Sisterhood and Solidarity

Kornbluh, Joyce L., Frederickson, Mary

Published by Temple University Press

Kornbluh, Joyce L. and Mary Frederickson.

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Chapter 2

From Soul to Strawberries:
The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’
Union and Workers’ Education, 1914–1950

Susan Stone Wong
The history of workers' education in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) mirrored the history of the American workers' education movement. Born of the necessity to teach workers the rudiments of trade unionism, the ILGWU's educational programs flourished in the burst of idealism and hope that followed World War I. For a few short years, it appeared that the ILGWU's Educational Department and other workers' education enterprises would be the vanguard of a new movement dedicated to the creation of an economically and socially just society. As the 1920s progressed, however, idealism and hope gave way to conservatism and defeatism, and the workers' education movement floundered. Workers' education reemerged during the successful unionizing drives of the 1930s and 1940s, but it had changed to reflect the hardened realism of the new labor movement. Workers' education had become labor education, and the link between education and social action was broken. Whereas workers' education had aimed to teach workers to build a new and better world, labor education endeavored to instruct them to manage in the world in which they lived. In the 1920s, workers' educators believed that workers' education would become the soul of the union movement. By the 1940s, labor education had become a union fringe benefit.

The workers' education movement and the ILGWU's Educational Department shared a similar concern for women workers. At the outset, the workers' education movement was composed of middle-class intellectuals, radicals, and reformers, many of whom were women. The architects of the ILGWU's Educational Department were two women from middle-class backgrounds. In designing workers' education programs, these educators paid particular attention to what they saw as women workers' special needs and desires. When workers' education became labor education, union leaders denounced this special concern as naive and sentimental.

The history of the ILGWU's Educational Department serves as a guide to the workers' education programs developed by other garment unions. In 1919, for example, the United Cloth Hat and Cap Makers, the Furriers' Union, and the Fancy Leather Goods Workers formed the United Labor Education Committee in New York City. For a few years the committee offered garment workers classes and lectures. In 1921, the committee sponsored the first workers' education conference in the United States, from which the
Workers' Education Bureau grew. In 1920, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America organized an educational department and launched a short-lived workers' education program. These unions, however, did not develop a continuing commitment to workers' education. During the next two decades individual locals sponsored occasional educational activities, but without the backing of the national unions these programs were little more than undersubscribed and underfinanced copies of the ILGWU's more successful ventures. Until the late 1940s, the ILGWU was more than the leader of the workers' education movement in the garment industry; it was the movement.

The ILGWU initiated its program of workers' education because, as the Chicago Cloakmakers declared in 1910, the principles of unionism were like "a sealed book" to the majority of foreign-born needle workers. Most of these workers were women, and, although many had socialist sympathies, few had trade union experience. As early as 1905, Secretary-Treasurer John Dyche urged locals to teach their members the importance of the union label.

The signing, in September 1910, of the first collective bargaining agreement in the industry added urgency to the need to inform members of the duties and benefits of unionism. Louis D. Brandeis, the Boston attorney and later justice of the Supreme Court who had negotiated what became known as the "Protocol of Peace," insisted that the ILGWU conduct an educational campaign to win workers away from the "radical" ideas they had acquired as a result of "a generation of mis-education." Thousands of workers learned about unions as participants in the 1909 "Uprising of Twenty Thousand" and the 1910 Cloakmakers General Strike. If the Protocol was to work, the workers had to be taught that arbitration and conciliation, rather than class struggle, were the basis of American unionism.

The 1914 ILGWU convention, agreeing that the educational programs then available to workers were too sporadic and unsystematic to be useful, decreed that the time had come "to dwell particularly upon the more solid and preparatory work of education and not to devote much time to the mere superficial forms of agitation and propaganda which have been the main features of our educational work in the past."

During the winter of 1914–1915, ILGWU president Benjamin Schlesinger initiated a joint program with the Rand
School to provide classes in trade union history, methods of organization, and English. The national leadership, however, did little else during the next two years to implement the convention's request. In the meantime, individual locals, especially New York Waist and Dress Makers' Union, Local 25, devised ambitious programs that laid the foundation for the International's future educational work. In 1915, Local 25 appointed Juliet Stuart Poyntz its educational director. Under her guidance, the first Unity House was established in Pine Hill, New York, to serve as a recreational retreat for union members and their families. Poyntz also organized Unity Centers at local public schools, where workers attended shop meetings, union lectures, and courses in English and physical training taught by Board of Education teachers.

Prompted by the activity of its locals, the International created its own comprehensive educational program in 1916. In stating its objectives, the convention alluded to the past concerns of Brandeis, the Chicago Cloakmakers, and John Dyche. The aim of the program would be to enlighten "the great masses of our organization upon general labor questions" and "on the functions, aims, possibilities and limitations of a trade organization."

The report continued,

They [ILGWU members] are to be taught about the contents of our existing agreements with employers, their rights as well as their obligations under the agreement. In short, this part of the educational system is to enlighten our members upon all matters concerning labor, and make of them a well disciplined and reliable body of men and women who cannot be misled and incited by anybody who desires to do so.

The General Executive Board appointed a five-member Education Committee, appropriated $5,000 for its work, and designated Juliet Poyntz as its part-time director. Poyntz expanded the number of Unity Centers and Unity Houses and established a Workers' University at Washington Irving High School in New York City. There, workers could take advanced courses in labor problems, economics, American history and government, literature, and psychology. The 1918 convention demonstrated its approval of the work by increasing the Education Department's appropriation to $10,000. By late 1918, when Poyntz resigned and was replaced by Fannia Cohn, the
basic direction of the ILGWU's program had been charted. Juliet Stuart Poyntz and Fannia Mary Cohn deserve joint credit for founding the union's educational program. Poyntz was the more original thinker, but her tenure at the ILGWU was short. From 1918 until a few months before her death in 1962, Cohn dedicated herself to explaining, expanding, and promoting workers' education. At first glance, two women could not appear more different than the attractive, college-educated midwesterner Poyntz and the short, stocky, Russian-Jewish immigrant Cohn. Yet both women were born into the comforts of the middle class, both chose to abandon their social position in order to champion the workers' cause, and both believed that workers' education was essential to the personal and political liberation of the working class.

Poyntz's background and education were typical of many women in the workers' education movement, but her commitment to revolutionary politics led her to leave the field early in her career. Born in 1886 to a middle-class family in Omaha, Nebraska, Poyntz came east to attend Barnard College. A brilliant student, she was awarded a fellowship by the General Federation of Women's Clubs to study at Oxford and the London School of Economics. She joined the Socialist Party in 1909, and besides teaching history at Barnard and working with the ILGWU, she headed the Rand School's Labor Research Department. In 1917, she left the Socialist Party to join the newly organized Workers' Party. The bitter disputes between the Communists and Socialists in the ILGWU forced her to resign her position in the union. In the early 1920s, she helped to organize the Communist Workers School in New York City, but she left shortly thereafter to become a top party official and candidate for public office.

Cohn was born in 1885 in Kletzk, Minsk, Russia. Her prosperous family had Cohn privately educated in preparation for a professional career. Attracted to radical politics, Cohn joined the outlawed Socialist Revolutionary Party in 1901. Three years later she emigrated to New York City. For Cohn, socialism was a basic creed, an article of faith. Unlike Poyntz, however, she eschewed doctrine and formal party affiliations. As a result, she was able to work with both Socialists and Communists within the ILGWU.

