

## CHAPTER II

### THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY

PEOPLE sometimes think of trade-union problems as if unions sprang from economic theories and flourished in the pure air of a revolutionary or labor movement. Should there be industrial or craft unions? Should they accept collective agreements? Should their strategy be determined by business policy or by faithfulness to the class struggle? These are fundamental questions, but they are not settled, for any particular union, by a mere appeal to metaphysics. Neither is the best answer to them, and to others of similar nature, dependent mainly on the traditions, character, and education of the workers involved. The character of labor organization takes its form from the nature of industry itself. In the case of any group of unions with a special tendency or philosophy it is safe to assume that their characteristics have developed largely from the special industrial environment in which they have arisen. Is it, for instance, pure accident that in both England and America the coal miners, utterly different as they are in races and culture, have industrial unions and demand nationalization of the mines, while in

both countries metal-trade or engineering unions have been built on craft lines, and are now engaged in a difficult struggle for amalgamation? There seems to be at work among the unions a principle of adaptation which in a real sense determines the nature of the survivors. It would be fruitless to attempt an analysis of the labor movement in the needle trades without first studying in some detail the industries in which it lives. It is necessary to understand the problems the unions have to solve to see how they have, not by inspiration or perversity, but by a process of trial and error, hit upon effective methods of solution.

Judged by any standard except capital employed, the group of industries under consideration—that producing clothing—is among the largest in the country. In 1917, according to government estimates made for the military draft, 754,062 persons were engaged in the manufacture of clothing, a larger number than in any other single industry except textiles, and more than in any other general occupation except agriculture, transportation, and the building trades. According to the latest available census figures<sup>1</sup> there were in round numbers 518,000 wage-earners in the ready-made clothing group (including furs), a number surpassed among industrial workers only by those in iron and steel and their products, lumber and its remanufacturers, and textiles. Clothing ranked 7th in wages paid (\$256,400,000), 8th in amount paid for materials

<sup>1</sup> Abstract of the Census of Manufactures, 1914.

(\$696,000,000) and 8th in value of the finished product (\$1,340,000,000). The capital invested was approximately \$600,000,000. The number of establishments was about 16,000. If clothing were combined with textiles, the two together would outrank in most respects any other large group of industries.

For our purposes the clothing trades must be divided into two main groups: one, of which we shall speak in this chapter, is that in which the unions originated and developed their strength; the other, of different industrial and social structure, is that into which they are now rapidly making their way. The first group includes <sup>2</sup> men's and boys' clothing (175,000 workers), women's and children's clothing (169,000 workers), cloth hats and caps (7,000 workers), and fur goods (10,000 workers). The second embraces men's shirts (52,000 workers), collars and cuffs (10,000 workers), men's furnishings including neckwear (22,000 workers), corsets (20,000 workers), suspenders and garters (10,000 workers), and millinery. The main distinction is that most of the second group are not so favorable to sub-contracting and small establishments, require a larger proportion of capital and have more highly developed machine processes. Overalls are included under men's clothing, but they form a special case which must be discussed separately.

Ready-made clothing was almost unknown before

<sup>2</sup>The figures in this paragraph are from the Abstract of the Census of Manufactures, 1914. These figures are inaccurate now, but they serve to show the relative importance.

1825. The first factory of which there is any record was that of George Opdyke in Hudson Street, New York City, established in 1831. Neither this nor its successors before the Civil War were, however, factories as we understand the term. The manufacturers merely sold, designed, and cut the garments, and they were sewed in the home, the cheaper grades by farmers' wives, the better ones by skilled city tailors. In no case did the product compete with custom-tailored suits. Its manufacture arose to fill the demand of second-hand clothing dealers for odd sizes to round out their stock, and it was sold principally to sailors who had neither the time nor the money to employ a tailor, and to southern negroes and poor whites. The sewing machine, placed on the market in 1850, gave the industry some stimulus. By 1859 it was estimated that there were 4,000 establishments giving employment to 114,800 workers. The centers were chiefly Boston, New Bedford, and New York, because of their proximity to the mills and to the most numerous supply of cheap casual labor.

Most of the first manufacturers were custom tailors. The busy seasons for the custom tailor lasted but 20 or 25 weeks in the year, and the making of ready-made clothes filled the gap. As the ready-made clothing business grew, some of the larger firms found it profitable enough so that they gave up the custom trade entirely. Before the Civil War, an advertisement appeared in a St. Louis paper announcing sales of ready-made clothing at wholesale

and retail, and stating that the goods were made in a New York factory permanently employing 2,000 hands.

