BEFORE TRIANGLE:
THE UPRISING OF THE 20,000, 1909-1910

by Miriam Frank

November 22, 1909: The wind was whipping hard that night as an overflow crowd of working girls gathered for an assembly in the Great Hall of the Cooper Union. Throughout the neighborhood, the center of the shirtwaist industry, leaflets in English, Yiddish and Italian advertised speeches by prominent union leaders and socialists. The assembly would discuss whether to call an industry-wide work stoppage – a General Strike – against manufacturers of next spring’s fashions. During this busy season a workforce of 30,000 were toiling in factory lofts 7 days a week, 11 hours a day to take home pay envelopes of $6.00 a week – at best. There was no overtime pay, not even when the work extended till 9:00 pm, though the girls might receive apple pies, the size of a woman’s palm, for sustenance.
In the 1880s and 1890s, ready-to-wear clothing was produced in the family-owned shops of crowded tenement neighborhoods where immigrants had settled. Workers, often kin from the same village in Europe, produced small lots in dingy workplaces that were badly heated in winter and stifling in summer. Wages and conditions were terrible in those shops, but union organizers rarely intervened: owners exerted strict supervision over the family members they employed. The organizing surge that brought on the general strike of 1909 had no place here; the movement arose from a new sector of the garment trade, one that was flourishing economically and located uptown, near Washington Square – the shirtwaist industry.

Production for this avid market required a large workforce capable of assembling elegant products quickly. Entrepreneurs set up their shops in new loft buildings, where a factory could occupy an entire floor. During the busy season they could employ as many as two hundred machine operators to sew fancy white cotton blouses. The lofts had plenty of room. Large bundles of cotton material could be stored for each day’s production and there was still enough space to pack finished blouses for shipping. The fashions would go directly uptown to “Ladies Mile” (18th to 24th Street, between 6th Ave and Park Avenue South) the district of glamorous department stores that were the newest thing in retail commerce.

Factory lofts of the shirtwaist industry were set up for high-volume production. Shop girls were paid by the piece and had to endure tough supervision. But their thoughts were free.

The shirtwaist was the perfect fashion for the growing “white collar” female labor force employed in offices, schools, stores and at telephone exchanges. These modern ladies had no time to make their own clothes and wanted styles that would be convenient, smart-looking and business-like. They would purchase a few shirtwaists to wash and press at home during the week, to be worn with one dark wool or cotton skirt that didn’t need daily changes (black doesn’t show the dirt the way white cotton does).

Working women in offices, stores and telephone exchanges wanted to come to their jobs looking smart and fresh but had no time to sew for themselves. The ready-to-wear shirtwaist was fashionable, affordable and convenient.
Most workers who sewed those garments were teenaged girls. Their meager wages contributed to their family’s sustenance in immigrant neighborhoods where jobs were seasonal, poorly paid, and hard to come by even when times were good. The girls traveled uptown a mile or so from their homes on the Lower East Side to the factory lofts of Washington Square to operate sewing machines and produce, piece by piece, shirtwaist fashions. Some sewed the puffy sleeves, others made collars or cuffs, assembled bodices or stitched the tucks and darts that made shirtwaists such complicated and elegant must-haves for a city lady’s wardrobe. The difficulty of the operation and the number of pieces a worker sewed determined her wage rate. Some workers were as young as 9 or 10 years old; these children snipped threads from finished garments and were hustled away by supervisors to hide in shipping crates whenever a factory inspector came to call.

The factories were modern, but conditions were awful. A sign in the elevator at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company warned, “If you don’t come in Sunday, don’t come in Monday.” Workers who arrived to work five minutes late would be docked half a day’s pay. The company charged employees for needles and for the electricity that ran the machines. Bosses knew that Local 25 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union was attempting to organize the shirtwaist industry and so they set up their own in-house union to eliminate “outside interference.” To discourage conversation they made Yiddish speaking girls sit next to Italians. Sometimes language continued to be an obstacle, but many of the girls formed friendships anyway.

The shirtwaist workers did not all come from the same village. The Jewish girls who spoke different dialects of Yiddish and made up 55 percent of the workforce were mostly from Russia but might also come from Lithuania or Poland; Italians came from different southern regions, Calabria or Sicily, and made up another 35 percent; the rest were native-born Americans. Many of the Jewish girls who joined the ILGWU were supported by their families and neighbors, some of them socialists and trade unionists. But other families were fearful of losing a wage-earner to the strike. Union participation was less intense among Italian workers who had immigrated more recently and did not know the language of either their new country nor of the mostly Jewish strike leaders.
Only as the strike developed did the union begin to find organizers who could address the workforce in Italian as well as Yiddish or English.