Cohn's American relatives offered her a chance to study pharmacology and eventually to join their drug supply company. However, in 1905, deter-
mined to dedicate her life to the labor movement, Cohn abandoned her studies and took a job in a garment factory as a sleevemaker. "I realized then that if I wanted to really understand the mind, the aspirations of the workers," she wrote years later, "I should experience the life of a worker in a shop." She began her life as a union official with her election in 1909 to the executive board of Local 41. In August 1915, she reached the high point of her organizing career when she headed the first successful strike of Chicago's dress and white good workers. 

Cohn gained a union-wide reputation because of her success as an organizer. She was elected the first woman vice-president of the ILGWU in 1916. A year later, she was appointed organizing secretary of the General Education Committee. Cohn and Poyntz did not work well together. Cohn lacked Poyntz's popularity and easy rapport with the immigrant women who Cohn considered her natural constituency. Despite these difficulties, from 1918 to her death in 1962, Cohn worked ceaselessly to promote the ideas Poyntz originated.

The ILGWU's desire to school its members and leaders in the responsibilities and duties of unionism prompted the establishment of its educational program but, in itself, does not explain the strength of the union's commitment to workers' education. This commitment grew naturally out of the ILGWU's particular philosophy of trade unionism and from Poyntz's and Cohn's perceptions of the needs of women trade unionists. "Social unionism," as the ILGWU's philosophy was dubbed in the 1930s, moved beyond Samuel Gompers's formulation of "pure and simple" unionism by addressing not only the economic concerns of workers for higher wages and shorter hours but also the workers' need for recreation, education, health care, and housing.

Social unionism tied the building of a union to the creation of a new and better social order. In so doing, this philosophy reflected both the practical needs and the political ideals of its immigrant constituency and provided the theoretical underpinnings for workers' education in the ILGWU. In 1923, the ILGWU's educational committee summarized this credo as it applied to workers' education: "The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union was practically the first labor organization in America to recognize the truth that in addition to providing for the economic needs of its members, a Labor Union has other functions; among the most important of
these is that of providing for their spiritual needs." As defined by Poyntz and Cohn, "spiritual needs" encompassed the workers' wishes for a general and wide-ranging education, for individual self-improvement, for social and intellectual respectability, and for recreation.

Most pressing of these "needs" was the immigrant workers' desire for an education. Cohn, in particular, believed that workers should not be deprived of the joys of a liberal education because of their age, their lack of formal schooling, or their class. Adult workers, as much as the sons and daughters of the upper classes, deserved exposure to art, literature, music, drama, philosophy, and history. On Saturday afternoons or Sunday mornings, union members could take classes in these subjects at the Workers' University; these were often taught by the same professors who lectured during the week to the children of the elite at such institutions as Columbia University. But "spiritual needs" could also be more mundane. Within the ILGWU there were hundreds of foreign-born men and women who required instruction in the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Under a special arrangement with the New York City Board of Education, public school teachers came to local Unity Centers to teach the three R's in the evenings or on weekends.

Poyntz and Cohn also recognized, especially among the young women garment workers, a longing for respectability. The very name "trade union" often conjured up in the minds of these women a picture of middle-aged men sitting in smoky taverns drinking and arguing interminably over the tactics of union organizing. Male unionists criticized their female counterparts for their reluctance to take part in union activities and for their unreliability as union members. But Poyntz and Cohn recognized that these women workers wanted their union to be more than a rallying point in the battle for economic justice; they wanted it to be a community in which they could learn, meet friends, and have fun. They also wanted it to be an institution of which they could be proud. Poyntz realized that through workers' education, the longings of these women could be met and, as a result, their loyalty to the union could be strengthened. Unity House, the vacation home in the Catskills, was described by Poyntz as a "center of spiritual inspiration," a place where:

*The girls grew to realize that a trade union has a very powerful influence beyond the purely eco*
nomic field. Ties of friendship made then held. Devotion to the ideal of trade unionism acquired then strengthened many a Unity girl to continue her struggle as a chairman of her shop against an ignorant and deceiving employer. The union has found a soul.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1917, Poyntz designed the first Unity Center, located in a public school building, with the same objectives in mind. In addition to attending their shop meetings, union members could join friends for a cup of coffee and a roll in the cafeteria, consult a nurse, listen to a concert, dance or exercise in the gym, take remedial courses, or attend a lecture in Yiddish on the history of the ILGWU. Poyntz realized what such centers could mean to young garment workers. She wrote:

\textit{The Unity Center seemed to the workers not a public school, but their own home, a home where they found cheer and familiar faces, a beautiful, clean, well ventilated home, well lighted and hung with beautiful pictures, a great change from the dirty, ill ventilated meeting rooms, often above a saloon, where trade unions most usually meet for want of a better place. The very entrance into the public school of a trade union raises it from the position of a social outlaw to that of a vital and recognized social group. \ldots It provided a possibility of growth and development of the body and of the mind of the individual worker through his collective organization.}\textsuperscript{15}

An educational program designed so carefully to reflect and serve the needs and desires of individual workers posed a dangerous dilemma. How did one draw the line between individual and individualistic needs, between self-improvement and self-aggrandizement? Education is traditionally viewed as offering class mobility, but if one of the aims of the ILGWU education program was to facilitate entry into the middle class, the program risked betraying the very union that sponsored it. More, in seeking to cater to the immigrant worker's demand for a general education, the union risked accepting another bourgeois educational tenet—"Knowledge for Knowledge's sake." Why should a trade union sponsor a program that threatened to inculcate its working-class members with the skills that might enable them to leave their class and thus their union? These questions plagued the workers' education movement from the outset. The architects of the ILGWU's educational program were the first to address them.

For Cohn and Poyntz, the
answer to the dilemma lay in the motto chosen for the ILGWU’s program—“Knowledge is Power.” The difference between workers’ education and what Cohn scornfully dismissed as “individual education” was its aim—the building of a stronger union. Cohn wrote in 1921:

The subject for study in workers’ classes must be selected with the definite object of giving the students the mental and moral equipment which will best enable them to be useful to their class and which will inspire them to disinterested service to the labor movement. . . . To give such service, we must receive a specialized training which will strengthen and broaden character, develop discrimination, and create in us the ability to form sound judgments when we are confronted with serious problems. Labor is reaching out toward a new life, and educational training such as this is a necessary step toward its attainment.

The ILGWU developed a curriculum which reflected Cohn’s goal. Courses that would enable workers to “form sound judgments” were emphasized. At the Workers’ University in the early 1920s, classes in economics, political science, and trade union and industrial history outnumbered those in art, literature, music, and remedial subjects.16

The ultimate justification for workers’ education was its ability to contribute to the creation of a new and better social order. The link between workers’ education and progressive social change reflected the political consciousness of the ILGWU’s educational planners and its membership. The socialist inclinations of a large number of garment workers and their leaders had led them to conclude that the aim of unionism was the rebuilding of society. Poyntz and Cohn believed that workers’ education was indispensable to achieving this goal. Through workers’ education, ILGWU members would become more aware of society’s problems and possible solutions. By demonstrating the importance of unionism in society and in the personal lives of members, workers’ education would create union loyalty, which in turn would contribute to a stronger union. The stronger the union, the more forcefully and successfully it could struggle to create a new order. Fannia Cohn put it simply:

It has always been our conviction that the Labor Movement stands, consciously or unconsciously, for the reconstruction of society. It dreams of a world where economic and social justice will prevail, where the wel-
fare of mankind will be the aim of all activity, where society will be organized as a cooperative commonwealth..."

