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ORGANIZING THE UNORGANIZABLE: THREE JEWISH WOMEN AND THEIR UNION *

by ALICE KESSLER-HARRIS

Women who were actively engaged in the labor struggles of the first part of this century faced a continual dilemma. They were caught between a trade union movement hostile to women in the work force and a women's movement whose participants did not work for wages. To improve working conditions for the increasing numbers of women entering the paid labor force, organizers painstakingly solicited support from labor unions that should have been their natural allies. At the same time, they got sympathetic aid from well-intentioned women with whom they otherwise had little in common. The wage-earning women who undertook the difficult task of organizing their co-workers also faced yet another problem: they had to reconcile active involvement in labor unionism with community traditions that often discouraged worldly roles.

Understanding how women who were union organizers experienced these tensions tells us much about the relationships of men and women within unions and throws into relief some of the central problems unionization posed for many working women. It also reveals something of what feminism meant for immigrant women. Evidence of conscious experience, frequently hard to come by, exists in the papers of three women who organized for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union: Pauline Newman, Fannia Cohn, and Rose Pesotta. All were Jews working for a predominately Jewish organization. Their careers span the first half of the twentieth century. Taken together, their lives reveal a persistent conflict between their experiences as women and their tasks as union officers. Their shared Jewish heritage offers insight into the ways

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women tried to adapt familiar cultural tradition to the needs of a new world.

Like most of the women they represented, Newman, Cohn and Pesotta were born in Eastern Europe. Cohn and Newman emigrated as children before the turn of the century, Pesotta as a teenager in 1913. In the United States, poverty drove them to the East Side's garment shops. There they worked in the dress and waist industry, a rapidly expanding trade in which Jewish workers predominated until the 1930s, and in which women made up the bulk of the work force.¹

Their experience was in many ways typical. Among immigrant Jews in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and other large cities only the exceptional unmarried woman did not operate a sewing machine in a garment factory for part of her young adult life.² In the old country, where jobs were scarce, daughters were married off as fast as possible. In America they were expected to work, for the family counted on their contributions. Many young girls emigrated as teenagers to go to an uncle or older sister who would help them to find a job so that a part of their wages could be sent back to Europe.³ The wages of others helped to pay the rent, to buy food and clothing, to bring relatives to America, and to keep brothers in school. An eldest daughter's first job might mean a larger apartment for the family—"a dream of heaven itself accomplished."⁴ When they married, young women normally stopped working in the

¹ In 1913, 56.56% of the workers in the industry were Jews and 34.35% were Italian. 70% or more were women. See Hyman Berman, "Era of the Protocol: A Chapter in the History of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, 1910-1916" (unpublished PhD diss. Columbia Univ., 1956), pp. 22 and 24. Jewish women were much more likely to be working inside a garment shop than were Italian women who often preferred to take work home. 53.6% of all employed Jewish women were in the garment industry in 1900. Nathan Goldberg, *Occupational Patterns of American Jewry*, (N.Y., 1947), p. 21. The relative proportion of women in the garment industry declined between 1900 and 1930. In addition to dresses and waists, women were heavily employed on kimonos, housedresses, underwear, children's clothing, and neckwear. Melvyn Dubovsky, *When Workers Organize: New York City in the Progressive Era*, (Amherst, 1968), p. 73 ff has a good description of conditions in the garment industry.

² The industry was characterized by the rapid turnover of its employees. In 1910 about 50% of the dress and waist makers were under 20 years old. The best estimate is that less than 10% of the women working on dresses and waists were married. See U.S. Senate, 61st Congress, 2nd Session. *Abstracts of the Report of the Immigration Commission*, Doc. #747, 1911, Vol. II, p. 336; Berman, p. 23.

³ The proportion of women in the Jewish immigration between 1899 and 1910 was higher than in any other immigrant group except the Irish. See Samuel Joseph, *Jewish Immigration to the U.S., 1881-1910* (N.Y., 1914), p. 179. This can be accounted for in part by the high proportion of family emigration, and in part by the numbers of young women who came to America without their parents, to work. Rose Pesotta, Rose Cohn, Emma Goldman fall into this category.

⁴ Unpublished autobiography #92, YIVO archives. See also #160, p. 8; Etta Byer, *Transplanted People* (Chicago, 1905), p. 28.

garment shops. As in the old country, they were still expected to contribute to family income. Married women often took in boarders, helped in their husbands' businesses, or ran small shops.

A combination of factory work before marriage and the expectation of a different kind of paid labor afterwards, presented problems for Jewish women, who, like Newman, Cohn, and Pesotta wanted to take advantage of the new world's possibilities. Women who earned wages could dream of self-sufficiency.⁵ Adolescents hoped that the transition to America would bring about a previously unknown independence and offer them new and different roles. Rose Pesotta (the name had been changed from Peisoty) arrived in America in 1913, aged 17. She had left Russia, she said, because she could "see no future for [herself] except to marry some young man . . . and be a housewife. That [was] not enough. . . . In America a decent middle class girl [could] work without disgrace."⁶

Expectations of independent self-assertion were frustrated when marriage intervened and women were confined to more restricted roles. But aspirations towards upward mobility may have provided the death blow. The legendary rapidity of Jewish economic success perhaps did women a disservice by encouraging husbands to deprive their wives of the limited economic roles marriage permitted—contributing, incidentally, to the American version of the "Jewish mother." Yet the hard physical labor required of women who worked for wages at the turn of the century led them to escape from the work force as soon as possible. A folk song, reportedly first sung in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century, and later heard in New York's sweat-shops records one woman's wish for a husband:

Day the same as night, night the same as day.
And all I do is sew and sew and sew
May God help me and my love come soon
That I may leave this work and go.⁷

Women who hoped they would soon marry and leave the shops joined trade unions only reluctantly and male union leaders thought them poor candidates for membership.⁸

⁵ Flora Weiss, interview in *Amerikaner Yiddishe Geschichte Bel-Pe*, YIVO archives, June 15, 1964, p. 4. See also Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (N.Y. 1932), p. 28.

