

SOCIALIST TRADITIONS OF JEWISH LABOR

By Morris U. Schappes

WHO suggested the changes is not known. It may have been the members of the Constitutional Committee or it may have been the delegates, all ten of them, who had on October 9, 1888, founded the United Hebrew Trades of New York and Vicinity—total union membership, less than 100. But a constitution was important and every word had to be examined. For a model the committee had brought in the constitution of the New York Central Labor Union. This was the mainstream of the New York labor movement, a powerful organization of some 50,000 members. There were white and Negro American-born as well as foreign-born workers among its affiliates—Irish, German, Bohemian, Jewish, Scandinavian and so on. Its leadership, like the American-born Peter J. McGuire, was socialist, its principles radical. Surely its constitution would be just the kind needed by the United Hebrew Trades, organized on the direct initiative of a handful of Jewish members of the Socialist Labor Party on the New York East Side.

So the delegates gathered at the Labor Lyceum at 25 East 4th Street—delegates from the Yiddish typographical union, the actors' union, and the union of choristers who sang in the Yiddish theater, from the two Jewish branches of the Socialist Labor Party (No. 8 was Yiddish-speaking and No. 17 was Russian-speaking), and from the United German Trades. The last-named had had the practical sense and socialist comradeship not only to lend their organizational support to the Jewish workers, but to bring a contribution of ten dollars that now constituted the entire treasury of the United Hebrew Trades.

Anti-Capitalist Constitution

The Central Labor Union constitution was on the whole good enough, but the Jewish workers found some fuzziness of expression in it that they preferred to change. After all, the members of Branch 8 of the Socialist Labor Party had spent many a meeting during the summer just past reading and discussing Abba Braslavsky's new Yiddish translation of Karl Marx's classic pamphlet, *Wage-Labor and Capital*. They knew the value of precision. Therefore when the C. L. U. model spoke of "prevailing system," the Jewish socialists changed it to "capitalist system." The Preamble of the C. L. U. began well enough with the need for "unity . . . to combat . . . organized and consolidated Capital," but then the phrasing sort of got diffused, so the Jews thought, into the value of "one Brotherhood for the defense and protection of the laboring masses." So the delegates revised the wording to read that the affiliates of the organization would "resist oppression and support each other in the

struggle against capitalist exploitation." Was not the process of capitalist exploitation exactly what Marx had described in his pamphlet?

Thus they went through the Central Labor Union constitution line by line, striking out a word here, changing a phrase there, rewriting a clause elsewhere. In each case they made the meaning clearer, showing the operation of the class struggle more accurately, projecting their socialist ideals more fully. Some sentences they agreed with completely, like this one: "The emancipation of the working classes must be achieved by the working classes themselves, as no other class has any interest in improving their condition." The delegates also knew that in working class hands "rests the future of our free institutions, and it is in their destiny to replace the present iniquitous social system by"—by what? The C. L. U. said, "by one based upon equity, morality, and the nobility of all useful labor." But the United Hebrew Trades decided that capitalism should be replaced "by a new order founded on justice, freedom, and the solidarity of all the workers of the world."

Then the "immediate demands" too had to be examined to see how they fitted the needs of the Jewish workers. The eight-hour day? Why of course, that applied to everybody, Jew and non-Jew. But how about "discontinuance of the contract system on public works," when the Jewish workers were not so much on public works as in sweatshops. Therefore that demand was revised to read, "the abolition of the contract and sweating-system." Another C. L. U. plank, having to do with currency reforms, was stricken out altogether as having nothing to do with a working class movement with socialist ideals.

Finally, the document was finished. This is not the place to analyze the changes in detail, nor to set forth at length the way in which many Lassalleian formulations were changed to Marxian ones (while other Lassalleianisms were overlooked). The important thing is that now the United Hebrew Trades had a program which was in a broad sense and to the best theoretical understanding of the delegates socialist. Now they were ready to go out and organize Jewish workers into trade unions, into "struggle against capitalist exploitation," into the fight for socialism. That was the evening of October 16, 1888.