Juliet Stuart Poyntz understood the relationship between workers' education and social change to be more subtle. For her, the creation of a better individual through workers' education and the achievement of a new and just social order were inexorably joined. "Body, mind, and will must be strengthened for the more effective participation in the great struggle... The worker must become more truly and deeply than now a person, not only for the sake of his individual happiness and fulfillment but also for the sake of cooperative accomplishment."18

The ILGWU's workers' education program offered a vision: trade unions—whose members developed, through workers' education, social consciousness, understanding of economics and politics, and the determination to struggle collectively—would bring about the restructuring of American society. This vision inspired workers and educators alike, and it addressed the contradictions inherent in the very name "workers' education." By linking progressive, even radical, social change to workers' education, the ILGWU demonstrated that education need not be thought of merely as a means to escape the working class or as an inculcator of middle-class values and beliefs. Workers' education would make the worker a better individual. Only the best individuals, acting in concert, could create a new order.

The architects of the ILGWU's educational plan left the outlines of the new society tantalizingly vague and failed to provide a blueprint showing how workers' education would necessarily lead to it. In retrospect, their logic is less compelling than their vision. At the outset of the movement, these weaknesses mattered less than the ILGWU's accomplishments. The union had devised a theoretical framework for workers' education and had begun a program which would provide the movement with its first full-scale working model. Finally, it is significant that most of the credit for this achievement goes to two women who, in developing a workers' education philosophy and program, believed that they were reflecting the feelings and ideas and serving the needs of the union's women members.

Poyntz and Cohn built the ILGWU's educational program upon the desire to create a new and better world. For a brief time following the First World War, it appeared that this desire was about to become a
reality. The Russian Revolution, the rise of the British Labour Party, the smaller revolts in Germany and Eastern Europe, and the wave of strikes which swept across America in 1919 seemed to presage a worldwide movement for social and economic justice. In the United States this yearning for social change was called “social reconstruction.” The workers’ education movement was a product of these heady and exhilarating times. Those who rallied to the banner of workers’ education defined social reconstruction as the restructuring of society by the working class; the aim of workers’ education was to educate the workers for this momentous task.19

The American workers’ education movement burgeoned in 1921 with the launching of the Workers’ Education Bureau, Brookwood Labor College, and the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers. The ILGWU’s educational department assumed an important role in all of these enterprises. Cohn and the other Workers’ Education bureau organizers hoped that the bureau would become the movement’s centerpiece. The bureau was designed to encourage and coordinate programs and activities and to develop and disseminate a philosophy of workers’ education. The ILGWU also provided Brookwood, the first residential labor college in the United States, with students, scholarships, and moral and political support.20

Cohn was less than enthusiastic about the summer schools for women workers. In 1914 she had attended the National Women’s Trade Union League (NWTUL) school in Chicago. Later she wrote of her experience there:

I found the economics very orthodox and of the kind I had long ago almost forgotten. The professors themselves admitted that I did not need it. Their instruction in how to organize women was also of no use to me as I had had more actual experience from my activities in charge of strikes.

More than the conservatism of the curriculum and its seeming irrelevancy, Cohn resented the middle- and upper-class women who ran the NWTUL. She characterized them as “mere do-gooders” and told an interviewer in 1948 that her experience at the school had convinced her of the futility of working with such women. Cohn’s attendance at the NWTUL’s school reinforced her belief that workers’ education would succeed only when provided by trade unionists for trade unionists. In the winter
of 1921, Mary Anderson invited her to serve on the organizing committee for the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, but Cohn declined. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, however, despite Cohn’s reservations, the ILGWU’s educational department provided scholarships to send union members to both the Bryn Mawr and Barnard summer schools.21

The conflict between Cohn’s feelings and actions toward the summer schools extended to her position on feminism. Late in her career Cohn was labeled by her detractors as “an old-fashioned feminist,” and she was lumped together with the very summer school women she disdained. Yet Cohn considered herself a trade unionist rather than a feminist. Her deep concern with women workers arose from her commitment to the trade union rather than to the women’s movement.22

Throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, Cohn wrote dozens of articles in which she expounded her belief that women needed trade unions and trade unions needed women. During the same period, she wrote to AFL president William Green to urge him to accelerate the federation’s efforts to organize women workers. Her message was simple: in an industry where women dominated the labor force, unionism would fail without strongly committed and loyal women members. For this reason, Cohn worked carefully to design workers’ education programs that would attract women. In paying attention to what she considered the special needs of women—be they a clean meeting room or a class in literature—Cohn’s aim was to foster trade unionism. While she remained suspicious of the middle-class and feminist character of the summer schools, she sent workers there because she believed that the schools shared this basic goal.23

Even as the delegates to the first Workers’ Education Bureau’s convention assembled, the first students walked across Bryn Mawr’s and Brookwood’s idyllic campuses, and the ILGWU announced plans to expand its programs and create a new extension division, the spirit that had animated these enterprises began to wane. The strikes of 1919 had been lost, and the labor movement was in retreat. The “red scare” had driven many radicals underground, and increasing numbers of prewar progressives abandoned the arena of reform. In politics, Harding’s normalcy replaced the tattered remnants of Wilson’s idealism.24

Not surprisingly, the ILGWU Educational Department, as leader and guide for much of the workers’ education movement, was among the first pro-
grams to feel the effects of this waning of spirit. By the mid-1920s, the program that had been so carefully designed by Poyntz and Cohn to reflect the needs and desires of the ILGWU membership seemed out of step with the realities of the decade. Fewer and fewer students enrolled in the Educational Department's programs. Classes in Marxism and public speaking could not compete with the allure of the burgeoning consumer culture—movies, radios, and Sunday auto trips. The idealism inherent in workers' education and the symbol of the worker as society's savior seemed hopelessly dated when compared to the cocktails, cynicism, and the Charleston that had become the cultural hallmarks of the age.

The decade was particularly difficult for the ILGWU. Beneath the veneer of prosperity, garment workers were forced to cope with automation, seasonal unemployment, static real wages, and an absence of fringe benefits. They also found their union under attack. Emboldened by their successes in 1919 and buttressed by friendly courts and legislatures, employers devised a number of antiunion strategies ranging from the run-away shop to a nationwide antiunion campaign piously called the "American plan." Within the union, Communists and Socialists waged a bitter and sometimes violent battle for control.

During the mid and late 1920s, Cohn alone kept workers' education alive in the ILGWU. Under such harsh conditions, however, it was inevitable that the program would change. The nearly bankrupt union often had no money for books, supplies, teachers, or even Cohn's meager salary. Cohn struggled on, compiling reading lists of books the union could not afford to buy, staging the occasional musical or play, arranging for concerts and lectures, and teaching the few classes the department offered.