Since the spirit of craftsmanship persisted in the tailor, however, and few mechanical processes had been introduced to split the process and make easier the use of unskilled labor, the factory system did not progress here as in other industries. Goods were given out by the warehouse man or manufacturer to the competent but dependent tailors to be done in the home. With the invention of the sewing machine, the participation of the family became easy. The tailor himself did the more difficult sewing and pressing, while his wife and daughters attended to the easier work. This was the beginning of the family system.

At the same time the factories, extending their business, and requiring large quantities of cheap clothing, had to draw into the process semi-skilled workers who could not do good work without supervision. The factory, known as a "warehouse," was already employing a number of skilled tailors as foremen to give out jobs to the home workers, to examine the product and pay for it. The tailors with whom they were dealing were responsible and known artisans, who could be trusted with the goods. There appeared, however, large numbers of persons applying for employment whom the foremen did not know, or did not believe sufficiently skilled or trustworthy. In order to utilize the labor of these persons the contractor was brought into being. The ware-

houses gave out the goods to the contractor on his own responsibility, and the latter employed the poorer laborers, finding some kind of shop for them. Thus the sweating system developed.

The Civil War laid the basis for large-scale production in the industry. While it cut off the southern market, it substituted government orders for uniforms in enormous quantities, one manufacturer, for instance, receiving a single order amounting to \$1,250,000. The natural results were larger establishments, factory buildings erected for the trade, a standardization of sizes, styles, and processes, a greater subdivision of labor making possible the employment of less skilled operators, and more efficient methods of production. The uniform trade furnished the manufacturers with knowledge of the sizes required in quantities and so prepared them to manufacture in advance of demand. When, after the war, soldiers returning to civil life began looking for cheap ready-made clothing, the manufacturers could supply it. Still, however, the making up and finishing of the garment was done in the home or by contractors. Wages were paid usually not to the individual, but to a man and wife. They had risen, on account of the great demand, and without pressure from the workers, a little more than had the cost of living. Whereas before the war a man and wife were paid from eight to ten dollars a week, they now received from twenty to twenty-five. Out of this they had to buy thread, irons, and sundries. Hours, of course, were unlimited, and rapidly growing conges-

tion in the cities was worsening the sanitation and other conditions of work.

By 1869 the men's clothing industry—the women's was of later development—had increased to 7858 establishments. It spent nearly twice as much for material as in 1859, and the value of the product was \$148,660,000 as against \$80,830,000 a decade before. The number of workers had diminished to 108,128, probably on account of large-scale production, but they were paid almost twice as much in the aggregate.

The decade from 1870-1880 was a flourishing one for the industry. It was a great pioneer period, and immigration both increased the demand and furnished labor. The sale was still for cheap and medium grades, in staple sizes and styles. The fashion factor was unimportant. Jobbers distributed the product to small shops. Long credit was customary. Large capital was therefore necessary and large cutting and merchandizing establishments the rule. Profits were ample. New machinery was invented, notably for cutting. While the number of firms decreased to 6166 in 1879, the average number of workers increased to 160,813, and the product was valued at \$209,548,000. Wages, however, remained stationary, the aggregate advancing only in proportion to the number employed. The home and contracting systems of work were almost universal.

By 1889, probably owing to further improvements in process, the number of workers decreased again to

144,926, and the continued tendency to large-scale production reduced the number of establishments to 4867. The value of the product, however, showed the usual increase, mounting to \$251,019,000. Improvements in the manufacture of textiles, with other causes, decreased the amount paid for materials by about two and a half million dollars. Wages were advanced slightly. The conditions of work remained as before, but the heightened competition among the contractors and among the workers under them intensified every evil of the sweatshop. Meanwhile, the industry had shown a large development in Chicago and other mid-western centers.

Through the latter years of the last century the value of the product in the men's clothing industry showed the same steady increase, accompanied, according to the census, by fluctuations in number of establishments and number of workers. These fluctuations are partly due to interaction of the growing demand for ready-made clothing with the improvement of process and the advantage of large-scale production. In part, however, they are fictitious, since different censuses employed different methods of enumeration. The Tenement House Act of 1892 in New York, prohibiting contractors from carrying on manufacture in the home, while it could not be enforced rigidly, was another factor in the establishment of larger shops. It was not until 1895, however, that the first large "inside shop" was established—that is, a shop in which practically all the operations were carried on. The centering of the

operations in one building made possible improvements in sanitation, power, and other working conditions, but it did not abolish the contractor. Most of the inside shops continued the sub-contracting system within their walls, dealing only with the sub-contractor and paying him for the finished article or piece. He in turn acted as the employer of the relatives and hangers-on who worked under his direction.

