

THE "GIRL ARMY": THE PHILADELPHIA
SHIRTWAIST STRIKE OF
1909-1910

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Four weeks into the bitter shirtwaist strike in the severest winter in recorded Philadelphia history (1909-1910), union leader Abraham Rosenberg had just about given up.¹ Hundreds of strikers, mostly girls in their teens, had been arrested by a hostile city government, union funds were almost depleted, and the manufacturers were maintaining a no-negotiation stance enforced by a few large companies who controlled access to materials. Meanwhile, the workers' "allies," society women who had joined the picket lines and raised money out of sympathy for the girls' plight, were urging "class harmony" and cooperation as the best method to improve working conditions.

After thousands of garment workers had crowded into New Royal Hall at Seventh and Morris streets in South Philadelphia for a mass meeting on Sunday afternoon, January 16, Rosenberg ascended the platform. He reviewed the state of the strike, then revealed the contents of the manufacturers' "final offer": if the strikers would return to work Monday, the manufacturers would

set up a committee to arbitrate all issues with the workers but one—union recognition. When Rosenberg recommended that the strikers accept this proposal as the best they could hope to win, the hall exploded in anger. As a local reporter recorded:

Whatever order there had been previously was instantly thrown to the winds. A wildly discordant chorus of jeers and hoots met Rosenberg's report, and all over the hall girls and men sprang to their chairs and cried: "No, no. We will never return unless we are recognized as a union. . . ."

Rosenberg left the platform: "I'm through . . . I've done the best I can and they will not listen." Other labor leaders tried to restore some order, but the rank-and-file chairwomen from each shop were quickly surrounded by garment workers who demanded that they "fight any attempt to arbitrate."²

Contrary to observers' expectations of an imminent collapse of the strike, the workers returned to the picket lines more determined than ever. Rosenberg reluctantly resumed leadership of the strike, and the strike took on "new life. . . . The girls have once again shown their allegiance to their cause and its leaders . . . with all their old vigor and determination." By early February the manufacturers granted *de facto* recognition to the union by signing an agreement with union delegates ending the strike. The settlement did not include the closed shop but did significantly improve wages and conditions. More importantly, the general strike of some seven thousand shirtwaist workers was, to borrow Nancy MacLean's words, an "unprecedented awakening in consciousness and collective activity" for the young women who confronted industrial capitalism and overcame odds previously thought insurmountable.³

This incident was one of many that demonstrated the resolute determination of the Philadelphia shirtwaist strikers to see their struggle through to victory, even in defiance of their union leaders, when necessary, and to the amazement of almost all observers. Such militancy and solidarity of young working women were not unusual in this period, as historians have shown for the simultaneous New York strike and for many other groups and places. But what inspired these relatively inexperienced young women to take such remarkable actions is still the subject of much debate. The heretofore unexamined Philadelphia strike may provide some important clues to the motivations and *mentalités* of these women.⁴

Contemporaries of the strike explained it in straightforward ways: the Philadelphia press focused on the aid and influence of the society women "allies" while official union histories highlighted the role of union leaders. Over the next several decades the New York strike became almost a barometer of the changing perceptions of historians, as Ann Schofield has documented. More recently, Nan Enstad, building on—and challenging—the work of Susan Glenn, Kathy Peiss, and others, has posited that the women in the New York shirtwaist strike had integrated facets of popular culture (especially fashionable clothing and dime novels) with the daily experience of their immigrant working-class lives to create a unique subculture of "working ladyhood" that incorporated concepts of entitlement, pride, and struggle.⁵

Despite the significance of this pivotal event, it has received little attention in the histories of labor, women, or Philadelphia. Among labor historians, only Philip Foner has given more than a passing acknowledgment of the Philadelphia strike, and even his coverage extends to only three pages. The sole study to examine the strike in any depth, a dissertation by Barbara Klaczyńska on working women in early-twentieth-century Philadelphia, provides many useful insights but also neglects important features of the struggle. A recent excellent compendium of the history of the labor movement in Pennsylvania does not even mention the shirtwaist strike.⁶

This inattention has not been the fate of the simultaneous shirtwaist strike in New York City. Numerous books, monographs, and dissertations have been written about all aspects of the "Uprising of the 20,000" there.⁷ The greater attention to the New York strike is not entirely unjustified: New York was the center of the women's clothing industry and in particular its shirtwaist segment, the strike involved more workers and began earlier and lasted longer than the Philadelphia strike. In fact, the spark that set off the Philadelphia strike was the discovery that New York manufacturers were sending their work to Philadelphia, although the underlying causes and consequent demands in Philadelphia immediately turned the battle there into one over home-grown grievances. While scholars have exhaustively mined the New York strike for data on multiple facets of women's and working-class history, an incident in one of the largest shirtwaist factories in New York the following year has even entered American popular consciousness. The infamous Triangle Shirtwaist fire led to the deaths of 146 workers, mostly young immigrant women; children's books, virtual histories on the Web, and annual

commemorations have kept alive the memory of the fire and its victims. A recent memorial held at the needleworkers' union headquarters in Philadelphia, organized by the Jewish Labor Committee, included readings from eyewitnesses to the New York fire. No mention was made, however, of an eerily similar fire that killed seven and injured dozens during the Philadelphia strike a year earlier than the Triangle fire, just two blocks away from the memorial at the union hall.⁸

Interestingly, the Philadelphia strike was accorded far more attention at the time of its occurrence than it has since. The union considered Philadelphia sufficiently important to send its International President there for the duration of the strike. Similarly, the national President of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) arrived in Philadelphia shortly after the strike started and organized much of the support until its conclusion, which came after the personal intervention of President William H. Taft. And a contemporary observer believed that, in many respects, "the Philadelphia victory [was] even greater than that of New York."⁹

Reexamination of the Philadelphia strike, the industry and communities in which it took place, and the actors on all sides of the dispute has value beyond just returning this event to its rightful place in women's, working-class, and Philadelphia histories. The strike was one of the first massive uprisings of American working women and one of the most thorough attempts to unite women in sisterhood across class boundaries. It was a dramatic case of the development of workers' consciousness, as members of a class, as rank-and-file leaders, and as women negotiating their response to societal ideals of womanhood in light of their own experiences. And it was a classic example of the double-edged sword of ethnic identity: it revealed the strengths inherent in a close-knit immigrant community, but it also exposed the splits within that community and the consequences of class division along ethnic and racial lines.

The Philadelphia strike may also shed some light on an important question raised by Nan Enstad's construct of "working ladyhood." Enstad demonstrates that an engagement with consumer culture was not antithetical to dedicated participation in a confrontational strike. However, neither did it lead inevitably to such radical actions; it could just as easily have had conservative consequences. Under what conditions did an engagement with popular culture lead in a radical direction, and when to a "politics of envy" and conservatism? Why did the young immigrant women of 1909 Philadelphia become the "Girl Army"? Why was recognition of their union so important

to them, even more than it apparently was to the president of the union? As the narrative of this strike will show, the answer seems to lie in the growing importance and consciousness of class in early twentieth-century Philadelphia, and to simultaneous transformations in gender relations, youth culture, and ethnicity that tended to heighten the significance of class even further.

The Setting: the Shirtwaist Industry, the Workers, and their Communities

The women's clothing industry in the United States in 1860 consisted of fewer than two hundred shops employing less than six thousand workers, mostly women. As the industry grew (to 84,000 workers in 1900) and as some facets of the trade became more mechanized, the proportion of male workers rose rapidly, jumping from under one-tenth of the workforce in 1880 to one-third in 1890. In the last decade of the century men continued to work in significant numbers in the older sectors of the industry, but around the turn of the century a new branch of the industry grew rapidly, the waist and dress trade. The shirtwaist industry took advantage of favorable aspects of the existing clothing trade while emphasizing some newer trends and technologies: unlike older sectors it contained several large factories that dominated the business, but utilized one of the distinguishing features of the old garment industry, a proliferation of small subcontractors. The new shirtwaist manufacturers hired mostly women. A characteristic that the new segment of the industry shared with the old was the predominance of Jewish immigrants as both manufacturers and workers, although the former were typically German-Jewish earlier immigrants, while the latter were usually more recent Russian-Jewish immigrants. An aspect of the shirtwaist industry that had been of little consequence previously but was to become a central tenet of the apparel industry was its dependence on "fashion." Because of the rapidly changing demands of retailers, manufacturers were reluctant to maintain large inventories and instead alternated between rush periods when orders arrived and slack periods when there was little work; reductions in workforce during slack seasons averaged 42 percent.¹⁰

The subcontracting system was especially notorious for its role in perpetuating the poor working conditions and abysmal wages characteristic of the industry. This system had many advantages for the large manufacturers and retailers.

It allowed them to offload some of the fixed capital costs onto contractors, who provided sewing machines and the physical location for the work, often in warehouses converted into numerous small manufacturing establishments crowded together and separated from one another with flimsy (and fire-prone) partitions. The system shielded the large manufacturers from the volatility of the industry—they could maintain a moderate manufacturing capability in their factories and distribute additional work to as many contractors as were needed during the busy seasons. The number of small contractors was substantial, but their position was decidedly subservient in an industry increasingly dominated by several large manufacturers, like M. Haber & Company, which employed some nine hundred women and men in a single factory.¹¹

The early twentieth century was a time of expansion and change for wage-earning women in the United States and in Philadelphia. The number of women nationally who worked outside the home soared from one million in 1890 to eight million in 1910.¹² Many worked in the garment industry, and the proportion of Philadelphia wage-earners employed in the women's clothing industry grew from 7.4 percent in 1899 to 9.0 percent in 1914.¹³ The flood of women entering the labor market helped the owners to keep wages and conditions depressed. While it was estimated that a family of five needed \$900 per year for a minimal standard of living, working women in Pennsylvania in 1909 averaged \$299.¹⁴ The forty-five female shirtwaist workers in Philadelphia interviewed by government investigators in 1905 had weekly earnings ranging from \$1.92 to \$12.00, with an average of \$6.69.¹⁵ Concerned investigators noted that "the average wage . . . will barely cover the actual cost of maintenance of a very economical, prudent woman."¹⁶ The effect of the low wages on the shirtwaist workers was compounded by the severe seasonality of their work as well as the petty exactions of their employers, who made them pay for needles, water, and sometimes power to run the sewing machines.¹⁷ The already abysmal wages and working conditions worsened after 1905. In the relentless drive to minimize costs employers hired increasingly younger women in the shirtwaist shops—the median age in Philadelphia dropped from 23 in 1905 to 20 in 1910.¹⁸ The financial crisis after the panic of 1907 encouraged the ongoing movement for efficiency typified by Taylorism, and many shirtwaist workers reported drops in their pay between 1905 and 1909.¹⁹

Despite these hardships, factory work also provided an arena for expanded social interactions. Young women who went to work in the factories—especially the larger factories—found not only oppressive working conditions

but also some measure of independence and opportunities to build friendships and create social networks with their peers. Outside the control of family members, many enthusiastically sought out and embraced features of American culture that would identify them as modern Americans. These included such lofty goals as education as well as an intense interest in fashionable clothing, dancing, and men. As in many of the dime novels aimed at working women, marriage was viewed as an escape, for most women left factory work after marriage. Yet this interest in consumer culture and the opposite sex did not preclude simultaneous participation in defiant strikes, for, as Glenn notes, "[w]omen's dreams . . . were broad and varied enough to embrace romantic images of marriage and equally romantic visions of class struggle." The independence and self-assertiveness displayed by these young women developed in struggles with family tradition, their employers, and even the union that represented them.²⁰