Cohn was horrified by the virulent battles between the Communist and the Socialist factions. She was determined to keep the Educational Department above the fray. As a result, both sides viewed her with suspicion, and in 1925 she lost her bid for a fifth term as an ILGWU vice-president. She continued as the department's executive secretary, but without the prestige and political clout her vice-presidency had conferred. Within the ILGWU, Cohn and workers' education were synonymous. As her importance within the union declined, so did that of the department she headed.

Cohn's attempt to keep workers' education above politics had still other, more important,
consequences. The link between workers’ education and social action that had so vitalized the department during its early days was strained by the general conservatism of the 1920s. Cohn’s efforts to remove politics from workers’ education further weakened this connection. Given the highly charged political climate within the union, Cohn understandably preferred lectures on art appreciation to courses on political economy that might, at any moment, erupt into violent shouting matches between members of opposing factions. The belief that workers’ education would train workers to create a new world became increasingly tenuous as classes in the social sciences were replaced with trips to museums and Broadway shows. Whereas Cohn had once designed programs to help unionists deal with the world in which they lived, she now increasingly offered entertainments to help them escape it. Ironically, despite Cohn’s efforts to remove politics from workers’ education, the department suffered from its past. When the Socialist faction emerged victorious in the political struggles of the late 1920s, the new leadership shied away from workers’ education for fear that it embodied the political utopianism they had come to associate with their Communist rivals.29

Cohn’s personal situation reflected that of the department she headed. She often complained of “extreme loneliness,” of being misunderstood and neglected. The obsessive zeal and stubborn self-centeredness which enabled her to carry on alone during these years discouraged close friendships. With the exception of Theresa Wolfson, who lent a hand whenever her busy schedule allowed, Cohn had no sustained support from within her own union. Her few allies came from outside the ILGWU. The Brookwood staff—notably A. J. Muste, Helen Norton Starr, and David Saposs—provided teachers, educational material, and moral support whenever possible. There was never enough. Cohn, depressed and dispirited, wrote to Helen Norton, “To be a woman active in the labor movement is a very difficult task.” But she realized that her lonely position was less attributable to her sex than to her union colleagues’ low regard for workers’ education.30

The decade which began so promisingly for the ILGWU and its educational department ended with both nearly destroyed. The union lost over half its membership, most of its treasury, and its preeminent position within the trade union movement. Its Educational Department abandoned most of
the programs and philosophy that had once made it a leading force in workers' education.31

The 1920s was a bleak time for workers' education in the other garment unions as well. By the mid-1920s the educational activities in the Hat and Cap Makers, Furriers', and Fancy Leather Goods unions had petered out. Only the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) created an educational department that, for a short time, rivaled the ILGWU's in the scope and depth of its programs. The men who ran the ACWA's educational program did not, however, share the ILGWU's commitment to workers' education. For men like J. B. S. Hardman, the ACWA's first educational director, the aim of workers' education was to equip workers, "individually and collectively, for a successful stand for what is theirs." When workers' education failed to accomplish this goal, the men of the ACWA abandoned it.

In 1916, two years after its founding, the ACWA endorsed workers' education. Its General Executive Board made clear that it saw trade union education as a means to an end. The board declared that education, like union organizing, "is a means for a great purpose, the carrying out of the historic mission of the workers as a class." Like their counterparts in the ILGWU, the ACWA's leaders believed that workers' education would lead to progressive social action by educating workers and by binding them more closely to their union. Education would make workers' "lives worth living" and would "tie them to their organization with those sacred bonds of love which though invisible are most powerful and cannot be sundered."

Beginning in 1920 the ACWA's Educational Department launched a number of ambitious programs. J. B. S. Hardman, aided by Paul Blanchard and David Saposs, supervised the creation of Active Workers' Schools in New York City and Rochester, New York. In style and program, these schools resembled the ILGWU's Unity Centers. An ACWA member could attend formal academic classes in the social sciences and humanities, lectures by well-known radicals and reformers, remedial courses in the three R's, debates, concerts, dances, and plays. Within two years, similar programs flourished in a half-dozen cities. By 1924, all but a few of these ventures had closed their doors, and the ACWA's Educational Department had essentially ceased to function.34

The factors that had led the ILGWU to abandon workers'
education during the 1920s—the political climate, the state of the union movement, the decline of worker-student interest—played only a small part in the ACWA's action. The ACWA gave up on workers' education because workers' education failed to live up to the goals its leaders had envisioned for it. Countless lectures on "the Industrial Situation and Its Outlook," endless lessons on "Social Problems," and impressively staged May Day pageants had created neither class consciousness nor class action. As far as the ACWA was concerned, until workers' educators could translate study into action, workers' education was merely adult education. Fannia Cohn was willing to support this type of education, but J. B. S. Hardman and the ACWA were not. Workers' education did not reappear in the ACWA until the 1940s. It did so not because the philosophical problem of translating education into social action had been solved, but because by then the ACWA had forsaken its commitment to the radical restructuring of American society. 35

With the coming of the New Deal, the ILGWU and its Educational Department revived. For both, this revival led to a transformation. David Dubinsky, the ILGWU's president, took advantage of the impetus provided by the National Industrial Recovery Act to launch an organizing drive in sixty cities. By the end of 1934, the ILGWU had quadrupled its membership. Unlike their elder sisters, these "NRA babies" were native born and unfamiliar with either radical political thought or the mechanics and philosophy of trade unionism. As had his predecessors, Dubinsky sought in his union's educational program an antidote to the membership's ignorance and a method to ensure its loyalty. 36

Cohn sought to oblige Dubinsky, but she was rebuffed. In January 1935, the Educational Department was reorganized. Dubinsky appointed Mark Starr, an Englishman, as educational director. Starr was the son of a miner and was himself a hod carrier's helper in the mines of Somersetshire. He became a union activist and an ardent follower of the socialist Kier Hardie. Acquainted with workers' education first as a student and then as an employee of the National Council of Labour Colleges, Starr came to America to join the faculty of Brookwood Labor College in 1928. Julius Hochman, a Brookwood graduate, ILGWU vice-president, and, in 1935, chairman of the Educational Com-
mittee, recommended Starr to Dubinsky. Cohn retained the title of executive secretary, but she was increasingly relegated to marginal activities. 37

Starr attributed his appointment to Dubinsky’s desire to appeal to the “NRA babies.” The ILGWU president believed that Cohn, with her heavily accented English and her immigrant background, could not do this as well. Cohn’s personality undoubtedly played a role in her ouster. Dubinsky was heard to have said on numerous occasions that he would rather lead a general strike than deal with Cohn. However, the real significance of the 1935 reorganization, which Cohn failed to recognize or understand, lay in its repudiation of the workers’ education philosophy that she and Poyntz had developed. 38

Benjamin Stolberg reflected the views of the union’s leadership when he criticized the original Educational Department. Cohn and Poyntz designed a program, he explained in his history of the ILGWU, that catered to the sentimental desires of women workers and centered on “the romantic concept of the Worker as the Redeemer of Society.” This “old-fashioned feminist” approach to workers’ education, Stolberg continued, appealed to middle-class female do-gooders but was irrelevant to the needs of a modern trade union. Thus the new ILGWU Educational Department discarded the special concern for women workers that Cohn and Poyntz had so carefully nurtured and dismissed “Miss Cohn” as “a missionary who must be judged by her good works among the heathen, not by the quality of her theology.” 39

