

New Unionism at the Grassroots: The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in Rochester, New York, 1914–29

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The 1920s did not begin badly for organized labor. The robust economy and the surge in union membership during the First World War generated political strength for American labor that Warren Harding was loath to challenge. However, the decade's auspicious beginning was eclipsed by the hardening of the federal government's attitude toward trade unions, the post-war depression, a renewed offensive from industry, and a flurry of court injunctions. In the face of this onslaught, unions reacted with uncharacteristic listlessness, drained of the activism that had defined trade union activity during the previous decade. While some industries, such as building and the railways, benefited from more inward and cautious behavior, most did not. The labor movement, as a whole, suffered marked reversals that historians have long identified with the 1920s. The reason, as Melvin Dubofsky has explained, is that "those unions that had been in the forefront of labor militancy from 1916 to 1922 suffered the severest losses."¹

The garment industry was among those in the forefront. The prosperity that the demand for military uniforms brought to the makers of ready-made men's clothing was without precedent in an industry that had long been considered pre-modern. Riding the coat-tails of the First World War, Sidney Hillman's fledgling Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACW) doubled its membership, drove wages upward, and effectively routed its rival, the United Garment Workers (UGW). The state's need for an uninterrupted flow of manufactured goods to the trenches also brought much-needed reform. Louis Kirstein, the Administrator of Labor Standards for Army Clothing, helped to bring an end to child labor, homework, and unsanitary facilities, and created the 48-hour week as an industry standard.²

The relatively easy relations that developed between the ACW, leading manufacturers, and the federal government resulted from Hillman's new vision of trade unionism, which Kirstein and others shared. Hillman defined new unionism as the effective management of the process of production against the waste and inefficiency of the capitalist system. Specifically, negotiated standards of production, informed by the principles of scientific management, and the democratic rule of the rank and file would

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¹Melvin Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994), 97; also chap. 4.

²Rochester Joint Board, *Rochester Clothing Labor, 1915–1939: Twenty Five Years of Organization and Growth* (1939), 15.

provide the basis for labor relations. William Leiserson, a labor mediator and future chairman of the National Labor Relations Board, wrote that the new unionism provided for a system of industrial democracy in which trade agreements served as “constitutions which set up organs of government, define and limit them, provide outside agencies for making, executing, and interpreting laws for the industry, and means for enforcing them.”³ Although industrial democracy protected the membership from arbitrary rule, it also curtailed their unqualified right to strike. Thus Hillman’s new unionism relied on the rationalization of labor relations to achieve stability on the one hand, and democracy on the other. According to Hillman’s biographer, the genius of this new unionism lay in its commitment “neither to suppress from above nor to succumb to the centrifugal force of ‘those of the extreme left’.”⁴

As an amalgam of the rationalization of labor relations and industrial democracy, Hillman’s new unionism succeeded initially in achieving the unity and stability required of a young organization. However, the ACW suffered from labor’s defensive position in the 1920s. Indeed no union, save perhaps that of the brewery workers, endured the setbacks that befell organized labor in the garment industry. Moreover, external setbacks were compounded by internal dissent within the organization itself. Throughout much of the 1920s internal factionalism became the defining characteristic of the ACW, threatening the arbitration agreements upon which the union’s success rested.

The prevailing explanation attributes the conflict within the union to the desire of first-generation workers for artisanal independence and militant unionism. As historian Steven Fraser has written, such workers were “not yet sufficiently deracinated to be assimilated into the bureaucratic patterns of behavior expected of an industrial citizenry.”⁵ In particular, ethnic differences, especially between Jews and Italians, and the tenacity of veteran craftsmen were the roots of opposition in the union’s formative years. But, while no one would deny that linguistic and other cultural factors hampered organization in the early years of industrial unionism, an ethnocultural explanation obscures the greater significance of *nonethnic* factors in generating conflict. Part of the difficulty is that this ethnocultural argument relies heavily on documents depicting the attitudes and perspectives of the national union and its leadership. While useful in understanding Sidney Hillman’s path from socialist to technocrat, these sources preclude close examination of the underlying issues of concern to the individuals who actually made the clothing and peopled the organization. An examination of local documents opens the largely unexplored question of the workers’ response, not only to the internal setbacks of the 1920s, but also to the new unionism of the early 20th century. Looking at the rank and file and their local organizations suggests that internal union turmoil in the 1920s represented chiefly a struggle over the definition of new unionism, between the workers who insisted on a democratic organization and union leaders who demanded stability at any cost. In other words, it was more the erosion of

³Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, *General Executive Board Reports and Proceedings* (of Biennial Conventions), 1914–1916 (New York), xvi, 34, 57–60, 64–65, 111. Hereafter referred to as Doc. Hist.

⁴Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York, 1991), 134; also 43–44, 91–96, 130–131, 133–134; Fraser, “Dress Rehearsal for the New Deal: Shop-Floor Insurgents, Political Elites, and Industrial Democracy in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers,” in Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz (eds.), *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society* (Urbana, IL, 1983), 213–223.

⁵Fraser, “Dress Rehearsal for the New Deal,” 232.

industrial democracy rather than the stubbornness of an “ethnoculture of work” that threatened to cleave the union.⁶

This examination of the ACW may also contribute to recent debates over how best to bring together a renewed interest by labor historians in politics and institutions with the social and cultural studies of the last 30 years. Recent historiographical debates have centered on the need to bring institutions, in particular, back to the forefront of labor history. The challenge has been to find a way to do this that builds upon, rather than rejects, the studies of the previous generation of scholars. By assuming, as Michael Kazin has written, that unions were the “primary vehicles for the expression of the aspirations, cultural practices, and racial prejudices of white working people,” we can avoid the rigid dichotomy of having to choose between the narrowly conceived studies of the old labor economists and the “new labor history.”⁷ This study of the ACW and the new unionism posits that an institutional “history from below” can be attentive to issues, such as kinship, migration, ethnicity, and leisure, for example, and may be one way to resolve what one historian has called labor history’s “unrequited search for synthesis.”⁸

