

*In Memoriam: Clara Lemlich Shavelson (March 28, 1886 — July 25, 1982)*

## Remembering the Waistmakers General Strike, 1909

By CLARA LEMLICH SHAVELSON  
Ed. by Morris U. Schappes

[When Clara Lemlich Shavelson died in a Los Angeles nursing home July 25, the death notice of the family in the N.Y. Times July 30 and Aug. 1 identified her as the "loving Mother and Grandmother who sparked 1909 Shirtwaist Makers' Strike." That action of hers has assured her a place in the history of the American labor movement, of the socialist movement and of American Jewish life. Thus the article about her by Paula Scheier that we published in Nov., 1954 has been reprinted in full in *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History*, compiled by Jacob Rader Marcus (see our review, May, 1982). The strike and Clara Lemlich's role in it are described in Philip S. Foner's *Women and the American Labor Movement from Colonial Times to the End of World War I* (Free Press, N.Y., 1979, 634 pages, indexed, \$15.95, Ch. 18, "The Waistmakers' Revolt," pages 324-345); in the Marxist feminist Meredith Tax's *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (Monthly Review Press, N.Y., 1980, 332 pages, indexed, \$17.50, Ch. 8, "The Uprising of the 30,000," pages 205-240); in Mari Jo Buhle's *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (University of Illinois Press, 1981, 364 pages, indexed, \$21.95, pages 190-194); and in Carol Hymowitz and Michaela Weissmann's *A History of Women in America* (Bantam, N.Y., 1978, 412 pages, indexed, paperback \$3.50, pages 249-252). The ILGWU monthly organ, *Justice*, contained a full tabloid page obituary, "Clara Lemlich Dead at 96; Heroine of Cooper Union," in its Sept. issue.

Yet, while the article we present below contains her own unpublished recollection of that Cooper Union meeting, we wish also to record that while her shining historic moment was in that desperate 13 week strike in 1909-1910, Clara Lemlich continued her activity in the labor, suffragist, socialist and Jewish movements for another half century until physical incapacity took her to the sidelines. Right after the strike she was appointed a Factory Inspector by the ILGWU, she was on the Executive Board of the Women's Trade Union League of New York (which played a strong supportive role in

the strike), and continued her socialist activity. After marrying the printing worker Joseph Shavelson in 1912 and beginning to raise three children, Irving, Martha and Rita, she became a member of the Communist Party in 1926 and in 1933 and 1938 was its candidate for local office.

In the 1920's, she was an organizer for the United Council of Working Class Women; when the Depression began, she helped organize the first Unemployed Council in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, and in 1930 and 1932 she went on the historic Hunger Marches to Washington to fight for home relief and unemployment insurance. Active also in the anti-fascist movement, she was a delegate in 1934 to the first International Women's Congress against War and Fascism in Paris (and while overseas visited the USSR). In 1935 she was active in the Progressive Women's Council in Brighton Beach; in 1941 she was the N.Y.C. secretary of the Women's Division of the International Workers Order. In 1951 she was on a trade union delegation to France, Italy, Czechoslovakia and the USSR — and also became a charter member of the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs. The last time I saw her in action was on a picket line to save the Rosenbergs. In 1954, with the aid of the late David Dubinsky, she was granted a pension by the ILGWU. Both Clara Lemlich and Clara Lemlich Shavelson deserve our respect, admiration and honor.

The article by her that we publish now originated in the following circumstances: Having supplied Herbert Aptheker, head of the American Institute for Marxist Studies, with bibliographical material on the 1909 strike, I received a letter from him dated Feb. 5, 1965 asking me to try to get from Mrs. Shavelson written answers to questions posed by a graduate student in a West Coast university who was working on a thesis on that strike. Mrs. Shavelson's answers were postmarked March 15 from Long Beach, Calif. and I forwarded them promptly to Aptheker to give to the student. (The bibliography was published in the AIMS Newsletter, Vol. 2, No. 2, March-April, 1965.) — M.U.S.]

**I** PERSONALLY came to this [country] in 1903.<sup>1</sup> I knew very little about socialism. I went to work 2 weeks after landing in this country. We worked from sunrise to sunset 7 days a week. Saturday till 4:30 o'clock. The shops were located in old delapidated buildings, in the back of stores. Those who worked on machines had to bring their machines, particularly the men. They had to carry the machines on their back both to and from work.

Most of the shops had both a foreman and forelady. The shop we worked had no central heating, no electric power. The shop was heated by [a] coal stove which was in the center of the shop. The ashes were emptied every morning but ashes were taken away once a week. The hissing of the machines, the yelling of the Foreman, made life unbearable. The girls, whether socialist or not (had) many stoppages, and strikes broke out in

many shops. However every strike we called was broken by the police and gangsters hired by the bosses. In 1906<sup>2</sup> some of us girls who were more class conscious called a meeting at 206 East Broadway, where we organized the 1st local of the waist makers. We elected S. Shindler<sup>3</sup> as our first secretary. We named the local Local 25 of the Waist Makers Union.

