

SWEATING FOR DEMOCRACY:  
WORKING-CLASS MEDIA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONIC JEWISHNESS,  
1919-1941

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication  
in the Graduate College of the  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011

Urbana, Illinois

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### **Abstract**

Using the framework of political economy of media, this dissertation examines the history of the Jewish working class counterpublic in the United States during the interwar period and its relationships to the broader public sphere. Between 1919 and 1941, organic intellectuals, such as B.C. Vladeck, J.B.S. Hardman, Fannia Cohn, and Morris Novik, employed strategies to maintain the Yiddish-language newspaper the *Forward*, worker education programs, and radio station WEVD. These forms of media and cultural production were shaped by internal conflicts and struggles within the counterpublic, as well as evolving practices and ideas around advertising, public relations, and democracy.

Vladeck, Hardman, Cohn and Novik all helped to extend Yiddish socialist culture through the reactionary 1920s while laying the groundwork for an American working class culture represented by the CIO in the 1930s, and a broad consensus around a commercial media system by the postwar period. This history demonstrates the challenges, conflicts, and contradictions that emerge in media production within counterpublics, and posits that other similar case studies are necessary in order develop enlightened strategies to democratize our contemporary media system.

## Acknowledgments

While this dissertation is the product of many years of labor on my part, I can not imagine having completed it without the support and inspiration of so many people. First, I thank my two home departments at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign: the Institute of Communications Research and the Department of Communication. Both provided me with intellectual and financial support through my years as a graduate student. In addition, I thank Matti Bunzl and Harriet Murav of the Program in Jewish Culture and Society, and the Illinois Initiative for Media Policy Research (IIMPR), for their generous support of my scholarship as well.

As this is a work based largely on archival research, I owe a debt of gratitude to the many archivists and library workers at the various collections I visited, namely those at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Library; the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago, IL; the Kheel Center at Cornell University; the Tamiment Library and Wagner Archive at New York University; the New York Public Library; the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, MD; the Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison, WI; and the YIVO Archives at the Center for Jewish History in New York.

I had the honor of working with an excellent dissertation committee, who are not only some of the most renowned scholars in their respective areas, but who admirably make the link in their everyday lives between research and praxis. My time in graduate school was marked by significant upheaval at the University of Illinois-- within the field of communication and within the university as a whole-- and my committee consistently worked to protect my best interests as a student, a worker and a human being. They all showed their support when it mattered most, as

the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) went on strike to protect its tuition waivers in November 2009.

James Barrett helped me develop ideas for this project in its earliest stages while I took his U.S. Working Class History course during my first year as a graduate student, and consistently offered in-depth comments regarding both the substance and style of my work throughout my time in the Ph.D. program. I knew, as a communications scholar, that I would need the input of a working class historian on this project in order to make sure my work was sound. I thank Jim for his willingness to give my work serious consideration-- from reading suggestions to line edits-- while juggling so many other responsibilities, among them struggling to make the Urbana-Champaign campus and community a more just place.

Inger Stole also helped me considerably with the early development of this project. Much of the material in chapters two and three emerges from work I did as an independent study with her about World War One propaganda and the Jewish working class, and from a paper I wrote while taking her History of Consumer Culture seminar. Through the writing process, she was generous with her time, reviewing several chapter drafts and offering helpful suggestions regarding archival research. Inger has played a formative role in my thinking about media history, and particularly the role of advertising and public relations. I learned much from being her teaching assistant, and she served as a consistent advocate on my behalf.

John Nerone has provided me with an intellectual and moral compass throughout my time in graduate school. He has always pushed me to think in new, innovative ways while blurring the boundaries between the seminar room and the "pub" (a term I use deliberately, with John in mind). His intellectual flexibility, curiosity and rigor gave me the courage to pursue a

project that drew from multiple academic literatures and perspectives. John has been a teacher, a mentor, a therapist, and a friend. I could not have completed my Ph.D. without his support. The next pitcher is on me.

My advisor, Bob McChesney, was one of my major inspirations to get a doctoral degree in communication in the first place. His commitment to fusing scholarship and social change has been both admirable and effective. I think many graduate students of my generation have been drawn into the field by Bob's works, such as *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, but I am one of the lucky ones who had the opportunity to work with him. Bob pushed me, particularly in the preliminary stages of research and writing, to clarify my project and make sure that it wasn't just interesting to me but relevant to many. He reviewed drafts of my work through the writing process, and offered his criticism and support. Bob helped me navigate the tumultuous terrain of graduate school and always ensured that I would have a space to do my research and flourish. And perhaps most importantly, he has provided me with a model of how historical research, pedagogy and political engagement can be brought together.

I also had the opportunity to take courses with many other wonderful faculty at the University of Illinois who shaped my thinking, and made an impact on this project indirectly. Among them are Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, Clifford Christians, Cara Finnegan, Isabel Molina-Guzman, Dan Schiller, and Bruce Williams.

Many others have also offered their input on this project, and I thank them for taking the time to assist me. Paul Buhle wrote several lengthy emails to me, displaying a lifetime of knowledge around working class culture, and offering me advice and encouragement in this endeavor. Nathan Godfried and Tony Michels, (whose work on WEVD and Yiddish socialism

respectively, provided the basis for much of my research here), Harry Sapoznik, and Steve Macek, also offered me helpful advice in the research process. I was also fortunate enough to find the Union for Democratic Communications (UDC) as a graduate student, which I am sure will provide me with an intellectual home and camaraderie through the rest of my career.

I could not have made it through graduate school without the intellectual and emotional support of the many friends and colleagues I met on the prairie-- among them are John Anderson, Peter Campbell, Christina Ceisel, Matt Crain, Ian Davis, Julie Laut, Eric McKinley, Caroline Nappo, Molly Niesen, Ben Poole, Richard Potter, and Desiree Yomtoob. Many of them assisted me with this project directly in reviewing chapter drafts, while others have enriched my ideas in unquantifiable ways through ongoing conversations and dialogue. I also thank my many sisters and brothers in the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), IFT/AFT Local 6300. If there is any contemporary organization that embodies the spirit of social unionism discussed in this dissertation, it's the GEO.

Finally, my family's imprint on this dissertation is deep. I began to investigate left-Jewish culture and media following the death of my great-uncle, Paul Pincus, during my first semester of graduate school. Paul was a Julliard-trained clarinetist who played both klezmer music and in Broadway pit orchestras, and on Station WEVD. My memories of him mostly consist of him sitting in his chair at my grandmother's house on holidays, vodka in hand, yelling at the Mets game on television or repeating his stories about playing for Ethel Merman. When I came across his obituary on the Yiddish Radio Project website, while looking for information about Socialist radio stations, I knew I was on the path towards uncovering an important chapter of media history. The familial connection to this project has provided a motivating force through several

years of arduous research. More importantly, it has taught me that our lives are all shaped by prior struggles. Social history can uncover those struggles, so that we may draw upon the past to build a better future.

My parents, Michael and Elaine, have provided me with constant love and support for thirty years. After so many years in school, they are still the most important teachers I've ever had. Their shared commitment to education, social justice, and the labor movement clearly set a course for me early on to work as a union organizer, and to pursue a Ph.D. They never shied away from discussing politics at the kitchen table, and always emphasized the importance of being an engaged citizen. At the same time, our family-- my sister, Jessica, and I-- has always remained at the center of their lives. I could not have made it this far without that commitment.

I dedicate this dissertation to the newest addition to my family, my fiancée, Christina Ceisel. Christina and I met in graduate school when I gave her a GEO card to sign. Since then she has contributed enormously to making my life richer and more meaningful. She's helped me understand performance ethnography, the politics of bacon, and the joys of dressing up small dogs. I hope my work can be as rich and engaging as hers. In our three years together, she's challenged me to be a better scholar and a better man. I can't wait for all the laughter and love we're going to have.

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## Chapter One:

### History From the Middle<sup>1</sup>: A Gramscian Approach to Understanding Working-Class Media<sup>2</sup>

What is the importance of working-class media and culture to the maintenance of labor activism? I ask this question at a moment of uncertainty in the state of the U.S. and global economy, and in the state of media and, particularly, journalism. Since the 1980s, neoliberal policies have assaulted the democratic potential of the media system and created a globally-reaching, oligopolistic cartel of a half-dozen multinational corporations that produce the lion's share of media consumed within the United States.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, a similar logic has led to a crackdown on labor unions and a dramatic decline in the influence of working-class organizations in our politics and culture. As a result, labor and the working-class are largely marginalized by the media system, and their viewpoints and values tend to be excluded from for-profit journalism and entertainment.<sup>4</sup>

This problem did not begin under neoliberalism. A longer examination of the relationship between labor and communication systems reveals how this problem became exacerbated over the decades, and more importantly, how it has more often than not been challenged by workers to varying degrees. Given the commodification of media and communications through the course of

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<sup>1</sup> This term was suggested in a personal meeting with media historian John Nerone.

<sup>2</sup> Many ideas in this chapter have been published in the article Brian Dolber, "From Socialism to 'Sentiment': Toward a Political Economy of Communities, Counterpublics and Their Media Through Jewish Working Class History." *Communication Theory* 21, no. 1 (2011): 90-109.

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. (New York: New Press, 1999), 15-77; Ben Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Deepa Kumar, *Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization and the UPS Strike*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of Mass Media*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); William Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor*. (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1992); Christopher Martin, *Framed!: Labor and the Corporate Media*. (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2003).

the twentieth century, political economists in media studies should place labor at the center of their analysis of this history of communications. Ben Scott has identified three areas of inquiry into the historic relationship between organized labor and communication: labor and the state, labor and the communications industry, and labor and culture.<sup>5</sup> The questions addressed in this dissertation are firmly located within the third category—labor and culture. Rather than discussing challenges working-class organizations have made to the regulation of media industries, or the role of workers within media industries, I concern myself here with the ways in which working-class movements have produced their own media in order to further their political and social goals.

One prime example in need of serious academic study in communications history is the experience of the Jewish labor movement in the U.S., and its use of mass media during the interwar period. Although this particular segment of the labor movement—the unions in the garment industry, working class fraternal organizations such as the Workmen’s Circle, and Jewish segments of the Socialist Party (SP) and Communist Party (CP) based chiefly in New York City—has been the topic of a great deal of scholarship in working class history, it has gone virtually unnoticed by U.S. media historians.<sup>6</sup> This is an oversight because the Jewish labor movement devoted more thought, energy and resources, than any other segment of the working

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Scott, “Organizing the Media Structure,” Ch. 3 in “Labor’s New Deal for Journalism,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2009, 3.

<sup>6</sup> A few examples, which are cited throughout this dissertation include: Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in USA: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1950-53); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarried: Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871-1917*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1977); Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor*. (New York: Free Press, 1991); Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Daniel Katz, “A Union of Many Cultures: Yiddish Socialism and Interracial Organizing in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, 1913-1941.” Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers University, 2003; and Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

class towards the development of media that would support the aims of labor and provide the basis for a system of alternative culture and social critique into the postwar era. In the 1920s and 1930s, while a national commercial media system became solidified as part of American everyday life, the Jewish labor movement struggled within a complicated political environment to maintain and grow forms of working-class communication.

The Jewish labor movement during the 1920s provides a missing link in the historiography of working-class media and culture of the 1930s. Media historians have done significant research on the working-class press during the early twentieth century, and on the rise of a working-class culture under the New Deal. However, the prior decade of the 1920s has been widely overlooked. While much of the labor movement retreated during this time period under the conservative leadership of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the social unionism that flourished within New York's Yiddish-speaking community put an important emphasis on labor education and mass media in order to build a culture of class struggle. These efforts provided a cornerstone for the development of a broader, national working-class culture in later years, manifest in the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

However, the Jewish working class was by no means unified in its efforts in media and cultural development. An illness took hold within the Jewish working class in the 1920s with the growth of two cancers: mass culture and governmental repression. Political divisions grew between Socialists and Communists, and within trade unions along generational and gender lines. These obstacles prevented the Jewish labor movement from developing a unified strategy to maintain itself as what communication theorists have termed a "counterpublic."<sup>7</sup> Despite these

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 109-142; Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

differences, though, the leadership of the Jewish working class maintained a commitment to developing its own journalism and culture. The variety of impulses toward cultural production that emerged helped preserve the labor movement as a whole in its most precarious moments, and ultimately provided a basis for what has been called the “cultural front,” or the CIO’s “culture of unity.”

These terms derive from two significant works in American studies and working-class history—Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front* and Lizabeth Cohen’s *Making a New Deal*. Both of these authors are indebted to the work of Antonio Gramsci, and are interested in the development of “historical blocs.” These are social formations which emerge from the “contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructures” reflecting “the ensemble of the social relations of production.” Thus, as Denning explains they are “both an alliance of social forces and a specific social formation.” Although the Popular Front, with its base in the labor movement, “never achieved national power or hegemony, remaining an unruly part of Roosevelt’s New Deal alliance, its economic, political and cultural authority among the ethnic working classes of the greatest metropolises and industrial towns of North America was far reaching.”<sup>8</sup>

How did the U.S. working class reach this apex? The media, cultural, and educational efforts of the Jewish labor movement in the 1920s and early 1930s played a crucial role in laying the groundwork for the political and cultural successes of the left during the New Deal era. The political divisiveness that characterized radical politics in the 1920s brought about a flowering of

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998), 6; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 366.

strategies—commercial, democratic, feminist and Communist—to ultimately preserve radical culture and provide an important opportunity for its eventual fruition during the late-1930s and 1940s. By this time, these different strategies would coalesce and become a cornerstone of the transformative “culture of unity.”<sup>9</sup>

I locate this history within the context of both the U.S. media, and the politics of labor and ethnicity during the interwar era. Mass media and the labor movement were being reshaped in the early twentieth century by similar social forces. As other communications historians have noted, Gramsci’s observations provide a sound theoretical basis to study the many challenges to this order that were occurring from within the working class. In the wake of World War One, Gramsci described the new relationship emerging between the state, civil society and intellectuals. He argued that under modern capitalism, intellectuals serve “as the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government.” These comprise both the “spontaneous” consent the masses give “to the general direction imposed on social life”—the dominant class’ norms, values, and practices—and “the apparatus of state coercive power which ‘legally’ enforces discipline on those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively.”<sup>10</sup>

This observation has two important implications for both media and working class historians. The first of these is the increasingly important role of ideological production—namely state and corporate propaganda—in combating the working class’ disruptions to the bourgeois order. Modern public relations techniques were first developed during the early 1900s to bolster the public image of corporations and robber barons as they faced challenges from organized

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<sup>9</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 324.

<sup>10</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 36.

labor, muckraking journalists and a middle-class Progressive movement. During the same period, the Americanization movement-- a collaborative effort between big business and government-- worked to combat the revolutionary elements within immigrant communities by selling ethnic leaders on the assimilation project. These efforts came to a head when, in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson formed the Committee on Public Information (CPI), enlisting a slew of modern intellectuals to help garner support for U.S. participation in the First World War. Led by the former muckraker George Creel, the CPI sought to use modern communication technologies and methods to promote the war effort. Creel directed that, “The printed word, the spoken word, motion pictures, the telegraph, the wireless, posters, signboards, and every possible media should be used to drive home the justice of America’s cause.”<sup>11</sup>

As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky have noted, Walter Lippmann’s discussion of the need to “manufacture consent” spoke to the central role propaganda played in the maintaining the status quo during the 1920s. After cooperating with the CPI during the war, Lippmann became quite concerned with the power of propaganda, and the willingness of the public to believe it. The public’s inability to have direct knowledge of all issues with which citizens must contend in the modern world made it necessary for responsible experts to take charge of government and shape the public’s perception to gain support for their well-meaning agenda.<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, democracy could be controlled—and thus preserved—through ideological rather than coercive means.

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<sup>11</sup> Stuart Ewen, *PR!: The Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 37-63; Ewen, *PR!* 112.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), lix; Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

But, as Gramsci suggests, the management of public opinion did not displace more explicit forms of repression. Attacks on the dissident press by both state and vigilante forces have been part and parcel of the American media landscape since the colonial period. The war provided the context for boosting such draconian efforts. Approximately nine hundred people went to prison under the Espionage Act for speaking or writing in opposition to the war, including SP leader Eugene V. Debs, anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, and over one hundred members of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The Department of Justice sponsored an American Protective League, comprised of 100,000 community leaders in six hundred cities, charged with finding cases of disloyalty often through spying and reading the mail of suspected radicals. In addition, the CPI and the national press offered their support to vigilante groups which called “for all patriots to join in the suppression of anti-draft and seditious acts and sentiment.”<sup>13</sup>

While legislative action and enforcement created problems for radical organizations, the actions of Postmaster-General Burlison most directly influenced the ability to communicate anti-war, and other radical ideas, through the press. Burlison used his power to deny second-class postal rates to periodicals, thus barring most radical publications from the mails. Between 1916 and 1920, 137 daily and 2,268 weekly newspapers disappeared. While many of these failures were the result of economic trends and wartime shortages, left-leaning papers were far more

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<sup>13</sup> John Nerone, *Violence Against the Press: Policing the Public Sphere in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States 1492 to the Present*. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 356-64; Steven Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism and the Committee on Public Information* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 216.

likely to fold.<sup>14</sup> The combined effects of corporate propaganda and state repression put labor in a severely weakened position in the battle for ideas by the 1920s.

### **The State-Corporate Nexus and the Rise of the Culture Industry**

World War One was an important turning point in the history of mass media in the United States, laying the groundwork for the emergence of a national, commercially-driven media system. Alongside the creation of the CPI and increased censorship, the federal government made significant decisions regarding the regulation and development of new communications technologies in the service of profit between 1917 and 1919. Corporate entities—namely commercial newspapers and motion picture studios-- were rewarded for cooperating with the war effort while pacifists and radicals were kept from expressing dissident ideas outside of legitimate, commercial channels. By the war's end, there had been a fundamental shift in the relationships among the press, the state, and the public. The new state-corporate nexus offered privileged status to the advertising industry and Hollywood, while military research would spawn the Radio Corporation of America (RCA).

The close-knit relationship between the government and private enterprise was instrumental in institutionalizing a national commercial media system during the 1920s and 1930s. This system, in turn, would largely reflect the economic and ideological interests of the corporate class. The professionalization of advertising and journalism, the rise of the Hollywood studio system, and the commercialization of broadcasting reflected the logic of an emerging “corporate liberal framework” and worked to perpetuate the common-sense nature of such forms

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<sup>14</sup> Frank Grubbs, *The Struggle for Labor Loyalty: Gompers, the AF of L, and the Pacifists, 1917-1920*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968), 89; Nerone, *Violence*, 181.



of social organization.<sup>15</sup> As the historiography indicates, these changes in the mass media system were linked to broader shifts in the U.S. political economy and had severe cultural consequences.

### *Advertising*

Political economists of communications have demonstrated that advertising plays an important role in configuring relationships between labor and capital. On the one hand, the proliferation of advertising throughout the social realm demands the production of “commodity audiences.” Leisure time-- time spent away from the traditional workplace-- becomes a site of accumulation as audiences produce surplus value for entertainment providers by making advertising time or space valuable to purchase. On the other hand, advertising obscures the material nature of commodities by focusing consumer attention on constructed brand identities physical properties or modes of production.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the history of advertising and the history of class are inextricably linked.

The advertising industry dates back to the emergence of national markets, the growth of the industrial economy during the post-Civil War era. Expenditures on advertising increased by

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 156. Although the relationship between the motion picture industry, the federal government and social forces that countered the rise of Hollywood is of great interest, it is tangential to the issues I have researched in this dissertation. For that reason, I have not included an explanation of this process here. However, several works that touch on this history and have informed my thinking regarding the rise of a state-corporate nexus and its relationship to working-class media, as well as Jewish culture in the U.S., include, Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Steven Alan Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds and Trade Unionists, 1930-1950*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); and Paul Buhle, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture* (New York: Verso, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Dallas W. Smythe, “Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism.” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977): 1-28; Sut Jhally, *Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).

700 percent between 1867 and 1890, reaching \$360 million. In 1870, only 40 advertising agencies existed in New York City. Within two decades, there were 400, making it the center of the booming new industry.<sup>17</sup>

It was not until the 1920s, though, that advertising became a bona fide professional enterprise. This transformation might be the most overlooked, yet most important shift in the media system to occur during the interwar era. Advertising played a crucial role in maintaining the emerging system of “monopoly capitalism.” As economists Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy argued, the “truly fantastic outpouring of resources,” dedicated to advertising, “does not reflect some frivolous irrationality in corporate managements or some peculiar predilection of the American people for singing commercials, garish billboards, and magazines and newspapers flooded with advertising copy.” Instead, advertising is “an indispensable tool,” because in concentrated, oligopolistic markets, firms must stimulate demand for their products by avoiding a potentially destructive price war. As Inger Stole puts it, “The rise of oligopoly is the gasoline that fuels the flames of modern advertising.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, economic conditions mandated that advertising become a widely acceptable institution within American capitalism. State reliance on advertisers during World War I gave the industry a newfound legitimacy. At the onset of U.S. entry into the war, the advertising industry actively sought to aid the government in promoting the effort. Herbert S. Houston, the president of the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World, argued that advertising could help democracy and business, the two working in tandem. In 1917, linking advertisers with the government, he

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<sup>17</sup> Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966); David R. Spencer, *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America's Emergence as a World Power* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 53.

<sup>18</sup> Baran and Sweezy, 118-9; Inger Stole, *Advertising on Trial: Consumer Activism and Corporate Public Relations in the 1930s*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 4.

helped create the National Advertising Advisory Board in order to sell the Liberty Loan and Red Cross drives. By the end of that year, the CPI established its own advertising division. The Division of Advertising “enhanced the prestige of advertising men, who sought to have the government pay for advertising.” Although this attempt failed, they demonstrated the possibility for national campaigns, and made advertising viewed as a respectable profession.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, it became increasingly necessary “to create consumers efficiently” as mass production expanded. Advertisers were forced “to develop universal notions of what makes people respond, going beyond the ‘horse sense’ psychology that had characterized the earlier industry.” Admen wanted to “erase the Barnum image” and “seize every opportunity to associate themselves with high culture and ‘business statesmanship.’” Advertisers constructed themselves as offering a gateway to modern life.<sup>20</sup>

Ads not only promoted the sale of products in oligopolistic markets—they perpetuated an individualistic, consumer ideology, particularly among the middle class. As early as 1899, Thorstein Veblen noted that advertising worked to strengthen cultural norms, perpetuating the wasteful social impetus towards “conspicuous consumption.” “The aim of the advertiser,” wrote Veblen “is to arrest attention and then present his statement in such a manner that it is easily assimilated into the thoughts and habits of the person whose conviction is to be influenced.” This cultural trend grew alongside the advertising industry. By the end of the 1920s, “material

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<sup>19</sup> Vaughn,  *Holding Fast*, 191-2.

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 33; Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7-8; 25-51.

nationalism cast the nation not as imagined communities but as an aggregate of appetites expressed in goods. Advertisers defined the nation as imagined commodities.”<sup>21</sup>

### *Journalism and the Public*

As a structuring force within the mass media, the advertising revolution spurred a transformation in the press. The commercialization of journalism in the U.S. dates back to the 1830s, with the rise of the penny press. By the 1890s, news had become a commodity—the result of a process of production organized around the profit motive and the drive to increase revenues and cut costs. However, due to the need to increase their advertising revenue, the newspaper industry was largely consolidated and dominated by a few newspaper chains by the 1920s. In 1909-10, 58 percent of America’s cities had a vibrant press, varying in ownership and perspective. By 1920, that same percentage would be under monopoly control. This commercialization helped fuel a sympathetic relationship between the new public relations industry and the press. Newspaper chains allowed PR practitioners access to large portions of the press, while the press benefited from the burgeoning firms’ subsidies.<sup>22</sup>

The emerging ideology of professionalism within the newsroom worked to make criticism of press concentration irrelevant. All the major journalism schools had been founded by 1920, while none had existed at the turn of the century. By 1923, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) was formed to solidify “the separation of church and state”— giving the impression of a distinction between the editorial and business departments—at newspapers, and counter the power of publishers. The publishers ultimately won the battle. Although

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<sup>21</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of Business Enterprise*, as cited in Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 147; 130.

<sup>22</sup> Gerald Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Ewen, *PR!*, 176-9.

“criticism of owners and advertisers for not respecting the autonomy of editors and reporters was acceptable...criticism of the capitalist basis of the newspaper...industry was now inviolable.”<sup>23</sup>

Commercial imperatives were only one aspect, though, of the new journalistic environment of the 1920s. In the post-CPI era, it became apparent to many intellectuals that the public and journalists alike were highly malleable, and needed to be guided towards proper choices by experts in order to preserve democracy. As Walter Lippmann argued in his classic *Public Opinion* (1922), “[P]ublic opinions must be organized *for the press* if they are to be sound, not *by the press* as is the case today.”<sup>24</sup> The press agent, then, played a central role in disseminating information that could be legitimately reported. “The development of the publicity man,” wrote Lippmann,

is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given a shape by somebody, and since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts, and since there is little disinterested organization of intelligence, the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties—

everyone from corporations and banks to suffragists and labor unions.<sup>25</sup>

It deserves noting, however, that Corporate America most successfully developed and implemented these techniques. Companies such as AT&T and General Electric used increasingly sophisticated methods of portraying themselves as operating in the public’s interest.<sup>26</sup> Taking

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<sup>23</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 64-5.

<sup>24</sup> Ewen, *PR!*, 151.

<sup>25</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 218; 217-19.

<sup>26</sup> Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 48-87; Ewen, *PR!*, 82-101.

advantage of professional journalism's demand for official sources, public relations agents made the reporter, "a tool of elite class interests," reducing the journalist to a "scribe."<sup>27</sup>

Thus, two contradictory impulses emerged, laying the groundwork for professional journalism. On the one hand, there was an increase in the expectation of objectivity spurred by the reliance on "expert" sources. On the other hand, in contrast with the muckraking investigations of the earlier Progressive era, journalism became increasingly reflective of the perspectives and social goals of the powerful. Taken together, in conjunction with the political repression of World War I and its aftermath, the growth of the newspaper industry brought about the narrowing of perspectives legitimated within the public sphere.

### *The Rise of Broadcasting*

A third area in which the state-corporate nexus worked to reshape the media landscape in the wake of World War I was in the rise of broadcasting. The U.S. government's involvement in regulating wireless telegraphy dates back to 1904, when the Navy was given authority over coastal stations. The Radio Act of 1912 later created a comprehensive plan to regulate wireless, dividing the spectrum among ship, coastal, amateur and government frequencies. At the same time, several large corporations began cooperating with the federal government on research and development to perfect wireless telephony.<sup>28</sup>

Upon U.S. entry into the war in 1917, the Navy took over all wireless stations based on provision in the 1912 Act. Amateur experimenters were forced off of the airwaves, and corporate entities such as General Electric, the United Fruit Company and Westinghouse were guaranteed

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<sup>27</sup> Robert W. McChesney and Ben Scott, "Introduction." In *Our Unfree Press: 100 Years of Radical Media Criticism*, ed. McChesney and Scott, (New York: New Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 68-9.

patent protection. For one year, from August 1, 1918 through July 31, 1919, the U.S. government owned the nation's wire communication system, under Postmaster General Burlison authority.<sup>29</sup>

Although Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels wanted Congress to pass legislation nationalizing wireless communication permanently, it would be a mistake to view this period as one where the state, on the whole, was hostile to corporate power. As advertisers, film studios and newspapers did with the CPI, private communications firms were expected to cooperate with military goals, and in the end, they were handsomely rewarded. The relationship between government and communications corporations, generally, was a “military-corporate love fest.” Companies that did work willingly with the government benefited handsomely, creating “a coordinated industry” that symbolized the United States’ newfound status as a world power.<sup>30</sup>

A coalition of corporate managers, military representatives and members of the Wilson administration organized the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in 1919, bringing together the interests of General Electric, the assets of the dismantled American Marconi, and the patents the Navy acquired from the Federal Telegraph Company. Around the same time, AT&T, who had understood the government’s ownership plan of the Bell System during the previous year as necessary within the context of the “war emergency,” received \$9.3 million from the U.S. Treasury to help balance its deficit.<sup>31</sup> These two bodies would be instrumental in the development of commercial broadcasting during the next decade, having received massive

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<sup>29</sup> N.R. Danielian, *AT&T: The Story of Industrial Conquest* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1939), 248-50.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Starr, *Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communication*. (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 225; Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets and Globalization, 1860-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 249-254; Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 52.

<sup>31</sup> Danielian, *AT&T*, 268-9.

assistance and security from the federal government. By the end of World War I, the state had helped to establish broadcasting as an arena of potential profit.

During the next decade, radio broadcasting became a hobby for many working-class and middle-class people in the early 1920s. As journalism, public relations, advertising, and the motion picture industry professionalized, the airwaves remained a space for locally-based communication among amateurs for the bulk of the 1920s. Thus, radio broadcasting provided one possible space for the reinvigoration of democracy.

In its earliest years, broadcasting had a grassroots orientation. Most broadcasting was done only at 100 watts, where good service could only be received within a three-mile radius. While the federal government pursued radicals and limited speech during the Palmer Raids and the Red Scare, it also lifted the ban on amateur broadcasting in 1919, and returning veterans reinvigorated the old hobby with new, more advanced equipment they had used during the war. By June 1920 there were fifteen times as many amateur stations as there were other types of stations combined, with 6,103 licensed amateurs. That number climbed to over 10,000 by the following year.<sup>32</sup>

By this point, large-scale commercial interests began considering the possibility of profiting from amateur activity. Westinghouse, having been in a slump since the end of the war, saw the opportunity to broadcast amateur concerts from its own transmitter in Pittsburgh, reaching a larger audience and creating a market for radio receivers. The new station, KDKA, “set off a national mania,” and Westinghouse built 500 watt transmitters in Newark, Chicago,

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<sup>32</sup> Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 295-99; Nathan Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago's Voice of Labor, 1926-78*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 13.



and Springfield, Massachusetts. By the next year, the company joined the RCA patent pool, along with the United Fruit Company. Sales of RCA manufactured radio receivers skyrocketed.<sup>33</sup>

Other commercial entities also became involved in broadcasting. For example, the *Detroit News* and the *New York Globe* led the way in establishing radio supplements to newspapers. By the end of the year, the professionalized newspaper industry owned 69 radio stations. Department stores also established stations for the purposes of self-promotion. Finally, in 1922, AT&T embarked on a controversial new business model—“toll broadcasting”—from its station WEAf, introducing advertising over the airwaves.<sup>34</sup>

From the beginning, the federal government clearly favored the corporate interests over the amateurs. The Department of Commerce forbade amateurs from broadcasting at above 200 meters. Corporate-owned stations, on the other hand, were assigned the 360-meter slot. The experimentation of amateurs presented a challenge to the radio trust’s conception of how the medium could be used, and forced RCA “to reorient its manufacturing priorities, its corporate strategies, indeed, its entire way of thinking about the technology under its control.”<sup>35</sup>

But others also worked to make use of the emerging medium, moving it from middle-class garages and into social institutions. Chief among these institutions were universities. The winter of 1921-22 brought “a huge academic procession to the air” led by the Latter-Day Saints University in Salt Lake City and the University of Wisconsin. By the end of 1922, seventy-four

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<sup>33</sup> Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 70.

<sup>34</sup> Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 98-106.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas, *Inventing*, 302-3.

colleges and universities had broadcasting licenses, and by 1925 there were 128. Educational broadcasting allowed for people to take courses, and even receive degrees, from their homes.<sup>36</sup>

By 1926, however, three major commercial radio networks were underway-- NBC's Red and Blue Network, and CBS. NBC developed under RCA vice president David Sarnoff's watch as a way to boost the sales of listening sets, while CBS was established by the Columbia Phonograph Company and soon received investments from the Paramount film studio. Relying on advertising support, both of these companies and their networks, then, were thus linked to the rest of the culture industry. While competition could be fierce between these two giants in the early days of commercial broadcasting, executives understood "that the economic development, political goals, and regulatory stability of the nascent industry required cooperation." Together, the networks "marched in lockstep," and created a united front against those who advocated legislation that supported non-commercial broadcasting.<sup>37</sup>

The establishment of the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) by the Radio Act of 1927, and the implementation of that body's General Order 40 in 1928, placed the bulk of the nation's radio spectrum in the hands of the networks and other commercial stations. Although hotly contested by a politically diverse reform movement in the following years, the commercial broadcasting system was finally solidified with the passage of the Communications Act of 1934.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, 97.

<sup>37</sup> Michael J. Socolow, "Always in Friendly Competition': NBC and CBS in the First Decade of National Broadcasting," in *NBC: America's Network*, eds. Michele Hilmes and Michael Lowell Henry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 25.

<sup>38</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

## Working-Class Media in Critical Junctures

The dominance of a commercial media system dependent on state support, however, was by no means inevitable. The development of this system faced intense criticism and was met with formidable resistance in multiple forms. Many facets of the national media and communications industries were called into question to varying degrees during their development through the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, critical media scholars have repeatedly pointed to the 1920s and 1930s as an era where working class organizations and their middle-class allies challenged the rise of commercial radio, the corporate press, Hollywood, and the advertising industry.<sup>39</sup>

Robert W. McChesney has dubbed this point in media history a “critical juncture.” A critical juncture is a historical moment where the rise of new media technologies, criticism of the status quo, and social upheaval coalesce to create the potential for transformations in the media system.<sup>40</sup> While McChesney originally argued that debate over the commercial media system essentially ended in 1934 with the passage of the Communications Act, more recent scholarship has demonstrated that contestation continued into the postwar era. Victor Pickard and Ben Scott have suggested that negotiations around the terms of commercial radio and professional journalism continued well into the 1940s, mirroring the CIO-era, leading towards a “postwar settlement” on the principles of self-regulation within the mass media.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> McChesney, *Telecommunications*; Godfried, *WCFL*; McChesney and Scott, “Introduction.” In *Our Unfree Press*; Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood*; Stole, *Advertising on Trial*.

<sup>40</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *Communication Revolution: Critical Junctures and the Future of Media* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2007),

<sup>41</sup> Victor Pickard, “Media Democracy Deferred: The Postwar Settlement for U.S. Communications, 1945-1949.” Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2008; Ben Scott, “Labor’s New Deal for Journalism,” Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2009.

The CIO unions continued to push these concerns, particularly around radio broadcasting. Elizabeth Fones-Wolf notes that a new wave of labor radio and a discourse concerning “listeners’ rights” emerged in the immediate post-war era with the advent of FM broadcasting. The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), the United Autoworkers (UAW) and the United Electrical and Radio Workers (UE) attempted to build their own FM radio stations. By the end of the 1940s, the UAW and ILGWU had opened five FM stations, which conservatives feared represented the rise of a “laboristic state,” forming “the nucleus of a pro-labor network blanketing the major U.S. metropolitan areas.” These efforts countered increasingly conservative propaganda efforts from corporate America, and the political onslaught against unions and the New Deal such as the Taft-Hartley Act. Thus, the presence of labor radio worked to sustain New Deal liberalism through the 1950s.<sup>42</sup>

Despite these successes, it is safe to say that the broad contours of the media system by the postwar era did not reflect the aims of the radical wing of the labor movement. Reformers’ failures have led critics to dismiss the Habermasian histories that chronicle them as overly nostalgic for the past and overly pessimistic about the present and future. Paul Starr argues that they rely on a “radical narrative...of struggle and betrayal” where media history is characterized by “the suppression of alternatives.” Although Starr notes that “the radical democrat spies rays of hope in occasional bursts of public protest over the power of the big media,” he sees this view of

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<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Waves of Opposition: Labor and the Struggle for Democratic Radio*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 161.

media history as ignorant of the “mixed, though on the whole positive, character” of the development of commercial mass media.<sup>43</sup>

While Starr acknowledges the contingency of mass media systems, he rests his understanding on a liberal conception of “constitutive choices” which obfuscates the role of class power. In his formulation, all parties participating in debates around the structure of media seem to exist on a level playing field. At the same time, Starr reduces the radical approach to a vulgar Marxism where fights over mass media are zero-sum games. From this perspective, anything short of significant control over the mass media by working-class interests, or “the public,” would be a loss.

A Gramscian view however, suggests that the study of working-class efforts to shape communications systems is essential to understanding the total character of a media system, including its contradictions and fissures. These efforts are particularly important during critical junctures because they help constitute “the superstructures of civil society.” These superstructures “are like the trench-systems of modern warfare,” and they become key battlegrounds in the “wars of position” particularly during “the great economic crises.”<sup>44</sup> Rather than a zero-sum game, studying these “wars of position” can account for resistant efforts and look at the important contributions they make to the overall political climate and the organization of power.

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Schudson, “Public Spheres, Imagined Communities, and the Underdeveloped Historical Understanding of Journalism,” in *Explorations in Communication History*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2008), 183-5; Paul Starr, “Democratic Theory and the History of Communications.” Paper given at “Back to the Future: Explorations in Communications and History,” Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. December 1, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Victor Pickard, “Whether the Giants Should Be Slain or Persuaded to be Good: Revisiting the Hutchins Commission and the Role of Media in a Democratic Society,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, n. 4 (2010), 395-6; Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 39.

This approach is supported by the all-too limited communications historiography of working-class media, where we see a continuous dialectical relationship between working-class media institutions and the broader media system. Since the 1830s, the labor press has played a central role in shaping the contours of the U.S. media system by providing alternative media structures, as well as criticism of the capitalist press. Rodger Streitmatter has shown the importance of the early working-class press in the 1830s in challenging the emerging two party system and fighting for real political gains, including the ten-hour work day, public education, and abolishing imprisonment for debt and child labor. Similarly, Dan Schiller has argued that the penny press emerged as a commoditized response to working class criticisms of the elite party papers.<sup>45</sup>

The rapid industrialization and the emergence of corporate power, alongside the growth in immigration, brought about the rise of an urban working-class in the U.S. by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. By this point, labor newspapers became an important part in organizing resistance to the industrial order, and in countering the influence of the profit-driven press. Holly Allen has shown the importance of the Knights of Labor's newspapers in developing a "movement culture," rather than creating passive consumers of information. Jonathan Bekken has argued that working-class newspapers of the early 1900s—many of them written in foreign languages— "stemmed from an alternative press ideology, one that sought to erase distinctions between newspapers and readers and to involve its supporters in every aspect of the newspaper, from management and editorial decisions to reporting." Hundreds of radical dailies, weeklies and monthlies were published by an expanding array of radical organizations, including the Industrial

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<sup>45</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, "Origins of the American Labor Press," *Journalism History* 25, n.3 (1999): 99-106; Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).

Workers of the World (IWW), the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), and smaller publishing associations affiliated with unions, or anarchist or socialist organizations, as the basic premise of the capitalist system was increasingly questioned.

Bekken, however, offers a decline narrative ending in 1930. Focusing on the radical press in Chicago, he argues that by the late 1920s,

Chicago's radical working-class movements had entered an irreversible decline brought on by factors including increased factionalism in the wake of the 1919 split in the Socialist Party, red scares that deported many radical activists and intimidated others, restrictions on new immigration, and the erosion of the mutual-aid societies and related institutions resulting partly from the foregoing but especially from two decades of hard economic conditions that forced immigrant workers to turn from their own institutions to state and federal programs to ensure their survival. Working class organizations and newspapers collapsed or retrenched during the Depression. While the Communist Party would enjoy a resurgence in the 1930s, and radical currents would survive for decades to come, radical workers' movements would never again be as deeply rooted in the everyday lives of Chicago's working class as they had been in the decades spanning the 1880s through the mid 1920s.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, working-class historian Tony Michels' study of the Yiddish socialists on New York's Lower East Side reveals the prevalence of a "newspaper culture" through the First World War and the Russian Revolution, where thousands of workers attended "excursions, balls, literary evenings, and anniversary celebrations," often with the purpose of raising money for the newspapers.<sup>47</sup> But Michel's narrative ends in 1922 as the unity around the SP disintegrated. Thus, Bekken and Michels both offer little insight into the

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<sup>46</sup> Holly Allen, "Gender, the Movement Press, and the Cultural Politics of the Knights of Labor." In *Ruthless Criticism: New Perspectives in U.S. Communication History*, eds. William S. Solomon and Robert W. McChesney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 122-150; Jon Bekken, "The Working-Class Press at the Turn of the Century." In *Ruthless Criticism*, 151-175; 151-2; Bekken, *Working-class Newspapers, Community and Consciousness, 1880-1930*. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1992.

<sup>47</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 69-124.

connection between the flourishing of left-wing culture in the 1930s and earlier efforts, particularly by Jewish immigrants, at the turn of the century.

Neither media nor working class historians have explained how the labor movement and other radical organizations used media during the 1920s and the pre-New Deal Depression-era. Lizabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal* begins to address this gap in the historiography. In her study of Chicago during the interwar period, Cohen uses a Gramscian framework to note how the CIO was built from the bottom up within the institutions and through the cultural practices that took root in the 1920s. For Cohen, "what matters most in explaining why workers acted politically in the ways they did during the mid-thirties is the change in workers' own orientation during the 1920s and 1930s. Working-class Americans underwent a gradual shift in attitudes and practices over the intervening decade and a half as a result of a wide range of social and cultural experiences," including the rise of "welfare capitalism," the growth of chain stores and consumer culture, and the prevalence of mass media including radio and motion pictures.

Arguing against the thrust of Frankfurt School theory, Cohen says that mass culture, "did not in itself challenge working people's existing values and relationships. Rather, the impact of mass culture depended on the social and economic contexts in which it developed and the manner in which it was experienced, in other words, how mass culture was produced, distributed and consumed."<sup>48</sup> Radio and motion pictures in particular, she argues, became integrated into the fabric of Chicago's working-class ethnic communities and helped, in many cases, to reinforce communal bonds. At the same time, particularly by the end of the 1920s and 1930s, the commercialization of radio and the growth of large movie houses created multiethnic

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<sup>48</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 5.



environments where workers came together as consumers. According to Cohen, this acceptance of American consumerism, particularly among immigrants' U.S.-born children, though, did not mean that mass culture led to the repudiation of ethnic identity, but rather, "help[ed] them reconcile foreign pasts with contemporary American culture."<sup>49</sup> Cohen's focus, however, is on how these changes were viewed and experienced by workers in their everyday lives. The ways in which the institutions of the labor movement reacted and worked to shape those experiences is quite a different matter.

Emphasizing the important role of Gramsci's "organic intellectuals" helps us to understand this process better. As the products of "organic intellectuals," working-class media challenge the "common-sense" perpetuated by the elite under modern capitalism. Gramsci noted, that working-class media "develop certain forms of new intellectualism and...determine its new concepts." This new intellectual must be "an active [participant] in practical life, as constructor, organiser, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator." Nathan Godfried demonstrates a deep connection between organic intellectuals and working-class media. Edward Nockels and John Fitzpatrick of the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL), for example, were instrumental in pushing for the creation of WCFL, an important labor radio station in the 1920s and 1930s. Drawing from George Lipsitz, Godfried argues that these two men "learned 'about the world by trying to change it,' and they changed the 'world by learning about it from the perspective of the needs and aspirations of their social group.'"<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 99-158; 143.

<sup>50</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 9; George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 10. Cited in Godfried, *WCFL*, 22.

Organic intellectuals and working-class media are central to the transformation of civil society under capitalism. This suggests a need to do working-class media history not from the top (by examining the role of political and economic elites in shaping the dominant media system) or the bottom (by examining the interaction of average working people with different cultural products), but from the middle, focusing on the organic intellectuals who structured working-class media institutions. While the immigrant working class made meaning from a cross-section of mediated messages and cultural experiences, organic intellectuals played a special role in ensuring that alternatives to the dominant, commercial media system existed and could provide a platform for organizing for political, economic and social change. These women and men determined how to acquire funding and how to navigate difficult political terrain. They implemented visions of how media and culture could build democracy. They had successes and they made mistakes. Their decisions helped to shape the media system's total landscape, and influenced the outcomes of labor's struggle. By turning towards the middle, media historians position themselves to better grasp the intricacies and contingencies of the political and cultural struggle for hegemony.

### **Jewishness, the Labor Movement and American Culture**

During the interwar years, in the face of a dramatically shifting media system, labor unions and left-wing political parties developed new strategies that could maintain a "movement culture" through politically difficult moments. Nowhere was this truer than within New York's Jewish working-class universe. Although the subject of much social history, little communications history has focused on this crucial segment of the U.S. working class and their

cultural forms. The Jewish working class in the United States was particularly positioned to play this important cultural role because of its class status and its social values which differed significantly from the dominant Protestant-capitalist order. As historian Daniel Katz argues, this manifested itself in a commitment towards “social unionism,” placing emphasis on the labor movement not merely as a device for improved wages and conditions, but as an organization dedicated to creating new and transformative ways of life.<sup>51</sup>

This understanding coincides with insights derived from scholarship within cultural studies and cultural history. Drawing from Gramsci, much work in these areas has noted that race, ethnicity, gender and other forms of identity in conjunction with class are sites in which opposition to the hegemonic structure manifests. Although the post-structural turn in cultural studies during the 1980s led many scholars away from a Marxian approach, Stuart Hall has argued that Gramsci’s “non-reductive” approach to Marxism points towards a need to study class alongside race, helping to complicate and give nuance to historical analysis.<sup>52</sup>

Although his writing on race and ethnicity was limited, Gramsci did argue that the history of immigration in the United States presented a problem for the development of a “national popular,” a historical bloc formed between national and popular aspirations and mediated by intellectuals that could work to reshape the hegemonic order. As a result, there was a “need to fuse together in a single national crucible with a unitary culture the different forms of culture imported by immigrants of differing national origins” in the U.S.<sup>53</sup> This is exactly what happened

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<sup>51</sup> Katz, “A Union of Many Cultures.”

<sup>52</sup> Robert W. McChesney, “Communication for the Hell of It: The Triviality of U.S. Broadcasting History,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 40, no. 4 (1996): 540-552; Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 5-27.

<sup>53</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 421,n65.

during the 1930s, as the second generation of “new immigrants” from eastern and southern Europe came of age as Americans.

George Lipsitz argues that one of Denning’s most important contributions offered in *The Cultural Front* is “his recuperation of ethnicity as a powerful independent generator of radical politics during the 1930s and 1940s rather than as simply one site where class consciousness emerged.” It was through the new multi-ethnic collaborations, described by Denning and Cohen, that “America” and “Americanness” became redefined, although not un-problematically. “[A]ffirmation of ethnic identity during the 1930s and 1940s as part of strategies for addressing and redressing the humiliating subordinations of working-class life and inverting the ideological formulations that rendered immigrants and their children as unworthy and unwelcome participants in American politics eventually evolved into an uncritical cultural pluralism after World War II,” while excluding African Americans from the real economic gains made by the new “white” working class through the New Deal coalition. Further, Lipsitz argues that the New Deal coalition’s emphasis on redefining “American” identity was due, in part, to xenophobia and racism that led oppressed groups to want to escape stigmatization, as well as a need to link the left to the American republican tradition, contrasting the early “producer democracy” with “a parasitical capitalism” that had betrayed the true American tradition.<sup>54</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, Jews experienced dramatic shifts in identity, representation, and their relationship to the dominant U.S. culture. As Jewish immigrants in the 1920s were cut off from the Old World by new quotas, they and their children became increasingly integrated into an emerging consumer society. In the post-World War One moment, a new liberal elite discourse

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<sup>54</sup> George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 38; 39; 45.

emerged that rejected the notion that all Jews were part of a radical fringe, and that they could be good Americans. An increase in Jewish representation in municipal government alongside the growing power of labor unions began to place Jewish immigrants in visible positions of power. Mass media products, such as the 1927 Warner Bros.' film, *The Jazz Singer*, which told the story of Jewish assimilation into whiteness via blackface minstrelsy re-articulated this possibility. At the same time, the most conservative elements of American society revamped anti-Semitism, with the popularity of Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent* and its publication of the fictitious "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." The "Americanization" process would be shaped by the tensions between these two poles.<sup>55</sup>

Emerging out of the "new" working-class history, much scholarship has focused on how Americanization happened "from the bottom up" as a result of interethnic cooperation in urban communities and on the shop floor. But little emphasis has been placed on the role of organic intellectuals in mediating this process, particularly through working-class media. When media have been a central topic of discussion, scholars have generally referred to the commercial mass media and their relationship to the immigrant experience. For example, Neal Gabler has focused on the role of Jewish immigrant entrepreneurs within the culture industries. Gabler views the rise of Hollywood as a product of the Jewish immigrant experience through which Jewish-Americans were able to enter into the mainstream and (literally) project their vision of the United States to the world. From a more critical perspective, Paul Buhle offers a similar narrative, focusing not on the role of moguls but on the role of *Yiddishkayt*—Jewish working class culture—as

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<sup>55</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*.

providing the roots for American mass culture.<sup>56</sup> What strategies, though, did working-class institutions-- the SP, the CP, and the garment industry trade unions—use to sustain this ethnic, working-class culture and put it to political use during the critical juncture of the interwar era?

There are clues to this answer throughout working-class media historiography. This is particularly true of scholarship surrounding the quintessential New Deal medium—radio. Nathan Godfried’s and Bob McChesney’s research on the Chicago Federation of Labor’s (CFL) station WCFL demonstrates that it served as an important site of contestation during the broadcasting reform fight in the late-1920s an early-1930s. Edward Nockels—who Godfried understands as a classic “organic intellectual”—and the CFL played a central role in trying to protect the rights of non-commercial broadcasters, supporting the Wagner-Hatfield Amendment which would have put aside 25 percent of the airwaves for non-commercial use. The station also challenged the commercial conception of broadcasting by working to offer “a first-class program that would be ‘entertaining and educational at the same time’” supplementing mass public gatherings that had developed working-class solidarity in the past. State pressures and the need for revenue from advertisers, however, forced Nockels and WCFL to make many compromises. Still, the station remained an essentially counter-hegemonic force on the airwaves through much of its programming and its unique ownership structure.

