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"SHOULDER TO SHOULDER FOR A COMMON CAUSE?:" JEWISH, ITALIAN, AND BLACK WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS IN NEW YORK CITY, 1900-1930

BY

DANA CHRISTINE MASSING 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on women in the New York garment trades early in the twentieth century has largely focused on Jewish women as strong labor activists, while ignoring the participation of Italian and black women in union activities. This thesis argues that union organizers and employers perceived many cultural differences between Jewish, Italian, and black women because they spoke different languages and came from different countries. In reality, however, there were many parallels in their experiences in the workplace and in their day to day lives as shaped by the fact that they were working-class women.

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Chapter I: *Introduction*

The garment trades in New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century were characterized by an abundance of immigrant workers, mainly women, laboring under poor working conditions for low wages. The composition of the shirtwaist industry (later the blouse industry) reflected the demographics of the garment trades as a whole. Eighty percent of the workers were women and, in total, fifty-five percent of workers were Russian Jews, thirty-five percent were Italians, and seven percent were "Americans" or native-born workers from a variety of backgrounds.

Eastern European Jews began to immigrate to the United States in large numbers in the 1880s, mainly due to religious persecution in their homelands. The last of these great migrations was in the first decade of the twentieth century as a result of the failed 1905 revolt in Russia. Beginning in the 1880s Italian men also migrated to the United States hoping to earn enough money to raise their standards of living.[1] Italians did not immigrate in substantial numbers, however, until the turn of the century when more men came to seek their fortunes, sometimes earning enough to bring over their wives and children. First Jewish immigrant women then Italian women found positions working within the various garment trades in New York City. At the beginning of World War I, the makeup of the workforce shifted as Jewish and Italian immigration tapered off and black women, mainly

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[1] Many contemporary writers discussed how Italians were motivated to come to New York by the promise of earning more money. See Charlotte Adams' 1881 article, "Italian Life in New York," *The Italians: Social Backgrounds of An American Group*, edited by Francesco Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1974).

immigrants from the West Indies, slowly found positions as garment workers. By the early 1920s, more black women entered the garment trade., but a number of these women had migrated from the South. Although the workers changed, the conditions under which they worked improved very little over the same time frame.

The garment trades were divided in terms of wages between the skilled male workers, working as cutters or pressers, and the unskilled female workers, who were generally machine operators or finishers. Among the unskilled workers, the "learners" of the trade, who composed thirty-seven percent of the industry, earned two-fifty to four dollars a week; and the more experienced unskilled workers sometimes earned as much as nine dollars a week.[2] The wages also depended on whether the worker did week work, in which they were paid the same rate regardless of their output, or piecework, in which their pay was determined by the number of garments they produced. Piecework was highly desirable to experienced and quick workers, but created conflicts among the workers because they fought over who would receive the largest bundles of work. Manufacturers likewise used the system to favor certain workers by giving them more work, thus producing petty jealousies. Those shops who relied upon the subcontracting system tended to pay less because the employer would contract work with a foreman who would, in turn, hire up to eight workers, usually "learners." Therefore, two sets of employers would supervise the workers and profit from their labors. Not surprisingly, workers considered the subcontracting system to be especially oppressive.

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[2] Dr. Woods Hutchinson, "The Hygienic Aspects of the Shirtwaist Trade," *Survey*, 2 January 1910, 395. The wage rates quoted were for 1909-1910.

The hours varied seasonably, depending on the demand for the goods, and during slack seasons, workers had to survive often with no savings to draw upon. While employers estimated the slack season to be only 2.6 months out of the year, workers claimed that they had little or no work for 3.5 months out of the year.[3] The workers put in long hours--from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. in better shops--which left them in a constant state of physical exhaustion. During the busy season, though, it was not uncommon for workers to toil for more than twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week. Workers complained, as well, that employers often changed the clocks in order to more efficiently cheat them of part of their breaks or to have them work late. Some workers objected to being followed to the washrooms by their supervisors who would hurry them back to their machines as quickly as possible, ensuring that they did not waste time socializing with other workers.

Each worker also had to pay for necessities for work, as well as being fined for various offenses, out of their paltry wages. Employers would charge the workers for the electricity, thread and needles that they used in the course of making the garments, sometimes as much as $1.50 a week. Workers paid their employers for "privileges," such as the use of a chair or a hook or a locker for their coats and hats, or for water to drink. As well, if workers accidently spoiled a piece of cloth or came a few minutes late for work, they were fined.[4] Many women were also expected to purchase their own sewing machines, usually on an installment plan. These costs all diminished the actual wages which the

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[3] Pearl Goodman and Elsia Ueland, "The Shirtwaist Trade," *The Journal of Political Economy* 18 (December 1910): 817.

[4] Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (New York: B.W. Huebsch Inc., 1924), 147.

workers received.

The conditions under which the workers toiled were poor and contributed to a great number of health problems. The shops themselves were extremely hazardous, as the weight of the workers and machinery combined to weaken the floors, sometimes to the point of collapse. Fires often broke out in the factories due to the flammability of the cloth and the oil on the machines. Workers frequently could not escape as employers locked the doors to prevent theft and provided inadequate fire escapes, as was the case in the famous Triangle fire in 1911. The workrooms had few, if any, windows therefore there was no source of ventilation to provide fresh air to the workers, and the shops were dimly lit by artificial lights. Workers were crowded into workrooms so heavily that often for one woman machine operator to leave her seat, all the others had to rise to let her pass. All sewing machines were required by state law to have a board to protect the operator from having her skirt dragged into the machinery, but many employers failed to provide these skirt guards.[5] The majority of women suffered under a continual parade of illnesses, but could not afford to take time off to allow their health to improve. One woman, for example, had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, but escaped from the sanatorium and the nurse later found her back working in the factory from which she had been removed.[6] Clearly these women workers needed to be unionized to protect them from such exploitation.

There were several obstacles to organizing women garment workers. One barrier to

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[5] Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, *Women and the Trades* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1909; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 108.

[6] Mary Van Kleeck, "Working Hours of Women in Factories," *Charities and the Commons*, 6 October 1906, 17.

the unionization of Jewish and Italian women garment workers was the employers themselves. Women were seen by employers as expendable and exploitable workers because they were unskilled and could be paid less than men. As two contemporaries stated in their 1911 work on women in trade unions: "The moment she organizes a union and seeks by organization to secure better wages she diminishes or destroys what is to her employer her chief value."[7] With a steady supply of immigrant workers, employers were able to replace those who tried to unionize a shop or educate coworkers about unionism. Employers also perceived there to be ethnic and language differences between Jewish and Italian workers. They attempted to hinder cooperation between the groups by placing a Jewish worker next to an Italian worker, using Italian newcomers to the industry to undercut the wages, and creating inequalities in the piecework system. For the most part, though, these tactics would have been unsuccessful if women workers had been accepted into the unions.

The major obstacle to unionizing women was not the employers, but labor union officials themselves who believed that women were temporary wage earners incapable of sustaining a union. Women's work was to be, in the eyes of society, in the home. Samuel Gompers, who was head of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), articulated this common sentiment: "Women had a right to work ... but they should not exercise it unless necessary, for their greatest contribution to society was as the centre of the home in their

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[7] John B. Andrews and W.D.P. Bliss, *History of Women in Trade Unions* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 151.

noble role as mother."[8] Moreover, union leaders maintained that women did not actually need to work because they lived with their parents and had no expenses. Instead, working women were seen to be motivated by the desire to earn "pin money" to buy material goods, and to pass the time before they married. The AFL leaders ignored the fact that these women worked to make much needed contributions to the family income. The AFL, then, was a craft union for skilled, male, native born workers with the aim of ensuring that men were paid sufficiently in their work to support their entire family on a single income. The AFL was not interested in the least in unionizing women, especially immigrant women who could not even speak English and did not perform skilled labor.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) was a small branch of the AFL committed to organizing the men employed in the garment trades through its various locals. The ILGWU was forced to be more liberal than the AFL regarding the issue of organizing women, given the large numbers of women in the garment trades. The ILGWU executive did not recruit women members, but did accept women if they asked to join. The executive agreed with the AFL that men should occupy all positions of leadership within the union. Thus, women workers seeking to unionize faced a great deal of opposition from the union officials themselves.

Union meetings were correspondingly geared towards male workers. Meetings were often held late at night when many women were occupied with household tasks, and in saloons or taverns which reputable women would not be seen in. Theresa Wolfson, a

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[8] James Kenneally, "Women and Trade Unions, 1870-1920: The Quandary of the Reformer," *Labor History* 14 (Winter 1973): 45.

contemporary writer, found that the few actual union halls discouraged all but the hardiest unionists: "... most unions halls or meeting places are dirty and unattractive. The room is filled with smoke, the floors are decorated with bespattered spittoons, the windows are usually closed and the air chokingly foul."[9] Clearly, serious obstacles needed to be overcome to break down these very unrealistic ideas that union leaders held about women workers.

The Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) was founded in 1903 to help rectify the fact that women had no voice in the AFL. The aims of the League were to draw women workers into the labor movement to improve the wages and working conditions under which they labored, and to form an egalitarian cross-class alliance between working women and the upper and middle class "allies" who constituted the executive of the League.[10] The allies were products of the Progressive era, which stressed the importance of creating order within the chaos created by industrialization, urbanization, and population growth caused by mass immigration. These women embraced the task of reforming the ills facing society out of the desire to be socially useful outside of the home. As Rheta Childe Dorr wrote: "... I for one wanted to get out into the world of real things."[11]

The League took several years to get its work fully underway due to the massive task which confronted it. Based on the needs of workers, the WTUL adopted a platform which

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[9] Theresa Wolfson, *The Woman Worker and the Trade Unions* (New York: International Publishers, 1926), 167.

[10] Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 1.

[11] *Ibid.*, 25.

advocated, in part: an eight hour day, a minimum wage, equal pay for equal work, and the organization of workers into unions.[12] The League members were split, however, on whether to concentrate on educating workers about trade unions, or to actually embark upon the task of organizing workers. Meanwhile, the general discontent of male and female workers alike rumbled throughout the garment trades beginning in 1907. Women workers began to mobilize themselves into informal groups to discuss how they would deal with the terrible conditions and wages to which they were subjected. Spontaneous walk outs, generally involving only one shop, increased in frequency and League members stepped in to assist the strikers.

The shirtwaist makers' strike in 1909 represented a significant turning point for League organizers and working women alike. The strike has achieved a prominence in American labor history as the first large scale women's strike in the country, with somewhere between 25,000 and 40,000 strikers. Moreover, the strike was called and sustained by working-class immigrant women, as opposed to the WTUL or the ILGWU. The strike was also significant in providing the only well-documented example of interactions between Jewish, Italian, and black women. Finally, the shirtwaist strike was the first general protest in the New York garment trades, drawing in workers from all shirtwaist shops. Workers in many of the other garment trades in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia were inspired by the success of the shirtwaist strike. These workers launched themselves into three years of intense labor activism, which resulted in a series of massive strikes. These subsequent

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[12] Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement From Colonial Times to the Eve of World war I* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 304.

strikes more or less followed the same basic course of events as the shirtwaist makers' strike, thus it was a model for future labor disputes.

Beginning in July 1909, workers in the Rosen Brother's shirtwaist factory had mobilized themselves to strike for better wages. By the end of September, this strike had spread to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company because the owners locked out a number of workers who were suspected of being union sympathizers, and to Leiserson's where non-union women operators insisted upon joining male unionists in their planned strike. These strikes were characterized by intimidation and violence on the part of employers which set the pattern of events for the eventual general strike. Leiserson's used hired thugs to harass and assault the strikers, while the Triangle hired prostitutes to cheapen the reputations of picketers by association.

The tiny local 25 of the ILGWU held a meeting on November 22 to discuss the strikes already in progress at these three large shops. At the climax of the meeting, a Jewish shirtwaist worker named Clara Lemlich, already struggling against her bosses at Leiserson's, called for the motion to strike. The chairman then asked the two thousand people at the meeting to take an adapted version of an old Jewish oath: "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise."[13] The next day, twenty-five thousand workers, eighty percent of them women, walked out of the shops and gathered at the ILGWU headquarters. Their major demands were for a fifty-two hour work week, elimination of the petty fines and the charges for supplies and electricity, abolition of the

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[13] Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt, "Working Girls' Budgets: The Shirtwaist Makers and Their Strike," *McClure's* 36 (February 1911), 81.

subcontracting system, and recognition of the union.

The WTUL was instrumental in directing the strike since the ILGWU lacked the organizational skills, numbers, and resources to render much aid. The ILGWU executive was, in fact, overwhelmed by the swarms of women streaming in to join because they had four dollars in the treasury and less than a hundred members when the strike was called. The ILGWU executive did little more than issue a pamphlet entitled "Rules for Pickets" to help the strikers avoid arrest, and eventually negotiated an end to the strike, while the strikers and the allies carried out all practical aspects of the strike. The WTUL organized meetings, made speeches to increase public support for the strike, raised funds for the strikers, and could often be found on the picket lines. The President of the New York WTUL, Mary Dreier, also brought the earliest major publicity to the Triangle strike when she was arrested on the picket line and called a "dirty liar" by the officer, which was subsequently reported in the *New York Times*, among other periodicals.[14] It should come as no surprise that the work of male organizers was highly praised by contemporary writers. The official history of the ILGWU, while giving due credit to the WTUL, maintains that the men in Local 25 planned every aspect of the strike from the moment they made the decision to strike.[15] This interpretation is rather strange since the executive of the ILGWU planned a meeting in which to discuss the possibility of a general strike, but hesitated to take any action until Clara Lemlich called the strike. Mary Dreier, the New York League President, consequently

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[14] *New York Times*, 5 November 1909, 1.

[15] See Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 151-167.

fumed about Local 25, "These men get me so mad, they treat us like two cents."[16]

Upper class women, who were referred to by the press as the "Mink Brigade," drew upon their financial resources to help strikers and used their influence in society to promote the aims of the strike. Alva Belmont, a prominent society member and suffragist, for example, spent her evenings in district night court bailing out strikers and arguing on their behalf. She also organized and financed a huge meeting at the Hippodrome on December 5, 1909 which was packed with strikers and their supporters who listened to speeches by Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, a suffrage activist, Leonora O'Reilly from the WTUL, and Rose Pastor Stokes from the Socialist Party. Anne Morgan, daughter of millionaire J.P. Morgan, was also active in fundraising and picketing and headed a movement to form a million dollar cooperative shirtwaist factory staffed by union labor.[17] College students from Columbia, Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, and Vassar could also be found on the picket lines. Carola Woerishoffer, a Bryn Mawr graduate, was prominent among college women for her contributions because she posted her home as bail for the strikers and assisted them each night in court. A meeting at the Colony Club on December 15, 1909 brought together four hundred of New York's wealthiest women to hear the stories of a group of strikers, including Clara Lemlich who remained at the strike's forefront. After listening to tales of the hardships endured by the strikers, these women contributed thirteen hundred dollars between them to the strike effort.[18]

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[16] Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters*, 97.

[17] *New York Evening Journal*, 11 January 1910, 2.

