

JEWES AND THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT, 1850-1880

By Morris U. Schappes

IT IS not until the 1880s that a distinct Jewish sector emerges in the general labor movement in the United States and maintains its identity for some half a century thereafter. But the participation of Jews in the American labor movement goes back, so far as is known, at least to 1850, and additional systematic research may push the beginnings still further back, as well as multiply our very spotty information about the three decades before 1880.

In the 1850s we find only individuals here and there. They pop onto the stage, perhaps in a scanty newspaper account, leave their faint, beginner's mark and then sometimes disappear without a trace or sometimes drift away from the labor movement into the liberalism of the middle class.

After the Civil War, labor leaders become aware of a noticeable growth in the number of Jewish workers that, like other workers, need to be organized. Again individual Jews here and there come into the record as minor leaders of workers' organizations.

The 1870s, dominated by the great crisis of 1873 to 1878, are marked by major class conflicts. In this period, for the first time conspicuous numbers of Jews appear in strike struggles, while at the time individual Jews come forward as leaders in the economic and political arena.

Journeyman Tailors' Strike, 1850

The beginning, then, was in the summer of 1850. On July 16 the journeymen tailors in New York, several thousand of them, had struck for higher wages. The workers were American, Irish, Scottish, German and, as we shall see, Jewish. Much of the work was being done at home by the tailors, so picketing was complicated. But if you could not picket to prevent scabs from working, you could try to prevent them from delivering finished clothing to the employer or from taking the cloth home to work on. And that was all that Morris Bernstein did that Saturday morning, July 20, down on Center Street. A scab and his wife were wending their way down the block laden down with unmade garments. Several strikers stopped them and were taking them to the strike headquarters to persuade them to join the strikers when a cop interfered and picked out Paul Gansert and Morris Bernstein for arrest. Now if

Bernstein is Jewish—and we have so far only his name to go by—he is the first Jew known to have participated in a strike, the first Jew to be arrested for picketing. Three days later they were still in jail awaiting trial. The newspapers that reported the arrest did not report the outcome.

Were there other Jews involved in the strike? Yes, there were, on both sides. Not only do the names of some Jewish employers appear in the press, but early Thursday morning, July 25, "at the corner of John Street and Broadway, as three or four Jews were taking home tailors' work, they were surrounded by a number of journeymen tailors, who took down their names, but did not offer them any further molestation." On the other hand, three weeks later, when the clothing cutters organized, they elected as secretary one Israel Kolb, who may be Jewish.

Meanwhile the majority of the commercial press was continually red-baiting the striking tailors. The *Journal of Commerce* was sure the strike was inspired by the "red-hot socialists of Paris," and other dailies cried "anarchy" and "Red Republicanism." One incensed German who signed himself dubiously as "Friends of Laborers" reacted bitterly to these incitations. In a piece in the *New Yorker Demokrat*, he flailed wildly in all directions, denouncing "Priests and Jesuits" and each hostile newspaper by name. When he came to the *Journal of Commerce* he skidded into anti-Semitism with the cry, "thou pious Jew-soul"—although the publisher of the *Journal* was not a Jew. At the same time it was reported that in Baltimore a meeting called to organize a tailors' trades association passed a resolution, after "much debate" and "considerable excitement," to keep "Jews from attending the meeting." Also at the same time, the most widely known Jew in the country, the Tammany leader Major Mordecai Manuel Noah, was using his *Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger* to try to incite Negroes to violence against the strikers!

Yet, although class lines were not free from distortion by national animosities, the strikers did succeed in raising wage rates about 25 per cent by the time the strike ended in the middle of September.¹

At the same time there came on the scene a socialist of

¹ *The New York Herald*, July 21, 1850, *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 23, 1850, *The Morning Star*, July 22, 1850; *Herald*, July 26; *Tribune*, August 15; *The New York Journal of Commerce*, July 31, August 16; *Herald*, August 13, 1850.

considerable influence, the 25 year old German Jewish "Forty-eighter," Sigismund Kaufmann, then a pocketbook worker, and a private teacher of German and French. On June 6, 1850, Kaufmann was leading a secession of 36 members of the New York Turn-Verein (German gymnastic society) to form a *Socialist Turn-Verein*.