Through its labor programming, ethnic hours, [and other unique content], WCFL made itself a community and grass-roots institution. Its moments of crass commercialization and growing reliance on advertising notwithstanding, labor radio performed a valuable

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<sup>56</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in New York City, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); James R. Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930,” in *Journal of American History*, 79, n. 3 (1992): 996-1020; David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*; Buhle, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood*.

service to Chicago's working classes by promoting and strengthening [what Lizabeth Cohen called] 'ethnic and working class affiliations.'<sup>57</sup>

Nockels' vision for WCFL was largely in synch with the social unionism of the Jewish garment unions and their focus on worker education. The Yiddish left's own experiment with radio was WEVD. Godfried has also studied this station, but has yet to adequately contextualize it within the world of the Jewish labor movement. Owned first by the SP's Debs Memorial Trust with strong support from the ILGWU, and later by the Forward Association, the publisher of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, WEVD challenged the corporate conception of radio broadcasting while making significant concessions in terms of both structure and content in order to remain on the air. Originally dedicated to providing educational programming, the station faced obstacles from the state-corporate nexus to offering an alternative to corporate broadcasting. Forced to justify WEVD's existence as a non-profit station to the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), the SP argued that denying its license amounted to the suppression of minority rights to free speech. Godfried argues that the SP's decision to equate the working class with a "dissident" group, rather than majority worked to legitimate commercial radio. After being purchased by the *Forward* newspaper in 1932, WEVD increasingly aired sponsored programming in order to offset the cost of sustained labor programs. Commercially sponsored Yiddish entertainment "urged the consumption of everything from noodles to furniture to headache remedies to Coney Island excursions."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> McChesney, *Telecommunications*, 63-72; Godfried. *WCFL*, 41; 135.

<sup>58</sup> Nathan Godfried, "Legitimizing the Mass Media Structure." In *Culture, Gender, Race and U.S. Labor History*, ed. Ronald C. Kent, et al. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 130; "Struggling over Politics and Culture: Organized Labor and Radio Station WEVD During the 1930s," *Labor History*, 42, no. 4 (2001): 365.

Ari Kelman suggests in his important history of Yiddish radio that the prevalence of Yiddish-language entertainment continued to build a community that existed as an alternative to the dominant culture, challenging the FCC's Anglo-centric notion of the "public interest." In addition, he demonstrates that WEVD in particular broadcast not only in Yiddish and English, but in a variety of other tongues spoken by working-class immigrants.<sup>59</sup> Thus, WEVD helped to forging a space for interethnic cooperation and the CIO "culture of unity" on the air. But Kelman neglects to adequately discuss the political drive behind Yiddish radio, particularly WEVD. In his account, Jewish ethnicity and culture are largely detached from demands for radical social change in his study. While there were certainly Yiddish radio programs that existed as pure entertainment, WEVD stood as part of a larger political project aimed at social change.

WEVD and the Forward Association were quite comfortable with working within an advertising-driven broadcasting system, and operating under the logic of capitalism. This strategy was not new in the 1930s. It had been developed by Baruch Charney Vladeck, managing editor of the *Forward* newspaper immediately following World War One. In combination with staunch anti-Communism, Vladeck and the *Forward* sought to advance a moderate democratic socialism that was not at odds with the politics of consumption. In order to do this, Vladeck focused on developing editions outside of the *Forward*'s New York City base in order to attract national advertisers and produce new commodity audiences. While the contradictions of this strategy had cultural consequences, it also allowed the newspaper to maintain a broad readership through the 1920s and 30s, and keep WEVD alive through the New Deal era. Although the *Forward* was a conservative force within the Jewish labor movement, its presence allowed for

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<sup>59</sup> Ari Kelman, *Station Identification: A Cultural History of Yiddish Radio in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).



the maintenance of an increasingly influential progressive voice, leading towards the development of a historical bloc.

While the Socialists and the *Forward* were able to expand their reach in the 1920s, Yiddish-speaking Communists also helped to sustain radical activity and cultural production. Vilified by Vladeck and the *Forward*, and by much of the garment unions' leadership, *Di frayhayt*—the Yiddish daily newspaper—was the widest circulating Communist publication in the U.S. While it began initially as a democratic challenge to the *Forward* after its more radical staff, including Jacob Salutsky, were expelled from the Socialist Party following World War One, *Di frayhayt* soon came under the control of the Communist Party. Under the editorship of Moyshe Olgin, the paper incorporated left-wing politics with poetry and literature, laying the groundwork for “the cultural front” described by Denning.

Frustrated with *Di frayhayt*'s Communist turn, Salutsky, who changed his name to J.B.S. Hardman, spent his life striving to create publications and forms of labor education that would promote a wide range of debate among working class people. As the Educational Director of the ACWA and the editor of its *Advance* newspaper, Hardman pursued the democratic ideal of communication dominated by neither partisan nor corporate interest. At the same time, Fannia Cohn, the Education Secretary of the ILGWU, worked to find new ways to draw workers, and particularly women, into union life through participatory culture.<sup>60</sup>

The combination of these four approaches to Yiddish left media—commercial, trade union democracy, feminist, and Communist—all helped to lay the foundation for a broad, multi-ethnic “national popular” working-class culture in the late 1930s. As such, they had significant

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<sup>60</sup> Michels, 217-250; Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*.

implications for the quality of democracy in the United States. Thus, they deserve the attention of a systematic study within the field of communications.

### **Counterpublics and Media Historiography**

The history of the Jewish working class and its media offers a case study in understanding the relationship between “counterpublics,” mass media, and the broader public sphere. This case study is of interest for both theoretical and historical reasons. Jewish immigration to, and labor activism within, the United States coincides historically with middle-class concerns over the viability of a unified public sphere. During the late nineteenth century, U.S. and European intellectuals warned of the deterioration of the modern liberal order and the possibility of democratic rule. Theorists such as Gustave LeBon and Gabriel Tarde argued that an irrational, working-class, feminized “crowd” was replacing the middle-class, rational “public.” These fears culminated during World War I, with the U.S. government’s engaged in its first modern propaganda effort through the Committee on Public Information (CPI).<sup>61</sup>

Based in his experience with the CPI, former muckraker Walter Lippmann warned in his 1922 classic *Public Opinion* that the modern world had become too complicated for the average citizen, and technocratic experts should govern “the pictures in their heads.” In Lippmann’s formulation, democracy can only work if there is an “independent expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions.” Thus, there is little room for citizen participation. Rather, the new expert class would have to replace the

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<sup>61</sup> Ewen, *PR!*, 60-81; 131-145.

public in the role of decision-makers, and would have to work to “manufacture consent” among the rest of the populous.<sup>62</sup>

Lippmann’s ideas spurred one of the great intellectual debates of the twentieth century. In response, American pragmatist John Dewey argued that education and participation among the public were necessary in order to maintain the viability of democracy. Dewey saw the roots of political democracy in the United States as grounded in the “genuine community life” of agricultural settings. Given the geographic expansion of the United States, the rise of the bureaucratic state, and the industrial revolution, this posed a problem, because although “we have inherited...local town-meeting practices and ideas...we live and act and have our being in a continental nation state.” Thus, it became imperative to transform the “Great Society” into the “Great Community,” where “the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of the word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being.”<sup>63</sup>

Communication scholars and intellectual historians have studied this debate, noting that it highlights a central problem in democratic theory. James Carey showed that Lippmann’s approach coincided purely with the ‘transmission model’ of communication while Dewey saw the ‘transmission’ and ‘ritual model’ working together. In the end, however, Dewey emphasized the ritual view because of its propensity to develop community.<sup>64</sup> Thus, although Dewey disagreed with Lippmann’s prescription, he did agree, essentially, with the diagnosis. Both men saw challenges for “the public” in the twentieth century, which they conceived of as a single unit,

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<sup>62</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), 111-2; 184.

<sup>64</sup> James W. Carey, *Communications as Culture, Revised Edition: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 33.

whose fragmentation was a burden for democracy. While Lippmann's "Great Society" would be managed by experts, and Dewey's "Great Community" involved high degrees of participation, both implicitly rejected the idea of what would come to be known as the counterpublic—the enclaved community, with its own forms of communication, speaking among itself, shaped by, but distinct from, a larger national dialogue.

Still, Dewey's thinking provides a starting point to understand how social engagement and even opposition might be fostered in Lippmann's world. This became necessary as the years following World War II brought even greater skepticism about the possibility for, and in some cases, even, the desirability of, a "social realm" that might be the locus of democratic discourse and action. The Frankfurt School demonstrated a loss of faith in the Enlightenment project, arguing that its logic led to human brutality and irrationality. Hannah Arendt saw the modern "social realm" as where the public and private realms "constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself." Private economic concerns become public matters and vice-versa. Thus, modernity demands conformity, as "society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to 'normalize' its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement."<sup>65</sup>

C. Wright Mills also critiqued this new "mass society," arguing that changes in the class structure of the United States culminated with the dominance of the "power elite." The mass society is characterized by a disproportionate ratio of givers of opinion to receivers, a low possibility of answering back, a lack of realization of public opinion in social action, and a high

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<sup>65</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 28.

degree to which institutional authority penetrates the public. Mills offers a starting point to think about the political economy of mass communication in conjunction with the changing nature of democracy. More specifically, he indicates that the commercialization process and the decline of a multiplicity of publics are interlinked. He writes,

In a public, discussion is the ascendant means of communication, and the mass media, if they exist, simply enlarge and animate discussion, linking one *primary public* with the discussions of another. In a mass society, the dominant type of communication is the formal media, and the publics become mere *media markets*: all those exposed to the contents of given mass media.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, both Arendt and Mills saw that the mass society had devastating effects on democratic culture. Arendt, however, positioned her reading outside of a Marxist, structuralist framework, drawing on the phenomenology of Heidegger. Mills, drawing from Weber, demonstrated the ways in which new forms of class and new bureaucratic institutions had reshaped the relationship between the masses, the public, and the state-corporate nexus. Mills, then, provides a better starting point to begin thinking about the reworking of the public sphere through an approach based in social history, particularly one that pays attention to the importance of mass media. This approach would be honed further by German social theorist Jurgen Habermas.

### **Habermas and his Critics**

The central work on the public sphere drawing from a Marxist-Hegelian tradition has been Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Here, Habermas describes the public sphere as both a normative category and a historical ideal. Written in light of the problems

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<sup>66</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 304.

of the mass society understood by Adorno and Horkheimer, Arendt and Mills, Habermas pointed to the Enlightenment ideal as a way of explaining how spaces for democratic discourse might exist. Like Arendt, he defines the public sphere as the space between the private sphere and the state. According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere was centered in Europe's coffee houses, salons, and taverns, and rose alongside the liberal state and capitalism. By the early twentieth century, however, the bourgeois public sphere had disintegrated, and fell with the birth of mass politics and a commercially-based media.<sup>67</sup>

While Habermas' main concern is the bourgeois public sphere, he does provide some insight to help understand the relationship between the working class and democracy, working through Marx's writings and draws out a theory of public, democratic discourse. In Marx's "counter-model," the classical relationship between the public sphere and the private was peculiarly reversed. However, Habermas notes that Marx's expectation that the dialectical nature of the bourgeois public sphere would bring about a transformation where private persons would be private persons of a public, rather than a public of private persons, did not transpire. Instead, "liberalism argued against the socialist division in favor of conserving a relativized form of the *bourgeois* public sphere. With liberalism, therefore, the bourgeois interpretation of the public sphere abandoned the form of a philosophy of history in favor of a commonsense meliorism—it became 'realistic.'" Liberal efforts to expand the franchise were essentially reactionary, countering "the power of the idea of a critically debating public's self-determination as soon as this public was subverted by the propertyless and uneducated masses."<sup>68</sup> Rather than retaining

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<sup>67</sup> Craig Calhoun, "Introduction," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 1-48.; Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 1-51; 141-80.

<sup>68</sup> Habermas, 129.

the virtues of the bourgeois public sphere, democratic societies in the late nineteenth century began transforming from a “culture debating” to a “culture consuming.” Habermas argues, “The public sphere of the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption.” The public sphere’s expansion alongside modern capitalism brought its own collapse.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps the greatest contribution made by Habermas’ *Structural Transformation* is that it helps us understand the relationship between democratic communication and power. As Nicholas Garnham notes, first, it links the institutions and practices of communication with those of democratic politics; second, it focuses on the “necessary material resource base of any public sphere”; and third, by positioning the public between the state and the market it demonstrates that threats to public discourse may emerge from both. Paul Starr has challenged these ideas from a traditionally liberal perspective, rejecting Habermas’ and the Frankfurt School’s Marxist approach and their assumption of the “class character of the early modern public sphere.” According to Starr, “In a dynamic sense, markets in liberal societies enrich the public sphere far more than they impoverish it... Our public life is a hybrid of capitalism and democracy, and we are better off for it, as long as the democratic side is able to keep the balance.” Thus, Starr focuses on the state’s role in making “constitutive choices” regarding the development of communications systems, but disregards the ways these choices are made alongside class struggle.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Habermas, 159-175; 160.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Garnham, “The Media and the Public Sphere,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 359-76; Starr, *Creation of the Media*, 395-402; 406; 1-2.

Political economists, such as Robert W. McChesney, have adhered more closely to Habermas' framework. McChesney illustrates the process by which corporate and state power gained control over radio broadcasting from "the public"—comprised of workers, educators and religious organizations—during the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, he offers a detailed history of one key moment in the "refeudalization" process of the twentieth century. More importantly, this process was not inevitable, but was contentious. The public sphere for McChesney is shaped during "critical junctures," moments of political upheaval, rather than Starr's "constitutive choices," which are made by officials seemingly unshaped by conflict.<sup>71</sup>

While the political economy approach has brought marginalized perspectives into the view of communications history, most of the research in this tradition has focused on the structuring of the national public sphere. However, many of the critiques of Habermas' book that emerged in the English-speaking world following its translation in 1989 pointed even more acutely for the need to conceive of multiple publics in democratic theory, arguing that *Structural Transformation* is highly problematic in its lack of attention to subaltern groups and its illustration of their relationship to the public sphere. According to Habermas, the ideal public sphere of the eighteenth century (1) disregarded status; (2) centered on issues of "common concern"; and (3) was inclusive in principle and could never be "consolidated as a clique," with everyone able to participate. Nancy Fraser argues that Habermas not only "idealizes the liberal public sphere but also... fails to examine other, nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres" through this formulation. "Or rather," she says, "it is precisely because he fails to examine these other public spheres that he ends up idealizing the liberal public sphere."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> McChesney, *Communication Revolution*, 9-12.

<sup>72</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking," 115.



Fraser calls into question many of Habermas' assumptions, including the belief that the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy, and that a single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics. This is central to issues of social class and the distribution of wealth because "deliberative processes in public spheres will tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of subordinates." Thus, "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs," or "subaltern counterpublics," are essential to the maintenance of democracy. Fraser is careful not to romanticize subaltern counterpublics; she argues that they are not always virtuous, and may be undemocratic and antiegalitarian, but they "help expand discursive space. In principle, assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out." This is essentially a "good thing in stratified societies."<sup>73</sup>

Fraser's essay offers a starting point to think about counterpublics, elaborated upon most usefully by Michael Warner. Counterpublics, according to Warner, are not necessarily "subaltern" but see themselves as "oppositional," and therefore, are. "A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one."<sup>74</sup> Thus, contradictions are endemic to counterpublics and often lead to their ineffectiveness in pushing for social change.

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<sup>73</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking," 117; 123-4.

<sup>74</sup> Warner, *Publics*, 119.

Warner's work emphasizes three important points: the relationship between counterpublics and publics, the relationship between counterpublics and social movements, and the relationship between counterpublics and media. First, Warner notes that counterpublics embody the "contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of all publics" and "work by many of the same circular postulates."<sup>75</sup> Thus, a dialectical approach, as taken by Habermas, to understanding the relationship between public and counterpublic, and the dynamics within counterpublics might be the basis for historical investigation.

Also, Warner notes that Habermas' public sphere environment is the context of modern social movements, including those which address "identity politics." This poses a problem for counterpublics. Social movements take shape in civil society, often with an agenda of demands vis-à-vis the state. In order to become social movements, counterpublics must "acquire agency in relation to the state," and seek to change policy by appealing to the broader public. This forces counterpublics to "cede the original hope of transforming not just policy but the space of public life itself."<sup>76</sup> This begs the question, *under what conditions do critical social movements lose their transformative power, or in Habermas' words, become "refeudalized"?*

Finally, Warner points to the importance of media for counterpublics. Counterpublics are "multicontextual space[s] of circulation, organized not by a place or an institution, but by the circulation of discourse." Thus, "radical alternative media" (as well as the media of non-radical counterpublics) do not exist for the purpose of disseminating information. Rather, radical media become the very embodiment of counterpublics. They are the essence of, as John Downing notes, "popular culture." Radical media also do not exist within a vacuum. Instead, radical media

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<sup>75</sup> Warner, *Publics*, 56.

<sup>76</sup> Warner, *Publics*, 124.

“intertwines with commercialized mass culture and oppositional cultures.” They are “a mixed phenomenon, quite often free and radical in certain respects and not in others.”<sup>77</sup> Such media therefore not only deserve scholarly attention because of their complexity and importance in counterpublics, but because they are partially constitutive of an entire process of shaping the total communications landscape.

### **Habermas and History: Moving Towards the Fragments**

Despite some of its theoretical and historical flaws, Habermas’ work remains useful because it draws attention to the importance of the press in general in the development and maintenance of public spheres. While historians have criticized Habermas for describing an imaginary, normative category as a historical reality, the work of communication historians and theorists has shown that the press played a significant role in constructing public life throughout U.S. history. With greater attention to historical evidence, many of these works have suggested modification of Habermas’ original theory.

Michael Schudson rejects Habermas’ public sphere, arguing that a rational-critical public sphere never really existed.” Instead, “mid-nineteenth century Americans lived in island communities” defined by ethnic and religious make-up. Here, high participation in politics did not necessarily correlate with high levels of understanding. However, Schudson still confirms the importance of the press in shaping this political involvement between 1840 and 1900, not

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<sup>77</sup> Warner, *Publics*, 119; John D.H. Downing et. al, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2001), 10; 8.

because it facilitated rational-critical discussion, but because newspapers encouraged partisanship, offering simplistic understandings of politics.<sup>78</sup>

John Nerone has also challenged the existence of the ideal public sphere as a historical reality. He argues that for Habermas, public discourse required a “negation of self” to an extent that denies “sociological facts. At no point in history were speakers so anonymous, audiences so universal and discourse so rational.” However, Nerone believes that the key to understanding the public sphere’s existence is through its representation, “the press,” which marks a key difference between “Habermas’ public and George Gallup’s.” These representations have been shaped through violence by the state and by vigilantes who have sought public stability, pointing to a public sphere that has never been truly rational, and never free of state influence.<sup>79</sup>

The history of representations of the public sphere has been taken up further by other scholars in communications and literary studies. Nerone and Kevin Barnhurst have focused on the newspaper’s form—“the persisting visible structure of the newspaper”—linking the public sphere to the materiality of print culture, because “the form of news is never innocent or neutral,” as it “reenacts and reinforces patterns of deference” and “encodes a system of authority.”<sup>80</sup> Understanding the history of the public sphere through the forms of news, Nerone and Barnhurst offer an innovative conceptualization of the relationship between citizens, the media, and the state, but remain bound to notions of a unitary, national public.

Trish Loughran has further interrogated the public sphere’s material nature in her study of the “national book”—namely *Common Sense* and *The Federalist Papers*—“as both object and

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Schudson, “Was There Ever a Public Sphere?” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 143-63.

<sup>79</sup> John Nerone, *Violence Against the Press*, 6; “The Future of Communication History,” in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 3 (2006): 255-62.

<sup>80</sup> John Nerone and Kevin Barnhurst, *The Form of News: A History* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 3; 9.

ideology.” Loughran points towards a more localized and historically specific way of understanding the relationship between print, the public, and the nation. Her approach “tells a different story about what kinds of communities were being imagined.” Loughran calls on us to turn our attention towards “the fragments” and understand the dangers of relying on one, totalizing theory of print and the public.<sup>81</sup>

Mary P. Ryan has explored such “fragments” within the context of urban environments. Ryan studies the municipalities of New York, San Francisco and New Orleans in the 1800s to understand “the associated democratic practices of specific places,” examining the social, cultural and political realms. She demonstrates that at the local level politics were contentious and factious. Those excluded from formal politics often took to the streets and engaged in violent action as a way to participate in the public. During the antebellum period, violent forms of political involvement were “not so much a breakdown of democratic process as its conduct by another means.” Between 1850 and the end of the Civil War, space opened up in urban environments for new voices, including women’s rights advocates, African Americans and radical, white working men. Following the war, “there was a narrowing of the range of public good and public possibility, an increasingly bureaucratized politics, a reliance on publicity more than public association, and a dualistic definition of the differences among the people” based in race and gender.<sup>82</sup>

Ryan’s Deweyite, pragmatic conception of the public brings those excluded from the formal institutions of democracy into view. For her, the public is constituted by whoever

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<sup>81</sup> Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press), 93.

<sup>82</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 17; 302.

participates in it. Thus, she points to a single, but contentious public linked not to the nation but to the city. This is a useful historiographic intervention, but it does not adequately deal with the role media institutions play in structuring publics. Instead, Ryan turns to the newspaper not as an object of study with its own logic, but as a representational resource—although admittedly a flawed one—for understanding “the public.”

Scholarship that has examined later periods in U.S. history has also highlighted the importance of the local, the urban, and the working class, while offering critiques of Habermas’ conception of the refeudalized public sphere where consumption overtook politics. Miriam Hansen argues that the development of cinema in the early twentieth century did not work to destroy the public sphere, but rather created new forms of public life. She argues that exhibition standards lagged behind “the mass-cultural standards of production and distribution...providing the structural conditions for locally specific, collective formations of reception.” Thus, cinema “functioned as a potentially autonomous, alternative horizon of experience” for women and the immigrant working class.<sup>83</sup> In other words, the cinema might have provided the basis for the formation of counterpublics. Other scholars have offered similar arguments, demonstrating the ways in which leisure activities and popular culture which emerged in urban environments laid the groundwork for new social formations among the marginalized.<sup>84</sup> While this line of research opens up new avenues for exploring public life among subaltern groups, as well as for more contemporary histories, it does account for what political economists have taken to be Habermas’ greatest attribute—his structural analysis. The question therefore remains: *what are the*

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<sup>83</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 17.

<sup>84</sup> Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*; Nasaw, *Going Out*; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 99-158.

*structures of counterpublics? How do people marginalized by dominant institutions of power and discourse build and maintain them?* In order to answer these questions, communications scholars much engage with working class history.

### **The “New Working-Class History” and its Problems**

Like histories of the public sphere, the “new working-class history” that emerged in the 1960s with the publication of E.P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* has paid inadequate attention to the structure of the organizations that shape working-class life.

Thompson’s groundbreaking study offered the essential understanding that the working class “was present at its own making.” Class, for Thompson, “is a relationship, not a thing.” Class consciousness is not a defined, determined way of thinking, but something that emerges differently in each specific historical circumstance.<sup>85</sup> This led to two important historiographic innovations. First, Thompson showed that the working class played an active role in its own making, in relation to other historical forces. Second, he demonstrated the importance of ideology and culture in the process of making class consciousness.

Thompson’s work, focusing on the development of a single working class has much in common with Habermas’ attention to the development of a unitary public sphere, and to Anderson’s work with its relation to the nation. This approach has posed problems in the development of the historiography of the working class in the United States, where concerns regarding immigration and regionalism have played key roles. As Ira Katznelson notes, Thompson’s national focus allows him to avoid arguing whether the English example serves as a

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<sup>85</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 9-14.

model, or whether its experience is contingent. In order to make Thompson's approach more applicable to the study of class formation, Katznelson outlines four levels of class, moving beyond the "class in itself-for itself" model. These levels include the structure of capitalist economic development, social organization both at and away from work, formed groups sharing dispositions, and collective action. Class formation is "concerned with the conditional (but not random) process of connection" between these levels, maintaining "the advantages of defining class formation in terms of outcomes while providing a more elaborated and variable object of comparative historical analysis."<sup>86</sup>

Within the U.S. context, Herbert Gutman adopted Thompson's approach, arguing against the "Commons school" of labor history which "encouraged labor historians to spin a cocoon around American workers, isolating them from their own particular subcultures and from the larger national culture." Instead, Gutman placed "the culture of work" at the center of his analysis, and noted the importance of maintaining a distinction between culture and society. Drawing from anthropologist Sidney Mintz, Gutman argued that culture is "a kind of resource," while society is "a kind of arena." Thus, culture might be mobilized and utilized by particular groups within a broader context. This distinction, Gutman argues, allows for a greater understanding of the ways in which diverse groups of workers from different cultural backgrounds reshaped their social milieus in the modern, industrial setting. The making of an American working class, according to Gutman, involves "the changing composition of the

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<sup>86</sup> Ira Katznelson, "Working-Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons," in *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, eds. Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 11; 21-2.



working population, the continued entry into the United States of nonindustrial people with distinctive cultures, and the changing structure of American society.”<sup>87</sup>

In order to understand the “making” of a singular American working class, historians have often turned their eyes to its fragments, noting the ways in which the parts have interacted with the whole. Elizabeth Cohen’s study of workers in Chicago during the interwar era shows that workers of various nationalities and races forged a distinct, unified class and consciousness within the institutions of everyday life, reaching their apex with the New Deal and the CIO. Thus, we might see Cohen’s work in conjunction with Habermas’, in that she suggests that New Deal culture was supported by a working-class public sphere comprised of a set of institutions, values and modes of expression that may be seen as paradigmatic.<sup>88</sup>

James Barrett points to the importance of historical generations in understanding the acculturation process. Working-class historians must look “between the generations...not simply telling the story of each group of ethnic workers” as the constant flows of migration yield not only “making” but persistent “remaking” of an American working-class. Understanding the “remaking” process means examining both formation and fragmentation. Rather than thinking of fragmentation as inevitable, Barrett conceives of it as “a problem to be explained with reference to a particular historical situation that shaped the process.” In Barrett’s narrative, the wave of migration to the United States from the late nineteenth century until World War I constituted a “remaking” of the working class, transitioning from the native born and old immigrant working-class institutions and practices. New immigrant workers “create[d] viable working-class cultures

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<sup>87</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, “Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919,” in *American Historical Review* 78, n. 3 (1973): 532-88.

<sup>88</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*.

with distinct institutions, political ideas, forms of socialization, organization and strategies.” Attacks against workers during the depression that followed the war between 1919 and 1922 led to a fragmentation of the working-class, as politics and race were used to divide labor. This “devastated the immigrant-based movement that had provided a context for Americanization from the bottom up...” Instead, nativism supported by corporate and government entities took hold and labor unions and radical political parties came to define themselves in explicitly American terms. The second generation of the new immigrants, though, forged their own version of Americanism through working-class organizations, ultimately giving birth to the New Deal.<sup>89</sup>

While the ‘new social history’ has become the dominant framework for historical research on the working class, it has been critiqued from multiple perspectives. First, David Roediger has noted the importance of race in the acculturation process. Although Thompson and Gutman opened the door to exploring race, they failed to explain it, particularly the role of the white working class in perpetuating white supremacy, adequately. Whiteness, Roediger argues, has been central to the formation of the working class, as immigrant groups—most notably the Irish, and later Jews, Italians and eastern Europeans—sought the privileges of whiteness in response “to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline.” Any examination of the transformation of a particular segment of the white working class must engage to some extent with the role in which race has been constructed by powerful forces, and if we are to take working-class agency seriously, the ways in which working class people struggled for racial privileges. Roediger points to discourse as a central battleground over

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<sup>89</sup> Barrett, “Americanization,” 996-1020; 1000; 1018; 999; 1018.

race.<sup>90</sup> Thus, any study of working-class counterpublics must note the symbolic realm, and articulations of race and ethnicity.

John Bodnar has offered another critique of the new labor history, demanding that we reconcile the importance of studying the private lives of immigrant workers with the demands of a Marxist analysis aimed at understanding power relationships. He has argued for a Marxian understanding that connects the “pragmatic culture of everyday life” among immigrant workers to the capitalist system that produced it. He says immigrant workers “accepted the world for what it was and what it was becoming and yet ceaselessly resisted the inevitable at numerous points of contact in the workplace, the classroom, the political hall, the church, and even at home.” For Bodnar, the private sphere constituted an important realm where the immigrant working class struggled to gain control over their lives. In addition, familial concerns were the catalyst for social and political activism among the rank and file. The limitations of American radicalism in the 1930s, he argues, “may have emanated from the scope of family priorities which continued to direct the objectives of most workers.”<sup>91</sup>

Bodnar’s perspective severely understates the ways in which public activity and worker consciousness shape each other. James Barrett places a renewed emphasis on the more traditional institutions of the labor movement. While class formation does occur in social spaces—dancehalls, movie theaters, and saloons, as noted by Cohen, Kathy Peiss and David Nasaw—

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<sup>90</sup> David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. (New York: Verso, 1999), 9, 13; *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White. The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005). Issues of Jewishness and whiteness that inform this dissertation, particularly, are discussed in Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*; Rogin, *Blackface*; and Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

<sup>91</sup> John Bodnar, *Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 210; “Immigration, Kinship, and the Rise of Working-Class Realism in Industrial America.” *Journal of Social History*, (1980) Vol. 14, n.1, 45-65; 58.

Barrett pays particular attention to this process in more explicitly political spaces, such as labor unions, shop floors, and radical political parties.<sup>92</sup> This is useful because it provides ways to conceptualize the working-class as a counterpublic. The re-emphasis on institutions allows us to study their role in producing culture explicated by the ‘new social history.’ This culture can be understood through the media created by working-class organizations, the “representations” of the counterpublic. A structural, Habermasian approach to working-class counterpublic history should examine the role of unions and radical political parties in creating media for their own constituents’ use and consumption.

These institutions emerged in relation to broader political economic shifts. David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich argue that although the new social history has been useful in “emphasizing ethnic, religious and racial diversity in the American working class,” it has “[failed] to integrate adequately the analysis of workers’ cultural experiences with the evolution of the organization of work and labor market structure.” Instead, they advocate the examination of the organization of work, the structure of labor markets and the segmentation of labor. Gordon, et al., argue that U.S. labor history can be divided into three overlapping periods: initial proletarianization (1820-1890), homogenization (1870-1945), and segmentation (1920-1970). Homogenization tempered working-class protest by the end of the 1920s as corporations developed new management strategies to help maximize profits. Following World War I, however, the contradictions contained in these strategies spawned new social structures of accumulation, creating differentiated labor segments.<sup>93</sup> The arrival of the “new immigrants,”

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<sup>92</sup> Barrett, “Americanization.”

<sup>93</sup> David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Worker: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 6.

then, occurred during the transitions between initial proletarianization and homogenization, while segmentation began as the second generation entered the workforce. These forces certainly played a role shaping working-class counterpublics, structuring forms of industrial organization, workplace culture, and public resistance.

Taking these factors into account—class formation and fragmentation, acculturation and historical generations, and political ideology and conflict—I will trace the evolution of the Jewish working-class counterpublic during the first half of the twentieth century in the U.S. This counterpublic went through four phases: formation (1881-1916), fragmentation (1917-1932), feudalization (1933-1945), and disintegration (1946-1955). In this dissertation, I pay particular attention to the years 1918 to 1941. Between the two wars, a struggle to preserve what Karen Brodtkin calls “hegemonic Jewishness” centered on socialism emerged within the Yiddish-speaking community. Brodtkin does not mean to suggest that all Jews in the U.S. were members of the Socialist Party. Rather, she argues that being Jewish generally meant being familiar with and oriented toward an anti-capitalist outlook. Jewishness constituted a non-discrete set of political and social values that challenged normative whiteness.<sup>94</sup> The media system created by Jewish working class institutions, dominated by the *Forward*, maintained this alternative hegemony in the 1920s and 1930s, and made a significant impact on American politics and culture.

Organic intellectuals did not aim to maintain a particularly Jewish culture for its own sake. Rather, they mobilized ethnic and political identities in different ways based on ideology and historical circumstance in order to further the aims of labor. Many of the leaders within the

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<sup>94</sup> Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 104-123.

early years of the counterpublic understood themselves as Yiddish-speaking workers, not as Jews. But during the interwar years, the need to attract advertising revenue in Yiddish language newspapers and radio stations facilitated the development of a new Jewish identity that was at once comfortable with socialism and consumption. At the same time, labor unions founded by and led by Yiddish speaking immigrants used cultural tools to reach out beyond New York's Jewish universe and help build a national movement. Thus, while hegemonic Jewishness shifted, it remained a progressive force in U.S. political culture through the first half of the twentieth century.

The maintenance of this distinct ethnopolitical identity suggests that the Jewish working class provides an interesting case for developing a way to understand how working class movements might act as counterpublics, and how historians and communications scholars may study them as such. First, the Jewish working class established and participated in a wide array of political institutions that were in conversation with each other. These included Yiddish-language groups within the Socialist Labor Party (SLP), the Socialist Party (SP), and the Communist Party (CP); trade unions such as the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA); and mutual aid societies such as the Arbeter Ring, or Workmen's Circle. These organizations expressed different positions in relation to the politics of class and Jewishness, and were often in conflict with each other. More importantly, they saw themselves as being in dialogue with each other regarding issues of central importance to themselves as members of a specific segment of a marginalized population. Thus, a wide range of left-centered political discourse existed within the Jewish immigrant and second-generation working class community.

A second reason that the Jewish working class might be studied as a counterpublic is that its institutions were particularly interested in using various forms of media and cultural production to foster itself and carryout political conversation. The Yiddish language press was the largest foreign language press in the country through the mid-twentieth century, and many of these newspapers had specifically left-oriented political agendas. In addition, Jewish left organizations used theater, motion pictures, and social gatherings to build a public culture in opposition to the dominant institutions and ideologies in American life. While other facets of the labor movement also made use of such techniques, many of them originated from within the garment unions, and were developed through other Jewish working-class institutions.

Finally, the dynamism within the Jewish working class during this period offers an avenue to understand how a counterpublic changes over time due to a variety of structural forces. Because shifts in politics, ideology and culture all occurred within the Jewish working class, it provides a template to understand how counterpublics evolve as a result of structural change. Like Habermas' "refeudalization" of the public sphere and the rise of a mass culture, the eventual immersion of the Jewish working class into the dominant American culture suggests the need to investigate the tensions between publics and counterpublics.<sup>95</sup> Understanding this problem speaks to issues of how we may build a multicultural society, a strong labor movement, and a democratic media system.

While much scholarship in the area of working-class culture and media history has been informed by Gramsci, the media within the Jewish labor movement have yet to be adequately theorized and studied as such. Gramsci's attention to the role of organic intellectuals suggests

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<sup>95</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 231.

that we study not just how working-class people built their movements from the ground up, but the people and ideas that glued these movements together. History demonstrates that working-class media, the products of organic intellectuals, can play a critical role in doing this work. In addition, Gramsci's implication that we study ethnicity in conjunction with class suggests that we examine the intersection of Jewishness and working-class political organizations. In order to fully understand the development of the historical bloc during the New Deal period, an examination of the organic intellectuals and their media strategies within the Jewish labor movement is essential.

This dissertation consists of eight chapters. The second and third chapters will focus on the efforts of Baruch Charney Vladeck, the manager of the *Forward*, to maintain a strong newspaper facing economic difficulty and political repression in the wake of the war. Chapter two provides context, explaining the role of the *Forward* in the pre-war period, and the challenges it faced from political economic forces, as well as exploring Vladeck's early life. I examine how Vladeck's politics—at once radical and pragmatic—shaped the direction of the *Forward* in the 1920s. Vladeck developed an intricate plan to rely on national advertising, and create local editions outside of New York in order to draw in more revenue. In addition, the *Forward* became increasingly anti-Communist in tone, mirroring the shifting politics of the Socialist Party. In chapter three, I discuss the ramifications of this plan on the internal operations of the newspaper, its politics, and the changing cultural dynamics within the Jewish working class, drawing from theories of commodification in the media studies.



As I demonstrate in chapters four and five, the two major unions in the largely Jewish garment industry, the ACWA and the ILGWU, challenged Vladeck's commercial approach. Jacob Salutstky, later known as J.B.S. Hardman, had been hoisted from the *Forward* for political reasons at the end of the war, and helped found the rival newspaper *Di frayhayt*. When *Di frayhayt* became a Communist Party organ, Hardman put his energy into democratizing the press at the ACWA, as the union's Educational Director and editor.

Meanwhile, Fannia Cohn of the ILGWU advocated for the maintenance of labor publications—namely *Justice* and the Yiddish-language *Gerechtigkeit*—in conjunction with a broader agenda around labor education, culture and dramatics. Cohn, the union's educational secretary, was the sole woman on ILGWU's executive board and had emerged from the rank-and-file. Her experience in the union's early years was rooted largely in the night schools and recreational activities supported by it supported. She believed that these approaches were particularly important in drawing working women into union life. Cohn struggled to maintain these programs, while other leaders appropriated them towards efforts of mass persuasion.

Chapters six and seven elucidate how the Jewish working class counterpublic became fragmented from growing radical movements, stymieing progressive change. In chapter six, I offer a history of the Socialist radio station WEVD. Rooted in the ideals of labor education that exemplified the Jewish labor movement, the station faced challenges from state regulators which compelled it to commercialize. In 1932, the *Forward* purchased the station to prevent its collapse. WEVD came to symbolize the New Deal coalition through a mix of commercial values, social democracy, and interethnic cooperation and representation. But the unique position of the

Jewish working class organizations prevented them from working with a broader national movement for non-commercial broadcasting.

In chapter seven I explain how in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the new CIO union, the Newspaper Guild, came into conflict with the media institutions in the Jewish labor movement as they sought to organize their own workers. This story reveals the tensions that arise as a local, ethnic counterpublic becomes incorporated into the broader, national public sphere. In addition, it illustrates the contradictions embedded in the system of professional journalism that became solidified during the postwar era. Ultimately, as C. Wright Mills suggested, the coming of the mass society squandered the counterpublic's democratic potential.

My final chapter makes concluding historiographic arguments, and draws lessons from this history for the contemporary moment. The history of the Jewish working class counterpublic reveals the importance of alternative media in moments of political and economic crisis. It speaks to the need for social movements to consider the benefits and drawbacks of compromise. And it demonstrates the need for an academic analysis and a social praxis committed to conceptualizing the intersection of cultural identity, labor, and communication in order to theorize and enact a more perfect "actually existing democracy."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking," 109.

## Chapter Two:

### Digging in the Dark:

#### B.C. Vladeck and Advertising Strategy at the *Jewish Daily Forward*

There is only one metropolitan newspaper which was founded neither for money nor the hope of making money nor the personal advancement of its owner. It has a circulation of more than a quarter million copies daily, is worth at least a million dollars, has given away about a million dollars, paid its scrubwomen \$37 a week, encouraged genius and the arts, and once didn't give a damn for advertising. This paper, one of the few non-commercial journals in the world, is the *Jewish Daily Forward*.-- George Seldes<sup>97</sup>

One admires William Lloyd Garrison, is overwhelmed by John Brown, is enthused by Wendell Phillips, but God gave Americans the courage to follow Lincoln-- for social order is deep-rooted and reenforced by a million props. The man who attempts to break it down by sheer force of will, by mere strength of dogma, may be magnificent and inspiring, he may call forth our deepest admiration and awe, but he will not break the old order...One must know how to go around obstacles...how to start digging in the dark without trumpets and flying banners.

--Baruch Charney Vladeck <sup>98</sup>

At the height of the New Deal, more than 4,000 people celebrated the Fortieth Anniversary of the *Jewish Daily Forward* with a banquet and performances at New York's Carnegie Hall in April 1937. Although not in attendance, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt sent a message of congratulations. FDR proclaimed that the newspaper offered "an example of the highest ideals of constructive journalism," and was "the utmost champion of truth in the news, and as medium for the free discussion of all the problems which clamor for solution."<sup>99</sup>

Such praise from the U.S. President marked a new experience for the *Forward* editors. For most of its forty years, the Yiddish language socialist publication had been a force of general opposition toward the establishment. Twenty years earlier, another Democratic administration

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<sup>97</sup> George Seldes, *Lords of the Press*. (New York: Julian Messner, Inc, 1939), 107.

<sup>98</sup> John Herling, "Vladeck." In *Survey Graphic*. November 1939, 664. Baruch Charney Vladeck Papers. Box Add. 6, Folder 1. Tamiment Library, New York University. New York, NY.

<sup>99</sup> "Jewish Newspaper Marks 40th Year." *New York Times*. April 25, 1937, 20.

under Woodrow Wilson had threatened to shut down the newspaper, accusing it of sedition during the First World War. But while the left wing suffered tremendous losses during the 1920s, the *Forward* newspaper and its readership among the Jewish labor movement gained power vis a vis the dominant American culture and the state. The prestige the *Forward* enjoyed by the mid-1930s, and the manner in which it benefitted from the New Deal, was in large part due to the decisions its leaders made in the previous decade.

How did a Yiddish language newspaper devoted to the socialist cause become a force praised by the highest levels of the U.S. federal government? In order to understand this phenomenon, it is essential to look at the newspaper from an institutional perspective. While much of the history of the *Jewish Daily Forward* has focused on its role as an ideological barometer of the Jewish left, making Abraham Cahan, the newspaper's long-term editor-in-chief, the central agent of the newspaper's history, little effort has been spent attempting to understand the political economy of the *Forward*-- how it was financed, how it operated as a site of production, and how it interacted with other institutions of the labor movement and of capital. In order to answer these questions, it is important to turn attention towards another important individual in the history of Yiddish socialism, and its press-- Baruch Charney Vladeck, the *Forward's* general business manager.

Like many Jewish immigrants of his generation, B.C. Vladeck emerged out of a radical background with high ideals and aspirations for himself and his new home, the United States. A former political prisoner from the Pale of Settlement-- the area designated for Jews in the western Russian empire-- Vladeck became involved in the tumultuous politics of his era at a

young age. As a devout socialist, he stood at odds with the dominant American political culture upon his arrival in the U.S. in 1908.

But Vladeck sought not only to change the United States, but to do so by adopting American values. Informed by the tradition of Jefferson and Lincoln as much as Marx and Engels, Vladeck helped to build a socialist movement within New York's Jewish community that claimed liberal democracy as a key value. At the same time, Vladeck's highly pragmatic approach led him to make decisions as the general manager of the *Forward* that bred criticism from multiple fronts. Thus, Vladeck's pragmatism, had contradictory impacts on the *Forward* and the counterpublic it represented. On the one hand, it allowed for the perseverance of the newspaper, and ultimately, the Jewish labor movement, through the reactionary period of the 1920s. At the same time, Vladeck's willingness to compromise on important ideological issues such as the First World War, and the rise of Communism and Zionism, as well as relying on national brand advertising for revenue and operating the socialist daily with businesslike acumen, all worked to fundamentally rework the politics and structure of the Jewish working-class counterpublic that had first emerged at the turn of the twentieth century.

Vladeck came to the U.S. as Yiddish socialism reached its peak on New York's Lower East Side, a lively cultural environment rife with political tension. Within a few short years, however, world war and the Russian Revolution placed this radical community, this counterpublic, in crisis. As the new general business manager of the *Forward*, Vladeck played a central role in shaping the political economy of the Yiddish press between the key years from 1918 through his death in 1939, coincidentally almost the entire interwar period. Vladeck not only influenced the ideology of the newspaper through his writing, but also by making important

business and personnel decisions that would shape the structure and representation of the Jewish working class counterpublic.

Ultimately, Vladeck helped turn the Forward Association into a progressive, not-for-profit media empire, maintaining liberal and Yiddish language broadcasting on radio station WEVD while providing a source of funding for other radical and liberal organizations. This system was integral to the development of the New Deal culture of the 1930s and 1940s, building an interethnic working class, enabling Jewish assimilation, and ultimately promoting a moderate, regulated American capitalism. In this chapter, I demonstrate that Vladeck should be understood as a pragmatic idealist. In chapter three, I argue that this perspective can be seen in Vladeck's day to day management of the *Forward*, as he encountered criticisms and difficulties as a result of this philosophy. Later, in chapter five, I demonstrate how these contradictions shaped the development of the Forward Association's broadcasting station, WEVD. While Vladeck's pragmatism enabled the *Forward* to withstand the political tumult of the 1920s, it indebted the newspaper and the radio station to the whims of the market and political elites. By the New Deal period, the *Forward* would become largely integrated into the state-corporate nexus.

### **The Lower East Side, 1881-1908: A Counterpublic in Formation**

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a radical culture blossom among Jewish workers on New York's Lower East Side. The mass exodus of Yiddish-speaking immigrants from the Pale of Settlement to the shores of North America began in 1881, following a series of pogroms in the wake of Czar Alexander II's murder. Some scholars argue that many of these immigrants brought a radical culture with them, while others stress the importance of the

largely non-Jewish, German socialist movement that Russian Jewish intellectuals encountered on the East Side, who provided financial and organizational assistance during the early years of Jewish migration.<sup>100</sup> Thus, external and internal influences helped create the context for organizing Jewish workers, as an increasing number of immigrants became contractors in the garment industry. Small shops were ubiquitous on the East Side, and contractors were forced into fierce competition with each other, creating tremendous pressure to underbid other contractors and keep wages low. Within a decade, the most competitive of these shops—“the moths of Division Street”—were as profitable as the more established operations—the “giants of Broadway.”<sup>101</sup>

It was not long before a counterpublic, represented by a nascent Yiddish labor press and manifest in a variety of other cultural and communicative practices, began to emerge. By 1885, in the midst of the nationwide fight for the eight-hour day, economic realities began to bond the Russian intellectual, socialist thinkers with the masses of Jewish workers in the garment industry, giving rise to the Yiddish labor press. The Jewish Workers’ Association (JWA) became the primary organization of the Yiddish-speaking left. The JWA organized the first Jewish printers’ union and raised funds to establish a Yiddish labor newspaper. The organization played a central role in Socialist Henry George’s mayoral campaign in 1886, but the campaign’s failure and the execution of the accused Haymarket bombers caused the JWA to split into anarchist and socialist

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<sup>100</sup> Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarried: Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871-1917* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 65-83; Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4-5.

<sup>101</sup> Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 94-5.

factions.<sup>102</sup> These two ideological camps would develop institutions seeking to further their political goals by building a culture of Yiddish left-wing resistance. For both of these camps, however, being Jewish was less important than being workers. Yiddish was used by radical organizers and writers not because it was necessary to preserve a religious, or even an ethnic identity, but because it was simply what most Jewish workers spoke. For this generation of radicals, the Yiddish language was to serve as an instrument, rather than a product, or social change.

In 1886, the anarchists established the Pioneers of Liberty and other venues for public discourse among radical Jews, including debating clubs, educational societies, and youth groups. In the meantime, the socialists reconstituted themselves as an official part of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) in New York and organized the United Hebrew Trades (UHT) in 1888. On December 25, 1889, the anarchists called for a conference with their socialist counterparts to launch a bi-party paper. The socialists, under the leadership of Louis Miller, Morris Hillquit, and Abraham Cahan, dominated the New York organizations and balked at the plan. Both camps soon began publishing separate weekly newspapers—the socialist *Arbeiter Tzeitung*, and the anarchist *Fraye Arbeter Shtime*. The latter, however, would fail twice before beginning regular publication in 1899.<sup>103</sup>

Ultimately, socialism became the hegemonic political ideology on the East Side, with its Yiddish variant expressed through a print culture, as well as in social spaces. This cultural

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<sup>102</sup> Levin, *While Messiah Tarried*, 86-89; Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in the USA: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement, 1882-1914* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1950), 147-56; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 104-5.

<sup>103</sup> Epstein, *Jewish Labor*, 192-272; Levin, *While Messiah Tarried*, 90-2; 113-34; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 105-6.



activity boosted the organizing efforts of the UHT by fueling general strikes in the garment industry in 1890 and 1891. Michels offers several reasons for growth of the Yiddish press: the spike in immigration, the need for businesses to attract Yiddish speakers through advertising, the invention of the Linotype machine and the falling cost of newsprint, and popular demand. Not all the Yiddish newspapers were radical; the largest, Kasriel Sarasohn's *Yidishes Tageblatt* promoted religious unity over class conflict. But the *Arbeter Tsaytung* and by 1894, the daily *Abend Blat* "had brought socialism into the very center of the Yiddish newspaper market."<sup>104</sup>

*Der Forverts*, or the *Forward*, the newspaper that would define the Jewish Left for decades to come, was established in 1897 after a split among the publishers of the *Arbeter Tsaytung*, reflecting a larger split in the SLP between supporters and detractors of party leader Daniel DeLeon. On January 7, Abraham Cahan, Louis Miller and fifty others broke from the publishing association of the *Tsaytung* and founded the Forverts Association taking the Yiddish press in a new direction, toward a "social democratic yellow journalism."<sup>105</sup>

The *Forward* became the cornerstone of the Jewish working-class counterpublic, having a broad impact on social life in the ghetto. While the SLP and trade unions grew through the 1890s, Tony Michels argues that "to appreciate socialism's influence during the 1890s, one must look beyond the formal organizations into the wider public sphere, the social realm 'where public opinion is formed.'"<sup>106</sup> This "public sphere"—or counterpublic—was represented not only through the Yiddish press, but also social activities associated with it, lectures and speeches, and workers' education societies. The emergence of a socialist Yiddish press gave rise to an entire

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<sup>104</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 104.

<sup>105</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 105.

<sup>106</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 70. Citing Jurgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere," *New German Critique* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1974): 49.

“newspaper culture” where thousands of workers attended “excursions, balls, literary evenings, and anniversary celebrations,” often with the purpose of raising money for the newspapers.<sup>107</sup>

Also of central importance was the Yiddish theater. New York’s first professional Yiddish theatrical production was staged in 1882 on the Bowery. The prevalence of such productions “filled the new psychological gap in immigrants’ lives,” acting as a meeting place, providing folk heroes, and representing loyalty to community.<sup>108</sup> Yiddish theater was not monolithic, and offered its immigrant audiences a wide variety of theatrical experiences over its first decades in the United States. Aesthetic debates raged over the existence of *shund*, low-brow comedic theater, which had become the standard fare. However, movements led by socialists and community intellectuals to improve the quality of the Yiddish theater brought about a new wave of sophisticated drama.<sup>109</sup>

Live theater was not mere entertainment. It was deeply connected to the political life of the Jewish working-class community. Labor unions, mutual aid societies and *landsmanshaftn* (organizations of people from the same European *shtetl* or town) would often purchase blocks of tickets at discounted prices, and then sell tickets at full price back to their members, building a political economy based on the social consumption of culture. Playwright Jacob Gordin noted

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<sup>107</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 106; 105. See also, Epstein, *Jewish Labor*, 239-72; Levin, *While Messiah*, 113-20; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 518-33; Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 147-61. Interestingly, these types of events preceded the “welfare capitalism” promoted by employers of the 1920s, which emphasized social services and recreation activity as a means to generate positive sentiment towards management. Lizabeth Cohen argues that such programs planted the seeds of cultural programs in the 1930s in the CIO. See Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 114-18; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 159-212.