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Rochester, New York, provides an excellent case to examine labor’s response to the new unionism and to understand the divisions the ACW faced at the local level. Rochester was not simply an important local market, but a leader in the national clothing industry. As historian Blake McKelvey has written, “only Chicago boasted of clothing factories that rivaled those of Rochester in size and in excellence of product.” In 1911, nine cities accounted for more than 70% of the industry’s output, with Rochester ranking fifth. Locally, the clothing industry was one of the city’s chief employers, second only to the new industrial giant, Eastman Kodak Company. Although they lacked the foreign supplies of raw materials and patent rights which bolstered other manufacturers, Rochester clothiers relied on their reputation for quality. The importance of the clothing industry to the Rochester economy was captured by the Chamber of Commerce motto: “Rochester Made Means Quality.”⁹

Like most cities where the ACW thrived, the Rochester clothing industry was characterized by “industrial dualism.” Unlike such cities as New York, whose garment industry was comprised almost exclusively of small sweatshops with a few employees, the Rochester, Chicago, and Baltimore markets were dominated by a small number of large manufacturers. Rochester, in particular, had the largest average size “inside” factory, that is, factories which employed hundreds or thousands of employees in one location. These large factories also boasted the most technologically advanced and sophisticated equipment. This pattern emerged in Rochester in the first decade of the 20th century, when many of its largest manufacturers expanded their operations and moved to new locations. Stein-Bloch opened their new factory on St. Paul’s Street in 1903. L. Adler and Company opened their “model” factory in 1909. Hickey-Freeman

⁶*Ibid.*, 228–242.

⁷Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, IL, 1989), 6.

⁸This phrase is Melvin Dubovsky’s; see also Jonathan Zeitlin, “From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations,” *Economic History Review*, 40 (1987), 381–415.

⁹Blake McKelvey, “The Men’s Clothing Industry in Rochester’s History,” *Rochester History*, 22 (July, 1960), 14; Steven Fraser, “Combined and Uneven Development in the Men’s Clothing Industry,” *Business History Review*, 57 (Winter, 1983), 541; McKelvey, *Rochester: The Quest for Quality 1890–1925* (Cambridge, MA, 1956), chapt. 9.

TABLE 1.

Ethnic population	1910	1920	1930
Percentage foreign-born	27.0	24.1	22.8
Percentage of the population with foreign-born parentage	38.4 ¹	26.5	26.6

¹ This higher figure is foreign and mixed parentage combined in the 1910 Census.

Source: 13th, 14th, and 15th U.S. Censuses.

moved to its modern location on Avenue D in 1911. A handful of other large manufacturers opened in Rochester throughout the 1910s. As the large clothing manufacturers emerged, the number of small shops declined. The ones that remained grew in size. In 1900, 307 small shops employed 5293 workers. By 1909, 8559 workers labored in only 196 small shops. Moreover, small shops seldom operated independently, but tended to do mainly contract work for large manufacturers according to fluctuations in the clothing market.¹⁰

This type of manufacture had a special significance for employees. Small shops with few employees and little investment in their equipment were financially free to operate in accordance with the fluctuations of the market. On the other hand, a large manufacturer, heavily invested in permanent machinery, had a vested interest in the stability of labor relations and was thus more inclined to accept the new unionism.

Still, the primary reason why Rochester makes an excellent case-study is the significant ethnic diversity of its working population in this period. The ethnic composition of Rochester's workers in the first three decades of the 20th century reflects that of similar clothing economies. Table 1 further demonstrates that the rate of foreign-born individuals and individuals with foreign parentage remained remarkably stable throughout the first three decades of the 20th century.

In Rochester, the ethnic population included significant numbers of Irish, English, Germans, Poles, Russians, and Lithuanians. Italians constituted the single largest ethnic population in the city, a fact of particular significance as they were far and away the most difficult ethnic group to organize. Given the overwhelming number of Italian immigrants in Rochester, one can assume that, if ethnic tension and craft resistance threatened the organization anywhere, it almost certainly would have been here.

In other words, Rochester was not a homogeneous and isolated place tucked away in upstate New York. In the early 20th century it was a major urban center with a rich social and cultural life, a dynamic economy, and a complex pattern of labor relations. As Garson Kanin, the son of a Russian Jewish immigrant, declared: "Rochester is America, proof of its basic character."¹¹ What the city lacked in size, it made up for in quality, as the success of its clothing industry suggests. It is not surprising that Rochester became, in David Montgomery's words, a "stronghold of the ACW."¹²

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The founding of the ACW in 1914 grew out of a wave of strikes in the garment industry

¹⁰Fraser, "Combined and Uneven Development," 543; McKelvey, "The Men's Clothing Industry in Rochester's History," 14-15.

¹¹Quoted in Blake McKelvey, *Rochester on the Genesee: The Growth of a City* (Syracuse, NY, 1973), 11.

¹²David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 421.

that began in Chicago in 1910 and reached a crescendo in 1913. The tumult that began in the Midwest did not spare Rochester. Late in 1912, a militant group of journeymen tailors called a general strike in which they demanded union recognition, the abolition of sweatshops, and a 10% wage increase. Despite the best efforts of a small band of labor organizers, worker protest quickly abated. The strike, however, was revived a few months later by activists from New York City who came to Rochester to organize workers they claimed were filling orders for city firms whose employees were out on strike. Using a tactic that would become standard in the ACW, the organizers made their appeals in Yiddish, Polish, and Italian. This allowed them to reach clothing workers in unprecedented numbers. Adding the 8-hour day and pay for holidays and overtime to their list of demands, workers voted overwhelmingly 2644 to 228 in favor of a strike. A spokesman for the Rochester Clothiers' Exchange (RCE), an association of manufacturers, denied the charge that they were filling orders for companies with striking workers and threatened that if the 3000 workers who were currently on strike did not return, all the clothing factories in the city would be closed. This would mean putting 12,000 employees out of work.¹³