During the first decade of the new century the industry began to undergo changes which further complicated the existence of the workers. It reached out for the trade formerly taken by custom tailors, and to do so it had to diversify styles and materials. Public taste in turn was affected, and many of the staple demands began to cease altogether. It had been the custom, for instance, for men to wear ready-made striped trousers, with a coat of different material. Now the separate trousers business waned rapidly; advertising was not influencing the men who had had their suits tailored as wholes, but was changing the taste of those who had not. With the tendency toward diversification of styles, and the intensified competition in merchandizing, went the gradual elimination of the large jobber and long credit. Goods could not be held over from season to season by retailer, jobber, or manufacturer. They had to be ordered as late as possible, so that the shelves should not be piled with unpopular styles. Tailor-to-the-trade houses arose, which made a point, not of carrying stock lines, but of making up suits as ordered

through the retailer. All this emphasized the seasonal tendency of the industry and made it still more difficult to avoid seasonal unemployment. It reduced the amount of capital necessary to engage in manufacturing, and robbed the large and medium-sized houses of much of their advantage. The system of small contractors, with all their irresponsibility, was encouraged. And the business became more dependent on general conditions. The panic of 1907 gravely injured the clothing industry, although previous depressions had helped it. Perhaps this indicated that recent panics have affected more people in moderate circumstances, but it is certain that the ready-made clothing industry was now serving more people in better circumstances. While the total of its business had been enlarging as usual, the problems of its workers, and of many of its employers as well, had been much aggravated. It was in this period that the unrest of the workers became acute, and the present labor movement in the industry sprang to power.

In 1909 the men's clothing industry produced nearly one-half the value of the total product of the clothing trades. Its principal center was New York, which turned out 40 per cent of the goods, and contained a still larger proportion of the establishments. Chicago accounted for 17 per cent. Other important centers were Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, Baltimore, Milwaukee, Rochester, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Louisville, San Francisco, and Syracuse.

The following table summarizes its growth:

Year	No. of Estab-lishments	Av. No. of Wage-Earners	Wages In Thousands of	Cost of Materials of	Value of Product <sup>s</sup> Dollars
1859	4,014	114,800	19,856	44,147	80,830
1869	7,858	108,128	30,746	86,794	148,660
1879	6,166	160,813	45,940	131,363	209,548
1889	4,867	144,926	51,075	128,846	251,019
1899	5,729	120,927	45,496	145,211	276,717
1904	4,504	137,190	57,225	185,793	355,796
1909	5,584	191,183	89,644	252,522	485,677
1914	4,830	173,747	86,828	230,032	458,211

The women's clothing industry was naturally of later development than the men's. The women whose husbands bought their suits from second-hand or ready-made establishments sewed their own dresses, and the women who could afford custom dressmakers were, on account of the stronger hold of fashions, more conservative in abandoning them. Cloaks were, however, manufactured in quantities before the Civil War. Even in 1860 cloak manufacturers were advertising in New York papers for French women operators. The total product of the New York ready-made cloak business was at that time estimated at about \$3,000,000. From the very beginning, the majority of employees were women, especially young girls who did not own sewing machines and worked better in the factory than at home. Home work was therefore not so prevalent as in the men's industry, and "inside shops" were the rule up to the 'eighties.

Working conditions in these shops, however, were no better than in the men's sweatshops. Boston was then a leading center of the industry, and conditions

<sup>s</sup> Of course, no deductions can be drawn from changes in money totals without taking into consideration the fluctuations in the value of the dollar.

there were reported to be better than those in New York. The Boston Labor Bureau in 1871 made a survey which brought out the following facts. The shops were located on the upper floors and were packed so densely that the girls could scarcely move from their chairs; they had no ventilation except from windows at one end of the rooms, and many of the windows could not be opened. Over half the shops had no toilet facilities and no drinking water. In 1872, according to the same bureau, some girls received as little as \$1.50 a week, and the highest wage was \$18.00, paid to cutters who also acted as managers of entire departments. The usual price for making a cloak was twenty-five cents, and two cloaks a day was the maximum output. The working day was usually ten hours, but as all received piece rates, many took work home at night and sewed from two to three hours in the evening. Some girls lived with their parents but others dwelt in cheap boarding houses, from three to six in a room, the room usually unheated. A few cases were reported of girls dying actually in the presence of investigators "from a death for which it is impossible to find another name than starvation." Others confessed to having eked out their existence by prostitution.