The new workers’ education—or, as it was increasingly called, “labor education,”—hearkened back to the dictums of Dyche and Brandeis. It aimed to create “a well disciplined and reliable body of men and women.” “What is good for the union is good for the members” replaced Cohn’s and Poyntz’s intricate cataloging of unionists’ intellectual and emotional needs. More important, the link between workers’ education and progressive social action was broken. Labor education in the ILGWU was designed to serve the union, not the world. Occasional vague references to creating an informed and intelligent citizenry were all that remained of the fervor for social reconstruction of the 1920s. The new members were to be taught about unionism not so they could be forged into a fighting force for a new and better world, but so they would loyally follow their leaders. The public was to be edu-
cated about the union not to be introduced to a progressive blueprint for social change, but so that it would accept the union as part of the existing order.40

The work of the Educational Department after 1935 was roughly divided into three parts: recreational and cultural, traditional classwork, and the Officers' Qualification Course. The recreational and cultural division sponsored baseball, basketball, soccer, and bowling leagues, tennis and track and field teams, swimming and calisthenics lessons, choruses, orchestras, and dramatics. The offerings of the division combined what Cohn had called the members' need for "individual enrichment" with the public relations Dubinsky desired. An ILGWU mandolin ensemble presenting folk music on a local radio station, a fashion show staged jointly with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a union all-star baseball team battling the Sing Sing prison team, and the long-running musical review "Pins and Needles" all contributed to the new image of American unionism that the ILGWU sought to project. No longer were garment workers foreigners spouting radical political doctrines in strange tongues. The young and attractive men and women who sang "Britannia Waives the Rules" at a White House command performance of "Pins and Needles" in 1938 symbolized the new ILGWU members. They were fun-loving, intelligent, all-American workers pursuing wholesome and self-improving activities.41

As the recreational and cultural activities expanded, systematic study classes, with two exceptions, dwindled. The New Members Course was designed to create union loyalty. Members were informed of their duties as unionists and introduced to a dramatized version of the ILGWU history. The Officers Qualification Course was created in 1937 when the ILGWU convention ruled that candidates for paid office who had not previously served must complete a prescribed course of study. Students attended fourteen to eighteen two-hour sessions where they were introduced to the bureaucratic structure of a modern union and to the intricacies of the garment industry. Subjects included how to keep union accounts, how to run a strike, and how to settle the price of neckwear.42

Critics complained that the courses ignored theoretical considerations. Where, they asked, were the classes in the humanities and social sciences that had once sought to stimulate workers to think about American society? Mark Starr
answered with the department’s new credo:

There is in workers’ education the possibility of creating the perpetual student—the member who knows more and more but does less and less; the member who can argue about the fine points of disputed doctrines but does not know how to serve as the chairman of a meeting, [or] make a lively two-minute speech. . . . Then too workers’ education has sometimes produced members who felt that they personally were so advanced in their views . . . that they could sit down and wait for the rest of the world to catch up to them . . . but who had little interest and no advice to offer concerning an immediate program of action.  

The workers’ education movement of the late 1930s and 1940s followed a course similar to the ILGWU’s. The ACWA revived its Educational Department in 1946. Its work, like that of the Textile Workers’ Educational Department, closely resembled the activities developed by the ILGWU. By 1950, labor-management educational programs in state and private universities and union educational departments had replaced the Workers’ Education Bureau, Brookwood, and most of the summer schools. The intellectuals, radicals, and feminists who had once flocked to the banner of workers’ education had long since departed. Professional educators and trade union bureaucrats ran the movement, and its goal was in keeping with the character of the unions and universities that sponsored it: workers were taught to manage within the existing social order, not how to change it.  

Mollie Friedman, a delegate from the ILGWU to the 1918 American Federation of Labor’s convention, closed her report on her union’s educational activities by declaring,  

In 1913 I came to New York City. I knew nothing about the trade union movement of America or any other trade unionism in the world. When I was asked to join the union I felt I had to join it, but now I feel that I would give my life for an organization that will educate its members.

Thirty years later, a Reader’s Digest article described the ILGWU’s Unity House as a resort hotel in the Poconos where members could swim, dance, canoe, play tennis and basketball, enjoy the latest movies, hear arias sung by Metropolitan opera stars, and watch shows put on by Danny Kaye. The article continued,  

At mealtimes [a union member] could choose from many delica-
cies in the 1000-seat dining room. So splendid is the table that many a veteran dress operator will remember the early days in the sweatshops and get off the favorite Unity House gag: "We used to say, come the revolution we'll eat strawberries and cream. This is the revolution. And I'm tired already of strawberries."

These two quotations epitomize the history of the ILGWU's educational program from 1914 to 1950. Cohn and Poyntz believed that what made workers' education unique was that it reflected and made possible the workers' desire to create a more equitable and just social order. The pragmatists of the 1930s and 1940s contended that this was never the desire of the vast majority of garment workers, but rather the dream of two middle-class feminists. Dubinsky and Starr believed that Cohn and Poyntz had misread the workers and the time.

Worse still, they felt, was that these two women were imbued with a fallacious belief in the ability of education to lead to social change. The factional struggles of the 1920s convinced the ILGWU's leaders that a membership educated in the humanities and social sciences led to organizational chaos rather than to a bright new world.

The union's leadership did not find it ironic that what Poyntz had once described as the "soul" of the union was by the late 1940s a $4 million "vacationland." The new resort symbolized what the leaders saw as the goal of unionism—a larger slice of the pie achieved through negotiation and compromise. In their scheme, workers' education was to be a source of happiness, not the union's soul. Workers' education could never again hope to arouse the passionate commitment of a Mollie Friedman. She might have been willing to give her life to rebuild society, but not to watch Danny Kaye.

As education director of the Ladies' Waist and Dressmakers' Local 2587, ILGWU, Juliet Stuart Poyntz described her vision of the role education could play in transforming the lives of women union members and the mission of the union itself. In this article, published in *Life and Labor*, she traces the development of the earliest union education programs for women workers.
The Unity Movement—The Soul of a Union

We have heard tales from across the seas of wonderful institutions which have been developed in certain countries of Europe for the creation of a higher culture among the workers: the great Maison du Peuple in Brussels, which made every possible effort to bring the best modern inspiration to the labor movement and enrich it there. In France, the great cultural organization among the sewing girls, the Association of Mimi Pinson, as it was called, for whom the best in art was none too good.

We sometimes think these things cannot be done in our unimaginative America. And yet the so-called Unity Movement among the dressmakers of New York may, perhaps, humbly claim some distant relationship to its Parisian prototype. In the shops of that city are produced the dresses of a nation, as in Paris, the dresses of a continent, while an army of eager, thirsty young souls sits at the work table, here as there, dreaming, as they stitch, of all that life has in store. Through years of sacrifice these workers have built up for themselves a wonderful organization comprizing about 25,000 members and controlling the industry in New York City. But they dream not alone of better prices and shorter hours; they dream also of more joy in life, of more to learn, to see, to know. They are interested not only in higher wages, but in what those wages will buy. They are eager for the best in life and literature and art, and through their organization they are determined to gain these good things for themselves.