In the midst of the tension, two groups of strikers were marching down Clifford Street singing "Solidarity Forever" when they noticed a light still burning in the window of a contractor's shop. Someone from the crowd hurled a stone through the window. Other strikers began pounding at the front and back doors demanding that the workers be let out. Carmen Lucia, the daughter of a Rochester tailor, was only 12 years old the night she followed her father down Clifford Street. He was unaware that she had slipped out the door behind him and had followed him through the overwrought crowd. Lucia later remembered that she was looking up at the contractor's window when the nose of his rifle came through the glass. He fired several shots into the crowd wounding many and killing 17-year-old Ida Brayman. Lucia recalled seeing Brayman's lifeless body fall 10–15 feet away. A lifelong member of the ACW, Lucia was not alone in viewing union membership as one way "to avenge her death."¹⁴

Lucia's connection with the "great uprising in Rochester" illustrates the relationship between the failed clothing strikes of this period and the furor which gave rise to the ACW. Membership blamed many factors for the failure of the strikes, not the least of which was the UGW, "who never failed to arrive on the scene in time to make a settlement that just settled things the employer's way." Thus, when the factional leadership of the UGW led by Hillman merged with the Industrial Tailor's Union (formerly the Journeyman Tailor's Association), the militant tailors of Rochester rallied in support. At the founding convention in New York City, Rochester workers sent to the "progressives" four delegates representing four of five new locals.¹⁵

For the members of the newly formed ACW, the founding convention expounded the ideals of the new unionism. In a season of youth, members declared a "new spirit of active and intelligently directed democracy [against] the immobile and deadening aristocracy" from which it had rebelled. Indeed, the language of the convention, an

¹³McKelvey, *Rochester: The Quest for Quality*, 278–280.

¹⁴Interview with Carmen Lucia, "The Rochester I Know," PBS, WXXI (1986). The story of Ida Brayman also appears in Joan M. Jensen, "The Great Uprising in Rochester," in Joan M. Jensen and Sue Davidson (eds.), *A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike: Needle Workers in America* (Philadelphia, PA, 1984), 94–113.

¹⁵Rochester Joint Board, *Rochester Clothing Labor*, 11–12. Locals in this period included former members of the Brotherhood of Tailors numbers 14, 136, 232, 234, and 235.

admixture of socialism and American Revolutionary idealism, was a response to those who charged the leadership with secession. "We seceded from nobody," the leadership announced. "It is a physical impossibility for a majority to secede from a minority." The chief virtue of the new unionism lay in the democratic form of its organization. Leaders frequently made reference to the promise of democratic leadership and of popular sovereignty within the union. "The message sent by the revolutionary fathers of this country to their own generation and to the generations that were to follow them ... renewed strength and courage to protect itself from being misled back to the slavery of old." In a letter from the convention to the district councils and local unions of the UGW dated December 9, Secretary-Treasurer Joseph Schlossberg stated as the new union's primary goal the removal of "antiquated and undemocratic forms and methods of our organization." Setting for itself an important precedent, the collective leadership of the new ACW declared that "this convention will fail in its mission if it fails to provide for a democratic rule of the membership." Surely rhetorical, the message of the New York convention nonetheless reaffirmed Hillman's belief that the new unionism would not "suppress from above."¹⁶

The initial ardor of the founding convention did not prepare enthusiastic trade unionists for the opposition they faced in Rochester. Just as the leadership of the UGW had assailed the infant clothing union at the national level, its local organ, the *Labor Herald*, maligned Rochester clothing workers. The newspaper followed with great interest the initial failures of the ACW in New York and Chicago. These setbacks, it argued, were proof that the renegade union was doomed to early dissolution. "The glittering promises of speedy returns from the Amalgamation plan ... have failed to materialize."¹⁷ The *Labor Herald* capitalized on the dissension caused by the ACW, arguing that it gave employers the opportunity to take back many of the gains achieved during the 1913 strike. Charges of secession and failure were union labels of a different sort that the struggling ACW would have to live with in Rochester for some time. The publication continuously undermined the ACW's ability to establish itself in the Rochester clothing market.¹⁸

The period following the New York convention was a time of transition in Rochester. An estimated 60–70% of tailors were unemployed, divided loyalty between the UGW and the ACW created rifts, and the local leadership found itself paralyzed. Numerous letters from the Rochester Joint Board (RJB), an administrative body representing the city's local unions, queried the national leadership on how to deal with the UGW locals which were closing down throughout the city. The president of the RJB summed up the institutional disorder at the local level: "We have everyday complaints but we are absolutely helpless and powerless." Most of the letters from the RJB in this period were written on the back of UGW stationery well into 1915, suggesting that the institutional transition was a slow process. Still, the initial enthusiasm for the union, in the face of heavy unemployment, was surprising. Lithuanians and Poles were among the first to express interest in forming their own locals. Even the Italians, "the harder nut to crack," as RJB secretary Louis Feldman wrote in 1915, responded to the union more readily in the face of employer repression and wage cuts. "In spite of this fact the tailors

¹⁶Doc. Hist., 1914–16, xxvi, 43, 68, 72.

¹⁷*Labor Herald*, July 23, 1915, 4.

¹⁸Interview with Elma (last name withheld), October 3, 1995 at UNITE Rochester Joint Board Headquarters. Elma began working with the Hickey-Freeman Company in 1924, when she first joined the union, and remembers her family having bought the *Labor Herald* every 2 weeks.

are very enthusiastic for our new organization. We can be sure that we will build up a strong organization."¹⁹

However, the initial enthusiasm in Rochester was short-lived. Employer resistance was a constant threat to the viability of the union, particularly when combined with the general passivity of the majority of workers. Numerous letters from the RJB to the national leadership expressed frustration with the union's inability to recruit the masses of unorganized clothing workers. Organizers failed to motivate workers even after the first biennial convention of the ACW was held in Rochester in May, 1916. Louis Feldman wrote to Secretary Schlossberg that "the workers take practically no interest in the organization now. The bulk of them seem perfectly stupefied to let well enough alone. We have had several meetings since the convention and not one could be called a success."²⁰

Apathetic workers would not be roused until they began to feel the effects of America's preparations for the First World War. The lack of a plentiful labor force and the promise of lucrative government contracts for military clothing predisposed otherwise intransigent manufacturers to accommodate the demands of labor. America's entry in March 1917 solidified this propitious shift for workers in the balance of power within the clothing industry. Both the *Labor Herald* and the ACW newspaper, *Advance*, celebrated the significant drop in unemployment as a result of wartime demand. The RJB secretary was happy to report as early as the summer of 1918 that "the spirit of the people is higher than ever."²¹

While the First World War produced a new optimism within the struggling locals, Rochester's largely unorganized workforce proved an embarrassment to Hillman. Hillman had worked hard to cultivate relationships with the likes of Louis Kirstein, his successor William Ripley of Harvard, and the leader of the Taylor Society, Morris Cooke. In doing so, he brought the purposes of the new unionism and the national government together for the sake of labor peace and stability during a time of national crisis. And yet, representatives from the RCE refused to negotiate with him or his union. At the same time, garment workers, realizing the increased power they wielded in the wartime economy, began to force stoppages, usually demanding an increase in wages to offset the general rise in the cost of living.