[18] These contributions were seen as woefully insufficient by a number of members of the press, the WTUL, and the Socialist Party because these women were extremely wealthy, yet

Despite the work of these middle and upper class women, it was largely the tenacity of the strikers themselves that sustained the strike. These women endured, while picketing, starvation, terrible weather conditions, and insults from members of the public and from policemen, who often referred to the women as "streetwalkers." The New York *Times* wrote that one striker had been insulted by an officer and pinched until she was black and blue and "When she remonstrated, he declared that if she said anything further he'd shoot her down like a dog."[19] The *New York Call* reported that pickets were beaten up daily by the police.[20] Clara Lemlich, for example, was arrested seventeen times during the strike and was nursing six broken ribs at the time she called for the general strike. Many incidents occurred whereby a striker was abused by "thugs" employed by the shop owners, especially a man named "Dominick" who was notorious in the press for his ruthless treatment of strikers. Strikers and strikebreakers were often engaged in altercations on the picket lines, mainly verbal. The press seized upon the idea that ethnic tensions between Jewish strikers and Italian strikebreakers were the cause of these conflicts and, although Italian women were quite active in the strike effort, the label of "scab" was often applied to them. Black women were also recruited as strikebreakers in small numbers despite pleas from the WTUL to support the cause of the union.

The disdain that public officials felt towards the strikers can be seen in the words of District Judge Olmstead who told one striker that she was "On strike against God and

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they only gave an average of three dollars each to the cause.

[19] *New York Times*, 22 December 1909, 8.

[20] *New York Call*, 1 December 1909, 1.

Nature, whose firm law is that man shall earn his bread by the sweat of his brow."[21] Most judges thought similarly, and sentenced strikers to a workhouse on Blackwell's Island rather than fining them. Rosa Perr, who was sixteen years old, was sentenced to thirty days in prison, despite the protests of Rose Schneiderman and Mary Dreier of the WTUL:

> We asked if he realized what it would mean to a girl her age to be locked up with prostitutes, thieves, and narcotics addicts. "Oh," he said, "it will be good for her. It will be a vacation."[22]

Mayor McClellan was also decidedly disinterested. At a march on December 3, 1909 on City Hall to protest the treatment of the strikers by the police, he promised to speak to Police Commissioner Baker so that they would get a "fair deal."[23] When asked to speak at the Hippodrome meeting, however, he said that he "was not interested in 40,000 women out on strike and expected to be out of town."[24]

The strike was arbitrated on several occasions, but each failed due to the refusal of the representative body of the employers, the Associated Waist and Dress Manufacturers, to recognize a union shop. By February 15, though, the strike was called off after settlements had been reached in most shops. The success of the strike sent the message to union officials that women could be competent labor organizers and strikers. Clara Lemlich summed it up most effectively when she said: "They used to say that you couldn't even organize women. They wouldn't come to union meetings. They were 'temporary' workers.

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[21] *New York Times*, 6 January 1910, 5.

[22] Rose Schneiderman with Lucy Goldthwaite, *All For One* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967), 93-94.

[23] *New York Times*, 4 December 1909, 20.

[24] *Ibid.*, 1.

Well, we showed them!"[25]

Contemporary writers rarely focused specifically on the lives of these Jewish and Italian women, however, apart from their roles in the shirtwaist strike and the general conditions faced by women workers Some periodicals did have general articles on Jewish and Italian immigrant life, such as *Charities and the Commons* and the *Survey*, social welfare publications, and the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Louise Odencrantz conducted an extensive study of Italian women, *Italian Women in Industry*. She interviewed over a thousand Italian working women and five hundred families to discern information about women's work and about the conditions in the workplace, with some discussion of culture and traditions.[26] Memoirs by working women, who later became labor leaders, also provided some information on the lives of immigrant women, but only Jewish women wrote such memoirs.[27] The best primary source is a series of taped interviews conducted in the mid-1970s by the City University of New York with Jewish, Italian, and black women who formerly worked in the garment trades. These interviews were first used in the mid-1980s when researchers on women's history began to study ethnicity.[28]

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[25] Paula Scheier, "Clara Lemlich Shavelson," *Jewish Life* 8 (1954), 8.

[26] Louise Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry* (New York: Arno Press, 1919).

[27] See, for example, Rose Schneiderman's autobiography, *All For One*. Michael Gold also wrote an account of his life growing up in a New York tenement, *Jews Without Money*, which has a great deal of information about his mother's life (New York: International Publishers, 1930).

[28] These interviews were conducted by the Oral History Project of the City University of New York, directed by Herbert Gutman and Virginia Yans. The interviews are located at the Tamiment Labor Library in the Elmer Bobst Library at New York University. The initial citation of each interview will include the name of the person who was interviewed, the series, and tape number. See also Jennie Masur and Sydelle Kramer, eds., *Jewish*

Initially, writers on immigrants focused on men with little mention of women. The purpose of these early works was to show the success stories of individual men, or the contributions which a particular ethnic group made towards the building of American society and culture as a whole. Later writers began to incorporate women into their studies, to varying degrees.[29] Irving Howe, author of *World of Our Fathers*, for example, gives many glimpses into the lives of Jewish women and men in telling the story of the migration of Eastern European Jews to New York and how they adapted culturally to the New World. Edwin Fenton studied Italians in the labor movement in his Ph.D. thesis, "Immigrants and Unions A Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920." His sections on women are riddled with stereotypes and he did not believe Italian women to be as capable of organizing as their Jewish coworkers, seeing them as docile and passive. The majority of Italian women, Fenton maintained, remained at their machines during the strike due to an absence of solidarity, leaders, and community support. His major contribution to the limited scholarship on Italian women is his analysis of the Italian press' reactions to the shirtwaist makers' strike.

The earliest works that concentrated solely on immigrant women were somewhat

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Grandmothers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976) which contains interviews with ten Jewish women. Marie Hall Ets also wrote a work, *Rosa: The Life of An Italian Immigrant* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), which was based on her interviews with an Italian woman.

[29] See Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Edwin Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions a Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1957).

limited. Some writers focused on the "great women," the leaders, rather than the mass of workers. Paula Scheier, for example, wrote on Clara Lemlich, and June Sochen studied Jewish women writers, radicals, and volunteer activists.[30] Other works were written around the same time that City University of New York interviews were being conducted, therefore the authors did not use these interviews. Thus, the experiences of Jewish women were filtered through the eyes of middle and upper class writers and one cannot get a clear idea of what immigrant women thought except for the Jewish women leaders. Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel wrote a collective work entitled *The Jewish Woman in America*, for example, in which they gave an overview of Jewish women's work experiences, and discussed the contributions of Jewish women in the shirtwaist strike, especially the leaders of the movement such as Rose Schneiderman.[31] Rudolf Glanz, author of *The Jewish Woman in America: Two Female Immigrant Generations, 1820-1929* produced an excellent survey of the working lives of Jewish women and their activities in the unions, but again without delving closely into what they actually thought.[32] One of the only works on Italian women at that time was a collection of essays from the tenth conference of the American Italian Historical Association on a variety of topics, including the question of Italian

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[30] Paula Scheier, "Clara Lemlich Shavelson;" June Sochen, *Consecrate Every Day: The Public Lives of Jewish American Women, 1880-1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

[31] Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: The Dial Press, 1976).

[32] Rudolf Glanz, *The Jewish Woman in America: Two Female Immigrant Generations, 1820-1929*, vol. 1, The Eastern European Jewish Women (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1976).

women's labor activism in Italy.[33]

In the early 1980s, many historians became interested in studying women, although works on women in labor unions rarely discussed the lives and contributions of immigrant women. The writings on the Shirtwaist Makers' strike are indicative of the content of typical labor histories because the authors examine the strike using gender as the main tool of analysis.[34] The strike was seen as significant mainly because it brought together women from different classes and they were able to cooperate with one another and fight for a common goal. Each author highlights the events of the strike and the contributions of the middle and upper class women and the Jewish strikers. While it was recognized by these authors that the strikers were immigrants, these immigrants were considered more as a class, and as women, rather than as being from distinct ethnic groups with different cultures, languages, and religions. These authors did not deny that ethnicity was important, however, but the scope of their work did not allow for detailed analysis of ethnicity. As well, every historian writing on the strike more or less discounted the contributions of Italian women, with the exception of Maxine Schwartz Seller, who mentioned the fact that Italian women were labor activists in Italy. Even books specifically written on immigrant women showed

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[33] Betty Boyd Caroli, Robert Harney, and Lydio Tomasi, eds., *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978).

[34] See Meredith Tax, *The Rising of Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980); Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*; Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters*; Maxine Schwartz Seller, "The Uprising of Twenty Thousand: Sex, Class, and Ethnicity in the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909," in *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working Class Immigrants*, edited by Dirk Hoerder (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986); Carolyn McCreesh, *Women in the Campaign to Organize Garment Workers, 1880-1917* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1980).

this bias of discussing Jewish women labor activists and ignoring Italian women.

In the mid-1980s, some researchers began to examine the lives of immigrant women using interviews with these women to place their personal experiences into the larger context of the immigrant experience in New York. Sydney Stahl Weinberg utilized interviews with Jewish women to illuminate their experiences in the workforce and attitudes towards their work, though she did not discuss the strike itself.[35] Susan Glenn, author of *Daughters of the Shtetl*, discussed the lives of Jewish women workers in an attempt to explain why they were so visible in the labor movement.[36] She believed that these women borrowed elements from the Old World, including traditions of women's work such as artisanal pride, and rejected notions of women's inferiority. From American culture, Jewish women admired the fact that women were not considered inferior and that womanhood was idealized and elevated. Thus, Jewish women drew upon Old World and American cultural ideas to form their own identities. The only historical study which focused on Italian women and drew on interviews was Columba Furia's Ph.D. thesis in which she examined the contributions of Italian women to the labor movement.[37] Furia maintained that Italian immigrant women had more difficulties than other cultural groups in processing the new culture with respect to the expectations of their families. Traditional expectations such as docility and obedience and

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[35] Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

[36] Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[37] Columba Maria Furia, "Immigrant Women and Industry: A Case Study. Italian Immigrant Women and the Garment Industry, 1880-1950" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1979), 130-133.

the fact that women considered their work temporary and not as important as men's (despite the fact that some earned more than their fathers and brothers) clashed with militant trade union practices. While some women did rebel, it was only after the shirtwaist strike that Italian men and women began to realize that unionization was necessary and could achieve some gains. Furia's work is thorough, though she could have strengthened her conclusions by utilizing the City University of New York interviews instead of just the interviews which she conducted herself.

Only one author, Elizabeth Ewen, who wrote *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, examined the similarities in the daily lives of Jewish and Italian immigrants on the Lower East Side.[38] By using the City University of New York interviews, she was successful in presenting a more inclusive picture of young immigrant women which complements her small section on the shirtwaist strike. Since Ewen studied all aspects of immigrant life, however, there was little information on women's experiences in the workforce and in unions. She also chose not to study relationships between Jewish and Italian women in the workplace--a question that was specifically asked of the immigrant women that were interviewed. This work can be expanded upon, then, with respect to these areas.

Essentially nothing has been written on black women in the garment trades in New York during or after the strike, perhaps because black women in the North were primarily engaged as domestic servants. Most post-slavery works on working class black women were

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[38] Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 16.

written about the domestic service. The scarcity of primary sources partly explains the deficiency in scholarship in labor history, though it seems that the material is sufficient to produce an article since a number of studies of black women in industry were conducted between 1919 and 1929.[39] Many periodicals also carried general articles on black people living in New York.[40] Starting in the 1930s, a number of books were published on Northern black workers and their membership in unions. These works contain a trace amount of information on women, but no more than a few pages.[41] Ruth Francis Paul's Ph.D. dissertation in 1940 did explore the area of black women in industry in Philadelphia, but mainly after 1930. In terms of secondary sources, Elizabeth Pleck wrote a more general comparison of married, wage-earning black and Italian women in which she analyzed why black women were more likely to keep working than Italian women.[42] Rosalyn Terborg-

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[39] See, for example, United States Department of Labor Women's Bureau, *Negro Women in Industry*, report prepared by Mary Anderson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922); United States Department of Labor Women's Bureau, *Negro Women in Industry in 15 States*, report prepared by Mary Anderson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1929); Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania, *Colored Women as Industrial Workers in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania); Consumer's League of the City of New York et al, A New Day For the Colored Woman Worker (New York: Consumer's League of New York, 1919).

[40] The *Survey* devoted its 2 October 1909 issue to problems facing the black population of New York.

[41] See, for example, Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, *The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931); Charles Franklin, *The Negro Labor Unionist of New York* (New York: AMS Press, 1936); George Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912); National Urban League, *Negro Membership in American Trade Unions* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1930); Lorenzo Greene and Carter Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (New York: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1930).

[42] Elizabeth Pleck, "A Mother's Wages: Income Earning Among Married Italian and Black Women, 1896-1911," in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of*

Penn briefly surveyed black women's attempts to organize themselves into unions or union-like organizations.[43] Philip Foner also published several works on various aspects of labor history with sections on black women.[44] This area of study warrants some attention, then, since black women did work in the garment trades and join labor unions, and were not merely relegated to domestic service work, yet so little is known about this facet of their experiences.

With the recent studies which specifically focus on Jewish and Italian immigrant women, and given the fact that nothing has been written on black women in the garment trades, it seems that a reexamination of the dynamics of ethnic relations and lives of these women is necessary. In this work, I will argue that employers and organizers perceived many cultural differences between Jewish, Italian, and black women, but these women actually shared many common experiences in their daily lives and in the workplace as defined by their shared gender and class, and the fact that they were not members of the dominant ethnic group in New York City. Organizers and employers attached their own meanings to what it was to be a Jewish woman, an Italian women, or a black woman, working in the garment trades. Accordingly, organizers and employers devised their own

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American Women, edited by Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth Pleck (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

[43] Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Survival Strategies Among African-American Women Workers: A Continuing Process," in *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, edited by Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

[44] Philip Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974); and sections in *Women in the American Labor Movement*. See also Philip Foner and Ronald Lewis, eds., *The Black Worker From 1900 to 1919*, Vol. 5 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

strategies to bring these women into the labor movement, in the case of organizers, and to prevent them from unionizing, in the case of employers. In reality, Jewish and Italian women only really differed from one another in terms of languages spoken. In the case of black women, the discrimination that they faced due to their skin color, and resulting barriers to their employment in the garment trades and to unionizing, was an additional difference between themselves and Jewish and Italian women. I will be discussing black women separately from Jewish and Italian women, however, due to chronology which places black women in the garment trades much later than Jewish and Italian women. As well, the experiences of Italian women will be highlighted more so than the lives of Jewish women because the lives of Jewish women are well documented.

In the second chapter, the lives of Jewish and Italian women will be explored in relation to education, work, and labor activism. Jewish and Italian women, despite the fact that their cultures were quite different on many levels, were strikingly similar in terms of their day-to-day lives. Women from both groups were expected to sacrifice their educations due to cultural expectations that women did not require an education and for reasons of financial need. Both Jewish and Italian women suffered under the same oppressive working conditions within the shops. As well, Jewish and Italian women shared traditions of labor activism in their homelands, although the degrees to which they transferred these ideas to New York varied, as will be discussed in chapter three. Relationships between Jewish and Italian women in the workplace and in the community will be considered using the interviews conducted with former garment workers in New York City. It will be argued that Jewish and Italian women were able to identify these similarities in their lives and generally

enjoyed warm relationships as a result.

Chapter three will be concerned with the attempts of the WTUL to organize Jewish and Italian women prior to and during the shirtwaist makers' strike. Jewish women were able to transfer the training that they received in labor theory in Russia to their new work environments and become labor activists once a Jewish organizer was appointed to listen to their needs. The role of Jewish women in the shirtwaist strike, which has been so extensively discussed in secondary sources, will be reconsidered based on the assertion that Italian women were not solely strikebreakers who did not identify with the aims of the labor movement, but could and did become active in the strike. Italian women did not directly transfer the ideas which they had formed in Italy about labor unions to the New York garment shops until they saw the benefits that could be realized by their families if unionized. Organizers interpreted Italian women's slowness to unionize as due to cultural differences, but language differences formed the major barrier to their organization. Italian women, much like Jewish women, required organizers that addressed their needs and spoke their language.