Girls Want Department of Education

It was as a result of a genuine and widespread demand among the girls working in the industry for more enlightening and educational activity in their organization that the Ladies’ Waist and Dressmakers’ Union established a special department of education a year ago. From this educational effort has grown up a unique movement in this and other organizations, which we may call for the want of a better name, “The Unity Movement.”

It all began with Unity House. Last summer, the union leased a beautiful residence in the Catskills, formerly the property of a Wall Street broker, and organized there a summer center of recreation and education among its members. This new home was christened Unity House, because it was part of an attempt to draw together the membership of the union with ties of greater solidarity and unity.
Unity House succeeded beyond all expectation. Under the able leadership of our comrade, Marie McDonald, it developed less as a mere vacation place than as a center of spiritual inspiration. The girls grew to realize that a trade union has a very powerful influence beyond the purely economic field. Ties of friendship made then held. Devotion to the ideal of trade unionism acquired then strengthened many a Unity girl to continue her struggle as chairman of her shop against an ignorant and deceiving employer. The union had found a soul.

Unity House seemed too good to the workers to leave behind them in the mountains, and they hoped fervently through the winter months that somehow, somewhere, it might be possible to find a Unity House in the city. This dream came true in January, when the union secured the use of an entire school building for every purpose of its organization. To the fine building on East Twentieth Street, which is christened the Unity Center, the union brought its entire life and activity, and began there a development of real educational work. Not only were regular shop meetings held there, often as many as twenty in an evening, but all sorts of other activities were developed. A cooperative cafeteria provided warm sustenance before the shop meeting, and prevented the impatience which had before spoiled the attempts of the workers to discuss their business in an organized manner. A nurse of the Joint Board of Sanitary Control gave physical and medical advice several evenings a week to workers in need of it. The two auditoriums provided space for general meetings and for concerts and lectures, the gymnasium for dancing and physical training.

In addition to these activities a beginning was made in labor education. Several classes were organized on such subjects as “Labor Problems,” “History of the Labor Movement,” “Literature,” under the guidance of the ablest and most popular lecturers in Yiddish and English. The success of these classes and their popularity justifies a development on a larger scale during the coming season. A library on social and economic questions as well as for literary pursuits will complete the framework of this workers’ university. Simplicity and clarity has been the chief aim of the classes. The most complicated subjects were taught in language simple enough for the average worker in the shop to understand and appreciate. The instruction given related to the facts and problems of his own industrial life and was in no sense an attempt to train him away from his own class.
Attendance Proves Center Popular

That the Unity Center filled a real need in this great organization is indicated by the fact that in six weeks 10,000 different individuals had attended 350 shop meetings there, and that at social affairs, concerts, etc.; during the same period, there had been an additional attendance of about 7,000. The Unity Center seemed to the workers not a public school, but their own home, a home where they found cheer and familiar faces, a beautiful, clean, well ventilated home, well lighted and hung with beautiful pictures, a great change from the dirty, ill ventilated meeting rooms, often above a saloon, where trade unions must usually meet for want of a better place. The very entrance into the public school of a trade union raises it from the position of a social outlaw to that of a vital and recognized social group. The school provides physical facilities and the space for the development of all the wonderful latent social, cultural and other possibilities of labor organizations. It makes upon society a claim for opportunity in the name of its most vitally important group. It provides a possibility of growth and development of the body and mind of the individual worker through his collective organization.

The same idea is being followed out in the development of the Unity House this year. An arrangement has been made with the Interstate Park Commission whereby a reservation of land will be granted to the union for the purpose of a summer house, and the Commission is even ready to build at its own expense a beautiful camp on the style of the Bear Mountain Inn, surrounded by smaller cabins for sleeping purposes. This camp will be situated on the shore of a beautiful three-mile lake, Cedar Palm, surrounded by fir clad mountains. The central headquarters, measuring about \(50 \times 100\) feet, will contain a large dining room, seating over 200, and a great hall which can be used for lectures, concerts and gatherings of all descriptions. These will be open to the air and the mountain view on all sides and will have glass doors which can be closed in case of rain.

This new and greater Unity House will have accommodations for between 200 and 500 people. It will respond with great elasticity to the demands of this kind which are placed upon it. It will be within easy distance from New York, the round trip costing only $1.00. It will be a two or three hour trip up the Hudson by boat to Bear Mountain, and thence by bus for several miles up into the mountains. Until the new headquarters are completed, the state has provided for the use of the union at a moderate rental a large house in a beautiful location, which is now being completely remodeled for this purpose.
Park to Be Made Real Playground

The whole development of the State Park is one of especial interest, for here are being worked out on a large scale some remarkable projects of collectivism. This fine tract of land in the foothills of the Catskills, on the shore of the Hudson, is being developed by the Interstate Park Commission as a real playground of the people. In addition to the thousands of picnickers who every summer find recreation at Bear Mountain, provisions are being made all through the park for colonies of vacationists.

For all these camps, which together serve many thousands, a central economic organization is being perfected whereby transportation and food supply are guaranteed with cheapness and regularity. The state, through a special agent, buys food and camp furnishings on a huge scale and at a basis of lowest market cost for all the organizations participating in the advantages of the park. Buying as it sometimes does $75,000 worth of food in a single deal, it is able to bring to these organizations the advantages of real cooperation. Scattered through the park are various beautiful pavilions which contain thousands of tons of ice cut on its own lakes by the hired workers of the Commission and sold in the park at cost.

A special force of men is constantly at work hewing the trees and building them into charming woodland camps. While all the camps are attractive, it is being planned that that of the waistmakers shall be the finest in the park, as befitting an organization of such a size.

Such is the Unity Movement in all its diversity. The prospects are that very shortly this educational idea will extend rapidly beyond its present bounds, not only in New York but in other industrial centers of this country, for it meets a real need of the worker. It brings to his service all the vast social and educational resources of the community; it lifts him to his proper position as a citizen of the community entitled to share in these resources, and it brings to him a vision of labor with an idea, a hope and ideal.

—Juliet S. Poyntz, 1917.
Garment worker Edith Berkowitz, a member of the ILGWU, wrote this song in 1932 when she was a student at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers. The song was sung frequently at ILGWU meetings and songfests for many years.47

WE SHALL BE FREE

"We Shall Be Free." Source: Edith Berkowitz Parker

The following three stories were the response of some trade union women to Life and Labor's offer in 1920 of prizes for articles on the subject. The three stories included here were awarded prizes because "each answers the 'why' so definitely and so individually."

They were written by members of the Philadelphia WTUL, the Office Employes' Association, and the Typographical Union.48
I was a lace worker in Philadelphia when I "joined my union." A business depression and lay off of two-thirds of our forces compelled me to seek a new job. I had grown so accustomed to spending the day at the old place that I felt wronged in some way by this order of ejectment, and it did upset my line of least resistance. Having learned only one line of work, to go to another meant much effort and low wages even if "paid while learning."

Naturally I turned to a place where I could follow the same trade. The only such place I knew was called a "closed shop." Just what that meant, I did not know, but it was said no one could work there without joining the union. I secured a price list from a person who had worked there, and used it to back up my arguments that our prices were about as good as theirs, and we wouldn't join any union. It was enough to have a forelady yelling at a person, I thought, without having anybody or everybody, just girls like ourselves, telling us what to do.