⁶ Rose Pesotta, *Bread Upon the Waters* (N.Y.: 1944), p. 4. The novels of Anzia Yezierska, who arrived in America from Russian Poland in 1901, beautifully express these aspirations. See *Bread Givers*; *All I Could Never Be* (N.Y., 1932); *Arrogant Beggar* (Garden City, N.Y., 1927); and her semi-fictional autobiography: *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (N.Y., 1950).

⁷ Ruth Rubin, *A Treasury of Jewish Folksong*, (N.Y., 1950), pp. 43, 97.

⁸ See for example, Rose Schneiderman as quoted in "Finds Hard Job unionizing Girls whose Aim is

To choose a militant and active future among a people who valued marriage and the family as much as most Eastern European Jews did must have been extraordinarily difficult.⁹ Women who chose to be continuously active in the labor movement knew consciously or unconsciously that they were rejecting traditional marriage. In her autobiography, Rose Schneiderman, just beginning a career in the Women's Trade Union League, recalls her mother warning her she'd never get married because she was so busy.¹⁰ One woman organizer, who did marry, made the following verbatim comment to an interviewer who asked her about children: "I wouldn't know what to do with them. First of all I never . . . we were very active, both of us, and then the unions. I don't think I . . . there were always meetings . . . so we had no time to have children. I am sorry now. . . ." ¹¹ Even after so many years, her discomfort at talking about her unusual choice was apparent. Despite difficulties, many in the first generation of immigrants, Newman and Cohn among them, did not marry and there are numerous examples of women whose marriages did not survive the urge to independence. Rose Pesotta divorced two husbands, and anarchist Emma Goldman and novelist Anzia Yezierska one each before they sought satisfying lives outside marriage.

These women were not entirely outside the pale, for while on the one hand, American-Jewish culture urged women into marriage, that culture's *injunction to self-sufficiency* encouraged extraordinary militancy. In this respect Jewish women may have been luckier than most. They came from a class conscious background in which competitive individualism and the desire to make it in America was only one facet. A well-developed ethic of social justice was equally important and played its part in producing perhaps the most politically aware of all immigrant groups. Socialist

to Wed," *New York Telegram*, June 18, 1924; Julia Stuart Poyntz, "Marriage and Motherhood," *Justice*, March 18, 1919, p. 5; Matilda Robbins, "My Story," unpublished manuscript, Matilda Robbins collection, Wayne State University Archives of Labor History, p. 38. Mechanics of organizing women are illustrated in Alice Kessler-Harris, "Where Are All the Women Unionists?," *Feminist Studies*, III (Fall, 1975), 92-110.

⁹ Although the same tensions existed for women of other cultural backgrounds, one does not always get the impression that non-Jewish women were quite so torn. Mary Kenney, for example, continued to be active after she married John O'Sullivan. The most prominent Jewish women who remained active after marriage married outside their ethnic group. Anna Strunsky Walling and Rose Pastor Stokes are two examples. In some ways Emma Goldman's life acted out the protest many women must have felt but expressed in more limited ways. See Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Emma Goldman and Crystal Eastman," unpublished paper delivered at the Organization of American Historians meeting, April 1973.

¹⁰ Rose Schneiderman with Lucy Goldthwaite, *All for One* (N.Y., 1967), p. 50.

¹¹ Interview with Pearl Halpern in Irving Howe collection, YIVO (undated), p. 8.

newspapers predominated in the Yiddish-speaking Lower East Side. Jews were well represented in the Socialist Party at the turn of the century and were among the best organized of semi-skilled immigrants.¹² On the Lower East Side, as in Europe, women absorbed much of their community's concern for social justice.¹³ A popular lullabye provides a clue to the extent to which women experienced a prevailing class consciousness:

Sleep my child sleep,
I'll sing you a lullabye
When my little baby's grown
He'll know the difference and why

When my little baby's grown
You'll soon see which is which
Like the rest of us, you'll know
The difference between poor and rich.

The largest mansions, finest homes
The poor man builds them on the hill
But do you know who'll live in them?
Why of course the rich man will!

The poor man lives in a cellar
The walls are wet with damp
He gets pain in his arms and legs
And a rheumatic cramp.¹⁴

There is no way of knowing whether Cohn, Newman or Pesotta knew that song, but it is likely that they sang the following tune:

No sooner in my bed
Than I must up again
To drag my weary limbs
Off to work again

To God will I cry
With a great outcry!
Why was I born
To be a seamstress, why?

Should I once come late
'Tis a long way

¹² Report of the Immigration Commission, Vol. 11, p. 317, indicates that in 1910 23.9% of Jewish men belonged to trade unions as opposed to 14% of Italian men.

¹³ See for example unpublished autobiography, #160, YIVO, pp. 8 and 12.

¹⁴ Rubin, *A Treasury of Jewish Folksong*, p. 23.

They dock me straight off
A full half-day!

The machines are old
The needles they break
My bleeding fingers—
Oh, how they ache!