The fourth chapter will consider the further attempts of the WTUL to unionize Italian women and, more importantly, the efforts of Italians themselves in this regard. Italian women, it seems, continued to fight for gains in labor when the conditions were right as illustrated by strikes such as the 1912 Lawrence mill strike and the massive garment strikes in New York in 1913. Organizers in the WTUL, however, still considered them to be poor activists in the sense that they did not respond in great numbers to the efforts of the WTUL organizers. It will be seen that Italian women had special needs and that the impetus for

their activism came from within the family and the Italian community, not from external groups such as the WTUL.

In the final chapter, the work of black women will be explored. Black women were initially overwhelmingly concentrated in the domestic service, although they desired positions in the factories which paid better for less hours of work. Employers refused to hire black women for factory work, blaming it on immigrant workers' refusal to work with black women, though there were actually a variety of other reasons for such discrimination. Some black women found that they could break into the garment trades as strikebreakers, which created a controversy during the shirtwaist makers' strike. While the WTUL begged black women not to undermine the cause of their striking "sisters," the black community argued that black women could not be expected to support the cause of the union that excluded them. The labor shortage during the First World War temporarily forestalled the question of strikebreaking for the most part as black women stepped in to fill unskilled positions in various garment industries. Their hold on these positions was tenuous until the 1930s, in part due to the fact that unions were unconcerned with organizing black women until strikebreaking was a threat to their members and black women formed a sufficient presence in the shops to warrant organization. Special methods were required to organize black women, although language was not a barrier, because they developed a distrust of union officials based on past experiences and the oppression which they faced in the shops was greater than their white coworkers'.

Chapter II: *Cultural Similarities Between Jewish and Italian Women*

Many writers on immigrant women in the garment trades in the early twentieth century have either focused on Jewish women, or on the perceived differences between Italian and Jewish women. That is, writers have presumed that Jewish and Italian women were different simply because they came from different countries and spoke different languages. Elizabeth Ewen, author of *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, has made clear, however, that Italian and Jewish women shared common cultural beliefs, family structures, living conditions, and experiences in the New World. Despite her observations, Ewen neglects to explore the parallels in the lives of these women with respect to work and labor activism in great depth. Yet, in listening to the Jewish and Italian women interviewed in the City University of New York project reflect upon their lives, one is struck by the fact that each woman is telling the same basic story. Their lives were shaped by the fact that they were immigrant women: they were often denied the educations they desired, they labored together in garment shops, and they brought ideas from their homelands about how they could improve their lives through the union. Consequently, beyond language and religious differences, Italian and Jewish women's experiences in the garment trades were so comparable that they were able to develop close bonds with one another, both in the workplace and beyond.

Jewish and Italian women generally never received more than a elementary education in their homelands, and were obliged to quit as soon as they were old enough to work to help out the family financially. In Italy, educational laws were so permissive that women did not go to school for longer than a few years, and for Jewish women discrimination in their

homelands hindered them from obtaining more than a basic education. Once in New York City, immigrant children were required to attend school until the age of fourteen, but Jewish and Italian parents either ignored the education laws or removed their children from the schools as soon as they were, or appeared to be, fourteen. Jewish daughters were the most likely to try and pass themselves off as fourteen to obtain factory work, while Italian women would work in home industries with their mothers. Mollie Linker, for example, was able to start working at thirteen, as she was a "big tall girl."[1] Katy Bottman described hiding in the toilet when the inspector came around her cousin's shop.[2] An Italian woman described how her mother would hide her when the truant officer came to their home, and tell him that she had three children when she actually had ten.[3] Many of these Jewish and Italian women wished to continue with their schooling, but felt pressured to contribute to the family earnings. Rose Pasquale, an Italian woman, explained why she left school at fourteen: "My father wasn't working then; he had stomach trouble. It was hard times at home."[4] Bella Hymen also recalled wistfully:

> I had the ambition for study I would have loved to continue. I wanted to study as a nurse, but I needed money to bring my parents over. At that time it didn't pay in the hospitals so I had to quit and go back to the factory.[5]

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[1] Masur and Kramer, *Jewish Grandmothers*, 94.

[2] Interview with Katy Bottman, NS14 I 104.

[3] See Leonard Covello, "The Influence of Southern Italian Family Mores Upon the School Situation in America," *The Italians: Social Backgrounds of an American Group*, edited by Francesco Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1974), 530.

[4] Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 254.

[5] Interview with Bella Hymen, NS14 I 59.

When the financial situation of the family was poor, Italian and Jewish daughters were expected to sacrifice their educations to help out the family.

Both Jewish and Italian parents also believed that girls only needed to reach a certain level of education because a woman's goal was marriage. Jewish boys were expected to continue with school as it determined their future success, while Italian boys continued only if they wished to do so. One Italian mother voiced the general attitude surrounding education for Jewish and Italian women: "when girls at thriteen (*sic*) and fourteen wasted good time in school, it simply made us regret our coming to America."[6] Elisabeth Stern's family, for example, was well off financially, yet her father maintained that she should quit school to marry. Elisabeth explained her desire to continue with her education: "I didn't mean to go to work at fourteen or fifteen, marry at sixteen, be a mother at eighten *(sic)* and an old woman at thirty. I wanted a new thing--happiness."[7] Very few women were able to convince their parents that they were entitled to this happiness derived from going to school. After Caroline Crupi's mother passed away, her father left her living with her grandmother and went to the United States to work. Caroline enjoyed school and her teacher hoped that she would also study to become a teacher. Her father came home for a visit, however, and would not allow her to continue in school, stating that "women gotta stay in a corner in a house."[8] Caroline subsequently relinquished her own happiness by quitting school, learning how to be a dressmaker, and working at home with her grandmother. In order to allow their

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[6] Covello, "The Influence of Southern Italian Family Mores," 526.

[7] Elisabeth Stern, *I Am a Woman--And a Jew* (New York: J.H. Sears and Co., 1926; New York: Arno Press, 1969).

[8] Interview with Caroline Crupi, NS14 II 22-23.

brothers to get a better education, many Jewish and Italian girls were compelled to sacrifice their own hopes of going to school.

Large numbers of women did try to achieve higher levels of learning in conjunction with work. In 1908 the public evening school classes in New York hosted a hundred thousand immigrants, and forty percent of the students were women.[9] Anna R. explained her situation:

> There's no use in living ... unless you have an education. Unless you have an education, you have a mind that isn't working. I was a maniac for education. It just meant everything to me ... I just went all out in every possible way to learn--I never went anywhere without a little dictionary. And so ... I went to work by day and went to school at night.[10]

Italian women were less likely to attend night school because they were expected to help around the house after work and it was not seen as proper for them to walk around alone at night. Members of the Italian community strongly enforced the cultural practice of chaperonage which prevented young women from going out at night without a male companion, usually a brother.[11] This practice sometimes influenced the ability of Italian

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[9] Sydney Stahl Weinberg, "Longing to Learn: The Education of Jewish Immigrant Women in New York City, 1900-1934," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 8 (1989): 112.

[10] *Ibid.*, 110.

[11] This system was used to prevent a woman from having clandestine meetings with her boyfriend, and from being placed in compromising situations with strange men which would damage her reputation. The custom of chaperonage, while seen by many union officials at that time as evidence of the backward nature of Italian culture, actually protected Italian women from dubious dance halls where many other immigrant women spent their leisure time. These dance halls were deemed immoral and dangerous for young women to visit because many women were taken advantage of and some subsequently became prostitutes. Reformers of the time spent a great deal of effort grappling with alternative forms of leisure for young women. Italian women instead socialized within the family unit, or the family would go as a group to Italian community events. See Marie Concistre, "Italian East Harlem," *The Italians: Social Backgrounds of an American Group*, edited by Francesco

women to learn English, as one contemporary researcher wrote:

> Among several nationalities, notably Italian and Syrian, there is a traditional disapproval in regard to permitting women to go out at night for any reason, unescorted by their men, and so long as this persists it makes daytime lessons for such women the only practicable arrangement.[12]

Nevertheless, some Italian women did at least pursue English classes, if not high school courses, despite the lack of family support. One Italian woman went to night school to learn English, but eventually quit after enduring the taunts of her brother. He echoed the common sentiment regarding the education of women: "'Oh,' he explained, 'she is going to get married. She doesn't need to know English.'"[13] Unfortunately the toll of work and study was too much of a burden for the majority of Jewish and Italian women and their attendance at night school tended to be irregular.

Parents were more likely to be supportive if their daughters studied domestic trades, such as dressmaking or sewing, which were thought to be more useful than formal schooling. Yetta Brier explained her mother's philosophy that everyone should learn a trade because "if you're rich, you wouldn't practice the trade; if you're poor, you would make a living by it."[14] Traditionally, Jewish and Italian girls were taught to sew by their mothers, often starting at a very young age, and improved their craft by apprenticing with seamstresses or taking classes in school. Mollie Wexler, for example, learned sewing skills from her mother:

Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1974), 227.

[12] William Leiserson, *Adjusting Immigrant and Industry* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1924), 314.

[13] Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 255.

[14] Interview with Yetta Brier, NS14 I 6-7.

> My mother took in dressmaking in the house ... I must have been about six years old and she began to show me how to sew ... and by eight years I was working on a machine.

Her mother later apprenticed her to a dressmaker, telling her that she was capable and should learn the trade.[15] Angelina Wanderling likewise was instilled with the belief that sewing was a necessary skill: "When I wouldn't want to sew, my mother would stick me with a needle."[16] Other women obtained specific training in the trades by attending vocational schools, such as the Manhattan Trade School, which better prepared them for the conditions in the factories.[17]

By seeking work in the garment trades, Jewish and Italian women believed that they would be able to use and further develop their sewing skills, which would prepare them for their future marriages. In reality, the specialization in the garment trades only taught women how to sew the same part of a garment over and over again in an assembly line fashion. For those women trained in skilled trades, the transition to working as a machine operator could be extremely frustrating. These women were not able to develop or exhibit their fine sewing skills as Linda Baia, an embroiderer, complained: "In Italy it would take six months to do a pillow and here it must be done in three or four hours. Cheap work!"[18] Mildred Hecht witnessed her pride in craftsmanship disappear:

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[15] Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 26.

[16] Interview with Angelina Wanderling, NS14 II 30-31.

[17] See Mary Schenck Woolman, "Private Trade Schools for Girls," *Charities and the Commons*, 5 October 1907; or Florence Marshall, "The Industrial Training of Women," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 27 (1906).

[18] Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 41.

> When I used to finish making a coat it was good and I would get much pleasure from it. I would look at it and feel good all over like I made a beautiful sculpture ... In America, when I went to work in a factory, I felt like a machine. Here is a bigger speed-up, hurry-up.[19]

Two Italian women summed up the dilemma facing women working in the garment industry:

> Lucy ... said that most Italian girls went into dressmaking and sewing trades because they believed they would be useful to them after marriage. "We have to think of the future and not always of the present." Her sister, however, disputed the fact that the trade would teach her much about making her own clothes. "In a shirtwaist factory," she said, "you may have to do only one part of the waist, sleeves, closing-in, or hemming, and you will have to work fast at that one thing."[20]

Jewish and Italian women were bitterly disappointed when they began working in the garment trades for instead of improving their sewing skills and taking pride in their work, they were expected to sacrifice quality for speed.

The majority of Jewish and Italian women worked in order to support other members of their families rather than to achieve economic independence, whether they contributed their wages to the household or they sent the money to their homelands to bring over other family members. Most women living at home turned over their earnings to their parents who then paid for their clothing, transportation, and necessities, or gave them an allowance. Jewish and Italian women did not donate their earnings to the household because their parents demanded they do so, but more because they felt an obligation to, especially when the family had fallen upon hard times. Many women expressed that to do otherwise was unacceptable. As Molly Linker put it: "It was the respect to bring and give your mother the

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[19] Weinberg, *World of Our Mothers*, 194-195.

[20] Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 39.

money (*sic*)."[21] Given the fact that many daughters could earn more than their fathers, these women felt pressured to give as much as they could to the household.

Italian and Jewish working women were usually given an allowance to buy both necessities and luxuries with the amount determined by either the parents or the daughters themselves. Historians have often perceived Jewish women as more independent than Italian women because they would often make their own decisions regarding how much to contribute to the household, depending on their needs and the financial needs of the family. When Bea Gitlin began working, for example, she gave her parents her entire paycheque, but when she was older she gave them only ten dollars a week and kept the remainder for herself.[22] Although Italian women have always been depicted as more obedient and less likely to argue with parents about their allowances, they could be quite assertive, like this woman:

> Filomena Moresco, whose calm investment of $25 in a pretty party dress, a beaver hat and a willowed plume was reported as little less than the act of a brigand. If she had withheld twenty cents out of her pay envelope a week from her mother she probably would have been beaten; as it was she appropriated $25 and her high-handedness was her protection.[23]

Jewish and Italian women were expected to work to help out the family and contribute towards the maintenance of the household, though the amounts that were given varied because most women also wanted to achieve a measure of independence.

Jewish and Italian women also shared common experiences in the workplace. Wages

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[21] Masur and Kramer, *Jewish Grandmothers*, 96.

[22] Interview with Bea Gitlin, NS14 I 108.

[23] Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, 107.

were low for all workers. Jewish women, however, were initially paid slightly more because they had achieved more seniority in the industries and were more likely be able to communicate with their employers who were often Jewish themselves, in comparison to Italian newcomers to the shops. Still, the conditions described in the previous chapter affected all women equally regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Women workers were commonly subject to sexual abuse, in varying degrees, at the hands of their employers or foremen because they were women. Numerous women remembered cases where they were hugged or kissed by an employer, or forced to sit on his lap. Gussie Agines recalled her mortification when her boss tried to hug her: "I was so ashamed because I didn't know what to say or do. No man had ever kissed me except my father."[24] Women also complained about the crude stories told by men working in the shops. Sometimes the workers were able to put an end to the exploitation, as Rose Schneiderman reported:

> She (the chairwoman at the shop) said that Mr. Aptheker had a habit of pinching the girls whenever he passed them and they wanted it stopped. I went to see him in the presence of the chairwoman, told him that this business of pinching the girls in the rear was not nice, that the girls resented it, and would he please stop it ... he said, "Why Miss Schneiderman, these girls are like my children." The chairwoman without a blink answered, "Mr. Aptheker we'd rather be orphans." Of course it was stopped.[25]

Pinching was such a common abuse against women in the workplace that Rose Cohen's first English words were "keep your hands off please."[26] Most of the time, though, women workers did not complain to their employers about the abuse because they were afraid of

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[24] Weinberg, *World of Our Mothers*, 199.

[25] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 87.

[26] Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers*, 198.

being fired.

Italian and Jewish women found various ways of distracting themselves from the oppressive conditions under which they worked, including daydreaming, singing and socializing. Bella Hymen, a former garment worker, emphasized the optimism that many of the women felt about escaping their dreary work:

> All of us young people were sitting and dreaming in the shops. "Well, it's only for a season or two and I'll be doing this, I'll be doing that, I'll get married. I'll marry a man that will be able to take care of me" and so on. We used to even sing the songs ... Yiddish naturally ... singing the dream songs, the love songs, and this is how we dreamed away our youth and go out gay and happy and what not. And we enjoyed our young life with all its problems.[27]

Angelina Wanderling passed the time by making up stories about the women who would be wearing the dresses she made:

> What kind of a person's going to wear this dress? Is she in good health? Is she a good person? Where is she going to go? Is she going to be careful? Is she going to keep it well? It's not mine--I only made it and got paid for it.[28]

If permitted by employers, Jewish and Italian women could foster closer relations with coworkers while socializing and singing to pass the time in the factories.