With my small knowledge of "unionism," of course I did not know that it was organization in other departments and in other shops that necessitated uniform prices in order to hold the workers.

It being the usual policy to secure a job first and later to learn the details concerning hours, amount per week, and rate per piece or dozen, when pay day came, I followed custom and awaited developments.

A week passed, and no one mentioned unions or gave orders, and the forelady did not yell, but everybody attended strictly to business. My first pay convinced me that a better system of giving out and completing work existed. It was more just and less exacting. The spirit of the girls was more independent and less slavish. This better system had enabled me to do better on what seemed cheaper work. I liked the place better than I had the other and asked for admission for a friend as soon as there should be room for her.

Another week passed, and I began to hope they would forget about the union. But no; just about quitting time a girl bent over me and in a cheery voice said, "I came to see if you wanted to join our union." I stopped my machine and studied her face. Only kindly comradeship
was expressed there. "I did not come last week because we always wait till a girl gets a pay or two to give her a chance." I smiled at her frankness and after a few questions paid the dues and so became a member of a labor union because I had no further arguments against it. The Lace Finishers' Protective Association it was. Later, I think the Lace Finishers joined hands with the Menders' Union, and they with the Lace Weavers, and so finally became a part of the A. F. of L.

I soon learned that the union was a kind of partnership in which every advantage or injustice affected all concerned in exactly the same measure. We were a firm selling our time and labor under a contract of equal responsibility. Because of this fact, we took pride in turning out good work and refused to stand for a careless worker. But we stood firm when the worker was not at fault.

Finding that complaints kept coming concerning work from a certain part of the room, we insisted that the long neglected windows be cleaned to allow more light, and the complaints ceased. We demanded that the men's toilets be separated from those used by women, that proper repairs be made, and the vermin that had bred for years be destroyed. These and other improvements we could insist upon only as a union.

The improved system brought about by the union resulted in an increased efficiency in the workers that was of even greater value than the actual wage gain. This because it enabled many to reach out with courage in other ways, such as evening study courses, and so move on to other business and accomplish things long held in their hearts.

True, some sleep on and fail to get a vision of the possibilities or take advantage of opportunities. But after fourteen years as a union member I feel nothing else boosts one like this partnership in our business life. It not only increases our efficiency and courage, but it instills a spirit of comradeship that is greater than our love of gold. Witness the amazing struggles in times of strikes when to scab on the others would bring money to avoid starvation. Yet loyalty holds firm in all honest hearts.

—Leona Huntzinger, 1920.
When I was about fourteen my father passed away. A year later conditions got so that I was compelled to go out and earn my own living.

At home I often heard my folks talk of shops. I could not imagine what they meant. I often wondered what kind of places they were or where such things could be located. Father had worked in a tailor shop and had talked much of how the people in the shop wanted to form a union because prices and conditions were not satisfactory. I was too small to understand this, though.

My first position was as errand girl in the basement of a department store. I studied every move they made. I was a stranger in that world, and when I was taken to my post, I worked as if it was an honor. As I became acquainted with the girls, I found that they were afraid of some one they called a boss. The girls would gather in groups and as soon as they saw a boss, away they flew. I remained and sometimes talked to the boss.

I said to the girls, "Are we not the same human beings as the bosses? You work more than girls of your age really can, which is a result of your weakness." I asked a boss why the girls were so afraid of him. He said, "Maybe their work is not done properly, or not done at all. Just do your work and all will be well." This interested me and made me think.

The days were hot and the girls did not like to work Saturday afternoons. They were the ordinary everyday type of girls who looked more dead than alive. They recalled to me what my father had once said of organization. I told the girls to get together and appeal to the firm for the half day. In a body a great deal can be done. I had the idea, but did not know what to do, or how. But I said, "I'll go to the firm." I went to the president’s office and found all the heads of the firm there. I asked them if it was any more than fair to let the employees off Saturday afternoons, and whether they wanted sick and lazy workers instead of workers healthy and ready to do all work necessary. They listened, but did not answer. Later I was discharged and told that when they needed me they would send for me.

Then my friends asked me to join the Ypsls, (Young People’s Socialist League.) Here I became interested in lectures and started to read a little, but I still kept the idea of getting together. I became more and more informed on what the working world is composed of. I
got a job in another department store. Here I stayed longer, but kept on telling the girls to get together. I was laid off because of my affiliation with the Ypsls.

Later I learned what was meant by a union. I read on the subject and found it to be something worth while to all working people—especially young girls.

About 1918, I began to want to take an active part in the labor movement. I did what I could in the Ypsls. Young as I was, I spent a day at the polls during every election for three years. This gave me more food for thought as I saw the way the politicians went about their work.

In January of that year I was arrested by my brother and taken to the Juvenile Court. Here I saw only children, young girls and boys. I was told by the attorney and detectives that unless I made up my mind to keep away from the radicals, I would not be released for three years. At the court I became acquainted with the different social workers, who were doing all they could for the betterment of the children.

I spent one month in the Juvenile Home. The inmates were all working girls. Most of them worked in factories. Whether they were found guilty or not, they were convicted and sent to what they called an industrial training school, where they teach the girls to make good use of themselves. But I couldn't see that anything for the betterment of the girl was really accomplished. Working conditions, which really caused the downfall of the average girl, were never considered. A young girl is sent to work before her mind is mature enough to consider what confronts her in the working world, and the employers never thought of the value of the girl herself.

This made me think more and more of a union. I asked the officer, "Do you think the working conditions of these girls should be investigated before you let them go? Would it decrease your work?"

"Well," she said, "the girls are well taken care of here. They are sent to a training school. When they get out they are ready to make a decent living for themselves."

"It looks to me," I said, "as if they are worse."

We did not talk any longer. She called me a Red and that was the end.

A month later I was released and paroled for two months. I had some new ideas about labor. How wonderful it would be, I thought, to be able to have something to say regarding your own environment.

I got a job with a dental instrument firm. Here I carried bundles to the post office. They were quite heavy. Once the owner's wife was in the office when I had five heavy bundles to carry. She looked at them,
but seemed not to care. I cried out, "If we had a union, I would only do the work in the office and not carry these bundles." I was fired.

Later the Boston Store strike occurred. I got a job there and went out to strike with the rest. It was interesting to see how the very ones who contributed, in a way, toward the welfare of the people would directly send sluggers to attack them. This showed me the great need for an organization of workers, if only to protest against that sort of thing. Also, I began to see that in order that any good for anyone may be accomplished, labor must be represented. It is the leading factor of society today, for practically the entire life of a person depends upon labor.

I am a member of the Office Employes' Union, and am working with the tailoring industry. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers had done a great deal for its members. When the slack time came in the clothing industry this year the employers were prevented from laying off their workers by the thousands because of the agreement the Amalgamated had made with companies. By this arrangement, every one gets his share of whatever work is going. It is due to the foresight of the union.

Freedom in the shop, and not to be under any obligation to a "boss," is worth much. The chance to develop leadership is open to all. Many have become great leaders only through the freedom which the union offers. All of which is, I am sure, of greater advantage than dollars, as well as a help in making them.

—Jennie La Zar, 1920.