After 1880 the women's garment industry became more diversified and gradually assumed more nearly the character of the men's industry. Suits began to be made in larger quantities, more men were employed in the manufacture of cloaks, and home work and contracting were introduced. Dresses and waists

were added to the product in the middle 'nineties. After 1900 a particularly rapid growth was noticeable. House dresses, wrappers, kimonos, skirts, children's and infant's wear, and undergarments of all kinds were produced for the ready-to-wear market. The following table will indicate the strides of the business.

In drawing inferences from this table it should be remembered that here, as with the men's industry, the method of enumeration adopted by the census was not always the same.

Year	No. of Estab-lishments	Av. No. of Wage-earners	Wages In Thousands of Dollars	Cost of Materials	Value of Product
1859	188	5,739	1,193	3,323	7,181
1869	1,847	11,696	2,514	6,838	12,901
1879	562	25,192	6,661	19,559	32,005
1889	1,224	39,149	15,428	34,277	68,164
1899	2,701	83,739	32,586	84,705	159,340
1909	4,558	153,743	78,568	208,788	384,752
1914	5,564	168,907	92,574	252,345	473,888

Although in 1914 there were not so many wage-earners in the women's clothing as in the men's clothing industry, there were more separate establishments. This is partly accounted for by the greater variety of styles and articles of apparel made, which leads to more specialization. It is an eloquent sign, however, that the contractor is as prevalent here as in any branch of clothing manufacture, and that the small establishment flourishes.

It is worthy of note that the period after 1900, which produced the great diversification of styles,

the intensification of seasonal unemployment, the increase of the small establishment, and consequent labor unrest in the men's industry, was paralleled by an almost identical development in the women's industry. In almost every respect, the characteristics of the women's industry are now similar to those of the men's. It also flourishes in the same centers. The main differences are that the men's industry is steadier and less seasonal than the women's; it contains more large establishments; it employs more men and fewer women workers; and it has more invested capital and mechanical power in proportion to the value of the product.

The most obvious problems of the workers in the clothing industry are caused by its seasonal character. The manufacturers of men's garments begin their busy season in January, and the total number employed is greatest in February and March. After that there is a slow falling-off until November. The 1914 Census figures show that the total of seasonal unemployment reached about 19,000, or over one-tenth of the maximum. In the making of women's clothing, the situation is still worse. There are two busy seasons, one reaching its climax in March, the other in October. Between seasons the number employed shows a disastrous decrease. The maximum in 1914 was 188,526 in March, and the minimum 145,362 in July. Thus if all the operatives thrown out of work could find nothing else to do, there would be in the worst period 43,000 unemployed, or 23 per cent of the total number. Most industries have

serious fluctuations, but in no other are there so many jobless concentrated in a few localities. When clothing workers in New York or Chicago are turned on the streets in such numbers, they cannot easily find other employment.

More serious than the case of the actually unemployed, moreover, is that of the majority of workers who, while they do not lose their jobs, are put on part-time during the slack seasons. The full wages received during the busy times do not set the standard of living, but the wages received during the period of lowest remuneration limit it. Savings cannot be great out of even the highest wage paid. It is the current expenses like rent and weekly food bill which determine the standard of life. These must be regulated according to the amount in the pay envelope when it is thinnest. In the dress and waist industry, for instance, during 1912 the average weekly wage earned by all the workers amounted to only 73 per cent of that paid during the busiest week. Census statistics of the cap-makers show little actual seasonal unemployment, but almost all the workers are on part time for some months in the year.

On account of differences in the busy seasons among the various clothing industries, it is possible in some instances for operatives thrown out of work in one industry to find it in another, but this does not appreciably affect the total. Taking all the clothing industries together, the difference between the highest month and the lowest was, in 1914, 76,670 workers. And it must be remembered that this total

includes the more highly developed manufactures such as shirts, collars, and corsets, which both on account of their processes and their location do not offer much opportunity of employment to workers on men's and women's garments. A study of selected individuals in the cloak, suit, and skirt industry of New York was made in 1914 by the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,<sup>4</sup> illustrating the usual condition. Out of 29 cutters and 30 pressers, 25 each were out of work at their trade for more than twelve weeks. A conservative approximation of the average period of unemployment for these persons shows that for the cutters it was 18.8 weeks and for the pressers 20.9 weeks. Only five of the cutters and three of the pressers were able to find other work during this period.