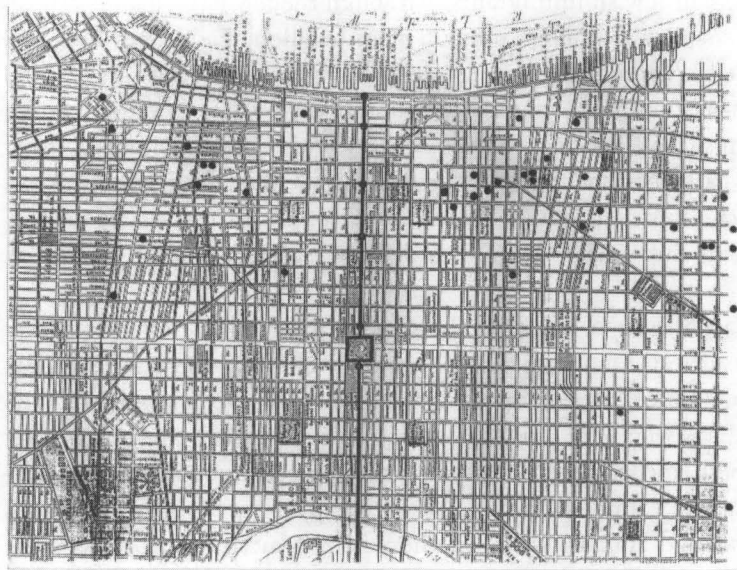
While the Philadelphia garment industry had seen sporadic strikes, only a small number of women were organized into unions. This resulted both from the disorganization inherent in the industry itself, spread among large factories, small shops, and hundreds of contractors, and from the ambivalence or indifference of many male union leaders toward organizing women. Their union, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), was a member of the craft-oriented American Federation of Labor, although it contained both craft locals and locals organized along industrial lines. The best paid and most skilled garment workers—the cutters—were organized into all-male craft locals. The union leadership also consisted mostly of men. The cutters played a crucial role in the industry: to begin with, they were better paid and they had a distinct path toward upward mobility. They were usually the workers hired to be inside contractors and they were the ones who, after saving about \$50, could open their own small shops and join the competition in bidding for work from the manufacturers. The successful ones could hope to move up one day to the ranks of the manufacturers. Other men moved into union staff jobs, some out of commitment to socialist or anarchist ideals, but some as just another business opportunity. Interestingly, a number of men listed in the early history of the union, written in 1924, had even moved from being organizers and union officials into becoming businessmen themselves. Thus A. Axelrod had been an "active member of Local 1 in 1910 [and] chairman of the New York Joint Board," but was a "dress sub-manufacturer" in 1924; similarly, B. Witashkin was a former waistmaker, then a vice-president of the International from 1910 to 1912, but was "in business" in 1924.²¹

Daniel Soyer has shown that, for male Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century, class was often an ambiguous notion, resulting from the clash of Jewish radical traditions with the desire and possibilities for upward mobility. For the unmarried women working in the large shirtwaist factories in Philadelphia, however, class was a far more clear-cut concept.²²

All elements of the shirtwaist industry in Philadelphia as in New York—the union, most of the workers, and the manufacturers—were part of the Jewish immigrant community. A small percentage of the workforce was made up of Italian immigrants and white native-born Americans, with just a few African Americans.²³ Forty percent of Jews in Philadelphia worked in the garment industry in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the immigrants lived in tightly clustered neighborhoods in close proximity to their jobs.²⁴ Virtually all Jewish shirtwaist makers lived in two small neighborhoods: one in South Philadelphia, between Second and Eighth streets from Spruce to Mifflin streets, and one in Northern Liberties, around Fourth and Fairmount streets (Figure 1).²⁵

In these neighborhoods a large number of institutions, formal and informal, comprised a vibrant and evolving community. Synagogues representing every home region in Europe were located throughout the neighborhoods; Jewish retail stores lined South Street and stood on most street corners. Out-of-work immigrants clustered at the informal labor market, dubbed the “pig market,” at Fifth and South streets. Immigrants who had joined socialist and anarchist movements in Europe continued their political activity at the dozens of workers’ associations and unions in South Philadelphia. As early as 1889 anarchists had established a Jewish Federation of Labor there and left-wing unions became a part of Philadelphia’s Jewish life. Radical activities extended beyond workplace concerns: in 1907 a large number of Jewish women met in Forward Hall on Pine Street to declare a strike over the price of kosher beef, led by a strike committee of over thirty women. More established members of the community took a different approach to integrating the new immigrants into the American way of life. German-Jewish immigrants who had arrived a generation earlier set up organizations to ease the transition for new immigrants. One of these was the Young Women’s Union, which started a kindergarten at 238 Pine Street in 1885, then branched into other work similar to that of Christian settlement houses in Philadelphia.²⁶ Among numerous other charitable institutions was the Hebrew Orphans’ Home; Morris Haber, owner of the largest shirtwaist company in the city, was its president.

THE "GIRL ARMY": THE PHILADELPHIA SHIRTWAIST STRIKE



(b) Non-striking's Residences



(a) Strikers' Residences

FIGURE 1: Neighborhoods of the Philadelphia Shirtwaist Makers, 1910. Source: compiled from all addresses listed in the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* and the New York *Call*, December 21, 1909 - February 12, 1910.

Streets where the shirtwaist makers lived were overwhelmingly populated by other Russian Jewish immigrants. Although the few large manufacturers lived out of the neighborhoods, often in mansions along Fairmount Park, the two clustered communities housed shirtwaist operators, contractors, and small manufacturers next door to one another (as well as butchers, liquor salesmen, musicians, and many other workers in the garment industry). For example, a garment manufacturer lived at 232 Catharine Street with his wife, eight children, and servant, while next door at 230 four young women (three of them shirtwaist makers) boarded with a Hebrew teacher and his family.²⁷

On the boundaries of their neighborhoods lived other immigrants and occasionally African Americans. The older, established immigrants, especially the Irish, sometimes battled the newcomers, but the Jews got on fairly well with the Italians who were arriving during the same period. The headworker at College Settlement at 433 Christian Street reported ongoing "racial animosities" in 1907 among "Slavs, Celts [and] Hebrews." While relations between Jews and Italians were, on the whole, amicable, there was some antagonism among Jews toward what the *Jewish Exponent* characterized as "the influx of Italian immigrants prepared to work for incredibly low wages."²⁸ Although Italians comprised only a small proportion of shirtwaist workers, their numbers could conceivably be sufficient to depress the wages of all. The same could not be said about African Americans: before 1910 they were largely excluded from the industry. Although they made up 5.5 percent of Philadelphia's population in 1910, no records were found of any working in the shirtwaist industry before the strike. The ILGWU was later among the most progressive unions in Philadelphia in supporting integrated workplaces and unity of workers across ethnic and racial lines, but the initial entry of African Americans into the Philadelphia women's clothing industry was "by the route which so often occurred in other industries—importation as strike-breakers." Once they were working in the industry (after the strike) the union made attempts to organize them, but one black woman in Philadelphia reported that "they never ask us to join except when they want to strike." In any case, on the eve of the strike of 1909, about 85 percent of Philadelphia shirtwaist makers were Jewish immigrants.²⁹ About the same proportion were women, and thus these two factors, gender and ethnicity, were to affect profoundly the development of the class battle between capitalists and workers in the great Philadelphia shirtwaist strike of 1909.

The Strike: December 20, 1909 - February 6, 1910

New York's shirtwaist industry had erupted in a general strike on November 22, 1909, after months of smaller strikes and a dramatic meeting in Cooper Union, where thousands of workers swore an oath to shut down the industry. Between 15,000 and 40,000 answered the call, and the manufacturers responded with strikebreakers and vicious attacks on the young pickets, aided by a city government and police who seemed interested only in protecting the property of the owners. One of the tactics of the manufacturers was to shift orders to non-striking areas outside the city, and especially to Philadelphia. Union officials led by special organizer Ben Frischwasser hurried to Philadelphia to ascertain the potential strength of the union there. Local 15 leaders reported a treasury of only \$200 but claimed three thousand members out of fifteen thousand shirtwaist workers in Philadelphia, and a poll of twenty-five organized shops found sympathy for joining New York in a general strike. The president of Philadelphia's Central Labor Union (CLU), John J. Murphy, promised the support of the labor movement in the city, and a CLU meeting appointed five members to take charge of the strike. Official support appeared ready for a strike, but many doubted that the "girls and men" in the shops would respond.³⁰

As it turned out, the Philadelphia workers were more than ready to strike, and not only to support their New York sisters. True, "it was considered emphatically inconsistent with union principles for union operators to produce waists for firms which had been repudiated by their sisters in New York," but most workers in Philadelphia were not "union operators" and the loyalty of those who were was largely untested. The previous four years, however, had seen bad circumstances turn to worse as the number of small contractors proliferated and the large retailers and manufacturers consolidated control of the industry and used their favorable position to squeeze ever more profit from the manufacture of shirtwaists.³¹

On the final Sunday afternoon before Christmas of 1909, Philadelphia's newspaper readers found an article in the *Public Ledger* about a puzzling new phenomenon taking place in New York. Society women and college girls were joining the picket lines of the immigrant girls on strike against New York's shirtwaist manufacturers. Readers were accustomed to stories about the activities of suffragettes, but this attempt at sisterhood across the great divide of class was unprecedented, for it went beyond traditional concern for

the poor to actual support for a strike, on the picket lines and in the courts. Meanwhile, that same Sunday afternoon, workers from Philadelphia's shirt-waist shops were streaming into the Labor Lyceum at Sixth and Brown streets. Director Clay of Philadelphia's Department of Public Safety had tried to prevent the meeting, banning the use of the originally planned venue, the Arch Street Theater, because a Yiddish leaflet advertising the meeting was "revolutionary in nature," according to an interpretation by one of the director's aides. The speakers *were* uncompromising in their attacks on the greed of the manufacturers, if not quite revolutionary. Famed labor agitator Mary Harris, better known as Mother Jones, urged the girls to "[g]et the spirit of revolt and be a woman," and trolleyman's union head C. O. Pratt assured the workers they would not stand alone if they chose to strike: "the trolleyman would remember how they helped them during the [trolleyman's] strike and would gladly reciprocate." Abraham Rosenberg, the International President of the ILGWU who had just come from New York to chair the meeting, read a strike resolution in English and Yiddish to the six thousand workers who crowded the meeting hall. Demands included the fifty-hour week, an increase in wages, the end of the detested system of charging girls for needles and other supplies, and, to enforce the rest of the provisions, the union shop. The workers responded to the speakers with ceaseless applause and "[w]hen Chairman Rosenberg took the vote every girl in the place arose and voted to strike." Mother Jones encouraged them to rely on their own strength and avoid entanglements with the wealthy women who had begun supporting the New York strike: "It's not a Mrs. Belmont or an Anne Morgan that we want, but independent workers who will assert their rights. . . . We don't want charity brigades or temperance lecturers . . . if they will leave us alone we will come out alright."³²

The next morning everyone went to work as usual, but at 9:00 a.m. thousands of young women, and some men, stopped their work, put on their coats, and walked out to join the first massive strike of women in Philadelphia's history. The spirit on the streets and in the union meeting places was exhilarating. Rosenberg estimated that 7,500 girls and 300 men had walked out, and crowds gathered on the streets to listen to Mother Jones's impassioned speeches and "jeered every policeman that they met." In the nine meeting halls music mixed with the hectic work of hastily convened committees: "several hundred of the girls waltzed and two-stepped to the music of the strained pianos. . . . It was a general labor festival, with a strong undercurrent of socialism." Some manufacturers

nervously offered to satisfy all the demands of the strikers except union recognition, but at the largest manufacturer in the city, M. Haber at 225 South Fifth Street, the city police ominously doubled the size of their force guarding the factory. Meanwhile, the most prominent representative of reform in the city, Florence Sanville of the Consumer's League, offered timid support for the strikers' demands and hinted that her group might be willing to play a mediating role: "We have brought about most of the reforms by co-operating with the employers, and that is our chief mission."³³