Growth and Struggle

Four months later the United Hebrew Trades had grown to 11 unions with 1200 members; a year after that, in March 1890, there were 22 unions with 6,000 members. The cloak-makers were being organized. It was in December 1889 that

the organizers of the United Hebrew Trades set to work building Operators' and Cloak Makers' Union No. 1, on the request of some workers in the big A. Friedlander & Co. shop. Beginning late in January 1890, a series of successful strikes won recognition for the union, and sent the membership figures zooming to 3,300 by the end of April. No wonder! For in his Official Report for that year, the New York State Commissioner of Labor was to remark, "There is not a worse paid set of artisans than the cloakmakers. Distress is chronic, and no one enters upon cloakmaking unless constrained by dire necessity."

Then came May Day, 1890, and the cloakmakers marched with the Socialists. Thirty years later one of the marchers remembered that 7,000 cloakmakers marched that May Day—and even if there were a thousand or two less than that, it was still enough to alarm the bosses of these cloakmakers. The bosses decided to break the union by locking out their workers. On May 19, 1890, the lockout began in two big companies and by June 14th the ten biggest employers in the field had locked out 4,000 workers. It was Meyer Jonasson & Co., A. Friedlander & Co., Farkin & Co., Friedman Bros., Blumenthal Bros., Louis Graner, Julius Stein, Oppenheim Collins & Co., Goldsmith and Platt, and Rothschild Bros.—Jewish capital—against 4,000 Jewish workers.

The lockout was turned into a strike. What the state labor commissioner half-wittily called "the policeman's rough and ready argument" was swung against the heads and backs of strikers, but they held their ranks. Even a couple of capitalist newspapers raised some money for the hungry strikers, and one Jewish congregation fed dinners at a nickel each to strikers showing union cards. After eight weeks, at least the leaders of the strike had reached an agreement with the manufacturers' association, but the workers balked at two crucial elements of that agreement: there was no provision for the closed shop, and the bosses were to be allowed to retain the scabs they had hired. On July 16, a mass meeting of cloakmakers at New Everett Hall, 31 East 4th Street, repudiated the agreement by the vote of 1536 to 20! The "friendly" capitalist newspapers promptly stopped raising funds for the strikers, and denounced them instead as—socialists and anarchists. But a week later, the bosses were ready to sign a better agreement, which included the firing of all scabs, and the recognition of the closed shop. Gathering in the same hall, the workers sing the *Marseillaise* and wave red flags.

Strike Lessons

The full meaning of the strike was set forth in a brilliant editorial in the Yiddish weekly, *Die Arbeiter Zeitung*, on August 1, 1890. This was the official organ of the United Hebrew Trades and the Socialist Labor Party, and had encouraged and guided the strikers during the entire bitter struggle. Now came the editorial, "The Great Victory and What It Teaches Us." The first lesson was that it was not the soon exhausted support of capitalist newspapers, but "that powerful solidarity and class consciousness" that

would have no truck with scabs. The second lesson was that "the Jews of America have understood their position and have correctly gauged their duty in their new homeland. They do not consider themselves God's chosen people; they come forward as workers, as members and allies of the American working class. Therein lies the solution of the entire Jewish question in America." Are there anti-Semitic forces in this country? Yes, indeed, but: "This struggle of the cloakmakers will shut the mouths of more anti-Semites, and accomplish more toward enhancing the name of 'Jew,' than all the charities of philanthropic bankers, and all the fawning of Jewish patriots who sing of the piety, orderliness and subservience of the Jewish people."