The frequency of discharge for seasonal slack work naturally leads to a shifting personnel of the labor force in any one shop. Out of about 15,000 workers questioned in the cloak, suit and skirt industry, the proportion who worked in only one shop during the year from August 1, 1912 to August 1, 1913, ranged from 79 to 57 per cent, according to operation. Some worked in as many as nine shops in that year. This high labor turnover not only adds to the expense of the manufacturer and acts as an economic drag on the entire industry, but it complicates the task of the unions. It is more difficult to keep track of such a fluid labor force, and the frequency of discharge

<sup>4</sup> Wages and Regularity of Employment in the Cloak, Suit and Skirt Industry, U. S. Department of Labor, Bulletin No. 147.



gives the manufacturer many an opportunity to get rid of a worker whom he finds troublesome on account of union activities. After collective agreements were adopted, many of the most vexatious adjustments arose over such questions of improper discharge.

It would be a comparatively easy matter to avoid the worst seasonal fluctuations by distributing work evenly throughout the year were it not for fashions. The total amount of clothing to be sold can be estimated roughly, and if each year the manufacturers could decide on a few staple styles, as they used to do in the last century, they could begin work as early as they liked. But competition has forced them to vie with each other in showing a great variety of samples, some of which are destined to be popular and others not. The public, in turn, has been educated to demand the "latest thing." So the dealers order as little as they can until the season is upon them and they know what is selling. Probably few individual members of the public really want so many styles and so many changes in them, but a spirit of social emulation leads them to accept the process. They blame the manufacturers for the multiplicity of fashions, which they believe are created to increase the volume of clothing sold. The manufacturers, in turn, blame the public for being so capricious and causing them so much extra expense; no individual manufacturer would dare to reduce his styles for fear of losing trade to competitors. He gains no benefit from any possible in-

creased total of clothing sold. The workers suffer in the vicious circle by enduring year after year long hours and rush work in the busy seasons, and semi-starvation in the slack ones. There is no one to make effective the communal will against the individual weakness.

A recent change in the origination of fashions for the ladies' tailoring establishments, or "tailors to the trade" as distinguished from the manufacturers of ready-to-wear garments, has in fact considerably reduced seasonal unemployment in that branch. Whereas fashions used to originate solely in Paris, and American tailors had to wait before beginning large operations until the prevailing fashion for the season established itself, now American capital has invaded the field to such an extent that many of the latest "Paris fashions" are actually produced in New York and are known simultaneously on this side of the Atlantic by most of the important firms. The origination of such fashions is the specialized function of a comparatively few houses, whose income is derived as much from the sale of designs as from the sale of garments themselves. In this way an approach to systematized standardization has been made. It affects, however, only a comparatively small proportion of the clothing workers. The recent lengthening of the seasons has been due in the main rather to the coincidence of a period of prosperity with the absence of immigration; if in the future we should experience a period of depression and an increase in the labor supply, the problem of

seasonal unemployment would undoubtedly be as acute as ever.

If it cost the manufacturer more than it does to keep his plant idle or going at low speed, he might make more heroic efforts to break loose from the round of fashions, or to find something with which to fill the slack seasons. In other industries the capital tied up in plant, machinery and power becomes a heavy weight on finances if it is not being used. The average for all American industries was in 1914<sup>5</sup> an installation of 3.2 mechanical horse power for each worker. In the men's clothing trade there is but one mechanical horse power for every 3.2 workers. In the women's industry there is one horse power for every six workers. The men's industry therefore uses ten times less, and the women's twenty times less power per worker than the average. Over half this power, also, is rented, and represents no investment when not turned on. A manufacturer is concerned to keep engines working steadily because they represent an investment which must be earning dividends, but he can turn man-power off at any time without concern—for that the worker has to pay.

The clothing industry and the employees in it also suffer from changes in the prosperity of the consumer. Clothing in the bulk may be a necessity, but the garments that are actually sold include a large proportion of semi-luxuries, which are cut off in time of crisis. 1914 and 1917 saw greatly slackened pro-

<sup>5</sup> Abstract of the Census of Manufactures, 1914.

duction in women's and men's civilian clothing, although the uniform trade partly filled the breach in 1917.

In most industries the large establishments do the bulk of the business and set the working standards. Once they are controlled by labor, a decisive battle of the workers is won. Not so in the clothing industries. Taking the men's and women's industries together, there were, according to the Census of 1914, 1663 establishments with an annual product of less than \$5,000, 3098 between \$5,000 and 20,000, 3496 between \$20,000 and \$100,000, 2129 between \$100,000 and \$1,000,000, and 101 over \$1,000,000. The establishments with a product worth under \$100,000 each employed 126,525 persons, more than half as many as those doing a larger business. Their total product was valued at \$207,046,000, while the larger houses produced only a little over three times as much—\$725,055,000. There were 2,219 establishments employing from one to five persons each, and the number of workers in these shops was 7,553; while there were only 12 establishments employing over 1,000, and the total of their wage-earners was but 22,078. The largest group of establishments (3,901) was that employing from six to twenty workers; 48,415 wage-earners worked in them. The largest total of wage-earners worked in shops employing from 21 to 50; in these 2,443 establishments there were 78,907 employed. The 934 shops employing from 51 to 100 each, accounted for 65,566 wage-earners, the 423 from 100 to 250, 63,509 workers, the 97 from 251 to

500, 32,591 workers, and the 36 from 501 to 1000, 25,235 workers. This condition of small enterprise and free competition may satisfy devotees of laissez-faire economics, but it makes untold trouble for the workers and their unions.

