

## MAKING A CONTRIBUTION

I would love to claim that I have had an impact on my times. Even a little impact. I have written about my work with unions—organizing unorganized workers, and educating union members. And how I worked to advance civil rights—first with a Jewish agency and then with a Federal agency. And finally, helping workers, as an employee of two State agencies. Five very significant decades: 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s.

In the 50s, I organized a few shops, and brought the message of trade unionism to a few workers: was drafted and served my country as a Statistical Clerk in the Signal Corps; and as an employee of the Jewish Labor Committee worked with unions developing civil rights programs and materials.

In the 60s, and 70s, and part of the 80s, I was a union education director for a few years, and then found a wonderful job with the US Civil Rights Commission and remained with them for 21 years. And when a budget cut eliminated my office in the mid 80s, I found work with the State Unemployment Insurance office, and then the State Attorney General's Fair Practices office, retiring in 1997.

I took pride in never having worked for a business or profit-making institution. I viewed all of my work as geared to helping others, making this a better world, I felt lucky that I was able to earn a living in such a way. I once heard it referred to as “doing well by doing good.” And I did well. I received a good education paid for by the taxpayers of New York. I received an excellent apprenticeship paid for by the members of the ILGWU. My career was further shaped by my work with the Jewish Labor Committee, which exposed me to the critical issues of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America.

I may not have realized it at the time, but this was the high point of organized labor in America. A third of America's workers were union members. The labor movement was strong and won real benefits for workers. As Talking Union describes, “...if you all stick together, you'll get higher wages, better working conditions, vacation with pay, take your kids to the seashore.”

At the same time, the civil rights movement was beginning to change America. Pressure was building to end discrimination in jobs, in public accommodations, in housing, in education. And I was in the midst of all of it. I was involved in the labor movement, I was involved in the civil rights movement. I worked with legendary figures who were effecting change. And what I did was as an American Jewish trade unionist, committed to equality.

In the 50s and 60s, organized labor was central to my life. I viewed the labor movement as the most important social force in America. Unions gave workers a voice in the work place. Contracts were negotiated, and workers got decent wages, and representation, and paid holidays, and sick leave and a pension. Non-union workers benefited too, because employers improved their wages and working conditions to keep the union out.