I've nothing to eat
I'm hungry all the day
They tell me: forget it
When I ask for pay!¹⁵

Like the women who sang them, the songs had travelled to America, steerage class. In the garment shops of the Lower East Side, they could sometimes be heard over the noise of the machines, reflecting always the conscious desire of working women not only to get out of the shops but to make life in them better.

Faced with the exploitative working conditions characteristic of the early twentieth century United States, many women turned naturally to unionism. The ILG, founded and nurtured by socialist Jews from New York's Lower East Side, offered an appropriate organizing agency, and early expressions of enthusiasm indicate something of its romantic appeal. "I think the union is like a mother and father to its children. I'd give my whole life for the union," said one young woman in 1913.¹⁶ Half a century after she joined the union in 1908 an eighty-year-old woman wrote to David Dubinsky, the ILG's president, "And I still have my membership book of that year. And I will keep it with reverence until the end of my days."¹⁷ Another recalled her experience on the picket line: "I felt as if I were in a holy fight when I ran after a scab."¹⁸

It could be said of the early 1900s that Jewish women courted the unions that should have been courting them. Rose Schneiderman solicited the signatures of 25 capmakers before the union would acknowledge them or provide aid.¹⁹ Her friend, Pauline Newman, recalled that when she and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97. These songs, with their hope of escape, should be compared with the hopeless and agonized verse of Morris Rosenfeld. See *The Teardrop Millionaire and other poems* (N.Y., 1955), pp. 14, 19.

¹⁶ "Manhattan's Young Factory Girls," *The New York World*, March 2, 1913.

¹⁷ Lillian Mallach to David Dubinsky, December 18, 1964, Glicksberg, mss., YIVO.

¹⁸ Weiss, YIVO, p. 11. The same woman recorded the influence the legend of Mother Jones had on her, p. 20.

¹⁹ Schneiderman, *All for One*, p. 49. Officially, ILGWU policy was to organize whoever was in the shop, regardless of sex. It was easier in practice to discriminate against women since they were often employed in sex-segregated jobs.

her friends “organized a group, we immediately called the union . . . so that they could take the members in and naturally treat them as they would treat any member who joined the union. Our job was to attract women which men were not willing . . . to do.”²⁰ But unions did not treat women even-handedly. During a capmakers strike, for example, when married men got strike benefits amounting to \$6.00 per week, women, even those who supported widowed mothers and young siblings, got nothing.²¹

Women who had had to struggle to create and enter trade unions, who were baited, beaten, and arrested on picket lines, and who had already rejected traditional roles sought help from other women, identifying their problems as different from those of male workers. Large numbers indicated their need for organization by participating in spontaneous strikes. Workers on women’s clothing (largely female) tended to strike without union support more than half again as many times as workers on men’s clothing (largely male).²² In the early years of organizing, attacks against other women often elicited support from co-workers. Clara Lemlich, whose proposal to strike sparked the 1909 uprising of 20,000 in the dress and waist trade, had been badly beaten by thugs. A woman who had participated in the Chicago garment strike of 1911 recalled that violent attacks against other female strikers had persuaded her not to return to work until the strike was won. As she and her fellow workers were negotiating with their employer to call a halt to the strike, they heard a terrific noise. “We all rushed to the windows, and there we [saw] the police beating the strikers—clubbing them on our account and when we saw that we went out.”²³ A sense of female solidarity joined the oppressed together. A 1913 striker who said she was “in good” at her job refused to work without a union “for the sake of those that didn’t have it good.”²⁴ In jail women strikers passively resisted when their captors tried to separate them.²⁵

Yet solidarity among women was limited by ethnic and class antagonisms that persistently interfered with the best efforts of organizers, and of which the organizers themselves were often guilty. Organizers repeatedly complained that their work was hampered by ethnic conflict among

²⁰ Pauline Newman, Interview, *Amerikaner Yiddishe Geshichte Bel-Pe*, June 26, 1965, YIVO, p. 19.

²¹ Schneiderman, *All for One*, p. 61.

²² Isaac Hourwich, *Immigration and Labor: the Economic Aspects of European Immigration to the United States* (N.Y., 1922), p. 373. These figures are for the period from 1880-1905.

²³ *Life and Labor* February 1911, p. 52.

²⁴ “Manhattan’s Young Factory Girls,” *The New York World*, March 2, 1913.

²⁵ Weiss, YIVO, p. 28.

women. Jewish women thought they were superior unionists. They 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.²⁶ Italian women were felt to be unreliable allies, and fear that they would not join in a strike sometimes hindered other garment workers from going out.²⁷ In the 1909 uprising, Italian and Jewish women, divided by language barriers, met separately. The ILG, without an Italian-speaking organizer, selected women to harangue the Italians in English daily until the Italians agreed not to desert the strike.²⁸ Julia Poyntz, the ILG's first educational director, used the pages of *Justice*, its official journal, to argue in 1919 that "our Italian sisters who are still suffering from the age long seclusion of women in the home need a long and serious education to enable them to function intelligently as members of the working class in the shop and in the political field."²⁹

"American" women, as the organizers persistently called them, were hardest of all for Jewish women to unionize. It was a necessary assignment in order to prevent some shops from undercutting the wages of others, enabling them to charge lower prices for finished goods. But it was dreaded by Jewish organizers who saw "shickses" as at best indifferent to unionism, and more often as strike breakers and scabs.³⁰ Success at organizing "Americans" evoked unconcealed glee. Pauline Newman wrote to Rose Schneiderman from Massachusetts that they had "at last succeeded in organizing an English-speaking branch of the waist makers union. And my dear not with ten or eleven members—but with a good sturdy membership of forty. Now what will you say to that!"³¹ Long after most Jewish women were comfortable within unions, Rose Pesotta complained that she was having a "hell of a job" with the Seattle workers she had been sent to organize. They were, she said, the "100% American white daughters of the sturdy pioneers. They are all members of bridge clubs, card clubs, lodges, etc. Class consciousness is as remote from their thoughts as any idea that smacks with radicalism."³² Women from such an ethnic background

²⁶ Faigle Shapiro, Interview, *Amerikaner Yiddische Geshichte* Bel-Pe, August 6, 1964, YIVO, p. 9.