With few exceptions, Jewish and Italian women stopped working in the factories when they married since it was culturally unacceptable to continue to work there. Jewish women affirmed that Italian women worked after marriage while they did not, but the reality was that both Italian and Jewish worked in home industries or with their husbands. Mary Abrams stated the reason for this difference between Italian and Jewish women: "the Jews

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[27] Interview with Bella Hymen.

[28] Interview with Angelina Wanderling.

were more proud .. When a man married, he felt he was the provider and the woman's place was in the home."[29] Jean Weiner defined the situation more bluntly:

> When they come home, they expected service and if your wife is going to come home an hour later than you or half an hour before you, then you're not going to get the kind of service that they wanted to because they were kings in the house. They'd sit and order you.[30]

Still, in actual fact, the majority of Jewish women did work after marriage, generally with their husbands. Mollie Linker enjoyed being her husband's helpmate and worked at his side for fifty-five years in their candy shop.[31] Some women, like Sylvia Levine, would rather have continued working in the factory: "In those years a Jewish girl gets married she doesn't work any more--it was a terrible thing. Even though I married a man who earned $25 a week."[32] Likewise, Mary Abrams worked in her husband's store, though she would have preferred to become a dressmaker, but maintained that it was not "considered working if you were in business with your husband."[33] Thus, the perception of many Jewish women was that their contributions in the family business or by taking in lodgers was not actual work, even though these labor brought income into the family.

The high number of cases where Jewish men deserted their families also dictated that married women work outside the home. Desertion was so common that the subject was addressed at the 1910 National Conference of Jewish Charities after many applications had

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[29] Interview with Mary Abrams, NS14 I 1-2.

[30] Interview with Jean Weiner, NS14 I 134-137.

[31] Masur and Kramer, *Jewish Grandmothers*, 100.

[32] Interview with Silvia Levine, NS14 I 21.

[33] Interview with Mary Abrams.

been received for relief citing desertion as the reason.[34] A popular feature also appeared for many years in the *Jewish Forward* entitled the "Gallery of Missing Husbands" in which abandoned wives in the United States, Galicia, and Russia appealed for assistance in locating their husbands.[35] While Jewish women asserted that they did not work after marriage, many did not have the luxury.

Italian women also quit working in the factories after they married and worked within the home, much like Jewish women, because it was not culturally acceptable to go out to work. The only difference was that while Jewish women were often helpmates to their husbands, large numbers of Italian women did "home work" which was essentially factory work inside the home.[36] Home work was largely unregulated, which made it easier to circumvent education laws so children could stay at home and work. In fact, the children's labor was necessary since the labors of an entire family were required to earn even four dollars a week. As one Jewish woman described Italian families: "the children worked, the grandma worked, and they all worked."[37] Some women preferred to work at home because they could draw upon the help of their children and avoid having to worry as much about

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[34] Louis Levin, "The National Conference of Jewish Charities," *Survey*, 11 June 1910, 469.

[35] Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 179.

[36] It is uncertain exactly how many women did do home work as the census did not include information on this area of employment, but an investigation in the men's clothing trades showed that 98% of home workers were Italian. See Louise Odencrantz, "Why Jennie Hates Flowers," *The Italians: Social Backgrounds of an American Group*, edited by Francesco Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1974).

[37] Interview with Mary Abrams.

child care and household tasks. Other women missed the shops because they provided an opportunity to get out of the house and socialize, and tenements were often too crowded to provide a comfortable work environment. Carolina Crupi was forced to work at home by her husband, despite the fact that she wanted to work outside the home. She described her husband as the most "jealous thing that existed in the world ... wouldn't send me to work ... wanted to keep me cooped in the house." Still, she conformed to his expectations, reflecting that "that's how it is with the Italian people--you gotta do it [listen to your husband]."[38] Italian and Jewish women both stopped factory work after they married and worked in more acceptable forms of labor for married women within the home or with their husbands.

Historians of Jewish immigrant women have often considered that Jewish women had strong roots in labor activism in their homelands which they brought to their workplaces in the New York garment trades, whereas Italian women were depicted as lacking these traditions to draw upon. Both Jewish and Italian women, in reality, were active in trade unions in Eastern Europe and Italy. Jewish women came to the United States instilled with values of the importance of unions, sometimes being well-schooled in socialist ideas, partly because they had suffered under legal discrimination and persecution of varying degrees in their homelands. The Bund was a socialist organization in Russia that drew in many Jewish women and gave them a consciousness of the conditions under which they lived. These ideas strongly influenced many individuals to immigrate to the United States, as Bella Hymen explained:

The people that came from all over here were already all class-minded. The boys

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[38] Interview with Caroline Crupi.

> and girls that came were very young--15, 16, 14--came at a very young age. The Russians due to the depression and pogroms, the Galicia oh, they poor people--didn't have anything. We had to seek out places of bettering our lives.[39]

As Fanny Heltzer clarified, most of the people who came from Russia were inclined to socialism because "of the conditions that are prevailing there. They were actually forced to think otherwise than their country presented to them."[40]

Eastern European women had not only been exposed to ideas relating to activism, but had put them into practice in their homelands. Rose Rubin, from Poland, worked as a quill winder before she came to the United States, At the age of eleven she went on strike and was arrested on the picket line.[41] Therefore, large numbers of young Jewish women had a clear picture of what was unjust in their lives in Eastern Europe and they came to the United States carrying these thoughts.

The interviews overwhelmingly illustrate that these women, primarily Russian Jews, were able to transfer these ideas into practical use once installed in the New York garment shops. Rose Cohen, for example, was educated in a socialist school in Russia and joined the Socialist Party when she moved to New York. Rose's parents had hoped that she would continue with her night school education, but she saw it as her duty as a socialist to organize the workers in her garment shop. She would meet secretly with her coworkers in the ladies' room of the waist factory to teach them about the union.[42]

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[39] Interview with Bella Hymen.

[40] Interview with Fanny Heltzer, NS14 I 110.

[41] Interview with Rose Rubin, NS14 I 55.

[42] Interview with Rose Cohen, NS14 I 9.

Yetta Altman had been influenced by her father in matters surrounding unionism as he was active in the unions and political movements in Poland. She described how her father and his colleagues could not meet in a house or they would risk arrest. Instead, they would take out a marriage license in order to legitimately assemble, and hold their political meeting. Yetta immigrated to the United States at the age of twelve in order to save enough money to bring over the rest of her family. This responsibility weighed heavily upon her, and she stated that she knew she had to go to work and did not come for pleasure. Yetta herself became an activist while employed in the Albert Waist Company for a man whom she described as "the rottenest boss that I ever worked for." After refusing to work on a particular garment, Yetta influenced other less sophisticated women not to work on it either and they "made a stoppage." When asked why she would belong to the union even though she was such a good worker, Yetta echoed the sentiments of a number of women: "on account of the good workers, the bad workers make a living." Clearly she felt a sense of class consciousness and believed in the necessity of protecting her coworkers through personal sacrifice.[43]

Sonia Farber, who came from Kiev around 1906, had also been active in revolutionary movements and participated in meetings and strikes. She described a general strike in Kiev in 1905 in which people were beaten and arrested by police and they were forced to give in. Yet, she was still optimistic, and remained committed to unionism:

> ...we had quite a nice revolution that day--it didn't last long because the police weren't with us. I couldn't understand when I came to the U.S. why we couldn't make a revolution in the U.S.

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[43] Interview with Yetta Altman, NS14 I 3.

Consequently, when she came to New York she sought to work in a union shop: "You see, I knew what a movement means and I know what a union is so I went to look for the union." She ended up working in a non-union shop, but when they "threw down" sixty pressers, she went to the ILGWU and asked them to organize her shop:

> He says "where are you working?" I says "Mark Solomon." He says "Mark Solomon! It's five hundred people and we haven't got five hundred members. How can you take down a shop like that?" So he laughed at me and I started banging on the table and crying "I want a union." So they had to take me out from that job and put me in a union shop. A small shop.

At the time of the shirtwaist makers' strike, Sonia was married, but she "was involved in every strike. Even if I wasn't working, even if I worked for myself, I used to come and picket with them and be on the picket line."[44] As the series of strikes in the garment trades would illustrate further, Jewish women had a strong sense of the necessity of unions, which was derived in part from their experiences in their homelands.

Southern Italian women also possessed experience in agricultural unions in Italy, which illustrates that they, too, were not ignorant of matters concerning labor activism. Women constituted a large percentage of the agricultural workforce in Italy, generally working side by side with men for considerably lower wages. Historian Emiliana Noether found that these women actively participated in agricultural strikes and agitation in 1893-94 and in 1898:

> Accounts of these demonstrations that soon became riots and led to the imposition of martial law in many parts of Italy reveal that women participated actively at the side of men, sometimes even at the head of columns of peasants who set out, often peacefully, to ask for lower taxes and cheaper bread. From 1894 to 1898 the average number of agricultural strikers every year numbered roughly 5500 and 2200

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[44] Interview with Sonia Farber, NS14 I 81.

women.[45]

Italian women, while working in an environment where they were at the sides of their husbands, could also join with their husbands to fight for more money for their families.

In the flood of immigration between 1900 and 1910, many men left for the United States leaving their wives and children to work in the fields in Italy.[46] Booker T. Washington described the impact of these migrations on the women who were left behind when he visited Italy:

> ... my attention was attracted by the large number of women I saw at work in the fields. It was not merely the number of women but the heavy wrought-iron hoes, of a crude and primitive manufacture, with which these women worked that aroused my interest. These hoes were much like the heavy tools I had seen the slaves use on the plantations before the Civil War. With these heavy instruments some of the women seemed to be hacking the soil, apparently preparing it for cultivation; others were merely leaning wearily upon their tools, as if they were over-tired with the exertion. This seemed quite possible to me, because the Italian women are slighter and not as robust as the women I had seen at work in the fields in Austria.[47]

Despite the fact that many men were leaving the workforce in Italy and being replaced by women workers, Italian women continued to fight against the unjust pay and working conditions, which suggests that they were not totally controlled by men in their actions. Claire LaVigna, a historian, found Italian working women on the whole to be more active

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[45] Emiliana Noether, "The Silent Half: *Le Contadine Del Sud* Before the First World War," *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978), 7.

[46] The immigration patterns were so disproportionate that there was one Italian woman for every nine Italian men in New York City until 1915. Valentine Rossilli Winsey, "The Italian Immigrant Women Who Arrvied in the United States Before World War I," *Studies in Italian American Social History*, edited by Francesco Cordasco (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 199.

[47] Booker T. Washington, "Naples and the Land of the Emigrant," *Outlook*, 10 June 1911, 295.

in labor organizations than Canadian women were, partly due to the large numbers of Italian women in the workforce. In Italy, the high percentage of women working in agriculture or in textile factories were more prone to bond and join together in unions. The Italian National Federation of Textile Trades, faced with the reality of 300,000 women in the industry, made their unionization a priority and by 1908 the number of unionized women nearly equalled the number of men.[48] Some women were even involved in leadership roles. The success of agricultural unions was assured due to the labor shortages which drove the wages up and created a desperation on the part of landowners to restrict emigration.[49]

These two studies illustrate that Italian women had strong models for unionization. They were not, as many authors have argued, apathetic and lacking in a revolutionary tradition. The women who were active in the unions in Italy, however, did not go on to work in the factories in the United States, as was often the case with Jewish women. Rather, the daughters of these Italian women found positions in the New York garment trades and did not seek to better their working conditions until they felt that unions would meet their needs. The dynamics behind this transition from Italy to New York will be discussed further in chapter three, but it is important to note that the fact that Italian women were initially reluctant to unionize sometimes created conflicts with Jewish coworkers who were strong unionists. More often the pattern of relationships between Jewish and Italian women at work

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[48] Claire LaVigna, "Women in the Canadian and Italian Trade Union Movements at the Turn of the Century: A Comparison," *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978), 36-37.

[49] Antonio Mangano, "The Effect of Emigration on Italy," *Charities and the Commons*, 4 April 1908, 13-14.

was very positive.

It is important to explore the personal relationships between Jewish and Italian women in the workplace and in the larger community to see if these women recognized the parallels in their lives. Most of the women who were interviewed were fairly vague, yet positive, in their answers when they were asked how Jewish and Italian workers got along. The usual responses were "very beautifully,""very nice," or "very good." From all accounts, it does seem that women were more comfortable working with women from the same ethnic group simply because communication was not a problem. Rose Rubin, for example, enjoyed working in her mainly Jewish shop because "we used to be jolly--we talked to each other you know--get friendly with each other and do our work in the mean time."[50] Likewise, Angelina Saltalmacchia had fond memories of her second place of employment: "I liked it because it was a lot of Italian lady and everybody used to joke, you know, sing."[51]

Since most of the interviews were conducted with Jewish women, there are a number of descriptions of incidents which showed that there was friction with Italian coworkers, but only with respect to unionism. Ida Seltzer, for example, was bitter about the apathy of the Italian women in her shop:

> Italian girls most cheap, they work for cheap and all that. They didn't like me because I was no good for them ... because I want a union shop. I want that they should get more money. I didn't like how they worked there, they were slaves.[52]

She even described how in one strike she hit an Italian strikebreaker with her umbrella after

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[50] Interview with Rose Rubin.

[51] Interview with Angelina Saltalmacchia, NS14 II 40.

[52] Interview with Ida Seltzer, NS14 I 132.

being similarly assaulted. Yetta Altman stated that in her shop the workers were mainly Jewish and, having come from Russia, were schooled in the revolutionary tradition. The Italian women were not which created some problems: "There was a little bit of friction ... had a lot of trouble with them ... I don't want to say it, but they were hard to organize."[53] The role of Italians as "scabs" or as "goons" hired to intimidate strikers could exacerbate tensions between Italian and Jewish women. Jean Weiner was distressed about the "goons" who harassed her on the picket lines, but tried not to let the fact that they were Italian prejudice her:

> People were people, but I was primarily a Jewish person ... But we just identify them as goons. It didn't make any difference if they were Irish, they would still be goons, you know what I mean, but it happened that the Italians were in this kind of a business more than the Irish were.[54]

The fact that Italian women were reluctant to join unions, then, was a source of contention for Jewish women.

Italian women were less likely to perceive conflicts with their coworkers, or at least were more cautious in articulating them. As Carolina Crupi stated: "I'm friend with anybody. For me there's no discrimination over race--Jewish, Polish, any kind."[55] Angelina Wanderling attributed any friction between workers in the shop as being due to the size of bundles for piecework because the larger bundles took longer to finish so workers fought

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[53] Interview with Yetta Altman.

[54] Interview with Jean Weiner.

[55] Interview with Caroline Crupi.

over who would get the small bundles.[56] If Jewish women attributed tensions with Italian coworkers to the fact that Italian women were less active in unions, it seems logical that Italian women would also sense the strain and respond in kind. Either Italian women were guarded in answering this question in the interviews or friction between coworkers was uncommon enough not to warrant mention by Italian women.

There were many cases where Italian and Jewish women bonded closely. If workers knew English, they could actually communicate with their coworkers, which helped to foster cooperation among different ethnic groups in the shops. Bella Hymen, for example, stated that she got along with her coworkers, but found it a struggle to interact with them:

> All our lives in the factories it was Jews and Italians, Polish people and that's why none of the immigrants [could talk to one another] unless we went to school and had schooling, even so none of us speak a perfect English ...[57]

Communication with one's coworkers seemed to be extremely important to many of the women who were interviewed, and several women described how they overcame language barriers by using signals to communicate. As Grace Gelo explained:

> Now these Jewish people were also very fresh immigrants and they didn't know how to speak English. So we were are the group of Italian fresh--we didn't know English ... Confusion! We had to work by sign and it was very hard ... you couldn't mingle socially because ... the communication wasn't there. We tried to with signs. We tried to get along, but there was no such thing--communication.[58]

Ida Seltzer maintained that when the Italian women working in her shop "worked with

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[56] Interview with Angelina Wanderling.