The larger establishments have no great advantage over the smaller, and do not tend to drive them out of business, except in some few lines where a well advertised name can be made to count. The percentage of manufacturing profit to net sales reported from those men's clothing establishments which did an annual business of under \$500,000 a year was 4.75, a larger percentage than in any group of establishments except those whose product was valued at \$2,000,000 and over apiece.<sup>6</sup> It is the medium-sized firms which make the least.

The same tendency makes contracting prevalent. A few "inside shops" have all the operations performed under one roof, but many give out the work to contractors—either part or all of it. The 1914 Census figures show in the men's industry 124,000 workers in independent factories and 50,000 in contractors' shops; in the women's industry 152,000 in independent concerns and 17,000 in contractors' establishments. Union officials state that these figures grossly underestimate the numbers working for contractors. It is probable that they do, for they are made up from the manufacturers' reports, and many a contractor who aspires to independence and

<sup>6</sup> The Men's Factory-Made Clothing Industry, U. S. Department of Commerce.

perhaps does sell part of his product direct to the retailer will call himself independent. There are also numerous sub-manufacturers—employers dependent for their capital and sales on the larger manufacturers, but each turning out complete garments in shops for whose labor management the larger firms are not responsible. Reports from a representative number of manufacturers show the relation of profits to contracting as follows:<sup>7</sup>

Firms having	Manufacturing Profits on	Net Sales
No operating contracted	Capital Employed	
No operating contracted	12.56	5.66
Part " "	9.79	5.22
All " "	13.04	5.89

There seems to be little advantage to the manufacturer in having all his work performed under his own roof unless he is making high grade advertised goods where direct supervision counts.

This separation of the commercial organization from the strictly producing one is a factor which makes it easy for small firms to arise in great numbers. In most industries the necessity of large-scale merchandizing and the economy of large-scale production go hand in hand, and it is perhaps due to this fact that many writers have failed to distinguish the producing from the merchandizing process, although they are different in many respects. In the clothing industry, however, the distinction is obvious and complete. To compete successfully in the modern

<sup>7</sup> The Men's Factory-Made Clothing Industry, U. S. Department of Commerce.

market, it is necessary to have skilled designers, travelling salesmen, large show-rooms, and expensive advertising. This makes at least moderate size necessary to real success as a merchandizing firm. To produce, however, size is not at all essential. An ambitious cutter or designer has all the knowledge necessary to set up a contracting or sub-manufacturing business of his own, and he needs but little capital. He can rent a loft big enough for a few workers, buy his materials on credit, rent his machines from the sewing-machine manufacturer and his power from the electric company. All he needs is the favor of an independent manufacturer and a few orders. He can pay his expenses out of the first year's turnover. He may be, to be sure, a bad manager; poor accounting and reckless ventures may overwhelm him the moment he tries to expand and secure direct business from the retailer. Every year sees hundreds of little firms drifting into and out of business. The total capital invested in the clothing industries was in 1914, as we have seen (page 16), about 15 per cent less than the amount spent for materials (including power). This shows vividly how little fixed capital is necessary and why no concentration of capital can control the industry. The total of all industries for the country shows, on the contrary, over \$22,790,000,000 capital and only \$14,368,000,000 spent for materials (including power). The capital for all was, instead of 15 per cent smaller, 27 per cent larger than the sum spent for materials. A further indication of the dom-

inance of the small establishment in the production of clothing is the fact that in 1914, in men's clothing—including shirts—only 47.1 per cent of the product was made by incorporated firms, and in the women's trade only 29.1 per cent. The average for all industries was 83.2 per cent.<sup>8</sup>

With such a large number of establishments, many of them new each year, there is of course a wide variation in managerial and commercial efficiency. Inefficient firms may lose out in the end, but their constant presence exerts a depressing effect on standards. Few manufacturers have accurate accounting systems, and many cannot tell whether certain styles are being made at a profit or a loss. The multiplicity of styles, with inaccurate accounting, leads to great confusion and divergence in the determination of piece rates. The union, endeavoring as it must to establish uniform minima of wages, is limited by the least efficient employer. The styles sold at a loss create a ruinous competition for the established firms, while on the other hand the majority of firms in an association cannot afford the level of wages that the best managed could pay. A special study of the men's clothing industry<sup>9</sup> furnishes evidence that the level of wages has little to do with the prosperity of the establishment. Of ten establishments showing the highest percentage of manufacturing profit, three had a higher percentage for direct labor than the average for the industry,

<sup>8</sup> Abstract of the Census of Manufactures, 1914.