²⁷ Constant D. Leupp, "Shirtwaist Makers Strike," in Edna Bullock, ed., *Selected Articles on the Employment of Women* (Minneapolis, 1919), p. 126.

²⁸ Louis Lorwin, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union* (N.Y., 1924), p. 156.

²⁹ Julia Stuart Poyntz, "What do you do with Leisure," *Justice*, February 22, 1919, p. 13.

³⁰ Unpublished autobiography, #160, YIVO, p. 13.

³¹ Pauline Newman to Rose Schneiderman, September 20, 1910. Rose Schneiderman Collection, Tamiment, Box A94. Hereinafter referred to as P.N. and R.S. respectively.

³² Rose Pesotta to David Dubinsky, February 6, 1935, Rose Pesotta Collection, New York Public Library, General Correspondence. Hereinafter referred to as R.P.

could severely inhibit the success of an organization drive. Pesotta complained that she could not call a strike as women would not picket. "No one will stand in front of the shop . . . as they will be ashamed. Not even the promise of getting regular strike benefits moved them."³³

Isolated from the mainstream of the labor movement and divided from other working women who came from less class conscious backgrounds, Jewish women gratefully accepted help from middle class groups like the Women's Trade Union League. But the financial and moral support of the WTUL came at a price.³⁴ Jewish women had been nurtured in the cradle of socialism, and for them, alliances with other women were largely ways of achieving a more just society. Many middle class members of the WTUL, in contrast, held that political, social, and biological oppression of women was the major problem. They saw labor organization among women as a way of transcending class lines in the service of feminist interests.

Contemporary testimony and filtered memory agree that the WTUL provided enormously valuable organizing help.³⁴ Yet the tensions were not easily suppressed. Rose Schneiderman, working for the WTUL in 1911 needed reassurance from a friend: "You need not chide yourself for not being able to be more active in the Socialist Party. You are doing a much needed and splendid work."³⁵ And it was always clear to those who continued to work for the union that the women of the WTUL had only limited access to and limited understanding of the Jewish labor movement. "Remember Rose," wrote Pauline, "that no matter how much you are with the Jewish people, you are still more with the people of the League. . . ."³⁶ And again, Pauline comforted her friend: "They don't understand the difference between the Jewish girl and the gentile girl. . . ."³⁷

Neither the trade union nor solidarity from other women offered adequate support to the exceptional women who devoted themselves to organizing. How did they choose between the two? And at what cost? They worked in a lonely and isolated world, weighing the elements of their

³³ Jennie Matyas to R.P., February 25, 1935.

³⁴ See Weiss, *YIVO*, p. 32 for one encomium. For the WTUL side of the story see Nancy Schrom Dye, "Creating A Feminist Alliance: Sisterhood and Class Conflict in the New York Women's Trade Union League, 1903-1914," paper presented at the Conference on Class and Ethnicity in Women's History, SUNY, Binghamton, September 22, 1974; and Robin Miller Jacoby, "The Women's Trade Union League and American Feminism," *Feminist Studies*, III (Fall, 1975), 126-140.

³⁵ "Joe" to R.S., November 8, 1911. R.S., A94.

³⁶ P.N. to R.S., April 17, 1911. R.S., A94.

³⁷ P.N. to R.S., February 9, 1912. R.S., A94.

success against the conflict and tension of their lives. They were not typical of rank and file union women, nor symbolic of others' lives. The three female ILG organizers I have selected, each chose not to conform to traditional patterns and to pursue what for women was an extraordinary lifestyle. Their particular struggles crystallize the tensions other women faced, and more easily resolved in the service of a familiar destiny. As their relationship to the union is filled with conflict so their attitudes towards women reflect the way feminism is experienced by working women. Their lives illustrate a continuing uncertainty over the sources of their oppression.

Pauline Newman became the ILG's first female organizer in the aftermath of the "Great Uprising" of 1909. She had a stormy relationship with the union until she settled down in 1913 to work for the Joint Board of Sanitary Control—a combined trade union and manufacturers unit designed to establish standards for maintaining sanitary conditions in the shops. Fannia Cohn worked for the union from 1919 to the end of her life. For most of that time she was educational director though she also served as an executive secretary and briefly as a vice president. Rose Pesotta (some 10 years younger than the other two) became a full time organizer in 1933 and a vice president of the union in 1934. She remained active until 1944 when she returned to work in the shops.

Their lifestyles varied. Pauline Newman, warm, open and impulsive, had a successful long-term relationship with a woman with whom she adopted a baby in 1923. Fannia Cohn lived alone—a sensitive, slightly irritable woman, concerned with her ability to make and retain friends. Rose Pesotta married twice and afterwards fell in love with first one married man and then another. Cohn and Newman called themselves socialists. Pesotta was an anarchist. No easy generalization captures their positions on women, or their relationships to the union. But all felt some conflict surrounding the two issues.

