impossible for the factories in smaller towns to compete with the large markets as effectively as they did in the past.

In the smaller trades, especially in New York, the best effect of the New Deal is the glamor of authority conferred upon labor unions, which makes the small manufacturer feel that Labor has standing with the government. As most of these manufacturers are themselves immigrants and entertain a natural fear of government, it is so much easier for the representatives of Labor to negotiate favorable agreements. However, in order to make the picture complete I shall present you facts and opinions pertaining to different trades as expressed by labor leaders in these trades.

Mr. David Dubinsky, President of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, states as follows:

"The work hours in our industry before the advent of the codes were 40 in most of our industries. In some industries we had no collective agreements at all and in those the hours were practically between 50 and 60. Now, over 90% of our workers have the 35-hour week. In the smaller trades, especially in New York, the hours were much shorter."

"Wages were increased on the average, 20 to 35%, aside from the stipulated compensation for the reduced number of hours. In many cases where actual sweatshop conditions existed, wages were increased 100 and 200% and, in some instances, even 300%.

"Among other improved labor conditions are the closed union shop; recognition of the International; elimination of overtime in most of our industries; the 35-hour week; classifications and definite wage scales for the various crafts and guaranteed minimum wage scales for piece-workers; elimination of home-work;
sentatives have no vote.

"Code Authorities upon which the Union has representation are a tremendous help for the enforcement of the code, not so much in Union shops as in the non-union shops where standards and maintaining competition so that union shops were forced to violate their agreements in order to preserve their business.

"It is estimated that additional 30,000 workers found employment in our industry because of the curtailment of hours and, more so, because of the more stringent observance.

"Our International is at present involved in 18 code activities in Blouses and Skirts, Coat and Suit, Corset and Brassieres, Cotton Garment, Covered Dress, Pleating, Stitching and Embroidery, Schiffli and Hand Embroidery, Handkerchiefs, Knitted Outerwear, Infants' & Children's Knitted Outerwear, Women's Neckwear, Rainwear, Rohe, Underwear & Allied Products, Undergarments, Negligee, Children's Dress. On practically all of them, we have union representation with equal rights and equal votes, with the exception of 4 minor industries where, because of the change of attitude on the part of the Administration, our representatives have no vote.

"We are in contractual relations with 37 employers' associations in New York and 31 employers' associations in New York State and Canada, in addition to several markets where we have individual agreements and where associations are not in existence,—a total of 68 associations.

Because of the fact that the International Ladies Garment Workers Union was one of the first to get a code, and also because the industry is concentrated largely in New York, it benefited from the New Deal of 4 minor industries where, because of the change of attitude on the part of the Administration, our representatives have no vote.

"Very little was gained by the workers in the Building Trades and again I quote Mr. Philip Zausner, Manager of the Painters District Council No. 9 of New York:

"So far as the NRA as an instrument to regulate industry and improve the welfare of the workers engaged in it is concerned, the Building Trades have not alone failed to attain any advantages therefrom, but it may be said with a great deal of justification that the Organized Building Trades Workers have to a large extent suffered a definite set-back since the inauguration of the NRA.

"The Building Industry, one of the important key industries of the land and one of the strongest enrenchments of organized labor has been treated as a step-child in the entire set-up of the NRA. It is one of the last to be placed under a Code and the large army of the workers depending upon that industry for their existence are no better off today than they were a year or two ago.

"The failure on the part of the Code makers to protect higher standards of wages which are imperative in a highly seasonal industry has caused great dissatisfaction among the workers.

"Whereas, in other industries NRA is said to have elevated wage levels and reduced hours of labor which was in keeping with its proclaimed policy, it can hardly make any such claim so far as the Building Industry is concerned.

"The Code of Fair Competition of the Construction Industry entirely ignores wage standards for skilled craftsmen who comprise 90% of the workers of the Building Industry and by limiting its wage provisions to minimums affecting unskilled workers NRA offers an invitation to open shop to take advantage of these minimums in their continued exploitation of the skilled craftman in the Industry.

Mr. Maurice Feinstone, Secretary of the United Hebrew Trades which comprises over 50 small labor unions in miscellaneous trades, states as follows:

"On the credit side of labor, the NRA has been a force. Workers are more responsive to organization efforts, since they feel more secure with a union that is lawful and sanctioned by popular sentiment. They are not afraid to picket and they will act more aggressively.

"The NRA has also been very useful in bringing about some satisfactory conclusion of strikes. It has always been difficult to get the employer into conference with the union representatives. Under the new system, the employers, especially the small fry, with whom we deal extensively, do not refuse flatly to meet the union committee—respect for the NRA is more compelling than consideration for toiling humanity!

"The small employer, cap in hand, comes frightened before the Regional Board. He is reluctant to oppose it, so he does the next best thing: he bargains. But whatever the situation he is close to the NRA call means a quicker solution of the workers' strike.

"During the organization work that precedes the formation of a new union, the employer will discriminate boldly against the men in his shop suspected of "agitation." In this case, there is an appeal to the NRA, and the employer is shown to be discriminating against the men and violating the spirit of the New Deal. Naturally, he is much simpler to take the men back into his shop, for he has not money to hire lawyers, nor power to resist the pressure of the union. In such cases, and there is a great number, the NRA is of unquestionable benefit to the worker, individually and collectively.

"There is a debit side to the ledger.

"The big employer is bold. He hires a lawyer, two, three, a dozen if necessary, and proceeds to defy the Regional Board with complicated legal rationalizations. The Regional board gets in touch with Washington. The union fights hard, the employer spends money,—meanwhile the worker or workers over whom the battle is fought is unemployed. Months pass. Shrewd economic pressure nullifies the theoretical benefits of the NRA for the union and the worker. It is a law with teeth, but not very strong teeth. While it works for the small employers, it cannot enforce its common-sense dictates with the big fellows. The clumsiness of its machinery and the highly organized resistance of the big capitalists renders it almost impotent in such cases.

"However, for the United Hebrew Trades and its small units, I can say that the NRA has been a splendid encouragement to small employers, and to date our success has been marked in improving not only the material condition of the workers, but in raising their dignity and prestige among men.

"These statements give, to my opinion, a fair idea of the effect of the NRA on the different trades. However, we must not lose sight of the following:

1. The National Recovery Administration is becoming more and more unfriendly to labor organization and labor union. It is becoming increasingly difficult for a labor union to receive substantial benefits under the codes and in many cases benefits already derived are being nullified by changes and amendments. Unless the unions prove themselves to be very strong or unless the administration changes its policy, many of the gains in the needle trades will be lost.

2. Even under a status quo it will be difficult for the needle trades to maintain their favorable standing. If Labor in other industries will not be in a position to raise its standards, the influx of new members into the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union constantly reduce the percentage of Jews, as most of the new comers are non-Jews. Eventually, it must lead to a condition where even the needle trades will no longer be considered as Jewish trades.