In July 1918, a strike broke out among the pressers and pocket makers of Rosenberg Brothers, one of Rochester's largest clothing manufacturers. This was the first formal strike of major proportions in the local clothing industry since 1913. News of the strike quickly spread from shop to shop, threatening Rochester's clothing industry with a general strike and endangering the fulfillment of the RCE's lucrative government contracts. Taking matters into his own hands, Louis Kirstein persuaded Sam Weill of the Stein-Bloch Company and Max Holtz, president of the RCE, to sit down at the bargaining table with Sidney Hillman. Labor leaders pleaded with workers to exercise restraint during the course of the negotiations. Both parties agreed to submit their grievances to arbitration. William Ripley and Louis Kirstein were chosen by both sides as arbitrators. Due to wartime pressures, the arbitrators reached a decision within a few

¹⁹Louis Feldman to Joseph Schlossberg, Feb. 9, 1915, ACWA Papers, Labor-Management Documentation Center, New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Martin Catherwood Library, Cornell Univ. (hereafter referred to as ACWA Papers), Box 53, Folder 11; Max Goldfarb to Sidney Hillman, Nov. 14, 1914, ACWA Papers, Box 53, Folder 10.

²⁰Feldman to Schlossberg, June 23, 1916, ACWA Papers, Box 54, Folder 1.

²¹*Advance*, Nov. 23, 1917; *Labor Herald*, Oct. 31, 1918; Louis Feldman to Jacob Potofsky, June 28, 1918, ACWA Papers, Box 54, Folder 3.

days. They provided for a 10–20% wage increase, time-and-a-half for overtime, establishment of the 48-hour week, and maintenance of the open shop. Because the agreement had been reached by the RCE, the arbitration extended beyond Rosenberg Brothers to include the entire industry in Rochester. Only the Michaels-Stern company refused to accept the agreement and immediately resigned from the RCE. Meyer Jacobstein, a professor of political economy at the University of Rochester, was chosen as the arbitrators' local representative. Workers were jubilant at the outcome of the arbitration. At a mass meeting the 3000 clothing workers in attendance approved the agreement. This marked the informal establishment of the new unionism in Rochester.²²

The formal establishment of new unionism, however, was not immediate. While setting a significant precedent, the arbitration in 1918 left the definition of acceptance open to interpretation. In other words, without a written agreement or a formal procedure to air grievances, the provisional arbitration was left to an honor system. Workers quickly felt the agreement's limitations. Jacobstein was barraged with complaints from workers who claimed that a number of shops were not holding up their end of the agreement, either failing to pay the wages they had promised or requiring workers to labor longer hours. Though he asked the workers to uphold the agreement, Jacobstein admitted that he was powerless to enforce the arbitration unless both sides returned to the bargaining table.²³ Strikes and stoppages grew more frequent as workers became more disillusioned with the new unionism.

Because of Hillman's associations with men like Kirstein, Ripley, and Cooke, the new unionism is sometimes depicted as the brain-child of elites, but the events in Rochester in the fall of 1918 suggest that workers thought otherwise. On Halloween night, the RJB decided that the provisional arbitration agreement was of little use without a formal process of collective bargaining and a proper grievance procedure. In addition to the terms of the arbitration agreement, local labor leaders insisted on the elimination of discharge without cause, the prohibition of subcontracting, bonus systems, and homework, and a board of arbitration which included two union men, two company men, and an impartial chair. The battle waged by the RJB quickly spread. Lazarus Marcovitz of the General Executive Board of the national ACW wrote that "the general unrest in Rochester is due to the failure of the arbitration machinery to bring democratic collective bargaining in the shops." Looking back to the ideals of the New York convention, workers declared: "Democracy in the shops is the crying necessity for the workers. We mean the right of the workers to discuss their grievances, of whatever nature they may happen to be, whether wages, discrimination against their fellow worker, excessive tasks or anything else."²⁴

Ignited by the daring of the RJB, small strikes and stoppages spread through the Rochester industry during the fall of 1918. Workers denounced the original agreement as a "sham democracy."²⁵ Regarding a small strike at Levy Brothers, a letter from the RJB summed up the situation for Hillman: "A machinery headed by such famous men as Professor Ripley and Mr. Kirstein not to be in a position to end a trouble in a house

²²Donald B. Straus, "Hickey-Freeman Company and the Amalgamated (CIO)," in Clinton S. Golden and Virginia D. Parker (eds.), *Causes of Industrial Peace under Collective Bargaining* (New York, 1955), 123; Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 120; Rochester Joint Board, *Rochester Clothing Labor*, 14–15; *Advance*, Aug., 1918.

²³*Advance*, Sept. 13, 27, 1918.

²⁴Rochester Joint Board Minutes (hereafter referred to as RJB Minutes), Oct. 31, 1918, ACWA Papers, Box 45, Folder 4; *Advance*, Nov. 15, 1918.

²⁵*Advance*, Nov. 15, 1918.

like Levy Bros. is not quite encouraging for the idea of collective bargaining.”²⁶ Yet, Kirstein was confounded and issued a number of complaints to the union’s president. “There is less justification for a strike in Rochester than any place I know,” he wrote to Hillman.²⁷ Kirstein failed to understand why these “labor people,” as he called them, continued to strike in violation of the labor agreement. Despite his protestations and Hillman’s attempts to apply pressure from above, the RJB held out in support of workers’ discontent.

