

# Point of View

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## Continuing A Vital Tradition

by Shelley Appleton

*The following notes were prepared for the Jewish Labor Committee's recent National Trade Union Conference on Human Rights. The author is an ILGWU vice-president.*

THE other day, a visitor to my office noticed on my desk a copy of one of Melech Epstein's books on the Jewish labor movement. "The Jewish labor movement," he said, "there's no such thing anymore, is there?"

It was less a question than a comment, and, in a sense, a perfectly valid one. We no longer have anything that can sensibly be described as the Jewish labor movement. The ILGWU, which was the single strongest component of that movement, long ago ceased to be Jewish. This is equally true of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and I am reasonably sure that it is true of the millinery workers. The few unions that remain predominantly Jewish in membership are insignificant in size and non-existent in influence.

Yet, paradoxically, the ideas and, to an extent, the spirit of the Jewish labor movement continue to influence the course of events. I assume that this is what we mean when we talk of tradition. It operates in strange and subtle ways. Sometimes, though imperceptible, it is present.

Let me return to my visitor. On my desk, there were also copies of booklets and newspapers our union had recently issued in English, Spanish and Chinese. The Chinese newspaper caught my visitor's eye. "The Jewish labor movement has become Chinese," he said.

I surprised him by agreeing with him. The fact is that it has become Chinese, Spanish and a variety of other things, but mainly American. Its influence has, to a degree, permeated the entire labor movement.

I told my visitor that, while the Jewish labor movement is a thing of the past, the ideas and spirit that animated it are very much in evidence. In fact, I continued, my own office is filled with such evidence. "Show me," he challenged.

I began with the union literature he had noticed. The Jewish labor movement had always been passionately concerned with the education of its members. It had pioneered in the field of workers' education.

The work we are doing reflects the influence of that pioneering. The fact that we are doing it in English, Spanish and Chinese, and not in Yiddish, is of secondary importance, I told him. What is of primary importance is our acceptance of the responsibility to inform our members.

My visitor was interested but not convinced. I asked him whether he had taken a good look at our offices. He said that he hadn't, and I suggested that we spend a few minutes in a little tour of them.

I took him first to a wall where we have a display of photographs on civil rights activities, our own and others. "So you're active on behalf of civil rights," he said. "Does that reflect the influence of the Jewish labor movement?" I believe that it does. The Jewish labor movement, for obvious reasons, was always especially sensitive about discrimination.

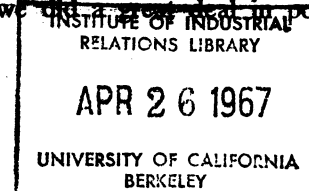
It was concerned with the issue of civil rights long before it became fashionable. Thirty-two years ago, the ILGWU moved its convention out of a Chicago hotel when the hotel management broke a promise to treat Negro delegates with equal courtesy. In the 1930s, when A. Philip Randolph was being insulted and hooted down at A.F. of L. conventions, his only supporters were delegates from the so-called Jewish unions.

It is no accident, I believe, that most of the college students who have gone South in recent years to work in the civil rights movement have been Jewish. I suspect that they, too, reflect, in some measure, the continuing influence of the ideas put into circulation in this country by the Jewish labor movement.

But let me continue the tour I made with my visitor. I showed him our library. "Encouraging workers to read," I said, "what could be more Jewish than that?"

I took him into the office of one of our accountants where contributions by our members to Cuban refugee relief were being tabulated. "All right," my visitor said, "helping the needy. I'll agree that that is in the tradition of the Jewish labor movement."

As we left the accountant's office, he noticed a picture of Mayor Lindsay addressing one of our meetings. "Do you do much in politics?" he wanted to know. I told him that we did a great deal in politics, that we



supported liberal candidates, that we worked hard for legislation to improve housing and education, for higher minimum wages, for stronger civil rights guarantees, for improved employment insurance laws. I noted that organized labor had provided the main support for Medicare.

My visitor, who had attended college, remembered something. "Wasn't labor once opposed to all social legislation?" he asked. Of course, it was. There was a time when Gompers and the AFL believed that labor could win all the gains it sought at the bargaining table.

**T**HE Jewish labor movement never shared that view. It believed that many of these gains could be achieved only through political action, and it therefore believed in vigorous participation in politics by labor.

"Then, the ideas of the Jewish labor movement have won out," my visitor said. That was too simple an interpretation, I thought. Life seldom operates that way. People are seldom knowingly conquered, or even influenced, by ideas. What generally happens is that events make certain ideas more acceptable, more usable, at times, and the people who accept and use them are often unaware of their origin.