Over the first few days of the strike, the positions of the strikers and the large manufacturers hardened, while various groups in the middle, including the press, reformers, and some manufacturers, scrambled to find some compromise. The Haber company declared its resolve to abandon the city rather than deal with the union and used its leverage to pull together a meeting of thirty manufacturers, extracting a pledge from each refusing to settle with the union; the *Public Ledger* noted that the larger plants were "assuming a spirit of aggressiveness." Haber's striking employees meanwhile bitterly told reporters of the degrading conditions they were forced to endure. The factory workers had to pay two cents a day for water from a hydrant while the "office girls drink sterilized bottled water" and in the "dull season" they were kept in the shop whether there was work or not on pain of dismissal, though they were paid by the piece. Most dangerous of all, the doors of the building were kept locked, "and should a fire occur we would all be trapped and burned alive." Hundreds of pickets spread throughout the factory districts downtown and in nearby neighborhoods, and arrests began the second day of the strike. The very first arrests were of a small manufacturer (who lived in the same neighborhood as the workers) and two strikers, but, significantly, this was also the last arrest reported in the *Public Ledger* or the *Call* of anyone on the side of the owners; the several hundred arrests that followed were all of strikers and their supporters. A police sergeant even visited manufacturers to determine where additional police help might be needed. The owners again made overtures to the workers offering improvements if they would abandon their demand for union recognition, but at every one of "a chain of meetings . . . the strikers declared that they would not surrender on this point." Some of the manufacturers, however, capitulated to the strikers' demands and reopened.³⁴

Early support for the strikers ranged all the way from the very qualified sympathy of a *Public Ledger* editorial (which, however, warned against the

evils of the “thoroughly unjust and un-American” closed shop) to the strong support of the trolleyemen, United Hebrew Trades, and Socialist party. Fifty trolleyemen and mechanics joined the strikers at union headquarters, many acted as pickets when off-duty (as did the Milkmen’s Union), and they began taking up collections at almost every car barn in the city. The United Hebrew Trades voted to levy a per capita tax on all its members for the strike fund, and Mary Charsky of the Socialist party spoke at a tumultuous meeting and helped resolve a simmering dispute between anarchist and socialist strikers.³⁵

On the fourth day of the strike Margaret Dreier Robins, president of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), and Agnes Nestor, head of the Glove Makers’ Union, arrived from Chicago and began establishing some order in what was admittedly a chaotic uprising. Robins did picket duty herself, spoke at up to nine giant meetings a day in “meeting mad” Philadelphia, and promised to win support, especially financial, from the city’s society women. Her efforts had only limited success initially: on January 4 (day 16 of the strike) she reported that contributions from clubwomen so far totaled less than \$100. Two days later she opened the Philadelphia headquarters of the WTUL just down the street from the Haber factory; there she and workers from the College Settlement (which had already begun strike support work of its own) began serving lunch daily to the strikers. For Robins, the effect of sweatshop work on children was the greatest evil, and the sight of seventy girls and boys aged 11 to 14 among the pickets validated the importance of her efforts. A picture of four young pickets on the front pages of two newspapers also helped to win sympathy among the public (Figure 2). However, the plight of the “helpless girls” did not quite convince clubwomen to pry open their pocket-books until Robins demonstrated the connection between the rights of women workers and suffrage. Gradually members of several clubs and the Pennsylvania Women’s Suffrage Association started joining the settlement workers and WTUL members in strike support work, and some even began providing bail for arrested strikers.³⁶

Mere Children Involved in the Philadelphia Waist Strike



Lizzie Weiss,
14 yrs. old.

Fannie Katz,
12 yrs. old.

Fannie Banish,
12 yrs. old.

Sadie Gorrek,
12 yrs. old.

Chapter I., verse I. Gospel according to St. Greed: "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Profit."

FIGURE 2: Girl Strikers in the Philadelphia Shirtwaist Strike of 1909–1910.
Source: *New York Call*, December 21, 1909.

While they may have looked like "helpless girls" to their society benefactors, the strikers were acting more like committed activists in a movement that was changing their lives, the industry, and the city. Every day up to two thousand pickets fanned out across the factory districts, talking to the women still working and urging them to join their sisters. Often their activities became adventures worthy of dime-novel heroines, as when a fourteen-year-old leader of the Markers' and Cleaners' Union used subterfuge to get hired in a factory that was still in operation, tried to talk the workers into joining the strike, then was fired on the spot when her true intentions were discovered.³⁷ Company managers and police became increasingly belligerent as bosses pointed out workers to be arrested and police followed their orders. Strikers were arrested for distributing leaflets, for "annoying" strikebreakers, and even for walking in front of a factory. By December 29 police began

making wholesale arrests and, by January 7, some three hundred strikers had been taken into custody. When they were not picketing, they crowded into union halls, attended union dances and variety shows, and discussed and debated strike tactics. On Christmas day, despite one of the heaviest snows the city had ever seen, strikers crowded into a hall on South Third Street for a "grand dance" and into another at Seventh and Morris streets to listen to speeches by Mother Jones, Mary Charsky from the Socialist party, and Isaac Dornblum, the organizer of the "picket army." The next day, eight shirtwaist operators hosted a dinner for some seventy child workers at the College Settlement. The union at this point was still enthusiastically leading the battle against the manufacturers, and its president Abe Rosenberg expected a quick settlement.³⁸

The actions and dedication of the strikers suggested that their jobs were more than merely a source of "pin money." Many contributed vital support to their families, some were living independently (usually as boarders) and needed every penny to make ends meet, and some were the sole support of invalid parents or younger siblings. Fifteen-year-old Bessie Ingeston's father was blind and her mother was an invalid; Bessie's income from her job supported the whole family. Seventeen-year-old Eva Goldenzweig provided the only income for herself and her father in the row house on Marshall Street that they shared with three other families. The sacrifices demanded by the strike were immense, and though some were forced to return to work, most of the strikers held out. Rose Schneiderman, a working-class leader of the WTUL, captured their feelings when she said, at yet another mass meeting, "We starve while we are working: what does it matter if we starve now?" At the same meeting, an organizer from the bakers' union reminded the workers of the essential position they held in their industry: "The bosses advertise for girls, not machines."³⁹

The bosses were advertising for girls daily, with dozens of want-ads appearing daily in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Public Ledger*. Some companies in desperation even advertised for phony housework and waitress jobs, then tried to convince the women who showed up to work in shirtwaist shops. The low inventories in this fashion-dependent industry left the companies especially vulnerable to any strike lasting more than a few days. Nonetheless the man who quickly became leader of the hard-line manufacturers, Leo Becker of the Haber Company, denied that the owners were suffering; on the contrary, "the manufacturers were in a position to dictate terms." On December 27 he declared, "We will bring the union to terms this

week"; a week later he remarked that "manufacturers have been overwhelmed by applications for work." He was selected president of the hastily convened Manufacturers Association, and his company used its control of supplies and influence with lending institutions to compel most firms to fall into line. Becker's statements during the strike became increasingly strident. He demanded more police protection, claimed strikers were planning to bomb his house, and filed for an injunction against the union, claiming that the strike had cost his company alone over \$50,000 (contradicting his own statements of a few days earlier).⁴⁰

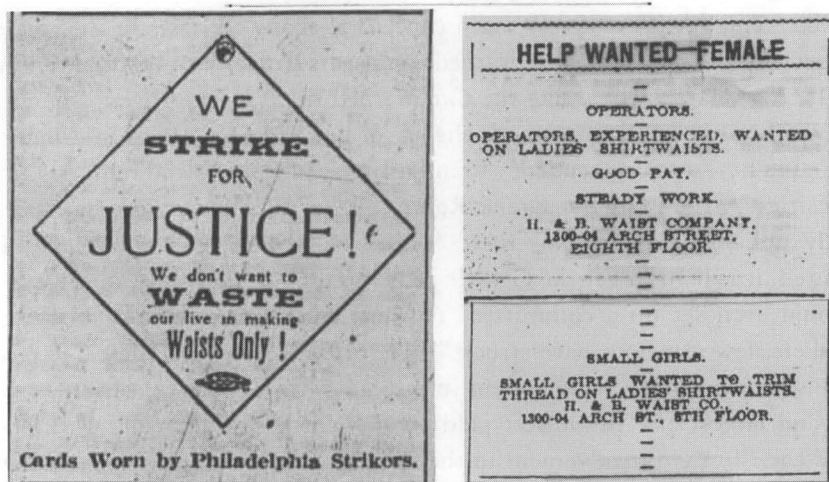


FIGURE 3: The Philadelphia Shirtwaist Strike of 1909-1910. The socialist *New York Call* reprinted cards worn by Philadelphia strikers, while the *Public Ledger* and *Philadelphia Inquirer* carried help-wanted advertisements for replacement workers. Source: *New York Call*, December 21, 1909; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, February 1, 1910.

The secretary of Local 15, Isador Sack, had charged that in recent years "bosses . . . tried to intermingle racial differences so as to create hostilities among the workers." In the beginning of January some firms brought this tactic into their battle with the strikers in a way that might solve their workforce shortages and exacerbate a serious liability within the workers' cause. Becker threatened that if strikers did not return to work the manufacturers "will employ negro girls" and union representatives attacked two firms "for employing negro girls as strikebreakers." The socialist *Call* reported "advertisements . . . in the capitalist press for negro girls to learn the trade" but claimed that "the colored members of the Socialist party

began an agitation to prevent members of their race being used to break the strike. . . . [They are] determined to prevent the greedy bosses from playing race against race for their own profit."⁴¹ But before the strike the union had done nothing to encourage the opening of the industry to African-American workers, in fact had gone along with their exclusion, and they now faced the consequences of limiting class unity to white workers. The manufacturers recognized this critical weakness and tried to take advantage of it. The "racial" exclusivity of the strike left out not only African Americans, but also Italians and white native-born Americans, and each of these groups was targeted by the owners in their attempts to break the strike. This "Achilles' heel" was a concern to many activists in the battle, especially the socialists, who warned against its dangerous potential repeatedly. A week into the strike the *Call* warned that "speakers would be well advised to confine themselves to the use of English, as speakers in different tongues have a strong tendency to intensify racial feelings and religious animosities." Even Margaret Dreier Robins of the WTUL worried that "[t]he only unhappy feature" was that, "while the Jewish girls are splendidly united, it is hard to get the Gentile girls interested," and the Central Labor Union even set up a committee "to work among the Gentile shirtwaist makers, few of whom have struck."⁴² Despite the generally amicable relations between Jewish and Italian immigrants, the Italians' position as the second largest and the lowest paid component of the garment workforce and their limited involvement in the strike led to some confrontations. On January 11, 1910, Sarah Robinson was arrested for assaulting Anna Privincino and Jennie Biobidivo. Two weeks later, in an incident whose details are unclear, Italian schoolteacher Aurora Latoni was attacked. One report blamed Jewish strikers who thought she was a scab since she was Italian, although the *Call* reported that the culprit was a drunken policeman who thought she was a striker. On January 14 strikebreakers from Haber and three other companies presented a petition to the mayor, stating that "the strikers were all of foreign nationality" but that they were "Americans . . . and we are satisfied with our wages, treatment, and hours of work."⁴³

On the first day of the walkout it was estimated that 85 percent of the strikers were Jewish, and over a month into the strike Agnes Nestor asserted that "ninety percent of the girls who are striking now are Jewish girls." Certainly the overwhelming majority of the most active strikers were Jewish: of the 214 arrested strikers whose names were printed in the newspapers,

none had Italian names and only a handful had names that were not clearly Jewish.⁴⁴ Although the near absence of other nationalities had the potential to wreck the strike, the factors that led the Jewish strikers to be "splendidly united" conversely provided a strong foundation for the struggle, and their almost total dominance in the workforce diminished the potential harm from owners' attempts to capitalize on this issue. The strikers were able to call on a strong Jewish radical and union tradition, as well as support from a wide segment of the Philadelphia Jewish community—but the support there was not unanimous. Jewish branches of the Socialist party issued subscription lists to their members, the United Hebrew Trades solicited funds for the strikers, and the Workmen's Circle put several thousand dollars at the disposal of the union. Beyond labor and socialist aid, Levis & Co., proprietors of a moving picture show at 506 South Street, donated two nights' proceeds; delicatessens contributed "from their larders" for a dance benefiting the strike fund. But the Jewish business community and the institutions established by middle- and upper-class members of the community were generally ambivalent toward the strike. The strikers' executive committee met next door to the original home of the Young Women's Union, but the older German-Jewish founders of that organization mostly preferred a more respectable route for uplift of the immigrant girls than the one in which they were engaged. Photographs in the 1910 history of the organization show "Jewish working girls" at the group's vacation home, at morning exercise and in a sitting room demurely reading (Figure 4). The voice of the upper-middle-class community, the *Jewish Exponent*, recognized (in English) that some shirtwaist factories were sweatshops, but deplored that workers had struck "well managed" factories. While Morris Haber continued running his factory behind heavy police protection and young immigrant Jewish pickets were being arrested there daily, Haber and his wife hosted a glittering gala and ball on December 29 that raised over \$4,000 for the building fund of the Hebrew Orphans' Home. John Murphy of the Central Labor Union condemned Haber for using orphans from the home as strikebreakers in his factory, and Haber admitted that a few boys and one girl from the home did work there but were "quite well satisfied."⁴⁵

If the sector of the Jewish community that had only recently climbed into the ranks of the respectable middle class was ambivalent toward the strike, the struggle of the shirtwaist makers gradually took on the nature of a *cause célèbre* among reformers in older Anglo-Saxon Protestant society. Dr. John Graham Brooks, president of the National Consumers' League, and Alfred



FIGURE 4: Social uplift in the Jewish community. Middle-class German-Jewish reformers provided a vacation home for these recent Russian-Jewish immigrants, all “working girls.” Source: *Twenty-fifth anniversary, February 8, 1885-February 8, 1910*, Young Women’s Union of Philadelphia. Courtesy of Urban Archives, Temple University.