A 13-week strike in the New York City clothing industry in January 1919 and a concurrent outbreak at Rochester’s Hickey-Freeman plant forced the hand of the RCE. On January 23, 1919, exactly 1 day after the settlement of the New York City strike, the RCE announced the establishment of the 44-hour week and a willingness to renegotiate the previous arbitration agreement. Fearing the unstable effects of labor unrest during a period of reconversion, the RCE agreed to a formal collective bargaining agreement, which provided for a grievance committee and an impartial chairman. In exchange for an official grievance procedure, the 44-hour week, and a guaranteed wage increase, the workers agreed to halt all strikes and stoppages.

The establishment of industrial democracy in Rochester was a crowning moment for the national ACW, not only because the battle was hard-fought but also because of what Rochester represented in the clothing industry. Writing in *Advance* in February, Sidney Hillman summed up the victory for the workers and the union: “Rochester is the oldest manufacturing center in the country, and is a market of the highest standards. The recognition of collective bargaining in this center has established this principle for practically the entire industry.”²⁸ That industrial democracy, the capstone of the new unionism, was created on terms set forth by the workers themselves cannot be emphasized enough. The demands of the RJB at its meeting on Halloween provided the specific details upon which the arbitration agreement was based. That it did not get everything it had hoped for should not obscure the significance of the demands themselves. Workers saw the 1919 arbitration not only as an example of what new unionism could be, but also as a first stage in the eventual fulfillment of all their goals. Working class Rochesterians provided Hillman and the national leadership with a specific model of the new unionism on workers’ terms. As *Survey* reported, both workers and employers “traveled far on the road to envisaging the business of making clothes as a fundamental human service. To understand that is to face the future. Rochester thus points toward progress.”²⁹

The concessions that emerged from the 1919 arbitration agreement proved to workers that industrial capitalism was a system that had the potential to benefit both labor and management concurrently. Much like the welfare capitalism programs that beckoned the steelworkers and meat packers of Chicago about which Lizabeth Cohen has written, the 1919 arbitration agreement appealed to clothing workers in Rochester as a model of just or “moral capitalism.” Peaceful coexistence, job security, and higher wages achieved through democratic unionism were no longer a “pipe dream” in an industry that had been considered pre-modern and uncivilized. As the decade wore on and union leaders and manufacturers began to trim away at the gains that were

²⁶Alex Cohen to Hillman, Nov. 17, 1918, ACWA Papers, Box 54, Folder 3.

²⁷Quoted in Micah Barbash, “Cracking an Anti-Union Town: The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in Rochester, NY, 1913–1938” (unpublished MA essay, Pennsylvania State Univ., 1992), 31.

²⁸*Advance*, Feb. 21, 1919.

²⁹*Survey*, May 1, 1920.

achieved, it would become clear that the clothing workers viewed the 1919 agreement as the model against which all other agreements would be measured.³⁰

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Once the principles of new unionism were laid down in the Rochester clothing industry, a sense of calm settled over labor relations in the city. The massive strike wave which plagued the nation in 1919 seemed especially brutal when contrasted with the peaceful coexistence of labor and management in Rochester. Ethnic tension was virtually absent. True, the majority of locals that composed the RJB were separated by ethnicity, but the pressers' local 200 had always been a mixture of Italian, Jewish, and Lithuanian pressers, and this mix posed no special difficulty. Moreover, the grievance procedure appeared to be functioning as expected. The RJB minutes from the early 1920s are filled with countless reports of grievances by both workers and their employers. Although stoppages and other minor problems did occur after the 1919 arbitration, all matters were more or less effectively handled through the grievance committee. Fully 50% of grievances were settled directly on the shop floor. Forty percent were settled with business agents in the shop or by local union officials. Only about 10% of grievances reached the desk of the impartial chairman, William Leiserson.

Only two disruptions of note occurred in the first years after the war. The Michaels-Stern Company, the only manufacturer in the city to refuse to sign the arbitration agreement, sued Sidney Hillman and the ACW in Rochester Supreme Court for an injunction against picketing and \$100,000 in damages. Not only did the ACW lose the lawsuit, but Michaels-Stern invited the UGW to organize its shop. Although this reignited conflict between the rival organizations, it did nothing to endanger labor relations between ACW locals and the RCE.

Industrial peace, however, was threatened in 1921. The post-war recession which gripped the nation particularly affected Rochester's clothing industry. Claiming its inability to maintain such high wages in a shrinking economy, the RCE requested a 25% wage cut. When it was first presented to the RJB, the request was unanimously denied. Still, employers persisted, adding to their request the repeal of the 44-hour week. To prevent a disruption of the arbitration agreement, representatives from both sides agreed to submit their cases to the impartial chairman. The civility of the negotiations was captured in the national press. The *New Republic* reported that "while workers in the building trades were engaged in strikes against wage cuts ... the clothing manufacturers of Rochester and leaders of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers met in the ballroom of the Powers Hotel last week to settle by discussion the question of a wage cut."³¹ Both sides presented their arguments, at which time the impartial chairman made a decision. Citing the economic outlook and higher rates of unemployment, Leiserson decided that a 15% wage cut was in fact appropriate. A conversation overheard between two workers following the meeting captured both the excitement surrounding industrial democracy and the pessimism Leiserson's decision ultimately engendered:

One: I have been in a tailor shop for twenty two years and I never thought I'd

³⁰Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 209.

³¹*New Republic*, May 4, 1921, 283-284.

see the day we could stand up and tell the bosses all we wanted to tell them. This is great stuff...