I believe, for example, that the currents of reform unloosed by the New Deal can be traced, at least in part, to the radical ferment of the old East Side. The ideas of the old East Side, which were those of the Jewish labor movement, had merged by then with Midwestern liberalism and other influences.

But there is no doubt that when Socialists said that the New Deal had taken over their reform program, they had more than a little justification.

Now let me return once again to my visitor, if only to dismiss him. He never really existed in the first place.

My first thought, when I was invited to speak on "Continuing a Vital Tradition," was, "Yes, that's a splendid subject."

The story of the Jewish labor movement, and my own peripheral experience with it, have always had a special fascination for me. I'm reasonably sure that it was a major factor in shaping my outlook on life. It probably explains why, in 1941, when I finished law school, I went to work as an organizer for the ILGWU.

But a few days ago, when I began to prepare these remarks, and really to think about the subject, I discovered some troubling doubts. I asked myself, first, "Is there really a tradition that has been continued, and that we can now carry forward?" And, second, "In what sense, is it vital?"

I know that outside of an extremely limited and narrowing sphere, there is little consciousness of this tradition in any formal sense. And even within that sphere, it is more nostalgia than it is a vital force.

I remembered that some years ago I had asked a Southern friend why he voted Democratic and had been told, "Why, because my pappy did." That, I reflected, was tradition.

And I wondered, broodingly, "What do we have as its counterpart? Who is transmitting the tradition of the Jewish labor movement, and how, and who is receiving it?"

Of course, there were some obvious answers. David Dubinsky, who is certainly a product of the Jewish labor movement, has had a very considerable influence on the American labor movement and on some of its leaders. But the influence of one man cannot fairly be equated with that of a tradition.

Other things occurred to me: the campaign for Medicare, for example. The whole issue had been dramatized by the Golden Ring clubs which are made up largely of retired Jewish members of the ILGWU.

But I decided that such examples, however many of them I could find, would not adequately prove a case for a "vital tradition." If there were such a thing, I should logically be able to find evidence of it in the way I function and in the affairs of the union I manage. And so, I conjured up my visitor. Instead of my taking him on a tour, he took me. I tried to see through his eyes what I and our union could reveal—with the results I have indicated.

I am not suggesting that the attitudes and activities I have described flow in a straight, swift channel from the Jewish labor movement of the past to the present. That would be misleading and more than a little absurd.

But attitudes do not spring into existence spontaneously. They originate somewhere. They survive if they meet a need—good or bad, unfortunately. They go through various transmutations with the passage of time, and as they come into contact with other ideas. Still, one does not have to be a genealogist to recognize their origin or their motivation. In that sense, and in the sense that these particular ideas continue to nourish the minds of men and their institutions, I believe that we can talk of the tradition of the Jewish labor movement as being a continuing and vital one.

There is a good deal more, of course, to the tradition of the Jewish labor movement, and I should like, briefly, to discuss it.

**T**HE Jewish labor movement, for me, had two elements of great value and of contemporary relevance. One is that, while concerned with the here and now, it was equally, if not more, concerned with distant horizons.

Jews have always been a future-oriented people, probably because they have so often found the present frustrating and painful.

The Jewish labor movement dealt with realities but it had a capacity for dreams. It fought for a dollar more a week, or an hour less in the work-week, but its vision was essentially utopian.

It was not satisfied with the Gompers credo of "more, more now and more tomorrow." It believed that basic changes were required in society if those "more tomorrows" were to become possible. It believed that many of the gains sought by labor could not be won, as Gompers believed they could, at the bargaining table. And it believed that labor had to widen its objectives if the kind of society it wanted was to be achieved.

In all of these respects, the Jewish labor movement was, I believe, right. The techniques by which it sought to achieve its goals, and the philosophies with which it

sought to justify them, were often arguable. About the goals themselves, there can now be little dispute.

The fact is that most of these goals have now gained general acceptance, not only in the American labor movement, but in our society as a whole. I must, however, add a reservation I consider significant.

The American labor movement has taken over goals that were once characteristic, though not exclusively so, of the Jewish labor movement. But much of it has remained immune to the spirit that animated the Jewish labor movement.

**C**ALL it idealism, if you choose, or describe it more modestly as the aura of idealism. It is too seldom evident in today's labor movement. And, while I do not know what, if anything, can be done about it, I believe that it is to be regretted.

The truth is that there is a strange irony here. While many of the ideas of the Jewish labor movement have gained acceptance, it is the spirit of Gompers that has prevailed. With all of our broadened social objectives, we cherish no dreams. We are conscientiously pragmatic. More than that, we are pedestrian.