H. Love, head of the Universal Peace Union, among others, weighed in with their favored solutions to the problem of the shirtwaist makers, and Anthony J. Drexel Biddle even performed in a benefit for the strike fund. Frances Perkins urged Philadelphia social workers to support the strikers, and University of Pennsylvania students sent \$150 to the strike fund and arranged what would have been called a teach-in in later times, with speakers such as radical economist Scott Nearing.⁴⁶

The strike became the special concern, however, of women reformers. Some, such as the earliest and most consistent allies of the strikers in the WTUL and the College Settlement, were long committed to the betterment of women workers, while others came to the campaign via their interest in suffrage and other issues of concern to Progressive reform. The types of support and level of involvement varied greatly: society women and Bryn Mawr students joined the picket lines, the "allies" sat through court sessions and provided money for fines and bail, a delegation of prominent women visited the mayor to demand an end to police abuses, supporters wrote letters to the newspapers, and numerous meetings were held in genteel clubs and homes of wealthy women where the working girls' cause was explained and money raised. This crucial aid grew just as the male business-oriented leadership of the strikers' union seemed to lose interest in continuing the strenuous efforts needed to maintain the strike, and commentators began to speak of the strike and its sustenance by the allies as a demonstration of the "bond of woman's sympathy for woman." The broadening of support, however, also resulted in the dilution of the early commitment by supporters to acceptance of the militant rank-and-file leaders. The attorney provided by the Pennsylvania Women's Suffrage Association drew up a list of what activities were and were not proper for pickets to engage in, and some educated women began to see their role as saviors of poor immigrant girls who were too ignorant to help themselves. The allies believed the solution to the strike lay in their ability to act "as an interpreter of one so-called class to others where the capacity for easy and sympathetic communication has been lost or dulled through non-use." Even the dedicated Margaret Dreier Robins considered that one of her important duties was to teach the girls that they had nothing to gain by the use of force.⁴⁷

The events that galvanized support among society women and garnered extensive publicity were the arrests of two of their number. On January 10, Bryn Mawr graduate and Consumers' League investigator Fannie Cochran was arrested while walking with striker Rosa Gratz in front of a struck factory; she was released in a few hours after the intervention of Anna Davies,

headworker of the College Settlement. Then on January 29, police arrested Smith graduate Martha Gruening while picketing; the local magistrate berated her for her interference in the strike and sent her to Moyamensing Prison where she spent the night. Gruening's description of "horrors in the prison cell" outraged reformers and generated a new surge of contributions. As incensed as the allies were, Leo Becker and the manufacturers were infuriated at the intrusion of society women at a time when the owners thought they had worn down the union leadership. Becker lashed out at social workers and society women "for every riot that took place and every assault which was made upon the operators who refused to join the strikers. These women injected suffrage into the situation." One detects in his outburst a desire to put women—of any class—"back in their place."⁴⁸

The allies were far from responsible for the riots and assaults, as indicated by their constant calls for cooperation and conciliation, except to the degree that this support enabled the rank and file to continue their fight. Many arrested strikers returned immediately to the picket lines when they were bailed out, and many were arrested several times, such as Lena Shore, who was arrested for the third time on February 4, this time "for calling Sarah Lipshutz a scab and hitting her." Far more responsible for the level of hostility was the belligerent approach taken by police, courts, and manufacturers. When thirty "influential women" met with Director of Public Safety Clay, their list of grievances included repeated examples of police taking the side of manufacturers and even following their orders. The allies testified that "fully a score of the strikers have come into strike headquarters with bruised heads and finger-marked throats." In one of the worst police riots, manufacturer Samuel Epstein led a band of plainclothes thugs in an attack on pickets outside his factory; they were joined in the *mêlée* by uniformed police who beat and arrested seventeen-year-old Lizzie Zenther and many other strikers. In another case, manufacturer I. Craverman attacked a striker with a bale hook and left her bleeding and unconscious. Judges invariably took the side of the owners and usually lectured strikers. Judge Staake ruled in late January "that anyone loitering about a place where a strike is in progress is guilty of a breach of the peace"; subsequently "a general cleanup of strike pickets was made by police."⁴⁹

Despite this brutal treatment and the dire condition of most strikers with no pay for weeks, the great majority of strikers held out. Their tenacity amazed observers, who remarked repeatedly on their determination and ability to endure. By the beginning of January, the union was paying small strike benefits "to all who need them," but many girls refused them so that others who

were in more desperate straits could receive more. On the streets the strikers held their ground and sometimes responded violently to strikebreakers and police. On January 3 a "small riot" ensued at Ninth and Walnut streets when strikers Rose Krider and Eva Barshvesky allegedly "buried Jennie Ross in a snow bank." The next day striker Katherine Epstein "severely mauled" strikebreakers Samuel Kollarsh and Minnie Faritz. Later that week Harry Tilles assaulted a "scab escort." Through January the level of hostilities increased. On January 10 someone in the Haber factory pointed out to police a girl he wanted arrested. When the policeman attempted to carry out the order, he was "instantly stretched out on the snow, with a dozen pickets tearing at his face, hair and clothes." At another location a policeman had seized Sarah Robinson and shook her; as he was trying to take her to jail "[t]he crowd of sympathizers followed [Policeman] Proctor to Market Street and hooted him the entire distance." Policeman Downs and the strikebreaker he was escorting were allegedly hit by stones thrown by strikers; fifteen-year-old Rose Seigel and a dozen others were arrested. One working cutter whose home was guarded by police claimed that the striking cutters had an "army" led by a man named Nefsky; a day later David Rosenberg was arrested as a member of the "fighting army," allegedly after he had threatened a scab with a revolver. On January 21 strikebreaker escort Max Berger was "badly beaten" by a female striker. The number of arrests continued to escalate until February 2, when "[t]he number of young women arrested during the twenty-four hours exceeded that of any other day since the strike began last December." Certainly not all these newspaper reports can be taken at face value—as indicated earlier the manufacturers and police instigated much of the violence that occurred. However, the volume of reports suggests that strikers were willing to use force when necessary to attain their goals, and the fact that police guards were provided routinely to escort strikebreakers could indicate that manufacturers feared the workers' actions. Even ally Anne Young of the College Settlement said that her greatest difficulty was in "restraining girls from attacking the workers." An editorial in the January 13 *Public Ledger* warned the girls that, though they might have public sympathy, they "must stop using force and violence" because these methods were unfair to the police, whose "chivalry . . . makes it difficult for them to disperse crowds of female strikers—they are liable to accusations of unmanly cruelty and brutality."⁵⁰

The crusade of the strikers extended beyond the picket lines and the jails. Meetings, dances, and concerts were held almost daily, and strikers packed halls by the thousands whenever an important issue was being discussed or

a prominent speaker came to town. On one day at union headquarters a dance was being held on the third floor and a volunteer variety show on the second, while at another location striker Emma Freidberg was simultaneously railing against Christianity and capitalism to approximately fifty co-workers. Another day all the rank-and-file "chairladies" met for dinner at the College Settlement. Throughout the strike the young women maintained an intense interest in all aspects of the struggle and never wavered on what they considered the central goal—recognition of the union. After Becker had given Abraham Rosenberg one of his (several) ultimatums on January 14, the union leader met at night with the strike executive committee near the old headquarters of the Young Women's Union. As they met "a throng gathered around the meeting place" and "hundreds of girls were debating" until nearly midnight. When two days later Rosenberg recommended acceptance of the "final offer," the strikers were informed as well as defiant, in the incident described at the beginning of this essay. The union president's limited faith in the strikers apparently began even before the tumultuous meeting of January 16. It was later revealed "that he argued against calling a strike in the beginning, feeling certain that it would not be successful." More than once the strikers had to drag their leader back into support of the strike. Despite his attitude that the strike was "a plain business proposition from beginning to end," Rosenberg did appear to accept the will of the workers. Although he "was the picture of despair" the day after the rejection of his recommendation, he told the press that "we will continue the strike on nothing"; the reporter concluded that the leaders of the strike did not know how they would proceed, "but 'Fight on, fight on!' was their shibboleth." A few days later Rosenberg seemed to echo the opinion of the strikers when he declared "we will either go back to work as a union or starve." The vacillating approach of Rosenberg apparently did not characterize all in the union leadership—there are hints that some of the men in charge held very different opinions on how to conduct the strike. In particular, Isaac Dornblum, the head of the "picket army," was especially targeted by police as a dangerous agitator, and he was beaten and arrested at least once; on another occasion police prevented him from speaking at a meeting. Another leader whose actions were at odds with the conservative business unionists was Barney Bichovsky, who was also the Philadelphia representative of the Yiddish *New York Forward*. He organized a meeting addressed by militant socialists that was denounced by Rosenberg; nonetheless Bichovsky remained on the committee negotiating with the manufacturers.⁵¹

A similar split in support among official union leadership developed in the Philadelphia labor movement in general. Conservative leaders barely gave lip service to solidarity with the strike, and instead some "urged caution" and joined with religious leaders at the YMCA to form a committee "to end labor disturbances, especially the shirtwaist strike." When statements of support from unions were read at one early meeting of the strikers and no financial assistance was included, one girl shouted: "What good are these resolutions? What do we give the landlord on New Year's—a resolution?" But many other unions and labor organizations did come forward with support, both financial and in less tangible forms of solidarity. As noted earlier, the trolleyman collected contributions for the strike as did many Jewish labor groups. The Central Labor Union appointed a committee composed of representatives from the cigarmakers, teamsters, bookbinders, upholsterers, and trolleyman to canvass other unions for monetary support. Frank Feeney, head of the Building Trades Council, denounced the arrest of pickets, provided bail for striker Hyman Petrovich, and declared that the Building Trades Council "was prepared to go bail for any amount in its efforts to aid the strikers." The miner's union local in Scranton contributed \$50 to the strike fund and miners' locals in Taylor held a mass meeting to raise money. And non-striking locals of other garment unions provided financial assistance.⁵²

At least as crucial as the official union support was the aid and solidarity expressed by ordinary working-class people throughout the city. The strikers were not alone in pressuring those still working to join the strike. Some strikebreakers visited Mayor Reyburn to ask his protection against strikers with hatpins; one continued: "But the men are the worst. . . . Why the motormen and the conductors on the cars help the strikers and countenance assaults on us. . . . A conductor on a Walnut Street car last night shouted after me, 'You dirty scab!'" Support came in various ways, such as the donation of bread to a fundraising benefit by union bakers. Perhaps the most successful demonstration of solidarity by the people of Philadelphia came on Sunday, January 30, when hundreds of volunteer collectors—none of them strikers—went door-to-door in many neighborhoods and raised between one and two thousand dollars. The previous Wednesday a Relief Committee had met at the Northern Liberties office of Dr. J. K. Jaffe and selected officers including general collector Joseph T. Connor and organizing committee George Cohen, B. Cooperstein, and Tema Camitta. As the names of the committee members attest, ethnic difference succumbed to a growing class consciousness.⁵³