<sup>108</sup> Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977) 72, 77.

<sup>109</sup> Nina Warnke, “The Child Who Wouldn’t Grow Up,” in *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), 201-16; Sandrow, 109-114; Howe, 467-73; and Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 143.

that over six hundred organizations annually made use of such benefit performances. Thus, attending performances was an experience based consciously in class, Jewishness, and often politics. It was not an act of individual consumption, but a social activity that served to sustain radical East Side institutions. Benefit performances not only allowed working-class people to enjoy cultural events, but allowed the theaters to “spread risks and maximize attendance” on weekdays, while weekend performances attempted to maximize box office receipts, charging between 25 cents and a dollar.<sup>110</sup>

While the late nineteenth century saw the development of politically engaged cultural institutions, Irving Howe argues that a mass socialist movement did not truly exist among Yiddish-speaking workers. Although socialism was integrated into everyday life on the East Side, very few immigrant Jews actually joined and paid dues to the SLP or the SP, and many were pessimistic about political engagement, doubting their ability as outsiders to change the country as a whole.<sup>111</sup> The arrival of a new generation of immigrants would change that. One of those immigrants would be Baruch Charney Vladeck.

### **Baruch Charney: The Early Years**

B.C. Vladeck was born Baruch Charney in 1886 to a religious family in the provincial town of Dukor, Lithuania, 30 miles southeast of the growing industrial city of Minsk. It was a dynamic period in the *shtetls* of the Pale. The czar’s anti-Semitic policies combined with an expanding industrial economy, wreaked havoc on the livelihood of Jews in Eastern Europe. Baruch’s father died at a young age. His mother raised him and his brothers to adhere strictly to a

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<sup>110</sup> Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 295; Levin, *While Messiah Tarried*, 142-6; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 141.

<sup>111</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 287-8.

fading religious tradition, waiting to be saved from the misery of *shtetl* life by the coming of the Messiah. Although he noted later that his village had been barely touched by the modernization of the nineteenth century,<sup>112</sup> many young Jews coming of age in this environment began to question traditional ways of life, abandoning religious practice for radical political engagement in both Marxist and Zionist incarnations.

Charney joined the fray after leaving Dukor for Minsk to study at *yeshiva*, or a religious school. By his third year, he was far more excited by modern Russian literature than rabbinical texts. “God was dying in my heart,” he wrote, “and the masters of Russian literature were taking the place of the Holy Books.” Turning his his interest towards the likes of Pushkin, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, Charney came to understand the Jewish experience in a new, political context. “I was barely fifteen,” he wrote, “and I faced a new world without anything else but youth and a dim feeling that henceforth I would sail larger seas.”<sup>113</sup>

In 1903, the Kishinev pogrom catalyzed a broader revolutionary zeitgeist. Vicious, bloody attacks on Jewish communities that Easter Sunday, during the Jewish Passover holiday, coincided with a growing animosity towards Czar Nicholas II. The radical Jewish organization, the Bund, which was first formed in 1897 began advocating “a socialist framework that gave scope to Jewish national culture” and providing collective security and self defense within the *shtetls*, reaching its height by 1905.<sup>114</sup>

Charney, already opening his eyes to the broader world around him, became swept up in the revolutionary fervor. “Radicalism was in the air then,” Vladeck said of the period late in his

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<sup>112</sup> Baruch Charney Vladeck Autobiography Draft, 3. Valdeck Papers, Reel 19.

<sup>113</sup> Herling, John. “Vladeck,” in *Survey Graphic*. November 1939, 665. Baruch Charney Vladeck Papers. Box Add. 6, Folder 1; Autobiography Draft, 13. Vladeck Papers, Reel 19.

<sup>114</sup> Levin, *While Messiah Tarried*, 161; 303, 305.

life. “You felt that a tide was rising. I joined the movement as casually as a boy on the West Side in New York might join the Democratic party-- the alternatives for us were to emigrate or fight.”<sup>115</sup> He had come to attain “a clear knowledge of universal oppression in which the persecution of the Jews was a bloody incident, perhaps the bloodiest.”<sup>116</sup> At the age of 16, Charney was working as an assistant librarian, and leading discussion groups about radical economics. After returning home from one of these discussions, Charney was greeted by the police and taken under arrest for his dissident activities.<sup>117</sup>

The cell for political prisoners was filled, and young Charney was placed with twenty eight men who had been convicted of murder and sentenced to hard labor for life. As a “political,” he gained the respect of his cellmates, and quickly began to communicate with other radical prisoners-- conducting classes and leading reading groups-- when he discovered that, during the day, the cells weren’t locked. Intellectual conversation flourished, as “the days passed in endless discussions of party programs and platforms.”<sup>118</sup> “Jail was something like a vacation,” he said. “It was an opportunity to study. Each time we were sentenced we brought in a book to build up the prison library. And when I came out-- well, I was a full fledged revolutionary. It’s like sending your kids to a reformatory-- they learn all the tricks.”<sup>119</sup>

When he left prison in 1904, Charney traveled undercover with a bodyguard throughout the Pale as an organizer with the needle trades circuit of the Minsk Revolutionary Committee. He began editing an underground trade publication, *The Bristle Worker*, and quickly landed back in

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<sup>115</sup> Wechsler, James. “Labor’s Voice in Our Council,” *New York Times*. January 9, 1938.

<sup>116</sup> Herling, “Vladeck,” 665.

<sup>117</sup> Autobiography Draft, 14, Vladeck Papers, Reel 19.

<sup>118</sup> Autobiography Draft, 15-17, Vladeck Papers, Reel 19.

<sup>119</sup> Wechsler, James. “Labor’s Voice,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1938.

prison after organizing Russia's first strike for an eight hour day in Vilna. During this second prison term, he became enthralled not by Marx and Bakunin, but by Americans-- particularly Abraham Lincoln.<sup>120</sup> Upon reading the Gettysburg Address, Vladeck said he "felt as if some unknown friend had taken me by the hand on a dark, uncertain road, saying gently: 'Don't doubt and don't despair. This country has a soul and a purpose and if you so wish, you may love it without regrets.'" He understood Lincoln as one who had "practical idealism, seriousness of purpose, patience, a sense of humor and a hatred of injustice." Particularly, he admired the way Lincoln had positioned himself within the U.S. power structure, bringing change from the inside. "One must know how to go around obstacles," he later wrote, "without arousing the suspicion of the foe, how to start digging in the dark without trumpets and flying banners."<sup>121</sup>

Charney spent nearly three years after his second prison sentence building the revolutionary movement in Russia, and developing oratory skills. He "could rise to a pathos that rang true; the lyrical poet was in every speech. His words, lively and hot, penetrated the hearts of his listeners."<sup>122</sup> By 1908, however, "the revolutionary epoch had subsided" and "what was left was a great pile of ashes with spies running around on the heap, busy as maggots." Charney decided to join his two brothers, who had left Russia years before, in the United States.<sup>123</sup>

Upon his arrival in the U.S. on Thanksgiving Day, the *Forward* greeted him with a front page story and sent him on a nationwide speaking tour.<sup>124</sup> He brought with him the revolutionary

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<sup>120</sup> Herling, "Vladeck," 667.

<sup>121</sup> Baruch Charney Vladeck, "Lincoln, Leader of Humanity." *Journal of Locomotive Engineers*, February 1923, 96. Cited in Franklin L. Jonas, "The Early Life and Career of B. Charney Vladeck, 1886-1926 : The Emergence of an Immigrant Spokesman." Ph.D. Dissertation. New York University, 1972, 116.

<sup>122</sup> Melech Epstein, *Profiles of Eleven* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1965), 326.

<sup>123</sup> Herling, "Vladeck," 701.

<sup>124</sup> Epstein, *Profiles of Eleven*, 336.

spirit cultivated through the Bund and his time as a political prisoner. While at once more radical than earlier arrivals, the Bundists who came to the United States beginning around 1905 brought a “Jewish dimension” to the socialist struggle that the older generation lacked, injecting a politicized understanding of ethnic culture into socialist discourse, understanding that

when garment workers won strikes...this was a victory not merely for workers who happened to be Jews but for *Jewish* workers. The class struggle pursued within the Jewish community would be a means of enriching the life of the Jewish workers, while enriching their life was a precondition for a successful pursuit of the class struggle.<sup>125</sup>

At the same moment, this new wave of immigration also introduced Zionism into the United States, spurring further debate about the particular nature of Jewish working class identity and political goals. Thus, both Bundist and Zionist influences reinforced the self-consciousness of the Jewish working-class as a *counterpublic*, as a movement separate from but in dialogue with a broader public sphere.

Vladeck believed in the importance of maintaining that dialogue, of immigrant Jews contributing to the making of a new world in the United States. For him, the U.S. represented a place of change and possibility. He wrote that Europe was like chess-- “motionless people move dead figures around with a logic that has nothing to do with the needs of the body nor those of the spirit.” America, though, was like baseball, where “living men are constantly in motion around a continuing, living, moving problem-- the baseball... whether forward or backward, the spirit of the country will be moving.”<sup>126</sup>

Vladeck held a left-wing interpretation of the American experiment throughout his life, and explicitly sought to link this to traditional Jewish culture. For example, as a member of the

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<sup>125</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 294; Levin, *While Messiah Tarried*, 160-81.

<sup>126</sup> “*Brivlakh tsu a fraynd*,” *Di Naye Welt*, Feb. 25, 1916. Cited in Jonas, “The Early Life,” 114.

New York City Board of Alderman in 1919, the patriotic radical declared his support for displaying tablets with the Ten Commandments and the Declaration of Independence in the Aldermanic Chamber “as a Bolshevik.” “The signers of the Declaration of Independence were Bolsheviks, pure and simple,” Vladeck proclaimed. As Melech Epstein wrote, “Vladeck was captivated by the political freedom of America, the absence of a caste system, and the vastness of the land... All contradictions and imperfections notwithstanding, the United States was to him a genuine expression of the democratic will.”<sup>127</sup>

Vladeck’s complicated mixture of American liberalism, socialism and Jewishness was not unique. Rather, as it was said following his death in 1938, he “was the most typical representative of the second period [of immigrants],” the first period having come to the U.S. in the 1880s.

His Socialism was not an acquired creed with him as with the older generation. He grew up with it; it was ingrained in him and was part of his mental make-up. But it was a much wider, profounder, and more refined Socialism than the simple almost crude faith of the people of the eighties. It included literature, poetry, a longing for the beautiful, a search for religio-philosophic truths and an esthetic refinement which the older Socialists who confined themselves to economic and social problems did not know.<sup>128</sup>

Vladeck’s ideology- a broad outlook rather than a rigid, scientific method to understanding the world-- was flexible and thus, sustainable through shifting economic conditions and transportable across cultures and geographic boundaries. It is this aspect of Vladeck’s thinking-- and more broadly, the Yiddish socialism of that period-- that lends itself to a Gramscian analysis. It provided tools of resistance within multiple “wars of position”-- on the institutional,

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<sup>127</sup> “Aldermen Assail Socialist Members,” *New York Times*. July 2, 1919, 15; Epstein, *Profiles of Eleven*, 327.

<sup>128</sup> William Zukerman. “Vladeck’s Generation,” May 1939, 317. Vladeck Papers. Box Add. 6, Folder 1. Better known than Vladeck today, Sidney Hillman, the president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) embraced a similar perspective, best explored in Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).



ideological and cultural fronts. As such, it worked in concert with the contradictory nature of an emerging consumer society in the United States, and-- specifically through the *Forward*-- the commercial imperatives of newspaper publication in the twentieth century.

Vladeck's faith in the American project, and his embrace of his new country's dynamic spirit coincided with the emerging Progressive movement for reform, as well as a changing media environment. This was the era of the muckraking journalism, as writers like Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, and Lincoln Steffens worked to expose the unethical practices of big business for a middle-class audience, challenging the reactionary politics of the emerging newspaper chains run by the likes of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. It was also a moment of relative openness and competition within local newspaper markets, as newcomers could enter with limited capital. Although already dominated to a great extent by commercial logic, newspapers provided a wide array of perspectives and opinions in the early twentieth century. In 1910, the twelve largest cities in the U.S. had an average of seventeen daily newspapers each, including an average of seven foreign language, ethnic newspapers. Although newspaper chains would soon begin to dominate the media landscape, consolidation had not yet put a stranglehold on dissident or non-mainstream perspectives aired in the press.<sup>129</sup>

Combining Old World radicalism with American liberalism and pragmatism, Vladeck played a vital role in institutionalizing the Jewish working-class counterpublic within an otherwise shrinking marketplace of ideas during the 1920s. By the time the United States had entered World War One, Vladeck was already positioned with one foot inside his new country's elite institutions, while keeping another firmly planted within the radical immigrant community.

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<sup>129</sup> Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols. *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution that will Begin the World Again*. (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 134-6.

In 1913, Vladeck enrolled as a student at Teacher's College at the University of Pennsylvania and simultaneously began to contribute to *Der Idisher Sozialis*, (later renamed *Di Naye Welt*) the official organ of the Jewish Socialist Federation (JSF). At Penn, he studied the humanities, taking courses in literature, history, public speaking and English. While his records demonstrate excellent grades, an instructor commented that he seemed to "have difficulty expressing [himself] in English," on a critical essay he wrote on Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>130</sup>

In the meantime, Vladeck was becoming well-known in Yiddish literary and political circles. A poet and playwright, he began to write for the Philadelphia edition of the *Forward*, and occasionally served as a lecturer and organizer within the Jewish socialist movement, helping to organize Philadelphia locals of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). He was earning respect within the broader Jewish community as well. In 1914, for example, the *Forward* solicited his input on the viability of a non-political English-language Jewish magazine focused on literature and the arts that would contain "translations of the best Jewish sketches, criticisms of Jewish plays, and articles on all higher activities of the Jewish quarter."<sup>131</sup> As Hillel Rogoff noted in an interview years later, "Indeed, aside from such routine administrative tasks as the hiring of minor employees and the sale of advertising space, the principal obligation of his new job was that he participate in the activities of the various institutions that had the backing of the Forward Association, such as the Jewish unions, the Workmens' Circle, and the Socialist Party."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Jonas, "The Early Life," 101; Grade reports; Emerson essay. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 4, Folder 11.

<sup>131</sup> Greenfield to Vladeck, December 2, 1914. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 1, Folder 9.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Hillel Rogoff, January 19, 1970. Cited in Jonas, "The Early Life," 100.

Despite his humanities background and his appreciation of the arts, Vladeck's ability to perform "routine administrative tasks" would prove, over the years, as equally important to maintaining a Yiddish socialist press as his role as a community organizer. In fact, they may have been Vladeck's greatest skills. As one commentator noted after his death in 1938, Vladeck had a natural inclination for operating in the commercial realm. "The truth is that it was in this sphere that he truly found himself...for his position at the *Forward* not only afforded him a certain prestige which even established writers do not gain from certain people, but he was able to receive the training required for an executive. And he was an executive par excellence."<sup>133</sup>

Vladeck easily adapted to the practical business decisions that had to be made in managing a newspaper. Unlike other radicals, he did not eschew mass culture as a total distraction from radical politics, as other Marxist activists and theorists, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, would. Criticizing the elitist attitudes of many radicals, Vladeck wrote,

The radical attitude has always been: If you don't take my theory and my solution, there is no hope for you either here or in the hereafter. If you read detective stories, you can't be a good Socialist. If you like jazz, you are no Socialist. If you are not serious-minded on all occasions, you cannot be trusted with radical work. There is a certain feeling of superiority in radical propaganda which hurts the radical movement very much. The truth is a fellow may read Dostoevski and not know what he is reading about. A girl may dance to jazz and use too much rouge and in time develop to a good worker in the Socialist movement. These things are simply things. They are not important in the movement.<sup>134</sup>

In 1916, Vladeck left the Philadelphia edition of the *Forward* to replace Hillel Rogoff as the city editor at the flagship paper in New York. Abraham Cahan, the *Forward's* high profile editor-in-chief, had turned the paper into one "for the masses." A hot-headed and divisive figure,

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<sup>133</sup> A.A. Robeck, "B.C. Vladeck." In Vladeck Papers, Reel 19.

<sup>134</sup> B.C. Vladeck, "Why Radicalism Has Failed." In Vladeck Papers, Reel 12.

Cahan had brought human interest stories and a writing style reminiscent of the yellow press to the socialist world. As “a strict realist,” Cahan was not a fan of Vladeck’s literary, poetic style, but Rogoff had also fallen out of Cahan’s favor, and he needed a replacement.<sup>135</sup>

By this time, several key ideological questions were being dealt with within the JSF. Vladeck was vocal within these debates, taking the side of the “old guard” against those of his own generation. First was the issue of cultural nationalism. Socialists debated building a distinctly ethnic culture as an end in itself, rather than as an instrument for developing class consciousness among Jewish workers. While many younger members of the JSF wanted to perpetuate the use of Yiddish and build on the Bund’s cultural nationalism, Vladeck and the *Forward* saw the Yiddish language as a necessary tool for the time being, but ultimately supported assimilation. “We carry on our work in Jewish,” wrote Vladeck, “not in order to hold up and develop the Jewish language, but only because those to whom we speak, speak Jewish.”<sup>136</sup>

The growth of the Zionist movement also sparked debate within the Jewish left. The Forward Association and the JSF both rejected Zionism and other forms of political nationalism as distractions from class struggle. Vladeck in particular saw collaboration between Socialists and Zionists as highly problematic. “In the real life of the Jews,” Vladeck wrote, “[Zionism] plays a reactionary and deadening role. We want the Jews to make American citizens....and we believe that the questions of American life are the most important.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Epstein, *Profiles of Eleven*, 354.

<sup>136</sup> “*Hura un histerika*,” *Der Idisher Sozialist*, New York, December 1, 1914, as cited in J.S. Hertz, *Di yidishe sotsialistische bavegung in amerika*. “*Der Wecker*,” 1954, 147-48, as cited in Jonas, “The Early Life,” 103.

<sup>137</sup> “*Brivlakh tsu a fraynd*,” *Di Naye Welt*, New York, September 3, 1915, cited in Jonas, “The Early Life,” 104.

This emphasis on participation within broader American structures became manifest in other ways during Vladeck's early years in the U.S. He became enamored with electoral politics while working as a poll watcher on Election Day. He was committed to formal democracy despite the corruption in the system that systematically eliminated Socialist votes. Vladeck had also learned that the Socialists did poorly in immigrant-dense districts. "You must," he wrote "give them a little more time and devotion because they are like children and they are not obliged to answer immediately to all your specifications." For Vladeck, socialism would provide a path for foreign-born workers to begin to engage as citizens in their new homeland.<sup>138</sup> As he explained in his article, "Ten Commandments of Campaigning," he believed that Socialists needed to place less emphasis on abstract goals and appeal to practical issues-- "living questions as taxes, schools, parks and labor laws." Calling for a move away from mass meetings and dramatic rhetoric, Vladeck saw a need to engage in the routine get-out-the-vote work on Election Day. Finally, he urged the Socialists to seek votes from the Jewish workers by appealing to them for loyalty to "their own [nominally socialist] organizations."<sup>139</sup>

Before long, Vladeck threw his own hat into the ring. In 1918, he was elected one of seven members of the SP to the Board of Alderman. Representing the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, he captured the most attention of all his comrades. Having been engaged in "secret propaganda work, fighting Cossacks, building barricades, and trudging hundreds of miles over the steppes under military guard," he was considered "the most interesting."<sup>140</sup> His compelling story made headlines, and it was said that he was "prouder of his prison record" than "being a

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<sup>138</sup> "Brivlakh tsu a fraynd," *Di Naye Welt*, November 12, 1915, as cited in Jonas, "The Early Life," 110.

<sup>139</sup> "Aseres hedibres far campaign-tuers," *Di Naye Welt*, October 22, 1915, cited in Jonas, "The Early Life," 109.

<sup>140</sup> "Revolutionist to Alderman." Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 4, Folder 9.

city father.” “How does he like it?” asked one press account. “Dull,” he says, “but we may be able to start something yet.”<sup>141</sup> While his career on the Board would be short-lived, he would do just that through his position as the *Forward's* general business manager.

### **The *Jewish Daily Forward* and the Crisis of War**

B.C. Vladeck became the *Forward's* general business manager in a moment of deep crisis for the newspaper, the left, and the Jewish immigrant community. The United States' entry into World War I in April 1917, and the Russian Revolution that soon followed, brought with them a crackdown on free expression and civil liberties. Elites in the government, with support from corporate America, heightened and exploited ideological divisions over the war within the Left to their own advantage. Nine hundred people went to prison under the Espionage Act for speaking out against U.S. involvement in the war, including Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs, Jewish anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, and over one hundred members of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).<sup>142</sup> The institutions and figureheads of Jewish radicalism were placed under attack by the state, sending a strong message to the Jewish working class: those who pledged themselves to patriotism would be hailed as model immigrants, while those who did not would be silenced or persecuted.

The xenophobic and reactionary environment concerned publishers of the vibrant foreign language press. In order to ensure survival, foreign language newspapers would have to prove that they were worthwhile channels for advertisers, and sought to secure themselves financially

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<sup>141</sup> Charles Wood, “New York’s Newest Style Alderman,” *New York World Magazine*. March 10, 1918, 10. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 4, Folder 9.

<sup>142</sup> For a good overview of this period, see Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1492 to the Present*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 356-64.

and politically. Early in the war, the Association of Foreign Language Newspapers (AFLN)—comprised of 744 newspapers, including 52 Yiddish publications, of which the largest in the entire organization was the *Jewish Daily Forward*—gave a \$5,000 contribution to be used by the National Advertising Advisory Board, “to assist the United States in placing before all readers in the shape of publicity of their duties as citizens of the greatest nation in the world,” thus showing loyalty both to the advertising industry and the propaganda effort. “As a good many of such citizens can only be reached through the foreign-language press, the aim of which has always been America first, this contribution is made to help your committee in defraying the expenses in that connection,” they wrote. The AFLN also sent a letter to President Woodrow Wilson promising that their collective readership of eighteen million people “cordially welcome the opportunity...to assist the enlightened citizenship of other nations in establishing more firmly throughout the world the great principles of democracy.”<sup>143</sup>

Advertisers, however, were skeptical of the AFLN’s motivations. An article in the advertising trade publication *Printer’s Ink* argued that the AFLN’s actions reflected their fear that people believed “editors might use their influence in an unostentatious way to arouse and keep alive a feeling of hostility among their millions of readers that might cause much trouble later on.” The burden would be on newspaper publishers to prove that their readers constituted a desirable commodity audience who would remain loyal to the United States. Thus, immigrants had to be seen as both good consumers and good citizens.

To some extent, this ideology was not antithetical to the perspective long held by the *Jewish Daily Forward*. From its inception, the *Forward* had a proclivity towards the commercial.

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<sup>143</sup> “Foreign-Language Newspapers Loyal to the U.S.A.” *Printer’s Ink*, May 17, 1917, 86-8.

Early historians of the *Forward* argued that the newspaper took a proto-Leninist approach to organization and communication. The newspaper's "moral foundation lay in its steadfast fidelity to the advancement of labor," and it had a "self-imposed ban" on "anti-strike and political ads," while acting as "*the campaigner* for the socialist candidates." But while the newspaper did rely on advertising, contributions from readers provided the most important form of financial support. For example, in an early appeal to raise money for new linotypes, the *Forward* declared to its readership in an editorial:

The *Forward* is yours. It is a child born, raised, and strengthened by your moral and financial support. It is flesh of your flesh and blood of your blood. And therefore you are all urged to participate in the important step which we are now undertaking... The paper is in the forefront of the fight of the advanced Jewish proletariat.<sup>144</sup>

More recent scholarship has examined the *Forward* as a key element in the cultural life of New York's Jewish working class. Abraham Cahan had left the *Forward* soon after its founding in 1897, and spent the next five years working for English-language newspapers. He returned in 1902 with an orientation towards human interest reporting and feature stories over essays on Marxist theory. This allowed for a greater ideological flexibility in the newspaper, and thus, a less sharply-defined brand of Yiddish socialism. Under Cahan's editorship, the *Forward* encouraged Jewish assimilation through socialism by criticizing 'American society by universal standards of justice and freedom.'<sup>145</sup> This approach helped bolster the paper's popularity. By 1917, the *Forward* had become the largest foreign language publication in the United States, reaching 200,000 readers every day.

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<sup>144</sup> Epstein, *Jewish Labor*, 318; 334; 320.

<sup>145</sup> Tamara K. Haveren, "The Un-American America and the *Jewish Daily Forward*." YIVO Annual Review of Jewish Social Sciences, 1969, 247.



While the *Forward* had always accepted advertising, typically from small businesses in New York, as was typical of most local papers. A brief examination of advertisements, during one randomly chosen week in 1916, reveals that the most prominent national advertisers in the *Forward* tended to be manufacturers of tobacco and alcohol products. These included Piedmont cigarettes, Prince Albert tobacco by R.J. Reynolds, Budweiser beer, and California brandy. The bulk of the advertising, however, was for grocers, piano manufacturers, phonograph salesmen, clothiers and banks, often with Lower Manhattan addresses on Grand, Houston, or Canal Streets. Thus, the *Forward* helped sustain a locally-based immigrant economy and culture.<sup>146</sup>

The *Forward* also ran many paid announcements from supportive political organizations, such as the Arbeter Ring (or Workmen's Circle), and for local lectures and courses that could develop community and support an oppositional culture. Ads for commercial motion pictures such as *Birth of a Nation* playing at local movie houses, as well as for performances of the Yiddish theater which played an integral role in supporting the labor movement through benefit performances, were also prevalent.<sup>147</sup> While these advertisements promoted forms of consumption, they did so largely within the framework of a local Jewish economy and helped to maintain counter-hegemonic political institutions and social life.

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<sup>146</sup> *Jewish Daily Forward*. June 23, 1916-June 30, 1916. Microfilm. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. While Marilyn Halter argues that brand name products carried the politics of assimilation with them, other products enabled the maintenance of community. Andrew Heinze and Lizabeth Cohen show, for example, that pianos and phonographs were often used to build and maintain cultural identities. The piano, Heinze argues, was used to build cultural experiences in the Jewish home, helped build a market for Yiddish sheet music publishers, and was seen as a key to success in America in conjunction with the rise of Tin Pan Alley and the popularity of many Jewish-American composers. Cohen argues that phonograph records allowed immigrants inexpensive access to ethnic music in the United States, helping them maintain ties to their home countries. Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2000); Heinze, *Adapting*, 33-144; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 104-6.

<sup>147</sup> *Jewish Daily Forward*. June 23, 1916-June 30, 1916. The author acknowledges the racially problematic nature of the film *Birth of a Nation*, and would argue that the presence of such a film within the Jewish community would have important cultural and ideological implications, but this is not the subject of this dissertation.

This began to change as the United States approached entry into the war. The American left, including the SP and the IWW, generally opposed the war from its start. In order to counter this opposition, the *Forward*, along with the rest of the Yiddish socialist press, became a prime target of the pro-war propaganda. Both the federal government's Committee on Public Information (CPI) and the conservative American Federation of Labor's (AFL) American Alliance for Labor and Democracy (AALD), aimed to sway the New York's radical Jewish community towards support for U.S. policies through the Yiddish press.<sup>148</sup>

The *Forward's* chief competitor, *Der Tog*, or the *Day*, was highly complicit with propaganda efforts from the beginning, and its editor William Edlin was a member of the AALD. As Edlin explained to CPI leader George Creel, in 1917, the *Day* was "leading the fight for the administrations [sic] policies among the Yiddish reading people of America."<sup>149</sup> For Edlin, there was complete compatibility between the struggle for socialism and support for the Allied cause. "I am not one of those," he told Creel in 1918, "who is anxious to inject the Socialistic elements that have broken loose from their own proposals of international brotherhood and are allowing themselves tools of Prussian Junkerism."<sup>150</sup>

By the end of the war, the rewards for such cooperation had become clear. Edlin's name was circulated as a potential candidate to serve on a commission to send aid to Russia following the revolution, having "contributed more than many people know to the brining about of a right

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<sup>148</sup> Frank Grubbs, *The Struggle for Labor Loyalty: Gompers, the AF of L, and the Pacifists, 1917-1920*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968).

<sup>149</sup> Edlin to Creel, October 21, 1917. William Edlin Papers, Box 8, Folder 76. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

<sup>150</sup> Edlin to Creel, March 19, 1918. William Edlin Papers, Box 8, Folder 76.

understanding as to the causes and purposes of this great war.” Into the postwar era, Edlin continued to work alongside the AALD to promote Americanization efforts.<sup>151</sup>

The *Forward* was more reluctant than the *Day* to embrace the war and participate in its propaganda efforts. Early on, it was quite successful at riling up anti-war sentiment. The newspaper was at the heart of the pacifist movement, which found its greatest strength among Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side. Abraham Cahan met secretly with editors of the Socialist English-language publication *The Call*, and the German-language *Volkszeitung* at the office of Socialist leader Morris Hillquit, pledging financial support to the anti-war Peoples Council, and column space to anti-war propaganda in their newspapers. The *Forward* was of particular importance because it housed Council organizers at their East Side offices, presenting a serious challenge to AALD and CPI efforts at selling the war through Americanization. As Robert Maisel of the AALD warned AFL president Samuel Gompers, “The *Forward* crowd is reporting that even the government is afraid of them.” The pro-war Jewish Socialist League feared that pacifists might win over the entire East Side.<sup>152</sup>

However, ideologies of patriotism and the demands of the state-corporate nexus were beginning to shift the direction of the *Forward*. Although Abraham Cahan was stridently opposed to the war, B.C. Vladeck was at the forefront of this shift. While a student, Vladeck wrote of the European powers in a college essay in 1914, “God Almighty! Make Thy children see the futility and horror of their greed, and their conquests. Help their hearts grow even at the expense of their brains. But if humanity cannot come to itself without having bathed itself first in

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<sup>151</sup> Letter to Samuel Gompers, June 27, 1918. William Edlin Papers, Box 8, Folder 67; William Edlin Papers, Box 8, Folder 8.

<sup>152</sup> Frank Grubbs, Jr. *The Struggle for Labor Loyalty: Gompers, the A.F. of L., and the Pacifists, 1917-1920*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968), 37; 71; 77.

blood and folly strike them all-- German and Russian, Englishman and Frenchman, Servian [sic] and Austrian.”<sup>153</sup> But by 1918, his attitude had shifted dramatically. When the State Department alleged that Germany was attempting to draw Mexico and Japan into a war against the U.S., Vladeck-- still the city editor wrote, “every citizen and every resident of the United States” should “fight to protect the great American Republic against an alliance of European and Asiatic monarchists and their associates.” As a result, Vladeck lost Leon Trotsky’s support and put the newspaper on a path towards a liberalism increasingly compatible with elite U.S. interests.<sup>154</sup>

That linkage would begin to serve the *Forward*, not only insulating it from political criticism, but helping it to remain financially solvent and attract advertising. During the first weeks of the war, in April 1917, the *Forward* began to stress the patriotism of its readership in search of advertising, linking notions of citizenship and consumption.<sup>155</sup> The *Forward* placed a full-page solicitation in *Printer’s Ink*, seeking support for its upcoming one hundred-page, twentieth anniversary issue, from which proceeds were used to buy food and clothing for Jewish war sufferers. Highlighting its circulation and its loyal following, the *Forward* presented itself to the advertising community as a proper venue to reach potential consumers:

What Dana, Greeley, Godkin and the other great American Editors were to their readers Abraham Cahan is to the large body of intelligent Jews in America today. Founder and editor of the *Forward*, he is read, believed and followed with intense faith by over 200,000 daily paid subscribers concentrated in New York City.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> B.C. Vladeck, “The Causes of the European War.” In Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 4, Folder 11.

<sup>154</sup> Epstein, *Profiles*, 337.

<sup>155</sup> Charles McGovern discusses the merging of the consumer and citizen identity during the 1920s and 1930s throughout American society in *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>156</sup> “Forward to Celebrate Birthday.” *New York Times*, April 21, 1917.

This was not enough, however, to insulate the *Forward* from state repression. Postmaster-General Burleson noted to George Creel, head of the CPI, that the pacifist campaign created “a problem which appears to me serious in the extreme.”<sup>157</sup> Burleson used his power to deny second-class postal rates to periodicals, thus barring most Socialist and radical publications from the mails.

Facing exclusion from the mails, Abraham Cahan and other left-wing publishers organized for a meeting with Burleson regarding the banning of at least a dozen publications. By October, Cahan was called to appear before Burleson and defend his paper.<sup>158</sup> He argued that although the paper had initially opposed U.S. entry into the war, it was loyal to the United States, and “anti-Kaiser and anti-junker more vehemently than anyone else.” Seeing the crackdown on the *Forward* as part of the Post Office Department’s plan to “[close] up every Socialist paper,” Cahan stressed the paper’s hegemonic potential, rather than its oppositional politics, claiming that shutting down the *Forward* would be a “great historical error. The *Forward* is the great Americanizing influence on the East Side”<sup>159</sup>

In order to maintain postal distribution, Cahan ultimately agreed to refrain from offering commentary on the war. He stated,

We will print the news of the war, but refrain from any discussion of it. We do not agree with the interpretation that the authorities have placed upon the law. We think we have always obeyed the statute, even when we did say that capitalism had a great deal to do with the war... But since all this is declared to be unlawful and since thinking and having

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<sup>157</sup> Grubbs, *Labor Loyalty*, 89.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 82; Grubbs, “The Struggle for the Mind of American Labor, 1917-1919.” Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Virginia, 1963, 131.

<sup>159</sup> “Editor Defends Forward,” *New York Times*, Oct 8, 1917.

your own opinion without expressing it has not yet been considered unlawful, we will just print war news without comment.<sup>160</sup>

Before the war's end, following a large propaganda campaign by the CPI and the AALD, the *Forward* had largely capitulated and declared its support for the United States and the Allies. "It is no longer a capitalist war, neither is it imperialistic or nationalistic," stated the *Forward*. "It is a war for humanity."<sup>161</sup>

By this point, however, the left-wing press had been decimated. Between 1916 and 1920, 137 daily and 2,268 weekly newspapers disappeared nationally. While many of these failures were the result of economic trends and wartime shortages, left-leaning papers were far more likely to fold. Although John Nerone notes these papers were frequently in smaller communities and towns, Jon Bekken's study of the labor press demonstrates that foreign language newspapers in large cities like Chicago also saw sharp declines in numbers after 1920.<sup>162</sup>

The Yiddish press, however, actually expanded during the decade following the war. As Dirk Hoerder shows, there was a general net growth in the number of Jewish-North American periodicals during the 1920s, reaching its all-time peak in 1927. The core of the Yiddish press also generally grew during this time, expanding from ten to fifteen in the first half of the decade.<sup>163</sup> But even with an increase in the number of core publications, the Yiddish press was highly concentrated. In 1921, the *Forward* claimed to constitute 47 percent of the total

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<sup>160</sup> "Will Ban War Comment," *New York Times*, Oct 15, 1917.

<sup>161</sup> Grubbs, "American Labor," 168.

<sup>162</sup> John Nerone, *Violence Against the Press: Policing the Public Sphere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 181; Jon Bekken, *Working-class Newspapers, Community and Consciousness, 1880-1930*. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1992.

<sup>163</sup> Dirk Hoerder, *Immigrant Labor Press in North America, 1840s-1970s: An Annotated Bibliography*, v. 2. Ed. by Dirk Hoerder and Christiane Harzig. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 19.

circulation of the Yiddish language press in the United States.<sup>164</sup> By the middle of the decade, some like-minded organizations argued that the dominance of the *Forward* made it unnecessary for them to expand their own publications. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) called for a reduction in spending on their publications because the *Forward* offered "a thorough and fair account" of union activities.<sup>165</sup> The *Forward's* influence within the Yiddish-speaking community was at its peak in the 1920s, while it increasingly sought revenue from national brand advertisers.

The move towards relying increasingly on national advertising was deeply informed by Baruch Charney Vladeck's pragmatic philosophy of politics. Vladeck was elected general business manager and awarded a high weekly salary of 65 dollars in 1918, in the midst of the war, as he sat on the New York City Board of Aldermen.<sup>166</sup> During the next two decades, Vladeck oversaw a strategy of expansion of the *Forward* into local markets and the professionalization of marketing services. While this strategy fundamentally changed the character of the Jewish labor movement and its flagship newspaper, it also allowed for the growth of its institutions at a moment when much of the labor movement was in retreat. As a non-profit organization maintaining itself as a profitable institution during a period of duress for the left, the Forward Association was able to contribute financially to the rest of the Jewish trade union movement using the revenues it brought in from the paper. Rather than collapsing, this

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<sup>164</sup> "A Threefold Record in Circulation, National Advertising, Merchandising Service," *Printer's Ink*. March 3, 1921.

<sup>165</sup> Report of the General Executive Board to the Nineteenth Convention of the ILGWU, 312.

<sup>166</sup> Vladeck to Palmer, October 27, 1938. Vladeck Papers. Box Add. 5, Folder 9. Sixty five dollars in 1918 represents about \$4,240 in 2010 dollars using the nominal GDP per capita. Thus, Vladeck's relative socioeconomic status was equivalent to someone earning approximately \$200,000 per year today. Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1790 to Present," MeasuringWorth, 2010. URL <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>.

segment of the left remained vibrant, laying the groundwork for the revitalization of labor under the New Deal.

### **The *Forward* and the Creation of the Jewish Market**

The *Forward* emerged from the war as a luminary among the faltering left wing press. Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the liberal weekly journal *The Nation*, dubbed the Yiddish paper “America’s most interesting daily” in the pages of his own publication in 1922. Villard was struck by the *Forward*’s institutional structure, as well as its role within the Jewish community. “While others have talked and speculated on the present crass materialism of the American press... a band of men has worked out in New York a cooperative enterprise of much merit with amazing success.” Rather than being driven by profit, the *Forward* stood out in its ability to generate revenue and, at the same time, contribute back to organizations and causes it supported. “Often in enterprises like this the profit is distributed in large salaries and expenses; yet the editor-in-chief of this amazing publication... recently strenuously resisted his colleagues’ efforts to advance his salary to a figure which would be scorned by a city editor of any of our English-language morning dailies.”<sup>167</sup>

But by this point, the *Forward* had already started down the road towards commercialization, eventually angering others on the left. In 1935, Villard declared that “the *Jewish Daily Forward* is far from being a great newspaper. It is full of features that make the Hearst papers the rags they are... Its editorials are distinguished by their irrelevance and plausible ignorance, and its news columns are either too skimpy or poorly written or both. Its general

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<sup>167</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, “America’s Most Interesting Daily.” *The Nation*, Sept. 27, 1922, 301.



attitude on Russia has been one of prejudiced antagonism. Such is the paper that Mr. Cahan has edited for nearly forty years.”<sup>168</sup> By the end of the decade, George Seldes-- journalist, press critic and founder of the Newspaper Guild-- noted that the editors of the *Forward* were expelled from the SP in 1936. “Liberals have long ago given up the *Forward*; radicals regard Cahan as a typical rich bourgeois renegade.”<sup>169</sup>

The transformation of the *Forward* in its form and politics by the 1930s must be understood in conjunction with changes in its structure during the 1920s. During the 1920s, the advertising industry became a significant force in the U.S. economy, as well as a dominant cultural institution. It had been central to the government’s propaganda efforts, including the Americanization movement. Populated by members of the Protestant middle class, and particularly exclusionary of Jews, the advertising industry of the 1920s rarely created images that depicted immigrants, people of color, or the working class. Roland Marchand argues that this sent a clear message: “only by complete fusion into the melting pot did one gain a place in the idealized American society of the advertising pages.”<sup>170</sup>

Although *Forward* readers generally were not reflected in national advertising, the editors of the paper were determined to secure accounts with major brands. Reliance on advertising would serve a two-fold purpose. First, it would help bring revenue to the *Forward* at a moment when other progressive publications were struggling financially. Second, it would

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<sup>168</sup> Editorial Comment. *The Nation*, July 17, 1935, 59.

<sup>169</sup> George Seldes, *Lords of the Press* (New York: Julian Messner, Inc, 1939), 106; 107. Vladeck’s \$20,000 salary in 1938 is the equivalent of \$310,000 using the Consumer Price Index, or \$1,430,000 using the nominal GDP per capita, in 2010 dollars. Thus, by the end of his life, Vladeck had become relatively wealthy through his work at the *Forward*. Williamson, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>.

<sup>170</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 35-6; 192-3.

demonstrate to political and corporate elites that the *Forward* and its readership were good Americans, and alleviate it of potential political repression. Following Vladeck's pragmatic approach, the *Forward* developed a sophisticated strategy for attaining national advertising that would help sustain it through the following two decades.

The key to this strategy was to expand the number of local editions. By reaching Jewish readers in cities across the U.S. and Canada, the *Forward* would become a more attractive venue for national advertising. This was a double-edged sword though, because it also meant that national advertising would be increasingly necessary to sustain these papers. The *Forward* would offer its services to corporate America in helping them solve the 'problem' of the Jewish market, acting as a bridge between a minority audience and the dominant culture.

With B.C. Vladeck as the business manager, the *Forward* began to seek national advertisers aggressively by 1921. Within the first two-and-a-half months of the year, the *Forward* claimed it had offered its merchandising services to sixteen national advertisers, and had printed 202,240 lines of national advertising, more than any other foreign language. Comparing figures from April 1920 and April 1921, the *Forward* increased its lineage from 284,680 to 492,668, nearly 75 percent.<sup>171</sup>

Up to this point, the *Forward* had largely relied on outside advertising agencies, particularly Joseph Jacobs' Jewish Market. With his offices on the Bowery, Jacobs worked to secure accounts for all four of the major Yiddish papers in New York City: the *Forward*, the *Day-Warheit*, the *Morning Journal*, and the *Daily News*. Jacobs promised "sound and impartial advice on securing dealer co-operation and consumer prestige in the Jewish market."<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> "Revised Lists," *Printer's Ink*. June 16, 1921, 98-9.

<sup>172</sup> "The Jewish Market," *Printer's Ink*. Jan 6, 1921, 79.

This changed when, in March 1921, the *Morning Journal* and the *Day-Warheit* announced the establishment of the Jewish Market Merchandising Service to Advertisers, and appointed Jacobs its managing director.<sup>173</sup> This decision appears to have been part of an exclusive agreement. Jacobs was forbidden to “directly or indirectly engage in, or become connected with” efforts that “stimulate, promote, produce, create, encourage, induce, or secure advertising business for any publication other than” the *Journal* and the *Day*.<sup>174</sup> The *Forward* would now have to compete more aggressively against the *Morning Journal* and the *Day-Warheit* in order to attract advertising revenue. Rather than working with these other Yiddish newspapers under Jacobs’ umbrella service, solicitations in *Printer’s Ink* now compared the *Forward*’s circulation figures with those of the other Yiddish-language journals, demonstrating “the tremendous preponderance of the *Forward* circulation over its contemporaries.”<sup>175</sup>

In order to continue to grow, the *Forward* would have to explore new methods of acquiring advertising. Vladeck worked closely with the *Forward*’s advertising manager Henry Greenfield to develop a new strategy. Together, they called a two day meeting, the National Conference for Advertising Agents of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, August 1921 at their Lower East Side headquarters with representatives from the newspapers’ editions in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Boston and Philadelphia.

Vladeck and Greenfield determined that advertising agents would work within a centrally operated network, attaining support from companies that could place their ads in all editions. They instructed all agents to “solicit business for the National Edition,” while keeping the main

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<sup>173</sup> “Jewish Morning Journal and The Day-Warheit,” *Printer’s Ink*. March 10, 1921, 119.

<sup>174</sup> Agreement between the Journal News Corporation, the American Jewish Publishing Corporation, and Joseph Jacobs. January 15, 1931. Forward Association Papers. Box 3, Folder 39. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

<sup>175</sup> “An Interesting Comparison,” *Jewish Daily Forward*. June 1, 1922, 177.

offices in New York and Chicago aware of particular national accounts. “In general,” the conference report stated, “all the offices everywhere should work hand in hand in the interests of bigger business for the National Edition of the *Jewish Daily Forward*.” All local editions would be listed in future national advertising directories.<sup>176</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, though, the *Forward* sought to cut out the middlemen in their advertising operations, discouraging the use of foreign language agencies, and declaring that no commission would be paid to them. They determined that “the Secondary Agencies... perform no necessary function,” and that the *Forward* could not allow those that were “so solidly entrenched [sic]...to grow stronger at our expense.” Competing with the other Yiddish newspapers for advertising revenue, the *Forward* wanted to control its own accounts. In order to do this, it would rely on its large network of local editions. At the August conference, it was determined that “local offices were instructed to make every effort to get along without the help of the secondary agencies in their own cities.” In addition, the *Forward* determined to deny “complete Merchandising Service if the account comes to us through a secondary agency.”<sup>177</sup>

Vladeck and Greenfield worked to turn the *Forward* into a one-stop shop for advertisers to reach Jewish consumers. To do this, they created a professional system of marketing that would interpret its ethnic, often radical readership, for corporate America. The merchandising services department-- first created in 1917-- had to “embrace every important city where the *Forward* has a local office.”<sup>178</sup> With maximum efficiency in mind, the managers saw the need for a clear division of labor. Local agents were re-contacting major accounts for products such as

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<sup>176</sup> Report from National Conference of Advertising Agents of *Jewish Daily Forward*. Forward Association Papers, Box 3, Folder 36.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

Yuban Coffee and Aunt Jemima pancake mix which had long been attained. “The work of soliciting accounts must be systematized,” Greenfield wrote. “It is essential that we know at all times the names of all the accounts on which the out-of-town agents work in order to avoid duplication of effort, etc...”<sup>179</sup> Local offices were to compile complete lists of Jewish businesses-- delicatessens, hardware stores, groceries, drug stores-- in their respective cities, and mail these lists to the New York office. This system would allow Vladeck and Greenfield to keep operating expenses low, while helping them attain contracts for such a large fleet of papers.

Greenfield also wanted tight control over the *Forward's* message to potential advertisers. He argued that there were ‘certain facts...of outstanding significance’ on which ‘every solicitation’ should be based. These facts were all meant to demonstrate why advertising in the *Forward* was a good investment, including the size, the organized nature, and the ideology of its readership. First, Greenfield noted that although there were twelve Yiddish-language daily publications, only the *Forward*, the *Jewish Morning Journal*, and the *Day-Warheit* (or *Der Tog*) were members of the Audit Bureau of Circulation, and could therefore provide advertisers with accurate information about their readership. Of these, the *Forward* was by far the most widely read, with circulation figures from October 1921 of 182,738. The *Journal* had reached only 80,085, and the *Day*, 60,640. Regarding other Yiddish papers that were not affiliated with the ABC, Greenfield argued, “No one really knows the genuine circulation of the *Zeit* or the *Tageblatt*. Of course they are quite ‘liberal’ in their Post Office Statement, but no one takes the statements seriously.”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> “Advertising Manager Has His Say,” *Forward Association Papers*. Box 3, Folder 39.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

Second, Greenfield argued that the *Forward's* influence within the labor movement made it a desirable place for advertisers to market their products. "The *Forward* is the organ of the organized Jewish Labor Movement," wrote Greenfield. "It voices the sentiments of the tens of thousands of members of the ACWA, the ILGWU, the Workmen's Circle, and of the scores of smaller labor unions and liberal organizations. The *Forward* is read by the masses." Because the *Forward* was part of a larger social movement, advertisements in it would be trusted, and the brands promoted in it would have special meaning for readers. He argued:

The readers of the *Forward* know that theirs is a paper which belongs to no individual, which cannot be bought, which is unafraid, and which can afford to be discriminating in the choice of advertisements. Our agents can proudly point to the fact that no advertiser can buy space in the *Forward* unless we are persuaded that he is telling the truth. No quack doctor can advertise his remedies in our paper. No 'package company' is allowed to extract money from the pockets of our readers. No political charlatans are permitted to bamboozle our readers. The National advertiser who has a meritorious product to sell will be the first to realize the value of such an independent, fearless paper as the *Forward*.<sup>181</sup>

Thus, Greenfield turned the arguments against advertising in a left-wing publication on their head. The paper's independent ownership structure, critical politics, and affiliation with labor organizations would not be a liability for advertisers, but would instead serve as a meaningful seal of approval of particular brands for nearly 200,000 socially conscious readers. In addition, the central role that the *Forward* played in people's lives as part of a closely knit ethnic community meant that products advertised in its pages would take on special meaning. The *Forward* explained in *Printer's Ink* that it was the Jewish immigrants' "vehicle for expression, their guide in search of knowledge a leader in their struggle for truth, a champion in their fight

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

for justice, an entertainer in their hours of recreation, a medium for their better understanding of American life, American ideas and ideals.”<sup>182</sup>

This countered the limited critique of advertising that organized labor was developing. In 1922, Chester M. Wright of the American Federation of Labor praised the role of advertising in educating the public about the necessity of certain products, and bettering social conditions.

“Advertising has set the styles and set the pace,” he wrote. “It has educated. A lot of persons who never heard of it in school know that uncleaned teeth are a menace to health and life. Even more, they know the reasons. They have been reading the advertisements.” However, advertising was thought to be problematic in its abstraction of labor conditions and the process by which advertised commodities are produced. Preceding the Consumers Union’s similar critique of advertising by nearly 15 years, Wright wrote,

Before me lies a two-color advertising page. There is harmony of line and tint, there is apparent worth of product, and fairness of price. Back of that page there is a long trail of arduous human effort, leading back to furnaces, mills, mines, railroads, forests, steamships, foreign countries... The whole complexity of industry is back of that page... I wonder how much advertising men and sales forces think about the welter of work places that are back of the products of which they are in part the final dispensers.<sup>183</sup>

The *Forward*, then, would play the role of a trusted friend giving reliable information about products, while readers would operate under the assumption that they were produced under fair labor conditions because of the *Forward*’s politics.

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<sup>182</sup> “Jewish Daily Forward,” *Printer’s Ink*, April 6, 1922, 93.