Two: This thing'll never last. What's the use of trying to prove to the bosses that we're a good union? Who in the hell cares for a good union anyway?³²

Indeed, the relative calm that characterized labor relations for 2 years was not fated to last. Following the decision, the national leaders addressed meetings of the various locals to urge their support. Hillman and the national leadership were immediately frustrated by the Italian local 202 and the Lithuanian local 203, both of which initially refused to accept the agreement. At a meeting of the General Executive Board (GEB), Hillman decried as "worse than bad" what came to be known in ACW parlance throughout the 1920s as the "situation" in Rochester.³³ Although the union eventually persuaded the locals to accept the agreement, the implication was that they accepted under extreme duress. To protest the alleged strong-arm "methods" of the national leadership, Italians from local 202 boycotted the biennial convention in 1922.³⁴ By the fall, tensions had eased somewhat and the functioning of the arbitration agreement was no longer imperiled. Yet, the RJB minutes suggest that workers still felt betrayed by a wage decrease they considered unjustified. Moreover, the "methods" which the leadership used to ensure support of the agreement ultimately brought into question the democratic base on which the new unionism rested. The squabble between the local union and the national leadership over the ratification of the agreement portended two serious disruptions in 1925 and 1926. It was already clear in 1922 that whatever struggles lay ahead, they would almost surely involve the growing Italian population, questions of local control, the viability of unionism by arbitration, and the testing of the ideals of industrial democracy. New unionism, which had been so well received in 1919, would be tested and redefined in the 1920s.

Although the 15% wage cut was restored in 1923, wages in Rochester remained well below the industry average. Continued discontent led to two serious disruptions in 1925 and 1926, the first centering on a charge of illegitimate elections, the second over proportional representation on the RJB. In both cases, the Italian local 202 took a leading role. Some have argued that Italian workers were unwilling to submit to the industrial routine of the factory, and that aggressive efforts by the Communist Party through its Trade Union Educational League challenged the ACW leadership in Rochester from within and ignited ethnic tensions between Jews and Italians.³⁵ However, an examination of both disruptions indicates that while such an interpretation may be partially true, it obscures the more important rebellion against the national leadership over the erosion of democratic forms within the union. In both cases there is no evidence to suggest that ethnic animosity, which was never a serious problem in Rochester to begin with, was at the root of the disruptions. On the contrary, the

³²*Ibid.*

³³General Executive Board Minutes (hereafter referred to as GEB Minutes), May 3–6, 1922, ACWA Papers, Box 164, Folder 8.

³⁴RJB Minutes, April 22, 1922, ACWA Papers, Reel 1. The methods which are referred to in the RJB minutes are not disclosed, but it is clear that members found them unacceptable.

³⁵Steven Fraser makes this argument in "Landslayt and Paesani: Ethnic Conflict and Cooperation in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America," in Dirk Hoerder (ed.), *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants* (DeKalb, IL, 1986), 280–303; see also Fraser, *Labor Will Rule* and "Dress Rehearsal for the New Deal." Micah Barbash, citing Fraser's work, also makes this argument in her MA essay on the Rochester ACW.

evidence suggests that among those locals which supported Italian protestations was the largely Jewish local number 14.

Throughout the middle of the decade the number of work stoppages in violation of the arbitration agreement grew alarmingly. This threatened the viability of the grievance process and the peaceful labor relations. The reasons for the stoppages were simple. First, the effects of the economic recession meant hard times for most people employed in the clothing industry. Second, the 1921 wage cut shook workers' faith in unionism by arbitration. Third, employers did not always abide by the arbitration any more than workers did. And fourth, Sidney Hillman's decision to support Robert LaFollette's campaign for President in 1924, a reversal of his previous loyalty to the Communist Party, ignited union factionalism. Smarting from its exclusion from the nominating convention, the Communist Party orchestrated the penetration of individual organizations by its Trade Union Educational League. One of these organizations was the ethnically mixed ACW pressers' local 200 in Rochester.³⁶

Already annoyed by the intransigence of Rochester workers toward the 1921 arbitration agreement, Hillman returned to investigate charges of voting fraud and violence. Convening the meeting of the GEB in the Powers Hotel in downtown Rochester on July 31, 1924, Hillman addressed the GEB members:

The Rochester situation came to a climax last week after brewing for a number of years ... there is a complete loss of control here. We do not have a considerable group who are loyal to the organization.³⁷

Hillman proceeded to identify the problems in the local union, including an IWW-dominated Italian local 202, problems with the Communist Party, and a lack of leadership on the shop floor and in the RJB. Even before hearings began Hillman declared that "the national Organization must take charge of Rochester with suspensions and expulsions of officers as well as members ... we will have to put in new officers under the direction of the General office." Although Hillman agreed to provide "an opportunity to as many members in Rochester as possible to be present at the Board," Hillman had already made his decision.³⁸

Once the hearings at the special session of the GEB began, it quickly became apparent that the dispute involved the election of business agents for the RJB. Specifically, unfair election procedures lay at the root of the discontent. The GEB gave the floor to individual workers hoping to shed some light on the current state of disorder. Sadie Goodman, a union member, explained that the election at L. Holtz and Sons was not legitimate. Goodman recounted a conversation with an election official: "I said, do you know what you are doing and he said, I am a committee man and I am here to show the people how to vote he said, I am a builder of this organization and I am going to see that things are done square." Goodman expressed the fear of many that members' concerns were not being registered by either the national union or the RJB. "I want to know how long the builders are going to poison the organization," she concluded. Others reported that election overseers were actually marking workers' ballots for them. Mr. Zeitses from Local 200 questioned one man who was handing out and marking ballots: "Do you do that here" and he said "yes." Wander [another

³⁶Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 194–195; Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker 1920–1933* (Boston, MA, 1960), 136.

³⁷GEB Minutes, July 31–Aug. 2, 1924, ACWA Papers, Box 164, Folder 23.