The strike built up in waves, beginning in July 1909. A dispute over wages led to a 5-week walkout by 200 sewers at the Rosen Brothers shirtwaist company. The union and the company arrived at a settlement and workers and owners throughout the industry started to pay attention. In September, 150 sewers at the Triangle Company were discharged for having joined Local 25. They protested when scabs arrived to take the work and “sluggers” – thugs and prostitutes hired by owners – attacked them. Then 100 Jewish sewers at the Leiserson Company were laid off. When they found out that their work was being sent downtown to a cheaper shop they protested loudly and were roughed up badly. Italian co-workers still on the job saw what was going on and joined the walkout. The struck companies retaliated by sending orders over to the Diamond Waist Company, but when those employees found out that they were handling scab work, they too went on strike.

Picketers were arrested regularly. They would be hauled away in paddy wagons to the Jefferson Market Courthouse (at 6th Avenue and 10th Street) where they would be charged and fined (usually $3, the better part of a week’s wages). Sometimes they would be jailed at the police station. In early November, the ladies of the Women’s Trade Union League resolved to intervene. These were socially prominent feminist reformers. They joined the picket lines and their president, Mary Dreier, got arrested along with the immigrant activists. The strategy was excellent: now newspapers began to cover what until then had seemed like unimportant trouble between respectable businessmen and rowdy working-class teenage girls.

The mass walkout by thousands of young shirtwaist makers was at first regarded as a rowdy annoyance. But the strike spread and production halted. The Women's Trade Union League supported strikers with funds and media connections and when a few of their most prominent members were arrested along with the shop girls, New Yorkers began to pay attention.

By the time of the Cooper Union rally on November 22, thousands of workers had already walked off their jobs. That night the assembly debated for two hours the practical
problems of conducting a mass strike. Then Clara Lemlich rose to speak. She was a 19-year-old Leiserson striker who had taken a bad beating on the picket line that very week. In plain Yiddish she demanded a resolution for a general strike. The response was thunderous. The night ended with a mass march to Union Square; two weeks later, the Women’s Trade Union League led another march of 10,000 downtown to City Hall.

The strike’s first month was a cold one and tough for the women on the street. Of the 723 strikers arrested, 19 were sentenced to the women’s prison on Blackwell’s Island (today Roosevelt Island). Throughout the strike’s 13 weeks, the League promoted the union cause in the press and raised money for relief, bail, and legal fees. Pauline Newman and Rose Schneiderman, young worker-organizers from the Lower East Side, traveled to upstate New York and New England to spread the news among local labor councils and to collect emergency funds.

In late December the union and the employers proposed a settlement. Though some terms were good – a shorter work week, employers pay for needles and power, shop-based negotiations for wage rates, reinstatement of the strikers – the basic demands for union recognition and shop security were not discussed. Workers voted down the proposal by a large margin; they would not accept a contract without the provision for a union shop. Many of the biggest companies reached settlements individually and their workers returned to their jobs. On February 15, 1910, the strike was called off, with 300 shops agreeing to major terms, including the union shop. Still, 1,100 workers remained out on the street.

Many strikers returned to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, glad for a raise in the wage rate. Still, they had to work next to scabs who had replaced some of their former co-workers and they had to put in longer hours than were now standard for the industry. While most garment workers were out by noon on Saturday, employees at Triangle still had 59-hour work weeks, which meant full days for Saturday. And safety concerns remained unresolved: workers had demanded that factory doors be left unlocked and repairs be made to fire escapes of the high factory lofts in the Asch building.
March 25, 1911: Flames and smoke spread through the lofts. The doors are still locked, the fire escapes still broken. The 146 who perish are former strikers and former scabs, supervisors and young girls, all still on the job at 4:30 pm on a Saturday afternoon.

April 5, 1911: Steady rain, all day long. It was just 11 days after the fire, and the mayor and the city's charity commissioner had arranged for the victims to be quietly buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Brooklyn. But unions and other community groups wanted a more public tribute. A rally at 3:00 pm in Washington Square gathered many thousands. For three hours the march flowed, eight abreast, under the arch and up Fifth Avenue. It was a somber parade of grief and it was led by an empty, horse-drawn hearse. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, George Grantham Bain Collection, USZ62-29333
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