[57] Interview with Bella Hymen.

[58] Interview with Grace Gelo, NS14 II 25-26.

Jewish girls, they learned to talk Jewish."[59] This form of adaptation is interesting, though it is unclear to what extent the Italian women did "learn" the language spoken by their coworkers: whether they understood some words or were actually able to speak Yiddish to some degree. Jewish and Italian women were clearly able to cope with language barriers and certainly made every effort to overcome them.

The majority of Italian and Jewish women had fond memories of the close relationships they shared with their coworkers. Belle Chinoy enjoyed being with her Jewish and Italian coworkers, and stated that they got along so well that she "went there like to my own home."[60] She, and other women, reflected on how, when someone left the shop to marry, all the workers made contributions towards a farewell gift.[61] Ida Seltzer, who voiced complaints about the apathy of Italian women toward unionism, was touched over the efforts of her coworkers in this regard:

> When I had to get married they made me a surprise party. When I came in the machines, everything was decorated ... the shop gave me a present--the girls, not the boss, the girls--was a big crystal candlestick. Italian girls, they were nice--nicer than the Jewish girls some of them ... I had a lot of friends to my wedding, even two girls were Italian girls.[62]

Clearly, for Ida at least, tensions that existed between Jewish and Italian workers with respect to the unions did not affect her personal relationships with Italian women on an

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[59] Interview with Ida Seltzer.

[60] Interview with Belle Chinoy, NS14 I 105.

[61] Belle Chinoy mentioned that the workers always chipped in to buy a gift when someone married. In her case, she did not tell anyone that she was getting married. When she phoned her employer to tell him, he chastised her for not letting him know sooner. Her employer then came over to her home and brought her a beautiful roll of Irish linen as his gift.

[62] Interview with Ida Seltzer.

individual level. Mollie Linker also reflected on her experiences with her Italian coworkers:

> There was mostly Italian women and girls [working there]. As you know, they're lovers of music. About once every week, we used to go to the old Auditorium; we were up in seventh heaven. And the garlic smell was awful but they liked it. I saw operas. We went straight from work. Everyone watched over me; they all liked me. I was one of the youngest ones.[63]

An Italian woman interviewed by Columba Furia worked in a shop composed entirely of Jewish workers and passed herself off as Jewish for a year because she feared she would be discriminated against by coworkers. She even attended meetings of the Jewish local and made many friends who "often wondered why she never learned Yiddish, or why such a bright 'Jewish' girl had never continued to go to school." Once she realized that her coworkers believed in cooperation with other ethnic groups against the common enemy, the employer, she revealed her identity to them and continued to enjoy warm and close relations.[64]

Outside of the workplace, it was rare for a woman to associate with women of ethnic backgrounds different from her own unless they were neighbours. Jewish women tended to live in Jewish communities, while Italian women lived in Italian ones. Angelina Saltalmacchia, for example, did not see any of her coworkers outside of the factory because she said that none of them lived near her.[65] Mary Abrams lived in a Jewish community and thus only mixed with non-Jewish women in the workplace "but not socially."[66] Jean Weiner

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[63] Masur and Kramer, *Jewish Grandmothers*, 96.

[64] Furia, "Immigrant Women in Industry," 403.

[65] Interview with Angelina Saltalmaccia.

[66] Interview with Mary Abrams.

also, while friendly with Italian women in the shop, "never made any Italian friends socially."[67] Therefore, physical geography strongly influenced relationships between women outside of the workplace.

Women who lived in neighbourhoods with people from many different ethnic backgrounds did become close to their neighbours and help them out in difficult times. Jean Weiner recalled that an Irish woman, Mrs. Henry, with nine or ten children lived in her Jewish neighbourhood. The Jewish women in the community would take care of Mrs. Henry's children, do all the cooking, and act as midwives each time she gave birth.[68] Michael Gold reflected that his mother talked about hating Christians, but actually had warm relationships with her Italian and Irish neighbours. When an Italian woman, Betsy, was forced to provide for her three children after her husband was jailed on murder charges, Mrs. Gold helped Betsy obtain home work to sustain her family. They would have long conversations, drawing words from Italian, Yiddish, Hungarian, and English, but somehow were able to understand one another and become close friends.[69] Rose Rubin described the apartment building in which she lived as a "League of Nations," in terms of the ethnic backgrounds of its inhabitants. She made an effort to get along with her neighbours and to encourage her children to do the same. As she explained it: "It's all experience that you went through when you got families and you're poor and you gotta manage and I did the best

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[67] Interview with Jean Weiner.

[68] *Ibid.*

[69] Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 167.

I could."[70] Angelina Wanderling, in reflecting on growing up surrounded by Jewish and Irish families, said: "... they would exchange the way they knew and then the heart would speak--they would understand one another. They all had large families and they all were home wives."[71] Clearly Jewish and Italian women who lived near one another in the tenements recognized that they led parallel lives in many respects and this knowledge drew them together in close friendships.

The closeness fostered by living in the tenements sometimes encouraged relationships to develop among members of different cultural groups, although such alliances were certainly not sanctioned by the Jewish and Italian communities. One's country of origin was not important in the Jewish community, just shared religious affiliations. A number of women described mixing socially with Jews from different countries, including Bea Gitlin who stated: "We didn't question where you come from, you know, a Jew is a Jew and that's it."[72] In the Italian community, it was unacceptable to date non-Italians, even if Catholic. Caroline Crupi was very upset with her son after he got engaged to an Irish woman. She was unsure if they even married since she refused to attend the wedding, which suggests that she had little or no further contact with her son.[73] Still, despite these cultural prohibitions, a number of intermarriages were recorded, especially after 1910, though never numbering

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[70] Interview with Rose Rubin.

[71] Interview with Angelina Wanderling.

[72] Interview with Bea Gitlin.

[73] Interview with Caroline Crupi.

more than a hundred in a year according to the Marriage License Bureau.[74] One writer attributed these intermarriages as being due to the weakening of religious values among Jewish women, who were less likely to pursue religious education than Jewish men were.[75] A contemporary, Celia Silbert, wrote that:

> While the Italian youth is the mental equal of the Jewess, this is hardly so where the Jewish young man and the Italian girl are concerned. This difference makes the Italian youth desirable to the Jewess, and the Italian maiden undesirable to the Jew ... girls who contract these marriages with Italians are usually of a tender age ... It is usually the poorer working girl that married the Italian youth ....[76]

It is highly unlikely that members of the Italian community would accept this theory, which depicts them as possessing little intelligence and suggests that Italian men exploited the young idealism of Jewish working women. The fact that intermarriages occurred between Jews and Italians is best explained by the fact that there were sufficient similarities in the cultures and experiences of Jewish and Italian immigrants to allow for the development of close relationships between members of each group.[77]

Jewish and Italian women found themselves in similar situations, then, as defined by their cultures and their gender. Many women learned to sew at a young age in preparation

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[74] Glanz, *The Jewish Woman in America*, 81.

[75] *Ibid.*

[76] *Ibid.*

[77] According to sociologist Daniel Monti, there was a rise in the number of intermarriages after World War I because decreased immigration, coupled with the economic and social mobility of Italians, made Italian enclaves within the cities less important or cohesive. See Daniel Monti, "Some Sort of Americans: The Working and Reworking of Italian-American Ethnicity in the United States," *Italian Americans in a Multicultural Society: Proceedings of the Symposium of the American Italian Historical Association* (Stony Brook: *Forum Italicum*, 1994), 22-23.

for their futures as wives and mothers. They entered the garment trades because such labor was socially acceptable, often at the expense of formal education which was denied to them because of financial reasons and parental disapproval. Moreover, these women were immigrants who were adjusting to a bewildering new environment, had little or no command of the English language, lived in the same crowded and dirty tenements, and were subject to the same indignities and exploitation in the workplace: such shared experiences led them to develop close friendships with one another, both in the workplace and in the community. The experiences which Jewish and Italian women shared as working class women, then, transcended language barriers and religious differences on a personal level.

Chapter III: *Jewish and Italian Women in the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike*

The Shirtwaist Makers' strike in 1909 offers an excellent opportunity to examine relationships between Italian and Jewish women in the garment trades. One contemporary wrote on the strike that "It is a unique spectacle to see Jews, Italians, and Americans working shoulder to shoulder for a common cause."[1] This view, however, is not reflected by the primary and secondary sources on the strike which emphasize the roles of Jewish women and upper and middle class native-born white women, while dismissing Italian women as strikebreakers apathetic to unionization. By examining the efforts of the WTUL to bring Italian and Jewish women into the labor movement and the barriers to their union activity, both before and during the strike, it is clear that organizers found it less exacting and more rewarding to organize Jewish women. Jewish women were generally less restricted by their parents and by religious leaders in union activities than Italian women were. Furthermore, the task of finding Yiddish-speaking organizers was less complicated than that of recruiting Italian-speaking organizers. Due to language differences and the fact that organizers perceived cultural barriers to the organization of Italian women, organizers put little effort into their unionization. Yet Italian women proved that they could be quite active strikers if financial considerations did not force them to go back to work. The larger Jewish community, as well, was not much more supportive than the Italian community if the reports of the Jewish and Italian press are any indication.

Jewish waistmakers, by the time of the strike, were fairly well-schooled in labor

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[1] Constance Leupp, "The Shirtwaist Makers' Strike," *Survey*, 18 December 1909, 385.

unionism and were enthusiastic about joining the union under their own terms. Jewish women workers in other industries had set a precedent for joining the unions and actively supporting strikes, thus it was not a new concept for Jewish waistmake Several obstacles stood in the way of unionization: the difficulties posed by differences in language between union leaders and workers, and the resulting slowness on the part of union officials to grasp what it was the Jewish women sought from the union.

The ILGWU executive members floundered with respect to forming strategies to recruit members, as discussed in the first chapter. The executive was composed of Jewish men, many of them socialists, who attempted rather ineffectually to organize skilled male workers and virtually ignored women workers. An editorial in January 1911 in the ILGWU's *The Ladies' Garment Worker* explained how overwhelmed the ILGWU leaders were at the idea of organizing immigrant workers in the years before the Shirtwaist Makers' strike:

> The backward state of civilization and industrial development of the countries from which the bulk of the people engaged in our trades emigrated from, has made the problem of organizing them into a union so difficult as to discourage the more faint hearted among us and lead them to the conviction that it is impossible to organize the great mass of floating immigrants who enter our trade each year by the tens of thousands.[2]

Jewish women pressed for action on the part of the ILGWU executive, who were able to speak Yiddish. Jewish women still found it troublesome to deal with the executive because these men did not understand how women's needs were different from male workers. The WTUL thus served as an intermediary between Jewish women workers and the Jewish executive of local 25.

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[2] "The International Union in 1910," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 2 (January 1911), 1.

The Waistmakers' local of the ILGWU was formed in 1906, but had only a handful of members due to a lack of funds and the need for an organizer. It was proposed that Clara Silver, the highly successful president of the Hand Buttonhole Makers' Union, take over the task of organizing the waistmakers. The Jewish waistmakers refused Silver, however, and were insistent that a Jewish organizer be found, with whom they could communicate.[3] This request was finally met, an appalling two years later, when Rose Schneiderman was appointed in 1908 by the WTUL to organize the waist and dress shops. Schneiderman, a working class Jewish woman herself, had been involved in a Capmakers' strike in 1905, thus many workers could identify with her. A scholarship from an unknown benefactor in 1908 allowed her to attend school during the day and work as an organizer in the evenings.[4]

Rose Schneiderman commenced her duties at a time when there was a depression and workers cared more about simply having work than they did about organizing and improving their wages and conditions, thus she found her work to be frustrating.[5] She visited East Side unions with women as members to explain the purposes of the League and the principles of trade unionism.[6] Her confidence was somewhat restored after a successful strike of the White Goods' (women's underwear) workers in which unorganized workers walked out and she was able to convince them to join the ILGWU local 62 after they won their demands. Much like the white goods' workers, Jewish women waistmakers did not join the union until

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[3] McCreesh, *Women in the Campaign*, 107.

[4] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 83.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, 84.

the strike was called, despite Schneiderman's effectiveness in conveying the trade union message. Part of the reason was that Schneiderman's strategy involved using strikes to unify the Jewish workers and bring them into the union. As she explained it, "exploitation was ruthless and discontent ran high ... strikes were spontaneous and numerous," and many were "without prior organization and without leadership."[7] Once workers made the decision to walk out, then, Schneiderman and other League members stepped in to help the strikers conduct meetings and organize picket lines, and they collected money for relief, provided speakers for meetings, and secured legal assistance.[8] Rose Schneiderman was someone who understood the language and specific needs of Jewish women workers, and therefore assisted them in gaining acceptance with union officials. The task of finding an Italian organizer, though, was much more complicated.

In reading the newspaper coverage of the strike, one could easily come to the conclusion that the strike brought the question of organizing Italian women out in the open, however the WTUL had broached the subject several years previously. The issue was first discussed in the Secretary's Report of December 1907 which affirmed that plans were in the works to organize Italian women by forming a committee and speaking to "important Italians," but that "special methods" were necessary.[9] The "Italian Committee" was

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[7] *Ibid.*, 89.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Secretary's Report, 26 December 1907, Papers of the Women's Trade Union League and Its Principal Leaders: The Women's Trade Union League of New York Papers (reel 1, frames 282-283). This collection can be found on microfilm at the Tamiment Library at New York University, and will hereafter be cited as the WTUL Papers with the specific name of the collection listed after.

subsequently formed and consisted of five non-Italians and three Italian men including Dr. Antonio Stella, a physician who occasionally wrote for *Charities and the Commons*, Tito Pacelli of the subway workers' union, and F.L. Frugoni, whose occupation was unknown. Whether these "important Italians" that were to be spoken to were so categorized due to their political, economic, or social power or influence is uncertain. It is evident, however, that the WTUL intended first to approach men of influence to reach the Italian women workers. The final impetus for this strategy, though, did not come from the League or Italians themselves, but corresponded with pressure from Jewish human hair workers to organize the Italian women in their trade.[10] These women were extremely interested in ensuring cooperation from their Italian coworkers, partly out of concern for Italian workers and partly because Italian women undermined the aims of the union. As one Jewish hair worker reported, "The Italians do the work for less money, not knowing that they get less money, for they take work home at night when the other girls have refused."[11] The WTUL initially assigned Leonora O'Reilly to this duty, but as the Jewish workers became more insistent, they asked that Tito Pacelli, try to "get hold of the men and through the Italian men ... reach the Italian women."[12] Pacelli appeared to be quite busy already, but promised to do what he could when he had the time. The dynamics of the relationships between Italian men and women

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[10] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 23 June 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 340); Secretary's Report, 26 December 1907, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frames 340 and 374).

[11] Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters*, 110 as quoted from National Woman's Trade Union League, *Proceedings of the Third Biennial Convention, 1911*, 19.

[12] See Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 23 June 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 340); Secretary's Report, 27 October 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 374).

indicated that Italian women were more likely to unionize if approached by Italians, rather than WTUL organizers.