The AFL-CIO is—beyond doubt, in my judgment—the most effective force this country has for economic and social reform. I believe that it has worked more effectively for better housing, for better education, for stronger civil rights legislation, for higher minimum wages, and for a wide range of other economic and social reforms, than any other segment of our society.

But, while it has consistently provided the infantry in these battles for reform, it has not often provided the leadership. It has failed to communicate the spirit of social idealism, or the sense of vision, that gives people the feeling that they are participating in a great and promising social adventure.

In one way or another, this criticism has often been brought against our American labor movement. It has been pointed out, for example, that whereas the European labor movement has always been socialistic, or even more radical, in its philosophy, we have been supporters of the existing system. Yet it is also true that, in terms of our every-day practice, and in terms of what we have gained for our members, we are far in advance of the European unions.

It may well be that these two situations are related. We're all familiar with the saying, "Everything you get, you pay for." It may well be that practical achievement, like the accumulation of years, exacts its price.

**N**EVERTHELESS, as a union official, and one very much concerned with practical achievements, I must confess to a certain ruefulness that it was Martin Luther King who aroused us over segregation, that it was Michael Harrington who aroused us over poverty, and that the vision of the Great Society has been held out to us, not by organized labor, but by President Johnson. I must confess to a certain ruefulness that organized labor is no longer, as it has been on occasion, the source of inspiration for progressive movements and ideas.

We generally do the work. We, more than others, are

instrumental in getting the results. But certainly, we no longer inspire.

And I believe that when we talk nostalgically of the Jewish labor movement, it is this element, though not only this one, that we miss.

I said that there were two elements of great value and contemporary relevance in the Jewish labor movement. The second element was that the Jewish labor movement was part of, and drew to itself, the intellectual and creative forces of the community in which it functioned. The Jewish newspapers, the magazines, the Jewish theatre, the poets, journalists and philosophers, all of these were closely linked to the Jewish unions. They were part of the movement. They made significant contributions to it.

**T**HE most significant contribution was perhaps the aura, the excitement, of idealism to which I have referred. But there was another contribution, more subtle but no less important.

Union officials, as I know from my own experience, tend to become enmeshed in the daily routine their responsibilities impose. There are agreements to negotiate, complaints to adjust, workers to organize, funds to administer, an immense mass of detail to be handled. We rarely have time for the luxury of thinking in broad terms.

It may be that, in our obsession with details of urgent importance to our members and to our organizations, we do not see the forest for the trees. It seems to us, on the other hand, that intellectuals tend to become so enchanted with the forest that they overlook the trees. Perhaps that is why, at times, we become so impatient with each other.

But the fact is that the labor movement needs the yeast of ideas intellectuals can provide—even when those ideas are, for one reason or another, unacceptable.

I remember wandering into the Cafe Royale, on Second Avenue, during the early 1940s, and seeing David Dubinsky in a passionate discussion with several of the East Side literati. The ferment of ideas was almost visible. It was certainly audible. The low-pitched voice is an Anglo-Saxon trait to which the East Side never succumbed.

But I remember thinking then, as I believe now, that I was witness to something essential in the character of the Jewish labor movement: the very close association between the labor leaders and intellectual and creative people.

This association, so characteristic of the Jewish labor movement, is conspicuously lacking in the American labor movement today. I am not prepared to say that it is entirely labor's fault. Intellectuals, I have observed, like to associate themselves with centers of power. This may explain why, ever since the New Deal, they have been clustering, in increasing numbers, around the federal government.

They are attracted to movements on the rise. That is why we had so many of them in the 1930s, and why the civil rights movement has them today. Or was it yesterday?

But when one has finished with explanations, the fact

remains that there is today a considerable gap between the labor movement and the intellectual community. When we talk nostalgically of the Jewish labor movement, this, too, is an element we miss.

If the tradition of the Jewish labor movement serves a purpose, it is partly that of reminding us of what once was, and of what, hopefully, can be again. The fact is that organized labor needs more vision than it has displayed in recent years. It needs, if you will, an elevation of tone.

It is not enough to propose stock options for workers, as the president of the Steel Workers did recently; nor is it enough to propose an annual wage, as the president of the United Auto Workers did recently. Such pro-

posals are not to be disparaged. They are more substantial than dreams.

But the dreams, too, are needed.

Some 200 years ago, writing on the cause of discontents, Edmund Burke said that "to lament the past, and to conceive extravagant hopes for the future, are the common disposition of the greatest part of mankind."

But that is not, after all, such a bad thing. It is better to fall short of extravagant hopes than to realize mean ones. And that, in essence, I think, is what we can learn from the tradition of the Jewish labor movement.

In the final analysis, none of us wants to devote his life to the trivial and the insignificant.

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