<sup>183</sup> Chester M. Wright, “How the American Federation of Labor Feels About Advertising.” *Printer’s Ink*, August 31, 1922, 33-6; 121-126. For a discussion of the Consumers Union see, Inger Stole, *Advertising on Trial: Consumer Activism and Corporate Public Relations in the 1930s*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006); and McGovern, *Sold American*.

Third, Greenfield claimed that for those who wanted to reach Jewish consumers, the *Forward's* socialist readership was likely to be the best consumers. In contrast to the “Jewish bourgeoisie” who “does not read the Yiddish newspaper as a rule,” but instead, “reads the New York Times and the Herald,” the reader of *The Morning Journal* who is “looking for a job,” or “peddlers [and] small shop keepers who want to while away the time,” and the reader of the *Tageblatt* who was “the old type Jew who spends his days in the synagogue and who is more concerned with the problems of the next world than with those of this ‘vale of tears,’” the *Forward* was read by a largely secular, politically aware, and employed demographic.

Thus, the *Forward* tried to demonstrate to advertisers that its form of Yiddish socialism was not antithetical to consumerism and Americanism. Solicitations placed regularly during this period in the trade press professed that *Forward* readers were good consumers, who had the “capacity for the absorption of meritorious food and grocery products, dry goods and drug articles,” and claimed its readership to be “Americanized immigrants—workingmen, business men, professional men—whose mother tongue is Yiddish.”<sup>184</sup> It was argued that the Jewish readership was not particularly different than the rest of the population, and could be easily reached through advertising. For example, a 1922 announcement in *Printer's Ink* read:

#### What Kind of Goods Will Sell in the Jewish Market?

The Jewish Market will absorb any class of goods that finds favor in the general American Market. Neither custom nor social habit debar [sic] any class of merchandise, with exception of a few obvious food products that are debarred by religious scruples.

Let The FORWARD, America's largest Jewish Daily, tell you how to obtain the vast Jewish Market of more than 3,000,000 population, and how to do it efficiently and economically.

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<sup>184</sup> “What Do You Know About the Vast Jewish Market,” *Printer's Ink*. November 23, 1922, 163; *ibid.*



Five years of intelligent cooperative service to national advertisers of food, drug and dry goods articles have established a vast number of new products in the Jewish field.

If the Jewish Market is your problem, we can solve it for you profitably.<sup>185</sup>

The *Forward* promised to “solve” this “problem” by supplying ‘detailed information’ collected by the merchandising services department. National advertisers could contract with the *Forward* for a “combination advertising-merchandising plan,” making use of what they claimed to be ‘the only paper with an established Merchandising Service Department and record of deeds.’<sup>186</sup> The *Forward* argued that Jews were the most “compact market” who “concentrated in several distinct sections it is most easily and economically reached.”<sup>187</sup> Jews in most major U.S. and Canadian cities would be easy to reach through advertising, and it would be easy to produce marketing information regarding them. Food companies, in particular, would be able to sell their products in these communities with information provided by the *Forward*’s merchandising services department, regarding retail food dealers in cities such as Boston, Newark, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Pittsburgh, and “every city where there is a Jewish community.”<sup>188</sup> With the help of the *Forward*, Vladeck and Greenfield promised corporate America that they would be able to extend their reach into the lives of Jewish workers. The reactions from within the Jewish working class, the broader labor movement, and the *Forward* staff over the following two decades demonstrate that this pragmatic approach was not without consequences.

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<sup>185</sup> “What Kind of Goods will Sell in the Jewish Market,” *Printer’s Ink*, October 19, 1922, 205.

<sup>186</sup> “What do you Know About the Vast Jewish Market?” *Printer’s Ink*. November 23, 1922, 163; “For Results,” *Printer’s Ink*, April 2, 1921.

<sup>187</sup> “What do you Know About the Vast Jewish Market?” *Printer’s Ink*, November 23, 1922, 163.

<sup>188</sup> “Jewish Daily Forward,” *Printer’s Ink*, June 16, 1921, 99.

## Conclusion

Baruch Charney Vladeck's idealistic pragmatism shaped the *Forward's* strategy during and immediately following the First World War. Rather than collapsing, the *Forward* developed a sophisticated system of soliciting national advertising, while moving politically towards the center. Aside from allowing the *Forward* to continue publication through sustaining revenue, advertising in the immigrant press-- and particularly the socialist immigrant press-- would have ideological consequences. As Americanization activist Frances Alice Kellor put it, advertising is 'the great Americanizer.' Writing in the advertising trade press, she argued, "If American institutions want to combine business and patriotism, they should advertise products, industry and American institutions in the American Foreign Language press."<sup>189</sup> This practice could also serve as a mechanism to teach immigrants English, as advertisements were often printed twice next to each other, once in the original English and once in translation, simultaneously linking linguistic assimilation with the acquisition of brand-name products.<sup>190</sup> Sociologist Robert Park pointed to this presence of national advertising as evidence that immigrants had the same desires as the native-born.

In examining the advertisements in the foreign-language press, we usually discover that the immigrant, in his own world, is behaving very much as we do in ours. He eats and drinks; looks for a job; goes to the theater; indulges in some highly prized luxury when his purse permits; occasionally buys a book; and forgathers with his friends for sociability. This is sometimes and in some cases a revelation.<sup>191</sup>

But Vladeck was opposed to the top-down methods of the Americanization movement, and saw it as an essentially reactionary force. Invented by elites, the Americanization movement

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<sup>189</sup> Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976), 62-4.

<sup>190</sup> "Advertising Gives Immigrants Lessons in English," *Printer's Ink*, March 4, 1926, 134.

<sup>191</sup> Robert Park, *The Immigrant Press and its Control* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 134.

as it stood was nothing more than one way to protect the status quo. As he explained to the 1920 convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America,

Their work of Americanization consists in inciting one nationality against another under the American flag, one struggling immigrant group against another. If any Americanization work is being done in this country, it is being done by organizations like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which is getting together all nationalities for one purpose, to make life in America worth while for the American working class.<sup>192</sup>

Reflecting Vladeck's assimilationist politics and his pragmatic sensibility, the *Forward's* merchandising services department came to play the role of the intermediary in the 1920s between the Jewish working-class counterpublic and the broader U.S. society, as represented by commercial interests. But Vladeck believed that, if put into context by a progressive force such as the *Forward* or a labor union, Americanism could be redefined in radical terms.

But as Vladeck worked to navigate these tensions, he pursued a policy of strict fiscal responsibility, sometimes at the expense of writers and advertising solicitors. At the same time, he came into conflict with members of the Jewish working class counterpublic and the broader left who objected, for a variety of reasons, to the paper's advertising policies. By the end of Vladeck's term as business manager in 1938, the *Forward* had been able to make significant contributions to the broader Jewish and labor communities, supporting the public it informed and represented. At the same time, the *Forward's* had shifted, to create consensus around the emerging consumer society. In the following chapter, I explore these contradictions and tensions.

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<sup>192</sup> Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Boston. May 10-15, 1920, 280.

### Chapter Three:

#### Selling “Socialism”:

#### Conflicts Over the *Forward's* Business Strategy During the Interwar Era

Instead of educating the masses in a truly cultural manner, in a truly revolutionary way, to awaken in them the most beautiful and best feelings and aspirations, it stooped to their level, to their crude instincts... In the chase after material success, striving to become a man of substance with a ten-story brick-house, the *Forverts* did not become the organ of the conscious labor movement, but the street paper of the rabble, of the marketplace.-- *Di frayhayt*<sup>193</sup>

Let me say something about advertising. There is a baker's union in New York City. This baker's union is a small union, which was built up by the good will of the Jewish immigrants and workers in New York. This union can exist only if people buy bread manufactured by the union people.-- B.C. Vladeck<sup>194</sup>

Under Baruch Charney Vladeck's management from 1918 to 1938, the *Forward* became increasingly adept at attracting revenue from commercial sources. The *Forward's* strategy to generate advertising revenue was a markedly different from other immigrant and labor publications. While most radical and foreign language newspapers relied on community support from unions and other organizations, the *Forward's* heavy reliance on advertising as a primary source of revenue allowed it to give donations back to the community.<sup>195</sup> Through its prominent place in the Yiddish community, the *Forward* was central to sustaining the larger broader labor and progressive movement for decades. Although revenue from advertising was key to maintaining the *Forward* as an important organizing force, Jewish and left wing organizations criticized its commercialism and related shift in politics in the 1920s and during the Depression

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<sup>193</sup> “Unzer ‘Frayhayt’ yontev in Leksington Opera Hoyz,” *Di frayhayt*, April 3, 1922, 6. Cited in Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 238.

<sup>194</sup> Transcript of “Debate: Resolved: That the Communist Party is the Only Party Fighting in the Interest of the Working Class,” Brooklyn, New York. November 2, 1932, 51-2. Baruch Charney Vladeck Papers, Reel 12, Speeches Folder, Tamiment Library, New York University.

<sup>195</sup> Jon Bekken, “Working Class Newspapers, Community and Consciousness, 1880-1930,” University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Ph.D. Dissertation, 1992, 293.

years. In addition, Vladeck's adoption of a corporate model of operation--low expenses and high returns-- bred discontent among *Forward* employees. On a day-to-day basis, Vladeck managed these tensions, while at once maintaining the *Forward's* stream of revenue from advertisers. In this chapter, I use the process of commodification as an entry point to examine the contradictions that emerged from the *Forward's* commercial and political agenda. The structural forces responsible for the *Forward's* production, distribution, and exchange took on three commodity forms described by the political economy of communication: content, labor, and audiences.<sup>196</sup> The resistance to this process from the *Forward's* workers and readers illuminates the ways in which commodification, though powerful and persuasive, is not static, singular, or inevitable.

The dynamics stemming from the complex structural and ideological relationship between Yiddish radical media and advertisers deserve serious attention, as the role of advertising and the institutional practices of the *Forward* have been generally ignored by the political histories of the Jewish labor movement. The only major scholarly work on advertising in the Yiddish language press has been Andrew Heinze's *Adapting to Abundance*.<sup>197</sup> While this work is useful in reminding us that the Jewish press in the U.S. always had a commercial element, Heinze's study is limited in a number of ways. First, while Heinze does discuss the role of advertising in the *Forward* to some extent, most of his research concentrates on the conservative, religious newspaper *Tageblatt*. The radical politics present within the Jewish

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<sup>196</sup> These categories are outlined in Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communications* (London: Sage, 2009), 127-141.

<sup>197</sup> Andrew R. Heinze's *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

community, and within the Jewish press are not explored by Heinze, giving the impression that capitalism was, by and large, accepted among working class immigrant Jews.

Second, Heinze works to refute Marxist critiques of consumption, and “avoid prejudices with which the American standard of consumption is often confronted.”<sup>198</sup> This effort leads him to obscure the ways in which commodity audiences are produced, concluding that immigrant Jews were eager to participate in mass consumption. The point of this study, and political economy in general, is not to denigrate or celebrate the ideological impact of mass consumption, but instead to advance the understanding of the institutional relationships among advertisers, media and audiences. While Heinze may be right to steer clear of criticizing individuals’ consumption practices, his arguments do not consider the structures of production which support advertising and consumption.

Finally, Heinze’s focus on the early twentieth century misses a critical moment in the formation of Jewish working class identity, and in the history of advertising and consumer culture—the 1920s and 1930s. While it is important to understand that the Yiddish press did not reject advertising in its formative years, the decades following the war brought a new emphasis on national advertising, and three important forms of commodification emerged in order to secure such accounts.

During the 1920s and 1930s, institutional and structural pressures fundamentally transformed the Jewish working class counterpublic, as commercial interests became more

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<sup>198</sup> Heinze, *Adapting*, 17-18. Marilyn Halter makes a similar error, arguing that the prevalence of ads in the *Forward*, and the Yiddish press more generally, indicated a willingness among Jews to participate in American consumer culture, more so than other immigrant groups. But she also briefly acknowledges the tensions that existed between the editors’ desire for advertising, the readership’s radicalism, and the political aims of the paper. Thus, rather than understanding the *Forward* as responding to audience demand, it is important to understand the decisions that were made within the *Forward*’s business and advertising departments. See *Shopping for Identity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), 34-5; 25.

important to the *Forward's* business model. The economic downturn in the early 1930s placed new pressures on Vladeck's organizational model, highlighting the contradictions embedded in a commercialized labor press. While the newspaper introduced its readers to new consumer products, it also took essentially mainstream political positions in the height of the New Deal. In 1936, Vladeck and the *Jewish Daily Forward* helped to create the new American Labor Party with its endorsement of FDR's re-election, and this represented a new, general acceptance by the Jewish working class counterpublic of welfare state capitalism. Two years later, Vladeck-- now the majority leader of the New York City Council-- passed away, leaving his newspaper in alliance with the Democratic Party. On one hand, Vladeck's business model helped bolster Jewish and left-wing organizations, but on the other hand, the financial imperatives of the *Jewish Daily Forward* were met with criticism from its audiences and workers. This fundamental contradiction raises two important questions for a political economic analysis of alternative media: 1) to what extent do alternative media institutions produce their audiences as a counterpublic?, and 2) To what extent do they produce them as commodity? The following chapter will explore these questions by addressing the commodification process at work within the *Jewish Daily Forward*. The 1920s and early 1930s saw the Jewish working class counterpublic become increasingly commodified as commercial interests became more important to the *Forward's* business model. While the political divisions of the 1920s within the left allowed for significant criticism of this process, the ideology of what Lizabeth Cohen calls "the Consumer's Republic" ultimately won out.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

## Commercialization and Content

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky name advertising as one of five filters that move journalism away from its democratic mission and towards becoming propaganda in the service of elite interests.<sup>200</sup> Others, such as Robert McChesney and Ben Bagdikian argue that advertising helps to breed a “dig here, not there” bias, whereby journalists rarely challenge corporate power.<sup>201</sup> Advertisers therefore yield tremendous power in determining the nature of media content. Little research, though, has been done on the ideological impact of advertising within the alternative or labor press, and this represents a lacuna in communications scholarship. Herman and Chomsky argue that the shift towards market interests accomplished what legal and economic coercion could not: the curtailment of “alternative” or “radical” press and the establishment of dominant, mainstream press that legitimates the status-quo. Advertising put “working class and radical papers at a serious disadvantage” because their readership, having little expendable income, was not of interest to advertisers.<sup>202</sup> The history of the *Forward* complicates this simple decline narrative. The *Forward* did not go out of business because it could not compete with commercial dailies; but rather, the newspaper’s editors made specific changes in order to curry favor with advertisers, and this decision corresponded with a general rightward trend in content.

As attracting national advertising became increasingly important, editors at the *Forward* considered more carefully the relationship between content and advertiser interests. For example,

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<sup>200</sup> Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 14-18.

<sup>201</sup> Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 6th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000) as cited in Robert W. McChesney, *Problem of the Media* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 72-3.

<sup>202</sup> Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing*, 15.



in February 1923, the *Forward* launched a special Graphic Art section as a supplement to its Sunday issues—which were the most circulated—whose explicit purpose was to provide an advertiser-friendly forum. The section appeared “in all editions simultaneously,” and promised “an unusual opportunity by which to reach the greatest portion of the Yiddish reading public throughout the United States, as a low lineage cost, unparalleled in the domain of graphic space rates.”<sup>203</sup>

Reliance on advertising was not the only determining factor--it operated within a web of social forces that were reshaping the Jewish working-class counterpublic during the interwar period. For example, the demand for advertising also coincided with the emergence of content geared towards women. Women were not imagined as political agents, however, but as consumers filling their roles within a gendered division of labor. The *Forward* promoted a gender ideology which saw it as women’s duty to help ‘Americanize’ the next generation through their roles as mothers, what Maxine Seller has called “socialist womanhood.” As the *New York Times* described, “Breaking down the indifference of Jewish women to newspaper reading was no easy task. It had been full of economics, socialism, talmudic disputes and other bromidic matter. There was little inducement for them to conquer the intricacies of printed Yiddish.” Abraham Cahan told the *Times* that the introduction of the advice column “*A Bintl Briv*” or “A Bundle of Letters,” in 1906 helped boost the paper’s circulation among women by about 30,000. The *Forward*’s women’s page portrayed the ideal socialist woman as a union activist, but “as equally heavily committed in the private sphere—as traditional and dutiful daughter, wife, mother, and homemaker.” While the *Forward* accepted women’s traditional domestic duties, it

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<sup>203</sup> “Forward Graphic Arts Section,” *Printer’s Ink*, January 18, 1923, 152.

advocated progressive ways for women to approach them, such as forming kitchen cooperatives with other women. In the early 1920s, Cahan frequently offered etiquette tips, urging, for example, that mothers provide their children with handkerchiefs. “And since when has socialism been opposed to clean noses?” he asked after receiving criticism from his readers for departing from strictly political discussion.<sup>204</sup>

These developments must be understood in conjunction with the *Forward*'s persistent search for advertising revenue. The *Forward* worked vigorously to sell its audience to advertisers in order to sustain itself and its community of readers. Market recognition, then, had contradictory impacts on the Jewish labor movement as national advertising introduced a wide variety of brands to the *Forward*'s pages in the 1920s. Advertisements promoted products that could be easily integrated into women's domestic labor, such as packaged foods and cleaning products including Hellmann's Mayonnaise, Johnson's Baby Powder, Royal Baking Powder, Colgate Talc Powder, and Linit starch and Palmolive Soap, and often depicted women in the ads. Other advertisements in the 1920s sought to capitalize on working-class identity across gender lines. For example, a 1922 advertisement for Coca-Cola featured an image of workers leaving a factory. In Yiddish, it instructed readers to drink a bottle after work, hardly a socialist solution to a difficult day of labor. By the end of the 1930s, the *Forward* was using its content to promote its sponsors. Joseph Jacobs promised TWA, for example, that the paper would regularly run publicity articles.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Maxine S. Seller, “Defining Socialist Womanhood: The Women's Page of the *Jewish Daily Forward* in 1919.” *American Jewish History* 76, no. 4 (1987): 416-38; Rose C. Feld, “Stirring Story of East Side Success,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1922, 103; Seller, “Defining,” 428; Tamara Haveren, “The Un-American America and the *Jewish Daily Forward*,” YIVO Annual Review of Jewish Social Sciences, 1969, 236.

<sup>205</sup> These advertised products were noted during a review of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, June 23-June 30, 1922; *Jewish Daily Forward*, June 28, 1922; Letter from Joseph Jacobs to M.L. Polin, March 4, 1939. Forward Association Papers, Box 3, Folder 39. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

While advertisers were ambivalent about the Jewish (and typically female) consumer, it was still easier for them to market to an ethnic community rather than a political community. This is not to say that advertisers were particularly anxious to cater to Jewish consumers. Roland Marchand argues, in his study of the English-language advertising in the U.S., that ethnic and racial minorities were virtually invisible in the ads of the 1920s and 1930s. Although Charles McGovern also shows that advertisers used all-American imagery in advertising as a way of promoting national unity through consumption, he notes that immigrants “did not simply accommodate themselves to the American national market on its own terms,” but rather “compelled American businesses to adapt to preferences and traditions brought from their homelands...”<sup>206</sup>

This was not, however, simply the result of immigrants’ natural inclination towards mass culture. The *Forward* helped to bring the ideology of consumption to its readers as a matter of necessity in order to continue publication. As discussed in chapter two, the *Forward* and other Yiddish language publications solicited ads through venues such as *Printer’s Ink*, making advertisers increasingly interested in reaching the vast Jewish market. As early as 1922, major companies tried to understand how immigrants, and particularly Jews, used consumer goods in their everyday lives and were working to exploit that knowledge for marketing purposes. White Rose Tea, for example, studied the use of tea in Jewish home life in New York, and began to run Yiddish-language ads that declared their product to be “the drink of Jewish hospitality.”<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 192; Charles McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship: 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 123-131; 124.

<sup>207</sup> Roland Cole, “Racial Traits of Foreign-Language Consumers Make Good Copy,” *Printer’s Ink*, Nov. 16, 1922, 8-12.

As the business manager, Vladeck pushed the paper in this direction, breeding conflict with Abraham Cahan, who resented Vladeck flexing his muscle. While the *Forward* began first and foremost as a political organ of the Socialist Party (SP) designed to organize the Jewish immigrant community, by the end of the 1930s it had morphed into a primarily ethnic publication that did political work. In 1934, one lecturer referred to Vladeck as “a captain of industry among Jewish labor organizations” working “to organize Jewish labor as much with respect to Jewish problems” in light of Hitler’s recent rise to power in Germany. As one critic within the Forward Association noted, “Vladeck said the fundamental policy of the *Forward* is not labor...His statement is correct. The *Forward* policy is a Jewish policy... Therein lies the danger. It is becoming a paper for the average Jewish reader who either by tradition or simply habit reads the *Forward*.” He continued,

I venture the opinion that if a survey should be undertaken as to the character and social standing of the *Forward* readers a picture not quite pleasing from a labor and socialist point of view will present itself. It is true we must have circulation but I wonder whether the field of labor is not the most fertile ground for us to cultivate, not to the exclusion of other spheres of course, and thus become a real labor paper.<sup>208</sup>

Vladeck was instrumental in moderating the *Forward*’s politics. With the rise of the Communist movement, he worked to distance the paper from being considered “radical.” On one occasion in 1936, the director of the New School for Social Research contacted Vladeck about giving a lecture on “The Radical Press.” Vladeck initially declined the offer. “I imagine that the radical press as represented by the *Daily Worker* or even by the *New Republic* and *Nation* would consider me a reactionary,” he responded. “Besides I think that the radical press is deficient in

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<sup>208</sup> Melech Epstein, *Profiles of Eleven* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1965), 354-5; Horace M. Kallen, Address to New School for Social Research, May 27, 1934. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 2, Folder 2; Forward Association Memo, n.d. Vladeck Papers. Reel 4, Forward Association Folder.

many respects and not always constructive and if there is such a thing as radical press, it might claim that I have misrepresented it.”<sup>209</sup>

Aside from the women’s pages, graphic arts section, and advice columns, the *Forward’s* shift towards catering to and producing an ethnic identity increasingly stripped of explicitly Marxist politics was most apparent in its evolving attitude towards Zionism. Prior to the First World War, Vladeck and other Jewish socialists eschewed Zionism as a distraction from building a global worker movement. Vladeck believed that “Jewish workers could best promote the liberation of their people by standing shoulder to shoulder with workers and socialists of every nationality and religion.” Jewish nationalists, he argued, were aligned with “the most conservative elements in America,” and contended that those who emphasized a common culture were playing into the hands of “philistines and political bosses.” Nationalism, he believed, was harmful to the cause of socialism and to Jewish people overall.<sup>210</sup>

This began to change during the war as non-Jewish reactionary elites saw the political benefits of backing the Zionist movement. A British-led propaganda campaign attempted to garner Jewish support for the war through the Balfour Declaration, supporting the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Britain’s Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour believed that “all Bolshevism and disturbance of a like nature are already traceable to the Jews of the world.” Thus, he was sympathetic to putting “the best of them” in Palestine, and “hold[ing] them responsible for the rest of the Jews.” The Declaration gained U.S. support, functioning not only as foreign policy, but as propaganda. Some Jewish elites in the U.S.--such as Justice Louis

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<sup>209</sup> Alvin Johnson to Vladeck, April 21, 1936.; Vladeck to Johnson, April 23, 1936. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 2, Folder 9. Vladeck ultimately agreed to give the lecture in a letter dated May 13, 1936, Add. 3, Folder 1.

<sup>210</sup> Franklin L. Jonas, “The Early Life and Career of B. Charney Vladeck, 1886-1926 : The Emergence of an Immigrant Spokesman,” Ph.D. Dissertation. New York University, 1972, 125-6.

Brandeis-- saw the benefit of siding with such a position, in order to direct Jewish energy away from anti-capitalist activity. As Lord David Lloyd George wrote in his memoirs, the Declaration was due “to propagandist reasons...Public opinion in Russia and America played a great part, and we had every reason at that time to believe that in both countries the friendliness or hostility of the Jewish race might make a considerable difference.” Inadvertently highlighting the cynicism behind the propagandists’ project, H.C. Peterson wrote ominously in 1939 that the encouragement of Jewish nationalism and the Balfour Declaration, constituted a “final solution” to the Jewish problem.<sup>211</sup>

As Ehud Manor details, the *Forward* gradually became less overtly oppositional to Zionism, and “hopped on the bandwagon” once Cahan realized that the Balfour Declaration had been generally warmly received. Manor argues that the *Forward*’s opposition to Zionism was more of a reflection to its indebtedness to wealthy, anti-Zionist such as Jacob Schiff, than of a principled view that saw socialism and Zionism as antithetical to each other. Schiff and other Jewish conservatives believed that nationalism would hinder assimilation. As his adviser Maurice Fishberg noted, “If Jewish nationalism is spread among the masses, one may expect in short time that one will deal with Jews just as one now deals with the negro.”<sup>212</sup>

With official British and U.S. support, Jewish nationalism and American patriotism were no longer antithetical, but complementary. The U.S. labor movement as a whole, led by Samuel

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<sup>211</sup> Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarried: Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871-1917* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 209; Zosa Szajkowski, “Jews and the Elihu Root Mission to Russia, 1917,” in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research*, Vol. 37, 1969, 113; H. C. Peterson, *Propaganda for War: The Campaign Against American Neutrality, 1914-1917* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), 242.

<sup>212</sup> Ehud Manor, *Forward: The Jewish Daily Forward (Forverts) Newspaper: Immigrants, Socialism and Jewish Politics in New York, 1890-1917* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 81-87; 86; Maurice Fishberg, *Di gefahr fun di yidishe natsionalistische bavegung* (The danger of the Jewish nationalist movement). (New York: Max N. Meisel, 1906), 74-5. Cited in Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 91.

Gompers of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), supported the Zionist cause in conjunction with the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy (AALD). Before the war's end, the *Forward* was actively involved in garnering support for a Jewish state, both reflecting and shaping the shifting views of its readership. In April 1918, two hundred organizations met to form the Jewish Labor Conference for Palestine at the *Forward's* headquarters. The International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union (ACWA) and the United Hebrew Trades (UHT) all announced their support for a Jewish homeland and began to buy war bonds. Soon, the Jewish Socialist Federation (JSF), the Workmen's Circle, and the People's Relief Committee also joined in supporting the war.<sup>213</sup>

Over the course of the 1920s, Vladeck's views on Zionism changed dramatically. In 1929, Vladeck went to Palestine for the *Forward* during a five week Arab strike against Jewish settlers. After his return to the U.S., he noted,

When the strike was declared, many Arabs brought their vegetables and dairy products to the market for sale to the Jews as they would have in ordinary times, and behaved as if they were in complete ignorance of the trouble. In Haifa and Jerusalem, many Arabs continued to drive their taxis, shine shoes, and perform their daily tasks as they used to before the strike. Common sense should have told the Jews to treat these Arab strike- breakers in a friendly fashion, to be tolerant, to make them feel that they were still appreciated. Not only would this have tended to keep the Arabs divided, but it would have given an opportunity to demonstrate to the world that the Arab peasants and workers were not in favor of the strike. But instead of buying from these friendly peasants, instead of dealing with them as an encouragement to other Arabs to break the strike, the Jews declared a retaliatory boycott against them. A Jew who bought from an Arab or dealt with an Arab in any way was regarded as a traitor.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Christopher M. Sterba, *Good Americans: Italian and Jewish Immigrants During the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 171. This is also discussed in Manor, *Forward*, 82-3; Frank L. Grubbs, *The Struggle for Labor Loyalty: Gompers, the A.F. of L., and the Pacifists, 1917-1920* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968).

<sup>214</sup> "An Abyss of Fear and Suspicion Separates the Jew and the Arab in Palestine," n.d. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 5, Folder 8.

Thus, Vladeck had adopted a moderate Zionism that, while critical of antagonistic attitudes among Jews towards Arabs, placed support for a Jewish state above global worker solidarity.

Vladeck believed that the *Forward's* evolving Zionist sympathies were good business. The Forward Association's business department noted that the newspaper placed great emphasis on Palestine, in part to boost circulation, which, in turn, increased advertising rates. Critics charged that the *Forward's* reporting on Palestine had transcended into the realm of the sensational. "In our Jewish policy, we very often go to the ridiculous and play up our headlines and stories to absurdity... This sort of stuff can be used and is being used by our competitors to much better advantage, and to boost their circulation further they are making inroads in the sphere of labor which should be our job and our job only."<sup>215</sup>

By the mid-1930s, the *Forward* had won the approval of many Jewish Zionists. As one self-described "Zionist, without any suffix" wrote to Vladeck, "the *Forward* has kept me informed...of all the Jewish news that 'is fit to print'..." In particular, the reader was impressed with the *Forward's* coverage of Palestine. "[F]or years," he wrote, "I have felt that although The *Forward* is a labor organ devoted primarily to labor interests, you have treated Zionism fairly. In some cases, your articles on the happenings in Palestine are closer to the truth than any articles appearing in other newspapers."<sup>216</sup> But not everyone was so enthusiastic.

### **Criticism: Left, Right and Popular**

Although anti-Zionism did overlap with some conservative views, it was the dominant position among the Jewish left until World War One. In the 1920s, however, the *Forward* became

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<sup>215</sup> Forward Association Memo, n.d. Vladeck Papers, Forward Association Folder, Reel 4.

<sup>216</sup> Israel Maltin to Vladeck, October 11, 1936. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 3, Folder 3.



the key opponent of anti-Zionist Jewish Communism during what has been termed labor's "civil war," constituting a shift towards the right.<sup>217</sup> It would be reductive to argue that reliance on advertising directly caused a political transformation, but structural theories of the press suggest strong correlation between these phenomena.

Perhaps more importantly, the *Forward's* commercialism prompted other intellectuals to found oppositional newspapers and to grow the Jewish Communist movement. Tony Michels has provided an excellent account of the origins of the civil war between Socialists and Communists and how it became manifest in the Yiddish press. In 1921, intellectuals within the Jewish Socialist Federation (JSF) left the Socialist Party because of its reformist politics. The *Forward* fired those writers who had split. Under the leadership of Jacob Salutsky and Moyshe Olgin, they were determined to start their own journal. They began publishing *Di frayhayt*, or *Freedom*, in April 1922 as an effort "to bring together two avant gardes: the political and the cultural." The newspaper pledged "to bring about a revolution, not only in the economic, social and political concepts of Jewish workers, but also in their outlook toward questions of culture."<sup>218</sup>

Positioning itself in direct opposition to the *Forward*, *Di frayhayt* critiqued its rival's commercialism, albeit from an elitist perspective. The premier editorial of *Di frayhayt* declared,

Instead of educating the masses in a truly cultural manner, in a truly revolutionary way, to awaken in them the most beautiful and best feelings and aspirations, it stooped to their level, to their crude instincts... In the chase after material success, striving to become a

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<sup>217</sup> For a discussion of the civil war, particularly in the Jewish labor movement and the needle trades, see Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in the USA: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement, 1914-1952, Vol. 2* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1953), 124; James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 118-28; and Stanley Nadel, "Red Versus Pink: A Civil War in the ILGWU." *New York History* 66, n. 1 (1985): 48-72.

<sup>218</sup> Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 228-239; 238. Salutsky, later known as J.B.S. Hardman, is, in part, the subject of Chapter 4 of this dissertation. His vision for the labor press is explored in detail there.

man of substance with a ten-story brick-house, the Forverts did not become the organ of the conscious labor movement, but the street paper of the rabble, of the marketplace.<sup>219</sup>

Operating as the organ of the small Jewish Socialist Federation, *Di frayhayt* was in financial straits from its beginning. Although Salutsky warned against it, Olgin decided to affiliate the paper with the Communist Party. This did not completely preclude commercial interests from marketing to *Frayhayt* readers. As Dovid Katz writes, “[I]ts pages were full of lively advertisements for everything from kosher hotels to the latest movies to the best banks for working families.”<sup>220</sup> But with funds from Moscow in addition to commercial interests, and a much smaller operation to sustain than the *Forward* had, *Di frayhayt* was able to offer a consistently radical alternative.

As a Communist paper, *Di frayhayt* became the major locus of opposition to the Socialist *Forward*. It not only criticized the *Forward* in its pages, but worked to counter its politics through direct action within the community. For example, as the *Forward* marked its thirtieth anniversary in April 1927 with speakers, an orchestra concert, and a performance of the Workmen’s Circle Chorus at the Century Theatre, *Di frayhayt* held three simultaneous meetings throughout Manhattan to protest the *Forward*’s attitude towards New York’s labor movement.<sup>221</sup>

While Michels argues that the newspaper became more of a mouthpiece of the Soviet government than a reflection of popular Yiddish politics and culture in the U.S., others have called the paper “manifestly American...Despite the supposed ‘similar persuasion’ of the

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid, 238. The ten-story brick-house refers to the *Forward*’s headquarters at 175 East Broadway that, at the time, dominated the Lower Manhattan skyline.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 242; See also Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre: The Social Background of the American Communist Party Elite* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 37-52; David Kotz, “Introduction,” in *Proletpen: America’s Rebel Yiddish Poets*, ed. Dovid Katz. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>221</sup> Thirtieth Anniversary Program. Forward Association Papers. Box 12, Folder 164; “Anniversary of the Daily Forward,” in *New York Times*. April 23, 1927, 2

Frayhayt, not one single page could ever be mistaken for one from a Soviet Yiddish newspaper.” Irving Howe has argued that *Di frayhayt* became the center of a new “network of culture” built by Jewish Communists. This network, like the older Socialist “newspaper culture” Michels describes during the prewar era, included theater troupes, choruses, and youth groups for the assimilated children of immigrants. As the *Forward* had done for years, *Di frayhayt* held large public events, bringing the community together. For example, 10,000 people turned out to the paper’s tenth anniversary celebration at Madison Square Garden, where “A thousand athletes and actors presented the ‘Red, Yellow and Black Pageant,’ which depicted the struggles of the Communist forces against conservative and reactionary groups.” They also played an active role in organizing workers in Communist-led unions, particularly the Furrier’s Union, and their headquarters provided a space for left wing rallies and mass meetings. Despite the newspaper’s dogmatic tone-- an approach that the *Forward* had long since eschewed-- *Di frayhayt* reached 22,000 readers in 1925 (still only one-tenth that of the *Forward*) and became the widest circulating Communist newspaper in the nation, more than even the English language *Daily Worker*.<sup>222</sup> Thus, *Di frayhayt* helped to maintain critical discussion about the direction of Jewish labor through the 1920s (albeit under the direction of the Comintern), even as the *Forward* became an increasingly powerful force.

Although relatively successful through the 1920s, *Di frayhayt*’s circulation plummeted by the end of the decade alongside Jewish support for the Communist movement. In 1929, the newspaper found itself in a quandary over its attitude towards Zionism. As the *Forward*’s

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<sup>222</sup> Michels ends his narrative of Yiddish socialism in New York in the early 1920s, as “The search for a radical, pro-Yiddish alternative to the *Forverts* thus ended in failure” with the CP’s takeover of *Di frayhayt* (249); Katz, “A Union,” 7; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 341-7; “10,000 Honor Freiheit,” in *New York Times*. April 1, 1928, 37; “3,000 Fur Strikers Rally in Park,” in *New York Times*. June 26, 1927, 12; Howard Sachar, *A History of Jews in America* (New York: Vintage Press, 1993), 295; 432.

Palestine policy evolved in order to keep circulation numbers high, shield itself from elite criticism, and garner advertising revenue, the Communists maintained that the Zionist project was a bourgeois distraction from building an international worker movement and that Jewish nationalists were in cahoots with British imperialists.

Moscow showed its strength in shaping *Di frayhayt*'s editorial policy when the newspaper compared Arab riots to pogroms in Eastern Europe. The next day, the editors retracted the statement and published a new editorial, proclaiming support for Arab workers. The Jewish counterpublic reacted with hostility towards the paper, as four were arrested for attacking *Di frayhayt*'s Chicago office. Within weeks, a vote of 2,500 men and women condemned *Di frayhayt* for "maliciously falsified news" in a mock trial at Chicago's Central Opera House.

Three editors, who opposed the CP's official interpretation of the events in Palestine, resigned and were dubbed "counter-revolutionaries."<sup>223</sup> While it is difficult to quantify public opinion on Zionism within the Yiddish community during this time, the attacks on *Di frayhayt* demonstrate that, by the end of the 1920s, expression of extreme anti-Zionist sentiment was outside the bounds of acceptable political discourse, placing new emphasis on ethnic and religious identity rather than on international working class struggle.

While *Di frayhayt* argued that the *Forward* was too embedded with powerful interests limiting the paper's radical critique of capitalism and paving the way for low-brow content, more conservative publications criticized the *Forward* for paying less attention to religious and ethnic concerns than to building a socialist movement. This sometimes took the form of criticizing the *Forward*'s advertising policy. For example, the *Jewish Courier*, the *Forward*'s chief competitor

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<sup>223</sup> "Reds Here in Clash on Palestine Riots," *New York Times*. Sep. 4, 1929, 10; "Riot on West Side Over War in Holy Land," *Chicago Daily Tribune*. Sep. 9, 1929, 1; "Find Reds Falsified News Of Palestine," *New York Times*. Sep. 23, 1929, 20.

in the Chicago market pointed to ways in which market logic tended to cut against more traditional values of cultural solidarity, terming their rival the “*Ford-ward*” because of its decision to run ads for the Ford Motor Company at the same time that Henry Ford was publishing his anti-Semitic tracts in the Dearborn Independent. Like *Di frayhayt*, the *Courier* believed this crass commercialism bred sensational, low-brow journalism. “People read the *Ford-Ward* just as they read the *Chicago Star*,” the paper editorialized, “a pornographic sheet which reports scandalous stories that no decent newspaper would print. The *Ford-Ward* would go out of business in forty-eight hours if it ceased its pornographic activity.” Even more offensive, was that rather than using this money to contribute to charity, the *Courier* saw the *Forward*’s donations to Socialist-affiliated groups as ultimately self-serving. “The *Ford-Ward* thus gives charity to itself and it bluffs the people into believing that it gives charity to the poor and helpless. Henry Ford also gives such charity.”<sup>224</sup>

Another publication, *Der groyser kundes*, or *The Big Prankster*, offered an editorial cartoon weighing in on the Ford advertising controversy. The satirical weekly newspaper began in 1909 and continued through to 1927, offering criticism of Cahan, Vladeck, and the *Forward*. Published by Jacob Marinoff’s Jewish Publishing and Advertising Company, “for fun, humor and satire,” *Der groyser kundes* was clearly not absent of commercial imperatives. Although it contained no shortage of advertising, the small weekly offered an independent left critique of the Jewish Socialist leadership and its journal. While even the first issues caricatured Cahan and leaders of the SP, the cartoons through the 1920s offered consistent criticism of the *Forward*’s

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<sup>224</sup> S.M. Melamed, “Mr. Henry Ford’s Ads,” *Courier*. Jan. 9, 1924, CFLPS reel 35, and Melamed, “Ford-Ward Celebrates Fifth Anniversary,” Jan. 4, 1924, CFLPS reel 35. Both cited in Jonathan Bekken, *Working Class Newspapers, Community and Consciousness in Chicago, 1880-1930*. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1992.

ties to money and power. For example, in one cartoon from 1922, the paper depicted Vladeck dusting off the coat of the *Forward*, (represented as a fat, wealthy capitalist donning a hat resembling the *Forward*'s ten story building at 175 East Broadway, which at that time dominated the lower Manhattan skyline) and Cahan lighting its cigar, while two servants labeled "literature" and "socialism" were on their knees, polishing the *Forward*'s shoes. In another, the cartoonist depicted Abraham Cahan walking a tightrope between Hester Street, the Lower East Side's commercial activity, and Wall Street.<sup>225</sup>

But *Der groyser kundes* did not only go after the "right." It also mocked the ongoing battles between the *Forward* and *Di frayhayt*. For example, one 1927 cartoon showed the *Forward* and the *Di frayhayt* going through each other's respective trash cans.<sup>226</sup> Providing a critical voice through humor, *Der groyser kundes* helped to sustain democratic discourse within New York's Jewish working class counterpublic as it was being feudalized by commercial interests, on the one hand, and the CP on the other.

### **Vladeck's Ethical Defense**

B.C. Vladeck was not blind to the irony of a socialist publication relying heavily on commercial funding. In order to rationalize the inherent contradictions, he worked to build an ethical approach to advertising and consumption that attempted to skirt the emerging tensions between labor, capital, and the working-class consumer. This strategy rested primarily on refusing advertising that promoted goods produced under excessively poor conditions by labor

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<sup>225</sup> *Der groyser kundes*, Jan. 25, 1924, 8. Microfilm Reel 15. Center for Research Libraries, Chicago; See, for example, *Der groyser kundes*, February 5, 1909, 4, 8, Microfilm Reel 1; *Der groyser kundes*. April 21, 1922, 8. Microfilm Reel 13; *Der groyser kundes*. March 25, 1927, 8. Microfilm Reel 16.

<sup>226</sup> *Der groyser kundes*. March 4, 1927, 7. Microfilm Reel 16.

unions. Instead of noting the inherent problems advertising poses within capitalist economies, Vladeck claimed to adhere to strict ethics in selling advertising space, refusing companies involved in labor disputes, and he wore this policy as a badge of pride. As he wrote to the socialist author George Bernard Shaw's secretary, in an effort to garner a contribution for the paper's 30th anniversary issue, "The *Forward* does not print any advertisement for concerns that are recorded as unfair to labour or rank patent medicines."<sup>227</sup>

Vladeck took this a step further, though, in a way that linked the Jewish community's ethnic concerns with broader critiques of global capitalism. In 1934, at the convention of the American Federation of Labor, Vladeck gave a rousing speech on the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism. This speech provided the basis for the beginning of the Labor Chest which ultimately raised \$100,000 to combat these forces.<sup>228</sup> At the same time, Vladeck helped to form the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), and became the Co-Chairman of the Joint Boycott Council, who promoted the boycott of German goods during the Third Reich.

This position put Vladeck at the forefront of defining a new left critique of consumption, at the height of the 1930s consumer's movement. Consumers Research (CR) and their more radical offshoot Consumers Union (CU) were working towards the passage of the Tugwell Bill, which would have restricted advertising to providing truthful product information, and prohibited the use of insinuation. As Inger Stole notes, CU, formed by workers striking at CR, "sought to link consumer issues with broader social concerns and showed a strong desire to cooperate with labor interests." In its premiere issue of *Consumer Union Reports* in May 1936, CU featured an

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<sup>227</sup> Vladeck to Miss Blanche Patch, n.d. Vladeck Papers, Reel 3, Correspondence Folder.

<sup>228</sup> "B. Charney Vladeck" Biographical Information. Vladeck Papers, Box Add.6, Folder 1.

article, “Consumers’ Goods Makers Unfair to Labor,” which included a list of companies facing complaints from unions.<sup>229</sup>

Vladeck’s Jewish socialism encouraged him to push the CU towards considering labor issues within a global context in light of the anti-worker and anti-Semitic policies under the Third Reich. As he wrote to CU,

Last Saturday I paid twenty-five cents for a copy of Consumers Union reports for June 1937 at the Conference of the American Labor Party. I was flabbergasted to find that the title page, featuring an exhibit of cameras and films, advertises Leica & Zeiss which are being imported from Germany. There is also an advertisement for Agfa Films which are manufactured in the United States, but according to our best information are controlled by German interests.

I have always assumed that the Consumers Union considers itself, if not an integral part of the Labor Movement, at least a sympathizer and co-worker. The American Labor Movement has gone on record four times within the last four years in favor of the boycott against German goods and services. So did the whole International Labor Movement.

I most emphatically protest against the Consumers Union not only breaking the boycott by recommending to its members the purchase of Nazi manufactured goods, but actually advertising these goods on the Title Page of its publication.<sup>230</sup>

Charles McGovern argues that the consumer’s movement was flawed in part because it did not take “the symbolic aspect of goods” that the ethnic working classes valued into account.<sup>231</sup> But here, the intersection of ethnicity and class prompted the Jewish labor movement to take a more proactive stance on advertising and consumer issues, while the CU’s insensitivity to Jewish concerns placed the mostly middle class movement at a distance from Yiddish speaking workers and their families.

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<sup>229</sup> Inger L. Stole, *Advertising on Trial: Consumer Activism and Corporate Public Relations in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 49-79; 80; 93.

<sup>230</sup> Vladeck to Consumers Union, Vladeck Papers, Reel 2, Folder “C” General.

<sup>231</sup> McGovern, *Sold American*, 216.



Like many within the consumer's movement, however, Vladeck did not believe that advertising was necessarily misleading for consumers, or bad for workers and the economy. Rather, he argued that advertising was a way to help union workers by promoting products made by union labor. He explained to an unfriendly crowd in a 1932 debate on the merits of Communism,

Let me say something about advertising. There is a baker's union in New York City. This baker's union is a small union, which was built up by the good will of the Jewish immigrants and workers in New York. This union can exist only if people buy bread manufactured by the union people...The *Forward* is the only newspaper that does not carry non-union bread advertising.<sup>232</sup>

For the *Forward*, the battle between labor and capital was not a zero-sum game. Advertising could play an intermediary role, encouraging laborers to patronize union shops and companies, and build a worker identity through consumer practices.

Evidence suggests, however, that the *Forward* did not always adhere to this standard. Labor organizations sometimes registered their objections to ads in the paper. The Label Committee of the Allied Printing Trades, for example, wrote to Vladeck to call attention to ads for R.J. Reynolds' Camel cigarettes. "This firm is opposed to organized labor, and has refused on several occasions to enter negotiations with officials from the Tobacco Workers Union." The Tobacco Workers, in the meantime, were calling on trade unionists to purchase union made cigarettes only.<sup>233</sup> In this instance, the *Forward* was obstructing union boycott efforts.

In 1936, Vladeck wrote to James O'Neal of the socialist periodical *The New Leader* against charges that appeared in *Der tog*, or *The Day*. The rival publication had declared that "the

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<sup>232</sup> Transcript of "Debate: Resolved: That the Communist Party is the Only Party Fighting in the Interest of the Working Class," Brooklyn, New York. November 2, 1932, 51-2. Vladeck Papers, Reel 12, Speeches Folder.

<sup>233</sup> James Redmond to Vladeck, n.d. Vladeck Papers, Reel 11, Miscellaneous Unions Folder.

*Forward* ‘accepts advertising indiscriminately.’” Vladeck vociferously defended against these charges, and attacked the *Day*:

Not a week passes during which the *Forward* does not refuse advertising amounting to hundreds of dollars or thousands of dollars because there is some objection to it on the part of organized labor...To my knowledge, the only advertising which *The Day* rejected are those of May’s Department Store in Brooklyn-- the store which [Socialist leader Norman] Thomas picketed. All the other scab advertising is appearing as usual.<sup>234</sup>

The most public criticism of the *Forward*’s practices in soliciting advertising came with the publication of George Seldes’ *Lords of the Press* (1939), published following Vladeck’s death. In his chapter on the *Forward*, Seldes alleged that the paper accepted ads from corporations whose workers were on strike. He wrote, “despite lip service to socialism, Cahan and his paper have taken the road to reaction...Worse yet, the *Forward* has been commercialized. It publishes the usual bad medicine ads and other advertising and it has accepted the ads of corporations whose union men were on strike.”<sup>235</sup>

Leon Arkin of the *Forward*’s Boston edition and a personal friend of Seldes’, wrote to the journalist asking for him to provide evidence of such transgressions. Seldes failed to substantiate the claims adequately, pointing only towards moments where the socialist publication had supported the more conservative elements of the labor movement. Arkin told Alexander Kahn, Vladeck’s successor as the *Forward*’s general manager, that Seldes was “trying to dodge the issue of the *Forward* accepting advertisements from Corporations whose Union Men were on strike. Together with his letter he sent me a copy of a report made to him by a research worker and you can very well identify that his research worker is a died-in-wool Communist.”<sup>236</sup>

<sup>234</sup> Vladeck to James O’Neal, March 6, 1936. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Advertising Folder.

<sup>235</sup> George Seldes, *Lords of the Press* (New York: Julian Messner, Inc, 1939), 106.

<sup>236</sup> Leon Arkin to Alexander Kahn, Feb. 24, 1939. Forward Association Papers, Box 5, Folder 68. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

That same year, Joseph Jacobs-- now under contract to provide all merchandising services at the *Forward*-- acted on behalf of the General Food Corporation when the Jewish Labor Committee threatened a boycott. The JLC believed the company was importing smoked fish from Nazi Germany. A representative of the company contacted Jacobs proclaiming innocence and asking for assistance. He wrote,

There is nothing to the complaint. We are not doing business with Germany. The shipment of smoked fish referred to was sent over by the North Sea Fisheries, a branch of an English company, Unilever, operating in Germany. It was their idea that we might be able to handle smoked fish but they have been advised we are not interested.<sup>237</sup>

Jacobs promptly wrote to Joseph Tenenbaum of the JLC, explaining that the General Foods Corporation was “a concern which has not only been advertising in the Jewish publications for more than twenty years, but which has also, on many occasions, manifested a sincere and decided friendliness towards the Jewish people.” It was not that the Committee was wrong to be upset were the allegations true, but Jacobs stood by his client, arguing that they were not. “The firm has nothing to conceal—nor would it want to,” Jacobs wrote. “The shipment to which you referred was something which was explained very definitely in Mr. Gibson’s letter to you. Naturally, you cannot prevent people from sending merchandise to you—nor can you control the manner in which they ship it. I am quite sure you can see this matter in its true light.” After “thoroughly investigating” the matter, Tenenbaum declared that the company would not be boycotted.<sup>238</sup> While the General Food Corporation may have rightly been vindicated, the importance of maintaining a positive relationship with a client was paramount. The *Forward’s*

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<sup>237</sup> JLC to Joseph Jacobs, 1939. Forward Association Papers, Box 5, Folder 68.

<sup>238</sup> Joseph Jacobs to Joseph Tenenbaum, 1939. Forward Association Papers, Box 5, Folder 68; Joseph Tenenbaum to Joseph Jacobs, 1939. Forward Association, Box 5, Folder 68.

role as a vehicle for the Jewish labor movement would have to strike a balance with the demands of national advertisers in a complex, global political economy.