The relationships between Italian men and women were often characterized in such terms:

> ... his women belong to him as much as the feather bed and the copper saucepans he brought with him from the homeland. As a thinking human being, acting independently, the southern Italian immigrant woman does not exist. She obeys absolutely the will of her nearest male relative ...[13]

Many Italian women remained behind in Italy and combined the roles of mother and father in caring for the home and children and wage-earning, while their husbands went to the United States to seek their fortunes and earn sufficient funds to send for the family. Hence, many Italian women achieved a sense of independence and the knowledge that they could singlehandedly provide for themselves and their children. Within the tightly knit Italian communities in New York, Italian women maintained a traditional role in the home, reinforced by the community and by neighbours who would gossip if a woman were to behave in a manner deemed inappropriate.[14] While Italian men possessed the power in the public sphere, Italian women controlled the family and the activities within the home. Leonard Covello described this relationship in his family after his father fell ill:

> My brother who became the head of the household, had to take orders from her. But that was done only in our home. On the street, he tried to impress everybody that he was the boss of the family. As I remember now, it was laughable to see him give my mother commands in the presence of other people and then, five minutes later, to

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[13] Adriana Spadoni, "The Italian Working Women of New York," *A Documentary History of Italian Americans*, edited by Wayne Moquin and Charles Van Doren (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 128.

[14] Furia, "Immigrant Women and Industry," 15.

listen politely to what my mother had to say at home.[15]

Thus, when Italian women went out to work, they had to maintain the illusion that their husbands, fathers, or brothers were in control. Consequently, Italian women did not demand to be unionized as Jewish women did, unless the men in their lives approved with the cause, as will be seen in later strikes.

The other aspect to this issue was that Italian women were motivated to work for the benefit of the family, not for individual gain or to achieve independence, as discussed in the previous chapter. Organizers had to convince Italian women that unions were for the benefit of the family, not just for women's benefits as a individuals, and the best way to do so was to gain support of Italian men and make unionism a concern of all members of the family. It could be argued that Italian women were most active in unions when fighting alongside their husbands for the financial benefit of the entire family, as was the case in Italy, but not in New York. Italian women were not passive and apathetic with respect to unionism, but organizers did need to realize that their needs were slightly different from Jewish women in this respect.

Closely following the first discussions on the hair workers, the WTUL took the first step towards ensuring a longer term commitment from Italian women in other trades. By June 1908, Miss Bennett, a volunteer with the WTUL, had formed a social club where eighteen Italian women had met for music and refreshments, and had agreed to meet every two weeks.[16] While reaching a handful of Italian women was a starting point for the League,

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[15] *Ibid.*, 20-21.

[16] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 23 June 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 340). Many individuals were not identified by their first names and

the WTUL was frustrated by the language barriers that prevented them from drawing in more interested workers.

The issue of language was addressed through the recruitment of Italian, or at least Italian speaking, women who presumably were better able to volunteer their time than Italian men were. Although the same problem had been addressed with Jewish women, WTUL executive members were presented with a far more formidable task in acquiring an Italian organizer. The League did not have the luxury of choosing the ideal organizer to reach Italian women, but rather was forced to accept any willing volunteers. In one case, an Italian-speaking woman proffered her services, but she was not actually Italian herself, which undoubtedly would have given her slightly less credibility among Italian women workers. The "Italian Committee," though, expressed optimism over enlisting the aid of an Italian-speaking woman:

> The secretary reported that she had seen Miss Adams, who could speak Italian and had been recommended as a good worker by the presidnet (*sic*) of the league, in regard to working among the Italians for the league. It was voted that if the league had funds and it was thought advisable Miss Adams would be engaged.[17]

Adams was never mentioned again in the meetings, although there is no reason to assume that she did not render her services to the League. In any case, it was clear that finding an Italian organizer with the experience, skills, and credibility of Rose Schneiderman was an insurmountable task.

The League was also fortunate enough to acquire an Italian volunteer, Miss Briganti,

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therefore will be referred to by title and last name only, as in the primary sources.

[17] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 27 October 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 365).

who offered to visit Italian workers. She was deemed to be:

> ... very anxious to help her Italian sisters, she speaks English and Italian and seems quite ready to get up at a meeting and tell them what to do. She impressed me with the fact of how terribly guarded the Italian girls were and the only hope of our doing effective work is through an Italian woman.[18]

Briganti addressed a significant issue with respect to unionizing Italian women. While the League had correctly assumed that Italian women could be influenced by the men in their families to join the union, an Italian woman organizer could not only be a role model but was more understanding of the issues facing her sisters. A League organizer, Miss Watson, also met with a settlement house club of Italian women finishers after their wages were cut to bring them "the spirit of Unionism." Unfortunately, the WTUL decided not to form a local union of finishers due to financial contraints and these women likely lost the motivation to seek better wages.[19] The WTUL was beginning to recognize that support from Italians was necessary to organize Italian women, but it was slow to grasp the best means by which to do so.

The question of language was also addressed through the production and circulation of pamphlets in Yiddish and Italian which, it was hoped, would especially reach out to Italian women. Whenever possible the WTUL distributed standard WTUL pamphlets written in Italian, English and Yiddish to workers in the garment trades. These pamphlets, entitled "Why Should Every Girl Join a Union?" read as follows:

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[18] Monthly Report to the Executive Board, 24 November 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frames 388-89).

[19] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 25 May 1909, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 457).

> Because the man she is going to marry is having his wages lowered by the girl who will work for less than he will.
> Because if you don't marry your own wages will be lowered by the girl who will work for less wages than you will.
> Because everyone knows in a trade without Unions the hours are long and the wages low.
> Because everyone knows in trades with Unions the hours are shorter and the wages higher.
> Because everyone knows the trade union is *The Only Way* to raise wages and to shorten hours.[20]

Reporter Sarah Comstock, who wrote for *Collier's Magazine*, explained how the WTUL always stressed marriage since this was the chief goal of most women workers. Some women, particularly Italian women, were thought to lack a commitment to labor unionism because they planned to work only for a short time before marriage, and subsequently cared little about the working conditions and wages in the long term. By emphasizing that her unionization would protect her future husband from earning less, and thus being unable to provide for her after marriage, the WTUL was able to appeal to workers. The fundamental problem with this approach was the high rate of illiteracy among workers, as discussed in the previous chapter, which the WTUL does not appear to have accounted for.

The degree to which each immigrant group was able to adapt to the New World, to "Americanize," played the strongest role in dictating the degree to which a woman transfered her knowledge of unionism to the garment shops. Illiteracy hindered the efforts of the WTUL to publicize their aims using the written word, whether it was written in English, Italian, or Yiddish. The ability of immigrant women to communicate in English, while certainly highly desirable, was not as necessary when there were Jewish and Italian speaking

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[20] Sarah Comstock, "The Kindergarten of the Factory Girl: Initiating the Working Woman into the Principles and Benefits of Organization," *Collier's*, 23 April 1910, 19.

organizers. Women who could not read their native tongue, in contrast, would potentially remain on the fringe of union activities because they could not understand the flyers and pamphlets handed to them by union organizers and may have been too shy to ask what they meant, instead tossing them away. These women relied on coworkers and "word of mouth" for information, which posed few difficulties for Jewish women who dominated the industry, but was a distinct problem for Italian women. Bella Hymen described how Jewish workers in her shop assisted one another in this regard: "[those] who understand a little better had to talk to the one who didn't and this is how we built the big powerful union."[21] As well, the education gained by Jewish women sometimes included specific instruction in labor theory, from the Rand School for example, which strongly influenced their activities in the workplace and unions. They may have actively sought out this information, irrespective of the fact that they did not know English, because they had a consciousness about unions. By virtue of the fact that Jewish women immigrated before Italian women, Jewish women were far more likely to know English than Italian newcomers. Jewish women also faced significantly less opposition from parents in terms of attending night school and studying English than Italian women did.[22] Knowledge of English and level of literacy influenced the degree to which workers became active in unions.

The WTUL also made a tremendous effort to appeal to potential unionists by holding

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[21] Interview with Bella Hymen.

[22] Jewish women also were more likely to live independently of their parents than Italian women because they often came from Eastern Europe and worked to bring over other family members. Italian women never immigrated alone and rarely lived alone due to the custom of chaperonage.

many events at the League headquarters. On Monday evenings from six to nine o'clock working women could visit the League and learn about trade unionism. On another evening, the League held English classes for workers in recognition of the fact that many could not understand the arguments of trade unionism being presented to them. The League also organized a debating club, a singing class and a gymnasium class.[23] WTUL leaders identified the importance of such events. According to Pauline Newman, a Jewish organizer:

> The Women's Trade Union League deserves credit for being the first organization to realize the necessity of combining social features with the serious side of work. No wonder, then, that so many of us feel more at home within the League than in any other union.[24]

While these women are dancing and singing, Newman stated, "they learn the lesson of 'sticking together.'"

Several issues arose with respect to the approach of the WTUL. First, many of the activities which the League organized were inappropriate for immigrant working women. Rose Schneiderman, for example, recalled her amazement and doubt when attending her first meeting of the WTUL in which little business was transacted and members danced the Virginia Reel.[25] As Nancy Schrom Dye wrote, "the League's gentility undermined workers' self-confidence and made them feel awkward ... the organization's aristocratic character was foreign and often suspect."[26] Only with time did Jewish women, at least, become less

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[23] Comstock, "The Kindergarten of the Factory Girl," 20.

[24] "What the New York Women's Trade Union League is Doing to Organize Women," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 2 (August 1911), 12.

[25] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 78.

[26] Nancy Schrom Dye, "Creating a Feminist Alliance: Sisterhood and Class Conflict in the New York Women's Trade Union League, 1903-1914," *Feminist Studies* 2 (1974), 28.

sceptical about these aspects of the League's work as they began to recognize, as Schneiderman did, that the women in the League were of a different social class but were sympathetic to the plight of laborers.[27] Another problem with these endeavors was that Italian women were not able to leave their homes at night to attend a meeting unescorted. This custom was a hindrance for union organizers who were required to hold meetings after work, but could not draw in Italian women in the evenings unless chaperoned. As Sarah Comstock wrote: "Italian prejudice prevented their attending meetings which must perforce be at night."[28] Hence, while Jewish women were slowly drawn into these classes, the process was slower with Italian women, although Comstock reported that once they acquired a few words in English "their prejudice against going out at night breaks down."[29]

Despite these efforts, it could be argued that the WTUL did not possess any consistent policy toward immigrants in the industry, and the lack of faith of some WTUL members was an impediment to the unionization of Jewish and Italian women. The National Women's Trade Union League president Margaret Dreier Robins referred to the League as a "kindergarten" training school whereby workers would be initiated into trade unionism, and "gathered under its wing, mothering them through their difficulties and their strikes, calming hysteria or rousing from apathy ..."[30] Since it was a "kindergarten," Robins

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[27] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 83.

[28] Comstock, "The Kindergarten of the Factory Girl," 20.

[29] *Ibid.*, 20.

[30] *Ibid.*, 19.

reasoned, "music and merrymaking are so essential a feature of our league work ..."[31] By referring to the WTUL as a kindergarten, Robins illustrates how little she thought of immigrant women, giving them no credit for being able to fight for their own interests by organizing themselves, or calling a strike as many workers had done without being organized. More importantly, she ignores the fact that many of these women had been schooled in trade unionism, whether formally in socialist school or informally in the home, and some had participated in political activities in their homelands.

Margaret Dreier Robins also espoused an anti-immigrant standpoint, arguing that New York immigrant women were

> ... inferior in physical strength and organization to the Western girls. The women in New York have suffered for too many generations, and their vitality has been sapped. I don't think the Western girls will come to that. There is more good native American blood out there, and they are fighting for their own protection. Although this is only the first generation of girls at factory work, they are far better organized than the girls here, and the further west you go, the better is the organization.[32]

This statement was uttered after many Jewish workers in the Triangle, Rosen Brothers', and Leiserson's shirtwaist shops had been on strike for six weeks of their own choosing and without direction from the unions. Ironically, as well, the women who had "good native American blood," were to prove themselves of no assistance whatsoever in the general strike. The Secretary of the New York League, Helen Marot, likewise showed her bitter feelings towards Italian women once the strike had ended. While there is no evidence that

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[31] Mary McDowell, "The National Women's Trade Union League," *Survey*, 16 October 1909, 106.

[32] *New York Times*, 3 November 1909, 9.

other New York WTUL members, including Robins' sister Mary Dreier, shared these sentiments, it reflects poorly on the WTUL leadership as a whole.

Many factors hindered the cooperation between Jewish and Italian women in unionizing. According to one organizer cited in a study by Alice Kessler-Harris, Jewish women felt that they were "superior unionists" and "treated non-Jews in the garment shops suspiciously complaining, for example, that Polish women would listen to their speeches quietly and then report them to the boss."[33] Perhaps Italian women felt similarly distrustful of Jewish women due to the shared ethnicity with the Jewish employers who oppressed them.[34] While this is certainly a possibility, it is uncertain whether this conflict existed as Jewish employers hired thugs to brutally assault Jewish and Italian strikers without discrimination.

Employers often did, however, attempt to exploit what they deemed to be "ethnic" differences and pit Jewish and Italian women against one another. Italian women worked for lower wages, which occasionally created bitterness on the part of Jewish women. Ironically, as was the case with the hair workers, many Italian women garment workers did not even realize that they were earning less, or being asked to work longer hours or take work home because they could not communicate with Jewish coworkers. Employers also prevented cooperation between the two groups by making it difficult for workers to

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[33] Alice Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable," 12.

[34] For example, Rose Pesotta, in organizing for the ILGWU in California, found organizing Mexicans difficult because they transferred their hatred of Jewish bosses to Jewish coworkers. See Robert Asher and Charles Stephenson, eds., *Labor Divided: Race and Ethnicity in United States Labor Struggles, 1835-1960* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 12.

communicate with one another. As Rose Schneiderman reported:

> In many of the places the girls are known by numbers. Two girls will work side by side for weeks without knowing each other's names. Italians will be placed by the sides of Jews, and race antagonism worked on to keep the girls at daggers' points, so that there will be created a distinct feeling against any sort of organization and fellow-feeling.[35]

Mr. Leiserson, who owned one of the first shirtwaist shops to go on strike in 1909, hired a brutal and cruel Italian foreman who made the lives of the workers miserable in order to foster resentment between Italian and Jewish workers.[36] During the shirtwaist strike, a Jewish striker, Jacob Malev, was sentenced to five days in the workhouse after assaulting this foreman.[37] Employers used any means possible to create tensions between the two groups and prevent them from identifying with a common cause. In the dress industry, Mrs. Evalenko attempted to pit her striking Italian and Jewish employees against one another by trying to lure back the Italian women with promises that she would take them back but would not re-employ the Jewish women "as she suspected them of leading the Italian girls out."[38] The Italian women refused this offer which illustrates that while employers assumed that there were tensions between Jewish and Italian workers, the two groups did not perceive any such antagonisms.

For the most part, these tactics of dividing Italian and Jewish workers appeared to be quite effective as a deterrent to walking out until the general shirtwaist strike in 1909 due

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[35] *New York Times*, 6 December 1909, 1.

[36] *New York Call*, 3 September 1909, 1.

[37] *New York Call*, 21 September 1909, 1.

[38] *New York Call*, 9 September 1909, 2.

to the fact that Jewish women could not be sure that Italian women would join the strike effort. An article by Constance Leupp in the *Survey* summarized the idea:

> Probably the only consideration that had kept them in check before [the strike] was the fear on the part of the Jewish girls--the larger part of the trade--that the Italians would "scab." Employers had made clever use of race and religious antagonism to keep the girls from uniting.[39]

While many contemporary writers used the term "race antagonism," the most common method used to divide workers was actually language, especially given the fact that Jewish and Italian women shared many cultural traits.