Then there was a third and a fourth lesson. The third was to "unite with your brothers in Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, and all other places where cloakmakers are to be found, and build a strong *National* Cloakmakers Union." The fourth dealt with the direction and goal of all struggle: "the ultimate *liberation* of the working class, and the complete *annihilation* of the domination of capital. Do not forget that just as you strive for *bread* you must also fight for *freedom*; that such spirit as you display in your *unions* you must also show in the ranks of the *workers' political party*. Go forward, hand in hand with your progressive brothers and help to smash the rule of the money-bags! Remember the immortal words of our teacher, Karl Marx, that 'the economic liberation of the working class is not possible without its political liberation.'" Thus the future was made visible in every present struggle.¹

International Solidarity

While the militant and socialist-minded Jewish workers were steadily becoming a more and more active detachment in the general American labor movement, they also strengthened their ties of international solidarity. It was not only that the United Hebrew Trades sent delegates to the congresses of the Socialist (Second) International. More continual in its impact was the fact that most of these workers were recent immigrants who still had personal ties and correspondencē with their families and fellow workers in the East European countries of origin. Then, also, the stream of immigration continued to pour in, bringing, as the underground trade union and labor movement in these countries developed, more and more workers with contact with these movements. When Jewish workers in the early 1890's staged strikes in Bialystok, Vilna, Warsaw and Minsk or took part in illegal May Day demonstrations, Jewish workers in the United States were quick to learn of these new signs of struggle against tsarism and capitalism.

Of special interest, of course, was the fact that in September 1897, at a convention in Vilna, there was organized the General League (Bund) of Jewish Workingmen in

¹ On the same page as this editorial there appeared a stirring poem by Morris Rosenfeld, "A Zieger-Lied" (A Victor's Song), "dedicated to all Jewish cloakmakers of New York."

Russia and Poland (Lithuania was added to the name in 1901), popularly known as the "Bund." Later that same year, the American Jewish socialists took the occasion not only to extend hearty fraternal greetings to their embattled brethren under tsarism, but also to give them certain lessons on the meaning of democracy under capitalist rule and to admonish them to fight primarily on class lines. The occasion was a national conference of Yiddish-speaking socialists that met in New York, beginning December 24, 1897. The resolution adopted on the second day of the conference declared that "wherever capitalism develops, class differentiations and class conflicts come to the fore and push into the background all racial differentiations and racial conflicts." On the one hand, it was pointed out, Jewish capitalists unite even with anti-Semitic capitalists in supporting tsarism, "a government which is the greatest persecutor of Jews in the entire world," simply because tsarism helps the Jewish capitalists oppress their workers, Jew and non-Jew alike. On the other hand, Jewish workers are uniting with non-Jewish workers in struggle for their daily bread and freedom from oppression.

Then the resolution turned to another problem, and reported on "the experiences which we have had in this free country. These experiences have proved to us that bourgeois equal rights for Jews under a republican form of government are not the main foundations for the freedom and happiness of the people. Here we have these rights and freedoms, and yet we still have to fight against the greatest of tyrants, capitalism." Then the American Jews went on

to advise their Russian brethren to take to heart the experiences of the American Jewish workers, and not to "waste any energies in a separate Jewish struggle for Jewish rights against oppression," since oppression of the Jews is just one branch of the whole tree of oppression. Instead, the Jewish workers under tsarism should "devote all their energy and attention to the root of all kinds of oppression, inequality, and injustice—the capitalist system of robbery. United with all the oppressed of all races, and in the name of all the advanced workers of America, we promise our brothers in Russia and in Poland to assist them in every way possible."

Not only was the resolution passed for consumption here, but the conference voted to print 10,000 copies, which were to be sent to the London and Zurich offices of the Russian social democratic organizations and the Polish Socialist Party for distribution among the Jewish workers of Russia and Poland. Thus the international exchange of working-class experiences was effected among Jewish workers.

This fragmentary silhouette of how, during one decade from 1888 to 1897, Jewish workers initiated the traditions of socialism among the Jewish people in the United States has of course depended upon certain typical highlights. If, in the later decades, some of the early socialist leaders deserted to the camp of opponents of socialism, and if the United Hebrew Trades, before it was 40 years old, was bragging of its militant fight *against* socialism, there were always those who, in the face of open and inner enemy, took up the relay and carried the flag forward.