Consistent support of the strikers' goal and their militant tactics came from most socialist organizations in the city as well. Several contributed financially and many took an active part in picketing, organizational work, and publicity. Mother Jones rallied strikers in meetings and on street corners throughout the city, and socialists organized a mass meeting addressed by William "Big Bill" Haywood of the Western Federation of Miners, an affiliate of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). He exhorted the strikers to stand by their union and reported that "the Western miners are hearty admirers of your courage and fighting qualities." He criticized male unionists who allowed "cops and thugs" to beat up women, and allegedly said, "Why for every girl that is slugged in this strike a cop ought to be sent to the hospital." Many socialists also had misgivings about the role of the strikers' wealthy supporters. While they recognized the value of their financial aid and their ability to generate much positive publicity, they saw another side to the "intrusion of society doves" who tried "to cover with soft down of smiling conciliation the hard, ugly lines of the class struggle."⁵⁴

If anyone did not understand why the workers treated their struggle as almost a matter of life and death, they got a tragic lesson shortly before noon on January 19. On the top floor of a converted warehouse at Dock and Chancellor streets a fire broke out in the shirtwaist company of Chachkin and Katz. Workers unable to escape through the smoke-clogged narrow passageways burned to death, while others fell to the concrete below: "Forms appeared at the windows of the fourth floor, and in a few minutes began to tumble into the street. The frightened girls did not actually jump, but rather seemed to shut their eyes and fall out." Five were pronounced dead on the spot, two more died within two days, and others were not expected to survive. Over a dozen were seriously injured. Coroner Ford condemned the building as a fire trap: "It was originally a warehouse and was converted into a factory. . . . It was full of board partitions where each small manufacturer had his own working people" with only a "narrow, dark stairway" for escape. He warned that "[t]here are hundreds of just such buildings as that one in this city." The forty-eight-year-old proprietor, Joseph Chachkin, was one of the injured, and among the dead were two of his daughters, sixteen-year-old Elizabeth and fourteen-year-old Rebecca. Two other victims had been walking the picket lines as recently as the previous week, but had been forced to return to work "because of the destitute conditions of their families." When Abraham Rosenberg announced the news of the fire to an overflowing meeting the next day and read the names of the former strikers who had

perished—Ida Greenburg and Rebecca Kauffman—their co-workers “broke down and wept bitterly.”⁵⁵ Almost every detail of the horror would be duplicated, at a much higher level of magnitude, the following year at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York.

In the final week of the strike most of the same themes seen earlier were continued, although often at a more intense level. Leo Becker claimed again that the manufacturers were no longer being hurt by the strike, then that owners would open a school to train new operators, and then that most firms would shut down operations in the city and move their machines elsewhere. Arrests rose to the highest level ever, but the week also began with the very successful city-wide collections and the Bill Haywood mass meeting. Divisions within union leadership between class-struggle and business-union advocates grew, as did attempts to split workers and supporters along ethnic lines. And the involvement of upper-middle-class reformers expanded as the Universal Peace Union took a central role in negotiations between union and management.

On Monday, January 31, the Manufacturers' Association declared it would open a school to train fifty new operators a week. The next day an editorial in the *Public Ledger* warned sharply of the limits polite society would place on its support of the strike. After praising the work of the women who “have been willing to give of their time and money on behalf of these poor girls,” it admonished the workers that “another class of allies has been attracted to the cause . . . which is likely to do it irreparable harm.” If the strikers were to listen to “the Haywoods and their kind . . . they will quickly lose all the support and sympathy they have won”; further, “all of the police severity that can legally be brought to bear upon them will be justified in the eyes of this community.” Abraham Rosenberg joined in the denunciation of the meeting organized by his colleague: “There is no socialism or anarchism in our strike.” He then went out of his way to dissociate himself from attacks on police: “We have no grudge against the police, that is, the police officials. Those in higher authority are in no way responsible . . . for the cases of so-called brutality. . . . The individual policemen—and some of them colored—are to blame for a great deal of the harsh treatment accorded to the young women.” Among the many arrests that day was that of Rosa Leisner, “accused of assaulting a colored girl as she was returning from work in a shirtwaist factory.”⁵⁶

By Wednesday police were rounding up record numbers of strikers but “prominent women who have heretofore furnished bail and paid their fines were absent from the hearings.” Meanwhile hearings were taking place on the

request of M. Haber Company for an injunction against the strike; Leo Becker testified that the firm had "suffered a loss of at least \$50,000" and strikebreaker Annie Gottlob testified that striker "Lizzie Gross had threatened to stick hatpins in her head and drink her blood." The following day saw two attempts to split the workers from their supporters by appeals to ethnic prejudice. Director Clay told the newspapers that four girls who were working during the strike—all American-born—had been attacked by three Russian girls with "snowballs, ice, tin cans and bricks." This sudden realization of the ethnic nature of the strike inspired him to collect statistics on arrests: he reported that of 285 strikers arrested in the first weeks of the strike, only 13 were of American birth—238 were from Russia, while he claimed that more than one-half of the victims of assault allegedly were native-born Americans (though newspaper reports suggest that the proportion was under one-third—most strikebreakers were, like most strikers, Jewish). The *Call* reported this story under the headline "Philadelphia's Safety Director Discovers That Waist Strikers Did Not Come on Mayflower." Even more incongruously, the manufacturers began trying to use the same ethnic tactics. In announcing the school to train replacement operators, "Mr. Haber, who is regarded as an authority, says that Gentile girls are in the future to be preferred for the work, as they are better educated and not so stupid as the immigrants."⁵⁷

Friday, February 4, 1910, was a critical day in the resolution of the strike. Arrests continued as usual, and a benefit at the Garrick Theatre featured Annie Yeamans—the "oldest actress in America"—and raised \$500 for the cause. But behind the scenes Alfred Love and Belva Lockwood of the Universal Peace Union had enlisted President William H. Taft in the effort to end the strike. At the request of Lockwood, Taft sent a letter urgently requesting both sides to come to a settlement. Love called both sides to a meeting at the Continental Hotel, showed them Taft's letter, and extracted concessions from both sides. He appears to have spent most of the day convincing union representatives that strikebreakers should not be let go to make room for strikers. After the union leaders conceded this point, "the bosses, somewhat ashamed, began to offer concessions . . . and the Shirt Waist Strike was settled." The strike was declared over on Saturday and representatives of the manufacturers and the union signed the agreement. It included a work week reduced from 56 to 52-and-one-half hours, increased wages, and an end to charges for needles or other supplies. The settlement explicitly recognized the union, but did not grant the closed shop. At the meeting on

Sunday formally presenting the agreement, strikers were "thrown into a state of delirium" when the victorious end of the strike was announced. Margaret Dreier Robins was given an ovation, but police prevented Isaac Dornblum from speaking. On Tuesday, February 8, strikers marched in ten parades to an equal number of meeting places to ratify the agreement. On Friday, the cutters, who had initially refused to accept the settlement, met and, after an address by Dornblum, voted to return to work.⁵⁸

Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Philadelphia Shirtwaist Strike

One of the central features of the strike, and the one which stood out above all others at the time, was the dominant role of young women—the "girl army," as the newspapers referred to them. Women comprised 85 percent of the workers in the industry, accounted for 83 percent of all the strikers named in newspaper reports, and were 84 percent of those arrested. Not only were the strikers' sex and age surprising to observers—so was their behavior. Confounding expectations of the press, and even of some "allies" and union leaders, the strikers appeared at once as intelligent and earnest advocates of their cause, as trouble-making and fun-loving girls who enjoyed "snowballing" scabs and "hooting" police, and as fashion-conscious young women immersed in American popular culture and intent on marriage. Though none of these characterizations, of course, fitted all the strikers, there was more than a grain of truth in each. Throughout, many of the strikers typified the entitlement, pride, and struggle of Nan Enstad's "working ladies," and many of them seamlessly combined adoption of American consumerism with an almost revolutionary determination to win respect for themselves and recognition for their union.

How can we explain the transformation of these young women into the "Girl Army" that held out until their goal of union recognition was achieved? As the narrative of the strike makes clear, at the core of this metamorphosis was the growing significance of class in their lives, beginning before the strike but escalating dramatically in the course of that struggle. At some point during the strike for most shirtwaist workers, "class" became the main way they looked at their world.

The underlying precondition for this outcome was the reality of class in their lives: the large factories that increasingly made up the shirtwaist industry, rising levels of work discipline, the unity of the large manufacturers

arrayed against them, violence by police and company thugs, and the support of working-class Philadelphia, on the verge of the great General Strike. The reality of class was translated into class consciousness not only as a result of everyday experiences, but also through the passionate arguments of socialists and anarchists in strike meetings and in newspapers like the *Call* and the Yiddish *Forward*. In the milieu of the strike, class analysis worked. Other influences in the lives of the shirtwaist makers tied to gender, age, and ethnicity were undergoing their own dramatic transformations, but without detracting from, and in many cases strengthening, the impact and consciousness of class.

In this environment, “working ladyhood” was manifested in a vision of an ideal union, led by rank-and-file chairladies and united with their male co-workers, their Jewish communities, and working-class Philadelphia. In this ideal they could take their rightful place as modern American women and workers, entitled to share in the fruits of their labor and the bounty of American consumerism. Their identities were multifaceted but increasingly class-centered, and their spirit of entitlement and solidarity compelled them to fight for total victory using whatever tactics were required, despite counsels toward moderation by reformers and official union leaders. Union president Rosenberg fought an ongoing battle with his own union members about the meaning of the union and the strike; at the conclusion of the strike, he warned that “girls who found fault” with the settlement were “like anarchists, against all government and yet unable to offer anything to take its place.” To his “business proposition” the strikers counterposed their ideal union—an example of what Ardis Cameron calls women strikers’ “totality of vision.”⁵⁹

The narrative of the strike makes clear the complexities, the personalities, and the historical contingencies that made up the day-to-day life of the Philadelphia shirtwaist strike. Certain themes were repeated throughout that struggle. At the base of the world of the shirtwaist makers lay structural changes that were transforming the early-twentieth-century garment industry. Philadelphia had long been the center of “proprietary capitalism” rather than the home of one or a few massive industrial establishments. Nowhere was this truer than in clothing manufacture where, even in the first decade of the twentieth century, cutters could advance through the role of subcontractor to become small manufacturers. Yet even here, fundamental changes were reorganizing the industry. A handful of large manufacturers rapidly consolidated control of the new shirtwaist

segment of garment manufacture. Small manufacturers and subcontractors were still numerous, but they occupied an essentially different role from what had been the norm in garment manufacture a few decades earlier. Rather than making up a diffuse set of artisanal producers operating in a competitive marketplace, the small producers of 1909 occupied a distinctly subservient position in the industry, typically working on contracts for the large manufacturers. Even among the large manufacturers, a few firms dominated, like the Haber company. When some firms began to settle with the union at the start of the strike, Haber and a handful of others forced the recalcitrant companies into line by threatening to cut off their supplies of capital and raw materials.⁶⁰

As the typical workplace changed from small family-oriented shops to large impersonal establishments, the experience for the workers was equally transformed. In earlier years, young women had often obtained employment in small shops through family connections, and employees included the owner's relatives as well as men and women of widely varying ages. For example, Joseph Chachkin's small establishment on the fourth floor of a partitioned former warehouse (the site of the tragic fire of January 19, 1910) employed the proprietor, eleven male workers, from fifteen-year-old Leo Petil to sixty-two-year-old Joseph Silverberg, and six female workers, including two of the owner's daughters. In contrast, M. Haber employed about eight hundred young women and one hundred men. As Susan Glenn has argued, these large factories attracted young women eager to earn the often slightly higher wages and escape the small patriarchal shops reminiscent of the Old World. The large shops became "sites of sociability" and "informal schools" that acted to build workers' identity as members of a collectivity, distinct from the owners.⁶¹