But since every strike we called was smashed by the bosses, the union decided to call a mass meeting at Cooper Union.<sup>4</sup> The hall was packed. On the platform was Samuel Gompers<sup>5</sup> of the American Federation of Labor, Leonora O'Reilly<sup>6</sup> of the Women's Trade Union League, B. Feigenbaum<sup>7</sup> of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Each one talked about the terrible conditions of the workers in the shops. But no [one] gave or made any practical or valid solution. Suddenly a young girl<sup>8</sup> in the audience asked for the floor. When she was given the floor she said, "I make a motion that we go out in a general strike." The entire audience rose to its feet. Men threw their hats in the air, women waved their handkerchiefs.

The girl who made the motion was called to the platform. Mr. B. Feigenbaum of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, who was chairman of the meeting, raised the right hand to the girl and made her repeat the famous Jewish oath: "May my right [hand] wither from [my] arm if I betray the cause I now pledge." The following day 20 thousand waistmakers, both men and women, came out on strike.

That's why this strike is known in the labor movement [as] the strike of the 20 thousand.<sup>9</sup>

Now as to the question whether the girls were socialist, is hard to tell. All I can tell you [is] that many of us marched in the streets of downtown N.Y. with [Alexander] Trach[t]e[n]berg<sup>10</sup> as our leader. Rose Pastor Stokes<sup>11</sup> marched with us. Many of the girls became leaders in the Women's Trade Union League. Some of them joined a political party.

[I'n so] far as I am concerned, I am still at it.

/s/Clara Lemlich Shavelson  
145 Lincoln Rd., Brooklyn, N.Y.

#### NOTES

1. The Lemlich family left Tsarist Ukraine after the Kishinev pogrom of Easter, 1903. In three days, 47 Jews were killed, 437 injured and 1,500 homes and stores pillaged. After a few months in England, the Lemlichs came to New York.

2. Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, N.Y. 1924, p. 149, says that Local 25 was chartered in 1905. At the 1906 ILGWU convention, the local reported its "weekly [dues] taking were not more than \$4 or \$5." At the 1908 convention, the local was reported in a "precarious condition owing to loss of strikes and general crisis" (1907 Panic) and asked to "be financed until such time as it will be able to pay its way."

3. S. Shindler was a wrapper-maker; in 1909 he was also recording secretary of the United Hebrew Trades, which played a big role in the shirtwaist strike (B. Weinstein, *40 Yorn in der Idisher Arbeiter Bavegung* — 40 Years in the Jewish Labor Movement —

N.Y., 1924, pages 237-244). By 1924, Shindler had left the labor movement and was owning a summer hotel.

4. The meeting at Cooper Union Nov. 21, 1909 was the largest of many simultaneous meetings held that evening organized by a General Stirke Committee elected at a conference called by the United Hebrew Trades to extend strikes already under way at the Triangle Waist Co. and at Leiserson's, where Clara Lemlich was working. At that Conference, she was elected to the strike committee for she was a well-known militant, having been arrested 17 times while picketing Leiserson's and having been beaten so badly she was hospitalized with six broken ribs.

5. Samuel Gompers (1850-1924) had been president of the American Federation of Labor since 1886 (except for 1895).

6. Leonora O'Reilly (1870-1927) was a worker at 11 and a union member at 16 in the Knights of Labor. After becoming a sewing teacher at the Manhattan School of Girls, she was active in the Women's Trade Union League, and was a powerful agitational orator. She was not, however, a speaker at the Cooper Union meeting; Mary Dreier spoke for the WTUL. Mrs. Shavelson was perhaps confusing the Cooper Union meeting with the Dec. 5 rally of 7,000 at the Hippodrome, at which both Leonora O'Reilly and Rose Pastor Stokes were speakers. After the strike, when the Wage Earners' Suffrage League was formed by a group that seceded from the National American Women's Suffrage Association, which paid little attention to working women, Clara Lemlich was vice-president, with O'Reilly as president.

7. Benjamin Feigenbaum (1860-1923) had been a primitive anarchist anti-religious agitator in London from 1887 to 1891, when he left for the USA. Here, while continuing to be an anti-religious satirist, he began to use his knowledge of the Bible and of Jewish tradition to promote socialist ideas. It is significant that it was he who called for the taking of the ancient Jewish oath. Among his many works are his 1911 translation into Yiddish of August Bebel's *Women and Socialism* and in 1914 his *Yiddishkeit und Sozialismus* (Jewishness and Socialism).

8. Of course this was Clara herself, then 23 years old but so slight she looked like a teenager.

9. Foner, work cited, pages 328n-329n, says estimates vary from 15,000 to 30,000. B. Weinstein said the UHT signed up 18,000 strikers in three days. WTUL records studied by Helen Marot in 1910 showed 30,000, which she breaks down to: "20,000 to 21,000 Russian-Jewish women, 6,000 Russian-Jewish men (cutters and pressers), 2,000 Italian women and approximately 1,000 native-born American women."

10. Alexander Trachtenberg (1884-1966) was a socialist economist and educator. She may have studied with him at the Rand School in 1915 and thereafter. Like Mrs. Shavelson, he was a charter member of the Communist Party and later established International Publishers as a Marxist publishing house.

11. Rose Pastor Stokes (1870-1933) created a sensation on the Lower East Side when she married James Graham Phelps Stokes (1872-1960), a wealthy socialist, in 1905 (they were divorced in 1925). At the time of this strike, she was a socialist and lectured for the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, which her husband then headed. She was a popular and effective speaker. In 1919 she also became a charter member of the Communist Party.

November, 1982