

JEWISH WORKERS' VICTORY—1890

A Yiddish labor paper, "Di Arbeiter Zeitung," acclaimed in a militant and inspiring editorial the winning of a strike by workers' solidarity

INTRODUCTION

This stirring and clear-visioned editorial article is a fine example of Yiddish socialist journalism at its best in the early days of the mass Jewish labor movement in our country. The article celebrates and evaluates the victorious strike just completed by 4,000 New York cloakmakers, and points the need, first, for organizing the ladies' garment workers into a national union, and, secondly, for uniting the economic with the political struggle through a "workers' political party" that will lead the way ultimately to socialism. Di Arbeiter Zeitung, in which this article appeared, was a weekly socialist newspaper, the first issue of which had come out on March 7, 1890.

The strike itself was a bitter one, with a dramatic background. On May Day, 1890 (the first May Day to be observed internationally), 7,000 cloakmakers marched in the New York demonstration. Their union was already 3,000 strong, and had the support of thousands who had not yet joined. Alarmed, the employers organized a lock-out, led by the biggest firms: Jonasson, Friedlander, Friedman, Blumenthal, Stein, Oppenheim Collins, Goldschmidt and Blatt, and others. By May 10 the union began to counter with strikes and by May 19 there were 4,000 workers involved, the great majority Jewish but including also

Poles, Italians, Germans, Czechs, Hungarians, Irish and some native Americans.

Some of the big business press expressed sympathy for these strikers, whose conditions of work were notoriously bad. The cutters too, the aristocracy of the trade, for the first time joined the other crafts in a strike. The American Federation of Labor, the United Hebrew Trades and the New York unions supported the strike. The key demands were recognition of the union, the firing of all scabs and rehiring of all strikers, and wage raises to \$15 a week for operators and \$14 for pressers.

After two months of struggle, the leadership accepted a compromise agreement which failed, among other points, to provide for the dismissal of scabs. It was here that the hungry workers, in a scene vividly described in this article, voted down the agreement. The commercial press promptly turned against the strikers and the police denounced them as socialists and anarchists. But the strikers knew what they wanted, held on and won on July 23, 1890. As the Workmen's Advocate wrote on August 2, "these immigrants from lands of despotism have set an example of courage and valor . . . which many a labor organization of American born workers would do well to follow."

MORRIS U. SCHAPPES

AS WE take up the pen to salute the cloakmakers on their brilliant victory and to express our joyous admiration of their really heroic struggle during the thirteen weeks of hunger and need, two wonderful, unforgettable scenes recur before our eyes:

The large auditorium in New Everett Hall, 31 East 4 St., New York, is a sea of flushed, resolute faces. The buzz, the noise of eagerness and impatience are in the air. There is a feeling that here is an army of brave men ready for a long, hard struggle. "To work or to strike?" That is the question which occupies everyone's thought, everyone's emotions, and which must be decided now. With ballot in hand, on which both words are printed, each one stands impatiently awaiting the important moment of voting. This was the day of judgment for the handful of enemies who had combined to tear down the banner of the Cloakmakers' Union. Everyone becomes quiet. With eager hand each one de-

posits his ballot, and immediately all eyes are riveted anxiously to the platform awaiting the answer. "One thousand five hundred and thirty-six for striking—and twenty for working!" The voice of the President booms, and is at once drowned in a noisy storm of hurrahs, loud applause and cries of enthusiasm.

A week later. The same Hall, the same crowd of people. But a different spirit reigns, a special animation lights up every face. Again hurrahs, again applause and loud exclamations, but this time they interrupt the friendly speeches of greetings with the godlike sound of the *Marseillaise*: words of Liberty, of Equality, of Fraternity. The victorious red flags flutter. Everything is joyous and filled with a holiday spirit.

The thousand five hundred and thirty-six votes were not in vain!

Only one week had elapsed between the two pictures,

but what a remarkable change! Who could have believed that these strikers, these poor, starved, emaciated Jewish workers, almost without a cent in their treasury, without a word of encouragement, abandoned by their former allies, the cutters, hounded by the diabolical taunts and provocations of the capitalist newspapers and the entire capitalist world, would stand together so firmly, proud and unafraid in the face of hunger and privation—stand together and triumph over the terrible power of organized capital! Who could have dreamed a few years ago that Jewish workers would be in a position to accomplish such wonders!