Sigismund Kaufmann, Labor Editor

Of perhaps lasting importance is the service Kaufmann rendered the American working class by publishing the works of Marxists when he was elected editor, late in 1851, of the *Turn-Zeitung*, the official national organ of the league of socialist gymnastic societies. Joseph Weydemeyer, co-worker of Marx and the first Marxist to settle and work in the United States, arrived in New York just a week before Kaufmann began to issue the *Turn-Zeitung* on November 15, 1851 (and every two weeks thereafter). The introduction declared that one purpose of the paper was "the dissemination of socialist ideas." Not himself a Marxist, Kaufmann promptly recognized Weydemeyer's clarity and vigor of analysis, and Weydemeyer became a regular contributor to the *Turn-Zeitung*. His first article, "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat," appeared on January 1, 1852—the first Marxist treatment of that theme to be published in our country! On January 5, when Weydemeyer wrote a letter to Marx in London describing in detail the many German-language newspapers in the United States, he singled out the *Turn-Zeitung* for special praise.

But Weydemeyer's article was not the only Marxist work Kaufmann published in that January 1852 issue. It also contained the first installment of Engels' masterpiece, *The Peasant War in Germany*, which had appeared in 1850 in Hamburg in Marx's magazine, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. The serial continued until February 1, 1853. Marxist influence was also apparent at that time in the *Turn-Zeitung* position on American political questions, on trade-unionism and on the slavery question. In fact, there was more of Marxism in the official organ than some Western sections of the movement could approve and protests began to be made. If, in those few years and in those few years only, the Turnerbund was, as Hermann Schlueter judges, in the van of the labor movement among the German immigrants here, a good deal of this achievement was due to Kaufmann's editorial policy of opening his pages to Marxist writing. Later, Kaufmann and most of the non-Marxist socialists in the Turn-Verein allowed their socialism to be completely swallowed up in the anti-slavery movement and in post-war liberalism, Kaufmann becoming a leader in the New York Republican Party.²

Early Jewish Marxists

Another noteworthy Jewish figure connected with the

² Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654-1875*, New York, rev. ed., 1952, p. 725, 539-542; *Turn Zeitung*, New York, Nov. 1, 1851 to Sept. 15, 1853; Karl Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer, Pioneer of American Socialism*, New York, 1947, p. 35, 45; Hermann Schlueter, *Die Anfänge der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung in Amerika*, Stuttgart, 1907, p. 214.

Marxist movement at that time was the brilliant 23-year-old German physician, Abraham Jacobi. A follower of Marx and chairman of the Turnverein at Bonn University, Jacobi was arrested in May 1851 in Cologne and indicted with 10 others on a charge of conspiring to overthrow the Prussian government. Although Jacobi was one of four acquitted on November 12, 1852, the Prussian authorities held him in prison until the summer of 1853. After a vain attempt to establish a medical practice in Manchester, England (aided by Marx and Engels), Jacobi came to New York early in November 1853. His arrival was a boon to Weydemeyer and other Marxists, who had been for some time—busy repelling slanderous attacks on Marx and the Communist defendants in the Cologne trial. With a real live defendant now on hand to help set the record straight, Weydemeyer, in collaboration with Jacobi and another Marxist, wrote a long article for the *Belletristisches Journal und New-Yorker Criminal-Zeitung*, November 25, 1853, refuting the slanders and defending Marx's political program. After that, however, Jacobi had only a casual and waning contact with the Marxists and the labor movement, lecturing on medical subjects before the Socialist Turn-Verein and other workers' audiences, and as late as the 1870s taking part in a united front organization with Marxists. He made major contributions in medicine, becoming known as the founder of the science of child care (pediatrics). When he died in 1919, the socialist *New York Call* pointed out that "it was his knowledge of the underlying principles of living conditions which made him such a potent force in the world of medicine." The influence of Marxism, in other words, was more permanent than his contact with Marxists.³