From 1909 to 1912 just before she went to work for the Joint Board, Newman vacillated between the union and the middle class women of the WTUL. Frequently unhappy with a union that often treated her shabbily she nevertheless continued to work for them throughout her life. "I cannot leave them," she wrote in 1911, "as long as they don't want to accept my resignation." "Besides," she rationalized a few months later, "they are beginning to realize . . . women can do more effective work than men, especially where girls are involved."³⁸ Yet later that year she angrily

³⁸ P.N. to R.S., April 17, 1911 and P.N. to R.S., August 9, 1911. R.S., A94.

severed her connection with the ILG for which she had been organizing in Cleveland. "They wanted me to work for *less* than the other organizers get," she wrote angrily to her friend Rose Schneiderman, "and while it was not a question of the few dol[lars] a week with me, I felt that I would lower myself before the others were I to go out on the price offered to me. . . ." Her anger increased as the letter continued to describe the women selected by John Dyche, the union's executive secretary, to replace her: "Well they too are not bad looking, and one is rather liberal with her body. That is more than enough for Dyche."³⁹ Two months later she was still angry. ". . . The International does not give a hang whether a local lives or dies . . .," she wrote to Rose.⁴⁰ And several weeks after that: "I for one would not advise you to work for any Jewish organization."⁴¹ But within a few months she was back at work again for the ILG.

She had little choice. Though she disliked the union's attitude towards women, she had equal difficulty relating to the middle class women who were potential non-union allies. Not that she disagreed with them on the women's issues: she was more than sympathetic. An ardent supporter of the ballot for women, she could not, she said later, recall any woman (save for Mother Jones) "in any of our organizations who was not in favor of getting the vote." Like her friends she was convinced that the ballot would "add greatly to our effectiveness for lobbying or sponsoring labor legislation."⁴² Moreover, she not only willingly accepted aid and support from women who were not workers but she actively solicited it, even quoting Christ in order to induce church women to help garment workers.⁴³ To gather support for striking corset workers in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1912, she visited women's clubs. When local officials and the mayor had been unable to help resolve the strike she "decided that the best thing to do would be to ask the ladies who wear corsets not to buy that particular brand."⁴⁴

Yet the task of reconciling class and feminist interests exhausted her. "My work is horrible," she complained from Detroit a few months before

³⁹ P.N. to R.S., November 14, 1911. R.S., A94. Three months later, the ILG fired the new organizers and Pauline crowed "I tell you, Rose, it feels fine when you can say to a secretary of an International to 'go to hell with your job together' and after have the same man beg you to work for them again!" P.N. to R.S., February 22, 1912. R.S., A94.

⁴⁰ P.N. to R.S., January 17, 1912. R.S., A94.

⁴¹ P.N. to R.S., February 9, 1912. R.S., A94.

⁴² Newman interview, YIVO, pp. 21 and 22. See also P.N. to R.S., May 17, 1911, R.S., A94, where Newman expresses sadness at not being able to attend a conference to discuss the "woman problem." "You must tell me about it in your next letter."

⁴³ P.N. to R.S., April 11, 1910. R.S., A94.

⁴⁴ Newman interview, YIVO, p. 2.

the Kalamazoo strike. "The keeping sweet all the time and pleading for aid from the 'dear ladies' and the ministers is simply sickening."⁴⁵ Her greatest praise went to the St. Louis, Missouri WTUL. It was, she said, "a strictly working class organization in spirit as well as in action." When she sent off an article praising it to the WTUL journal, *Life and Labor*, Margaret Dreier Robbins suppressed it.⁴⁶ Newman, in a remarkable letter to Rose Schneiderman written in 1911, explored her feelings about the effect of the WTUL on women workers. Mrs. Robbins, she noted, "has made all the girls of the League think her way and as a consequence they do not use their own mind and do not act the way they feel but the way Mrs. R. wants them to." She frowned at the League's Saturday afternoon teas (which served "a glass Russian Tea") and disapproved of giving the girls folk dancing lessons. "It is of course very nice of her," conceded Newman, "but that is the instinct of charity rather than of unionism."⁴⁷

Her disagreements were not simply matters of style. She was more than willing to give way when she thought a well-spoken woman could influence a stubborn manufacturer. But she thought it bad strategy to raise issues of morality when they threatened to interfere with negotiations over wages and hours. It may have been true, she argued, that a factory owner's son and his superintendent had taken liberties with female employees: "There is not a factory today where the same immoral conditions [do] not exist. . . . This to my mind can be done away with by educating the girls instead of attacking the company."⁴⁸

Caught between the union and middle class allies, Newman called for help—a pattern repeated by other women involved in the labor movement. Her letters to Schneiderman are filled with longing: "all evening I kept saying if only Rose were here . . ."; and with loneliness: "No matter how good the people are to me, they do not know me as yet."⁴⁹ At times one can only guess at the toll her job took. She wrote repeatedly of trying to "get away from the blues" and complained, "I am just thrown like a wave from one city to another. When will it end?"⁵⁰ Respite came at last in the form of the Joint Board of Sanitary Control. With the struggles to organize behind her she could spend her energies improving working

⁴⁵ P.N. to R.S., March 5, 1912. R.S., A94.

⁴⁶ P.N. to R.S., November 7, 1911. R.S., A94. Newman had already had a similar experience with the *Ladies Garment Worker* (*Justice*'s predecessor) which mutilated an article on the League she had written for them.