Vladeck's and advertising manager Henry Greenfield's approach to garnering advertising had, by the time of Vladeck's death, institutionalized ad revenue at the *Forward* as absolutely essential. As the leading foreign language newspaper in the United States, the *Forward* helped to produce a consensus around the necessity of advertising throughout the Yiddish press. While the *Forward* increasingly relied on national advertising, its ideological competitors were also in search of revenue from commercial interests. In 1927, *Di frayhayt* claimed, "Thousands of prosperous Jewish-Americans depend on the *Freiheit* (sic) each day, with complete confidence, to direct them to Real Estate, Investments and Business Opportunities. These people represent the greatest concentrated wealth in Greater New York, with unlimited buying power." While the *New York Times* assumed Socialist "exhilaration" over the Communist's hypocrisy, they applauded *Di frayhayt*'s pragmatism, ironically similar to Vladeck's.

The 'concentrated wealth' of New York is perfectly willing to avail itself of a profitable advertising medium even if it is one dedicated to the destruction of wealth. And the *Freiheit* (sic) is willing to quote rates to concentrated wealth until such a time as communism is ready to destroy all wealth. It would be absurd to suppose that one of the inducements offered by the *Freiheit* (sic) is a guarantee of exemption to all its advertisers against the time when the Communist State sets out to confiscate all private possessions.<sup>239</sup>

Some other newspapers also contained significantly higher volumes of advertising than the *Forward*. In March 1934, for example, the *Forward* had only approximately one-third the advertising lineage as the *Day* and the *Morning Journal*. Further, while the *Forward* dominated the Yiddish newspaper market in New York and in aggregate throughout North America, there

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<sup>239</sup> "Communists Endorse Business as Usual," in *New York Times*. July 7, 1927, 24.

were particular cities where other newspapers enjoyed greater circulation, forcing local editions into a tough competition for advertising revenue. For example, *Der tog* was actually more popular than the *Forward* in Montreal, as “many people of the middle classes and even working classes, who [had] read before the *Forward*, [had] gone over to the *Tag* (sic).”<sup>240</sup>

While the *Forward* was widely criticized because of its commercial nature, it was not the most commercial of the Yiddish language papers, nor was it necessarily the most commercial of the Jewish left press. Commercialization in the *Forward* was the most controversial because the paper served as the primary representation of Jewish working class counterpublic. Across the board, those representations shifted due to commercial pressures. As Vladeck and the *Forward* leadership chose to bind the newspaper’s success to a strategy of relying on national advertising, Jewish-American life and the U.S. labor movement writ large became increasingly interwoven with the emerging consumer society. The labor at the newspaper produced this new ideology at the *Forward*, which increasingly became thought of as a commodity itself due to the capitalist logic of the *Forward*’s operations.

### **The Commodification of Labor at the *Forward***

The labor force within the Yiddish press and other cultural institutions of New York’s Jewish working class counterpublic understood the productive nature of their work from their inception in the late 19th century. In fact, it might be argued that the Jewish labor movement in the U.S. was founded by culture industry workers-- the primary unions involved in starting the

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<sup>240</sup> March 1934 Advertising Lineage. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Forward Association Folder; Letter from Halpern to Vladeck. September 7, 1928. Vladeck Papers, Reel 3, Correspondence Folder. Vladeck denied that this was the case in a letter on September 11, 1928, Reel 3, Correspondence Folder. However the numbers actually fell, though, it is clear that the *Forward* faced competition for readers and advertisers within some of its local markets.

United Hebrew Trades (UHT) was the Hebrew Typographical Workers' Union, the Hebrew Actor's Union, and the Hebrew Choral Singer's Union.<sup>241</sup> But as the institutions of the Jewish working class counterpublic changed, so did the nature of work within those institutions. In the case of the *Forward*, the advertising plan and increasingly complex business arrangements created new pressures for new kinds of workers.

The demands to attract advertising most directly affected the "out of town" agents. Even as the plan was relatively successful in the 1920s, these employees struggled with Vladeck over disputes regarding compensation. In 1927, one agent in Montreal secured an account for 50 insertions of 30 lines each over the course of the year in the Sunday edition with the popular Zuckerman's restaurant. "The Zuckerman's restaurant is the oldest and most popular here in the center of the city," he told Vladeck, "and all other restaurants will follow suit with ad's (sic), I am sure, when they see Zuckerman's in your paper."<sup>242</sup>

The agent told Vladeck that he was "not encouraged" in his work for the paper, because they did not seem particularly interested in getting advertising from Montreal after the *Forward* had failed to give him his commission upfront. "How can you expect a man going around and wasting his time...without any remuneration, in the hope of being paid at some later date. I got my commission from the other papers right away: this is my only means of existence." He demanded at least fifty percent of what he was owed immediately, or he would "have to look for something else to keep body and soul together...I am very sorry that my financial circumstances compel me to write you in this way: but I have to feed a wife and four children etc." Vladeck did

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<sup>241</sup> Morris U. Schappes, "The Political Origins of the United Hebrew Trades, 1888," in *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 5 (1977): 20.

<sup>242</sup> Letter from Halpern to Vladeck. September 7, 1928. Vladeck Papers, Reel 3, Correspondence Folder.

not see the need to meet the agent's demands. He responded, saying that it was "absolutely impossible for us to change our rules," refusing "to pay commission before collection for reasons it would take too long to enumerate."<sup>243</sup>

Similarly, a Boston classified solicitor wrote a lengthy, *chutzpah*--filled letter to Vladeck the next month, appealing to him "for fair play and justice." The employee, claiming to have done excellent work, was earning 15 dollars per week. He had asked for an advance of five dollars, but received only three. Leon Arkin told him, "Your salary is based upon what you produce for the classified department." The young man protested to Vladeck,

I am the only boy in the office (my age is 21) and it has been my duty to make myself generally efficient and useful. I spent 65% of my time doing just that! When I called that fact to Mr. Arkin's attention he told me deliberately that there was always only one boy in my place and that my predecessor accomplished much more than I... That was not so! The previous year there were two men on my job receiving, combined, \$42.00 a week... Together their total business did not exceed mine by more than 33 1/3%.

He went on to describe several hostile interactions with Arkin. "[H]e yells and froths at us as if we were dogs." Asking Vladeck to intervene, the solicitor announced, "That is not fair and I object! I rebel! And I will fight, if necessary, with everything I have...and I intend to see this matter justified. Now-- do I get a square deal or don't I?"<sup>244</sup>

It was, however, Arkin's job to keep his office's expenses low. In 1928, Vladeck congratulated Julius Levitt, Arkin's equivalent in Los Angeles, on his "splendid" record for the first six months of the year after he achieved "an increase in over three thousand dollars in

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<sup>243</sup> Letter from Halpern to Vladeck, September 14, 1928. Vladeck Papers, Reel 3, Correspondence Folder; Letter from Vladeck to Halpern, September 25, 1928. Vladeck Papers, Reel 3, Correspondence Folder.

<sup>244</sup> Theo R. Grossman to Vladeck, October 21, 1928. Vladeck Papers. Reel 4, Boston Folder.

advertising without an increase in expenses,” signaling an increase in worker productivity.<sup>245</sup> Just as in the business world, managers were rewarded for cost-saving measures.

As the nation plunged into the Great Depression and advertising revenue dried up, the commodity nature of the *Forward's* own labor force became more apparent. The economic downturn in the early 1930s sparked a crisis in the advertising industry, which had just enjoyed a decade of growth and prosperity. Advertisers began to tighten their belts, and there were 12 to 15 percent decreases in advertising lineage and revenue between 1929 and 1930. By the 1932, U.S. advertising agencies were cutting staff, salaries and vacation time.<sup>246</sup>

At the *Forward* ad revenues peaked in 1932, but Vladeck's and Greenfield's plan to rely on local editions was becoming less and less profitable. This added to the stress on the *Forward's* local managers. Julius Levitt, the manager at the Los Angeles office, wrote to Vladeck with concern about the competition he would face as a new Jewish publication was starting in the city. “This will of course mean a more strenuous effort on my part to keep up the standing of this office. But where I can get the additional strength I do not know. I feel that my strength is on the verge of breaking.” He noted that he would be more successful if he had “proper additional help in the office.”<sup>247</sup>

The Chicago office, the center of the midwestern and western editions, in particular found itself in financial straits and became a burden on the entire enterprise. In 1932, the Chicago edition was bringing in \$106,248.27 in net advertising revenues, with its Western counterparts attracting an additional \$38,000. In combination with their circulation revenue, the *Forward's*

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<sup>245</sup> Vladeck to Julius Levitt, August 17, 1928. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Employees Folder.

<sup>246</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 286-7.

<sup>247</sup> Levitt to Vladeck, February 5, 1934. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 2, Folder 1.



enterprise in the West generated \$377,417.22. But with operating expenses at these newspapers totaling \$374,777.56, their excess was negligible at only about four thousand dollars.<sup>248</sup>

The advertising industry's collapse hit the Chicago *Forward* hard. In 1932, Chicago's payroll totaled \$196,057.16. In 1933, it fell to \$160,920.29. The deepest cuts occurred in the advertising department, which went from \$8,318.28 to \$4,837.90. A downward trend continued, as the entire national advertising industry suffered during the Depression decade. The Chicago edition ran at a financial loss to the *Forward* over the course of the 1930s, costing a total of \$96,000. By 1940, the edition ran a deficit of \$26,000 and faced a projected loss of more than \$30,000 the following year.<sup>249</sup>

In November 1941, several years after Vladeck's death and just prior to the U.S. entry into World War II, the *Forward* leadership stated that the Chicago edition was in a state of crisis. Advertising business was in decline across the Yiddish language press. In addition, the American Publishing Association had reported that advertising business had declined in the English language press by 40 percent since 1929, and that further declines were expected. Leaders proposed that the Chicago edition be printed in New York and shipped by train to the Western cities, dating the paper one day ahead, leading to significant layoffs, particularly in the mechanical department. They noted,

we will not do them any favor if we hesitate and wait. The condition we are in is not a temporary one. We are suffering from a progressive ailment. We will be worse off next year and worse the year after. If you should not have the courage to face realities today you will do it a year later or two years later. But you will have to do it. I didn't invent this plan and I didn't bring it about. I...discussed it with Vladeck [years ago]. At that time we

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<sup>248</sup> Jewish Daily Forward Chicago and Western Editions Statement of Profit and Loss Year Ending December 31, 1933. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 5, Folder 2.

<sup>249</sup> Record of Cash Disbursements, Vladeck Papers. Box Add. 5, Folder 2; Chicago report, November 1941 meeting. Forward Association Papers, Box 4, Folder 54.

did not have such losses, our disease was not so visible, so we waited. But now everybody can see it and two years from now you will be blaming your manager for delaying it. Then again, now there is a better chance for people to readjust themselves. Whatever they can do, they can do it better now. There is a shortage of labor. There is a chance in a small business. But when the war is over, the chances will be less. You will not do these men a favor by waiting and delaying.<sup>250</sup>

This management approach did not only impact those in the “out of town” editions, but all workers within the *Forward* enterprise. Just prior to his death, Vladeck further streamlined the procurement of advertising and began cooperation with its rival papers. The *Forward* entered into a new contract with its former agent, Joseph Jacobs. Jacobs would work for the *Forward* through a joint venture with two of its competitors-- the *Day* and the *Jewish Journal and Daily News*. Jacobs, relieved of his merchandising duties, would be paid at a rate of 20 percent commission. By the time of the Jewish holidays that fall, Jacobs had attained nearly 90 percent of the national advertising for the paper. In 1939, with Alexander Kahan as the manager, Jacobs recommended major overhauls, creating a Merchandising and Promotional Department requiring a secretary, stenographer, two copy men, a translator, an office and errand boy, six merchandising men, and a Jewish artist. These positions were expected to mandate a payroll of \$27,456 and incur further expenses of approximately \$35,000 annually, to be shared by the three newspapers.<sup>251</sup>

With the *Forward* and its rivals facing difficulty, Jacobs was willing by 1940 to agree to a compensation package that paid him only for ads he secured in exchange for the exclusive handling of national advertising and merchandising, eliminating the work of the local agents and

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Contract between Jacobs, Jewish Day and the Jewish Forward, Feb 26 1938. Forward Association Papers. Box 3, Folder 39.; Memo Re: Joseph Jacobs, March 3, 1938. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Business Folder; Approximate Expense Involved for Merchandising and Promotional Department, July 13, 1939. Forward Association Papers, Box 3, Folder 39.

giving him full authority over his staff. “True, the element of risk should not fall on me,” Jacobs told the publishers. “I should always be in the position of receiving compensation for work which I have done. Yet, appreciating your circumstances, I am willing to make an arrangement whereby there will be no risk to you whatsoever.”<sup>252</sup>

The advertising department wasn’t the only area that saw dramatic shifts in the 1930s. In late 1932, Vladeck wrote to the president of the Hebrew American Typographical Workers Union, which represented the printers, asking him to make concessions “with or without an official committee of the union, for the purposes of disseminating possible cooperation of the part of your union-- to sustain the *Forward* in a position of security.” The following month, Vladeck issued a notice that the Board found it necessary to reduce wages of some employees.<sup>253</sup>

The difficult economic conditions of the Depression era also placed considerable pressure on the *Forward*’s contracted distributors. Criticism of the *Forward* erupted as management worked to save as much money in distribution costs as possible. Newsdealers accused the *Forward* of hypocrisy, and for violating its self-proclaimed principles of socialism, as they were allowed only one out of the five cents for every copy sold, and then not were not allowed returns on unsold copies.

The *Jewish Daily Forward*, which should set an example to capitalistic publishers because of its socialistic-- communistic leanings, does just the opposite. The paper would increase its circulation materially if it would treat newsdealers as human beings-- as workingmen! Newsdealers demand of the *Jewish Daily Forward* a three cent price for its five cent Sunday edition and FULL RETURNS.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Joseph Jacobs to the Publishers of the New York City Yiddish Newspapers, May 13, 1940. Forward Association Papers, Box 3, Folder 40.

<sup>253</sup> Vladeck to President of the Hebrew American Typographical Union, December 14, 1932. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Employee Folder; Vladeck to Local 58, January 13, 1932. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Employee Folder.

<sup>254</sup> “Daily Forward Fails to Live Up to Its Own Teachings.” Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 5, Folder 2.

Such demands began to interfere with readers' access to the paper. One *Forward* reader in Philadelphia changed his subscription to receive the paper only on Sunday in 1934 “[d]ue to present business conditions.” Eventually he stopped receiving the paper altogether, because it was not profitable for the distributor to deliver the paper on Sundays only. He sent a letter to the Philadelphia office, which eventually made its way to Vladeck in New York, saying

The stores in our neighborhood do not sell the *Jewish Daily Forward* so naturally these people can't see their way clear to purchase the *Forward* every day must also do without the Sunday edition because it isn't profitable enough for the carrier to deliver the Sunday edition...I think steps should be taken immediately to either replace this carrier or sell the paper to the stores in the various neighborhoods and let the people who want to buy the paper be able to do so.

Not surprisingly, then, Vladeck seems to have had little sympathy for the distribution companies or their employees. When the *Forward* office manager in Newark expressed concern about a potential strike at Metropolitan News Services, Vladeck determined not to get involved.<sup>255</sup>

By 1936, Vladeck sought to manage without these outside contractors. “[The Metropolitan's] circulation can be taken care of by our delivery at no extra expense,” he argued, “giving us a net profit of over a hundred and fifty dollars a week. When added to our present income, it would insure the delivery against loss even under present circumstances and even at an average drop of circulation for the next two years.” As they did with their merchandising services, the *Forward* joined with the *Day* to create the Newspaper Sales Company “to establish and maintain an economical method of selling and delivering their newspapers to the dealers, newspaper stands and newspaper vendors” throughout the New York area.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Attention: Circulation Manager, January 15, 1934. Vladeck Papers Box Add 2, Folder 1; B. Cohen to Vladeck, Sept. 28, 1928; Vladeck to B. Cohen, Oct 3, 1928, Vladeck Papers. Reel 4, Employees Folder.

<sup>256</sup> Pertaining to the Delivery, Vladeck Papers. Box Add 5, Folder 2; Agreement between the Forward Association and the Day, 1936. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Business Folder.

The writers were not immune to the paper's business operational logic. In 1934, Vladeck analyzed the *Forward's* editorial staff, noting that they could reduce expenses by cutting the \$20,000 annual budget spent on purchasing articles and features from outside sources.

“[T]his is the only amount which could be reduced by getting more production from members of the regular staff. There is an opinion that at least 17 members of the staff are not producing enough...

It is possible that by getting these members of the staff to be more productive that contributors' expense could be cut into half...

By introducing this rule and by managing assignments in such a manner as to keep the members of the staff reasonably busy, between fifteen to eighteen thousand dollars could be saved this year. On the basis of the editorial expense of 1933, with the suggestions here given, the editorial budget for 1934 should be a little less than \$230,000 or at the rate of \$19,000 a month.<sup>257</sup>

Vladeck's income as a manager was also dependent on the willingness of businesses to buy ad space. Although Seldes argued that, during this time period, the wages of the big editors increased regularly, this was only half true. In 1922, Vladeck reported a gross income of \$8,233 to the Internal Revenue Service for the 1921-22 fiscal year, when his and Greenfield's advertising strategy was first implemented. The following year, that figure increased by over 25 percent to \$10,406.50. By 1930-31, Vladeck was earning \$13,780. Like other *Forward* employees, though, Vladeck's salary decreased with advertising revenues. In 1934-35, Vladeck's gross income was \$10,511 gross income, and he netted only \$6,436-- less than he made in

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<sup>257</sup> “Pertaining to Editorial Budget,” January 27, 1934. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 5, Folder 2.

1922-23.<sup>258</sup> Thus, Vladeck maintained, to some extent, a communal ethos in managing his non-profit paper, never asking others to take a hit when he would not take one himself.

This, however, was not enough for the *Forward* writers. In response to the commercialization of journalism throughout the country, and the disastrous impact of the Depression throughout the news industry, news workers throughout the country were joining the newly formed Newspaper Guild in the mid-1930s. The *Forward* staff were no exception. In 1936, as one *Forward* worker wrote to Carl Randau of the Newspaper Guild of New York, expressing the inadequacies of labor representation through the Jewish Writers' Union (JWU) at the paper. "Our situation," wrote Randau,

is an uncomfortable one. We are members of a union-- and we are not in the real sense. The union which is recognized in the Editorial Department does not have any official relations with us, and in a sense we are step-children. The sooner this is settled, the better for all concerned.

Further, the conditions under which we work require quite some improvement. We have been patient in view of the previous situation. Now, we feel that not a moment ought to be lost.<sup>259</sup>

By May 1938, workers had won representation through the Guild, officially becoming part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the movement that was remaking working class politics nationwide. The *Forward* now operated within a new social and institutional milieu. No longer the voice of an ethnic labor movement, *Forward* writers were ethnic workers within a diverse, national historical bloc. These conditions were produced, in part,

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<sup>258</sup> Seldes, *Lords*, 106; Individual Income Tax Returns, 1922-1935; Vladeck to Palmer, October 27, 1938. Vladeck Papers. Box Add. 5, Folder 9. Vladeck notes in one letter to the New York State Income Tax Bureau that his salary increased at some point during his tenure from \$65 per week to \$200 per week in order to help him pay out of pocket for incurred travel expenses. However, Vladeck's net income, taking expenditures into account, still rose and fell similarly through this period.

<sup>259</sup> Speiling to Carl Randau, July 29, 1936. New York Newspaper Guild, Box 10, Folder 18. Tamiment Library, NYU. In chapter six I discuss, in detail, the conflicts that emerged as the Newspaper Guild organized the Yiddish and Jewish labor press.

by the contradictions embedded in a commercialized labor press. At the same time, the *Forward* had produced its working class readership as a commodity audience, while also helping to sustain it as a vibrant, political community.

### **Commodity or Community?**

One of the major developments in mass media, as theorized by Dallas Smythe, has been the commodification of audiences in conjunction with the rise of the advertising industry. Smythe argued that television content, and commercial content generally since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, acts as “free lunch,” luring viewers to their screens and readers to their papers. Audiences and readerships are therefore simultaneously produced as commodities to be sold to advertisers, while doing the labor of making advertising time valuable. Media firms use programming to construct audiences, while advertisers pay media companies to access those audiences. As Vincent Mosco explains it, “The process of commodification thoroughly integrates the media industries into the total capitalist economy not primarily by creating ideologically saturated products but by producing audiences, *en masse* and in specific demographically desirable forms, for advertisers.”<sup>260</sup>

This requires the production of “immanent commodities,” commodities that grow out of the need to produce other commodities. A prime example is gathering data on audience characteristics, exemplified by Eileen Meehan’s study of the A.C. Nielsen ratings. The commodification process in the media-advertiser-audience relationship requires measurement techniques, monitoring, and ratings systems. Thus, the rise of marketing research accompanied

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<sup>260</sup> Dallas Smythe, “Communications: Blindspots of Western Marxism,” in *Counterclockwise: Perspectives on Communication*, ed. Thomas Guback, 271; Mosco, *Political Economy*, 137.

the rise of mass media. Through the 1920s, advertising agencies in the U.S. employed techniques of basic market research, compiling indexes of buying power in various areas and quantifying brand preferences at retail stores. In order to better target advertising to consumer preferences, researchers segmented audiences by class and occupation, but did not generally “explore the subjective qualities of the masses.”<sup>261</sup>

This strategy worked well with the *Forward's* specialized audience, and the *Forward* adopted these emerging methods, studying the reading and buying habits of the Jewish working class. Under Vladeck's management, the *Forward* gathered information about its readership and produced them as a valuable commodity. While they did not discuss psychological motivations, as would become common in advertising research in the postwar decades, the *Forward* did introduce to national advertisers ideas of particularity around culture, paving the way for “narrowcasting” and market segmentation that would come to define advertising beginning in the 1960s.<sup>262</sup>

The Audit Bureau of Circulation's (ABC) figures were used to set advertising rates and deduct circulation numbers for unpaid subscriptions. Vladeck understood the importance of maintaining high circulation data in the ABC. In August 1928, for example, Vladeck claimed that the circulation numbers should have been 2,000 higher than those reported. “Every subscriber should be paid in advance,” he wrote, “and it should be the business of our agents to watch out for delinquencies.” In order to assume greater authority over the circulation figures, Vladeck petitioned the body to include one representative of the foreign language press on its board of

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<sup>261</sup> Mosco, *Political Economy*, 142; Eileen R. Meehan, *Why TV is Not our Fault?* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 75.

<sup>262</sup> This move towards segmentation is discussed in Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, 298-309.



directors. “[Y]ou always have in mind the different fields of activity in which the press and advertising profession exert their activities,” he noted. “Is not the foreign language press a distinct field?”<sup>263</sup>

Circulation data was just the tip of the iceberg. As Oscar Gandy notes, the production of these commodities often depends on the formation of racial identities through the use of ‘geodemographics,’ locating commodity audiences at the nexus of race and space.

The *Forward* began to do its own research on the Jewish market during the Depression years, offering more specific data to potential clients. In 1931, the *Forward* issued a detailed report on the consumption patterns within New York’s Jewish population for use by advertisers. According to the report, the *Jewish Daily Forward* would provide an excellent venue for advertisers for multiple reasons. First, there was the substantial Jewish population. With a map of the New York metropolitan area detailing the Jewish populations of 32 communities, the report noted that “in many of those sections the Jews are concentrated and are the dominant majority, both as consumers and store owners. In others the percentage varies from 2% to 53% of the total.” Second, the *Forward* demonstrated that Jews represented 30 percent of the market share of all food expenditures in the region, spending over \$300 million. Third, the organized nature of the Jewish community, and particularly Jewish cultural life, was seen as a reason that the *Forward* would be a good place to advertise. “The progressive element of the Jewish community has built up the most active cultural life to be found anywhere in America. The *Forward* carries the advertising and reviews of all important plays along Broadway, concerts, recitals, dance recitals,

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<sup>263</sup> Vladeck to Teitelman, August 13, 1928. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Business Folder; Vladeck to Audit Bureau of Circulation, October 3, 1928. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Business Folder.

readings, etc. The large percentage of Jewish patronage of all cultural events is a well known feature of New York life.”<sup>264</sup>

This culture, according to the report, had helped to build the basis for a population of reliable consumers. “There are approximately 750,000 Jewish men and women gainfully employed in New York City...The vast majority of Jewish workers are unionized.” They noted,

The large majority of the approximately 2,000,000 Jews in the Metropolitan area are in the skilled labor class, in wholesale or retail trade and in the professional classes. Family expenditures in a population so diversified vary according to residence districts, ranging from \$1,500 per family per year in one district to \$12,000 per family in another.

In order to meet the needs of advertisers, the *Forward* incorporated sophisticated methods for gathering marketing information, including the state of the given product in the Jewish field, the potential competition, the dealer and jobber attitude, the consumer attitude, possible sales resistance, and whether or not the product would need to be adapted for the Jewish market, before recommending a merchandising plan.<sup>265</sup>

As the *Forward*'s budget tightened, the newspaper continued such efforts under the direction of Joseph Jacobs following Vladeck's death. Jacobs was particularly concerned with the consumption habits of Jewish women in order to provide the best marketing information to their advertisers. In order to bolster ad buys for issues during the beginning of the week, the advertising manager explained, “The Jewish housewife does a lot of shopping in the beginning of the week. This is especially true since grocery stores have been forced to close at 11 o'clock

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<sup>264</sup> Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., *Communication and Race: A Structural Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 121-22; Standard Market Data issued by Jewish Daily Forward for the New York Market. October 15, 1931. Forward Association Papers, Box 12, Folder 164.

<sup>265</sup> Standard Market Data issued by Jewish Daily Forward for the New York Market. October 15, 1931. Forward Association Papers, Box 12, Folder 164.

on Sunday morning. The meals at the end of the week are much more likely to be festive and thus require fewer canned products.”<sup>266</sup>

By the end of 1939, the *Forward* had commissioned Ross Federal Research Corporation (RFRC) to undertake an extensive study of the paper’s readership for nearly \$1500. RFRC hired Yiddish-speaking men to conduct field work at newsstands selling the *Jewish Daily Forward* and interview those who purchased the journal. The firm determined to survey 3,000 readers, or three percent of the paper’s circulation in order to get statistically accurate data. “In allocating the interviews, consideration will be given to the breakdown of your circulation by the five New York City Boroughs, as outlined in your most recent ABC statement.” The company developed a questionnaire in order to determine the effectiveness of newsstand sale; frequency of readership; readership of other Jewish and English language papers; employment status and income; and other information. The data was to be “prepared for machine tabulation,” and maps were to be created showing where readers live, block by block.<sup>267</sup>

With the help of this increasingly sophisticated data, the *Forward* would further its merchandising services, explaining the nature of the Jewish market to advertisers. In 1940, Joseph Jacobs produced a pamphlet for food and grocery marketers, explaining Jewish dietary laws and practices and offering the Yiddish press as a viable advertising vehicle. As they had been in the early 1920s, advertisers were assured that “The Yiddish press is dedicated to and serves those Jews who have established themselves in this new homeland and who today give undivided allegiance to the United States.”<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Joshua Epstein to Joseph Jacobs, October 25, 1939. Forward Association Papers, Box 3, Folder 39.

<sup>267</sup> Ross Federal Research Corporation Presentation to the Jewish Daily Forward, November 13, 1939. Forward Association Papers, Box 3, Folder 39.

<sup>268</sup> “The Jewish Market.” Forward Association Papers, Box 3, Folder 40.

The commodification of the *Forward's* readership was an internal contradiction for the newspaper, as it continued its role as a community-building institution. At the 1922 convention of the ACWA, Abraham Cahan spoke of his newspaper and its relationship to the people it served. "We mean to help every bona fide trade union organization... That is the object of the *Forward*. It was established with the pennies and the rings and the watches of workmen and working girls. It is not a private industry any more than your bank is a private industry. It belongs to the working people."<sup>269</sup> Changes within the business and advertising departments by this point, though, had severely altered the relationship between the *Forward* and its readers. Rather than maintaining operating costs through contributions, the *Forward* ran on advertising dollars. This allowed the Forward Association to continue to give substantial contributions back to labor and community organizations, as well as other progressive publications. Like labor conditions at the *Forward*, the budget for these contributions were largely dependent on fluctuations within the advertising industry.

The *Forward's* primary beneficiary was the SP, "including all its branches, activities and auxiliaries." However, they continued to spend the most within New York. In 1936, the Forward Association proposed that \$20,000 of its \$30,000 budget for donations go to the SP. In 1935, Vladeck reminded SP leader Norman Thomas, "If you check up on the Socialist vote in New York City by districts, you'll find that the *Forward* is still the backbone of the Socialist vote. It would be hard to state a percentage but my conservative is that at least 65% of the Socialist strength on Election Day comes from the *Forward*."<sup>270</sup> While Vladeck often presented his paper

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<sup>269</sup> Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Chicago. May 8-13, 1922, 339. Abraham Cahan was referring to the Amalgamated Bank, which was started by the ACWA and played an important role in financing the *Forward* and other labor efforts, particularly within the Jewish community.

<sup>270</sup> Proposed Budget of Contributions for 1936. Vladeck Papers. Forward Association Folder, Reel 4; Vladeck to Norman Thomas, January 7, 1935. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 2, Folder 3.

as a Jewish rather than a labor paper to advertisers, he made sure that Thomas understood the importance of his journal to the party, until it endorsed of FDR through the American Labor Party (ALP) in 1936.

In addition to aiding the SP, the *Forward* used its advertising revenue to support striking workers. Through the 1920s and into the 1930s, the newspaper maintained a unique relationship to its readership and the broader community. Rather than simply providing information, the *Forward* was an important institution in the lives of thousands of working class people, not only within New York's Jewish community, but throughout the country. Vladeck claimed that, between 1921 and 1926, the Forward Association had contributed over \$500,000 to labor and socialist causes, including \$5,000 towards relief for miners and their families during a 1926 strike.<sup>271</sup>

The *Forward's* dependence on advertising revenue, however, meant that this community support was contingent on the well being of the business community and the capitalist economy. The early years of the Depression, prior to the New Deal, witnessed a significant drop in the *Forward's* ability to assist other organizations. As advertising money dried up and unions found themselves in dire straits, the ethnic and labor press were hit harshly. Interestingly, English-language Socialist publications, such as the *New Leader*, turned to the *Forward* for financial support, even though the Yiddish publication would reach an ostensibly smaller market.

The unions indebted to us are down and out, and can give us nothing. Most of the *Forward* appropriation went to the printer as soon as it came in, but we were so far behind in our account with him previously, that he is absolutely justified in making his demand.

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<sup>271</sup>Vladeck to Miss Blanche Patch, n.d. Vladeck Papers. Reel 3, Correspondence Folder.

Last summer the International Madison Bank was still in existence. To help tide us over the summer months we managed to borrow over \$1000.00 from them. This year we no longer have the International Bank to call upon for assistance. Although our circulation income has been comparatively good, our advertising and contribution income has been deplorably low...

We are counting on you as our last resort. Please do not fail us.<sup>272</sup>

Other publications, such as *The New Era*, the official publication of the SP in Los Angeles, sought the support of the *Forward* in order to continue. Asking for a donation, the editor wrote to Vladeck in 1931, explaining,

The *New Era* is the only Socialist newspaper on the coast. It has played and must play a big part in building up a powerful Socialist movement in California. But unless we get financial aid at once we will have to discontinue the paper...

We hope that the Forward Association will be able to help us with a five hundred dollar donation, which will clean up the remainder of the deficit and will leave us a little sum to work on...We cannot build a movement without a paper and unless we receive help we will be forced to suspend publication.<sup>273</sup>

Vladeck, in this instance though, was unable to extend the largesse of his organization, calling such a donation “completely out of the question.” “Because of the reduced budget,” he wrote, “and also because of the increased demands for support, we find our budget completely exhausted...”<sup>274</sup>

Difficulty continued in the following year, and contributions to organizations continued to suffer. Vladeck wrote to the head of the Philadelphia Labor Institute, denying the organization a thousand dollars that it had been counting on, “As the budget this year is only two-thirds of what it was last year, there was nothing left in the Emergency Fund, and there isn’t a thing that

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<sup>272</sup> Goldine Hillson to Vladeck, July 20, 1932. Vladeck Papers. Reel 8, New Leader Folder.

<sup>273</sup> Bunick to Vladeck, September 12, 1931. Vladeck Papers. Reel 1, “B” General Folder.

<sup>274</sup> Vladeck to Bunick, September 1931. Vladeck Papers. Reel 1, “B” General Folder.

can be done this year. I cannot tell you how sorry I am but I really see no way out of it.” In 1933, the *Forward* cut its budget of contributions by 50 percent from the previous year.<sup>275</sup>

This did not fully prevent the *Forward* from doing important work within New York or other cities, particularly as organizing efforts ratcheted up through the Roosevelt years. The *Forward* used its space to promote labor causes, helping to raise funds for charitable causes and promote benefit events. In one instance, the *Forward* offered free publicity for the Hebrew-American Typographical Union’s theater benefit, allowing them to raise “a substantial sum for our Emergency Fund to relieve our needy unemployed.” The *Forward* also worked with numerous unions, including the American Federation of Musicians Local 802 and the Hebrew Actors Union to raise money through performances to send poor children to summer camp in New York each year.<sup>276</sup>

The *Forward* could also help provide other forms of support for struggling workers. In 1935, for instance, the Boston office of the *Forward* ordered food for the relief of 1400 strikers at Colt Patent Firearms. As one leader noted in a letter to Vladeck, the donation was instrumental in saving the strike after workers had been out for seven weeks and all other organizations had exhausted their funds. The *Forward* could also use its political capital, urging, for example, AFL President William Green to meet with a committee of the Taxi Cab Drivers Union of Greater New York and grant them a charter.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Vladeck to Leof, February 26, 1932. Vladeck Papers, Reel 7, “L” General Folder; Vladeck to Shiplacoff, January 14, 1933. Vladeck Papers, Reel 9, “S” General Folder.

<sup>276</sup> Theodore Glass to Vladeck, December 19, 1932. Vladeck Papers, Reel 11, Miscellaneous Unions Folder; Vladeck to Kanavan, July 18, 1933. Vladeck Papers, Reel 11, Miscellaneous Union Folder.

<sup>277</sup> Daniel Hurley to Vladeck, Vladeck Papers. Box Add. 2, Folder 3; Vladeck to Green, May 2, 1934. Vladeck Papers. Box Add 2, Folder 2.

But despite the *Forward's* venture into serving many of the major cities outside of New York, the Big Apple remained its priority. The local editions existed primarily for commercial purposes. This became clear when, in 1933, Vladeck told the Jewish Labor Central Council in Toronto that its entire limited budget for contributions that year had to go to socialist and labor efforts within the paper's home city. The prioritization of New York garnered some criticism. For example, in 1931 the *Forward* raised money for the unemployed in Boston, but that money was allegedly redirected back to New York. As a representative of the Associated Jewish Philanthropies wrote, "In view of our own serious problem, there is very little justification for turning over funds raised here to relieve people in New York... It would seem to me from the point of view of the *Forward*, it would strengthen your local prestige if you announced on your Boston page that a certain proportion of the funds would be expanded for the relief of the unemployed in this community."<sup>278</sup>

Local communities found relying on content from New York and Chicago insufficient. For example, one representative of the Los Angeles Forward Association Auxiliary told Vladeck, "We are working hard on the 25th anniversary of the [Workmen's Circle] in Los Angeles. Publicity is necessary for big doings to stimulate interest among the members and to wind up a very poor membership campaign. We can read news from New York theaters, Chicago... doings, a quarter page house ad... besides the "regular" full page ad, etc. The copy for a history making two weeks, does not go in-- but one notice out of so many."<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Vladeck to A. Kirzner, February 20, 1933. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Forward General Folder; Associated Jewish Philanthropies to Vladeck, January 27, 1931. Vladeck Papers, Reel

<sup>279</sup> Sam Glass to Vladeck, March 1, 1934. Vladeck Papers. Box Add 2, Folder 2.



Still, readers preferred content from other cities to a large number of ads, the primary reason they had local editions at all. The business manager of the Los Angeles' Bakery and Confectionary Workers Local 453 wrote, "For many years we have been receiving a six page paper, and we did not expect much news in a six page paper, but lately since we are getting an eight page paper, we feel that instead of the advertisements appearing of mid-Western summer resorts appearing day in and day out, that the paper should be devoted to reprinting labor news from the New York City edition."<sup>280</sup>

These demands went beyond the capacity of the newspaper. Vladeck had always seen local editions as potential revenue streams first and movement centers second. Although helpful, *Forward* money and representation could not build a national labor movement alone. The role of labor unions-- particularly the ACWA and the ILGWU-- would be far more central to developing cultural and educational programs, bringing working class people together and providing a critical framework for understanding their social and political environment. These efforts will be the subject of the following chapter.

### **Conclusion: Commercialism and its Limits**

By the time of his death, Vladeck had overseen the transformation of the internal business at the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Guided by the principles of socialism and a philosophy of pragmatism, the newspaper was able to survive and, at points, thrive in the turbulent interwar decades. Unlike many other left-wing publications, the *Forward* was able to brave the economic crisis and political repression that immediately followed World War One, and withstand the

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<sup>280</sup> Bakery and Confectionary Workers to Vladeck, August 4, 1933. Vladeck Papers, Reel 11, Bakers and Confections Folder.

downturn that came with the Great Depression by 1932. Through these transformations, however, Jewish socialism came to take on a very different meaning. While in the early twentieth century, the *Forward* was a workers' paper written in Yiddish, it had become, by the New Deal era, a Yiddish language, Jewish paper that was sympathetic to workers.

This change was not solely due to the *Forward's* need to produce a commodity audience. Other important political and social changes were happening that brought Jewish identity to the fore, becoming more salient in the lives of many working class Jews than their proletarian status (which, by the Second World War, was also beginning to shift). The rise of Nazism and the Hitler-Stalin pact prompted organizations like Vladeck's Jewish Labor Committee to consider issues increasingly through a Jewish lens, even as they became integrated into a broader worker movement.

Some might argue that the spread of totalitarianism necessitated a more radical, not a more tempered response. In 1935, the anarchist Emma Goldman wrote ominously to Vladeck from exile in Toronto, after having been denied permission to return to the U.S,

The final news as regards Washington was a more poignant blow than I had thought it would be. Perhaps it is because Europe is in such an unsettled state and my chances there for any activity absolutely nil... After all my case is but one in the tens of thousands of political refugees who are nowheres wanted and nowheres permitted to earn a livelihood. Did we ever dream in our wildest dreams that the world would retard and be turned into a vast prison? We were naive, weren't we? We thought that the wonderful things we were talking about were around the corner. We had but to dedicate ourselves more earnestly and they would be realized. Now they are farther away than ever.<sup>281</sup>

When Vladeck died of a heart attack at the age of 52 in October 1938, writers commented that he had never lost his passion for justice. As City Council President Newbold Morris said,

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<sup>281</sup> Emma Goldman to Vladeck. March 28, 1935. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 2, Folder 4.

His mind was big enough to comprehend great problems. His wisdom was inexhaustible. His heart was big enough for all mankind. His voice made articulate the aspirations of millions of people. His vision was of the world free from tyranny, brutality and hatred, and secure for all who love freedom.<sup>282</sup>

But despite this idealism, Vladeck was not, as Goldman suggested, naive. He may have dreamed big, but he spent his daily life managing budgets, signing contracts, denying raises and attracting advertising. Ultimately, the *Forward* came in many respects to resemble other facets of the commercial press, breeding critiques of advertising and worker discontent.

Vladeck's reliance on advertising coincided with a new emphasis at the *Forward* on Jewish rather than worker concerns. Thus, the *Forward* worked to produce a commodified Jewishness through the interwar era. It did not, however, completely lose sight of its original purpose-- to help build a broad-based working class movement. The *Forward* continued to function as an important institution in the Jewish working class community, providing important resources to the labor movement moments of crisis. This continued commitment bred an environment where the *Forward* was still read within a broadly socialist milieu, sparking criticism and discussion about its role in American Jewish society and the labor movement. The *Forward's* ability to make financial contributions, however, was increasingly dependent on market forces-- particularly the advertising market. The experience of the *Forward* in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrates the difficulty in maintaining a powerful alternative press under capitalism, and the contradictory nature of Vladeck's pragmatic approach.

While controversy around the *Forward* demonstrated anything but a full-scale acceptance of the ideology of consumption among Jews in the U.S., Vladeck knew that such work had to be done in order to sustain a publication like the *Forward*. Although *Di frayhayt* relied less on

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<sup>282</sup> "Charney Vladeck Dies at 52," *New York Herald Tribune*. October 1, 1938. Vladeck Papers, Box 23.

advertising, it reached far fewer people and was far from an independent, democratic voice. The *Forward's* commercial strategy extended a socialist-centered hegemonic Jewishness beyond World War One, for another generation through the New Deal. Criticism of Vladeck's approach generated further public discourse about the nature of working class, Yiddish language newspapers. While the *Forward* was the central media institution of the Jewish labor movement, it by no means exerted total control. Rather, it kept discussion within the counterpublic going far longer, and with greater political impact, than might otherwise have happened.

But, under Vladeck's supervision, the Jewish working class counterpublic did change. In 1936, the *Forward's* endorsement of FDR marked a decisive shift, as "the goal of transforming American society gave way to reforming it."<sup>283</sup> That same year, Vladeck assumed the office of majority leader on the New York City Council. No longer a threat to the status quo, the *Forward* was an integral part of a new hegemonic bloc, representing one important segment of a new American public. As the New Deal reached its apex, and as the CIO built a new social contract, Vladeck and the *Forward* played a significant role in the remaking of the American public sphere. As I argue in chapters four and five, this could not have been done without the spread of community through the trade union movement, and the work of two important organic intellectuals, J.B.S Hardman and Fania Cohn. Respectively, they offered alternatives to the *Forward's* highly commercial approach with acute attention to union democracy and gender equality.

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<sup>283</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 255.

## Chapter Four:

### J.B.S. Hardman and the Search for Radical Democracy: The ACWA and the Labor Press

“A writer in the lay Catholic magazine, Commonweal, some time ago analyzed ‘the scope of a Catholic paper,’ suggesting that the aims and objects of that press are ‘the enlightenment (of the readers) by telling...things which (they) need to know...or telling or reminding of things which are...worth knowing, enrichment, by wise comment or information about any matters not necessarily formally religious, which play a part in our lives; confirmation in our faith and our determination to live by it, by careful...exposition and explanation of principles or practice under attack...’

It is a good ‘scope’: enlightenment, enrichment, confirmation. The union press might inscribe that on its masthead. But although unionism, not unlike religion, is an admixture of a faith, of an art, of a way of life, and of an institutionalism, there is nothing in it that is taken on faith. All things in unionism must prove themselves.”

-- J.B.S. Hardman<sup>284</sup>

State propaganda, a commercial media system, and anxieties of revolution raised new concerns about the role of the public and the potential for democracy among the “American intelligentsia in the wake of World War One. “Nervous liberals,” such as the former muckraker and CPI official Walter Lippmann, believed that the modern world had become too complicated for average citizens, and technocratic experts should govern “the pictures in their heads.” In Lippmann’s formulation, democracy can only work if there is an “independent expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions.” There is little room for civic participation. Rather, the new expert class would have to replace the public in their role of decision makers, “manufacturing consent” among the rest of the populous.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> J.B.S. Hardman, *House of Labor*: (1951), 223. Cited in Jack Barbash, “Perspectives on the Problems of Union Leadership, J.B.S. Hardman Memorial Session.” University of Wisconsin, Industrial Relations Research Association, December 29, 1968. J.B.S. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 2. Tamiment Library, New York University.

<sup>285</sup> Brett Gary, *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 15-54; Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Free Press: New York, 1997), 17; 173.

As a counterpoint, education advocate and philosopher John Dewey argued that experts needed to “help provide the public with the information necessary to perform its functions,” and “facilitate the democratic dialogue” necessary to “create a shared political consciousness and a shared set of interests.” The “eclipse of the public” that Lippmann bemoaned, made it imperative to transform the “Great Society” into the “Great Community,” rooted in direct associational bonds. In the Great Community, “the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of the word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being.”<sup>286</sup>

Leaders within the Jewish labor movement echoed the famous Lippmann-Dewey debate, as the need for an informed and participatory union membership contradicted democracy’s apparent threat to organizational viability. Fannia Cohn, the Education Secretary of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) remarked, “The Great War signaled the beginning of the crumbling of our civilization. The question arose as to who would be the builder of the new system. Progressive minded elements in society looked to the labor movement to be that social force and were ready to throw their lot in with it.” While budget crises and political divisions consumed time, energy and resources away from productive organizing within the heavily Jewish garment industry during the 1920s, struggles within industry unions helped to build what Dan Katz terms “social unionism.”<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> James Carey, “The Chicago School and the History of Mass Communication Research,” in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, eds. E.S. Munson and C.A. Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 35. Cited by Brian Dolber, “Unmaking ‘Hegemonic Jewishness’: Anti-Communism, Gender Politics, and Communication in the ILGWU, 1924-1934,” in *Race, Gender, and Class*, 15, no 1-2 (2008): 192; John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), 111-112; 184. Cited in Dolber, “From Socialism to ‘Sentiment’: Toward a Political Economy of Communities, Counterpublics and Their Media Through Jewish Working Class History,” in *Communication Theory* 21 no. 2 (2011), 95.

<sup>287</sup> Fannia Cohn, “Brookwood’s Strength: Relating Facts to Ideas.” Fannia Cohn Papers, Reel 5. New York Public Library; Daniel Katz, “A Union of Many Cultures: Yiddish Socialism and Interracial Organizing in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, 1913-1941.” Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers University, 2003.

As the *Forward* commercialized during the interwar period, and defined itself increasingly in relation to Jewishness rather than labor, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) and the ILGWU helped maintain a class-based identity among Jewish workers through their publications and educational activities during the 1920s. Within these institutions, leaders debated the role of the press, the importance of culture and entertainment, and the limits of modern democracy. Carrying the banner of worker education, organic intellectuals fought for a participatory labor movement in the midst of commercialization, political infighting, and partisan rhetoric. These efforts provided a basis for national mass organization in the 1930s.

Here, and in chapter five, I explore the efforts of two particular organic intellectuals-- J.B.S. Hardman, the Educational Director of the ACWA, and Fannia Cohn, the secretary of the Education Department of the ILGWU. These individuals made media and culture central components within the Jewish trade union movement during the interwar years. In this chapter, I trace Hardman's career within the Yiddish press and the labor movement. Born Jacob Salutsky, J.B.S. Hardman was one of the the Jewish labor movement's most strident voice for true democracy. He dedicated his life to creating a working-class public sphere. As advertisers' demands increasingly shaped the *Forward's* politics, and as the Jewish labor movement became mired in factional ideological and partisan battles, Hardman sought to make the ACWA home to a truly independent, free democratic discussion about working class politics that was beholden to neither commercial interests nor party influence. Under ACWA President Sidney Hillman, the union became intertwined with the state-corporate nexus of the New Deal. As an eternal critic, Hardman often found himself further removed from the seat of power. But because of his efforts,

he helped to build a movement culture that made the New Deal possible, with influence extending into the postwar era.

### **The ACWA and the Worker Education Movement**

New York's garment industry was the major site of employment for eastern European Jewish immigrants in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1900, 40 percent of all "Russian-born" (meaning, by and large, Jewish) women, and 20 percent of men worked in the industry. Karen Brodtkin argues that although Jews came to the U.S. as a skilled workforce in a variety of trades, they found themselves "concentrated in one of the most de-skilled and low-paid industries in the United States." Jews faced occupational restrictions upon arrival, and were barred from entering the craft unions of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Although they made up the bulk of the skilled hat makers, furriers and tailors, the influx of immigrant labor allowed manufactures to re-organize the industry for mass production. By 1914, New York's garment industry employed 510,000 workers in 15,000 shops, earning an annual payroll of \$326 million and producing over \$1 billion in value.<sup>288</sup>

Sweatshops were the locus of production not only of garments, but also of "racial darkening." While the industry grew, Jewish immigrants saw their jobs de-skilled. Craft unions in other occupations, however, helped govern industry growth. Brodtkin writes, "The freedom of craft autonomy in the construction of work was a prerogative of whiteness. It stood in contrast to the 'servility' of the nonwhite assembly line."<sup>289</sup> Thus, organization within the needle trades

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<sup>288</sup> Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 60-4.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.



challenged managerial logic, as well as the conservative institutions of labor that helped to construct an ideal notion of the free white worker.

Within the men's clothing industry, the ACWA formed as a response to this severe exploitation. It was a site of independence and radical democracy from its inception. The union first developed as an oppositional group within the conservative United Garment Workers (UGW), which was out of synch with its foreign-born membership who largely adhered to some form of socialism. Rather than serving all in the industry, the UGW favored the craft organization of cutters and corruptly sold the union label to manufacturers in order to grow its treasury. Sidney Hillman, radicalized by the 1910 general strike in Chicago, led an insurgency against the UGW at its 1914 convention, and ultimately founded the new organization in December at a meeting at New York's Webster Hall in Greenwich Village.

But despite the fact that the ACWA had the support of the AFL-affiliated ILGWU, the AFL would not recognize the new 30,000 member organization. As an independent union, the ACWA expanded beyond Chicago's Hart, Schaffner, Marx factory. Through industrial organizing, it secured wage increases and a forty-four hour work week eventually to full unionization of the local market, and national prominence by 1918.<sup>290</sup>

During the following decade, Hillman embraced "industrial democracy" over more revolutionary forms of social organization. This approach "recognized the need for autonomous vehicles of working-class representation, but also sought to incorporate such institutions within a broader collaborative program premised on expanded and efficient production and mass consumption." This "new unionism" won the support of middle-class progressives, and garnered

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<sup>290</sup> Earl D. Strong, *The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America* (Grinnell, IA: Herald-Register Publishing Co., 1940); George Soule, *Sidney Hillman: Labor Statesman* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1939), 21; 12-72.

praise for introducing mediation and arbitration in the workplace alongside “unemployment insurance, cooperative housing, labor banking, and consumer cooperatives.”<sup>291</sup> The “new unionism” had both radical and conservative tendencies. While it went beyond the limitations of AFL craft unionism by building alternative institutions, it also further entrenched the union within the broader structures of the state and of capitalism.