Another Jacobi, unrelated to Dr. Abraham and even more active in Marxist circles in the 1850's, was young Fritz Jacobi. On October 25, 1857, the Marxists in the New York metropolitan area formed the Communist Club, the first one in the Western Hemisphere. Seventeen-year-old Fritz Jacobi was the first secretary of the organization and continued to hold his office at least until 1859. The constitution of the club bound all members to "recognize the complete equality of all people—no matter of what color or sex" and to "strive to abolish the bourgeois property system." The club corresponded with Marx and tried to stimulate the establishment here of a broad labor association to cooperate with similar movements in Europe. Another probably Jewish member of the club was (Max?) Cohnheim. The Club disbanded when the Civil War began because most of its members enlisted in the Union Army. Jacobi, then age 21, and Cohnheim, age 34, were among those who enlisted. Cohnheim became an artillery captain before his discharge in April 1863. Jacobi was a second lieutenant when he was wounded in action July 1, 1862 at Malvern Hill, Va. On his recovery, he was promoted to first lieutenant, returned to action, and was killed at Fredericksburg, Va., December 13, 1862.⁴

³ Schappes, "Two Humanists: Doctors Jacobi," *JEWISH LIFE*, September 1952.

Militant Unionists

In the first few years after the Civil War, facts about Jewish participation in the labor movement are scarce. Yet the nameless number of Jewish workers was growing and the leaders of labor knew this. In July 1867, the National Labor Union, preparing for its second Congress in Chicago in August, published an *Address . . . to the Workingmen of the United States*, in which they declared that "the interests of labor are one; that there should be no distinction of race or nationality; no classification of Jew or Gentile, Christian or Infidel. . . ." And when the Congress opened on August 19, one of the 71 delegates was Jacob G. Selig, probably Jewish, representing the Chicago Cigar Makers' Union. Although it lasted only until 1872, the National Labor Union, first national organization of American workers, was of far-reaching practical as well as historic significance.

In September 1867, the fourth Convention of the Cigar Makers' National Union opened in Buffalo; the delegates included Abraham Simons of the Westfield, Mass., local and Harry Jacobs of New York Local 15, either or both of whom may be Jewish. The list of Secretaries of Local Unions also contains the names of Joseph Levy of Norfolk, Va., Louis Benjamin of Cincinnati, Jacob Wolf of St. Louis, Louis Schneider of Troy, N. Y., and others who, like these, may be or probably are Jews. Among the thousands of German immigrants who were then in the cigar-making trade, there were undoubtedly many Jews.⁵

But it was the New York capmakers' general strike of 1874 that for the first time, so far as is known, brought hundreds of Jewish workers into a militant mass action. When in 1873 the great crisis struck, it hit the country like a social cyclone. In the first months of 1874, tens of thousands of homeless workers slept in police stations. *The World* printed many columns of names of the destitute unemployed, Jewish names among them. Cries for public relief were met with pious horror in the capitalist press and the *Jewish Messenger* feared "the utter subversion of society." The *Herald* got a reputation for "philanthropy" by financing four soup-kitchens, and a "model soup-house" for Jews was opened at 100 Mott Street.

It was amid such destitution that some 1,500 to 2,000 capmakers, their wage-rates cut over 50 per cent, were driven to strike. One-third of the strikers were Irish women and girls while the majority of the men were Germans, mostly Jews. Strike headquarters, interestingly enough, were at Covenant Hall, 56 Orchard Street, the headquarters of the B'nai B'rith! The secretary of the Central Union of Capmakers and the leader of the strike was M. Weiner. A couple of other officers, as well as members of the negotiating committee, were Jews. So, too, were

many of the leading cap manufacturers, whose wage-cutting pattern had provoked the strike.

The strikers' demands were for a 20-40 per cent increase in wage rates, a ten-hour day and the observation of certain union rules. When the employers protested against such extreme demands as constituting a 125 per cent increase, the workers countered by pointing out that such an increase would merely restore the scale to what it had been before the cuts; and they added: "Our craftsmen work, not like Christians or Jews, but like heathens, seven days in the week. . . ."