⁴⁷ P.N. to R.S., December 1, 1911. R.S., A94.

⁴⁸ P.N. to R.S., July 11, 1912. R.S., A94.

⁴⁹ P.N. to R.S., October 19, 1910 and April 11, 1910. R.S., A94.

⁵⁰ P.N. to R.S., October 29, 1911 and November 7, 1911. R.S., A94.

conditions for women in the factories.

Feelings of displacement and the need for support may have preceded the drive by women members of ILG's Local 25 to create first an educational department and then a vacation retreat. The men in the union had no patience with the demands at first. One active woman recalled the men's snickers: "What do the girls know—instead of a union they want to dance."⁵¹ But the women persisted, insisting that the union would be better if the members danced with each other. The women proved to be right. By 1919 Unity House, as the vacation home was called, had moved to quarters capable of sleeping 900 people and two years later Local 25 turned it over to a grateful International.

Unity House may have symbolized a growing solidarity among working class Jewish women. In any event, the feminism of ILG members seems to have become a problem for just at the peak of its success, *Justice*, the Union's official journal, began to attack middle class women. Could it have been that some union leaders feared that working women were seeking alliances with others of their sex and would eventually cease to identify their interests with those of working men? "Women who work," an editorial intoned early in 1919, are not like "that type of woman, who to her shame be it said, is less a person than a thing."⁵² Increasingly *Justice's* writers insisted that working women had it in their own power to defend themselves. When female pickets faced attacks by gangsters, *Justice* insisted that the solution was in the hands of the strikers themselves. It urged women to "take a little trip down to City Hall and get the vote that will put these fellows out of business."⁵³ Julia Poyntz, *Justice's* writer on women's affairs, was adamant that middle class women no longer interfere with their sisters. "The interests of the women of the working classes are diametrically opposed to those of the middle classes. . . ."⁵⁴ A month later she attacked a Women's International League for Peace and Freedom conference for virtually excluding working women and their problems.⁵⁵ Although the journal continued to solicit support for the WTUL and the ILG continued to send women to the Bryn Mawr Summer School, attacks did not cease. A 1923 article protested the absence of working women at a conference on women in industry: "The ladies who employ domestics came to Washington to speak about higher wages, shorter hours, and

⁵¹ Shapiro interview, YIVO, p. 17.

⁵² "On Lightheaded Women," *Justice*, March 8, 1919.

⁵³ Julia Poyntz, "The Unity Corner," *Justice*, March 29, 1919, p. 3.

⁵⁴ "The Problem of Life for the Working Girl," *Justice*, February 1, 1919, p. 3.

⁵⁵ *Justice*, March 15, 1919, p. 5.

better working conditions for their help. The domestics, of course, or their representatives were not invited.”⁵⁶

It was just in this period that Fannia Cohn climbed to a position of authority in the ILGWU. In many ways she was fully aware of women's issues. In 1919, in the aftermath of a successful shirtwaist strike, she pleaded for tolerance from male union members. Recalling the militancy of the young female strikers she wrote: “Our brother workers in the past regarded with suspicion the masses of women who were entering the trades. They did everything to halt the ‘hostile army’ whose competition they feared.”⁵⁷ Wasn't it time, she asked, finally to accept fully the women strikers who had so often been jailed and beaten. An ardent supporter of the Bryn Mawr Summer School and a regular contributor to the WTUL, Cohn had friendly relations with many of its officers.⁵⁸ In 1926 she protested the absence of women's names on a list of anti-war petition signatures, and later she was to fire off a rapid telegram insisting that Anne Muste be included in a tribute offered to her husband.⁵⁹ Her experiences strike familiar chords. She complained of the difficulty of holding independent views from the men she worked with but noted “It is still more painful to have women, too, assume a similar attitude toward their sex.”⁶⁰ She laughed with a friend whose husband was called by his wife's surname (“let men have the sensation of changing their lifelong name for a new one”), and supported Mary Beard's proposed world center to preserve a record of women's achievements.⁶¹

Cohn's strong empathy for women's feelings surely derived from her own uncomfortable experiences in the ILG. Theresa Wolfson, later to become a well-known economist and an expert on the problem of working women, glimpsed this suffering in 1923. “Never have I realized with such poignancy of feeling,” she wrote to her, “what it means to be a woman

⁵⁶ B. Maiman, “Conference on Women in Industry,” *Justice*, January 19, 1923, p. 4.

⁵⁷ Fannia Cohn, “With the Strikers,” *Justice*, February 22, 1919.

⁵⁸ Fannia Cohn to R.S., January 24, 1929, Fannia Cohn papers, New York Public Library, Box 4; see also E. Christman to F.C., October 2, 1915, F.C., Bx. 1.

⁵⁹ James Shotwell to F.C., December 31, 1926, F.C., Bx. 1; F.C. to James Maurer, March 6, 1931, F.C., Bx. 5.

⁶⁰ F.C. to Helen Norton, February 9, 1932, F.C., Bx. 5. The rest of the letter reads in part: “It hurts me also to know that while ‘men’ frequently come to each others’ assistance in an emergency, ‘women’ frequently remain indifferent when one of their own sex is confronted with a similar emergency. Of course, a woman is expected to assist a man in his accomplishments, but she (the woman) is forced in her aspirations—in social and economic field—to struggle along. She is compelled to depend upon her own resources, whether this be material, moral or intellectual.”

