

# Effect of Recent Economic Trends on Jewish Labor

By DAVID J. SAPOSS

IN SO FAR as the history of the American labor movement goes, there were two important immigrant groups that organized themselves into separate labor movements. One of those groups consisted of the early Germans who came here in large numbers beginning with the 1840's. They organized themselves into a complete German labor movement. When the Jews started to come here in large numbers they also, for practically the same reason, organized themselves into a separate labor movement. So that we had for a considerable length of time an English-speaking labor movement, a German-speaking labor movement, and a Jewish-speaking labor movement, and we do even up to the present have a Jewish-speaking labor movement.

The Germans when they came here organized themselves into what might be considered a fairly rounded out labor movement. That is, they organized themselves into unions. They organized themselves into political organizations, into cooperatives, into educational activities. They had their own labor press, and so on.

When the Jews came, whether they were intent upon copying from the Germans or not, I don't know—I suppose they wouldn't at the present time—but they were on exceedingly amicable relations with them at that time and they did follow very largely on that same basis.

The Germans, for instance, had the United German Trades. When the Jews organized themselves into unions they had the United Hebrew Trades. Those of you who are in Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago probably know that there are still United Hebrew Trades up to the present time.

There was another similarity between the Jews and the Germans in the sense that ideologically they were on the same plane. They both adopted the Socialist philosophy. So that for a long time the Socialist movement in the United States was supported primarily by the organized German workers and the organized Jewish workers.

These Jewish workers as early as 1890 became an important factor. At that time the stormy petrel of the labor movement, Daniel De Leon, became an important factor, sufficiently important to upset the applecart in the then already declining Knights of Labor,

because he had the support of the United Hebrew Trades of New York City which was already an important organization.

By about 1900 the Jewish unions became very important and by about 1910 the Jewish unions in so far as the liberals, the radicals, the intelligentsia were concerned, became a symbol.

We heard a great deal in those days of the "new unionism" which was supposed to center around the type of unionism that the Jewish workers built primarily in the needle trades but also in a variety of miscellaneous trades where there were a considerable number of Jewish workers.

So that we find the Jewish workers, beginning with about 1910, in the vanguard of the American labor movement, becoming pioneers, so to speak. For instance, at the present time we hear a great deal about "vertical unionism" or "industrial unionism." Well, the Jewish workers in common with the Socialists at that time advocated industrial unionism. In so far as the Jewish workers were in a position to do so when they organized unions they attempted to approximate industrial unions. They weren't able, because of a variety of difficulties, actually to organize themselves into complete industrial unions but most of the unions dominated by the Jewish workers at the present time are at least semi-industrial unions and were so from the very beginning.

Similarly we hear a great deal at the present time of social insurance. Commissioner Lubin has indicated the policy of the present Roosevelt administration with reference to social insurance. Even in this early period the Jewish organized workers in common with the Socialists were advocating a complete program of social insurance.

Similarly, we don't hear so much about this at the present time, but I am positive that we will within another year or so—the question of independent political action. The Jewish workers began in common with the German and other Socialist organized workers at that time to advocate independent political action. So that in that sense they were the pioneers, and it was for that reason that they were looked upon as the new symbol, as the new unionism.

The Jewish unions pioneered on other grounds. They were the first to introduce a new technique in

collective bargaining, known as the impartial chairman machinery. Most of you are probably familiar with it and it won't be necessary to explain it.

They were the first ones, for instance, to introduce workers' education. They were among the first to use economic research in order to determine policies, in order to carry on collective bargaining, and so on. They certainly developed one of the most effective labor presses in the United States. Even at the present time the most important daily labor paper is a Jewish paper, The Daily Forward, with which Mr. Vladeck is associated.

We hear a great deal for instance about the brain trust. Well, the Jewish unions antedated President Roosevelt by a considerable period because it was the Jewish unions that raised the price of the college professors in the market by making very extensive use of them. They used them as impartial chairmen. They used them in connection with their research, and so on. And while Mr. John D. Rockefeller may have had a more expensive public relations counsellor in Ivy Lee the Jewish unions didn't stop at that. They had their public relations counsellors and they knew how to advertise themselves, and they worked just effectively as did John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and the others. They probably overdid it. There was a certain amount of ballyhoo. Some of us who ate at the trough of plenty at that time enjoyed it. Occasionally we laughed up our sleeves but it was a fine show, and they managed to hold the limelight to a very large extent.

This general progress went on of course through the War, with the exception of the political ends, which suffered, of course, a great deal because of the war hysteria and because of the attitude of the Socialist Party towards the War.

Then after the War some new problems arose. In so far as most of the unions were concerned it was the violent and vicious open shop campaign of the employers which plagued them, but in so far as the Jewish unions were concerned it was the violence of the Communists that plagued them.