Capmakers in other cities sent their aid and the workers of New York also supported the strike. At the very height of the struggle, the Capmakers' Union affiliated with the Workingmen's Union, the largest central body in New York, embracing 30,000 workers. From the beginning of the strike on January 29, daily mass meetings, sometimes with as many as 1200 present, kept the workers mobilized and militant. By February 24, all except some of the biggest employers settled with the union for an average increase of 15 per cent and the strike was finally called off on March 9, 1874. The commercial press had called the workers foolish for striking at such a time of crisis. But the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, organ of the American Section of the Marxist International Workingmen's Association which had supported the strike, congratulated the workers on their victory under such difficult circumstances.⁶

The Great Cigar Makers' Strike, 1877-8

Another strike involving many hundreds of Jewish workers was the great cigarmakers' strike in New York from October 15, 1877 to February 3, 1878, in which from 11,000 to 15,000 workers fought bitterly to wrest a minimum living wage from the employers. The conditions can be judged from the fact that the main demand was a rate of \$6 per thousand cigars, when a fast worker might make 300 cigars in a long day's work. Moreover, the employers had developed the tenement system of production, in which the employers rented the tenements in which the cigarmakers and their families lived and worked, and deducted the rent weekly from the wages!

The cigarmakers were inspired in part by the great railroad strike of 1877 and in part by a couple of successful short strikes in cigar factories. In October thousands of tenement cigar makers, without consulting the Union, Local 144, poured out on strike. The cigar manufacturers on October 15 countered with a lockout and soon more than 11,000 workers and their families were involved in

⁵ Schappes, *Documentary History*, p. 509-510, 714; John R. Commons, *Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Cleveland, 1909-1911, vol. 9, p. 169; *Proceedings of the Fourth Session of the Cigar Makers' National Union*, Philadelphia, 1867, p. 4, 46. It is also necessary to correct here Dr. Foner's statement that the Mrs. Esther Greenleaf of Lynn, Mass., who was one of the leaders of the 1860 New England shoemakers' strike, is Jewish (*Jews in American History, 1654-1865*, New York, 1945, p. 47). There is no evidence that she is Jewish and Dr. Foner's assumption, which is based on her name alone, is without foundation, for Greenleaf is a common Christian New England name (as in John Greenleaf Whittier). Dr. Foner has informed me he intends to correct this as well as other errors whenever a revised edition is possible.

⁶ Schappes, *Documentary History*, p. 561-563, 735-736.

⁴ Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, New York, 1947, p. 233; Schlueter, work cited, p. 161-162; *Sociale Republik*, New York, May 15, 1858, March 19, 1859; *Karl Marx Chronik Seines Lebens*, Moscow, 1934, p. 169, 173, 177, 182; *Trow's New York City Directory*, 1859/60, p. 168; Frederick Phisterer, *New York in the War of the Rebellion 1861 to 1865*, 3d ed., Albany, 1912, vol. 3, p. 2244; *A Record of the Commissioned Officers . . . in . . . New York . . . as taken from the Muster-in Rolls . . .*, Albany, 1864, vol. 1, p. 168.

bitter struggle. Most of the strikers were women, who had been drawn into the craft when the mold was invented. The largest single national element were the Bohemians, with the Germans next, among whom were many Jews and a small number of Polish Jews.

The president of Local 144 was the 27-year-old Samuel Gompers, still working at the bench to provide for a wife and five children. He was active and effective, especially as a mass speaker, in the strike, but the day to day leadership was assumed by Adolph Strasser, who was also Jewish, a single man of 34 recently elected president of the Cigarmakers' International Union. Strasser became president of the Central Strike Committee, a democratic body with delegates from each striking shop, which met every day and developed an extraordinarily effective strike apparatus. Jewish participation was noticeable. On the Strike Executive Committee were Max Salamon and Adolf Rosenbaum. On the Strike Committee as delegates from shops there were Solomons, Isaacs, two M. Levys, L. Friedman, G. and H. Rosenbaum and Milton Kohn. The Packers Union, which joined the strike, had A. Rosenbaum as vice president, L. Eisner as secretary and M. Gluck as treasurer. On October 18 the *Sun* reported that the workers at Kerbs & Spiess, the biggest manufacturer, had all struck, "with the exception of a few Polish Jews," but the next day *The World* said the Polish Jews had struck too. Most of the manufacturers, especially the main ones, were also Jewish.