³⁸*Ibid.*

overseer] grabbed a ballot from a woman and took it up and threw it on the floor.” Countless examples of ballot and election fraud filled testimony of the GEB minutes.³⁹

However, Hillman was more interested in the charge of rioting, and had twice to warn those present that the GEB had heard enough about fraudulent balloting. Apparently, a group of workers had burst into a room where the “illegitimate” ballots were being counted. One of the marauders, with a metal wrench in his pocket, jumped up on a table where members sat counting the ballots. When they were called before the GEB, the “rioters” claimed that they simply “wanted to see that we get a square deal.” As local member Rathman said, “I felt it was my liberty to go in and I told Soloman [RJB manager] to live up to the rules.” Their explanations, which all focused on the desire for fair elections, illuminated the thrust of worker discontent and the growing division between an unresponsive leadership and a discontented rank and file. All five accused were suspended from the union. Hillman voided the election, forced out the existing RJB manager, and installed Hyman Blumberg, an executive officer, as the provisional manager. All local elections were suspended until further notice. Decisions in Rochester were now made directly by the GEB. New unionism in Rochester, as an experiment in industrial democracy, passed from the hands of the workers to the highest echelons of union bureaucracy.⁴⁰

The problem was that the decisions made at the emergency GEB meeting in Rochester were based on faulty assumptions. Sidney Hillman and the GEB characterized all workers’ complaints within the local union as the product of radical, left-wing thugs whose primary goal was to destroy the machinery of arbitration. In part, he was right, especially as it concerned local 200. But he was unable, or unwilling, to distinguish between the forms of protest. Workers’ complaints, particularly from Italian local 202, about the unresponsiveness of the union and election fraud were superseded by the need for order and stability. As a result, tensions deriving from the 1925 conflict were left unresolved. The lack of a resolution further disillusioned a local membership already rocked by a shaky economy and suspicions that the new unionism of the ACW was no longer serving the interests of the workers. In a speech before the RJB, Joseph Schlossberg advised that “individuals or groups within the organization cannot take it upon themselves to determine organization policy in such cases without the counsel and consent of the general membership represented by its general officers.” Although he articulated what probably seemed a truism to the leaders of the RJB, he was reinforcing a shift in the new unionism in Rochester, from terms set forth by workers and the local union to those defined by the national leadership.⁴¹

The sense that workers were losing control of their organization in Rochester precipitated a second upheaval in the summer of 1926. At a meeting in mid-July, the Italian local 202 proposed a resolution before the executive board of the the RJB, which was still under the official control of the GEB. It summed up its frustration:

The members of local 202 and others in this city have not been taken in the proper consideration either by the local administration or by the national organization ... we have been a very large part of the members in this city who have many times been compelled to obey the officers of the national organization, which we did in the best interests of the organization.

To help remedy the situation, local 202 proposed a reapportionment of delegates.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ RJB Minutes, July 7, 1924, ACWA Papers, Reel 1.

Locals with 1000 workers or fewer would be permitted seven delegates. Locals with 1000 members or more would be permitted seven delegates plus one for each additional 200 members. The resolution was declared out of order. The Italian representative of the RJB appealed the declaration, but when a vote was finally taken, the recommendation was rejected by the board.⁴²

When the RJB executive committee met on July 22 the following week, local 202, reinforced by the radical local 200, sent additional delegates anyway. When the RJB president asked them to leave, they refused. Hyman Blumberg, still in charge of the Rochester local, threatened that the defiants “were attempting to force their will upon the Joint Board [and] would be dealt with by the GEB.” He claimed that he was sympathetic to their demands, but denounced their tactics.⁴³

News of the aborted meeting traveled quickly and the actions of locals 202 and 200 became a topic of great interest. Only one local came out officially against the action. The others, like the Jewish local 14, reported “a great deal of interest was shown by its members. Numerous questions were asked as to what proportional representation meant and whether same would improve the condition in the shops.” The subject caused dissension within other locals. Lithuanian local 203 was divided over whether or not to accept the minutes from the July 22 meeting. Members clamored for a vote, but the chair refused and resigned in the face of protest. Members held a vote anyway and agreed to support the defiant locals.⁴⁴

Beginning August 26, the GEB again staged its meeting at the Powers Hotel and held hearings on the problems in Rochester. Hillman again denounced what he called the influence of “outside organization”. This time Aldo Cursi, a prominent Italian labor organizer and an ally of Hillman, came to the defense of local 202. He explained to the national president that the influence of the Trade Union Educational League and the Communist Party was greatly exaggerated. Although the Communist-influenced local 200 supported the Italian local’s claims for proportional representation, it was the Italian local which was leading the fight. Local 202, he argued, was expressing legitimate grievances to which the national union should respond. Despite Cursi’s plea, Hillman was unconvinced. He was sure that the IWW held influence among the Italians and that the Trade Union Educational League had also infiltrated the local and jeopardized the union’s leadership. Although it may have been difficult to tell at the time, given the radical activities of local 200, hindsight makes it clear that the Communists, not to mention the IWW, had made no significant inroads into the Italian workers’ organization.⁴⁵

Led by Hillman, the GEB blamed the “subversive and destructive tactics [of] an outside agency bent on this, as on previous occasions, on disrupting the Union in Rochester.” In its decision handed down in August, 1928, the GEB called for the dissolution of local 200 and the expulsion of its Communist leader, Peter Teems. In language that the UGW had once used against the ACW, the GEB argued that local 200 was “in form and spirit, a sectional organization, not in conformity with the industrial form of organization which is the goal of the Amalgamated.” They also accepted the idea of proportional representation, but put off its implementation for a future date.⁴⁶ Although the response to the decision was not uniform, disagreement did

⁴²*Ibid.*, July 22, 1926.

⁴³*Ibid.*, Aug. 5, 1926.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, Aug. 19, 1926.

⁴⁵GEB Minutes, Aug. 26–28, 1928, ACWA Papers, Box 165, Folder 4.

⁴⁶GEB decision, RJB Minutes, Aug. 28, 1926, ACWA Papers, Reel 2.

not turn on ethnic divisions. Whether or not a local accepted the GEB's decision depended on how it felt about the dissolution of local 200. As could be expected, Italian local 202 "disagreed strongly." But also Gustave Strebelle of the Jewish local 14 read the GEB decision at its meeting, after which "it was moved that the local go on record protesting against the decision." Other locals also passed similar resolutions of protest. Brother Rissiman of the GEB helped to restore calm to the aggrieved locals. He spoke at several meetings in which he appealed to the membership "that the only way their interests could best be served was by helping establish law and order in the Rochester organization."⁴⁷

However, it was not the law and order that troubled many members, but the GEB policemen who still controlled their local. In November, 2 months after the GEB's decision, Hyman Blumberg announced that elections for the RJB and its manager would continue to be withheld. Local 202 went on record against the decision: "the Joint Board should know that this action is resented by the local." Lithuanian local 203 also opposed Blumberg's decision. Later in the month, however, the national leadership sent its proposal for proportional representation to the locals. It was nearly identical to the one the Italians had first proposed. This, coupled with a call for general elections, settled tempers in Rochester for the first time in several years.⁴⁸