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 1907, and in the city where Frederick Taylor pioneered his "scientific management," many shirtwaist workers reported increasingly severe work discipline in the big factories. In their efforts to get as much work as possible for the least cost, manufacturers repeatedly cut pay rates in the years leading to 1909. But their efforts to rationalize production also reduced the workers to mere parts of the machinery; employees complained of "being regarded by the 'boss' as though they belonged to an infinitely inferior order of beings" and of the "tyranny of certain forewomen."⁶²

A further consequence of the drive to reduce production costs was the employment of ever younger workers. This demographic change in the workforce likely contributed to the militancy of the strike. Such workers probably

had fewer responsibilities than did older ones, and, as Elizabeth Ewen has noted, most young shirtwaist workers lived at home. As is clear from incidents described above, many employees exemplified the rebellious style noted by historians of other youthful strikers of this period. Female strikers in 1909 Philadelphia were, on average, younger than women workers overall in the industry—the median age of shirtwaist workers was twenty years old, while the median age for the twenty-three strikers whose ages were listed in the newspapers was seventeen years old.⁶³

Another characteristic of the youth culture of the strikers was a strong heterosexual orientation, in contrast to the homosocial traditions of many of the middle-class reformers aiding the strike. Confirming similar evidence from other cities, the strikers of 1909 were “dance mad” and many of their activities during the strike brought them into close social contact with men, both other strikers and supporters from other unions. Glenn concluded that this characteristic demonstrated “an evolving notion of partnership and coparticipation with men along class and community lines,” even in the New York strike, where women often were more militant than men and where male strikers went back to work before female strikers did. Glenn’s hypothesis is at least as true for Philadelphia, where men fully participated in strike activity and returned to work only after the women had. Men comprised about 15 percent of all shirtwaist workers and a similar proportion of those arrested. While the strikers of 1909 may not have been aware of it, such cross-sex solidarity had some precedents in Philadelphia. Twenty-five years earlier men of the Knights of Labor had struck in sympathy with female carpet makers, even though they had no demands of their own.⁶⁴

Despite tentative steps toward this “evolving partnership,” men and women still occupied very different positions in the workplace, the community, and the family, and faced different expectations. Women overwhelmingly left the world of factory work at marriage; the topic of marriage and weddings occupied an important place in their lives. Even during the strike discussions of marriage continued. One newspaper reported, above photographs of two strikers, about “Shirtwaist Girls Who Found Marriage a Strike Panacea.” While this was reported as an “escape,” the marriages were not viewed as contradictory to the workers’ struggles: to recall Glenn’s apt description of these women’s dreams, they could easily “embrace romantic images of marriage and equally romantic visions of class struggle.” According to the newspaper, both weddings had been postponed due to the strike. For Dora Horowitz, “[l]oyalty to the union and her friends caused Miss Horowitz

to ask a postponement in order that she might devote all her time to working for the cause. When her shop was reopened to union girls, [her fiancé Hyman] Glick interposed, and the wedding is scheduled to take place early next month." The world of the shirtwaist strike did not preclude expectations of marriage, but did provide an arena for women and men to join as partners in new ways as well. This limited reconstitution of male-female relationships strengthened the new notion of marriage for love that many younger immigrants were embracing as part of their transformation into modern Americans even as it reinforced consciousness of their common membership in the working class. Even "Big Bill" Haywood reflected this attitude toward the compatibility of marriage and class struggle when, after praising the militancy of the Philadelphia "girl" strikers, he suggested that any strikers who wanted to get married could readily do so by placing an advertisement in the *Miners' Magazine*.⁶⁵



FIGURE 5: Many posed photographs of strikers in the Philadelphia newspapers focused on their fashionable dress. Source: *Philadelphia Press*, December 25, 1909.

Many young shirtwaist workers also embraced American high fashion, or at least cheap imitations of fashionable clothing that they could afford to buy or were able to make. Most of the newspaper photographs of strikers showed young women in feathered hats and fancy shirtwaists, and reporters pointed out strikers' fashionable clothing in a few articles (Figure 5). Most of the photographs appear posed, however, and in one apparently unposed photograph of strikers marching from union headquarters to a mass meeting, women in shawls and plain clothing can be seen as well as fashionably dressed strikers (Figure 6). Thus, at least in Philadelphia, fashion may have occupied a less significant role in shirtwaist makers' lives than in Enstad's reading of the New York strike. For many Philadelphia strikers fashionable clothing was certainly an indicator of their sense of entitlement to full participation in modern America, yet it was only one of several dimensions along which these women were experimenting as they created new identities in a changing world. In any case, as Sarah Eisenstein has argued, work outside the home was an important influence in the development of a sense of identity for working-class women. Almost every contemporary commentator on the strike spoke of its transformative effect on the participants, not only in confirming their sense of power, but also in opening up wider vistas for their intellectual development and, in general, for "becoming more fully human." Ally Constance Biddle noted that the girls were "spending much of their time over books," and that they were "keenly alive intellectually." Day after day they attended meetings and debated tactics as well as standing up against police and hired thugs on the streets. In the course of the strike, networks of friendship begun in the shops developed further. Alice Henry wrote in 1915 that the shirtwaist strikers were "transformed by the revolution through which they have passed."⁶⁶

The most remarkable fact about these transformations is that they happened with virtually no encouragement from the nominal leaders, the male officials of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (though local union leadership, which included some women, was more in tune with the hopes and demands of the rank and file). The International was instrumental in initiating the strike, but even in the first days the ones who rallied the strikers were Mother Jones and a local female leader of the Socialist party, quickly joined by rank-and-file chairwomen from each shop. By the fourth day of the strike, women from the College Settlement were providing lunches and WTUL leader Margaret Dreier Robins was putting in place a solid support organization. Even at the start Abraham Rosenberg was reported to have little faith in the women's ability to conduct an effective strike, and when

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FIGURE 6: A march from union headquarters to a mass meeting, showing strikers in both Old World and fashionable dress. Source: *Philadelphia Press*, December 23, 1909.

he reached an agreement with the manufacturers he expected the "girls" to fall in line. Yet despite the divergence in understanding the meaning of the strike, between the male leadership of the International on the one hand and the mostly female strikers on the other, the strike seemed to harden the women's resolve in pursuing the class battle against their employers, in unity with their male co-workers and a large segment of working-class Philadelphia. Women garment workers, unlike men, had no chance at upward mobility in the industry, and thus there was no safety valve that could absorb the most active women or act as a potential prize that could be won by working hard. When the spark was lit, their grievances and frustrations exploded in a strike that meant far more to them than just a "business proposition"; they had nothing to lose—as one girl said: "We live not much on forty-nine cents a day." Though Rosenberg and the International leadership considered the Philadelphia strike a mere business proposition, local leaders were aware of the greater significance the shirtwaist workers attached to the strike, and they appear to have shared many of the same concerns. In addition to socialist Barney Bichovsky and picket captain Isaac Dornblum, both of whom Rosenberg and city officials castigated for alleged radicalism, Local 15 secretary Isadore Sack usually appears in press accounts taking the side of the rank and file. Sack led a delegation that included two women to the Central Labor Union meeting in December to seek support of the city-wide council, and two weeks into the strike presented a resolution to the same body outlining the strikers' grievances. Significantly, these included a demand that never appeared in the list Rosenberg provided to the newspapers, one that emanated from the bitter daily experience of the women: "4th. Freedom from abusive and

insulting language by those in authority in the shops. We should have the right to work without surrender of our selfrespect [*sic*]. No decent woman should be subjected by fear of the loss of her job to unwarranted insults." Enstad convincingly argues that similar "unofficial" demands in New York pointed to an important "emerging critique of sexual harassment by working-class women." Such harassment undoubtedly hardened the strikers' antipathy to their bosses and their resolve to hold out for a new compact with their employers that included more than increased wages.⁶⁷

The role and significance of the two groups who received most of the attention in the press and in official histories—the allies and the union leadership—were complex and ambiguous. Both the official union and the supporters from the Progressive reform movement were crucial in the strike, but the strikers and the rank-and-file leadership that emerged in the course of the conflict were most responsible for the ultimate victory.

Many unions in this period were reluctant to organize women at all. In the clothing industry, and its shirtwaist segment in particular, this was not a realistic option—in many parts of the business women made up the overwhelming majority of workers. But while women were often taken into the union, men comprised most of the leadership, and a gentleman's agreement reserved the top jobs, those of the cutters, for men alone. Many manufacturers and union officials shared similar backgrounds—often both had risen from the ranks of the cutters. While they could be bitter adversaries during a strike, they could shake hands afterward and move on (in earlier decades it was tradition for the owner to provide a keg of beer at this point). Their "shared manliness" separated them from the women who worked for them or who were members of their union. As noted above, Local 15's leaders included men and women who were still close to the rank and file and supported their demands, but the local was small and had few resources. With the assumption of control of the strike by the International, the workers had to rely on their own abilities and strengths, and the work of support and organization fell to others: other working-class Philadelphians, and women of a different class, who recognized the special requirements necessary for organizing women. Fortuitously, a branch of the Progressive reform movement had taken up the struggle of working women; they brought to their work, however, a class perspective that had its own consequences.⁶⁸

There can be no doubt of the sincerity and dedication of Margaret Dreier Robins and the other women of the WTUL and the College Settlement. They worked tirelessly during the strike, providing meals to the pickets, risking

arrest, raising money, and gaining a level of sympathetic publicity for the strikers that they could not have achieved without the work of the allies. They in turn were energized by the spontaneous enthusiasm of the strikers. Louise Elder of Bryn Mawr wrote to the *Public Ledger*: "No lover of stirring and inspiring sights should lose a mass-meeting of the Philadelphia shirt-waist strikers. To sit where one faces these young people, tier upon tier, as they listen, absorbed and unself-conscious, to the speakers—how strange and new and shining in this corrupted and weary city . . ." It is likely that the victory could not have been achieved without the allies.

Nonetheless, the two classes of women had differing conceptions of the meaning and place of work in working women's lives, and of the goals and appropriate tactics of the strike. For the professionals and the independently wealthy women who were the allies, their mission was essentially one of relieving misery and uplifting "poor immigrant girls." While the WTUL and College Settlement women were also committed to the goal of union recognition and supported the strikers consistently, the next wave of allies won to the cause was more timid. The Pennsylvania Women's Suffrage Association hesitantly came on board, but they were most comfortable in providing support from within their drawing rooms, with perhaps a single striker present for authenticity. The Consumers' League went out of its way to maintain its status as "an entirely neutral body," although the arrest of one of its members while engaged in an investigation of conditions in shirt-waist factories pushed it toward taking a stand in favor of the strikers. Its statements were so qualified, however, that opponents of the strike claimed that the League's findings supported their position. League director Florence Sanville finally wrote a letter to the newspapers explaining once and for all that they did in fact support the strikers; it was published four days after the strike ended. The final set of reformers to get involved, such as the Universal Peace Union, refused to take sides officially at all—their goal was simply to end the disturbance by mediation.⁶⁹

