

HATS

Recently, David and I were going to participate in a labor demonstration at Walmart, and I asked David if he wanted to wear a cap with the name of a union on it. He said no. He was wearing his union (GEO) tee shirt and he felt that was sufficient. I kept looking for my “UNITE” cap, but then I realized I had given it to David, and he had left it in Ann Arbor. So I put on my UFCW tee shirt and we left without hats.

Which got me to thinking about hats and caps. First, the full name of the hatmakers union was “United Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers International Union.” It was one of the three “Jewish” needle trades unions. (The other two were the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.) The “Hatters” had a long and distinguished history. They go back to 1885, when they were not a Jewish union. That came in 1934 when the United Hatters merged with the Cloth Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers, which was Jewish, and was founded in 1901, about the same time as the ILGWU.

One of the classic strikes in labor history was that of the Danbury Hatters in 1902. It ranks alongside the Lawrence Textile Strike, and the Dressmakers and Cloakmakers Strikes of 1909-10. About 240 hatters working for a large hat manufacturer in Danbury struck, and the employer brought in scabs. The union initiated a boycott of their hats, and the employer took to the union to court, charging it with conspiracy in restraint of trade, under the Sherman anti-trust act. After several years, the US Supreme Court ruled against the strikers, and awarded the company triple damages. To conclude the history lesson: The Hatters merged with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union in 1983, and they merged with the ILGWU in 1995 to form UNITE.

Where the garment unions were divided by sex (men’s clothing workers represented by the Amalgamated, and women’s clothing workers by the ILGWU), the workers who produced men’s and women’s hats (millinery) were represented by one union. In my day—the ‘40s, ‘50s and ‘60s—there was a close political relationship between the hatters union and the ILGWU. Their leaders were democratic socialists (David Dubinsky and Alex Rose), and they came together in 1936 to form the American Labor Party (ALP). When the Communists captured the ALP in the early ‘40s, the ILGWU and the Hatters left and formed the Liberal Party. I realize this has nothing to do with the subject of hats, but I find it interesting.

Also, my first job was as a delivery boy for a small millinery shop on 38th Street off Fifth Avenue. It was the summer of 1942, I was 14 years old, and I was paid \$8 a week. I assume the workers were union members. They made lovely felt hats with interesting trim—feathers, bows etc. I packed them in cardboard boxes with lots of tissue, and delivered them to nearby retail stores. This also has very little to do with the subject. While I am at it, in the early ‘50s, I was organizing custom tailors and alteration workers in the 57th Street and Madison Av. areas, and met Anne Draper who was organizing hat workers in the same area. Small world.

There was a time when no one, male or female, left their house without a head covering. Outdoor crowd pictures, from the turn of the century into the ‘30s and ‘40s, showed everyone with a hat. Even before my Bar Mitzvah in 1940, my mother demanded that, when I go to Shul, I wear a hat. And it had to be a felt fedora (which she called a “kupelich”), not a cap or a yarmulke. Somehow, hats have fallen out of fashion. The only person wearing a fedora these days is Paul Solmon reporting economic news on Public TV. I have two great fedoras but I don’t wear them.

Hasidim and some other Orthodox Jews wear big black fedoras. They are cooler than the big fur hats, “shtreimels,” which Hasidim wear on special occasions. Orthodox women also wear hats.

When it is cold, I wear a cap. I have a brown cap, and two gray caps. I recently gave the brown cap to David. I used to buy caps in Filene’s basement, but it doesn’t exist any more. Many years ago, I was visiting my friend Sol in Phoenix, wearing a gray cap, which he admired, so I gave it to him. In return, he gave me a really neat cowboy hat. When I was in London, I bought one of the gray caps. The other gray cap, I bought on sale at the Gap. Of course it was made in China.

I never wore wool knitted hats, although I always bought them for my kids. Seeing grownups wear them, made me think that their mothers dressed them, insisting that they put on their mufflers and mittens and button up. They make sense if you are hiking or skiing or working outdoors, but not for office workers walking around town.

Finally, I have a closet shelf full of baseball caps. The only ones with union labels are the ones with union names on them. My Boston Red Sox caps are all knock-offs. They sell for \$5 outside Fenway Park. The official Major League Baseball (MLB) caps, sold at the official MLB store cost five times as much, and their quality isn’t five times as good. I wear Red Sox caps when going to a ballgame or when I am on vacation and want people to know I am from Boston.

Though I am sure it is not required, professional golfers wear a variety of hats and caps, and many professional tennis players wear caps as well. Unfortunately, they tend to advertise different products.