Once the strike was officially declared, a WTUL representative attended a meeting of the ILGWU to further discuss the organization of the Italian workers in the trade. ILGWU executive members already had selected a man to organize the Italian workers in the trade, but requested that the WTUL form a separate women's local to "get hold of the Italian women." Arthur Caroti, the ILGWU recruit, was a former International Workers of the World (IWW) official and socialist who was managing a cooperative store owned by the silk workers of Hoboken, New Jersey.[40] He maintained a low profile during the strike, only being mentioned once by the *New York Call*, and interacted with the Italian workers on a more personal level. Beyond this act, then, the ILGWU appeared to have little interest in organizing the Italian workers, reporting that shops "where American and Italian girls were employed, remained at work."[41] The WTUL and the Italian Socialists were the only groups

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[39] Leupp, "The Shirtwaist Makers' Strike," 384.

[40] Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions A Case Study," 490.

[41] "The Strike of the Ladies' Waist Makers of New York and its Results," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 1 (May 1910), 2.

involved in trying to reach Italian women.

With the WTUL concentrating on coordinating almost all aspects of the larger strike effort, there were few organizers specifically designated to convince Italian women to join the union. Miss Reisen, one of the women most active in organizing Italian women during the strike, was not even an Italian herself. Her position was to keep the Italian women from returning to work once they had made the decision to strike:

> Almost daily someone would jump up and propose to return to work. Miss Reisen, who did not know the Italian language, would guess what was proposed, jump to the platform and plead vociferously until she would get the Italian women to remain with her in the hall. She had to put up at first with a lot of abuse, but gradually she won the hearts of the Italian strikers. And towards the end of the strike she could report to the strike committee that she "could almost understand what the Italians were talking about."[42]

Miss Briganti, who volunteered with the WTUL before the strike began, continued to devote time to giving speeches and working in the Italian headquarters. The work of the male Italian organizers, mainly from the Italian Socialist Party, often attracted more Italian strikers.

Salvatore Ninfo, of the Italian Socialist Party, was one of the major activists responsible for promoting the strike to Italian women workers. He addressed many of the large meetings and on November 25, for example, he spoke at 48 meetings, 32 of which were Italian.[43] It seems in some cases that the Italian committee was quite successful. In the New York Waist Company twenty Italians were working as strikebreakers, but the

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[42] Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 156-57.

[43] *New York Call*, 26 November 1909, 2.

committee was able to convince fifteen of them to strike.[44] A more gratifying victory was achieved over the National Waist Company which had boasted that their Italian employees would never go on strike, but "were given a surprise when they all walked out."[45] This event more or less coincided with the fact that Italians were provided with a central meeting place which relieved some of the chaos which characterized the Italian strike effort.

By December 1909 a headquarters for the Italian strikers had been opened at the Manhattan Lyceum where meetings were held daily with a number of notable Italians, including Miss Briganti and members of the Italian Socialist Party, giving speeches.[46] Antonio Cravello and Publio Mazzella, both of the Socialist Party, also took on the task of visiting Italians and persuading them not to act as strikebreakers.[47] At the mass meeting at the Hippodrome on December 5, Publio Mazzella was the only Italian speaker. He noted that it was the first time that an Italian had been asked to address a meeting of that nature, and reminded the audience that Italians needed assistance in organizing:

> Some months ago while in Italy, Samuel Gompers promised the leaders of the labor movement in Italy that the American Federation of Labor would give its moral and material assistance in organizing the Italian workers in this country. Now, I would like to ask whether that promise was given sincerely, and if so when the work of organization will begin. The Italian workers are awaiting the fulfillment of Gompers' promise.
> Let us organize an Italian United Trades like the United Hebrew Trades, not like the Civil Federation, so that we may be respected as intelligent workers.[48]

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[44] *New York Call*, 8 December 1909, 3.

[45] *New York Call*, 26 November 1909, 2.

[46] *New York Call*, 2 December 1909, 3.

[47] *New York Call*, 2 December 1909, 3.

[48] *New York Call*, 6 December 1909, 2.

Mazzella's request was not granted in the years following the strike but highlighted a significant deficiency in the work of the unions. Italians were always organized by small branches of larger trade union organizations like the AFL, IWW, and WTUL, but never possessed an organization devoted solely to their own labor interests and concerns. Partly in response to the concerns which Mazzella raised, a group of Italian professors, settlement workers, and other professionals held a conference at the WTUL headquarters to discuss launching a movement to organize Italian workers into unions.[49]

Notwithstanding the lack of organizers and organizations to unionize Italian women, numerous other obstacles existed, the chief problem being, of course, language. As Rose Schneiderman of the WTUL later reflected: "[there was] a serious problem in the strike-breakers' inability to unders and our message of trade unionism. I mean literally to understand because language was a great problem to organizers ..."[50] The WTUL struggled to recruit Italian speakers for meetings, often without success, and typical was scenes such as the following:

> "Say you send a speaker quick--right now. The girls are there and they don't wanta wait."
> "Say, they're all leavin' We can't keep 'em. Hurry up a speaker in Italian ..."
> "Can't get an Italian to-day. Hardest thing to find," said Miss Marot [of the WTUL].[51]

The *New York Call* often entreated Italian speakers to volunteer their services for meetings.[52]

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[49] *New York Call*, 19 January 1910, 1.

[50] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 91.

[51] Sarah Comstock, "The Uprising of the Girls," *Collier's*, 25 December 1909, 15.

[52] *New York Call*, 1 December 1909, 2.

Aside from the difficulties in organizing and finding speakers and procuring funds to pay strike benefits, attempts to unionize Italian women met with opposition from the Church and often family. One sixteen-year-old Italian striker told women at the Colony Club that her employer "got the priest to come around and tell the Italian girls that if we went out on strike with the Jewish girls we would all go to hell--excuse the language."[53] Max Goldberg, the proprieter of a Brooklyn shop, was another employer who called in a priest to speak to the Italian women in his shop. The priest blamed the Jewish women for causing all the problems in the shop and exhorted the Italian women to ignore the strike.[54] This tactic of using religious authority figures to keep the Italians at work was a common one. Other Italian women were forbidden by their parents or brothers to strike. Italian women who did act as strikebreakers were often escorted to work by their fathers or brothers to prevent them from being convinced by organizers and strikers to join the effort. With escorts, these women were also protected from injury due to harmful or violent incidents between strikers and strikebreakers on the picket lines. Devout Catholic daughters would be quite reluctant to openly disobey the requests of their priests and demands of their families. Thus, the Italian women who did go on strike risked slightly greater opposition than Jewish women seemed to.

More energy was devoted to organizing Jewish women during the strike because

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[53] *New York World*, 16 December 1909, 20. See also *New York Tribune*, 16 December 1909, 8; and a speech delivered by Rose Schneiderman at a WTUL banquet, 20 May 1910, Margaret Dreier Robins Papers in WTUL Papers (reel 8, frame 366).

[54] *New York Call*, 8 December 1909, 3.

there were less obstacles to their unionization. The WTUL found it easier to recruit Jewish speakers, especially since one of the New York WTUL executive members, Rose Schneiderman, was Jewish. One of the most active attorneys defending the strikers in night court was also a Jewish woman, Fannie Horowitz. More importantly, Jewish leaders could be found among the strikers, women who identified with the cause, worked in the industry, and spoke the language. Clara Lemlich was a focal point in the press coverage that generally devoted its space to the work of the upper and middle class women. Clara Lemlich was a Ukrainian immigrant who spent her free time studying English and Russian, reading history and literature, and taking night classes--including courses in labor theory at the Rand School. All this was accomplished while she worked long hours in the garment industry to save for medical school. Although Lemlich was quite well-paid, she encouraged and led her lesser paid coworkers to strike. She was arrested seventeen times and suffered numerous injuries, including six broken ribs.[55] Referred to by the *New York World* as the "Joan of Arc" of the strike, Lemlich was a natural leader because she was proficient in English, eloquent, passionate, and educated in labor theory.

Jewish strikers have frequently been credited by the media, organizers and employers with sustaining the strike effort. One employer, Joe Roth, maintained that the Jewish workers were the only ones causing trouble in his shop and praised the Italians and "Americans" and gave them chewing gum and chocolate.[56] Another blamed the anarchists and socialists for riling up the Jewish women and asserted that the "American, Irish, Italian,

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[55] For more information on Clara Lemlich, see Paula Scheier, "Clara Lemlich Shavelson."

[56] *New York Call*, 7 December 1909, 2.

and other nationalities are not concerned ..."[57] Thus, it was certainly the perception of employers that Jewish women were active strikers, while Italian women were not.

In sheer numbers, Jewish strikers formed a massive presence on the picket lines, and the newspapers, especially the *New York Call*, are filled with the names and stories of Jewish strikers and the hardships they faced. While Clara Lemlich was certainly the most famous of the strikers, many others made tremendous sacrifices, particularly in terms of personal safety due to the continual attacks on their persons. Some strikers were actually sent to the workhouse on Blackwell's Island by magistrates who argued that if they were fined, one of the rich women would only pay it.[58] When sixteen-year-old Rosa Perr was sentenced to thirty days in prison, Mary Dreier and Rose Schneiderman pleaded with the magistrate to reconsider:

> We asked if he realized what it would mean to a girl her age to be locked up with prostitutes, thieves, and narcotics addicts. "Oh," he said, "it will be good for her. It will be a vacation."[59]

Bertha Elkins was imprisoned in the workhouse for five days, necessitating the postponement of her wedding which made for good publicity for the strike.

Some of the Jewish strikers were extremely outspoken about the wrongs done upon them and attempted to fight back, others became quite discouraged. Yetta Ruth, for example, was charged by police for leading out other workers at Beckman and Hayes shirtwaist shop. She publicly denounced the officers who detained her for their comments

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[57] *New York World*, 24 December 1909, 7.

[58] Clark and Wyatt, "Working-Girls Budgets: The Shirtwaist Makers and Their Strike," 81.

[59] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 93-94.

and, her "face flaming red," spoke to reporters at the *Call*:

> "The policemen asked me with how many men I was living. One officer told me that I was a dirty Socialist and anarchism (sic). One man said 'here is a nice fellow, Yetta, hook onto him.' One policeman showed me a torn pair of pants and asked me to mend them." The little girl stopped abruptly and her voice failed her. She was urged again to continue and after some hesitation said: "One man went to some place and winking to me, said: 'Come along Yetta.'"[60]

Several Jewish strikers were so depressed over the strike that they even attempted suicide, such as Gussie Perk who stuck her head in a gas oven.[61] When she was rescued by her cousin's husband, Perk launched into a "bitter arraignment of industrial conditions," wailing "Let me die ... what's the use of living and being a slave" before lapsing into unconsciousness.[62] Another striker, Sadie Cohen, was found dead in a gas-filled room after going through "a period of dejection" regarding the strike.[63] These cases brought some publicity to the cause of the strikers.

Contradictory statements appear in the press regarding the number of Italian women actually sympathetic to the strike. On November 24, Elizabeth Dutcher of the WTUL told the *New York Call* that "As the strikebreakers are all Italians, and the strikers Jewesses, there is a danger of racial feeling which we feel the masters are constantly inciting."[64] The next day, however, Salvatore Ninfo announced that:

There is a thousand of my people out and they are standing solidly with their fellow

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[60] *New York Call*, 4 December 1909, 2.

[61] *New York Tribune*, 2 December 1909, 5.

[62] *New York Times*, 2 December 1909, 3.

[63] *New York Times*, 7 December 1909, 2.

[64] *New York Call*, 24 November 1909, 2.

> workers determined to win before they return to work. There is no race prejudice among us as some of the papers try to make out. We are all united for a common purpose. The Italian strikers are among the most active in doing picket duty and assisting in the work of carrying out the strike. There is no chance of them breaking away from the union and returning to work.[65]

By the next day, the Call reported that four hundred Italians had settled with their shops and returned to work.[66] On December 1, however, the *New York Times* reported that 1,000 more workers had gone on strike, "principally Italian girls." Most estimates placed the total number of Italian strikers at around three thousand.[67] The *New York Tribune*, which barely discussed the strike at all, reported that the Italian strikers had asserted that they would "keep up the strike until it was won."[68]

References to Italian strikers are few in newspapers and magazine articles, but they were often just as active as Jewish strikers. Sarah Comstock, who paid a visit to the strike headquarters at Clinton Hall, reported that "two excited young Italians" appealed for assistance after the shop where they had been picketing sent out "toughs" to frighten them away and they were consequently too intimidated to approach the shop.[69] Many other Italian women were more aggressive in their demands, shattering the illusions of contemporaries that they were passive and cowed by their male relatives. A highly publicized incident involved a "lively fight" between a strikebreaker, Celia Copeloff, and two Italian strikers,

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[65] *New York Call*, 25 November 1909, 2.

[66] *New York Call*, 26 November 1909, 2.

[67] William Mailly, "The Working Girls' Strike," *Independent*, 23 December 1909, 1419.

[68] *New York Tribune*, 13 December 1909, 3.

[69] Comstock, "The Uprising of the Girls," 15.

Raffaela Evangelista and Giuseppi Zazo.[70] Copeloff asserted that the strikers had held her and "the Evangelist woman had stabbed her in the forehead with a pair of scissors."[71] As the police took away the two accused, other strikers attacked police, stabbing Sergeant Deye with a hatpin. It seems that the dispute had a positive conclusion because Copeloff later joined the strikers and was arrested for picketing.[72] Some Italian women exhausted more non-violent options in order to publicize their cause. One Italian striker was a speaker at the meeting held at the Colony Club, and appealed to her audience by describing her conditions of work and how she earned four cents a dozen for finishing waists.[73] Two sisters, Angelica and Grace Serra appealed to Mayor Gaynor to act as an arbitrator, between strikers and employers, after they had been on strike for nine weeks and were arrested for picketing. Grace was fined ten dollars, but Angelica, who was only fifteen, was sent to the work house on Blackwell's Island for five days. The Mayor conceded that the punishment seemed somewhat extreme and promised to look into the charge that magistrates were too severe in their treatment of strikers.[74]

Despite the activism of Italian women strikers, they still received less attention from the media than did Jewish women. The press generally only reported on the women who were assaulted, arrested, or otherwise mistreated, so perhaps Italian women were active on

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[70] Apparently the two strikers were mother and daughter. See the *New York Call*, 25 December 1909, 2.

[71] *New York Times*, 24 December 1909, 3.

[72] *New York Call*, 3 February 1910, 2.

[73] *New York Times*, 16 December 1909, 3.

[74] *New York Times*, 18 January 1910, 1.

the picket lines but less likely to invite arrest by speaking to strikebreakers. Italian strikers may have felt uncomfortable with confronting Italian strikebreakers, and were unable to speak to Jewish strikebreakers due to the language barrier. It is also probable that Italian strikers were protected on the picket lines by male relatives or friends much like Italian strikebreakers were. This theory is given credence by the fact that the press mentions more Italian men than women being arrested by police. Alex Guertis, for example, was arrested while handing out circulars of the Italian bureau to Italian strikebreakers.[75] Two other Italian men, Tony Clacchia and Mario Arcario, were fined for disorderly conduct although they were not actually strikers but sympathized with the pickets.[76] The contributions of Italian strikers, then, are largely unknown beyond the fact that large numbers did go on strike

Some mention needs to be made of those Italians who did cross the picket lines. The major motivating factor was economic necessity, although it can also be argued that there were not enough Italian organizers to promote the strike and convince Italians to join. Arthur Caroti, the ILGWU organizer, attempted to persuade Italian women to strike by educating them and their families on unionism. He quickly realized that this method was ineffective and began to pay the women strike relief to keep them from strikebreaking. As soon as Caroti convinced one women to strike, another would quickly take her place. The fathers, however, not the women themselves were the most formidable obstacles. The women sometimes earned more than did their fathers or at least their wages were necessary

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[75] *New York Call*, 4 December 1909, 2.