⁶¹ F.C. to Dorothea Heinrich, February 3, 1937, F.C., Bx. 5; F.C. to Mary Beard, January 23, 1940, F.C., Bx. 5.

among men in a fighting organization as last Monday when I heard your outcry and realized the stress under which you were working.”⁶² In a letter she hesitated at first to mail, Cohn shared some of her angry frustration with a woman who taught at Brookwood Labor College. Cohn had urgently requested the college’s faculty to make two studies of union women for her. The faculty had repeatedly postponed the request. “I wonder whether they would treat in the same manner, a ‘man’ who would find himself in a similar position . . .” She wrote, “The labor movement is guilty of not realizing the importance of placing the interest of women on the same basis as of men and until they will accept this, I am afraid the movement will be much hampered in its progress.”⁶³

Despite the anguish caused by her male colleagues and her strong sympathy with women’s causes, Cohn came down on the side of the labor movement when a choice had to be made. She rejected a request to segregate men and women workers in evening classes: “I am a great believer that men and women working together in the labor movement or in the classroom have much to gain from each other.”⁶⁴ In 1925 she appealed to William Green, the AFL’s president, “not as an officer speaking for her organization [but as] a woman trade unionist” protesting conferences called by ladies. “When the deplorable conditions of the unorganized working woman are to be considered,” she objected, “a conference is called by many ladies’ organization who have no connection with the labor movement and they are the ones to decide ‘how to improve the conditions of the poor working woman.’”⁶⁵ A year and a half later she regretfully refused an invitation to attend a WTUL conference on working women, cautioning the delegates to “bear in mind that it is very difficult nowadays to even organize men and they should remember that in proportion there are not enough men organized in our country as yet.”⁶⁶ On the question of protective legislation for women, Cohn only reluctantly sided with the middle class reformers who favored it: “I did not think the problem of working women could be solved in any other way than the problem of working men and that is through trade union organization, but considering that very few women are as yet organized into trade unions, it would be folly to agitate against protective legislation.”⁶⁷

⁶² Theresa Wolfson to F.C., November 19, 1923. F.C., Bx. 1.

⁶³ F.C. to Helen Norton, February 9, 1932. F.C., Bx. 5.

⁶⁴ F.C. to Evelyn Preston, September 21, 1923. F.C., Bx. 4.

⁶⁵ F.C. to Wm. Green, March 6, 1925. F.C., Bx. 4.

⁶⁶ F.C. to R.S., October 5, 1926. F.C., Bx. 4.

⁶⁷ F.C. to Dr. Marion Phillips, September 13, 1927. F.C., Bx. 4.

These contradictory positions were not taken without inner struggle. Cohn knew well the sacrifice she was making to stay in the labor movement. "Did you ever think of the inner pain, worry and spiritual humiliation . . . ?" she lamented in 1922.⁶⁸ Her remedy, like Newman's, was close friendship. "You know that I . . . must be in constant touch with my friends," she wrote. "If I can't have personal contact then the medium of letters can be employed."⁶⁹ Or again, "To satisfy my own inner self, I must be surrounded by true friends . . . [who] never for a moment doubt my motives and always understand me thoroughly."⁷⁰ Cohn found refuge in the education department of the ILG where she could continue the battle and yet remain sheltered from the worst of the storm.

Rose Pesotta took no shelter and asked no quarter. By 1933 when she began full-time organizing for the ILG, it had become clear to many that women, married and unmarried, were in the work force to stay and the ILG willingly committed both money and resources to organizing them.⁷¹ Membership campaigns no longer focused on the East Coast cities. In the garment centers of the Far West and in places like Buffalo and Montreal, Jews took second place to Mexican, Italian, and "American" women. But Pesotta was a Russian Jew who worked for a still Jewish union and, like her predecessors, she suffered the turmoil of being a woman in ambivalent territory. Sent by the ILG to Los Angeles in 1933, she moved from there to organize women in San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Puerto Rico, Buffalo, and Montreal before she became involved with war mobilization.

None could question her awareness of women's particular problems. Persuaded by the argument that there were no women on the union's General Executive Board, she accepted a much-dreaded nomination for Vice President. "I feel as if I lost my independence," she confided to her diary.⁷² She often berated the union leadership for its neglect of women: "our union, due to the fact that it has a WOMAN leader is supposed to do

⁶⁸ F.C. to Theresa Wolfson, May 15, 1922. F.C., Bx. 4.

⁶⁹ F.C. to Evelyn Preston, September 9, 1922. F.C., Bx. 4; see also F.C. to E.P., February 19, 1924.

⁷⁰ F.C. to Theresa Wolfson, May 15, 1922. F.C., Bx. 4.

⁷¹ Fannia Cohn, "A New Era Opens for Labor Education," *Justice*, October 1, 1933, p. 9. The article may be more hopeful than real. Cohn said in part ". . . the women strikers, many of whom were married and their younger sisters, too, increasingly realized that no longer do they want a strong union as a temporary protection for themselves but as a permanent safeguard for their present and future families." There is no question, however, that the industry's workers were increasingly drawn from married women and older women.