Sanitary Conditions and a Real Pay Day

THIRD PRIZE

My reason for joining a union was the bright prospect of work in a union office with sanitary conditions, a real pay day, and real gentlemen and ladies as co-workers, contrasted with the dreadful conditions endured for three years in non-union offices.

At the age of fourteen, my sister Alice and I were taken to a dark, dirty shop to learn to set type. Windows opened on a court and light was poor at best. When too dark to see, gasoline torches were used. Poor light caused me to have granulated eyelids. The floor had a thick
coating of tobacco spit. The towel was so black and thick it could stand alone. Often there was neither soap nor water to wash up with.

The first few weeks we received no pay, later we were to have $1.50 weekly, but that was not forthcoming on pay day and often was several weeks behind. One of the workers said her mother counted on the $1.50 she would bring home to buy something for Sunday. The money was not paid and she quit. Father came around and insisted we be paid. Sometimes part of it was collected. When too much was owing us we were laid off for a time. I went around to other offices and worked, but the first boss always came and tried to get me back.

Hours were 7 A.M. to 6 P.M., or later, until work in hand was finished. I was sent on errands, and down a business street with oil cans for oil. That hurt my pride. The proprietor and his wife both worked. The wife frequently had us race with her. I can understand now that it was to speed up production.

An occasional tourist was put to work. So little money came in that two of the tourists were taken home with the boss to board out salary. One tourist tired of that and had a telegram sent to himself saying his mother was dead and succeeded in getting out of town. The other frequently slept in a waste paper box and crawled out when we arrived at work. The office was frequently moved, to locations each worse than the former ones. They could not understand it was cheaper to pay rent than move a printing office. The proprietors kept moving their home until finally they took a single room and arranged to get meals at a hotel in exchange for printing. The office was moved to a hotel basement, but was only allowed to remain a week. The next move was to a building full of barrels of salt from fish. The odor was bad and the vibrations of the presses shook the building.

My sister quit and found work in a union office. That was the first I knew a union existed and that conditions were better there. Sister Clara started to learn and was put to feeding Gordon presses, furnishing the power with one foot while she stood on the other. This made her very sick.

At this stage such a gloom possessed me that it showed in my face. Father sued for my money, I being a minor, and then I lost out in that office for good. It was then that I had the chance to finish my apprenticeship in a union office. The thought of a real pay day and better working conditions brought smiles to chase away the gloom. I joined the union as an apprentice, not telling father until after I was initiated, because he would object to it. Union membership was not required at that time, but I wished to cast in my lot with successful people.
My early views of non-union conditions have not been altered by a quarter century's observation. Most non-union offices operate with beginners. One large office in Chicago conducts a school to teach printers, that it may have help. The help leave as soon as they know anything. Open shops are not friendly to women workers. I would have been crowded from a trade years ago had I not joined a union that believes "an injury to one is the concern of all."

A union card is a guaranty that one has graduated at the trade, while the open office stunt is to start one in at a small salary and raise when they think the worker is worth more, not wishing to give credit for time worked in other offices.

Proprietors have a strong organization; so should the workers. The Typographical Union has business headquarters on a par with the bosses themselves. Our best diplomats are sent to treat with the bosses, and they obtain raises in salary for us without any effort on our part, save our standing solidly behind the committee. Now, had each individual to treat separately for a raise, few would even be given a hearing.

The Typographical Union has a beautiful home at Colorado Springs for sick and aged members, an old age pension, a mortuary benefit, sick benefit society, rates in hospital for the sick, and lots in various cemeteries. It also conducts a school.

—Venus M. Heath, 1920.

Notes


3. Ibid.

4. International Ladies' Gar-


8. Poyntz disappeared from her New York City apartment in 1937 (see “Woman Communist Missing 7 Months,” *New York Times* [December 18, 1937]). Her fate remains a mystery. My special thanks to Professor Alice Kessler-Harris for sharing with me biographical data she gathered on Poyntz and the FBI files she obtained through the Freedom of Information Act.


10. Cohn to Selig Perlman, December 26, 1951, Box 5; Cohn to Emma, May 8, 1958, Box 5; Cohn to David Dubinsky, October 12, 1932, Box 4 (all in Fannia Cohn Collection).

11. Interviews with Mark and Helen Starr, April 12, 1976, and July 27, 1978; Theresa Wolfson to Cohn, May 6, 1922; Cohn to Wolfson, May 15, 1922, Fannia Cohn Collection, Box 4.

12. ILGWU Educational Department, "Announcement of Courses Given in Workers’ University" (1923–24), in David Saposs Collection, Box 3, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wis.

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School and Society 11 (March 20, 1920): 349–50; "Knowledge is Power" (1920 pamphlet), Selma Borchardt Collection, Box 145.


16. Fannia Cohn, “What Workers’ Education Really Is.” The motto is from Francis Bacon’s Meditationes Sacre (1597). Information on Cohn’s selection of the motto is from an interview with Mark and Helen Starr, April 12, 1976. See also ILGWU Educational Department, “Announcement of Courses Given in Workers’ University” (1923–24), David Saposs Collection, Box 3.


23. For examples of Cohn’s
27. ILGWU Educational Department, "Report of the Educational Department to the Nineteenth Convention of the ILGWU," March 7, 1928, David Saposs Collection, Box 34.  
28. Cohn to Evelyn Preston, November 5, 1923; Cohn to Preston, May 22, 1924; Cohn to Florence Thorne, June 24, 1926; Cohn to Sonia, August 28, 1928 (all in Fannia Cohn Collection, Box 4).  
29. Cohn to Phillips, July 13, 1938, Fannia Cohn Collection, Box 4; Schaefer, p. 138.  
30. A. J. Muste to Cohn, October 11, 1928; Wolfson to Cohn, May 6, 1922, and November 19, 1923 (all in Fannia Cohn Collection, Box 1); Cohn to Preston, November 5, 1923, May 22, 1924, and December 6, 1923; Cohn to Helen Norton, February 9, 1932 (all in Fannia Cohn Collection, Box 4).  
J. B. S. Hardman was born Jacob Benjamin Salutsky in Grodno, Russia, in 1892. He attended the University of St. Petersburg and became active in the social democratic and union movements. He came to America in 1909 and studied for two years at Columbia University before embarking on his lifelong career as editor, writer, and labor intellectual. In the early 1920s he changed his


36. In 1920, The ILGWU claimed 105,000 members. This figure steadily declined through the 1920s. In 1932, the union counted 63,000 members; in the early months of 1933, a mere 40,000 members. As a result of its organizing drive, the ILGWU had nearly 200,000 members at the end of 1934, making it the third largest union in the AFL (Bernstein, The Turbulent Years, pp. 84–89).

37. Interview with Mark and Helen Starr, April 12, 1976.


42. ILGWU, "Report of the Educational Department," June 1, 1942, to May 31, 1944, and June 1, 1944, to December 31, 1946; Schaefer, pp. 180–86; "New Members Classes" (n.d.), Fannia Cohn Collection, Box 11.

43. ILGWU, Educational Department, Training for Union Service (New York: ILGWU, 1940), pp. 6–7.


46. From Life and Labor 7, no. 6 (June 1917), pp. 96–97.

47. From the collection of Edith Berkowitz Parker, Irvington, N.Y., used with permission.

48. All three from Life and Labor 10, no. 10 (December 1920), pp. 312–15.