The most consistent of the allies, the WTUL, had its beginnings in an attempt at "cross-class cooperation."⁷⁰ It had attracted some working-class members, but these found in the League a "denial of the realities of class, of struggle, of [their] own experience." When well-meaning allies took a few strikers to elite drawing rooms to plead their case before wealthy women, the reality of class difference was brought home to the workers even while they valued the opportunity to build solidarity with other women. The allies were sincere reformers who wanted to help their less fortunate sisters, but they had

their own ideas about how this should be accomplished: "The idea," in Meredith Tax's words, "was not to transform existing class relations but to duplicate them while creating a benevolent elite that would function on behalf of the masses of working-class women."⁷¹ In the Philadelphia strike a patronizing undercurrent was present in many statements by allies, and there was occasional resentment by workers who, in general, appreciated the help they were receiving. The allies considered that "in extending the practical aid of their own personal ministrations to these wage-earners, many of whom are prevented by their ignorance from helping themselves, the society women of Philadelphia have only done what any woman may feel compelled by her own innate sense of justice and humanity to do." One young striker, speaking partly in Yiddish and partly in broken English, reacted negatively to their ministrations, calling society women hypocrites: "Is it that I should be compelled to hear about the Christ at some mission or starve to death?"⁷² Strikers and allies also had differing ideas about what it meant to be a young woman in 1909 America: many shirtwaist makers were avid enthusiasts of dances and popular culture, which middle-class reformers saw as "sites of vice" or, at best, distractions from the serious work of uplift. The strongly heterosocial orientation of the strikers frequently clashed with ideals advanced by allies.⁷³

The most significant divergence between strikers and allies in Philadelphia concerned what methods should be used to achieve the goals of the workers. Once they had struck, the workers refused to compromise on union recognition and they were willing to use forceful methods to make the strike successful. The allies, on the other hand, encouraged compromise and conciliation, opposed any but peaceful tactics, and generally wanted to eliminate strikes and class conflict. The strikers gratefully accepted the allies' help, but ignored calls for compromise and escalated their efforts to shut down factories. Their most dedicated supporters in the WTUL and College Settlement repeatedly tried to stop the strikers from attacking those still working. The other reformers who took an interest in the strike were even more eager to eliminate antagonisms between the classes. The strangest statement of this position appeared in the journal of the American Federation of Labor:

Much of this class difference would disappear if there were a better understanding. . . . [I]f there is injustice and inequality and evils born of both, if we encounter greed and avarice and misused power, if we find wrong wearing right's face—do not let us foster within our souls malice, hatred and uncharitableness, believing that in destruction we shall find the

remedy. Think of the curative power of warmth and of sunshine! . . . Let the working women of America and the employers of America and the women of leisure in America strive to understand each other.

The reformer whose efforts led most directly to the end of the strike, Alfred H. Love of the Universal Peace Union, was opposed to strikes for practical reasons as well as idealistic ones. As proprietor of a successful business in "Cotton and Woolen Goods," interruptions in delivery of goods due to strikes were detrimental to the stable conduct of business. In the middle of the strike he had presented to the Chamber of Commerce of Philadelphia an eleven-point plan for the prevention of strikes, which was unanimously adopted by the Chamber. Though he played the role of impartial mediator, most of his efforts consisted of winning the union leadership to acceptance of the owners' demand not to replace strikebreakers with strikers. Overall, the ideas of the allies and other reformers were very different from those of the workers, and the striking women accepted them selectively.⁷⁴

Though the strikers received little encouragement from their union leaders and rejected the conciliationist advice of the allies, they were nonetheless able to develop and maintain the militant solidarity that became the hallmark of the strike. The collective experience of working in industry flourished in the collective world of the strike and, as Ardis Cameron noted for the 1912 Lawrence strike, "participation in militancy was itself a radicalizing process." For those seven weeks everything revolved around the union and the strike: picketing, arrests, court hearings, meetings, dances, concerts, and always the constant discussions and debates. Richard Oestreicher identified a similar "subculture of opposition" as the essential ingredient in the success of the labor movement in Detroit in the 1880s. In this milieu in Philadelphia rank-and-file leaders emerged and quickly won the allegiance and commitment of the strikers: "They are very grateful to any one of their number who reveals the capacity for leadership, and they trustfully commit their cause to the hands and heads of these more eloquent spokesmen." Many of these new leaders were the shop chairwomen who played a central role in maintaining a united front of the workers against capitulation by officials of the International.⁷⁵

The strikers came to rely on themselves and their own grassroots leaders, but they were not alone in their steadfast opposition to the manufacturers. They could see that a large section of working-class Philadelphia was with them, from trolley conductors harassing scabs to the nickels and dimes collected in the car barns and door-to-door in the neighborhoods. The

seventeen-year-old strike leader at the Max Clair plant, Mary Loney, reported that "the people are with us in this part of the city." Other unionists had been victims of police abuse during strikes, and the women in 1909 proved themselves on the picket lines and won the support of those with whom they had shared experiences. The shirtwaist makers' stance was validated on a more intellectual level by their supporters in the Socialist Party, who also joined them on the picket lines and in the meeting halls but did not counsel them to tone down their demands or actions. The class solidarity they heard from the socialists and saw from their neighbors was reflected by the unified stance of their adversaries. The city government, police, and courts had rallied to the side of the manufacturers, overcoming any alleged ethnic or religious divisions, and even some of the reformers' actions seemed motivated more by class interests than selfless charity. The strikers also soon learned that solidarity was more than just a noble but naive ideal: it was the most effective weapon they had. As the socialist union organizer reminded them, "the bosses advertise for girls, not machines," and they saw that without them the manufacturers were thwarted in their attempts to satisfy more than a fraction of their orders.⁷⁶

The solidarity of class and the bonds of sisterhood combined to make possible the victory of the shirtwaist workers, but these were joined by a cohesion based on ethnic identity that both provided additional sources of strength yet threatened to shatter the class unity that was the basis of their power. The Jewish community and many of its institutions furnished a supportive environment for the strikers, and Jewish tradition accepted women working outside the home. Further, a strong element of socialist and anarchist radicalism provided ready sources of support for the strike from within the strikers' own neighborhoods. Yet the exclusivity of the industry shut out others; the owners tried to take advantage of this to exacerbate ethnic tensions within the workforce. They encouraged the Italian women who worked in the industry to continue working during the strike, and many of them did, not feeling especially welcome in union meetings where the primary language was Yiddish and no one spoke Italian. They did the same with white native-born Americans, appealing to their allegedly higher status. And they finally opened their doors to African Americans, as long as they could use them as strike-breakers. Predictably, fights broke out between strikers and these women from other backgrounds, and several strikers were arrested for attacking Italians and African Americans. This potentially fatal flaw in the workers' unity did not prove decisive because the industry was overwhelmingly Jewish. The few

non-Jews in the shops could do only a small portion of the work; it would have taken a long time to train sufficient replacements. In fact, the majority of the strikebreakers were also Jewish and lived in the same neighborhoods as the strikers (Figure 1). Middle-class leaders of the Jewish community opposed the strike, though they recognized the validity of many of the workers' complaints. For the future, they echoed the goals of the Anglo-Saxon reformers in wishing that "[t]here should be some better way of adjusting difficulties of this kind, unless we are prepared to accept the Socialistic theory of a class war."⁷⁷ For the large manufacturers themselves, ethnic loyalties were easily sidestepped when their class interests were threatened—they found themselves solidly united with the Gentile leadership of the city and police.

The Philadelphia shirtwaist strike, in sum, exemplified the emerging movement of women workers at the turn of the twentieth century. In many ways this episode in Philadelphia's history confirms the findings of scholars of other working women's movements in this period. Yet the strike also challenges certain understandings about what motivated those women to engage in the dramatic actions that so fascinated their contemporaries, not to mention historians ever since. Virtually all studies on the subject since the 1980s have put to rest any myths about the docility of young working women, and the Philadelphia strike is no exception. However, one of the critical factors, according to Stephen Norwood, in the success of the Boston telephone operators—a strong pre-existing women's movement—appears to have been less significant in Philadelphia. Unlike the Boston case, in Philadelphia there was no chapter of the WTUL until after the strike and the suffrage movement was little concerned with working women or their issues. The activities of the WTUL's Margaret Dreier Robins—after her arrival during the first week of the strike—were crucial to its success, but cannot have played any part in the enthusiasm and militancy visible at the very start. Her counsels of peace and reconciliation between classes were ignored. Norwood's point may be more helpful in explaining the subsequent rockier road traversed by Philadelphia's ILGWU when compared to the Boston telephone operators' union, but we are left with the question of what inspired and sustained the Philadelphia shirtwaist makers in their struggle. Similarly, Nan Enstad's contributions are useful in explaining how many of the workers combined "ladyhood" and radicalism. She correctly notes that aspects of popular culture were sometimes utilized in creating the sense of adventure and entitlement characteristic of the strike. Yet still we are left wondering what conditions impelled these young women to use these cultural constructs to build a radical fight for

recognition of their union. The story of the Philadelphia shirtwaist strike suggests that the reality of class in their lives, and their growing consciousness of class, led them (and the other women workers who were less engaged with popular culture) inexorably toward such a battle. Arising from structural upheavals in industrial capitalism and interpreted day in and day out by socialists and anarchists in their midst, the notion of class struggle fused with evolving conceptions of gender and ethnicity that transformed the shirtwaist makers into full members of Philadelphia's working class. Within weeks after the strike, 146,000 workers, many of whom had supported the shirtwaist strikers in sundry ways, joined together in Philadelphia's only general strike.

The struggle for union recognition in the garment industry that blossomed in 1909 achieved victory in the 1930s, though the fight for gender equality always ran second and never reached the same level of success. Still, the improvement in material conditions undeniably bettered the lives of the women working in the industry. Many observers today are alarmed that the gains won in the New Deal and World War II are being dismantled and fear that the United States is returning to a class-polarized society with much in common with that of the early twentieth century.⁷⁸ These concerns and evidence of the return of sweatshops have generated another movement, but one complicated by the spread of garment shops far beyond New York or Philadelphia. The resurrection of almost every feature of the early-twentieth-century industry is startling, in particular the construction of a gendered, low-wage workforce comprised of young women considered flexible and temporary and too docile to join unions. In 1909 the women of Philadelphia and New York took the first giant steps in overturning this construction. The new movement will need to challenge it again, with the women garment workers themselves at the center of the battle.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Kenneth Kusmer, Sharon McConnell Sidorick, and several anonymous readers for helpful comments and suggestions.
2. Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, January 17, 1910.
3. *Public Ledger*, January 28, 1910; Nancy MacLean, *The Culture of Resistance: Female Institution Building in the ILGWU* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1982), 26. MacLean, however, was referring to the New York strike and the impact of the Women's Trade Union League.
4. On the New York shirtwaist strike, see below. For other examples of working-class female militancy see Stephen H. Norwood, *Labor's Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878–1923*

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- (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); and Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986): 354-382.
5. Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the ILGWU* (New York: B.W.Huebsch, 1924); Ann Schofield, "The Uprising of the 20,000: The Making of a Labor Legend," in *A Needle, a Bobbin, a Strike: Women Needleworkers in America*, ed. Joan Jensen and Sue Davidson (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).
 6. Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: Free Press, 1979); Barbara Klaczynska, "Working Women in Philadelphia, 1900-1930" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1975); Howard Harris, ed., *Keystone of Democracy: A History of Pennsylvania Workers* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1999).
 7. In addition to Enstad and Glenn, two excellent earlier works on the New York strike are Meredith Tax, *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980) and MacLean, *Culture of Resistance*.
 8. See a short bibliography of popular works on the fire at the excellent web site of the Kheel Center at Cornell: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>. The program "Sweatshops Then and Now" was held on March 24, 2000 at Philadelphia UNITE! headquarters and was cosponsored by the Jewish Labor Committee, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, Philaposh, United Students Against Sweatshops, UNITE!, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.
 9. Philip Davis, "The Shirtwaist Makers' Strike," *Chautauquan* 59 (June-August 1910): 103.
 10. Levine, *Women's Garment Workers*, 5-99; Pearl Goodman and Elsa Ueland, "The Shirtwaist Trade," *Journal of Political Economy* 18 (1910): 823.
 11. Levine, *Women's Garment Workers*, 18-21; Goodman and Ueland, "Shirtwaist Trade," 819; Leon Stein, ed., *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977), xv, 44-45; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 77-78, 99-100.
 12. Sarah Eisenstein, *Give Us Bread But Give Us Roses: Working Women's Consciousness in the United States, 1890 to the First World War* (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1983), 13. Of course, the increase in the number of working women resulted from both the growth in population, largely a result of the wave of "new" immigration, and an increase in the proportion of women working for wages.
 13. Emmett H. Welch, *Employment Trends in Philadelphia* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, 1933), 54.
 14. Scott Nearing, *Wages in the United States, 1908-1910* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), iii, 142.
 15. *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1910), 313-331.
 16. *Ibid.*, 165.
 17. Tax, *Rising of the Women*, 209.