Just think of it, reader, and you will agree with us that they were held together by a bond stronger than a treasury full of money; that they were supported by a power greater than that of a capitalist press. You will feel that the only weapon in this marvelous struggle was the feeling of brotherly love, of that powerful solidarity and class-consciousness that now bind the workers of the whole world into one determined, mighty army against the rule of capital.

Yes, it was by their own strength alone that the workers triumphed. This might not have been so apparent, had the great victory come eight or nine days sooner, when the capitalist world was still helping the strikers with words and money. Now, we can be happy that victory did not come that way, for the heroic courage of the brave strikers would then have been obscured by what help was rendered them through public opinion. It might have been erroneously interpreted that their triumph resulted not from their own efforts but from the general sympathy of the newspapers. It might have appeared that it was not their own devotion to each other that held them together, but capitalist support.

This great triumph will become a new source of courage and strength for the Jewish labor movement. It offers the best proof that the Jews of America have understood their position, and have correctly gauged their duty in their new homeland. They do not consider themselves God's chosen people; they come forward as workers, as members and allies of the American working class. Therein lies the solution of the entire Jewish question in America. This struggle of the cloakmakers will shut the mouths of more anti-Semites, and accomplish more toward enhancing the name of "Jew," than all the charities of philanthropic bankers, and all the fawning of Jewish patriots who sing of the piety, orderliness and subservience of the Jewish people.

But in your present rejoicing, cloakmakers, do not forget that now, after your great triumph, is really the time more than ever to devote yourselves to your unions, and to prepare for further and greater struggles. Do not forget that your conquered enemies are even now trying to organize against your power by planning an association of all cloak manufacturers throughout the United States. Therefore you too should unite with your brothers in Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, and all other places where cloak makers are to be found, and build a strong *National Cloakmakers Union!*

But even that is not enough. While fighting, while going from victory to victory, you workers must ever bear in mind that the main goal of your struggle is the ultimate *liberation* of the working class, and the complete *annihilation* of the domination of capital. Do not forget that just as you strive for *bread*, you must also fight for *freedom*; that such spirit as you display in your *unions* you must also show in the ranks of the *workers' political party*. Go forward, hand in hand with your progressive brothers and help to smash the rule of the money-bags! Remember the immortal words of our teacher, Karl Marx, that "the economic liberation of the working class is not possible without its political liberation."

Throw yourselves into the struggle body and soul. Fight with strikes, fight with the ballot, fight with everything you have until the outbreak of that uncontrollable storm that will tear down the degrading and terrible structure of capitalism and clear the way for *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity!*

(Translated from the Yiddish by Mrs. Tania Brook Klein.)

Save the Rosenbergs!

MORE evidence that the Justice Department is trying to sit on the lid of world-wide demands for clemency for Ethel and Julius Rosenberg followed the disclosure that the department had not notified the president that Pope Pius XII had transmitted pleas for clemency. Recently it was learned that the French Association of Rabbis had sent a message to the White House on January 2, which the Justice Department had not made public. "The Rabbinate of France," said the message, "profoundly moved by the death sentence pronounced on Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, but wishing to avoid any exploitation of this plea for political purposes, respectfully appeals directly to you to implore you to use your prerogative of clemency in their behalf.

"Troubled in conscience by certain indications, and convinced together with an important section of public opinion of the extreme severity of the sentence handed down by Judge Irving Kaufman, the French Rabbinate joins with all European persons—sincere friends of American democracy—in asking this measure of clemency in the very name of our common ideal of justice and generosity which we derive from the Bible. . . ."

Action goes on all over the world on behalf of clemency. In New York on March 18, 1,100 New Yorkers gathered at a stirring dinner to save the Rosenbergs which was chaired by the prominent Catholic layman and Professor of Law at Northwestern University, Stephen Love, and sponsored by eminent religious and civic figures. Messages were received from Attorney General of France Mornet, who had prosecuted collaborationist Petain, and many prominent individuals in England, Italy, Sweden, Finland, New Zealand, Australia and other countries.

It is of the utmost urgency that individuals send letters to President Eisenhower for clemency before the petition for a new trial is submitted to the Supreme Court on March 30. Organizations and individuals in every community throughout the country should be urged to send in appeals for clemency and to write Attorney General Herbert Brownell asking that he advise the president's reconsideration.