

Why 1913 Garment-Worker Strike Was Among the Oddest Ever

By Marc Levinson - Jan 15, 2013

It was one of the best-organized work stoppages in U.S. history. It was also one of the oddest, for the strike that briefly crippled the women's clothing industry in [New York](#) 100 years ago this week was backed by factory owners as enthusiastically as by the union.

Work in New York's garment factories didn't pay much in 1913. The women who sewed seams on dresses and underwear, working on a piece-rate basis, typically took home less than \$5 for a 56-hour week. And bosses in many shops reclaimed part of that pay by fining workers for showing up late or for "damage" to the goods.

Most of the factory owners, like the majority of their workers, were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and they were sensitive to complaints about low pay and poor conditions. But they were also aware that in the labor-intensive garment industry, wages accounted for a large share of production costs, and a factory that was too generous couldn't compete with those that paid less.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (or ILGWU) had dealt with this issue before. A series of bitter strikes in 1909 and 1910 had culminated in a walkout by 60,000 workers who made women's coats and jackets. Eventually, the union and a manufacturer's association accepted a proposal by Boston lawyer Louis Brandeis, a leader of progressive opinion. Brandeis suggested a more cooperative approach to labor-management relations, including a joint committee to monitor safety conditions, another to hear workers' grievances, and a board to arbitrate disputes between employers and the union.

New Model

As part of the pact, known as the Protocol of Peace, factory owners agreed to hire workers directly and abandon "inside subcontracting," a practice that allowed an owner to escape responsibility for working conditions by arranging for foremen to engage the workers and produce the goods.

The protocol offered a new model for both union and management. But it applied only to one part of the garment industry: women's coat manufacturing. In other sectors, employees still earned miserly pay in unsafe workplaces; nonunion shops undercut wages; and union shops were subject to wildcat strikes. Some factory owners were willing, even eager, to sign union contracts, but only if they could be assured

that their competitors would operate on the same terms. The ILGWU itself, meanwhile, faced increasingly harsh attacks from members and left-wing organizers who thought it wasn't sufficiently militant.

The strike of January 1913 was designed to solve all three of these problems at once. It was a highly choreographed affair, with each step agreed to in advance by union leaders and employer organizations. First, the union would call a general strike against all dress, shirtwaist and women's-underwear manufacturers in New York. Then it would announce the terms on which it would settle. The members of the employer associations would accept those terms. Then ILGWU members would return to work at factories that had settled, but would remain on strike against other factories. When those manufacturers sought to settle, they would be told they must first join an employer association.

In this way, the entire industry in New York would be unionized, with every manufacturer in each sector covered by a single contract.

The strike unfolded as scripted. On Jan. 14, 1913, ILGWU members voted overwhelmingly to strike. They walked out the next day. On Jan. 16, the parties negotiated a settlement almost identical to the Protocol of Peace, which members of the various employer organizations accepted the following day. On Jan. 18, amid much fanfare, it was signed. And on Jan. 20, the union shops went back to work. Nonunion shops still faced picket lines, and their orders from retailers that had pledged to buy from union shops were cut off. One by one, they agreed to join an employer association and thereby accept the contract.

Greater Significance

This dramatic episode brought raises, especially for the lowest-paid workers, as well as a shorter workweek. Its greater significance, though, was institutionalizing more of the workplace cooperation that Brandeis had advocated. Labor-management health and safety committees vastly improved conditions in New York's factories. When a shop won a contract for a new style -- which happened often in the garment trade -- a joint committee would determine what piece rate the workers should receive, resolving a perennial point of conflict. If a manufacturer wished to send work out to a contractor, the contractor had to register with the union, ensuring the workers would receive union wages.

The ILGWU's power would wax and wane for the next two decades, until, in the 1930s, it became one of the largest unions in the country. Although its militant wing was loath to admit as much, support from manufacturers and retailers was critical to the union's success. Many employers considered themselves socially responsible and favored higher wages and improved working conditions. The women's garment strike of 1913 sought to achieve those social goals by enforcing labor-management cooperation in an intensely competitive industry.

([Marc Levinson](#)'s books include "The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger." The opinions expressed are his own.)

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