The most significant scholarly work on the ACWA is Steven Fraser’s *Labor Will Rule*, an in-depth biography of Sidney Hillman. Against the backdrop of the emergence of New Deal liberalism and a bureaucratic, national labor movement, Fraser traces Hillman’s life as a Jewish socialist immigrant through his union presidency, to his role as an advisor to President Roosevelt. Fraser credits Hillman’s “drive to succeed and to other equally compelling traits of character” with allowing him “to recognize and seize his historic opportunity” and “enter a far wider universe of national influence and power.”<sup>292</sup>

But, as the ACWA’s Education Director, J.B.S. Hardman was also of crucial importance to the organization’s success. The worker education movement of the 1920s maintained the ethos of social unionism from the prewar era and paved the way for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and their wave of organizing and strikes in the next decade. Representing a departure from the “bread and butter” unionism of Samuel Gompers and the AFL, worker education, according to Gloria Garrett Samson, “kept the movement for industrial unionism alive in the ‘lean years’ of the 1920s. Labor progressives who found ideological support in workers’ educational institutions contributed to the advances made in the ‘turbulent years’ of the 1930s.”

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<sup>291</sup> Steven Fraser, “Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America,” in *The Encyclopedia of the American Left*, eds. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>292</sup> Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor*. (New York: The New Press, 1991), 22.

Hardmans's staunch commitment to union democracy, and particularly, a democratic labor press were also important factors catapulting Hillman and the ACWA into the ranks of national political influence during the New Deal.<sup>293</sup>

If, as Fraser argues, Hillman was the labor movement's Machiavelli, then Hardman was its Rousseau. As Hillman and Vladeck operated strategically, Hardman thought deeply about the ideal role of the labor press and its relationship to the trade union movement. This independent spirit fit well at the ACWA, at least for a period. With its leadership emerging from Chicago, the ACWA was somewhat removed from the left-right split that plagued the New York labor movement after World War One.<sup>294</sup> The leadership took a more inclusive attitude, which was both shaped by and reflected in Hardman's union newspaper, the *Advance*, and its Yiddish companion, the *Fortschritt*. Rather than using the press as a propaganda tool, Hardman believed union newspapers should encourage free expression and provide members with access to a wide range of debate. He understood that the quality of the movement press was inextricably linked to the quality of democracy within the movement. Vibrant newspapers were essential in order to build a broad, democratic trade union movement that could provide the basis for a new social order.

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<sup>293</sup> Gloria Garrett Samson, "Education for a New Social Order": The Ideological Struggle over American Workers' Education in the 1920s," In *Culture, Gender, Labor, Race, and U.S. Labor History*, eds. Ronald C. Kent, etc. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 161; 151. Still others played an important role as well. Most notably, Karen Pastorello chronicles the important work of Bessie Abramowitz Hillman, in bolstering women's participation in the union through her own cultural work. *A Power Among Them: Bessie Abramowitz Hillman and the Making of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

<sup>294</sup> Steven Fraser, "Sidney Hillman: Labor's Machiavelli," in *Labor Leaders of America*, eds. Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 207-33. Sidney Hillman was quite disheartened by the divisive politics in New York, and sought to operate in a more inclusive, less adversarial manner as he had been accustomed to in his home city, as he made clear at a General Executive Board meeting in 1922, declaring that "blackmailing and defamation is a product of New York... It is a New York method of discussion. Calling officers crooks in New York does not mean anything." GEB Minutes, August 12, 1922, 17. ACWA Records, Box 164, Folder 21. Kheel Archives, Cornell University.

### **Jacob Salutsky and the Search for Radical Democracy, 1921-1924**

Like B.C. Vladeck, J.B.S Hardman's experiences as a young activist in Russia were formative in shaping his political trajectory. Still going by the name of Jacob Salutsky, he arrived in the United States in 1909 at the age of 27, having cut his teeth on radical politics in the Bund. Although he was the son of a businessman, Salutsky was attracted to Marxism in the midst of the political and cultural ferment in the Russian Pale. As a young man he became a seasoned political dissident in the trade union movement. After his third arrest he was exiled for two years. He spent one year in Paris and then left for the U.S. as an intermediary between French syndicalist leader Jean Juares and American socialists Daniel De Leon and Eugene Debs. Although his visit was initially supposed to be temporary, Salutsky decided to stay in New York as conditions in Russia worsened.

Salutsky quickly became a luminary in New York's Jewish political circles. He enrolled at Columbia University's Graduate School of Political and Social Science in 1910, and began to write for the Yiddish press and work as the head of the ILGWU's Research Department. By 1912, Salutsky was the national secretary of the Jewish Socialist Federation (JSF), the organized opposition to the *Forward* and the older generation of Jewish socialist leadership, and editor of the comparatively high-brow journal *Di naye velt* (*The New World*). To counter "the lively, heated, somewhat hoarse shout of the marketplace" at the *Forward*, Salutsky ensured that *Di naye velt* was committed to a "guiding principle" of "free discussion." In opposition to the *Forward's* stifled discourse, fellow Bundists struggled to place the *Forward* under direct party

control in order to protect its commitment to socialism and isolate it from commercial influence.<sup>295</sup>

Tensions between the JSF and the *Forward* compounded as *Forward* editor Abraham Cahan and Vladeck increasingly bent to the will of the state-corporate nexus during World War One and following the Russian Revolution. In 1919, the Socialist Party (SP) split over its support for the Bolsheviks, and then split again, “by those,” according to Salutsky, “who wanted a Communist Party speaking in the American language without a Russian accent, which was entirely intolerable to the Communist Party.” Initially Salutsky stayed with the SP, but tensions continued to build over the next two years. In the fall of 1921, under his and Moishye Olgin’s leadership, the majority of the JSF left. In retaliation, the *Forward* fired the writers who supported the JSF and evicted the organization from its East Broadway building.<sup>296</sup>

Salutsky did not see the Bolshevik question as a black-and-white issue. On the one hand, he believed the SP was far too moderate and had become a party of “bourgeois sympathizers and half-socialist petty bourgeois elements.” At the same time, he disapproved of the Communist Party’s (CP) underground structure, and its insistence that revolution was just around the corner. Salutsky wanted to cooperate with the broader revolutionary movement, but was turned off by those who blindly followed Bolshevik mantras and models. He understood this tendency as more of an emotionally driven nationalism, held by people who had left the Russian empire rather than part of a well-conceived revolutionary strategy. “[R]evolutionary parties,” he said, “do not thrive in an unrevolutionary environment and if anyone expects an American revolution to happen, he

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<sup>295</sup> Felicja Figa and Franklin L. Jonas “Biographical Sketch,” Bulletin of the Tamiment Library, No. 48 March 1973. ACWA Records, Box 242, Folder 9; J.B.S. Hardman Interview with Ed Edwin, 49. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 11; Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 165.

<sup>296</sup> Hardman Interview, 51; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 231-3.

would have to have a long life before he sees it happen.” What Salutsky longed for was a “broad, proletarian mass party” that would speak to the needs of the American worker.<sup>297</sup>

Salutsky believed that the most important aim of the labor movement was to build democracy. In turn, a labor movement could only be successful if it was democratic. He told the ACWA’s 1918 convention in Baltimore,

We are now going through a very grave crisis-- possibly the gravest so far in human history, possibly the most important in the whole trend of civilization. Democracy itself is being subjected to the acid test of reality...[I]t behooves a body of representatives of a large labor organization assembled together... to deal with this particular problem. It seems to be that if the problem is ever solved it will not be solved by English Professors; by people with nice manners and still nicer words. It seems to be that the solution might emanate from here.

For Salutsky, the labor movement needed to show “a real democratic spirit” in order to “hold its grip on its membership,” demonstrating that each worker had a true stake and say in their union.<sup>298</sup>

As president of the fledgling ACWA, Sidney Hillman believed that Salutsky’s unrelenting demand for a democratic movement would be an asset to his union. The ACWA was on the outs not only with the national labor leadership, but with many of the luminaries of Yiddish socialism as well. Although Cahan and UHT leader Abraham Shiplacoff initially endorsed forming the organization, the ACWA ultimately had to withdraw from the UHT because of the latter’s affiliation with the AFL. The *Forward* and the UHT together “continued to float propositions that would have seriously compromised the autonomy and authority of the fledgling ACW.”<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 234; Hardman Interview, 51; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 235.

<sup>298</sup> Documentary History of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Proceedings of the Third Biennial Convention, May 13-18, 1918. Baltimore, MD., 269.

<sup>299</sup> Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 91; Hillman to Cahan, April 19, 1916. ACWA Records, Box 9, Folder 19. Kheel Center Archives, Cornell University.

Distanced from the hegemony of the *Forward*, the ACWA was well positioned to develop an independent and democratic Jewish labor culture.

By the time Salutsky took his position with the ACWA in 1920, educational efforts were underway locally in Chicago, Rochester, and New York, but there was no national coordination. Through worker education, Salutsky believed union members would come to take ownership over their own organization. “You have been kicked out of the ‘regular’ labor movement to become a real movement,” he told the convention. “You have been kicked out to learn what the labor movement of this country has not succeeded in learning in the course of a quarter of a century, that the labor movement is something far bigger than merely a combination of labor organizations.”<sup>300</sup>

Worker education would bring dynamism to the working class. Different from those who advocated programs for “moral uplift” and teaching bourgeois manners to proletarian immigrants, Salutsky put forth a radical vision. “Workers education,” he wrote, “... is not a polishing proposition. It is not a charitable undertaking of those ‘better situated’ to help the ‘minor brethren.’ ...It is not a ‘thing in itself,’ independent of the union. Just to the contrary. It is part and parcel of the life of the union. Such it ought to be, or there is no reason why it should be at all.” For Salutsky, education and organization were synonymous, and therefore had to reach workers in every aspect of their lives. As he explained,

The union is not a political party, and workers’ education must not be partisan in any narrow sense, though it cannot in the nature of things be impartial as the union itself is not. It must be fair and accurate. But it is workers’ education, and education that will enable the workers, individually and collectively, to make a successful stand for what is theirs. That is not a narrow program. In fact, it is all-embracing. It demands the inclusion

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<sup>300</sup> Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Convention of the ACWA, Boston. May 10-15, 1920, 244.

of the sciences and the arts, and of the knowledge of technique and industrial mechanics and management, in the plan of workers' education.<sup>301</sup>

Through such a process, Salutsky hoped not only to rework economic relationships but to address political inequality as well. Attuned to the intellectual debates of the day, he proclaimed, "It is not the question of cooperation between the three factions, the employers, the employees and the public. There is only one public worthy of its name and they are the employees."<sup>302</sup>

Salutsky began to implement this vision in the midst of an economic crisis in 1920-1. Employers in New York took advantage of the post-war recession and attempted to break the unions, locking out 60,000 clothing workers. The union was in a defensive position, "engaged in a war for its life." The General Executive Board (GEB) called upon the new Education Department "to put itself on a war-time basis" and develop an information bureau and intelligence service; boost morale among locked out workers through education and recreation activities; coordinate activities for workers' families such as a children's New Year party; and create a curriculum for the Amalgamated Labor College. These efforts would build community, dispel anti-union myths among members, and through the College, offer "systematic study" to locked out workers of the history of civilization, public speaking, working-class movements, and economics.<sup>303</sup>

Despite the union's successful utilization of these methods during the lockout, the GEB reported that the struggle "consumed all the energy of the organization" and hindered the development of the Education Department nationally. It was not until the fall of 1921 that

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<sup>301</sup> *The Amalgamated Illustrated Almanac, 1923* (New York: ACWA, 1922), 35.

<sup>302</sup> Proceedings of the Fourth Biennial Convention of the ACWA, Boston, May 10-15, 1920, 245.

<sup>303</sup> Documentary History of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, 1920-1922. Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Convention, Chicago, May 8-13, 1922, 89-96.



Salutsky began to coordinate with national officers and outside educators-- including Educational Committee members such as Professor Charles Beard, Scott Nearing of the Rand School, and Alvin Johnson of the *New Republic*, to develop a program and secure funding for “a speaker’s service, a reference service that would furnish materials wanted by local groups, a weekly news letter of significant current events, a leaflet service giving brief outlines of important questions, moving picture films and stereopticon slides for the illustration of lectures.” For Salutsky, worker education would require a diversity of tactics and approaches in order to reach all the members of the union, in a growing number of cities who spoke thirty different languages and represented an array of “racial varieties.”<sup>304</sup>

The early educational programs put tremendous emphasis on what Steven Fraser calls “a democratic variant of [high] culture.” Offering lectures on political philosophy and literature, discussions of current events, classical music and dance performances, the educational agenda Salutsky developed contained “a tacitly understood political subtext...: To appreciate a Shakespeare tragedy or a Beethoven symphony was simultaneously to disdain the inherent shoddiness and vulgarity of the marketplace.” It would replace “the multiplicity of cultural agendas articulated by each ethnic constituency with a homogenous set of values, beliefs and motivations,” making the union the bearer of modernity.<sup>305</sup>

But while Salutsky certainly believed these unmediated activities were important, he did not pay nearly as much attention to them as his ILGWU counterpart, Fannia Cohn, did.<sup>306</sup>

Instead, Salutsky was most concerned with the role of publication. Although the Education

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<sup>304</sup> Strong, *The Amalgamated*, 202; “A.C.W. Educational Work to Commenced Soon,” *Advance*, Sept. 24, 1920, 1; Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Convention, 1922, 247.

<sup>305</sup> Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 221-4.

<sup>306</sup> I detail Fannia Cohn’s approach to worker education in chapter five.

Department strove to enable autonomy, allowing locals “to advise or suggest, but not prescribe” particular activities, Salutsky understood that printing union literature was so central to the Amalgamated’s organizing efforts that it was “the one field where the Education Department is free to take the initiative and has every opportunity to develop an interesting and fruitful activity.” In its first year, the ACWA printed 23,000 copies of five pamphlets, which sold for 10-cents each, arousing “great interest” and generating “a constant stream of letters” from the membership. The union also took innovative steps, publishing almanacs and, as Theodore Debs described it, a “very beautiful and finely illustrated calendar” for 1922. The calendar offered a brief record of events that occurred each month in labor history, quotations from writers, poems and pictures. With “the cold facts on the one side, the embodiment of an ideal on the other,” the calendar, according to the New York *Evening Post*, “presented with dignity and with the esthetic sense that the department is trying to instill in the workers.”<sup>307</sup>

Such projects were possible because the large number of members in the union-- 150,000 “and probably double their number of dependents”--offered the Department a guaranteed “market.” This allowed the union to offer publications at incredibly low prices, making books accessible to the lowest earner. “It is no idle dream,” Salutsky said, “to speak of the union actually being able to develop its own literature...”<sup>308</sup>

Despite his grand vision, Salutsky-- now known as Hardman-- declared his educational efforts to be a failure by the end of the 1920s. Reflecting on it years later, he explained that “the deterioration in the general union field,” the result of harsh employer strategies, and unfriendly federal government, and massive political infighting between Socialists and Communists,

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<sup>307</sup> Proceedings of the Fifth Biennial Convention, 252.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid, 250.

“toward the end of the twenties made it practically a dead affair.”<sup>309</sup> Hardman, though, remained dedicated to one aspect of worker education throughout his life-- newspaper publishing.

### **Conflict at *Di Frayhayt***

While the Educational Department’s publications were decidedly centralized and aimed to offer members information, Salutsky saw the role of the union press as quite distinct. Rather than directly mold public opinion, Salutsky believed that the union press should enable conversation among members, helping them come to their own understandings. Thus, while Fraser argues that worker education in this era was intended to impose cultural uniformity, the press as Salutsky conceived it was meant to inspire critical reflection.

The most important aspect of this effort, for Salutsky, was the development of working class newspapers. He spent the first several years of his tenure as the ACWA’s Educational Director more dedicated to other projects outside of the union. He found himself mired in political battles, caught between the Communist Left and the Socialist Right during the early 1920s, in fights centered around the Yiddish press.

The split within the JSF in 1921 caused Salutsky a great deal of personal anxiety. He worried that he would be forced to leave his union position “as a result of possible unpleasant notoriety in connection with the convention.” The following month he told his wife Hannah Salutsky, a committed labor activist in her own right, “No new developments except that the demand for my head in the Amalgamated has become quite popular. The *Forwardists* went to the locals, resolutions are being framed, the ‘people’ are called in, and it is rather jolly.”<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Hardman interview, 72.

<sup>310</sup> Salutsky to Hannah Salutsky, December 21, 1921; January 14, 1922. Hardman Papers, Box 3, Folder 3.

With little sense of security, Salutsky and Olgin sought a political home for the JSF. Late in 1921, the Comintern urged the CP to establish an aboveground party, and to incorporate the JSF into its structure. While Salutsky expressed much trepidation about such a merger, the majority of the JSF went along with the plans. In the end, they helped to form the Workers' Party (WP)-- dedicated to building a "workers' republic" and utilizing the legitimated political process in the U.S.-- under the assumption that it would have a large degree of autonomy from the CP and Moscow.<sup>311</sup>

Salutsky and Olgin founded a new journal, *Di frayhayt (Freedom)*, as a new Yiddish-language daily with the support of the WP in 1922. Salutsky wanted *Di frayhayt* to provide a space for truly open dialogue regarding Jewish socialist politics and culture, declaring publicly that he hoped it would destroy the *Forward*.<sup>312</sup> But Salutsky's idealism and constant state of dissatisfaction ultimately got in the way of his relationship to the journal. From the outset, he was frustrated with the management of the newspaper and its tendency towards dogmatism. As Hannah Salutsky told him,

I am not bothered much about the approach of financial difficulties but I fear your condition of a fallen general. If you could stick to some group it would not be so bad. I see they announce you as speaker to some meetings which shows that you are not entirely out of it. But your keeping away from the paper altogether makes the paper so pale and I doubt whether it makes you any happier...It would seem that keeping up an influence in their work would make it more possible to accomplish something in the long run....Hatred is a very fine thing, but when it becomes one's only activity it does endanger one's spiritual self.

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<sup>311</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 234-8.

<sup>312</sup> General Executive Board Minutes, May 3-6, 1922, 11. ACWA Records, Box 164, Folder 19.

Before the first issue was published, she said, “So the world is safe for demagogy again and the *Freiheit* (sic) is really going to appear. I hope the fellows do give up their demagogic tone...How much of a better job you could make of it than the entire CP taken together.”<sup>313</sup>

By the journal’s premiere, Salutsky was disheartened and socially isolated from his comrades. He wrote in his diary, that he “spent the evening wandering” and “took in 30 cents worth of movies.” While Salutsky understood the *Frayhayt* to have been largely his own project, he came to feel quite dissatisfied with the outcome and the decisions others made.

What culminated today in the [*Frayhayt*] I started 10 years ago. No one believed it possible. I forced it to the front, cultivated the belief in the possibility to realize it, a daily challenge to the [*Forward*’s] editorial rule of vulgarity. That paper is now in fact. I thought the paper should not have been started just now, without money and with a house divided against itself. They would not take my advice. I left them. Was I right? Somehow I think often of the problem of leadership embodied in the story of Moses withdrawal on the verge of Israel entering the Land of Promise. If it is true that a new era in the movement starts, new leadership is the only hope. Unfortunately, the caliber of people around the [*Frayhayt*] is low, as bad as the [*Forward*] crowd. Not as corrupt in the material sense but mentally no less dishonest.<sup>314</sup>

With the paper facing financial problems immediately, discussion turned towards relying on the Comintern’s support. Although in Tony Michels’ assessment there is little chance that the paper could have survived without Moscow’s assistance, Salutsky believed the new journal could remain independent, financially solvent and compete with the *Forward*. In order to cut their weekly deficit of \$3000 in half, he suggested that the paper “be reduced to four pages, the staff editorial and management cut to an absolute minimum, the price not to be raised.” He would “write off [his] fingers” in order to make up for having a small staff. Olgin told Salutsky privately that he approved of this plan, but he did not support it in official meetings. At this

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<sup>313</sup> Hannah Salutsky to Jacob Salutsky, February 3, 1922; March 23, 1922. Hardman Papers, Box 3 Folder 4. Hardman Papers, Box 3, Folder 4.

<sup>314</sup> Diary Notes, April 1, 1922. Hardman Papers, Box 7, Folder 3.

point, Salutsky formally cut ties with *Di frayhayt*. They ultimately raised the price of the paper, which Salutsky feared would lead to a drop in circulation, which had already declined from 40,000 to 18,000. He explained to Hannah Salutsky, “I am not prejudiced when I take the paper to be dull, incapable of a fight of any kind. They killed a grand thing by starting it in a wrong time, in a wrong way. Well, that is after all as much as our “involvement” is worth.”<sup>315</sup>

The experience with *Di frayhayt* prompted Salutsky to leave the field of Yiddish-language journalism. He set his sights on developing an English language magazine that would adhere to his vision for an independent, democratic forum. He wrote in his diary that his new periodical, *American Labor Monthly*, would be “a new center of gravitation in the American labor movement. I will see that the magazine idea, an honest to goodness solid magazine...be materialized.”<sup>316</sup>

Salutsky and others started the magazine as an independent enterprise, each contributing 25 dollars a month to the effort. Once again, Salutsky hoped to provide the labor movement with a forum for critical self-reflection, intelligent analysis, and empirical claims. Its editorial statement read explained that it did “not set out to compete with any of the existing labor journals” which too often thrived “on manifestoes and ‘statements’” ...[dealing] in canned party goods only. Authoritative and competent dispenser of canonized truth, the official press rightfully assumes to speak for the ‘organization.’” Instead, the *ALM* would offer “an analytical review of the affairs of labor in this world.” Rather than operating as propaganda, the magazine would help workers makes sense of the complex world around them.

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<sup>315</sup> Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 241; Salutsky to Hannah Salutsky, May 28, 1922. Hardman Papers, Box 3, Folder 5.

<sup>316</sup> Diary Notes, April 1, 1922; Hardman Papers, Box 7, Folder 3.

The greatest need the worker in the labor movement experiences today, more at this time than at any other, is that of clear orientation. Finding one's way amidst the most amazingly riotous array of conflicting judgment and mutually exclusive proposals, coming from the same source, is a task becoming more urgent and complicated with every day that passes. A searching analysis of the heretofore accepted 'facts' and 'truth' of the movement is in the order of business. So many 'facts' have reversed themselves and truth has become a 'thing' even more relative in these days of doubt and test.<sup>317</sup>

While *ALM* represented a necessary ideal, the political conditions of the moment made it seemingly impossible to realize. Max Weinzweig, the education leader of the ACWA's New York Joint Board, found the proposition "a bit worrisome," but believed it would help meet a pressing need. He wrote,

The terrible dearth of clear-sightedness, of plans for action or even reasons for action so far as these are apparent in the consciousness of the so-called leadership in the American movement becomes sharper and clearer day by day. If the magazine will not make for a noticeable change in the immediate present, it will at least prepare the ground for definite attempts in the present or future.<sup>318</sup>

Olgin was even more skeptical about how Salutsky would approach *ALM*. "In view of your changed attitude towards the Workers' Party which was supposed to be the foundation of all the discussion in the magazine you are planning," he wrote, "I would rather wait till the first issue of the magazine appears before I definitely decide on participating in it. I am sure it will be o.k., yet I wish to know the tone in which you will attack the ticklish problems [emphasis in original]." <sup>319</sup>

Ultimately, *ALM* created more political trouble for Salutsky, leading to his expulsion from the WP. Although he insisted that the magazine was "not out to fight any particular set of people" and was meant to serve a completely different purpose than party publications, therefore

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<sup>317</sup> Hardman interview, 57; *ALM* Promotion and Editorial Statement. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 7.

<sup>318</sup> Max Weinzweig to Salutsky, August 28, 1922. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 6.

<sup>319</sup> Olgin to Salutsky, Dec 28, 1922. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 7.

posing no threat, the WP brought Salutsky up on charges for his public criticisms of the party and his personal financing of an outside publication. The WP wanted to merge the *ALM* with its own publication, the *Liberator*, but Salutsky would only allow this if they would commit the magazine to “an analytical study of American problems of life and labor” that was both “free and unhampered” and “friendly and constructive.” The WP never agreed to these terms, and Salutsky was expelled from the organization.<sup>320</sup>

Once again, Salutsky’s attempts to create a space for independent, critical reflection within the movement had been thwarted by strict partisan politics and ideological orthodoxy. By the end of 1923, Salutsky was “politically homeless.” Estranged from his one-time comrade Moyshe Olgin, Salutsky argued in the *Fortschritt* for “the right of a revolutionist to make a revolution against his own revolutionary party.” Olgin claimed that Salutsky’s “bitterness had led him astray.” But, from Salutsky’s perspective, it was the WP that had failed to make good on its promise to be a radical party representing the broad interests of U.S. labor.<sup>321</sup>

By 1924 it was clear that there was no longer a chance for an independent, radical Yiddish publication to succeed. In October, Salutsky anglicized his name. As J.B.S. Hardman, he would commit himself not to Yiddish radicalism, but to democratic, American trade unionism through his editorship of the ACWA’s weekly, the *Advance*. While Sidney Hillman became increasingly concerned with reaching the higher echelons of power, Hardman retained his commitment to independence and democracy as the union came increasingly under the *Forward*’s sphere of influence.

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<sup>320</sup> Salutsky to Lore, January 15, 1923. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 7; Hardman interview, 57-64; Salutsky to C.E. Ruthenberg, June 13, 1923. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 7.

<sup>321</sup> Felicja Figa and Franklin L. Jonas, “Biographical Sketch”; Moissaye J. Olgin, “The ‘Rights’ of a Revolutionist.” *Daily Worker*, September 8, 1923. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 7.



### Visions for a Union Press, 1924-1932

Between 1924 and the dawn of the New Deal, J.B.S. Hardman struggled to bring the ideological independence he had tried to create within the world of Yiddish radical politics into the world of trade unionism. As the *Advance* editor, he carved out a democratic space while the *Forward* became increasingly influenced by market pressures. His effort helped to sustain some semblance not just of labor unions, but of a labor movement, until the New Deal provided the appropriate context for an explosion of organizing and working class cultural activity.

The garment unions in New York were ground zero for divisive fights between Communists and Socialists during the 1920s. In the midst of a severe economic downturn in 1920 and 1921, employers collectively determined to reduce wages, reestablish piecework, and increase workforce flexibility. The number of small contracting shops in New York grew, while larger factories moved to smaller towns, diminishing union power in its stronghold while creating a demand for organizing in new places. As new industry strategies put the ACWA on the defensive in the early years of the decade, the CP and its affiliates offered workers a means to resist management's postwar onslaught. William Z. Foster's Trade Union Educational League (TUEL) was instrumental in helping the rank-and-file members fight for control over their unions under these adversarial circumstances, while labor leaders on the right sought to limit this influence.<sup>322</sup>

Melech Epstein argues that the civil war "sapped the vitality of Jewish labor," but Steven Fraser notes that unlike the ILGWU, the ACWA exited the 1920s "relatively unscathed" by the

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<sup>322</sup> James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 118-28.

conflicts.<sup>323</sup> While Hillman undoubtedly managed these conflicts with considerable diplomatic skill, Fraser overlooks the high opportunity cost that the conflicts had on the union's education programs and press. Hardman, who despised rigid partisanship, became increasingly marginalized as Hillman sought to curry favor with the *Forward* in the latter half of the decade.

Early in the 1920s, Sidney Hillman and the Amalgamated leadership entered into a "strange alliance" with the CP and the TUEL in order to avoid a rank-and-file revolt. Hillman gained the Left's support ensuring that he would not have to face united factional opposition, while the Soviet leadership garnered the union's support, material aid, and an agreement to help reconstruct the Russian clothing industry. As a result, they became isolated from Cahan, Vladeck and the anti-Communist *Forward* leaders. While Salutsky battled the *Forward* from outside the union, the *Forward* attacked the ACWA. They attempted to get members of some locals to stop paying their dues, and supporters of the right physically attacked left-wing union members and leaders.

But by the middle of the decade, the ACWA's tenuous relationship with the CP had fallen apart. The union's decision to support Robert La Follette's 1924 independent presidential campaign finally broke the ACWA's ties with the Communists, as La Follette dubbed the CP "the mortal enemy of the Progressive movement and democratic ideals."<sup>324</sup> ACWA officials understood that the press would play an important role in articulating its positions to members, leaders of other factions and the public. But the harsh anti-worker environment that characterized

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<sup>323</sup> Epstein, *Jewish Labor in the USA: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement, 1914-1952, Vol. 2* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1953), 124; Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 178.

<sup>324</sup> Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 179-80; 189-197; 194.

the decade had taken its toll, creating a severe obstacle for publishing journals at the moment they were most essential.

The union published its first newspaper, the Yiddish-language weekly *Fortschritt*, in April 1915 and soon followed it with *Lavoro* for the its Italian members. The English-language *Advance* premiered in March 1917, along with bi-weekly publications for Polish and Bohemian workers. Originally edited by the union's general secretary, Joseph Schlossberg, the *Advance* began as an eight-page weekly dedicated to correcting the "misrepresentation and misunderstanding, and often unfounded accusation" levied against the union. As a motion towards moving beyond its ethnic enclaves, the *Advance* was to "[fill] that gap" to speak to English speaking members, and the rest of the American labor movement.<sup>325</sup>

"We are part of the general labor movement in America," Jacob Panken declared on the front page of the *Advance*'s first issue. "More than that, we are cutting the pathway in the wilderness of confusion that exists in the American Labor Movement, leading toward the final goal to which the movement strives." The *Advance* pledged to "criticize and analyze the doings in the American Labor Movement, but always in the spirit of friendliness, always in a spirit of helpfulness; therefore accurately and truthfully."<sup>326</sup>

In the midst of the battles between the *Forward* and *Di frayhayt* in 1922, the GEB committed itself to developing a newspaper that would divorce itself from divisive politics and advocate in the interest of the organization and its members. At that point, one board member commented, "*Advance* is not like a labor paper. There is no feeling in the *Advance*. We should definitely decide to get an editor that will write Amalgamated news to make it interesting for our

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<sup>325</sup> Jacob Panken, "Hail Advance!" *Advance*. March 9, 1917, 1.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

membership. We need a pro-Amalgamated policy.” Sidney Hillman declared, “The *Forward* and the *Freiheit* (sic) have a right to do anything they consider to be of advantage to them, and we cannot be the judge of either.”<sup>327</sup>

But by 1924, while the *Forward* was becoming increasingly profitable, the ACWA was running significant deficits. Salutsky assumed the role of editor for a short while in order to improve the distribution and circulation of the journals, but he resigned from this duty in May after claiming to have fixed the problems. The journals, however, continued to operate at a loss of \$50,000 a year. Hillman called for a committee to find a way to save \$15,000 to \$20,000 a month. They formed an editorial board, who reported back to the GEB that reducing publication of the *Advance* to bi-weekly would save the union \$15,000. As fiscal problems persisted, and the union found itself on the outs with both sides of the civil war, the GEB again requested Salutsky’s help. He soon took on the editorship of the ACWA’s seven publications. Three of them were in languages of which he said he “couldn’t read a line or understand any.”<sup>328</sup> Ironically, the flame-throwing founder of and refugee from *Di frayhayt* would be the best candidate to assume the editor’s role in what was presumably to be a neutral environment.

Thus, as the *Forward* increasingly concentrated on particularly Jewish issues, meeting the demands of advertisers, the demands of the American trade union-- to bring together working people from across ethnic and linguistic backgrounds-- provided an impetus for the largely Jewish ACWA to draw on the Yiddish socialist “newspaper culture” of the prewar era, and build

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<sup>327</sup> GEB Minutes, August 12, 1922, 14-15. ACWA Records, Box 164, Folder 21.

<sup>328</sup> GEB Financial Report, August 1-2, 1924. ACWA Records, Box 164, Folder 24; GEB Report, 46-7. ACWA Records, Box 164, Folder 24; Hardman interview, 51.

a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual movement through its press.<sup>329</sup> Hardman's vision for a democratic trade union press and his dissatisfaction with the *Forward's* politics and rhetoric combined to make the ACWA a home for a new kind of labor publication, corresponding to his ideas of worker education.

Hardman not only adopted this perspective; he developed it into a sophisticated theory, and his personal lifetime pursuit at the Amalgamated, and later, within the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Union newspapers, he believed, should provide a forum for the voices of average members to be heard, rather than simply the party leadership and intellectuals. In 1928, he wrote in his edited volume, *American Labor Dynamics*,

Editors should encourage and stimulate discussion of union problems. The usual fear that the outside may learn of what is happening in the union may be safely overlooked. The 'outside' is almost always well informed and knows more about the union than the editors and the presidents of the union will ever tell their members, and perhaps more than is known to them. Secrecy to that end is of no avail, whereas on the other hand a membership ignorant of union matters is a source of weakness. Ignorance breeds indifference.

This, however, did not mean that the union should represent a complete free-for-all of baseless opinion. He argued, "Union papers should be more than disseminators of dry and distorted information. They should aim at feeding the mind and imagination of their readers. Veracity and exactness of statement should likewise be their concern. Their news, of necessity, must be spirited. Their editorials must be based on facts." Reflecting the tensions of the interwar moment, Hardman believed that the press had to provide "analysis of policy and problems" and

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<sup>329</sup> The term, "newspaper culture," is borrowed from Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 105-6, as discussed in chapters one and two of this dissertation.

“continuous frank discussion of any and all issues of importance” to ensure that public opinion be “intelligent.”<sup>330</sup>

Thus, union newspapers had to engage readers in rational discussion. The editor would serve as a guiding force, shaping discussion, not dictating public opinion. Introducing his volume with a quote from John Dewey, Hardman sought to make the ACWA and its publications into sites of experimentation in radical democracy, producing workers as union citizens.<sup>331</sup>

The union citizen, however, was not a uniform subject. From his experience in the Bund, Hardman understood that members represented a multiplicity of cultural backgrounds and viewpoints. This translated into a proto-multiculturalism. Hardman believed in the principle of Jewish cultural autonomy, that “no national majority should have a legal right to suppress their language and their cultural aspirations.” This freedom could only be protected through creating “legally recognized institutions representing the national minorities and authorized to manage the educational and cultural affairs of their constituents.”<sup>332</sup> Rather than seeking homogeneity and consensus, democracy necessitated the protection of diversity among cultural groups, as well as political opinion.

This vision of robust debate, functioning in conjunction with the worker education movement, presented a threat to the *Forward*'s dominance. As Hardman understood it, the

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<sup>330</sup> J.B.S. Hardman, *American Labor Dynamics in the Light of Postwar Developments: An Inquiry by Thirty-Two Labor Men, Teachers, Editors, and Technicians*, Ed. J.B.S. Hardman (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928), 410; Report of the General Executive Board and Proceedings of the Eighth Biennial Convention of the ACWA. May 12-18, 1928, 24-5.

<sup>331</sup> The quote is, “Many persons seem to suppose that facts carry their meaning along with themselves, on their face. Accumulate enough of them and their interpretation stares out at you... What is needed to direct and make fruitful inquiry is a method which proceeds on the basis of interrelations of observable acts and their results.” *American Labor Dynamics*, 3.

<sup>332</sup> Jacob Salutsky, “On the Rights of National Minorities: A Memorandum of the National Jewish Workmen’s Committee.” Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 3.

*Forward* was part of “the general labor press,” which represented “a more or less clearly-defined philosophy or ideology and is concerned with the advocacy of a distinctive *ism*... As the mouthpiece of the groups behind it, the labor press approaches the present from the viewpoint of the future, where its ideal resides.” It was the job of the union press to reverse this tendency, to build the future based on ideas members generated in their actual lived experiences, without being limited to the tenets of a preconceived ideology. Hardman believed that workers were disengaged from the theoretical arguments within the Left-- “this dialectical bunk about this thing and that thing, when the revolution will come; they are sick of it.”<sup>333</sup> Union newspapers would have to be relevant, realistic, and connected to the needs of the rank-and-file.

Informed by his experiences in the JSF, Hardman held firm that the union should be dependent on neither the left nor the right. By 1926, he concluded, “The Amalgamated will have to break away from seeking the patronage of either the *Forward* or the *Freiheit* (sic)... A way must be found to talk to the members directly rather than through the papers. A trade union undoubtedly needs the support of outside papers but it can not possibly depend upon that solely.” Acknowledging the importance of the TUEL’s perspective, Hardman called on the union press to “carry on a full intelligent discussion of current problems” rather than being “a society column.”<sup>334</sup>

Hardman believed that the best way to deal with conflict was democratic discussion. As his first order of business, he approached the union’s split with the CP by expanding the role of the press. Hardman suggested that the paper allow members to offer

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<sup>333</sup> Hardman, *American Labor Dynamics*, 409; Hardman interview, 52.

<sup>334</sup> Hardman, “The Situation,” 1926. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 6.

an airing of views and opinions... You may not think that a LaFollette administration will be anything like a labor administration, and you are free to express yourself according to your opinions and convictions or feeling in the matter. Not to exceed one hundred fifty words-- the shorter the better.<sup>335</sup>

He consistently worked and reworked the *Advance* in order to best meet the needs of the ACWA membership. As he wrote to Potofsky in 1925,

I want to get a clearly formulated statement of 'What kind of a paper the Advance should be' from a number of active and leading citizens of the Amalgamated, somewhat oligarchically represented. I have asked Brother Bellanca, Frank Rosenblum and Samuel Levin to answer questions along the same line. Statements in reply to this request will make up a series of articles in the Advance and I am sure will be read carefully by many active and interested members of the organization. It goes without saying that you will be give freedom of expression, within, of course, the limits residing in you.<sup>336</sup>

Indeed, Salutsky believed that open dialogue was the only way union democracy could be maintained. He feared that the battles between the left and the right would spread from New York and completely consume the union. But he argued, "If, however, the unity is to be kept by means of policing, the value of that unity must be questioned."<sup>337</sup>

In spite of budgetary constraints, such discussion had to be ongoing and pervasive.

Through the 1920s, the GEB consistently toyed with the idea of cutting the frequency of publications, but Hardman believed that this was a dangerous path. In 1925, he insisted that the *Advance* maintain its weekly schedule, with eight pages three times per month, and twelve pages once a month, rather than being reduced to a longer biweekly. Highlighting the crucial importance of the journals, Potofsky suggested that they would be able to pay for the publications if they laid off two organizers.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Salutsky to Dorothy Bellanca, October 6, 1924. ACWA Records, Box 32, Folder 8.

<sup>336</sup> Hardman to Potofsky, Sept 23, 1925. ACWA Records, Box 21, Folder 3.

<sup>337</sup> General Executive Board Minutes, May 20, 1926. ACWA Records, Box 165, Folder 3a.

<sup>338</sup> Meeting of the General Executive Board, February 9-14. ACWA Records, Box 165, Folder 1.



As budget concerns continued, the union considered merging the foreign language papers. In 1926, Hillman argued that separate language papers should be phased out, because growing numbers of members spoke English and it would reduce division among nationalities within the union. But the consolidation of the Bohemian, Lithuanian and Polish papers upset many members, particularly in Chicago. Hardman spoke against this consolidation and advocated going back to the previous system because the decision had been made undemocratically, without consulting the concerned communities. To him, economy was “of secondary importance.” The ideological role of the foreign language papers, and particularly, the Yiddish *Fortschritt*, was paramount, because they helped maintain allegiance to the union in the midst of the factious wars between left and right. But by 1928, the ACWA budget had a 30 percent deficit, with ten percent of its expenditures going towards its publications.<sup>339</sup> The coming of the Depression the following year led to the eventual suspension of the foreign language papers, at least on a temporary basis.

Through the second half of the 1920s, the union drifted increasingly into the *Forward's* camp, much to Hardman's chagrin. As *Di frayhayt* continued to attack the union from the Left, Hillman began to repair his relationship with the *Forward* on the Right. In 1925, Abraham Beckerman, a *Forward* loyalist held a seat on the GEB. He advocated “strongarm methods” and had connections to underworld leader Louis “Lepke” Buchalter, who was penetrating strategically important locals. In February, the GEB determined to suspend members of the executive board of New York's Local 5 for engaging in attacks on the organization through a series of circulars and articles in *Di frayhayt*. Just one year into his tenure as editor, Hardman

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<sup>339</sup> General Executive Board Minutes, August 25-28, 1926. ACWA Records, Box 165, Folder 4; General Executive Board Financial Statement, May 1-December 31 1928. ACWA Records, Box 165, Folder 11.

threatened to resign from his post because of the union's growing allegiance with the *Forward* and influence of Lepke. He recorded the bitter conversation that ensued between him and Sidney Hillman in his diary. "Understand it, J.B.," Hillman told him, "if you will quit it will be because you want it not because we want you to quit. You say our politics don't interest you, we don't want you to be interested. So it means you are (sic) resigned because you are restless and don't appreciate your own work as worthwhile."<sup>340</sup>

Although he stayed in his position until 1944, Hardman began to lose enthusiasm for his work on the *Advance* and sought other venues for developing a democratic working class public sphere. Operating out of the ACWA's Union Square headquarters, Salutsky served as the chairman of the American Labor Publishing Association (ALPA). Working alongside public opinion expert Harold Lasswell, Hardman sought to have "a discussion... as thorough going and as far reaching as it can possibly be" regarding the problems of labor through scientific surveys. The ALPA adhered to an editorial policy "of inquiry and friendly interest toward all contending progressive factions and groups within the organized labor movement" and "of activist laborism, of service to the labor movement in all its endeavors to raise labor to a commanding position in social society." Detached from factious politics, the ALPA was a fresh, welcome change from the rivalries within the radical parties and the garment unions. As he told his wife in 1928, he had

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<sup>340</sup> Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 245-7; Findings of the General Executive Board On the New York Situation, February 14, 1925, ACWA Records, Box 165, Folder 1; Hardman interview, 73; J.B.S. Hardman Diary Notes, March 5, 1925. Hardman Papers, Box 7, Folder 3.

derived much more gratification from his work with the ALPA than he did with the ACWA.<sup>341</sup>

With the emergence of the New Deal, though, the labor movement would eventually realize the importance of shaping public opinion.

### **Hardman and the New Deal**

The 1930s saw the dissolution of rivalries within the Jewish labor movement, and the consolidation of political support around the New Deal. First, many Jews fled the CP in 1929, amidst the controversy over the Hebron riots, diminishing *Di frayhayt*'s position within the counterpublic. Second, while the *Forward* experienced economic troubles with the coming of the Depression, its ability to attract advertising helped it maintain its prominence within the Yiddish-speaking portion of the movement while acting as a benefactor to trade unions writ large. Third, the *Forward*'s endorsement of FDR in the 1936 election, alongside the ACWA and the ILGWU placed the old institutions of Yiddish socialism at the center of American politics. Finally, the CP's popular front strategy between 1937 and 1939 quelled tensions between the left and the right, uniting a broad progressive movement behind the U.S. government. In many ways, Hardman's dream had become a reality.

Thus, after spending the 1920s trying to build radical democracy on the East Side, Hardman became quite comfortable with the task of molding public opinion in the 1930s, in order to protect the New Deal coalition against the fascist threat. As the chairman of the New

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<sup>341</sup> Hardman Obituary. *NYT*. January 31, 1968. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 3; American Labor Publishing Associates Aim and Policies, Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 4. According to Brett Gary, Harold Lasswell claimed to be most intellectually indebted to John Dewey, but bore "much greater resemblance to Walter Lippmann." While Lasswell claimed to be "committed to the Deweyan idea that people were capable of good decision making," he aimed towards achieving these ends through the scientific measurement and management of opinion. Thus, we might see Hardman, too, as becoming increasingly interested in centralized methods of ensuring democratic discourse. See Gary, *Nervous Liberals*, 55; Hardman to Hannah Hardman, May 3, 1928. Hardman Papers, Box 4, Folder 4.

York State Congress of Industrial Organizations' (CIO) Radio, Press, and Education Committee, Hardman suggested that publicity should "clarify the public mind" and "seek to offset unfavorable impressions created by misrepresentations of the CIO." By the late 1930s, this was of dire importance. As he explained to the New York State Conference of Public School Principals and Superintendents, "The battle between democracy and anti-democracy is the very essence of what life centers around today." Neutrality was

intellectually untenable... Non-partisan as we are, as a group, and it is altogether right that we should be, towards schools of thought within democracy, we are anything but impartial toward the question of the day: democracy or fascism... We cannot practice impartiality in this matter of liberty and democracy without, in effect, pouring water on the mills of the other side. The fascists do not pretend to be impartial. They are in dead earnest about destroying democracy whether they choose to say so openly, as abroad, or they veil their intentions as their spokesmen and imitators do in the U.S.A.... We want to organize brains for democratic defense.<sup>342</sup>

In this context, Hardman understood the centrality of a free press, not just among the left, but at the national level. In December 1940, he received a letter from Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. Ickes observed that, in the previous three presidential elections, "the great majority of most newspapers advocated one thing; the people did the opposite." This, Ickes believed, "showed an unprecedented and progressively dangerous situation in a democracy," with the press representing the interests of big business rather than "the general public." He asked Hardman to contribute to the volume *Freedom of the Press Today*, discussing and debating the status of press freedom along with over two dozen other intellectuals.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Radio, Press and Education Committee, New York State CIO. Memo to the Executive Board. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 10; J.B.S. Hardman, "Non-Partisanship But No Impartiality in the Battle to Reserve Democracy." At the New York State Conference of Public School Principals and Superintendents. February 24, 1939, Schenectady, NY. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 10.

<sup>343</sup> Harold Ickes to Hardman, December 10, 1940. Hardman Papers, Box 6, Folder 4.

In his essay, Hardman pointed towards the need for federal regulation to protect the First Amendment. He suggested the formation of a public agency, the Free Press Authority (FPA), in order to stop “the encroaching of the newspaper industry over the Bill of Rights.” Hardman believed that such an agency should create a system of licensing or registry in order to assure the free expression of opinions that differ from those of newspaper publishers. The FPA would determine “by the use of appropriate, dependable yardsticks,” the diversity of opinion in the news and, though a court of appeals, act on complaints of violations by publishers. Ultimately, in Hardman’s vision, the FPA would be able to revoke the license under which a newspaper is issued through due process.<sup>344</sup>

“Regulation,” said Hardman, “is intended not to limit the freedom of the many but to check the abuses of the powers of the few. The newspaper industry cannot, with justice, claim that it isn’t an industry in which the public has a vital stake.” Indeed, by this point he had greater faith in the New Deal bureaucracy to maintain a vibrant public sphere than he did in the democratic potential of organized labor. “[A]dherence to the principle that freedom is the prerogative of ownership or ‘special interest’ in a publication isn’t the exclusive characteristic of pecuniary business enterprise,” he wrote. “Religious publications, the labor press, organs of political groups or parties, or of theoretic or creedal groups and expressions, all operate from the same conception that only he or they who pay the piper have the right to call the tune.”<sup>345</sup>

True democratic discourse had become less possible as unions sought to use the methods of mass culture to persuade rather than discuss, to organize public opinion. This was a necessary

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<sup>344</sup> J.B.S. Hardman, “The Newspaper Industry and Freedom of the Press.” In *Freedom of the Press Today: A Clinical Examination by 28 Specialists*, ed. Harold Ickes. (New York: Vanguard Press, 1941), 131.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

strategy, as the need to grow membership went beyond the Yiddish-speaking base in New York and effective mass education became necessary in order to build a movement. That movement, in turn, became increasingly linked to state bureaucracy and with policies strategically set by the top-tier leadership. While Hardman had hoped during the 1920s that the ACWA's newspapers would provide an alternative to the commercialized, increasingly conservative *Forward* and the stridently dogmatic *Di frayhayt*, political demands forced the union to ultimately align itself-- along with both of Hardman's rival newspapers-- alongside the New Deal during the Popular Front period.

## **Conclusion**

When J.B.S. Hardman turned sixty years old in 1942, the ACWA passed a lengthy "resolution." It stated that, "Whereas: It is generally recognized that independent thinking has no place in the theory and practice of trade unionism as we know it, and that ideas, as such, are not only weakening but downright dangerous to the existing trade union structure." Hardman had "stubbornly and recklessly insisted upon introducing ideas into trade union discussion," while clinging "to the false dogma of labor education." Thus, the clever roast sentenced Hardman to "sixty more years of hard labor in the cause of the labor movement."<sup>346</sup> Hardman had made his concern for worker education and union democracy known. But while this resolution was written in playful jest, Hardman had ruffled more than a few feathers during his life's work in the Jewish labor movement.

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<sup>346</sup> Resolution on J.B.S. Hardman's Sixtieth Birthday, November 17, 1942. J.B.S. Hardman Papers, Box 7, Folder 8.

Two years later, Hardman finally made good on his repeated threats, and left his post (now titled the Director of the Department of Cultural Activities) at the ACWA, frustrated with Sidney Hillman's prioritizing political power at the expense of democratic principles. The last straw though, was not Hillman's role within the New Deal government, but rather his continued collaboration with Communists. As Hardman understood it, this was not based in ideology but rather strategic maneuvering, the kind of motivation that he had always found distasteful in left politics. "Hillman was no more a Communist than the man in the moon," said Hardman, "but the measure of Sidney Hillman's approach to things was: Do you gain power? Does it bring power?"<sup>347</sup>

After his departure from the ACWA, Hardman founded the publication *Labor and Nation*, yet another attempt at providing independent, left-centered analysis. There, he published some of the early works of social theorist C. Wright Mills, one of the foremost critics of the mass society. Mills described Hardman as someone "in revolt against boredom in the labor movement."<sup>348</sup>

Mills dedicated his 1948 monograph, *The New Men of Power*, to Hardman. There, he argued that labor leaders were "strategic actors: they lead the only organizations capable of stopping the main drift towards war and slump." Upon reviewing the manuscript, Hardman told Mills that while he still supported the idea of a labor party, "I don't want a trade union owned or controlled party." Within the next few years, Mills came to understand unions as "a vested interest" and could not believe that they would be able to play a role in significant social

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<sup>347</sup> Hardman interview, 67.

<sup>348</sup> Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism, 1945-1970*. (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 54.

change.<sup>349</sup> Thus, Hardman's critique of labor bureaucracy and his concern for democracy set the precedent for the mass culture critiques of the postwar period providing a bridge between the Old Left and the New Left.

The "drift," though, brought upon by the integration of labor, business and the state, had begun in the previous decades. Through the 1920s, J.B.S. Hardman did his best to stop it. In the process, he brought elements of participatory democracy to an increasingly centralized movement. By widening the scope of discussion within the labor movement, he extended the life of hegemonic Jewishness, at once strengthening the organization of Jewish workers and bringing their movement into the center of American political life.