<sup>9</sup> The Men's Factory-Made Clothing Industry. U. S. Department of Commerce.

and seven had a lower percentage. Of six establishments showing a manufacturing loss, four had a higher percentage for direct labor than the average, and two a lower percentage. A lower percentage for direct labor does not mean necessarily lower wages, but may mean fewer employees and better management. If all establishments were as well managed as the most prosperous, the general level of wages could therefore be far higher than it is. Moreover, the workers suffer in the end from the general economic loss due to the excess of competition. One indication of this is that even some of the best firms carry many styles at a loss in order to present an attractive line and prevent competitors from undermining their custom.

Managerial inefficiency is also reflected in unnecessary unemployment or part-time employment due to a lack of balance between various departments. The failure to provide a sufficient proportion of operatives at one stage of the manufacturing process may cause a congestion there and idleness at other stages. In 1913 in the dress and waist industry, even during the busiest week of the season, a large number of the workers were not fully employed. Although the full working week was 50 hours, 20.9 per cent of the workers were employed for between 40 and 50 hours, 3.7 per cent between 30 and 40 hours, 2.5 per cent between 20 and 30 hours, and 2.2 per cent under 20 hours.<sup>10</sup> Illness,

<sup>10</sup> Wages and Regularity of Employment and the Standardization of Piece Rates in the Dress and Waist Industry: New York City. U. S. Department of Labor, Bulletin No. 146.

tardiness, and other causes leading workers to report for only part of the week must be allowed for in these percentages, but probably the largest factor in them is due to managerial inefficiency. If this is the case during the busiest week of the year, imagine the conditions when there is no particular urgency in finishing the product.

Attempts of the workers to improve their conditions were always hindered by the extraordinary difficulty of mobilizing and controlling the labor in this industry. It has flourished in large cities, and has depended chiefly on the work of immigrants recently arrived, the majority of whom did not know English, but all of whom needed immediate employment. Keen competition among the workers themselves was for long the rule. The fact that much of the work could be done in the home, and was done there for years, prevented the growth of solidarity among the toilers, or any effective regulation of hours, conditions, or wages. Each head of a household might have a separate establishment. His wife and children, and even the boarders, would work for him. Newly come relatives or acquaintances who had no other point of contact with the new world would find at his house temporary employment. Thus they would all work seven days a week and far into the night, in small overcrowded rooms which they rarely had time to clean, often sleeping and preparing their rude meals in the workroom. Much has been written of the sweatshops and the insanitary tenements in the slum. Few, however, have under-

stood that these conditions were not only frightful in themselves, but that they hindered the growth of labor organizations which alone could affect lasting and fruitful improvements. It was not the fault of the homemaker, the contractor or his employees that long hours were the rule. Their competition with each other continually depressed prices and made it necessary to work longer and longer in order to keep soul and body together.

Even after the worst sweatshops were abolished, it was still difficult for the unions to mobilize so fluid a supply of labor. Little skill for much of the work is required, and that is of a type which is usually learned in the home. Every woman knows something about sewing; only the designers and cutters need any special tailoring skill. The unorganized are always in the background, in the masses of the population, ready to drift into the industry. No man can learn to be a toolmaker or a locomotive engineer without undergoing a long apprenticeship in the shop, coming in contact with his fellow-workers, and being educated to union solidarity and discipline. But some woman fresh from a little town in Russia or Poland, unable to read and write, might within a week after her arrival in this country be working in the shop of a garment contractor.

It is a commonplace of the labor movement that women are harder to organize than men. Many of them go to work while they are young and live at home; they accept seasonal employment easily, and

they do not intend to stay permanently in the shop anyway. To them marriage is the real career, and wage-work is a mere temporary expedient, to be endured without much thought until the way of escape opens. Motives based on social status and on race or religion are likely to be stronger with women than with men. Many a young woman, forced into industry by the pressure of circumstances, hesitates to admit that she is a member of the working class, and believes that it would cast a stigma upon her to join a union. She prefers rather to maintain her associations with the women who do not have to work for wages, to read and sympathize with the newspapers which support the employers. If she is native-born, she dislikes to link herself with "foreigners," and if she is a Christian, she shares a popular prejudice against Jews. She thinks it unseemly to go to meetings where there are many men who will treat her as an equal, but whom she has not met in a social way, and whom she does not wish to entertain in her home. As a result of these preconceptions, she would rather allow the employer to exploit her than to do anything so unladylike as to affiliate with the labor movement and perhaps be called on strike. Fortunately these remnants of a passing social stratification are now weakening among working women. When organized, their spirit and endurance are often greater than that of men, but it is more difficult to enlist them in the labor army.

