

For a lot of years—say from before the turn of the century (the 20th) until the 1960s—there was a group of remarkable Jewish labor leaders leading what was known as the Jewish unions. (The same unions had a large Italian membership and Italian locals with able leaders like Luigi Antonini.) The most prominent were David Dubinsky of the ILGWU and Sidney Hillman of the ACWA. There were scores of others, and Dubinsky was followed by Stolberg and Chaikin, and Hillman by Potofsky and Sheinkman. The Hatters had Alex Rose, the Furriers had---etc. There had also been Jewish labor leaders who led unions that did not have a large Jewish membership, the best example being Samuel Gompers.

The fact is, that the “Jewish” unions stopped being Jewish during the 1940s. The old-timers were retiring, and they were being replaced by black and Hispanic workers in the large metropolitan areas—New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Los Angeles etc. And when the garment shops ran away from the Northern metropolitan areas to rural areas and the South, the workers were mostly WASPS, white and mostly Protestant, like Norma Rae.

Interestingly, the organizers who followed and attempted to organize those runaway shops were mostly Jewish. And the union officials in the large metropolitan areas were mostly Jewish. So for a while, the Jewish leadership and staff of the once Jewish unions, now consisting of urban minorities and rural whites, remained in place. As an aside, a Jewish staff member of the NAACP led the attack on the ILGWU claiming that its black members were denied leadership positions. Over the next decade, the garment factories which ran away from the metropolitan garment centers to rural America and the South, ran to Latin America and Asia, and the garment unions faded away.

But then there was a reemergence of Jewish labor leaders, among the teachers and public employees. Some of the children of Jewish workers, finished college and went to work for a wide variety of trade unions. I grew up aware of, and proud of, Dubinsky and Hillman. When I had the opportunity, I became one of those Jewish organizers, starting out trying to organize non-Jewish garment workers in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Then non-Jewish alteration workers and shipping clerks in New York. Yes, and all of the locals and districts for which I worked were headed by Jewish officials: Pennsylvania—Sol Greene; Ohio—Nicholas Kirtzman, Local 38—Isidore Sorkin, and Local 99--Shelley Appleton.

When I left the ILGWU in 1956, I went to work for the Jewish Labor Committee, getting to know hundreds of Jewish labor leaders. Many were the legendary pioneers who created powerful unions. Politically, they were socialists who received their early training and point of view in Eastern Europe from the Jewish Labor Bund, which they adapted to the American scene. I also had the pleasure of working with the next generation of Jewish labor leaders: Charles Cogen and Al Shanker of the Teachers (AFT), and Jerry Wurf of the Public Employees (AFSCME).

In 1962, I left the JLC to serve as the Education Director of the Amalgamated Laundry Workers Joint Board, headed by Louis Simon. He was Jewish, but had no connection with the Bundists. In fact, as far as I know, he had no connection with any Jewish

organization. He became the manager of the Laundry Workers because he was a laundry driver, and a rank and file leader. Simon had a remarkable sense of self-preservation.