18. *Report on Condition*, 313–331; United States Census, 1910.
19. Joan Jensen, "The Great Uprisings: 1900–1920," in *A Needle, A Bobbin*, ed. Jensen and Davidson, 87; Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 145.
20. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 166.
21. Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 40, 152–155; Levine, *Women's Garment Workers*, 14, 581, 595. An A. Axelord, very likely the same person, was arrested for assault and battery in the Philadelphia strike; *New York Call*, January 10, 1910.
22. Daniel Soyer, "Class Conscious Workers as Immigrant Entrepreneurs: The Ambiguity of Class among Eastern European Jewish Immigrants to the United States at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Labor History* 42 (2001): 45–59.
23. Caroline Golab, *Immigrant Destinations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), 183. The classic account of Jewish immigrants and their communities remains Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); see especially chaps. 5 and 9. The percentage of African Americans in the workforce of the shirtwaist industry reached only one percent as late as 1915.
24. Jensen, "Great Uprisings," 84; Rakhmiel Peltz, *From Immigrant to Ethnic Culture: American Yiddish in South Philadelphia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 16.
25. Map compiled from addresses of 158 shirtwaist workers listed in *Public Ledger* and *New York Call* between December 20, 1909 and February 6, 1910; 113 strikers, 26 strikebreakers, and 19 fire victims.
26. Peltz, *From Immigrant to Ethnic Culture*, 14–17; Levine, *Women's Garment Workers*, 44; Harry D. Boonin, *The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia: A History and Guide, 1881–1930* (Philadelphia: Jewish Walking Tours of Philadelphia, 1999).
27. On two blocks in their neighborhoods between 83 and 92 percent of the 833 residents were Jewish in 1910. United States Census, 1910. Data are from the 200 block of Catharine Street and the 900 block of North Marshall Street; the large manufacturer Leo Becker lived at 4204 Parkside Avenue.
28. Peltz, *From Immigrant to Ethnic Culture*, 25; Anna Davies, "The Philadelphia Settlement: Report of the Headworker," in *Eighteenth Annual Report of the College Settlements Association* (Boston: College Settlements Association, 1907); *Jewish Exponent*, December 31, 1909.
29. Elaine Gale Wrong, *The Negro in the Apparel Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), 28; Consumers' League of Eastern Pennsylvania, *Colored Women as Industrial Workers in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The League, 1919–1920), 27; Alice Henry, *The Trade Union Woman* (New York: B. Franklin, 1973 [1915]), 96.
30. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 327; *New York Call*, December 15, 1909; *Public Ledger*, December 13, 1909 and February 9, 1910. Philadelphians had a wide choice in newspapers in 1909, with over a dozen competing for readers, ranging from the quirky and irregular *Daily News* to the "respectable" *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Both those papers virtually ignored the strike, though the *Inquirer* occasionally ran a small article in the back pages. More useful were the *Public Ledger*, the *North American*, the *Evening Star*, and the *Evening Telegraph*, which all carried frequent front page stories, though coverage in all dropped over the seven weeks of the strike. Apparently multiple reporters at each paper covered the strike, as suggested by differences in style and contradictory content (e.g., an *Evening Star* headline on December 30 read "Girl Strikers Meet Privation . . . Dire Need of Funds," followed the next day by an article headlined "Spirits and Finances High"). The

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muckraking *Evening Times* billed itself a pro-labor paper and provided the most extensive and sympathetic coverage in the first days of the strike, but its interest quickly waned as a monster snow-storm and a missing heiress replaced the strike on the front pages, and minutes of the Central Labor Union reveal much antagonism toward the paper. Of all the papers, the *Public Ledger* was probably the most consistent in its coverage and I have used it to provide the base for my narrative, supplemented by the *New York Call*, which provided daily coverage of the Philadelphia strike from the important socialist perspective (as did the Yiddish *New York Forward*), and by occasional articles from other papers.

31. *Public Ledger*, December 20, 1909.
32. *Public Ledger*, December 20, 1909; *Call*, December 21, 1909.
33. *Public Ledger*, December 21, 1909.
34. *Public Ledger*, December 22, 1909; *Call*, December 22 and 23, 1909.
35. *Public Ledger*, December 21, 22 and 24, 1909; *Call*, December 24 and 25, 1909.
36. *North American*, December 21, 1909; *Call*, December 22 and 29, 1909; *Public Ledger*, January 4, 5, 6 and 7, 1910. The picture of the four Philadelphia girl strikers, aged 12 to 14, first appeared in the Philadelphia *North American* with the caption "Figures in the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike. . . . The illustration shows four of the youngest strikers. . . ."; the *New York Call* reprinted the picture the next day, but with the headline "Mere Children Involved in the Philadelphia Waist Strike" and a new caption: "Chapter I., verse I. Gospel according to St. Greed: 'Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Profit.'"
37. *Call*, December 30, 1909.
38. *Public Ledger*, February 4, 1910 and December 26, 1909; *Call*, December 27, 1909.
39. *Call*, December 27, 1909; *Public Ledger*, January 3, 1910.
40. *Public Ledger*, December 28 and 29, 1909; January 1, 4, 12, 16 and February 3, 1910.
41. *Call*, December 29, 1909 and January 4, 1910; *Public Ledger*, January 7, 1910. Perhaps these African-American socialists were the workers WTUL officer Elizabeth Dutcher was referring to in her letter to W. E. B. DuBois's *Horizon* magazine a few weeks after the strike: "In Philadelphia several of the girls going on strike were colored girls and two of these were the best pickets the union had." No other mention of these strikers was found in any sources consulted for this essay. *Horizon*, May 1910, quoted in American Social History Project, Heaven Video Text, <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/ashp/heaven/text2.html>.
42. *Call*, December 24, 28 and 29, 1909.
43. *Public Ledger*, January 12 and 15, 1910; *Call*, January 26, 1910.
44. *Public Ledger*, January 24, 1910. The data on strikers were compiled from all issues of the *Public Ledger* and the *New York Call* between December 20, 1909 and February 12, 1910.
45. *Call*, January 5 and 8, 1910; *Public Ledger*, January 7 and 14, 1910; *Jewish Exponent*, December 31, 1909 and January 14, 1910; *Twenty-fifth Anniversary, February 8, 1885-February 8, 1910* (Philadelphia: Young Women's Union of Philadelphia, 1910).
46. *Public Ledger*, January 20, 24 and 27, February 5 and 6, 1910. The Universal Peace Union, which was to become central to the resolution of the strike, was a well known organization dedicated to finding peaceful solutions to the world's problems, including class warfare. It was founded in 1866, in reaction to the compromising approach of the American Peace Society during the Civil War.

47. *Call*, January 11, 1910; *Public Ledger*, January 7, 12, 13 and 19, 1910; Lucy Perkins Carner, *The Settlement Way in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Federation of Settlements, 1964), 11.
48. *Call*, January 19, 1910; *Public Ledger*, January 11, 30 and 31, 1910.
49. *Call*, January 12, 1910; *Public Ledger*, January 13 and 14, February 2 and 5, 1910.
50. *Call*, January 5 and 13, 1910; *Public Ledger*, January 4, 5, 8, 11, 12, 13, 19, 22, February 3, 4, 5, 1910.
51. *Public Ledger*, December 24, 1909, January 13, 15, 18, 23 and 30, February 2, 6 and 7, 1910; *Call*, December 31, 1909, January 30, 1910.
52. *Public Ledger*, December 26, 1909, January 7, 8, 10 and 23, 1910; *Call*, February 5, 1910.
53. *Public Ledger*, January 14 and 15, 1910; *Call*, January 27 and 31, 1910.
54. *Call*, December 28, 1909, January 31, 1910.
55. *Public Ledger*, January 20 and 22, 1910.
56. *Public Ledger*, February 1 and 2, 1910. The bitter antagonism of Rosenberg toward Haywood was in interesting contrast to his toleration of that other well-known socialist, Mother Jones. Perhaps she was too well respected for him to attack openly, or perhaps he did not feel as threatened by a woman radical.
57. *Public Ledger*, February 3 and 4, 1910; *Call*, February 5, 1910. The threat to favor gentile workers may have had some basis in previous employment practices; according to Susan Glenn, "the few modern factories under Jewish ownership [in Eastern Europe] tended to favor gentile workers." Glenn, *Daughters of the Shirt*, 32.
58. *Public Ledger*, February 5, 6, 7, 9 and 12, 1910; Belva Lockwood, "How I Helped to Settle the Shirt Waist Strike in Philadelphia," n.d., Belva Lockwood papers, box 1, series II, folder c5, Swarthmore College Peace Collection; Alfred H. Love, Diaries v. 24-25, February 4, 1910, Universal Peace Union papers, box 15, series II, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.
59. I prefer Cameron's phrase "totality of vision" to Enstad's "utopian entitlement," as the latter phrase implies the unattainability of the strikers' goals. Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1869-1912* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 164; *Public Ledger*, February 9, 1910.
60. On Philadelphia's predominant type of industrial establishment, see Philip Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism: The Textile Manufacture at Philadelphia, 1800-1885* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840-1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), chap. 1; *Public Ledger*, December 30, 1909.
61. *Public Ledger*, January 20, 1910; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 45; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shirt*, 154.
62. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shirt*, 153; on Taylor and Taylorism, see Dan Clawson, *Bureaucracy and the Labor Process* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), chap. 6; *Public Ledger*, January 13, February 5, 1910.
63. Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 252; Norwood, *Labor's Flaming Youth*, 7-8; data on strikers are from all issues of the *Public Ledger* and the New York *Call* between December 20, 1909 and February 12, 1910. College Settlement headworker Anna Davies stated that the average age of strikers was 16; *Public Ledger*, February 5, 1910.

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64. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, chap. 4; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 6; Susan Levine, *Labor's True Woman: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization, and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), chap. 4.
65. Ewen, *Immigrant Women*, 250; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 45; *Public Ledger*, December 26, 1909; *Evening Times*, January 26, 1910; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 166; *Call*, January 31, 1910.
66. *Report on Condition*, 313–331; Eisenstein, *Give Us Bread*, 7, 29–33; *Public Ledger*, February 4, 1910; Henry, *Trade Union Woman*, 121. An example of a comment about the strikers' dress is in the *Public Ledger*, January 13, 1910.
67. *Public Ledger*, January 13, 1910; Minutes of the Central Labor Union, Urban Archives, Temple University Library, December 12, 1909 and January 6, 1910; Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 141.
68. Heidi Hartman's concept of "shared manliness" is discussed in Alice Kessler-Harris, "A New Agenda for American Labor History: A Gendered Analysis and the Question of Class," in *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis*, ed. J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 229.
69. *Public Ledger*, January 11, 1910; December 29, 1909; February 9, 1910; January 13, 1910; January 22, 1910; February 6, 1910.
70. Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 165. See also Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1980), and Robin Miller Jacoby, *The British and American Women's Trade Union Leagues, 1890–1925: A Case Study of Feminism and Class* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994).
71. Tax, *Rising of the Women*, 107, 110.
72. *Public Ledger*, January 12, 1910, December 24, 1909.
73. On similar contradictions in other cities, see Norwood, *Labor's Flaming Youth*, 145; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 98; Ewen, *Immigrant Women*, chap. 5.
74. *Public Ledger*, February 7, 1910; Elizabeth Marbury, "We Are All Members of One National Family," *American Federationist* 17 (March, 1910): 209; Alfred H. Love, *Diaries v. 24–25*, January 20, 1910.
75. Cameron, *Radicals*, 113; Richard Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875–1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).
76. *Evening Times*, December 21, 1909 and January 18, 1910.
77. *Jewish Exponent*, February 11, 1910; see also *Evening Times*, January 18, 1910.
78. See, for example, Charles Derber, "The End of the Middle Class," *Tikkun* (Jan.-Feb. 1998).