[76] *New York Call*, 30 November 1909, 1.

to sustain the household, thus fathers demanded that they receive full wages as strike benefits.[77] Caroti was able to pay only five dollars a week to married women and three dollars and fifty cents to single women living at home. As Caroti ran short of funds, he endured a great deal of harassment as "the male relatives of the 'scabs' descended upon the Women's Trade Union League headquarters and demanded the wages of their women ... demanding that he make payment or meet the consequences." He was also threatened anonymously by graffiti on the WTUL headquarters saying "Pay, Caroti, or you die!" Caroti had no fears about these threats, stating:

> Afraid? I know them. When they came to my office I pointed to the wall: "Look what some fool writes." Bah. Like a child threatening the passer-by with his toy pistol, the grumbling relatives went home.[78]

The fact that these women would go on strike if paid benefits strongly suggests that financial constraints, not opposition to or ignorance of trade unionism, induced Italian women to "scab." Despite this example, there were many more Italian strikers who did remain firmly committed to the strike.

It is difficult to ascertain the state of relations between Jewish strikers and Italian strikebreakers on a personal level. The newspapers did not explicitly identify the ethnicity

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[77] In Louise Odencrantz' study, *Italian Women in Industry*, she found that while many fathers reported their weekly wages to be quite high, they had so many slack periods during which there was no work that their average wages were considerably lower. For example, one man said that he earned $24 a week. When Odencrantz investigated further, however, she found that he had only actually earned that amount for four weeks of the entire year, while for 44 weeks, he had earned nothing. Another man claimed his weekly wage as $16.50, but he earned that amount for only 13 weeks, while for much of the time his wages hovered around $4.00. Pages 172-173.

[78] Spadoni, "The Italian Working Women," 14.

of strikebreakers involved in disputes with strikers, though the names were always given. The *Call* named far more Jewish strikebreakers than Italian and only rarely mentioned Italian "scabs." A few incidences of violence between Italian strikebreakers and Jewish strikers were described. Anna Raffino, for example, charged that striker Max Joseph attempted to "slug" her.[79] On January 3, 1910 Maria Deltara was assaulted by two Jewish strikers, Esther Monto and Annie Cohen, who were sent to the work house as a result. On the same day, Mary Les, an Italian strikebreaker, hit Bella Putterman on the head with her pocketbook causing a large wound. Putterman and fellow pickets Fannie Cooper and Beckie Schwartz yelled to a policeman for assistance, but were dragged away and fined in court for calling Les a "scab."[80] On January 18, Mary Bruno was also called a "scab" by two Jewish strikers who were then arrested.[81]

Often employers paid strikebreakers to testify against strikers, as was likely the case where Sadie Schneewiss was accused of assaulting three Italian strikebreakers, all of whom were larger than her. The Italian women testified that Sadie told them she would break their faces if they went back to work.[82] Part of the reason why these incidents rarely occurred was that Italian women always had a male escort accompanying them, such as more than one Italian woman discussed in the *Call*.[83] Moreover, the language barrier generally prevented

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[79] *New York Call*, 11 December 1909, 2.

[80] *New York Call*, 4 January 1910, 2.

[81] *New York Evening Post*, 19 January 1910, 3.

[82] *New York Evening Post*, 21 December 1909, 2.

[83] *New York Call*, 25 December 1909, 2.

Jewish strikers from speaking to Italian strikebreakers about the need to strike, thus avoiding potential clashes between the two groups. The animosity between Jewish strikers and Italian strikebreakers, then, while almost certainly present, did not manifest itself in cases of assault, either verbal or physical.

Disputes between Jewish strikers and strikebreakers appeared to be far more common owing to the fact that they could communicate with one another. The nature of most contacts on the picket lines were of strikers approaching strikebreakers to ask them to join the union and immediately being arrested by police for "disorderly conduct." Sometimes violence did erupt, such as when Ida Bolinsky allegedly punched a strikebreaker and knocked out two of her false teeth, which had to be removed by a stomach pump in order to be used for evidence.[84] Margaret Moskowitz, a strikebreaker, was kicked in the breast and stomach by strikers, including Sadie Friedman, and was said to be in a precarious condition.[85] One striker, Ada Hoffman, had ended her relationship with her "sweetheart" Herman Goldstein because he refused to strike. When she saw him emerge from the factory on December 1, she slapped him a half dozen times across the face and called him a "scab."[86] Jewish strikers, then, were not reluctant to confront Jewish coworkers who crossed the picket lines. The details of these relations were more prevalent in the newspapers than were instances of conflict between Jewish strikers and Italian strikebreakers, or Italian strikers and strikebreakers. Judging from the many newspaper articles naming Jewish strikebreakers, one

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[84] *New York World*, 11 January 1910, 3.

[85] *New York Times*, 25 December 1909, 2.

[86] *New York Times*, 2 December 1909, 3.

could easily come to the conclusion that there were indeed substantial numbers of Jewish "scabs." One must consider, however, that there were many more Jewish women in the industry so there was a correspondingly high number of Jewish strikebreakers, but still a smaller percentage than Italian strikebreakers.

Support from members of the Italian community was scattered, if the strike coverage in Italian newspapers is representative of the views of the Italian population. Italian strikers passed a resolution condemning all Italian newspapers, except the *Glornale Italiano*, for favoring the strikebreakers in their coverage of the strike and for printing advertisements for scabs.[87] *L'Araldo Italiano* and *Il Bolletino Della Sera* did provide some additional coverage of the strike, but the articles were brief and non-controversial.[88] *Il Bolletino Della Sera* allowed Giacchino Fiorello, who would later become the Italian editor of the *Ladies' Garment Worker*, to print official strike bulletins.[89] *L'Araldo Italiano* published daily accounts of the events of the strike, the arrests, the trials of strikers, and which shops had settled, but ignored the contributions of Italian strikers and organizers.[90] The largest newspaper, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano,* basically had no coverage of the strike, printing only two articles in December.[91]

Despite the activism of the Jewish strikers, they were not really assisted in their

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[87] *New York Call*, 6 December 1909, 2.

[88] Furia, "Immigrant Women in Industry," 128.

[89] Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions," 493.

[90] *Ibid.*, 492.

[91] *Ibid.*

efforts by the larger Jewish community. Jewish labor interests, such as the United Hebrew Trades Association (UHT), did aid the strikers. On January 12, for example, the UHT raised $60,000 for the cause by having each of its members pledge a half day's wages. The UHT was also heavily involved in the negotiations with the employers and the Manufacturer's Association for a settlement of the strike.

A 1908 article in *Charities and the Commons* explains in part why only Jewish laborers donated money to the cause while other citizens were apathetic. The article highlighted the plight of the United Hebrew Charities which, at that time, closed down for a while during the winter and was unable to assist many Jewish people in need due to unemployment. In a campaign to raise a hundred thousand dollars, letters were sent out to thousands of prominent Jewish citizens, but only 257 responded with donations totalling 78,000 dollars.[92] The author of the article found it striking that out of approximately one million Jews in New York, so few supported the United Hebrew Charities financially. He hypothesized that Jews who had immigrated to the United States many years ago contributed to distinctly Jewish organizations. Their children, however, often lacked the knowledge of Jewish traditions and did not follow the religion, thus they identified with and contributed to non-denominational associations. New immigrants, such as the strikers themselves, had little to give to others as they could barely support themselves. The trend in giving to others among members of the Jewish community, then, was seldom based on shared religious and cultural values, as those with wealth were losing touch with their backgrounds. This theory

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[92] "The Jew and the Jewish Poor," *Charities and the Commons*, 14 November 1908, 270.

certainly explains, in part, the apathy of members of the Jewish community, but more importantly, that the wealthy identified more with Jewish employers than they did with Jewish strikers.

A few Jewish religious leaders recognized the need for the Jewish community to support their co-religionists in the strike. Rabbi Samuel Schulman criticized the members of his Temple Beth-El for their indifference:

> The attitude of the household of Israel in this strike ... is a disgrace to the synagogue. It is the prominent women of Christian society that are bringing sympathy, counsel and help to the striking girls. I regret it is my duty to proclaim aloud of the synagogue and its shame in failure to bring peace between the Jewish employer and the Jewish employe *(sic)*.[93]

Rabbi Schulman emphasizes a significant point about the Jewish role in the strike. Since many of the employers were Jewish also, the Jewish community had trouble choosing sides in the struggle and opted to remain aloof from the issue. Dr. Stephen Wise from the Free Synagogue, risking the loss of members of the congregation, publicly championed the cause of the shirtwaist strikers and condemned the employers for refusing to arbitrate the strike.[94] The Council [of] Jewish Women at the Free Synagogue also discussed the strike with WTUL representatives.[95] In a meeting similar to but less publicized than the gathering at the Colony Club, Mary Dreier, Leonora O'Reilly, and Rose Schneiderman presented the case of the strikers to the Council of Jewish Women and received their sympathies.[96]

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[93] *New York Evening Journal*, 10 January 1910, 5.

[94] *New York Times*, 13 December 1909, 16. The next day the *Times* printed a response from the Manufacturer's Association.

[95] *New York World*, 22 December 1909, 4.

[96] *New York Call*, 22 December 1909, 2.

It is interesting to note that among the upper and middle class women who volunteered their time and money during the strike, only a few were Jewish, thus provoking criticism from the WTUL. According to a report by Eva McDonald Valesh of the AFL and WTUL, the Jewish community was not supportive enough:

> ... although 75 percent of the striking girls were of the Jewish race ... a very small amount of the relief fund was contributed by wealthy Jewish citizens of New York. They seemed to stand aloof and have little sympathy while women like Anne Morgan and Elizabeth Marbury and Mrs. O.H.P. Belmont were bending every effort to collect money from their friends after they had given large sums personally to assist the cause.[97]

This report, then, underscores the perceptions that the WTUL had about the Jewish community's apathy during the strike, which is especially significant if the contributions of the synagogues were to be contrasted to the sympathy shown by church members who had no religious ties to the strikers. The Manhattan Congregationalist Church, for example, asked Rose Schneiderman to speak about the strike and took up a collection for the strikers during the holiday season.

The Jewish press, like the Italian press, was split on the issue of the strike. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company had established a branch plant in Yonkers in order to break the strike against the main factory in Manhattan and employed twelve strikebreakers from Manhattan and twelve from Yonkers. After a meeting held by the Yonkers Central Labor body on December 3, however, it was explained to these workers that they were employed as strikebreakers and they consequently walked out. The *Yiddish Morgen Journal* ran advertisements for the Triangle appealing for workers for this branch plant by stressing that

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[97] Special Correspondence by Eva McDonald Valesh, Papers of the WTUL: [illegible] Schneiderman Papers (reel 2, frames 22-25).

the rents were cheaper in Yonkers.[98]

The *Jewish Daily Forward*, though, was quite supportive of the strike effort. The *Forward* organized a benefit for the strikers at Thalia Theatre on November 8. The performance was a four act play entitled "East Side Ghetto," and Abe Cahan and B. Feigenbaum, editors of the *Forward*, spoke between the acts.[99] The benefit was such a success that hundreds of people were lined up when the box office opened and hundreds more had to be turned away.[100] The writers at the *Forward* also printed articles supporting the strikers and condemning the shirtwaist manufacturers. The *Forward* had at least one dispute with the Triangle Company in the form of a $150,000 lawsuit against the newspaper for damages resulting specifically from six articles promoting the benefit in which the company was "bitterly denounced." The *New York Call* printed an example of how the Triangle Company mistranslated one of the articles:

> The translation is so crude that in many instances it is hard to get at the meaning of the allegations, and the well-written original accounts of the strike are rendered gruesome and unconnected ... "The murders that happen from the strike of the Triangle Waist Company is hard to be described."
> The original has it that "the cruelties inflicted by the Triangle Waist Company on the strikers taxes the imagination."[101]

It stands to reason that because the owners of the Triangle were Jewish, they were particularly offended by attacks by a Jewish newspaper. No further information was given

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[98] *New York Call*, 4 December 1909, 2. The *New York Times* reported on 10 December 1909 on page 13 that this bid to acquire strikebreakers had been unsuccessful and that the Triangle had been forced to close down the Yonkers branch factory.

[99] *New York Call*, 8 November 1909, 1.

[100] *New York Call*, 10 November 1909, 1.

[101] *New York Call*, 19 November 1909, 3.

regarding the outcome of this lawsuit, however. Thus, the Jewish and Italian press was, in general, disapproving of the strike with the exception of socialist newspapers.

In examining the contributions of Jewish and Italian women during the strike, many writers have argued that Jewish women were much more class conscious than Italian women. It appears in the case of the shirtwaist makers' strike that Jewish women were better known in the strike because they garnered more attention from the English language press. First, the WTUL began to organize the Jewish shirtwaist makers' in 1908 using Rose Schneiderman, a working-class Jewish woman who could communicate with the workers. Although the WTUL attempted to organize Italian women beginning in 1907, the executive did not really procure an Italian organizer until around the time the strike commenced. This difference, in part, explains why Italian women were slower to respond to the strike call. As well, Jewish women had a number of leaders within the factories who were able to speak English, understand the aims of the strike and the union, and thus transmit this information to their Jewish sisters and lead them in the strike. Italian women, being more recent immigrants, were less likely to speak English and thus had less exposure to the union's ideas. Italian women's inability to understand the WTUL organizers also inhibited the emergence of an Italian woman leader. Despite these factors, several thousand Italian women did eventually strike under the direction of Arthur Caroti and Salvatore Ninfo, who were able to understand the special needs of Italian women, something which WTUL leaders were never able to grasp. Italian women who went out on strike could be just as militant as Jewish women, and many were involved in altercations with strikebreakers. Furthermore, those Italian women who did work as strikebreakers seemed to have been motivated by economic

necessity rather than apathy regarding unionism. Both Jewish and Italian women did not seem to draw a great deal of support from their respective communities, or from the press, which partly discounts the theory that Jewish women were inherently more conscious of the need for unions.

Although organizers saw Jewish and Italian women as quite different, both groups did require special consideration from organizers due to language barriers and had similar experiences during the strike. The idea that Jewish women were avid unionists w[illegible] women were indifferent to the cause was solely a creation of the press and [illegible] writers on the strike who ascribed certain cultural traits to each group, and failed to realize that Jewish and Italian women actually had quite comparable experiences.

Chapter IV: *Italian Women in Unions, 1910-1914*

At the conclusion of the Shirtwaist Makers' strike it was realized that more attention needed to be devoted to the question of dealing with Italian women in the garment trades. While the AFL seemed relatively content with the level of commitment that Italians gave to the labor movement, the WTUL and Arthur Caroti continued to approach Italian women through social events, classes, and home visits during the four years following the strike. As a result of having Italian organizers to overcome the language barrier, Italian women became increasingly active in the unions. Many of the garment strikes between 1910 and 1913 reinforced the idea that Italian women were not apathetic in comparison to their Jewish coworkers, but merely required an approach that met their needs from organizers.

After the strike the AFL favored the view that Italians did have an interest in trade unionism, despite what many believed. An article in the *Federationist* pointed out that the perceived problem with Italian unionists was that they functioned entirely in the Italian language. Italian workers, then, were less "Americanized" than other immigrants and were seen as less likely to identify a common cause with other workers. The Shirtwaist Makers' strike and Cloakmakers' strike served as evidence of how Italians were less Americanized because they had their own locals, delegates, and headquarters. Many other workers believed that Italians lacked an interest in trade unionism because they did function separately from other strikers. The author, J.W. Sullivan, suggested that other wage-earners needed to recognize the fact that Italians did not lack a commitment to trade unionism. The common perception that Italian workers came to the United States to save money in order to return to Italy to live in luxury was not substantiated by the fact that hundreds of