We found that the mounting wave of communism naturally became strongest in those unions where there was a great Socialist following, and since the Jewish unions were of course overwhelmingly Socialist this wave of communism almost engulfed them. As a matter of fact it is highly probable that in the period from 1925 to 1927 the Communists would have captured the Jewish unions if the leaders hadn't very skillfully built a great many dikes around them, so that the Communist wave was held back even

though it did a great deal of damage.

As a result of that Communist wave the Jewish labor movement was vitally affected. It was thrown into the arms of the conservative elements in the American labor movement and from that time we find that the Jewish labor movement began to cater more and more to these conservative elements. The International Ladies Garment Workers, for instance, one of the outstanding unions, even went so far as to hire a sculptor, who was undoubtedly worthy and needed a job very badly, to make a bust of Samuel Gompers, which was presented at a great ceremony such as only Jewish unions can stage. They presented it to him at one of the conventions of the American Federation of Labor. In other words they bent backwards a little too much, because up to that time the rank and file had been taught to expect that men like Gompers were anathema, were devils in disguise. Suddenly, overnight, you might say, they went to the extent of deifying him by putting him into marble.

There might have been some explanation by virtue of the fact that Gompers was also a Jew but the rank and file somehow or other didn't take very kindly to it and Gompers himself when he was asked whether he was a Jew would turn around and say, "Yes, but a Sephardic Jew." You see, he wasn't this common garden variety of Jew which made up the bulk of the membership of these needle trades unions. So that there was considerable friction.

For those of us with Jewish countenances who for one reason or another trail after conventions of the American Federation of Labor like certain unsavory elements used to trail after armies in the Middle Ages this change helped tremendously. I remember going to conventions of the American Federation of Labor in the olden days when anybody who was Jewish-looking was looked upon with suspicion, because the Jews were in the radical camp and the dominant and controlling elements were in the conservative camp. But now with the change in attitude of the Jewish unions anybody with a Jewish countenance was welcomed and given a place of honor. So that I indirectly profited tremendously from the change.

But the unions of course had their troubles with the rank and file; everything was going askew. Then of course the depression only added to it. And then of course came NRA.

The NRA again showed the adaptability of the Jewish unions. The NRA showed that they knew how to take advantage of any opportunity which presented itself. I doubt whether there are any unions in the United States that have so effectively taken advantage

of the NRA as have the Jewish unions. They have all come back very strongly. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the International Ladies Garment Workers, the Cloth Hat and Cap Workers—they have just changed their name; they are now known as the Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers International Union—the International Pocketbook Workers, the various other miscellaneous occupations that go where there are a great many Jews, all came back very strongly under the NRA. But then a new problem presented itself.

The bulk of the new members that are coming in are not Jews. That isn't exactly a new phenomenon in so far as the American labor movement is concerned. We have had similar situations with reference to the whole labor movement.

The German unions, for instance, even earlier than the Jewish unions, lost most of their German membership and other groups came in, to be sure, mostly immigrant groups from southern and eastern Europe. The same thing occurred in other unions. Take the United Mine Workers, for example. At one time over eighty-five per cent of the members of the United Mine Workers were not Anglo-Saxon or Irish, but the leadership is definitely either Anglo-Saxon or Irish.

In so far as the entire labor movement is concerned, probably seventy per cent, even at the present time, of the leaders—certainly of the important leaders—are Irish Catholics. Insofar as the membership is concerned the Irish Catholics, are a relatively unimportant element.

So that the leadership of American unions was usually of a different stock than the rank and file and therefore this particular change in the Jewish unions is nothing new. It may have some different problems, however. There may be a more distinct cleavage, a more distinct demarcation between the Jewish leadership and the new membership that is coming in. On the other hand, of course all the leaders in these unions in order to maintain themselves have known how to make alliances. They have known how to take local leaders or minor leaders of these new racial groups that have come in and elevate them to relatively important positions and annex them to their "political machine," for instance. So that in that way they have managed to maintain themselves in a strong position.

The Jewish leaders of the dwindling Jewish unions have done the same thing. If you were to go over, for instance, the lists of the general executive boards of the important Jewish unions you would find that there are Poles, there are Italians, there are Bohemians, there are other Slavic groups represented. So that they have in a sense maintained a balance.

But up to the present time the non-Jewish members that came in particularly to the Jewish unions have also been immigrants, and although they had a different background than that of the Jewish workers they were foreigners. They had that much in common.

A very large number, at least, the most alert, the most articulate of these immigrant groups that came into the Jewish unions were also Socialists. So they had something else in common.