Although internal disruptions within the Rochester organization never reached the level they did in 1926, the national leadership did not manage to quell dissident voices entirely. In the process of choosing delegates for the 1928 convention, Blumberg again found himself chastising the Rochester workers: "The organization would be forced to take action in any case where it is determined that statements are being made deliberately with malicious intent." Local 202 continued to test the leadership with a resolution in which they insisted on the right to bargain with the RCE directly. However, such concerns faded into the background as 1928 came to a close. The ailing economy was beginning to bear down on the local industry. The downturn in Rochester's clothing manufacturing sector anticipated the coming national Depression. By 1931, Rochester's Fashion Park, which represented a merger of several clothing manufacturers in the city, fell prey to hard times. "When it is considered," a delegate of the RJB wrote, "that one half of our Rochester membership work in Fashion Park it becomes clear that this is the most serious situation we have ever been confronted with." Rochester was now distracted by a new set of concerns. The battle for democratic control of the organization against the national leadership was simply subsumed by the pressing concern of mass unemployment in the late 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁹

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In 1926, Sidney Hillman declared, "we will not tolerate revolutions in the Amalgamated."⁵⁰ On the one hand, it was this ability to stand strong in the dark days leading up to the Great Depression that enabled Hillman's ACW to survive while much of the rest of the labor movement lay in ruins. On the other hand, that the language of the founding convention in 1914 would ultimately be used against the union membership is bitterly ironic. The ACW had always defined itself in opposition to the conservative and repressive unionism of the UGW. Yet, in less than two decades the ACW had

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, Sept. 30, 1926.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, Nov. 11, 30, 1926.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, April 12, 1928, Oct. 22, 1931.

⁵⁰GEB Minutes, Aug. 26-28, 1926, ACWA Papers, Box 165, Folder 4.

dissolved locals, voided elections, accepted arbitration agreements without workers' consent, and taken over the leadership of a leading Joint Board. As the definition of new unionism passed from workers' locals to the national hierarchy, the spirit of the *ancien régime* re-emerged.

Steven Fraser writes that Rochester Italians' "anger with the union leadership was sparked not by political difference but by a sense of ethnic discrimination and a general reluctance to submit to industrial routine."⁵¹ However, there is no evidence to suggest that ethnic differences or craft resistance played a major role in the Italian opposition to the union in Rochester in the 1920s. Neither the substance of their grievances nor the ethnicity of their allies leads to this conclusion. Had resistance to new unionism been such a juggernaut in Rochester, it most surely would have sabotaged the great success of 1919. But, as that success and as the words and actions of the workers themselves suggest, such problems could not have accounted for the massive disruptions of the 1920s. Instead, what union members found most troubling was the sense that, after 1919, the ACW was becoming a less and less effective way of meeting workers' demands. As the national union attempted to maintain stability in a decade of employer and employee resistance and economic recession, bureaucratic necessity simply overpowered the democratic ideals of new unionism. As employers and national leaders chipped away at initial gains and industrial democracy began to erode, workers became understandably more restless. It is a fair guess that had the economy not soured in 1928, protest against the union leadership would have persisted.⁵²

Fraser correctly identifies the ethnic divisions that existed among clothing workers. However, he seems mistakenly to assume that ethnic division necessarily implies ethnic divisiveness. In this case, it does not. Like their native-born counterparts, Jews and Italians turned to organized labor when they saw that it could help them and shied away when it did not. What workers in Rochester in the 1920s resented was not so much that they were becoming part of an industrial citizenry, but that the loss of their political voice was the price of membership. This conclusion corroborates the findings of a number of immigration historians whose own studies of Jews and Italians suggest that immigrants were not only *not* dragged kicking and screaming into the modern industrial world, they often accepted it as a means of upward mobility.⁵³ In other words, they

⁵¹Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 204; see also "Landslayt and Paesani," 283, and 298 and "Dress Rehearsal for the New Deal," 228–242.

⁵²A question which invariably arises with a case-study concerns the extent to which its conclusions can be generalized. J. B. S. Hardman, an ACW insider who became editor of *Advance* in 1925, examined the source of intra-union conflict in his edited collection of essays, *American Labor Dynamics: In the Light of Post-War Developments* (New York, 1928). Using the New York International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) as his primary example, Hardman identified the main issues that divided union leaders from their rank-and-file opposition in the 1920s: "the demand for the exercise of greater democracy," "the fight against insufficient leadership," "the failure of the administration to enforce existing agreements," "the demand for freedom of expression and anti-administration groupings," "dissatisfaction with the generally conservative course of the union leaders," "and opposition to extravagance, to direct dishonesty, to the 'pretorian guards' with which union leaders have surrounded themselves at the expense of the organization and for no better purpose than to assure elections and to intimidate oppositions" (31). Not surprisingly, many of the same issues that plagued the New York ILGWU similarly afflicted the Rochester ACW. The reason, Hardman argued, is that "the claims of the opposition cannot be said to be characteristic of developments in New York City or the ladies' garment industry only" but were representative of a widespread pattern of conflict within the needle trades (31). In other words, Hardman not only supports the case for the non-ethnocultural roots of intra-union factionalism, but suggests that it is an explanation not limited to the Rochester example.

⁵³See, for example, John W. Briggs, *An Italian Passage: Immigrants to Three American Cities, 1890–1930*

were not as backward looking as Fraser and others would have it. Historian David Brody suggested, several years ago, that “the job concerns of American workers were largely bound up with, and sometimes observable to us only through collective activity and labor organization.”⁵⁴ Attempts, however, to write institutions like the ACW back into the history of American labor run the risk of assuming that workers, whose voices are not always readily discernible, will fall into preconceived patterns of behavior. That they do not is the value of studying the ACW, and other organizations like it, at the grass roots.

(New Haven, CT, 1978) and Andrew Heinz, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption and the Search for American Identity* (New York, 1990).

⁵⁴David Brody, “The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of an American Working Class,” *Labor History*, 20 (1979), 126.