Strike-Breaking Measures

Strasser designated a Relief Committee of 25 (later 35) and appealed for financial and material aid. \$39,458.51 came in as contributions from workers all over the country, and from Canada, England and Belgium too. Hundreds of families were given weekly rations of food in three relief stores for the duration of the strike. (The first such store was given rent-free to the strikers by G. F. Cohn.) When medical service was needed, the Strike Committee enlisted the aid of doctors; when lawyers were needed to help arrested and evicted strikers, eminent lawyers volunteered their assistance.

The eviction tactic was the most vicious used by the bosses. One of the demands of the tenement cigarmakers was a \$1 reduction in the rent they paid their employers. The answer was the dreaded dispossession notice in the dead of winter. 1980 eviction notices were served, 630 were dismissed in court and 1300 were carried through. People who were sick, and in one case a woman in labor, were put out. The Strike Committee at once organized a Room Committee, which found over 100 "homes" for the evicted. This tactic of the bosses turned the sympathy of some lower middle class elements towards the strikers. Small landlords came forward with offers of rent-free apartments, J. Cohn of Pitt Street offering two dwellings on November 8, 1877. A few days before, in a court-room, the lawyer Elias G. Levy asked the court to be allowed

to withdraw from the case when he found that his client had engaged him to evict "poor men and their families into the streets just because the men are seeking to get higher wages." The court agreed and the landlord-employer had to drop this particular case.

The bosses used evictions, strikebreakers, threats to import Chinese contract laborers, police attacks and arrests, the shipping of work out of town—and red-baiting, crying that Strasser was not a real cigarmaker but "an avowed German Communist." Even the union's opening of a cigar factory on December 10 that put several hundred cigarmakers to work with Gompers as foreman could not turn the scales. As Gompers wrote, "The strike slowly crumbled away." Yet, "it was a wonderful fight. . . . Although we did not win, we learned the fundamentals and techniques which assured success later." In their approach to trade unionism at that period of their lives, both Gompers and Strasser were influenced by the Marxist emphasis on trade union organization.⁷

Organizing Activity

While this strike was crumbling away, a movement of another sort was forming. J. M. McDonnell, editor of *The Labor Standard* and an associate of the American Marxists, began to call for an organization that would amalgamate all the unions. Enthusiastic support for such a project was expressed in a letter to the *Standard* on January 20, 1878, written by P. Cohen, Secretary of Local No. 1 of the Slipper and Shoemakers Union, 28 Avenue B, New York. A few weeks later, the Marxists formed a united front with the leaders of the Eight Hour League and established the International Labor Union, the first organization in American labor history to set out to organize the unskilled workers. As President George E. McNeill put it, the aim was "to band together Jew, Greek, Irishman, American, English and German, and all nationalities in a grand labor brotherhood." A member of the Central Committee of this International Labor Union was Emil Levy, a cigarmaker in Evansville, Indiana, and corresponding secretary of the Cigar Makers' local in that city. Although the ILU lasted only until 1881, it too left its mark.⁸

Within a few years after such events as have here been described, the new mass immigration was going to change basically the character of the Jewish workers. While the participation of Jews in the general labor movement was to continue, a new feature was to emerge: the organization of Jewish workers as a distinct part of the American labor movement. That story begins in the 1880's.

⁷ *The World*, New York, October 15, 1877; Bernard Mandel, "Sam Gompers Leads a Strike," *The American Federationist*, December, 1953, p. 19-20; Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, New York, 1925, vol. 1, p. 144-154; *New York Herald*, October 16, 17, 18, 1877; *The Sun*, New York, November 5, 1877; *Financial Report of the Cigar Makers' Central Organization*, New York, 1878; *World*, October 25, 1877; *The Labor Standard*, New York, December 23, 1877; *World*, November 9, 1877; *Sun*, November 4, 1877; *World*, October 31, 1877; Isaac Markens, *The Hebrews in America*, New York, 1888, p. 155-156; *Sun*, December 10, 1877; Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, p. 516-517.

⁸ Foner, work cited, p. 500-504; *National Socialist*, Cincinnati (organ of the Socialist Labor Party), May 18, 1878; *Labor Standard*, July 14, 1878; letters by Emil Levy appear in the issues of January 13 and February 3, 1878.