The new membership that is coming in is of a different type. As a matter of fact, we might even apply it to the new Jewish membership that is coming into the Jewish unions because the new membership coming into the Jewish unions—and of course the same could be applied to other unions—are American born of the second generation. Most of them have had a grammar school education. A very large number of them have a high school education or a good portion of a high school education. A very few have even had a college education. They are, of course, all devotees of baseball and jazz, in other words, one hundred per cent Americans.

So that you do find a very distinct cleavage and the question is to what extent will these Jewish unions adapt themselves to this new element. It seems as though they are doing it.

The new members probably will accept all of the program that Commissioner Lubin enumerated. I am inclined to think that they may go a little further and perhaps accept even a little more radical program, some sort of a mild collectivistic program, including independent political action. I doubt whether they will go beyond that at the present time. And that will present a problem to the Jewish unions, because their old members and particularly their Jewish members are still Socialists and it will be a question, you see, of reconciling these two elements, on the one hand, the new members who are predominantly non-Jewish of second generation, south and east European stock, and a considerable number of Jewish second generation who can be placed in the same category; on the other hand, the old membership. The old membership is more articulate, the old membership is more sophisticated, and therefore will have to be reckoned with, and the leaders will have to attempt to bridge this ideological gap between Socialism and a sort of form of populism which I think progressivism is. And I am inclined to think that the new leaders will succeed in doing it. Of course, there will be this other thorn: Communism.

Since about 1929, it is rather interesting to note, or since the depression has set in, Communism has

been receding. The theory has always been that radicalism arises, extreme radicalism, in a depression. Communism as a matter of fact has been receding since about 1929 but it still has a fairly strong hold among the Jewish workers. The best Communist daily paper is *The Freiheit*, a Jewish paper. The *Daily Worker*, the English daily paper, is exceedingly insignificant, and very poorly edited, although they have introduced a sport page recently. It can't compare at all with *The Freiheit*, the Jewish paper, which I think is an index of the strength that the Communists still have among the Jewish workers.

The Communists, however, in so far as the needle trades are concerned, are fairly well isolated in one sector of that industry and that is the fur industry which is a relatively unimportant branch of the industry, but they still have to reckon with the Communist element in that industry.

However, since Communism is becoming less and less important, it may not deter the Jewish unions in making this particular compromise that they will have to make between the new members and the old Jewish Socialist members.

I might perhaps illustrate it by this little story that came from a rather capable labor journalist who had just made a tour throughout the country and reported that the Communists at the present time are recruiting from three elements, the migratory workers, the agricultural workers, (and those that are advocating that the Jews go back to agriculture had better take heed) and the intellectuals.

Of course, we know that the Jew is not a migratory worker to any large extent. For the present, anyway, the Jew is not in agriculture. But it has always been said that if you scratch a Jewish worker you will find an intellectual. Of course, that is an exaggeration.

So that it may be that since the intellectuals are inclined when they want to be radical to drift towards Communism, they may find a considerable recruiting ground among the Jewish workers.

However, there is another—I suppose to some it might be considered such—point of comfort. From my own observation I have concluded that not all types of intellectuals drift towards Communism when they are inclined to be radical. Usually what might be called the esthetic fraternity of the intellectuals drift towards Communism, as, for instance, the literati, the artists, and so on. The more prosaic type of intellectual, like the college professor, for instance, the minister, the social worker and that type, if they are inclined to drift towards radicalism at all, seem to drift towards Socialism or towards this progressivism that I have described.

So that the Communists will not really present then an insurmountable difficulty in so far as the problem which the Jewish unions are confronted with is concerned. It will largely depend upon the intelligence, I think, of the Jewish leaders, and so far they have shown very keen intelligence and very good adaptability.

If we are not going to have any Jewish unions we will at least have Jewish-led unions for perhaps a quarter of a century. In these days of chaos none of us look much further ahead than that—and these Jewish-led unions will undoubtedly be in the vanguard of the labor movement. That is, they will be the most adaptive. They will be the ones who will advocate the most progressive ideas and I think that they will be the ones who will not accept Professor Perlman's dictum of scarcity. I think they will be the ones who will fight for a social order that will try to introduce an era of abundance.

## Jews In Commerce and the Professions

By MORRIS R. COHEN

*Professor of Philosophy, College of the City of New York, and Chairman, Conference of Jewish Relations*

I WAS somewhat surprised when I received an invitation to address this audience, because I had an idea that you would have men who had studied these problems for many years, and I didn't know how a philosopher could fit into this program, except on the theory that the philosopher is the only one who is privileged to admit his ignorance and even to boast of it.

I don't mean to be ironical towards the speakers who have preceded me. I am sure they would agree with me that in these social questions it is important not only that we say what we know, but that we also emphasize what we do not as yet know; for the only way in which we can adapt ourselves to the conditions in which we live is by constantly being awake to the necessity of new knowledge.