Hardman's commitment to what Habermas would understand as "rational-critical debate" through print could not build a movement culture on its own.<sup>350</sup> Fannia Cohn of the ILGWU understood the important role of aesthetics and cultural production in building worker consciousness. Although she conceptualized this in participatory terms, her understanding of worker education had to negotiate with the forces of bureaucratization, anti-Communism and sexism. With her influence, the ILGWU had adopted her methods to become the most significant producer of popular culture in the labor movement. As I show in chapter five, Cohn's efforts in the field of worker education complemented Hardman's. Similarly, though, they became largely integrated into the new bureaucracy of the New Deal period and reflected the transformation towards the mass society.

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<sup>349</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 3; Hardman to C. Wright Mills, April 31, 1948. Hardman Papers. Box 6, Folder 4; Mattson, 54.

<sup>350</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 188.



## Chapter Five:

### Singing a Song of Social Significance: Fannia Cohn's Fight for Participatory Culture in the ILGWU

It is said that no country can exist without its songs. The labor movement, too, must have its songs, its pageantry, its theatre, in order to inspire the workers in their daily struggle, and fill them with pride in the achievements of their local union, their International or National, and with the larger movement as a whole, and finally inspire them to work for a still better America for all.  
-- Fannia M. Cohn, 1934<sup>351</sup>

In March 1938, a troupe of actors originating from New York's garment factories gave "a command performance" of a musical revue at the White House for the President of the United States. Featuring numbers such as "Sing Me a Song with Social Significance," "Chain Store Daisy," and "One Big Union for Two," *Pins and Needles* celebrated industrial unionism and satirized commercial culture. At the same time, it participated in commercial culture's most popular forms-- the Tin Pan Alley song and the Broadway-style revue. The talented members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) performed selections from the musical privately for Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and a few friends, before giving another show at a banquet celebration honoring the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Department of Labor.<sup>352</sup>

Michael Denning argues that *Pins and Needles* represented "the reclaiming of leisure and entertainment from the leisured class, and the celebration of the common pleasures and ordinary songs of working-class life."<sup>353</sup> But its performance in Washington also suggests the ascendance

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<sup>351</sup> Fannia Cohn, "Social Drama: A Technique for Workers' Education." *Workers' Education Quarterly*, 1934. Fannia Cohn Papers, Kheel Center Archives, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. Box 6B, Folder 7.

<sup>352</sup> Louis Stark, "President Pledges Wide Aid to Labor," *New York Times*. March 4, 1938, 8.

<sup>353</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*. (New York: Verso, 1997), 295- 308; 309.

of a bureaucratic labor movement, the cementing of mass culture as part of American politics, and the transformation of a Jewish working class counterpublic into part of a new hegemonic bloc-- the New Deal. With a cast recording on Decca Records, and songs garnering commercial radio airplay, Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno commented that *Pins and Needles* served as an example of the total domination of capitalism's logic in the cultural realm.

"Impulse, subjectivity and profanation, the old adversaries of materialistic alienation, now succumb to it," he wrote. "In capitalist times, the traditional anti-mythological ferments of music conspire against freedom, as whose allies they once proscribed. The representatives of the opposition to the authoritarian schema become witnesses to the authority of commercial success."<sup>354</sup>

Indeed, *Pins and Needles* became the longest running Broadway show until the success of *Oklahoma!* in the 1940s.<sup>355</sup> Although thousands of union members and working class people saw the play, it was sustained by middle class audiences. Thus, it represented the culmination of the worker education movement that had its roots in the Yiddish-speaking unions of the early twentieth century, while it also marked the domination of the culture industries and their commodifiable forms. *Pins and Needles* embodied both the possibilities and the limitations of the New Deal.

The ways in which these contradictions played out emerged from a struggle within the ILGWU during the previous decade. Representing workers in the women's clothing industry, the

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<sup>354</sup> Theodor Adorno, "On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Ed. by A. Arato and E. Gebhardt. (New York: Continuum, 1982), 273.

<sup>355</sup> Illka Saal, *New Deal Theater: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theater*. (New York: Palmgrave MacMillan, 2007), 136. Like Adorno, Saal argues that *Pins and Needles* offered "the spectacle of consumption as a remedy to the crisis of capitalism" deflecting "from the necessities of class struggle and the responsibilities of organized labor, affirming instead a fundamental belief in capitalism itself" (146).

ILGWU exemplified “social unionism.” As “an outgrowth of Russian Jewish revolutionary concepts of national autonomy,” Dan Katz notes that social unionism oriented itself towards feminist and interracial inclusivity with an emphasis on cultural activity.<sup>356</sup> This provided an explicitly political and non-commercial alternative to mass culture, particularly important as the *Forward* became increasingly intent on soliciting advertising and producing a valuable audience commodity. Thus, Jewish and other ethnic workers operated within a complex ideological matrix, as the imperatives of modern consumerism overlapped with the communal bonds created through trade unionism. As Elizabeth Ewen writes, “If the new culture preached independence, mobility and modernity, the economic context conspired with strong Old World custom to forge an urban ethnic working class culture that sustained family, community and organization over time.”<sup>357</sup>

More than any other individual, Fannia Cohn fought within the ILGWU to develop and preserve the basis of these social bonds through educational programs. Cohn was part of the founding generation of the ILGWU, and the only woman on its executive board despite the fact that its membership was mostly female. She understood firsthand the need for cultural activities to develop a union identity and build community. In the face of a growing bureaucracy committed to anti-Communism and steeped in patriarchy, Cohn aimed to broaden the scope of the labor movement, bringing the union into the everyday lives of women workers and male worker’s wives.

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<sup>356</sup> Daniel Katz. "A Union of Many Cultures: Yiddish Socialism and Interracial Organizing in the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, 1913-1941." PhD dissertation. Rutgers University, 2003, 106.

<sup>357</sup> Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 267.

Under Cohn's influence as secretary of the Education Department, the ILGWU maintained its night schools, lectures, theater and choral groups, field trips, athletics and newspapers during the politically tumultuous 1920s. While the male leadership conceptualized these programs as propaganda tools, used largely to fight Communist elements within the union, Cohn's vision was rooted in what Annelise Orleck calls "industrial feminism."<sup>358</sup> Industrial feminism grew out of the experiences of immigrant women working in Lower East Side sweatshops, as they sought to meet their economic and social needs through the gendered, working class spaces they inhabited and communities they created. As such, it provided a major impetus to organizing and bolstered a socialist-centered "hegemonic Jewishness."

While the *Forward* shifted its focus from class to ethnicity and increasingly hailed its readership as consumers, the ILGWU continued to foster the development of a working class identity through the 1920s and 1930s among and beyond the Jewish population. Cohn's efforts became increasingly important as manufacturers moved out of New York during the Great Depression, and the industry came to rely more on non-Jewish workers throughout the country. By the mid-1930s, labor education took on new proportions and importance as newly passed labor legislation opened new organizing possibilities. Although by this point the union leadership had marginalized Cohn, her longstanding interest in drama as a form of pedagogy laid the groundwork for *Pins and Needles*. Moving past its origins of the small night courses on the Lower East Side, *Pins and Needles* brought the "residual culture" of *Yiddishkayt* into an "emergent culture" around a national labor movement, and ultimately a middle class public.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>359</sup> I borrow these terms from Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 121-8; but the argument about the trajectory of *Yiddishkayt* vis a vis mainstream American culture reflects Paul Buhle's *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture* (New York: Verso, 2004).

While J.B.S. Hardman emphasized rational political discourse within the union press at the ACWA, Cohn hoped to combine attention to facts with aestheticized forms of culture in order to build community, particularly among women workers. Despite the enormous impact that these programs had, budget concerns, political factions, and sexism, worked to marginalize Cohn among the union leadership. Although the ILGWU's worker education movement during the New Deal indebted itself to, and often worked alongside John Dewey, it operated largely within a Lippmannesque framework.<sup>360</sup> Rather than focusing on building a "Great Community," labor leaders sought to influence public opinion not through rational argument but through aesthetic and emotional appeal.

In this chapter, I chronicle Fannia Cohn's career, experiences, and evolving perspectives on worker education and culture. As an organic intellectual committed to the democratic expression of ideas and the expansion of movement participation, she helped carry elements of the pre-war Jewish working class counterpublic through the 1920s. This was essential for building a mass labor movement during the Depression era. That movement, however, was wed to political power and a media logic committed to persuasion over participation. This narrative demonstrates the important role that feminist voices play in developing democratic movement cultures, and the ways in which these cultural efforts can be subsumed by hegemonic power.

### **The Garment Workers: Intersectionality and the Production of Movement Culture**

The ILGWU's history demonstrates how class, gender and ethnicity work together to shape the nature and direction of social movements. Labor historians have paid considerable

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<sup>360</sup> See, for example, John Dewey to Fannia Cohn, March 4, 1933; March 22, 1933. Fannia Cohn Papers, New York Public Library, Reel 1. Dewey also authored a laudatory pictorial biography of David Dubinsky, *David Dubinsky: A Pictorial Biography* (New York: Inter-Allied Productions, 1951).

attention to New York's garment workers since they first organized their unions at the turn of the twentieth century. This was due, to some extent, to those unions' own education and public relations efforts. The telling and re-telling of the history of the ILGWU served as a way to educate new members about the history of their organizations and build institutional allegiance. Thus, the first history of the ILGWU, Louis Levine's *The Women Garment Workers*, was published in 1924 with the union's support.<sup>361</sup>

The industrial hardships Jewish immigrants encountered at the turn of the twentieth century in the U.S. gave rise to the garment unions. The ILGWU first organized in 1901, and rose to prominence through the 1909-10 "rising of the twenty thousand" shirtwaist makers strike, and the 1910 cloak maker's strike in New York. The resulting "Protocols of Peace" instituted significant reforms in the industry, including wages, hours and safety provisions, but also suspended class conflict within the garment industry, angering more radical rank-and-file and provoking dissidence. The tragedy of the 1911 Triangle fire, which took the lives of 146 workers at one of the few factories that did not agree to union demands, demonstrated the importance of organized labor as a check on industrial abuse to a broad public at the height of the Progressive era.

Subsequent scholars inserted the stories of the ILGWU into broader historical narratives about Jewish politics and culture in America. Nora Levin, Melech Epstein, and Irving Howe demonstrate that the garment unions were important institutions within a much larger framework of Yiddish socialism. Both Epstein and Howe detail the ways in which the union became a battleground between warring factions of Socialists and Communists in the 1920s. Howe writes,

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<sup>361</sup> Louis Levine, *The Women Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (New York: Huebsch, 1924).

“in the actual experience of the leaders of the garment unions, nothing was more damaging to their earlier visions that the struggle with the Communists in the twenties.” The CP-supported Trade Union Education League (TUEL) “had one of the strongest bases inside the ILGWU, and also some of its most sophisticated opponents.” Calls for democratization from the shop floor challenged the authority of bureaucratic leaders, culminating in the International leadership splitting the radical Local 25 union in 1925, and an unsuccessful six-month, Communist-led strike in 1926.<sup>362</sup>

But while earlier scholarship focused largely on the union leadership, it paid little attention to the rank-and-file. This constituted a significant gender bias because the ILGWU’s leadership was mostly male, while its members were mostly women. Karen Brodtkin notes that, “If the [garment] industry was important for Jewish men, it was even more important for women, as it was their chief form of waged labor.” Bosses paid young, unmarried women less than men, and believed they were less likely to organize because they viewed their work as temporary until they would return to the domestic sphere upon marriage. Thus, with the turn towards “new social history” in the 1980s and 1990s, scholarship moved away from explaining the institutional politics of the unions and placed emphasis on the every day lives of garment workers, with keen attention to the role of gender. Susan Glenn, Elizabeth Ewen, and Nan Enstad highlight the important role of culture among Jewish women garment workers in fostering opposition in the

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<sup>362</sup> Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarryed: Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871-1917*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 181-195; Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in the USA: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement*, (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1950-53); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 330-41; 338; Paul Buhle, “International Ladies Garment Workers Union,” in *The Encyclopedia of the American Left*. Second Edition. Ed. by Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 370-2; 371.

workplace, the domestic realm and the public sphere. However, they do not adequately explain how this culture was structured by the unions themselves.<sup>363</sup>

Annelise Orleck, however, offers an excellent account of how four women leaders of Jewish labor movement (Cohn, Pauline Newman, Rose Schneiderman, and Clara Lemlich Shavelson) developed a culture of “industrial feminism” within the ILGWU. Industrial feminists challenged Gompers’ “bread and butter unionism,” arguing that unions should do more than negotiate wages and hours, but offer education, cultural activities, health care and recreation. Between 1920 and 1945, these women “labored to institutionalize many of the industrial feminist goals first articulated in their young years on the shop floor” as “they were forced to navigate obstacles of class, gender, and ethnicity that obscured their contributions even as they were making them.”<sup>364</sup>

As J.B.S. Hardman did at the ACWA, Fannia Cohn tried to create a democratic labor movement that included as many voices as possible. As one of the few female leaders in a union comprised mostly of women, Cohn believed that the best way to do this was to build community not through traditional public discourse, but through cultural activities. While the union’s male leadership increasingly marginalized her, they appropriated her ideas but largely stripped them of their democratic spirit, placing the into the context of mass culture.

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<sup>363</sup> Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 61-2; Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Ewen, *Immigrant Women*; Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>364</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense*, 54-5; 119.



### **Fannia Cohn and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union**

Like J.B.S. Hardman, who came to the trade union movement as an intellectual outsider, Fannia Cohn was born into a middle class cosmopolitan family of merchants in Minsk in 1885. Unlike many of the poor Jewish girls of eastern Europe, her parents emphasized the importance of education as a mark of sophistication and worldliness. Cohn learned Russian, and put her knowledge towards revolutionary activities, joining the Bund at the age of 16. When her brother was nearly killed in a 1904 pogrom, she left the Pale for New York. But while Hardman and Vladeck continued their studies in the United States, paving the way towards movement leadership, Cohn gave up her bourgeois privileges. She declined family offers to finance her education and went to work in the “white goods” trade-- making underwear, kimonos, and robes-- which used immigrant girls from a wide range of backgrounds in small sweatshops, rather than large factories, to do very specified low-skill tasks. She became seen as a leader among the young girls in the shop (at the age of twenty years, Cohn was among the older women in the industry) and taught them how to read, write and speak in public. Her efforts became part of a broader organizing movement that led to a three hundred worker strike with the assistance of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) in 1908.<sup>365</sup>

The white goods strike was a precursor to a massive wave of resistance among working women in the garment industry that commenced with the 1909 “Uprising of the Twenty Thousand” in New York, breathing life into the fledgling ILGWU over the next decade. Growing the ILGWU meant not only organizing thousands of new members, from New York to Chicago to Kalamazoo, but radicalizing the agenda and pushing for reforms inside the organization.

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<sup>365</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense*, 22-3; 37-8; 47.

According to Philip Foner, “union women...[expressed] their grievances, demanding internal reforms and a greater role in the functioning of the unions, and participating in the events that ultimately provided them with a greater share in the organizations they had helped create,” critiquing the increasingly conservative, male-dominated union bureaucracy and the comfortable relationship it had forged with management through the 1910 Protocols of Peace.<sup>366</sup>

As part of this broader critique, members agitated at the local level for educational programs. Worker education came to the ILGWU from the bottom up. In 1913, ILGWU Local 25-- New York’s shirtwaist makers-- instituted courses in trade union instruction, as well as the English language, under the direction of Barnard Professor Juliet Poyntz. The local also rented a vacation center for its members in the Catskill Mountains, allowing members a place for relaxation and community development. “More than anything else, the women’s labor movement had done,” writes Orleck, “the education program of Local 25 embodied the spirit of bread and roses.”

Worker education programs expanded within the ILGWU over the next several years. In 1914, delegates to the International convention encouraged President Benjamin Schlessinger to arrange for courses with the Rand School of Social Sciences. At the 1916 convention, the International established the Educational Department, providing it with a five thousand dollar budget. Poyntz was named the department’s director, and Cohn-- who had been elected an International Vice President following her organizing work at Local 44 in Chicago-- was made its organizing secretary. While the garment industry shared in wartime prosperity, the ILGWU optimistically expanded its operations within New York, working alongside the city’s Board of

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<sup>366</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense*, 63-80; Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 374.

Education to establish Unity Centers, offering classes in labor history and immigrant naturalization.<sup>367</sup>

The movement quickly spread to other cities including Philadelphia, Chicago and Boston. By 1919, ten thousand students-- mostly immigrant women-- were enrolled in classes. Union-sponsored cultural activities such as plays, concerts and lectures drew another 7,000 people. "From its very first days," Cohn , "[the department] had taken an active interest not only on the economic problems but the health, educational, and recreational life of its members."<sup>368</sup>

But this did not happen without a struggle. Despite the success of the programs, the ILGWU General Executive Board (GEB) remained ambivalent towards them. Since women constituted the majority of students, and many courses focused on literature and art, they believed that the program distracted workers from real "union business." After only two years, Poyntz resigned from her position because the leadership believed she was too radical. Cohn continued to fight hard to secure funds for education programs, but the leaders denied her the directorship. Rather than hire another woman, Cohn worked under a series of male directors, remaining the the Education Department's Executive Secretary, as the GEB intended to relegate her to administrative duties.<sup>369</sup>

As early as 1921, Cohn was left the lone defender of worker education among the union's vice presidents. She regularly countered complaints that attendance at classes were low and suggestions that the union could not afford such "luxuries." While educational work helped to bolster union membership up to 110,000 in 1923, the ILGWU found itself in dire financial straits

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<sup>367</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense*, 175-177.

<sup>368</sup> Fannia Cohn, "ILGWU History," Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 7.

<sup>369</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense*, 177-181.

by the mid-1920s. They paid their officers next to nothing. At one point, things were so bad that the union could not pay its electric bill and had to shut down the elevator at their six-story headquarters.<sup>370</sup>

With few available resources at the ILGWU, Cohn ventured outside the union's bounds in order to further the cause of worker education. She played a leading role in creating the Workers Education Bureau, an agency affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) aimed at developing programs throughout the trade union movement; in establishing Brookwood Labor College, a residential workers' training school in Kanotah, New York; and served as a delegate to the first International Workers' Education Conference in Brussels. However, Cohn's commitment to the ILGWU prompted her to stick with the organization despite consistent disappointment, setback and marginalization.<sup>371</sup>

### **The Dramatic Aesthetics of Worker Education**

Fannia Cohn, like J.B.S. Hardman, was deeply committed to free expression within the trade union movement. Although Cohn was at once skeptical of Communist insurgents within particular locals, she refused to bar them from the Education Department. She argued that discourse within the union should be "colored by one bias-- that in favor of labor." Worker education was to provide "enlightenment so as to be more capable of using...radicalism." Rather than being a "mutual admiration society," she believed that unions should encourage debate so

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<sup>370</sup> *New York Times*, October 13, 1938. Fannia Cohn Papers, Reel 11; Orleck, *Common Sense*, 186-7.

<sup>371</sup> Fannia Cohn, "Educational Department of the ILGWU," 1948, 31-2. Fannia Cohn Records, NYPL, Reel 7; ILGWU History. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 7.

that members could “[argue] out their ideas with people who disagree with them,” rather than strictly adhering to “any particular ism.”<sup>372</sup>

Despite this idealism, Cohn understood the pragmatic problems that emerged within democratic institutions. Echoing Lippmann, Cohn noted that a union “has only a small active citizenry; most people do not take advantage of the democratic machinery which has been established. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the union keep its members informed of its affairs, since even the passive group, by its power of suffrage, can, if it is left uninformed, destroy all the constructive plans of the organization.”<sup>373</sup>

The labor press would have to play a central role in that process. Newspapers, Cohn argued, were “the most effective means of reaching the minds of the multitudes.” However, the transformation of newspapers into major business dependent on advertising dollars, she argued, made “editorial independence...less and less noticeable.” This created a demand for labor papers that relied on mandatory subscription dollars rather than advertising revenue.<sup>374</sup> Labor papers could therefore provide an antidote to the ideological assault of the business class.

Like the ACWA, the ILGWU had been involved in this endeavor for quite some time by the 1920s. The union began publishing newspapers during the prewar era, with the *Ladies Garment Worker* in 1914. Four years later, in 1918, the union replaced the *Worker* with the weekly English-language *Justice*, the Yiddish-language *Gerechtigkeit*, and the Italian-language

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<sup>372</sup> Report of the General Executive Board to the Eighteenth Convention of the ILGWU, 159; Report of Proceedings of the Eighteenth Convention of the ILGWU, 217, 219. Cited in Brian Dolber, “Unmaking ‘Hegemonic Jewishness’: Anti-Communism, Gender Politics and Communication in the ILGWU, 1924-1934,” *Race, Gender and Class*. 15, no. 1-2 (2008): 193.

<sup>373</sup> Fannia Cohn, “Workers’ Education and the Garment Worker.” *The New Leader*, November 12, 1927. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 6.

<sup>374</sup> Fannia Cohn, “For a Greater Labor Press,” n.d. Fannia Cohn Papers, Kheel Archive, Box 6B, Folder 4.

*Giustizia*. Although Cohn never assumed the role of editor, as Hardman did, the Education Department of the ILGWU was responsible for publications. Throughout her long tenure, Cohn fought to maintain union publications where “the problems, policy and programs of our Union are discussed and an analysis made of our current economic, social, labor, and cultural problems as they affect our members as organized workers and citizens.” In order to compete with the commercial press for members’ attention, the union “spared neither time, money, nor energy in planning and publishing an attractive, interesting newspaper.” While Cohn held onto the belief that the newspaper was first and foremost a space for discussion of issues, she knew this was not enough. Cohn also wanted the union press to draw people together. The single page of the weekly newspapers devoted to the Educational Department informed members of other educational activities in which they could participate and worked to link the newspaper to the broader social movement, helping to continue the tradition of the Lower East Side’s prewar “newspaper culture.”<sup>375</sup>

But the maturation of the culture industry prompted Cohn to develop a keen sense of the importance of aesthetics. In order to be effective, she thought that labor papers had to look polished. The covers of most labor magazines, she said, were “unattractive; there is too much vague matter printed on the cover. The type is small, the paper is thin, there are no margins, the eye tires looking at it.” Further, the contents had to appeal to the workers’ “mind, heart, and ambition” and address the needs and interests of all members of the family through “the tragic, the dramatic, the comic.” Reflecting a broader interest in the use of drama to draw new members

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<sup>375</sup> Fannia Cohn, “The Contribution of the ILGWU to the American Ideal,” 1947, 10; “The Educational Work of the ILGWU,” 6. NYPL, Reel 5, Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 5; Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 106.

into union life, these approaches had deeply democratic possibilities. Cohn expected they would help organize working women, male workers' wives, and young people.<sup>376</sup>

Central to this strategy was Cohn's belief that democracy needed to transcend gender lines. Alongside other women in the garment unions-- Rose Schiederman, Rose Pesotta, Dorothy Bellanca, Pauline Newman, and Bessie Abramowitz Hillman-- Cohn worked to construct the "New Womanhood," of the 1910s and 1920s, which Susan Glenn argues had its own particularities among Jewish working women. Different from the "social housekeeping" of middle class Progressive women such as Jane Addams, who argued that women were morally superior to men and thus were positioned to "cleanse urban industrial life of waste, greed, and corruption," Jewish women in the garment unions based their claims to civic participation on their equality with men as wage earners and as members of a vulnerable ethnic community.<sup>377</sup>

In 1918, Cohn wrote in support of a women's suffrage from a trade unionist perspective. "You, our brothers, will be called on to decide whether we are intelligent enough to participate in the political life of the land, whether we can help you solve economic and social problems which press on women workers no less than on laboring men. If you make a difference between men and women politically employers, too, make a difference between them on the economic field... It enables him to cause competition between men and women in the shops." Cohn's view of women's political participation went beyond the ballot box. For her, the labor movement was the locus for democratic action, to be realized through educational programs. "Only when working

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<sup>376</sup> Cohn, "For a Greater Labor Press."

<sup>377</sup> Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 213. See also Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense*; Karen Pastorello, *A Power Among Them*; and Daniel Katz, "A Union of Many Cultures."

women will assume responsible positions, join in the study of trade union problems and help to solve them, only then will they receive recognition,” she argued.<sup>378</sup>

Further, Cohn challenged many of the prevalent stereotypes about ignorance, irrationality and proclivity towards style over substance that presumably prohibited working women from being good union citizens. Such sexism created a real crisis for the working-class movement as a whole. Female membership in the ILGWU declined dramatically between 1920 and 1924, as male membership increased slightly, yielding a net loss of 17,000 members. Male leaders were little concerned, and insisted that women were, by and large, unorganizable despite the fact that at one point they had comprised 75 percent of the union.<sup>379</sup>

Nan Enstad demonstrates that the middle-class progressive reformers of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) and leaders within the ILGWU during the 1909 uprising viewed female garment workers as too enamored with the trappings of commercial culture and fashion to be taken seriously. Rather than letting working women speak for themselves, they constructed and image of the “rational striker” in the press in order to conform to the ideals of masculine, middle class discourse. Though J.B.S. Hardman believed that women should be active in their unions, Karen Pastorello notes that he blamed them for their own exclusion from union activity.<sup>380</sup> Thus, Cohn’s approach to gender politics was quite radical compared to other worker education advocates. Cohn not only understood the necessity of working women and men having equal rights and protections; she also believed that union leaders had to bring women into the

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<sup>378</sup> Fannia Cohn, “Vote for Woman Suffrage!,” 1918. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 7; “Complete Equality Between Men and Women,” From ‘The Ladies’ Garment Worker,’ December 1917. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 5.

<sup>379</sup> Orleck, 183.

<sup>380</sup> Enstad, *Ladies of Labor*, 84-118; Pastorello, *A Power Among Them*, 65.



movement on their own terms. She sought to dispel the myths that “women... stay in industry only a short time and never look forward to remaining in it,” and that “their confinement to their home and their limited expertise in the social world have made them more individualistic and self-centered.” Cohn challenged the labor movement to give women a “fair trial” and think of creative ways to bring them into union life.<sup>381</sup>

Organizers had to address young female workers in engaging ways that respected their perspectives and experiences. While working women demanded educational programs, they also wanted to be approached in an engaging and entertaining way. Speaking in Yiddish, one female delegate told the International convention in 1925 that union lectures tended to be “too highbrow and abstract” and should be “of a more proletarian character which workers would understand.” Another woman, who believed education programs did not emphasize a clear enough ideological position, stressed the necessity for “mass education, and mass education only,” as opposed to “small group education,” in order to “bring the message of unionism to the great mass of workers.” Concerned that efforts to “intellectualize” members would turn them away, she echoed Lippmann’s skepticism about the interest and ability among the public to make democratic decisions.

When mass education is very well developed then you can give the individual members who desire it the higher and more technical education. But you cannot have workers who work a whole day and a whole week come in on a Saturday morning and listen to a dry lecture and have them concentrate on it. You cannot inspire them properly and have them take it seriously.

Thus, Cohn sought a middle ground that would build an inclusive movement through both education and entertainment. As she wrote some years later,

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<sup>381</sup> Fannia Cohn, “Are Women Organizable?” *Labor Age*, March 1927. Fannia Cohn Papers, Kheel, Box 6B, Folder 1.

It is inconceivable to think how much printed material workers are asked to read and digest, ranging from books to the daily press... to subway advertisements. All these media of the printed word are constantly competing for the workers' attention. Fortunately, even in a world where dictators rule over large masses of people, no one has yet devised a means of compelling us to read material which has little or no appeal. Because of this psychological approach to the problem of the labor press, our International has spared neither time, money, nor energy in planning and publishing an attractive, suggestive newspaper.<sup>382</sup>

The GEB noted this problem in 1924. The union had to compete with the amusements and distractions of the modern world for member attention and involvement.<sup>383</sup> In order to do this, Cohn worked to develop a style of union publication that marked a departure from the didactic, ideologically driven essays or dull "information" about union happenings, or educational events that went beyond lengthy lectures on historical materialism. Instead, worker education would have to comport with the mass culture environment.

For example, Cohn put forth ideas for trying to organize "the flapper." A woman's participation in frivolous forms of consumption and mass culture did not preclude the possibility that she could engage in radical political thought and action. Rather, Cohn understood the need to seize upon the contradictions in working people's modern lives and use them to bring them into the union. She argued,

While it is true that she is easy-going and responsive to the frivolities of life and does not want to be burdened, seemingly, with problems, it is also true that she has fewer prejudices. And I believe that she can respond to ideologies no less than the preceding generation-- but these ideologies must not bore her. We must not paint gloomy pictures of her present life. No exaggeration of conditions was ever successful in a general organizing campaign and it is especially repulsive and fatal with the modern flapper... The most effective approach in presenting industrial conditions is to point out their

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<sup>382</sup> Fannia Cohn, "Analysis," 57. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 5.

<sup>383</sup> Report of the General Executive Board to the Seventeenth Convention of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Boston, 5 May 1924, 122.

defects to convince the flapper as to the necessity of changing them and to stimulate confidence in her ability to achieve it.<sup>384</sup>

Male workers' wives, also, needed to be brought into the movement through educational activity in auxiliaries, helping them to bring politics into the domestic sphere. Women were expected to support their husbands' political activities as informed partners, and educate their children regarding the benefits of trade unionism. This conception reified women's place in the home, but it also politicized the private sphere. The labor movement could permeate working class women's everyday lives, setting the stage for "labor feminism" to emerge in later decades.<sup>385</sup>

In addition to writing essays exploring these ideas, Cohn published dramatic narratives that highlighted the importance of women's involvement in the labor movement. For example, in "Mrs. Martin Sees a Light: Concerning Education and the Workers' Wife," Cohn offered a short, two-page dialogue published in *Labor Age*. Mrs. Reese explains to Mrs. Martin why she should have been at the previous night's auxiliary meeting, where a labor educator, Miss Manning, spoke. At the meeting, Mrs. Reese learned how women could "help in organizing women workers into unions, how we can get more leisure by helping to make electricity prices cheaper so that we can use more electric appliances in our homes and how we can use our leisure time to learn about our problems." Overcoming her initial skepticism about the utility of the auxiliary, Mrs. Martin says "I think I'll be there at the meetings after this and see if we can't make our lodge really do something."<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> Fannia Cohn, "Can We Organize the Flapper?" n.d. Fannia Cohn Papers, Kheel, Box 6B, Folder 6.

<sup>385</sup> Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 26-8.

<sup>386</sup> Fannia Cohn, "Mrs. Martin Sees a Light." *Labor Age*, July 1927. Fannia Cohn Papers, Kheel, Box 6, Folder 4.

Cohn hoped to draw people into conversation, particularly young workers, “[stimulating] in them an interest to reveal their minds in our press.” Those with more experience in the movement would be able to respond, and participate in an intergenerational discussion. “Guidance based on free discussion is always effective,” she said. “Our labor press can become a great, educational medium, only when it will cease repeating the accepted conventional economic, political formulae and conclusions.”<sup>387</sup>

This approach was at the root of Cohn’s interest in labor drama. As she wrote in *Workers’ Education Quarterly* in 1934, labor’s against against capital was inherently dramatic. Events in labor history, such as the Uprising of the 20,000 lent themselves to be “fully exploited for the stage.” Social dramas, she suggested, should be written for both dramatic groups within local unions, and for the professional stage. They needed to render union history interesting and accessible to new members, include humor and satire, and make use of song and dance, while addressing immediate worker concerns. “Of all the arts,” Cohn wrote, “the drama makes the greatest appeal to man. It is the best medium for making people think, because it is a creative interpretation of their own experience. In a few hours it can enlighten and make the workers conscious of social and economic conditions which would require volumes to explain.”<sup>388</sup> On the one hand, drama engaged; on the other hand, it simplified.

The ILGWU, however, had to strike a balance between the need for democracy and the need for institutional authority; between the mass appeal of aestheticized politics and the corporate regimentation they tended to symbolize. As Steven Fraser makes clear, grassroots

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<sup>387</sup> Cohn, “For a Greater Labor Press.”

<sup>388</sup> Fannia Cohn, “Social Drama: A Technique for Workers’ Education.” *Workers’ Education Quarterly*, 1934. Fannia Cohn Papers, Kheel, Box 6, Folder 7.

democracy and labor bureaucracy in the 1920s became two sides of the same coin. He writes, “If the bureaucracy was a cage of invisible iron, it was by no means one erected by outsiders but rather a more organic outgrowth of the mass movement itself, including especially its most democratic impulses.”<sup>389</sup> But the marginalization of labor education advocates through the 1920s demonstrates that real tensions existed between the ambitions and interests of union officials and the potential power of the rank-and-file. Like Hardman at the ACWA, Cohn struggled to maintain a democratic ethos within educational activities against a tide of centralization, political maneuvering and severe budget constraints, but her orientation towards a participatory labor culture set the scene for a new act on the national stage in the mid-1930s.

### **The ILGWU, Anti-Communism and the Growth of Propaganda**

In the midst of the civil war between the Socialists and the CP, ILGWU presidents Benjamin Schlessinger and Morris Sigman implemented anti-TUEL measures. The GEB declared the organization a dual union and expelled left-wingers, including a majority of the executive board of Local 22. The Communists eventually formed the Joint Action Committee (JAC) and began collecting dues from ILGWU members. Rather than Bolshevism, they claimed democracy as the fundamental aim of their movement. In order to put an end to the internal strife and the CP’s “boring from within” strategy, President Sigman, Morris Hillquit, and *Forward* editor Abraham Cahan created a Joint Board of the ILGWU in New York in 1925. The plan, however, backfired. The Left briefly gained control over the Board in the midst of the disastrous 1926 strike. The CP members, however, refused to settle and eventually lost power. The union

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<sup>389</sup> Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 193.

emerged from the strike near collapse, with a two million dollar debt, low worker morale and diminished work standards in the industry.<sup>390</sup>

Through this ordeal, Cohn's resistance to the union leadership and her lack of venom towards the Left led her to pursue policies of ideological openness within the union. But at the same time, the anti-Communist union leadership sought to use its press to curtail the rise of radicalism within its ranks. By 1925, the ILGWU journals were confronted with the "frequently galling and annoying burden of mailing the slanders and the attacks which the enemies of our Union have day in and day out hurled against it and its leaders in a most unconscionable manner," while "attempting to remain on the level of decent and honest controversy." Like J.B.S. Hardman, Cohn fell out of favor with the union leadership because of her commitment to democracy. Although Cohn remained in her position as education secretary, Mollie Friedman, an education advocate of a less adversarial nature with close ties to President Sigman, replaced her on the GEB.<sup>391</sup>

With Cohn isolated, she had little sway over union policy. There was a severe anti-left backlash in the wake of the strike, particularly apparent regarding the role of publications and free expression within the union. Maintaining the voice of authority and objectivity, the GEB noted in 1928 that the newspapers set "forth all issues fairly and squarely," while "the Communist leadership of the Joint Board carried out its work of disruption and treachery."<sup>392</sup>

Some locals went even further in their recommendations for dealing with Communist propaganda than the International did. For example, Local 80 in Boston offered a resolution

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid, 124-56.

<sup>391</sup> Report of General Executive Board to the Eighteenth Convention of ILGWU. 30 November 1925, 157. Cited in Dolber, 196.

<sup>392</sup> Report of the General Executive Board to the Nineteenth Convention of the ILGWU, 321. Cited in Dolber, 196.

condemning Communist propaganda at the 1929 convention, recommending that “the ILGWU appoint a committee to visit various ladies’ garment centers, study the facts and sources of this propaganda, and report their findings to the General Executive Board.” The Committee at the convention voted against the resolution, arguing that “it might be interpreted as an infringement on the right to free speech,” but “appreciate[d] expressed sentiment.” Instead, they argued that they continue their “campaign of education and enlightenment...until the last vestiges of the evils brought about by Communist slander and misinformation are eradicated.”<sup>393</sup>

By the 1932 convention, the New York-based Local 10 offered a resolution to suspend those who distributed “slanderous propaganda” about the Union, as, according to the resolution “certain elements [had] adopted, for the purpose of obtaining political power, a method of propaganda which in reality is nothing short of the most shameful kind of slander as exemplified by the leaflets distributed in many cloak and dress centers.” While the Committee on Groups of the General Executive Board did not amend the constitution, they offered “certain measures to regulate the activities” of groups viewed as “detrimental to the very life and existence” of locals. Centralizing control over communication within the union, the Committee recommended that none of the issues involved in local elections could be discussed outside of the official press and meetings of the union, and called for a special committee of the General Executive Board to be created to mediate disputes regarding the language and expression used in election programs.<sup>394</sup>

The war with the CP put the union deep into the red. In order to address financial concerns, ILGWU leaders determined to decrease the volume of media they produced. “[A]s a

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<sup>393</sup>Report of Proceedings, Twentieth Biennial Convention of the ILGWU, 183. Cited in Dolber, 196.

<sup>394</sup>Report of Proceedings, Twenty First Biennial Convention of the ILGWU, 59; 303-04. Cited in Dolber, 197.

matter of economy,” the GEB shrank the size of its journals by four pages in 1925. They recommended the change be permanent. As a remedy, they suggested reliance on “mass education” activities, which would yield a greater return on investment. Three years later, they called for further reduction on spending on journals, which cost the union \$70,000 a year. Rather than publish these newspapers and offer a unique perspective, the GEB argued that since other publications, particularly the *Forward*, offered a “thorough and fair account” of union activities, *Justice*, *Gerechtigkeit*, and *Giustizia* were less important, their role replicating the work of other publications.<sup>395</sup>

Following the 1926 strike, fiscal constraints forced the Educational Department to limit its activities. Cohn noted years later that during “these trying times the teachers, devoted to the ideals of workers’ education, considered the functioning of the Department so important that they continued to render their services without compensation.” She herself was no exception. In spite of a shrinking budget and limited political influence, Cohn never gave up on the ILGWU’s educational work. At times she tried to put a positive spin on her difficult situation. Writing to one friend, she noted, “At a time when the minds of many of our people are poisoned and there is hatred towards anything official, I find that I am more effective and more useful in our organization because I am not responsible for an administration policy. This makes it easier for me to enlighten our members on their imaginary notions about the organization and to convince them where they are wrong.”<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Report of the General Executive Board of the Eighteenth Convention of the ILGWU, 157. Cited in Dolber, 196.

<sup>396</sup> Fannia Cohn, “Analysis,” 33. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 5; Cohn to Florence C. Thorne, June 24, 1926. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 4.



But this came at a price. By the late 1920s, Cohn suffered from severe depression and experienced mental and physical breakdowns. She was working long hours and paying many union expenses out of her own pocket, likely with the assistance of her well-to-do family. She explained to one correspondent,

You realize that when one has to do the administrative work with one assistant, and has to carry on all the work of our Educational Department, there is not much time left at one's disposal for writing. I used to write my own articles, but I am not doing this any longer. I have not enough time or a calm enough disposition for it now. Lately, I invite a young lady to come in several hours a week and I dictate the article to her. You know how I like to discuss the subject matter with a person who responds before I write an article. I pay for this myself, although I realize as you and many others do that it really is and should be a part of our educational activities. I do it for two reasons, first because the International is not in a position to make additional expenses. Secondly, I am influenced by my interest in this subject, and I am willing to go to this expense, although it is hard on me.<sup>397</sup>

Following the Hebron riots in 1929, however, the CP exercised relatively little power within Jewish labor circles. *Di frayhayt* did not reflect the counterpublic's emerging sympathy towards the Zionist cause, keeping in line with CP doctrine and spurring protests at the newspaper's headquarters. Thus, Communism become increasingly marginalized as the *Forward* had secured its dominance within the counterpublic through its successful soliciting of advertising. Further, the ILGWU "slid toward dissolution as membership and financing withered away." Cohn's calls to keep alive the union's "soul" seemed frivolous to leaders who saw educational work as tangential to the organization's core mission. This changed in 1933, when the New Deal spurred renewed demand for educational programs. While Cohn continued to be marginalized within the International, her interest in dramatics culminated in the production of *Pins and Needles*. But rather than emphasizing member participation and community, labor's

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<sup>397</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense*, 192; Cohn to John, April 14, 1927. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 4. See also Cohn to John, November 4, 1927; August 13, 1928. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 4.

cultural activities through the 1930s and into the 1940s increasingly took on the characteristics of mass culture. This transformation was intertwined with growing concerns about the role of public opinion in democratic societies.

### **The New Deal and the Battle for Public Opinion**

During the New Deal era, the ILGWU aimed to extend worker education far beyond its roots in New York's Yiddish-speaking communities, putting it in the service of mass organizing at the national level. The growth of the union bureaucracy in the 1920s placed the garment union leaders in excellent positions with Roosevelt's 1932 election. FDR had established positive relationships with the ILGWU as governor of New York, and Eleanor Roosevelt had been a long time supporter of progressive reforms that helped working women. The president's appointment of Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) leader Frances Perkins to Secretary of Labor, and of Sidney Hillman to the National Industrial Recovery Board indicated a possibility working people to have a real influence on the national agenda, as labor leaders "drew closer to the inner sanctum of the new regime."<sup>398</sup>

Early New Deal legislation aimed to save industry and provide new worker protections. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) offered a great hope to unions, creating the National Recovery Administration (NRA) to regulate industry and granting federal collective bargaining rights to workers in 1933. The law's passage enabled tremendous growth in trade union organizing. The garment unions took particular advantage of the new law. The ILGWU led

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<sup>398</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense*, 141-160; Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 284.

a strike throughout the northeast that year. By 1938, it had grown fourfold to 225,000 members.<sup>399</sup>

“The NRA,” Cohn wrote, “was a bright sun on the horizon, signaling the dawn of a new era in the history of the International. Fired by a new enthusiasm, the young workers swarmed to the banners of unionism.” But despite the unprecedented access labor leaders enjoyed to the new administration, Cohn understood that legislation would not do the work of organizing alone. Organizing possibilities produced anxieties for long time leaders. New unionists, “NRA Babies,” needed to be educated in the history and practices of their organizations. Cohn argued that while legislation could, at best, assure rights, labor education was more important than ever given the “rapid growth in membership.” “The raw recruits,” she claimed,

frequently do not know how to conduct a meeting, or how to draw up demands to begin to bargain. They are ignorant of the history of their union and of the movement as a whole, and their knowledge of the theories behind the movement is so elementary that they may be a prey to propaganda of employers or even fascistic groups.”<sup>400</sup>

Indeed, the NRA raised labor’s hopes, other events of 1933 raised the specter of fear. With Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, and the popularity of right-wing populists such as Father Coughlin in the United States, unionists understood that the stakes were high. This was particularly true of Jewish labor leaders, who believed that the failure of the labor movement could mean a sharp turn towards anti-Semitism. While the new membership of the garment unions was mostly non-Jewish and American-born, Cohn believed it was important that Jews continue “to fight for social justice, for the necessary changes in our economic and social

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<sup>399</sup> *New York Times*, October 13, 1938, Cohn Papers, Reel 11. Also of note, the ACWA gained 50,000 new members in 1933 and 1934. By 1934, the trade union movement as a whole had fully recovered the membership it had lost since 1923, now representing 33 percent of the American workforce. Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 292-3.

<sup>400</sup> Fannia Cohn, “Educational Department Report,” 1942, 34. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 13; Fannia Cohn, “Labor’s Best Tool,” *New Republic*, January 30, 1935. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 6.

structure, which will prevent a clash between the social forces which will bring about fascism in this country. The Jews will be the first to suffer no matter under what name they are known or in what industry they are engaged.”<sup>401</sup> Thus, rather than focusing on building community, the garment unions saw the need to speak to the public writ large. This meant communicating within the dominant media and framing issues in such a way that they would resonate with non-union members and the middle class.

But attention towards the general public came at the expense of developing an independent union culture, Jewish or otherwise. In 1928, as the ILGWU decreased the size of their own newspapers, it also appointed Paul Dembitzer, a former lecturer of the Workmen’s Circle to direct a propaganda department and Richard Rohman, to promote the union in the English-language press. By the time of the New Deal, the ILGWU had founded its Publicity Department, helping it become “one of the best known labor organizations in America.” Through cooperation with “leading writers in the preparation of articles and photographic displays for many leading journals of opinion and illustrated magazines,” it helped “remove prejudices and antagonisms in some communities where labor unions in the past [had been] treated with either suspicion or open enmity.”<sup>402</sup>

Despite her general proclivities toward local education, Cohn had long believed that the union needed to counter conservatives’ claims, playing a defensive game in the national court of public opinion. “These publicity men,” she wrote in the 1920s, “using inaccurate figures if accurate ones will not do, point out to the public the increased production made possible under

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<sup>401</sup> Fannia Cohn, Notes on Jewish labor. October 22, 1936. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 5.

<sup>402</sup> Report of the General Executive Board to the Nineteenth Convention of the ILGWU, 314; Report of the General Executive Board to the Twenty Fourth Convention of the ILGWU, 148-9. Cited in Dolber, 197-8.

the company union system. They attack the trade unions for curtailing production and though they base their attacks on mere guesses, their brisk talk impresses the public mind.” In order to mitigate the harm done, Cohn advocated reliance on “the facts about labor movement achievements, policies, problems, aims. The facts exist, we must assemble them and make them widely known that trade unions and the public may know the truth and organizers and active members be armed against the poisonous propaganda carried on by company union advocates.”<sup>403</sup>

Ultimately, though, Cohn maintained that true democracy arose from its enactment in communal spaces. Disgusted with the “age of publicity,” Cohn was concerned about the disregard for verifiable information. “Gradually the policy ‘the public be damned’ has been superseded by the policy ‘It is not enough to be right. We must also seem right.’” Polling data, Cohn argued, hampered the democratic process and obfuscated “the factors that influence the making of public opinion.” She wrote,

There is something not only pathetic but indicative of a basic weakness in polls’ conception of democracy in the stories of those who tell interviewers they could give a ‘better answer’ to the question if only they had time to read up a bit or think things over. It is precisely the reading up and thinking over which are the essence of political participation and which makes politics and educational experience play almost no part in the process.<sup>404</sup>

Thus, Cohn was always most passionate about the humanistic elements of worker education. She hoped that the new organizing environment would bring her greater recognition and inclusion of her perspectives. Although David Dubinsky, the new ILGWU president elected

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<sup>403</sup> Fannia Cohn, “Company unions and workers education.” *Labor Age*, October 1926. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 11.

<sup>404</sup> Fannia Cohn, “Publicity,” n.d. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 11; Fannia Cohn, “Public Opinion,” n.d. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 6.

in 1932, was thought to be a departure from his predecessors in his support of worker education, he placed Mark Starr, a British minister's son who had been an instructor at Brookwood Labor College, in charge of the union's educational efforts. Disappointed with Dubinsky's decision, Cohn wrote to a friend, "Cooperation is the first and most important principle of the labor movement. Not only is it easy for me to cooperate with people but I cannot work otherwise...I never treated the union as my personal property. Furthermore there are so many problems to be solved in the Educational Department, which can best be done by two persons."<sup>405</sup>

Starr did oversee the Department's expansion, but in a different manner than Cohn might have hoped. As the number of organized workers grew rapidly from 3 million in 1936 to 7 million in 1938, Starr noted that worker education had "made an even greater proportionate increase because the CIO unions have seen the need for it more clearly than did the old-line unions and have made provision accordingly." The ILGWU programs, in particular, had grown to include 20,000 students in 553 classes and groups throughout the country, and educational directors at twenty five locals. The emphasis here, however, was on "programs of mass education." Starr expected these programs-- including movies, radio shows, and live dramatic performances, to reach 265,000 members in 1938. In addition, the union restored publication of pamphlets in full force, producing 40 new items of which 145,000 copies were sold and distributed from 1934 and 1936.<sup>406</sup>

The rise of top-down organization and communication methods were anathema to the early Jewish working class counterpublic's intimate community building. Cohn, though, was simply not at home in the New Deal environment. As Leon Stein, one of the editors of *Justice*,

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<sup>405</sup> Cohn to Bertha, April 24, 1935. Fannia Cohn Records, NYPL, Reel 4.

<sup>406</sup> Mark Starr, "Worker's Education- CIO Model." Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 11.

noted, she was frustrated by the turn away from East Side intellectualism. “The emphasis now became more on Pennsylvania than New York...Fannia couldn’t handle it.”<sup>407</sup> As the ILGWU made greater strides towards building a national labor culture, Cohn found herself at the margins of her own union.

### **The Labor Stage and Mass Media in the New Deal**

Despite her dissatisfaction with Starr’s approach, Cohn continued to design educational programs that reflected her love of the arts. During the 1930s, she wrote plays that could be produced by local unions and enacted by amateur talent drawn from the membership. These efforts were quite successful. ILGWU Players’ groups formed and presented her play “All for One,” throughout the country, from Camden, New Jersey to Decatur, Illinois to San Francisco. A Spanish translation of the play was also performed on the radio in Los Angeles. Cohn eagerly sent scripts to local presidents, telling them to expect more plays in the future. Continuing to emphasize industrial feminist themes, “All for One” dealt

with the life of a working woman who at the time of her marriage was intellectually superior to the man. She was the “smarter” of the two, according to their friends. Both continued to work. But the husband had a measure of leisure and devoted some of it to his union, through which he functioned. This helped him in his development. But the wife, after a day’s work in the factory, began her second shift at home. She could not spare the time for personal development. As a consequence, they did not share in each other’s experience and no companionship developed between them.

Of course, the discovery of worker education transforms the woman’s life. Cohn crafted her plays with predictability and clarity. She and her co-author, Irwin Swerdlow, commented,

In writing our plays, we were faced with the following questions: whether these were to be for a sophisticated audience, who was already convinced; or whether we were

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<sup>407</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense*, 194.

to consider the new recruits of our union-- the many tens of thousands throughout the country, who had no previous experience in the labor movement and of course, did not , as yet, know anything about labor dramatics-- in a word, workers who needed a new orientation. We decided upon the latter.<sup>408</sup>

Cohn insisted that labor plays use “short sentences” and “effective language.” Eschewing abstraction, she claimed, “A play should be so clear that one coming late into a theatre may take up the thread of the action. What the author knows he should be able to tell clearly and simply. No well written play is above the understanding of the boy in the gallery.” This, however, did not make the plays any less meaningful.