This has been an additional obstacle of the needle-

trades unions. In 1914 there were more women than men in both the men's clothing and women's clothing establishments, the totals being 147,572 men wage-earners over 16 years of age, and 203,009 women over 16. A special study of representative establishments making men's garments showed only 19.3 per cent of the women workers married, and of these about one-third were in the shop temporarily. The percentage of permanent married workers in the women's industry would probably be even smaller, since it is chiefly the Italians who remain in the shop after marriage, and there are many more Italians in the men's clothing than in the women's clothing establishments.

Unions facing a few strongly entrenched employers such as the manufacturers of iron and steel have their own difficulties, but there at least the problem is clear. It is a test of strength; the workers know that they must organize, and then enforce the conditions they wish. But the character of the clothing industry presents the unions with a confusing entanglement of obstacles. The fluctuations of busy and slack seasons tend to destroy solidarity. For years strikes would occur at the beginning of the busy season, concessions would be won, and then as more and more workers were deprived of employment, competition among them would again arise, standards would be lowered and the concessions lost. The struggle would have to begin anew every year. The union itself would lose members who when out of work could not afford to pay their dues. The large number of small establishments made necessary, not

a few great victories, but a thousand small ones. An argus-eyed vigilance was necessary to make sure that agreements were everywhere observed. The manufacturer who himself assented to the union terms might employ a new or irresponsible contractor who obscurely violated them. After associations of employers were formed, the divergence of the members in prosperity, attitude, and ability made negotiations difficult. It was impossible to raise the general level of wages to the point which the best employers would be able to maintain. And it was difficult for the unions themselves to reach and include a controlling majority of the available labor supply.

Here were evident all the worst evils of competition under private enterprise. Words like unemployment, sub-manufacturer, contractor, and sweatshop are symbols which carry to the reader little but a formalized intellectual concept of industrial problems. What they mean in the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, year after weary year, escapes. They really mean the tenements of New York at their squalid and ugly worst, they mean tuberculosis, curved spines, hollow eyes, premature death after an unfulfilled life, sickly children and a stunted race.<sup>11</sup> The important thing to remember is that the problems of the clothing industry have not been simply industrial problems or abstract problems of labor organization, but problems of human life, involving the entire existence of enough people to inhabit a small nation.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter VI, under Joint Board of Sanitary Control.

The evolution of industry predicted by early socialists took place here only in part. It was believed that industrial establishments would grow larger and larger, that the concentration of capital would become more and more intense, and that eventually the workers, forming the democratic state, could take over industries which were, so to speak, completed products. In the clothing business, capital has been able to approach consolidation of merchandizing, and the bankers control credit, but, in the process of production, competition has persisted as strongly as ever. It has remained for the workers to assume the constructive rôle, and to perform in another way the task which Marx assigned to capital. In order that their lives might be tolerable, some kind of control had to be established. Capital was unable to furnish anything like a monopoly; enterprise and management could not furnish it. There was no single point at which effectual pressure could be applied. The only possibility left was for labor to organize so thoroughly as to provide the necessary cohesive force. Once organized, the workers could not rest on past victories. Since they were the only element of cohesion, the slightest relaxation on their part would allow the industry to relapse into its old anarchic chaos. Furthermore, their task was not only to extract certain concessions from the managements, but in many respects to reshape the entire structure of the industry. No perfunctory type of unionism could help them. The sort of union membership which carries cards and pays dues, but leaves

the rest to the devices of business agents and officials, would not have survived—did not survive—their struggle. The union had to go into the daily lives, into the dreams and wills of its members. Its fights had to be fought in thousands of shops, and fought over again in thousands of new shops. Every member had to proselyte without ceasing. And the unions themselves had to be democratically successful, they had to retain the interest and enlist the cooperation of all their members. At the top there had to be vision and leadership, coupled with ability of the most practical sort. It is for these reasons that a particularly strong and self-reliant type of unionism has been developed in the clothing industry. But before relating the history of the unions, it is necessary to say something about the origin and culture of the workers.