

HOW I BECAME A UNION OFFICIAL

As youngsters, we have all been asked by well meaning relatives: What do you want to be when you grow up? When I was in junior high school, I had few role models, and knew very little about "the world of work." My mother was a garment worker; most of my friend's parents were also garment workers, but no one I knew aspired to be a garment worker. It was clear that we would all go on to college, but what we would study in college was unclear.

Two of my friends, influenced by a junior high school science teacher, developed an interest in chemistry. Three of us submitted articles and poems to the school's literary magazine "The Knowlton Herald." However, none of us presumed to think of ourselves as future writers.

By ninth grade we had to choose the high school to which we would go. The choices were: the neighborhood high school--Morris; the science exam schools--Stuyvesant, Bronx High School of Science, and Brooklyn Tech; or the prestigious CCNY "prep school"--Townsend Harris. I, presumptuously, chose Townsend Harris, though our "advisor" made it clear to me that she did not believe I was Townsend Harris caliber. The issue became moot when New York closed the school for economic reasons. So, I, together with a large group of my classmates, took the Stuyvesant exam, passed it, and in the fall of 1942, started classes at Stuyvesant.

Most of the summer before entering Stuyvesant was spent looking for work. I answered every ad for "boy wanted" in my neighborhood that appeared in the Bronx Home News or that was posted in store windows, to no avail. Three weeks before the summer ended, the son-in-law of a friend of my mother's, who had heard of my plight, convinced his employer to hire me. He was a hat blocker in a small millinery factory, and my job was to pack and deliver the finished hats. The factory was in a loft on 38th Street off 5th Avenue. I felt very important getting on the subway every morning along with the rush hour crowd, getting off at 42nd Street, walking from Lexington Avenue up 42nd Street to 5th Avenue past the 5th Avenue Library to my job. I was paid \$8 a week.

It was a small shop. There were two or three blockers in the outer area, and about 10 women who finished the hats--sewing ribbons or pasting feathers on them. The truth is I paid very little attention to the process. I was impressed with the strength of the blockers who would take the felt hat bodies, place them on wooden shapes and stretch and shape the hats to the various styles, pounding them with the palms of their hands. Though I don't believe I was given the title, I was the packer, shipping clerk and delivery boy. When there were hats to be delivered, I would take a hat box, line it with tissue paper, place the hat in the box, close the box and place it on the floor. When I had completed eight boxes, I would tie them together. Deliveries were in the mid-town area and I would be required to maneuver my way through the crowds with piles of hat boxes in each hand extended straight out at shoulder level, trying to avoid bumping into people. At the end of the second week, the boss gave me an extra half dollar, and I was overjoyed. At the end

of my third and final week, I received a one dollar bonus. So ended my first job. High school started the following week.