⁷² R.P., diary, June 9, 1934, Rose Pesotta Collection, New York Public Library. In her autobiography, *Bread Upon the Waters*, p. 101, Pesotta wrote that "the voice of a solitary woman on the General Executive Board would be a voice lost in the wilderness."

everything, organizing, speechmaking, etc., etc.”⁷³ She was not shy about asking for courtesies that men might have had trouble obtaining. Women who earned meager wages could not be expected to pay even modest union initiation fees, she urged at one point. At another, she demanded that ILG pay not only the expenses but make up the lost income of a Spanish woman elected to attend the biennial ILG convention.⁷⁴ And she knew the advantages of solidarity among women, making personal sacrifices to “win the support of the ladies who might some day be of great help to the girls.”⁷⁵

Repeatedly, however, Pesotta and her fellow West Coast organizers sacrificed the feminist issues in the interests of generating an enthusiastic and loyal membership. To keep striking women happy they agreed to double strike benefits before Easter Sunday “for the girls to buy something.”⁷⁶ When newly organized women brought their husbands to discussion meetings, the men were made welcome.⁷⁷ In 1933, Pesotta compromised to the extent of abandoning the negotiating process to men and confining her own activities to organizing women because “our late President Schlesinger once told your humble servant to stop this kind of business and go home and get married. I hate to hear that from an employer.”⁷⁸ Her perspectives were not always those of other women. While WTUL officials were praising the NRA codes, Rose Pesotta condemned them. Organizing in Seattle and witness to how badly the codes were abused, she complained “the women are satisfied that the N.R.A. gave them 35 hours and better wages, why pay dues to a union that does nothing for the workers?”⁷⁹

Pesotta carried the scars of the woman organizer. “A flitting happy little whirlwind,” her friends called her. It was an image that did not fit. “Nobody knows how many cheerless, sleepless nights I have spent crying

⁷³ R.P. to Rae Brandstein, April 9, 1934.

⁷⁴ R.P. to David Dubinsky, April 26, 1934.

⁷⁵ R.P. to David Dubinsky, March 3, 1934. Pesotta on this occasion stayed in a YMCA because it was “respectable.”

⁷⁶ R.P. to Jennie Matyas, April 16, 1935.

⁷⁷ R.P. to Paul Berg, February 15, 1934.

⁷⁸ R.P. to David Dubinsky, September 30, 1933. Pesotta’s snippy attitude comes through in the rest of that letter. “Now, my dear President, you will have to come across with the help we need namely; financial, moral and the representative for a week or two. After we’ll pull this through you will come to visit these whores and I am confident that you will see with your own eyes that enthusiasm is not such a bad thing after all.”

⁷⁹ Rose Schneiderman called the codes “the Magna Charta of the working woman” and characterized them as “the most thrilling thing that has happened in my lifetime.” *New York Evening Journal*, October 24, 1933, p. 15 (clipping in R.S., A97); R.P. to David Dubinsky, February 1, 1935.

in my loneliness . . .,” she confided to her diary.⁸⁰ Unlike Newman and Cohn, she sought solace in men and depriving herself of close women friends exacerbated her isolation. Tormented by the gossip of her female colleagues she struggled with her self-image. Occasionally she confessed “I feel so futile . . .,” or sorrowed. “everybody has a private life. I have none.”⁸¹ In an effort to avoid entangling herself with a married man she exiled herself to Montreal in 1936. It was no use. She wrote from there to her lover: “Why must I find happiness always slipping out of my hand . . . I’m sinking now and who knows where I will land.”⁸² For ten years, Rose Pesotta battled against police alongside her union colleagues. Then she returned to the comparative peace of the garment shop from which she had come.

By the middle 1930s, with unionism apparently secure and the ILG’s membership expanding rapidly, it looked as though women might at last begin to raise issues peculiar to them within the confines of the union. Fannia Cohn wrote a play in 1935 which raised critical issues. Intended for presentation at union meetings, it described a husband and his “intellectually superior” wife. Both worked, but, because the wife had to devote her evenings to caring for the home, the husband rapidly developed more interests and became increasingly discontented with his spouse. The wife, wrote Cohn, brought with her the resentment and “the protest of a woman worker, wife and mother against an economic condition that compels her to work days in the shop and evenings at home.”⁸³ Chivalry, Rose Schneiderman had said, “is thrown away” when a girl enters the factory or store: “Women have to work and then are thrown on the dust heap the same as working men.”⁸⁴ Working men were by no means chivalrous in 1935, but enough women had been organized in the ILG so that the union, no longer afraid of imminent disintegration and collapse, could lend an ear to the women’s issues. Perhaps in consequence the solidarity of women within the unions diminished.

Those who came before walked an uneasy tightrope—slipping first to one side and then to the other. Tempted sometimes by the money and

⁸⁰ R.P., diary, November 3, 1931.

⁸¹ R.P., diary, February 24, 1934, March 12, 1934, August 9, 1934.

⁸² R.P. to Powers Hapgood, February 21, 1937.

⁸³ F.C. to Jess Ogden, June 25, 1935, F.C. A second play described how two sisters, both of whom worked, nevertheless waited on their brother at home because they had to atone for earning less than he did.

⁸⁴ Quoted in a clipping entitled “Says Chivalry stops at Door of Workshop,” from an unidentified newspaper, 1912. R.S., A97.

support of middle class women, at others by the militance of a changing labor union leadership; alternately repelled by “ladies” and repeatedly hurt by their union’s male leadership, women who tried to organize their sisters were in a precarious position. They were not feminist—they did not put the social and political rights of women before all else. They did draw strength and support from the solidarity of women inside unions and outside them. Their lives illustrate the critical importance of “female bonding” and of female friendship networks. Newman and Cohn, who had particularly strong relationships with women and who managed to find relatively passive roles within the union, maintained their relationship with the ILG far longer than Pesotta who relied on men for support and who stayed in the front lines of battle. All were class conscious, insisting that the class struggle was preminent. When their class consciousness and their identification as women conflicted, they bowed to tradition and threw in their lot with the working class.