The idea is held by many writers that the purpose of the drama is merely entertainment. A drama must certainly entertain, or it fails; but it is a shallow assumption that proclaims as its only function. The drama should appeal to the heart and to the mind. If all there was to the drama was amusement, then we should have clowns instead of actors. A serious and entertaining drama cannot be otherwise but instructive. It is a supplement to life. Its potentialities are immense. Its influence need not be examined but it exists. We know that it can affect the moral and political life of a nation. The drama can preach and teach.

Although Cohn emphasized that the union needed to “believe in playing and singing,” this was always with a highly strategic purpose of member education. Under Starr’s direction, the strategy shifted towards gaining public influence as he became the chairman of the artistic center of the labor movement during the late 1930s-- the ILGWU’s Labor Stage. The idea for the Labor Stage emerged in 1935. Max Danish, editor of *Justice*, expressed to Sidney Hillman the need for “a genuine labor theatre” that was neither commercial nor influenced by “political groups.” By November the leaders of garment worker movement had formed a board of directors under Julius Hochman of the ILGWU. “Labor Stage marks the entrance of Organized Labor into the American Theatre,” proclaimed Hochman. “For the first time in its history labor will

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<sup>408</sup> Letter from Cohn, June 25, 1935; Cohn to Margaret Gully, August 6, 1935; Cohn to Caroline Burke, June 24, 1936. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 4.



endeavor to create and maintain a theatre and develop a Drama as part of its general social and cultural movement to express the aims and ideals of organized workers.”<sup>409</sup>

But the project was also the product of a new and tenuous alliance between organized labor and the state. Labor Stage received funding, in part, through the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Theater Project (FTP). A controversial New Deal program that faced tremendous battles until it was cut in 1939, the FTP employed approximately ten thousand theatrical workers in twenty states by 1937, including four thousand in New York. Existing for the dual purposes of creating employment in the theater industry and bringing affordable entertainment to the working class, the FTP funded a diverse array of theatrical productions, from the dramatic to the comedic, from vaudeville to the avant garde.<sup>410</sup>

In December 1936, the Labor Stage debuted with a New York production of John Wexley’s *Steel*, a play depicting the efforts of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). The cast was comprised of amateurs, members of ILGWU Local 10 who had rehearsed for six months. Labor Stage guaranteed a “professional aspect” by hiring professional directors and set designers. At the request of Clinton Golden, the SWOC Northeastern Regional Director, Starr began to plan a tour of the production through the steel towns early in 1937. Starr noted that the ILGWU had spent a “considerable sum” on the New York production, and needed to raise money “to bring the tour into the centers where thousands of steel workers will see it, and where it

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<sup>409</sup> Max Danish, Lyons and Shore to Sidney Hillman. Sept 10, 1935. ACWA Records, Box 71, Folder 6; Julius Hochman to Dorothy Bellanca, November 13, 1935. ACWA Records, Box 30, Folder 37.

<sup>410</sup> Hallie Flanagan, “Federal Theater Project,” February 17, 1936. Fannia M. Cohn Papers, Kheel, Box 6A, Folder 2.

rightfully belongs.” In Starr’s view, the play would serve a highly pragmatic end, sharing “labor’s point of view” with workers in the midst of a massive organizing drive.<sup>411</sup>

The committee scheduled performances in 32 cities throughout Pennsylvania, Ohio and the industrial midwest, on a budget of \$10,450, projecting losses of \$5200. Although they agreed to do the production on a non-professional basis, they sought the sanction of Actors’ Equity and the Stagehands Union, and developed a promotional strategy for the play. Wexley suggested that important columnists such as Newspaper Guild founder Heywood Broun be invited to the production in order to generate popular interest.<sup>412</sup>

But while the union’s focus with *Steel* was to build support for the CIO’s organizing campaign, the Labor Stage’s follow-up, *Pins and Needles*, was less tied to a specific organizing goal and more towards shaping the general public’s view of the ILGWU, the labor movement and the broad New Deal agenda. Premiering in November 1937, Starr dubbed the play “a horse of another color.” Although the union prided itself on the fact that “every member of the cast was recruited from behind a sewing machine, a shipping cart, or a cutting table,” *Pins and Needles* marked a new emphasis away from developing relationships among union members, and towards swaying public opinion. As performances moved from being weekend only to nightly, and as the production gained critical acclaim, the audience composition shifted towards the middle class. Spurring two companies that went on the road for four years, the play ran until May 1941. World events then prompted a reworking resulting in *New Pins and Needles*, marking labor’s support for the war effort. The New York production ran for 1200 performances and raised \$1.5 million

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<sup>411</sup> “Wexley’s “Steel” to Tour Steel Regions,” Press Release, n.d. Mark Starr Papers, Tamiment Library, NYU, Box 5, Folder 5. Golden to Shaffer, January 25, 1937. Mark Starr Papers. Box 5, Folder 5; Starr to Labor Groups, February 18, 1937. Mark Starr Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

<sup>412</sup> Minutes of Sub-Committee on the Itinerary and the Tour of “Steel,” February 10, 1937; Wexley to Schaffer, March 5, 1937. Mark Starr Papers, Box 5, Folder 5.

in box office receipts. Its success made clear to Dubinsky that it was critical for labor unions to cultivate “sound public relations.”<sup>413</sup>

Rather than creating drama based in fact that could both inform and entertain, *Pins and Needles* fostered an affective relationship with its audience. Using parody and satire, the play poked fun at the far right, fascist dictators, corporate America, and consumer culture. On the one hand, as Michael Denning suggests, this reflected the broad progressive agenda of the Popular Front, solidifying interclass alliances within the new hegemonic bloc. But it also marked a departure from Cohn’s commitment to using drama to communicate factual information. Showing favor for the dramatic at the expense of the empirical, Mark Starr noted, “[the song] ‘Nobody Makes a Pass at Me’...is more effective in debunking the ads claiming to give ‘it’ than a whole volume of Consumer’s Union research reports.” Rather than engaging in worker education in any traditional sense, *Pins and Needles* “was fundamentally a song cycle about working-class romance, a gentle parody of ‘moon songs and June songs’ and their place in working-class life,” combining vaudeville with experimental Brechtian theater.<sup>414</sup>

As *Pins and Needles* garnered success, its producers compromised much of the show’s critique. Composer Harold Rome insisted to NBC that the show’s most successful song, “Sunday in the Park,” was completely apolitical, despite the fact that Michael Denning argues that it embodies a class critique. Further, the recordings of some songs had to be altered in order to garner airplay.<sup>415</sup> Rather than promoting the labor movement through historical dramatization, or

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<sup>413</sup> Mark Starr, “A Union Accepts Youth’s Challenge.” Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 11; David Dubinsky and A.H. Raskin, *David Dubinsky: A Life with Labor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 189. Cited in Sara U. Douglas, *Labor’s New Voice: Union’s and the Mass Media*. (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986), 55.

<sup>414</sup> Mark Starr, “A Union Accepts Youth’s Challenge,” Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 11; Denning, *Cultural Front*, 229.

<sup>415</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 308.

realistic portrayals of everyday situations of workers, the ILGWU aimed to build positive public perception through a politically acceptable medium.

For director Louis Schaffer, this meant minimizing the Jewishness of its cast, in an effort to demonstrate the union's true Americanness. According to Dan Katz, through the show's national tour, Schaffer weeded out actors with thick Jewish accents, replaced "Jewish-looking" performers with those who appeared more Northern European, and told some actresses that they needed to get nose jobs. In the meantime, the play's two African-American cast members experienced discrimination on the road and were asked to perform demeaning "mammy" stereotypes onstage. By participating in a performance of whiteness, the ILGWU portrayed itself "as suited for an allied relationship with the state: critical but not militant, and certainly not radical."<sup>416</sup>

Marginalized from the Labor Stage community, Cohn was a point person for the FTP's Jewish branch and helped to promote Yiddish language productions through ILGWU locals throughout the New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia areas. Shortly after its inception, though, the FTP's budget came under attack, and its Jewish division was one of the first to be threatened with cuts. Cohn protested this move, noting the project's "great cultural value to the Jewish people of America," bringing "a new audience to theatre-- those who could formerly only afford a movie in a neighborhood house."<sup>417</sup> Cohn's passion lay in preserving the elements of the early Jewish working class counterpublic which had built her union, as the rest of the organization's

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<sup>416</sup> Katz, "A Union," 268-315; 315.

<sup>417</sup> Bernard Freund to Cohn, January 13, 1937. Fannia Cohn Papers, Kheel, Box 6A, Folder 2; Cohn to Harry Hopkins, December 1, 1936. Fannia Cohn Papers, Kheel, Box 6A, Folder 2; Cohn to Philip Barber, February 19, 1937. Fannia Cohn Papers, Kheel, Box 6A, Folder 2.

leadership moved towards representing itself as part of a white, all-American national labor movement.

## **Conclusion**

As an emerging mass communications scholar, Joseph T. Klapper came to the Educational Department of the ILGWU in the fall of 1938. Cohn suggested to Klapper that before he embark on his study of the union's educational activities, he "acquaint himself with the history" of the organization. Within a few weeks, though, Klapper found himself dissatisfied, immersed in what he believed was organizational propaganda.

"Of course, it is for you to decide how you can best learn of the labor movement," Cohn told Klapper. "I thought, when I suggested that you attend a few sessions of one of our classes, that you would have an opportunity to get the viewpoints of workers fresh from the shops, whose discussions reflect their struggles and their aspirations." For Cohn, workers created meaning through ritual participation in labor education programs. For Klapper, the elite attempted to transmit meaning to the masses, albeit with limited effects dulled by social relationships, as he would later argue in his seminal work, *The Effects of Mass Communication*. Ironically, these very social spaces helped position workers outside of the dominant bourgeois culture, offering an immediate environment more central to developing individuals' political attitudes than top-down mediated messages, as Klapper and would ultimately conclude.<sup>418</sup>

By this point, however, the ILGWU leadership also conceived of the union publicity efforts within the framework James Carey calls the "transmission model," the model of Walter

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<sup>418</sup> Fannia Cohn to Joseph T. Klapper; See Joseph Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (New York: Free Press, 1960).

Lippmann. The point of media was no longer to build community, but to build consensus. This conception held within the ILGWU into the Cold War period. In 1950, the ILGWU produced the film *With These Hands*. This large “Hollywood-type undertaking” dramatized the union’s establishment fifty years earlier. It was translated into twelve languages and given distribution through union locals, schools, and universities. The film garnered television time, and the U.S. Information Service used it as part of its anti-Communist efforts overseas. As Nathan Godfried argues, the film depicted “a sanitized version” of ILGWU history that “reflected... the union’s overwhelmingly male, Jewish, and by the late-1940s Cold War liberal leadership.”<sup>419</sup>

The ILGWU also moved towards working alongside the broader culture industry to shape public attitudes. In 1957, the union had offered assistance on the film, *The Garment Jungle*, a Columbia Pictures production. By the end of the decade, the ILGWU had initiated its famous “Look for the Union Label” promotional campaign, with the assistance of the up-and-coming advertising firm Doyle Dane Bernbach, Inc. (DDB), linking union loyalty to consumer behavior.<sup>420</sup>

Like J.B.S. Hardman, Fannia Cohn continued to advocate for labor education and alternative approaches to cultural production outside of the commercial system. In order to promote her agenda, she placed emphasis outside of the union. For example, as a delegate to the 1946 planning meeting in London that created the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Cohn sought to use media and education to “further mutual

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<sup>419</sup> Douglas, *Labor’s New Voice*, 56; Nathan Godfried, “Revising Labor History for the Cold War: The ILGWU Film *With These Hands*.” *Historical Journal of Film, Television and Radio*. 3, (2008): 311-333; 312.

<sup>420</sup> Douglas, *Labor’s New Voice*, 56-65. As Thomas Frank notes, DDB was extremely influential in creating the conception of “cool” that would fuel the counterculture in the 1960s, by using anti-consumer society messages in its ads. By 1961, however, the union had switched agencies. See *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 52-74.

understanding and good will among the peoples of the world.” While mass media had become solidified as a hegemonic component of industrial societies, Cohn still hoped to use it towards democratic ends. “It was realized that these media of mass communication and entertainment may prove a greater influence in making our planet ‘one world,’ than the airplane. While the airplane is within the reach of the few, the movies and radio can be made available to all.” Thus, Cohn’s efforts in the 1920s and 1930s helped to contribute to a global liberalism based not solely on state actors, but on the development of civil society in the Cold War period.<sup>421</sup>

Unlike Hardman, though, Cohn remained fiercely loyal to the ILGWU, even when its leaders showed little respect for her or her ideas. In 1962 at the age of seventy-seven, Cohn was forced into retirement. She continued, however, to come to the international office every day “furiously writing ideas for new programs that her union would never fund,” until David Dubinsky ordered her desk and papers removed. A few months later, Cohn suffered a stroke and died alone in her apartment.<sup>422</sup>

For Cohn, civil society needed the arts. Dramatics emerged from the gendered, ethnic communities of the Lower East Side sweatshops. They helped to build relationships among Jewish, and between Jewish and non-Jewish, working class women, producing new forms of public expression. At the same time, Cohn did not abandon the modernist project of public enlightenment. She understood that drama did not mean a lack of concern for historical facts. Garment workers’ lives and their stories of struggle were inherently theatrical. While Cohn advocated using drama in a simplistic way, its strategic purpose was twofold: it gave information and created a bond between workers and their organization through action. Those who saw

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<sup>421</sup> Fannia Cohn, “UNESCO: Its Objectives and How to Implement Them.” n.d. Fannia Cohn Papers, NYPL, Reel 7.

<sup>422</sup> Orleck, *Common Sense*, 295-6.

greater value in public persuasion than in community appropriated Cohn's emphasis on the arts. They injected proletarian values into forms mass media while making working people primarily consumers rather than producers of American culture.

The most immediate impact of worker education from within the Jewish labor movement, though, came with the emergence of radio broadcasting. While U.S. progressives heralded the democratic potential of this new technology, particularly in the realm of popular education, the rise of commercial broadcasting interests during the late 1920s ultimately shaped the policies governing the medium. By the CIO era, the commercial broadcasting system was firmly in place in the U.S. This did not happen without resistance, and the emergence of significant alternatives to the for-profit format. In New York, the Socialist Party's radio station, WEVD, aimed to offer worker education and democratic culture to its audience. But as chapter six details, the political and economic strength of the *Forward* pulled the station in the direction of commercialism, helping to orient its listeners towards an the emerging mass society.



## Chapter Six:

### A New Deal on the Air: The Production of Ethnicity and Public Service Broadcasting on WEVD

“It is fitting that this most modern medium for the interchange of ideas should be dedicated to the causes of all forward looking and progressive movements... The Debs Memorial Radio Fund is operating Station WEVD in memory of Eugene V. Debs, who was imprisoned because he believed in peace and opposed war. WEVD, however, will not be devoted to any particular or partisan “ism” It is our intention to make this station a forum for Labor, Peace and Progress.”

-- G. August Gerber, 1927<sup>423</sup>

“I wonder what Eugene V. Debs, if he were alive, would say about a Debs radio which gives any amount of time to those who were advocating the election of candidates of a capitalist party but which gave practically no chance for candidates of the Socialist party to present their message.”

-- Harry Laidler, 1936<sup>424</sup>

Morris Novik, a twenty-nine year old Jewish socialist, arrived at his first day of work at Station WEVD in the fall of 1932. Housed at the Hotel Claridge in midtown Manhattan, WEVD had one year to prove itself to the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) that it could operate “in the public interest.” The station stood as a living memorial to the recently deceased Socialist Party (SP) leader, Eugene V. Debs, founded in 1926 at the zenith of non-commercial broadcasting. Before its on-air debut, though, federal regulators had forced WEVD, like many other non-profit stations, to share time with three other broadcasters on the same frequency, while it awarded “clear channels”-- frequencies on which no one else in the entire nation could broadcast-- to the new corporate-run networks, NBC and CBS, and the *Chicago Tribune*’s station, WGN.

As the new programming director, Novik was to ensure WEVD’s survival. *Forward* manager B.C. Vladeck had convinced him to leave his position as the associate manager of the

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<sup>423</sup> G. August Gerber to Friend, November 10, 1927. Applications and Correspondence Related to Broadcast Licenses, WELL-WEXL, Department of Commerce, Bureau of Navigation Files, Radio Division. Box 444, WEVD File. National Archives Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>424</sup> Laidler to Vladeck. October 9, 1936. Vladeck Papers. Box Add 3, Folder 3.

International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union's (ILGWU) Unity House resort in the Pocono Mountains. His new job was to help breathe new life into the embattled radio station to serve the interests of working-class listeners. When the labor leader arrived at the Hotel Claridge, he encountered a picket line.

“The pickets were opposed to the station because it was practicing discrimination,” said Novik in an interview in 1978. “Well, that just didn't make sense to me. It took a half hour to find out what was going on, although all you had to do was look at the people and you realized that what they wanted to do was to stop the station from going on the air or at least embarrass the new station.” According to Novik, the picketers were Communists who had “picked up on a little technicality. It was an old hotel with two elevators in the lobby and one freight elevator. Everybody who went up to the radio station with any kind of an instrument larger than a fiddle had to go through the basement to take the freight elevator.”<sup>425</sup>

The high number of African American musicians playing on the air prompted the Socialists' left opposition, quite literally, to raise a red flag. While Novik was quite dismissive of the Communists' accusations, there is some evidence that the previous programming director, George Maynard, may have resigned because the station did not challenge the hotel's discriminatory practices. Novik, however, took no such action. Instead, in an effort to keep the station's new studio space and detract from political criticism, he sought to delegitimize the protesters. “I knew Walter White,” he explained,

who was head of the NAACP. He certainly knew John Dewey, he knew Vladeck, he knew all of these people...I went after Arthur Garfield Hays, who was the attorney, and Morris Ernst, who was the attorney for the Civil Liberties Union, and told them about us.

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<sup>425</sup> Morris S. Novik. Interview with Burt Harrison. October 30- November 1, 1978. The Public Oral History Project. University of Maryland, College Park, 9-10.

They said, ‘What do you want us to do?’ I said, ‘Very simple, we can organize a counter picket line.’<sup>426</sup>

The next day, Novik organized a counter-demonstration which said simply ‘This is not a legitimate picket line. This is a Communist infiltrated picket line.’ Well, you know, when you put the two of them together, it was obvious. That picket line within a few hours dissipated and we started the station.’<sup>427</sup> The tactics Novik employed on his first day at work were not isolated. Instead, they were part of a broad, long term strategy employed by WEVD throughout its formative period from 1927 through 1938 to build alliances with both liberal and reactionary forces in politics and business in the name of self-preservation and sometimes at the expense of larger progressive aims.

WEVD has been studied under two different lenses-- first, as a Socialist station, and second, as a staple within Jewish American culture from the 1930s into the postwar era. In order to understand WEVD more accurately, these lenses must be brought together. From its beginning, WEVD was woven into the institutional and ideological fabric of the Jewish working class counterpublic. The station was to function as part of an effort to organize beyond the SPs Yiddish-speaking base in New York, and grow a working class movement through mass media and education. As had happened with the *Forward* newspaper following World War One, regulatory forces prompted WEVD to rely increasingly on advertising dollars by 1932. WEVD worked to create programming that could attract commercial sponsorship, namely programs targeted at “foreign language” speakers.

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<sup>426</sup> Nathan Godfried, “Struggling over Politics and Culture: Organized Labor and Radio Station WEVD During the 1930s,” *Labor History*, 42:4 (November 2001), 350; Morris S. Novik, Interview With Burt Harrison. October 30 and November 1, 1978, 9-10. Public Radio Oral History Project, University of Maryland.

<sup>427</sup> An Interview with Morris S. Novik. Interview with James Robertson. October 7, 1981. The Public Oral History Project, 12. University of Maryland.

WEVD's efforts at self-preservation had varying consequences for the future of the Jewish working class counterpublic and the rise of the U.S. commercial media system. As Robert W. McChesney shows, "Elements of education, labor, religion, the press, civic groups, and the intelligentsia created the opposition and reflected a general social dissatisfaction with the contours of the emerging commercial system" between 1928 and 1935, and fought for legislation to ensure a continued presence for non-commercial broadcasting on the air.<sup>428</sup> Despite its connections to some of the most progressive elements of the labor movement, WEVD remained at the margins of this movement. The leadership at WEVD did not fit the model of the policy reformers such as Edward Nockels of the Chicago Federation of Labor, or Joy Elmer Morgan of the National Coalition for Education by Radio (NCER). Rather than seeking to remake the broadcasting system in the face of a state-assisted capitalist takeover, the station's first manager, G. August Gerber, and later B.C. Vladeck and Morris Novik, worked to preserve WEVD within the framework put forth by corporate elites and federal regulators.

Thomas Streeter minimizes the importance of this grassroots movement, and argues that the corporate structure of American broadcasting was already determined by 1922-- that is to say, by the time broadcasting began-- because of the emergence of corporate liberalism as a dominant ideology by the end of World War One.<sup>429</sup> What Streeter ignores, though, is the way in which the rise of broadcasting fundamentally changed the nature of wireless, prompting a host of interests from across the political spectrum who believed that a medium with such strong consequences for democracy ought to remain a non-commercial endeavor. Thus, WEVD played an important

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<sup>428</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>429</sup> Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

role in solidifying corporate liberalism at a moment when it was being called into question.

According to Nathan Godfried, the SP's arguments to keep the license for WEVD during crucial FRC hearings in the late 1920s and early 1930s legitimated commercial broadcasting.<sup>430</sup> However, Paul F. Gullifor and Brady Carlson suggest that the station's arguments before the FRC, and their on-air practices, paved the way for an understanding of the "public interest" in broadcasting policy that went beyond technical superiority and took the importance of content into consideration. As early as the 1920s, then, WEVD was setting the stage for what Victor Pickard has termed "the postwar settlement" for U.S. broadcasting and media, which contained both radical and conservative elements.<sup>431</sup> WEVD's leaders did this by actively pursuing institutional and personal relationships with corporate and policy insiders. As one of the best representations of the political left on the air, this strategy was a key factor in the failure of the broader movement for non-commercial broadcasting.

Instead, WEVD incorporated working-class Jews as part of a broader, multiethnic public sphere by producing Jewishness as a commodity and fracturing the ethno-political identity of Yiddish socialism. As B.C. Vladeck had done as part of his advertising strategy at the *Forward*, Jewishness became increasingly central on WEVD through the 1930s. Yiddish-language programming grew alongside other entertainment shows designed to attract advertising aimed at eastern and southern European immigrants and their families. These shows allowed the station to generate enough revenue to broadcast English-language, educational programming. With enough

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<sup>430</sup> Nathan Godfried, "Legitimizing the Mass Media Structure: The Socialists and American Broadcasting, 1926-1932." In *Culture, Gender, Race and U.S. Labor History*. Ed. by Ronald Kent, Sara Markham, David R. Roediger and Herbert Shapiro (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 123-149.

<sup>431</sup> Paul F. Gullifor and Brady Carlson, "Defining the Public Interest: Socialist Radio and the Case of WEVD." In *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, (1997) 4(1), 203-17; Victor Pickard, "Media Democracy Deferred: The Postwar Settlement for U.S. Communications, 1945-1949." Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2008.

backing from advertisers to maintain WEVD as a self-sustaining business, and educational programs that gave the station credibility with policy elites, WEVD's continued presence helped to shape the contradictory contours of the postwar liberal culture both by bringing Jews and other "white ethnics" into a consumer society, but also by speaking to them as citizens and workers-- as members of a public.

### **Vladeck, Sarnoff and the National Broadcasting Corporation**

As noted in chapter one, broadcasting began as a grassroots-oriented medium in the wake of World War One. The proliferation of amateur stations between 1919 and 1921, and the success of Westinghouse's Pittsburgh-based station, KDKA, demonstrated that a lucrative market for RCA-manufactured radio receivers could be exploited. Like the rest of the American public, immigrant communities were captivated by broadcasting at the emergence of the medium in the early 1920s. Liz Cohen demonstrates that in Chicago, "Almost from the start, ethnic groups saw radio as a way of keeping their countrymen and women in touch with native culture." Rather than isolating workers, early broadcasting devoted to ethnic, religious and labor concerns brought immigrant workers together, creating communities of listeners and helping to unify people from different backgrounds. Within the Jewish community specifically, Ari Kelman shows that even though Yiddish broadcasting did not begin until 1926, Jewish immigrants eagerly participated in radio culture in the early years of the decade. According to Kelman, "the

language barrier did not exist. Jewish immigrants embraced radio and participated in it as an English-language medium.”<sup>432</sup>

Despite broadcasting’s popularity among rank-and-file workers, much of the left’s leadership-- particularly the editors of the SP’s newspaper *The New Leader*-- thought that constructing and maintaining a radio station was too expensive to be anything other than a tool of the capitalist class. But broadcasting excited Baruch Charney Vladeck. He believed that the new medium was the future of communication, and that it would be necessary for the *Forward* to have a radio station of its own. While some commercial newspapers were using radio as a way to promote their print editions, Vladeck thought it might become necessary to rely heavily on the airwaves. As his son, Stephen Vladeck, noted, “My father thought that the circulation then... would wane and therefore the *Forward* needed some other way of communication.”<sup>433</sup>

Vladeck saw broadcasting as an essential component for building working class culture and labor education. “Morris, you’re old enough to know this business,” Novik said Vladeck told him, when he asked him to take over the management at WEVD in 1932. “What you’re doing is going to go out of business with radio coming in. People are not going to spend money to go to Town Hall and Carnegie Hall to listen.” Radio would replace the lively community and educational institutions that had been central features of the Jewish labor movement. “I know

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<sup>432</sup> Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 295-99; Nathan Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago’s Voice of Labor, 1926-78* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 13; Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 70; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 135; 135-8; Ari Y. Kelman, *Station Identification: A Culture History of Yiddish Radio in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 28-38; 39.

<sup>433</sup> Godfried, “Legitimizing the Mass Media Structure,” 127; Stephen C Vladeck, “Interview with Stephen C. Vladeck,” 1974, ed. Alice Herb, American Jewish Committee, Oral History Library. Cited by Kelman, 33.

how you feel, but I think you ought to give up your Discussion Guild,” he told Novik, “because radio is giving it away free.”<sup>434</sup>

Vladeck, however, was a pragmatist and intent on proving the *Forward* to be a patriotic institution. Thus, he saw no reason not to work alongside radio industrialists while using the new medium as a tool for the Socialist cause. Never shy about his ambitions, the former radical political prisoner cultivated his interest in radio through a friendship with David Sarnoff, vice president and general manager of RCA. Although some have characterized this as a “marriage of opposites” between the one-time revolutionary political prisoner and the consummate immigrant-turned-entrepreneur, the comfort with commercialism that Vladeck displayed at the *Forward* and his own pursuit of political power indicate that this may not have been such an odd pairing after all. While Vladeck was reconfiguring the *Forward*’s business model and seeking national advertising for the journal, he and Sarnoff developed a friendship. On several occasions, Vladeck made unannounced visits to Sarnoff’s midtown offices, and the two men arranged for meetings between their wives.<sup>435</sup>

In 1923, Vladeck told Sarnoff that he was interested in moving the *Forward* into the broadcasting arena, with plans to erect a radio antenna at the top of the paper’s headquarters at 175 East Broadway. Vladeck sought advice from Sarnoff about how to attain a broadcasting permit. “I would also ask you to get me in touch with men in your organization who could give me figures on the possible costs and possible types of a station on the *Forward*,” he wrote.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> Novik, Interview With Burt Harrison, 9; Novik. Interview With James Robertson, 11.

<sup>435</sup> Henry Sapoznik, *Klezmer! Jewish Music From Old World to Our World* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1999), 127; Sarnoff to Vladeck, June 8, 1923; July 16, 1923; March 19, 1924. Vladeck Papers. Microfilm Reel 9. Tamiment Library, New York University. New York.

<sup>436</sup> Vladeck to Sarnoff, August 22, 1923. Vladeck Papers. Microfilm Reel 9.



While Vladeck had been a force in developing Yiddish socialist culture, Sarnoff was, to some extent a product of it. Like Vladeck, Sarnoff was born near Minsk in the Russian Pale of Settlement, and was turned off by the religious life of the *shtetl*. Sarnoff immigrated to New York in 1900 at the age of 9, and came of age on the Lower East Side. He enrolled in classes at the progressive Educational Alliance at the Cooper Union, and earned money for his family by selling Yiddish-language newspapers, including the *Forward*.<sup>437</sup>

Vladeck, the newspaperman, wanted to get into radio, but Sarnoff had long been attracted to the press. Tasked with being his family's primary breadwinner by the age of 15, Sarnoff was motivated by the values of capitalism and sought a career in journalism. Biographer Kenneth Bilby writes, "Ultimately he envisaged himself as an editor or publisher, a successor to William Randolph Hearst or the flamboyant James Gordon Bennett...He would craft editorials that influenced or even shaped the course of national policy." According to the Horatio Alger myth perpetuated in multiple biographies, Sarnoff went to ask for a job at the *New York Herald*, and accidentally walked into the Commercial Cable Company's offices, housed on the ground floor of the newspaper's building. Sarnoff was given a job as a telegraph messenger. He mastered Morse code, but was fired when he asked to have the High Holidays off. Sarnoff quickly found employment at American Marconi, where he would work his way up the corporate ladder from the bottom rung to the very top.<sup>438</sup>

American Marconi, though, would soon undergo dramatic transformations, placing Sarnoff at the head of a new corporate structure that would be key in shaping the future of U.S.

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<sup>437</sup> Tom Lewis, *Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 89-100; Kenneth Bilby, *The General: David Sarnoff and the Rise of the Communications Industry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 13-17.

<sup>438</sup> Bilby, *The General*, 18; 18-22; Lewis, 89-100; Carl Dreher, *Sarnoff: An American Success* (New York: Quadrangle Press, 1977), 9-29.

broadcasting. A coalition of corporate managers, military representatives and members of the Wilson administration organized the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in 1919, bringing together the assets of the dismantled American Marconi, General Electric, and the patents the Navy acquired from the Federal Telegraph Company. For Thomas Streeter, the formation of RCA symbolized the crystalizing of corporate liberalism within communications, as companies that had worked willingly alongside the government during the war benefited handsomely.<sup>439</sup>

The RCA patent pool did not, however, solidify the commercial future of broadcasting. Between 1919 and 1926, RCA sought to profit primarily from the sale of radio sets, not from station ownership and advertising revenue. Sarnoff placed great emphasis on radio's democratic and educational potential. As he commented later in his life, he wanted to avoid the medium being dominated by a "damn bunch of hucksters, who let the advertisers run things."<sup>440</sup>

In 1924, Sarnoff shared his Congressional testimony with Vladeck, where he had been on his "feet for four hours and fifteen minutes talking about this infant Radio." Sarnoff explained to Congress his idea to create "the superpower station," a national network that would offer high quality entertainment to the masses to preserve "that element of the broadcast situation which makes it possible for grand opera to go to the slums...everywhere in the world and without any charge" within a for-profit model. "It is my firm conviction," Sarnoff said, "that broadcasting can be made commercially practicable without any means being found for collecting from the

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<sup>439</sup> Streeter, *Selling the Air*, 82-3; Barnouw, *A Tower*, 52.

<sup>440</sup> Dreher, *Sarnoff*, 264-5.

consumer.” In the event that stations charged those who wanted access to the air, Sarnoff suggested that these stations act as common carriers and be highly regulated as public utilities.<sup>441</sup>

Sarnoff also argued that broadcasting must allow a multiplicity of voices to be heard, echoing the liberal sentiments of the Jewish labor movement. Broadcasting stations should be regarded, he said, “as a new entertainment and educational facility for the public as a whole, and as a expression of leaders of worthy causes. No political, religious, racial or color lines should be drawn.” The businessman went on to tell Congress,

Any candidate for the Presidency of the United States, or other high office, whether he be the candidate of the Republican, Democratic, Progressive, Farm-Labor, Socialist, Prohibition, or any other lawfully organized party should, by the very fact of his nomination by a considerable group establish himself as of sufficient interest to a sufficient group to warrant a hearing.<sup>442</sup>

Sarnoff’s liberalism helped cultivate a positive working relationship between his company and elements within the Jewish labor movement and the Socialist Party. Thus, when RCA changed its business model upon acquiring AT&T’s “toll broadcasting” station WEAJ in 1926 and made it the cornerstone of the new National Broadcasting Corporation’s (NBC) Red network, Vladeck and other progressives saw the network as a potential ally in getting their message out to a broad national audience.<sup>443</sup> Already comfortable with advertising from his experience at the *Forward*, Vladeck and Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas would begin working with NBC through the 1920s to get their viewpoints on the air.

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<sup>441</sup> Sarnoff to Vladeck, March 19, 1924. Vladeck Papers. Microfilm Reel 9; David Sarnoff Testimony, “To Regulate Radio Communication.” U.S. Congress, Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries. House. March 11-14, 1924. Microfiche, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

<sup>442</sup> David Sarnoff Testimony, “To Regulate Radio Communication.”

<sup>443</sup> Streeter, *Selling the Air*, 87.

## **Laboring for the Air**

Although the age of commercial broadcasting had begun, its dominance of the airwaves was far from settled. Plans for two non-profit radio stations were underway to represent labor and left-liberal perspectives. The first of these was radio station WCFL. Based in Chicago and operated by the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL), WCFL was the brainchild of the Federation's secretary Edward Nockels. Nockels and CFL President John Fitzpatrick had taken a uniquely progressive position within the American Federation of Labor (AFL) that emphasized democratic unionism and emphasized the importance of independent publications. Nockels saw broadcasting as having "revolutionary" implications, but would fall far short of its promise if dominated by capitalist interests. Afraid that such a system would ignore the interests of workers, Nockels was quick to advocate for a labor station in Chicago, and was unafraid of challenging the powers that be in order to see his vision take root. When the Department of Commerce denied a license to WCFL, Nockels questioned why WEA, still owned by AT&T, was allowed one frequency for the entire country, but the CFL could not be afforded any space on the dial. Following the Justice Department's determination that "the commerce secretary could not refuse a license, assign hours, limit power, or specify and restrict wavelengths" under the Radio Act of 1912, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover determined that his office would now "issue licenses only for stations which are fully equipped and ready to operate." The Department granted WCFL the right to broadcast at 610 kilocycles-- WEA's frequency-- from Tuesday

through Saturday, from 6:00 PM to 10:00 PM, at one thousand watts of power, beginning on July 27, 1926.<sup>444</sup>

WCFL provided an opportunity to begin rebuilding a national progressive labor movement in the midst of a reactionary period. During its early years, the Chicago station received a good deal of support in a number of forms from the New York-based garment unions. They understood that radio could be used to help build their strength nationally. With their long histories of educational programs, broadcasting was a natural fit, and they were eager to utilize and help develop the station. Sam Levin of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) was an original member of the station's board, and the union, which was not in the AFL or CFL, contributed \$10,000 to Nockels' effort.<sup>445</sup>

Other support came from the ILGWU, who were affiliated with the conservative AFL, and whose Chicago locals were part of the CFL. President Morris Sigman offered to support the station through notices in *Justice*, and Vice President Mollie Friedman congratulated Nockels on the station, writing, "May your spiritual child blaze the trail for a large family of labor broadcasting stations, through which labor's message may be carried into every home of our nation." By July 1927, the ILGWU was utilizing WCFL to air its dramatized history of the union.<sup>446</sup> WCFL provided an opportunity to begin rebuilding a national progressive labor movement in the midst of a reactionary period.

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<sup>444</sup> Godfried, *WCFL: Chicago's Voice of Labor 1925-1978*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997) 27; 38-9. Even the CFL had its limits, though. Nockels and Fitzpatrick were incredibly concerned about the influence of Communist publications, including the *Daily Worker*, the *Amalgamationist*, and the *Worker's Monthly*. Fitzpatrick and Nockels to Officers and Members, July 18, 1925. Morris Sigman Papers, Box 2, Folder 10.

<sup>445</sup> Godfried, *WCFL*, 34; 38.

<sup>446</sup> Sigman to Nockels, June 6, 1927; Friedman to Nockels, December 11, 1926. Sigman Papers, Box 2, Folder 10; "Triumph of Garment Workers Through Idealism Broadcasted by Labor Radio." Press release, July 13, 1927.

But New York's labor movement needed a station of its own. WEVD had its genesis when the Socialist Party created the Debs Memorial Fund in order to start a radio station in honor of its great leader, with the proposed call letters WDEBS. Although Godfried notes that the SP's popularity and strength nationwide had dwindled through the 1920s, its base remained within New York's Yiddish speaking community. WEVD's founders-- many with links to the institutions of the Jewish working class counterpublic-- sought to use radio to reinvigorate a progressive movement at the nadir of radical activism in the U.S.<sup>447</sup>

The station would be "a militant voice of the American labor movement to give expression to the aspirations of the millions of men and women who toil for a living." Rather than partisan propaganda, WEVD would represent a coalition of interests across progressive spectrum, a forerunner to the Popular Front politics of the 1930s. As such, the Fund's officers-- SP leader Norman Thomas, Morris Hillquit, and G. August Gerber-- chose trustees from numerous organizations and perspectives, including Roger Baldwin of the ACLU, A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, as well as leaders from within the Jewish labor circles-- B.C. Vladeck and *Forward* editor Abraham Cahan, Abraham Baroff of the ILGWU, and Sidney Hillman of the ACWA.<sup>448</sup>

Like the left-wing Yiddish press in earlier decades, the *Forward* sought to use radio not to develop Yiddish culture, but to grow a political movement. Although the *Forward's* readership was exclusively Jewish, WEVD offered the paper the opportunity to organize beyond the Yiddish-speaking immigrant community, and reach the American public writ large. In addition to

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<sup>447</sup> Godfried, "Legitimizing," 126-7.

<sup>448</sup> "Debs Fund Acquires Radio Station Here," *New York Times*. August 5, 1927, 14; Godfried, "Legitimizing," 127-8; In Re: Application of Debs Memorial Fund, March 3, 1931, 16. FRC Records, Docket 969. National Archives. College Park, MD.

Vladeck's attempts to build a relationships with RCA and NBC, the *Forward* sought other avenues throughout the mid- to late-1920s to get on the air. For example, as Kelman shows, the *Forward* organized a radio concert aired over New York City's municipal station, WNYC in May 1926, and promoted it within its own pages to Yiddish readers, and in the *New York Times* to the broader population.<sup>449</sup> Thus, the *Forward* unsurprisingly became involved with WEVD from the beginning, planting the seed of a relationship that would grow in importance over the next several years.

The garment unions also gave a tremendous amount of support to the project. Most significantly, the ILGWU offered WEVD free use of the sixth floor of its New York headquarters at 3 West Sixteenth Street, near Union Square. Within two weeks, the space was "converted into studios and reception rooms, with every possible arrangement for handling varied musical and artistic programs" before its scheduled inaugural date. The union worked to garner support from other organizations, attending "several conferences to bring about widespread patronage of the system by the workers of this country." Morris Sigman noted that his union was "acutely aware of the importance of radio in the lives of the masses of American workers and accordingly in the lives of our own members," said Morris Sigman. In a joint statement to the press, WEVD officials noted "Labor is becoming more and more articulate and the radio is one of the most powerful means of expression at its service."<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Kelman, *Station Identification*, 44-6.

<sup>450</sup> "Numbers Proposed for Radio Channels," *NYT*. Sept. 8, 1927, 22. Importantly, Godfried (2001) notes that while the Debs Memorial Fund cultivated relationships with labor in order to garner resources, they did not encourage trade union participation in programming, 353; Report of the General Executive Committee to the Nineteenth Convention of the ILGWU, 335. Cited in Brian Dolber, "Unmaking 'Hegemonic Jewishness': Anti-Communism, Gender Politics, and Communication in the ILGWU, 1924-1934," in *Race, Gender & Class*, 15, 1-2, 2008, (188-203); "Radio Corporation Defends Licenses," *NYT*. Sept. 30, 1927, 22.

From its inception, the Debs Memorial Fund sought to create a forum for democratic discourse rather than partisan propaganda. Ultimately, this would serve the interests of the American working-class, countering the elite interests that were quickly gaining control of the air. G. August Gerber, the Fund's secretary and the station's manager, was by far the most invested in building the station and creating a vision for its mission. "With radio as now privately owned," said Gerber, "a station like WDEBS is the only cry in the wilderness. But WDEBS assures to the American labor movement and to all the forces of progress a rallying ground from which to capture the imagination of the American public." Gerber promised that WEVD would be "a unique station" as "a radio extension university," offering a curriculum including English, civics, citizenship, history, politics and other subjects.<sup>451</sup> Thus, WEVD would largely mirror the educational programs that had been developed through the Jewish garment unions in the previous decades, bringing them to a wider audience.

WEVD, however, was just a tad too late to establish itself before Congress passed the Radio Act of 1927 as emergency legislation, creating the Federal Radio Commission (FRC). The proliferation of radio stations and lax licensing system under the Department of Commerce highlighted the problem of scarcity on the airwaves. As a temporary body, the FRC would be charged with creating a new spectrum allocation plan that would serve "the public interest, convenience and necessity."

Edward Nockels understood that this was a potential disaster for broadcasting as a democratic medium. In an appeal to assist WCFL in attaining a license to broadcast on an

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<sup>451</sup> "Debs Fund Acquires," *NYT*, August 5, 1927, 14. The station was named WEVD instead of WDEBS because five letter designations were reserved for aircraft carrying radio equipment ("Debs Radio Station to be Named WEVD," *NYT*, August 22, 1927, 20); "Radio University Over WEVD Planned," *NYT*, Sept 14, 1927, 28.



exclusive frequency at maximum power, Nockels and John Fitzpatrick informed Secretary-Treasurer Abraham Baroff of the ILGWU in May 1927 that the FRC

has power to control and limit all broadcasting stations. The Capital-owned stations are now seeking to monopolize the air. They are inducing influential persons and thousands of listeners to write to the Commission, urging greater power and latitude to their stations, and the reduction of power and latitude to Labor's one station, WCFL.

The Chicago contingent saw the writing on the wall. "Unless we can convince the Radio Commission that Labor and its allied interests are interested in this Station, and that it is rendering a real public service of national significance, the Commission may so limit it in power and time as to almost destroy its usefulness."<sup>452</sup>

New York-based labor leaders, such as Sigman, did comply with Nockels' request for solidarity, signaling the possibility of developing a national, working-class movement for non-commercial broadcasting. But the emerging regulatory environment put WEVD at an incredible disadvantage by the time it had the chance to get off the ground. The Debs Memorial Fund began broadcasting over the foundering station WSOM, owned and operated by Broadway Broadcasters, Inc. with a transmitter located in the Woodhaven section of Queens, in order to garner opposition to the pending executions of Sacco and Vanzetti. Gerber filed the application for the station's own license on August 18. By offering programs with "music and entertainment of real value and possibly, too, of popular appeal" as well as "a means for educational work, consonant with the composition and purposes of the operating group," the Debs Memorial Fund promised to operate "in the public convenience, interest and necessity" by making "articulate the needs and desires, the purposes and aims of the labor, liberal, progressive, socialist and affiliated groups. We believe these opinions necessary to properly leaven public viewpoints and attitudes."

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<sup>452</sup> Nockels and Fitzpatrick to Baroff. May 2, 1927. Sigman Papers, Box 2, Folder 10.

While Gerber said that the station would sell time “if feasible,” he indicated that the station would be supported primarily “by voluntary contributions.”<sup>453</sup>

On August 27, the FRC transferred WSOM’s license to the Debs Memorial Fund, effective October 1, awarding it the call letters WEVD and the right to broadcast at 1220 kilocycles. But by this point, the FRC had already begun lowering the hours and power of non-profit broadcasters to the benefit of the emerging commercial networks. Thus, WEVD would have to share time with stations WAAT of Jersey City, and WGBB of Freeport, Long Island, breeding logistical difficulty in agreeing on a schedule and delaying their official launch by several weeks until October 20.<sup>454</sup>

As had happened to the *Forward* during World War One, the state put WEVD in an extremely precarious position. Although the station was used in important labor struggles in its early months, assisting the Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees and the AFL in their dispute with the Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT) and Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit (BMT) Companies, and was used to build community by broadcasting speeches and a musical program to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the *Communist Manifesto*, the station quickly found itself in a perpetual fight for its existence.<sup>455</sup> While WEVD’s founders cared deeply about building an educational, non-commercial station for workers, some SP and *Forward* leaders were also hesitant to challenge the emerging networks.

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<sup>453</sup> Secretary to the President to Fitzpatrick, May 3, 1927. Sigman Papers, Box 2, Folder 10; Hauser to FRC, April 4, 1927. FRC Records, Docket 969; Gullifor and Carlson, 206; FRC Application for Radio Station License, WEVD. August 18, 1927.

<sup>454</sup> Gerber to Terrell, August 17, 1927; Terrell to Gerber, August 19, 1927; Gerber to Terrell, August 26, 1927; Radio Station to Honor Debs Gets U.S. License, Chicago Tribune. August 28, 1927, E4; McCheseny, *Telecommunications*, 33; “Tries to Block Wire for Radio at Bout.” *NYT*. Sept. 17, 1927, 20; “New Microphone Passes Studio Test,” *NYT*. Oct 7, 1927, 23.

<sup>455</sup> “Labor Crisis Looms Over Subway,” *NYT*. Nov. 1, 1927, 1; “Karl Marx Lauded at Socialist Fete,” *NYT*. Feb 25, 1928, 34.

## Cooperation or Co-Optation?

Rather than placing all their eggs in one basket, the Socialists and the *Forward* collaborated with their friends at NBC during WEVD's formative years, hoping to ensure that left-liberal opinion would still be heard on commercial stations. NBC's executives provided a relatively comfortable environment for SP leaders. While David Sarnoff took as liberal a view as one could expect from a corporate leader (so long as it did not interfere with his bottom line), NBC President Merlin Aylesworth was particularly concerned about insulating the network from radical criticism. He hoped to accommodate progressive voices, particularly the Socialists as they drifted closer towards the center through the "civil war" of the 1920s.

SP leader Norman Thomas came to be known as the network's "pet radical." During the 1926 election cycle, RCA, General Electric and Westinghouse entered into contract with NBC for program service "to broadcast all shades of political opinion." They hoped this would help dispel "the fear manifested in some quarters that the radio would be monopolized by special interests and open to the propaganda of such interests only," limiting skepticism towards the commercial network and garnering popular support. As Sidney Hertzberg of the Bronx wrote to Aylesworth after hearing Norman Thomas on the air,

If the radio is to become a force and a factor in American life; if radio is to become more than a passing fad; if radio is to become an institution with a sound basis, then broadcasting stations will have to offer more substantial programs. I should like to see the microphone brought to the debating rostrum more often. I should like to hear the voices of men whom I am only familiar with by their writings. I should like to hear less of lyric sopranos and of dance orchestras.

You are in a position to make radio the standby of the man interested in the world's affairs, in what people are doing and what they are thinking. You can break the monopoly that music hounds (not Lovers) and jazz hounds have over radio and make the public

strive to correctly appreciate a radio program, in this way lifting the people to the standard of radio instead of dragging radio to the standard of the people.<sup>456</sup>

But cooperating with the networks quickly posed problems for the Socialists. In April 1927-- as WEVD's license was pending-- Herbert Merrill, the State Secretary of the New York State Committee of the SP arranged for NBC to broadcast a speech to be given by Ramsey McDonald, the leader of the Opposition in the British House of Commons, at the *Forward's* Thirtieth Anniversary celebration at the Century Theater. Ramsey, however, was unable to make the event due to health problems and his daughter spoke in his place. Following her speech, the Socialist Congressman Victor Berger of Wisconsin said on air that "the American radio, the church and the press were 'capitalist controlled,'" and quickly had his microphone pulled away.<sup>457</sup>

It is unclear exactly what motivated this action. While newspaper reports indicated that this was a clear act of censorship, NBC claimed that it was a misunderstanding due, in part, to confusion in the schedule and, in part, a lack of "brain power" used by the young man who moved the microphone in the middle of Berger's address. Strikingly, SP and *Forward* leaders took great pains to defend NBC and repair any damaged relationships. Vladeck told Aylesworth, "I happened to be in the office of the theatre at that time and I didn't hear that remark myself. I have explained later to Mr. Berger that this was not the case and I wish to take this opportunity to thank you and the National Broadcasting Company for the manner in which you served us at the celebration." Merrill told the NBC President that he understood that the allocated time had been

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<sup>456</sup> Nathan Godfried, "Legitimizing," 142; McChesney *Telecommunications*, 83; Sidney Hertzberg to Aylesworth, January 11, 1927. NBC Records. Box 5, Folder 28. Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.

<sup>457</sup> Herbert Merrill to M.H. Aylesworth, March 7, 1927; Aylesworth to Merrill, March 9, 1927. NBC Records, Box 5, Folder 28; "Proof for Berger," *New York Telegram*. April 27, 1927. NBC Records, Box 5, Folder 28.

exhausted, and the cut microphone was “no reflection on the fairness” of NBC, and defended the network in letters to locals and members of the SP of New York State.<sup>458</sup> Ultimately, the Socialist leaders strove to vindicate NBC of any allegations of wrong doing, and both parties saw mutual benefit in maintaining a positive, non-antagonistic relationship.

The incident did not deter Vladeck from collaborating with the emerging network, as its executives tried to demonstrate to the Socialists that commercialization and open political dialogue were not mutually exclusive. By 1929, Vladeck began to negotiate with Aylesworth for NBC to carry a weekly *Forward* program. Aylesworth offered Vladeck a half hour of time each week for a year on either WJZ or WEAJ for over \$8,000.<sup>459</sup> Thus, Vladeck sought to use the commercial media to promote a progressive agenda, and to build-- as newspapers had done in the previous decades-- a movement culture integrated into a commercial framework.

In the meantime, it became blatantly obvious that commercial interests did not have a serious commitment to free expression on the air. In one instance, two New York radio stations denied Frederick Libby of the National Prevention of War the right to speak on air. August Gerber wrote to potential supporters of WEVD in the pacifist community,

Such censorship makes imperative that the members of minority groups and persons of dissident opinion band together to maintain a broadcast station of their own control. It is fitting that this most modern medium for the interchange of ideas should be dedicated to the cause of all forward looking and progressive movements.<sup>460</sup>

Further, the FRC was clearly working against the interests of labor broadcasting, defending commercial interests. Vladeck’s and Thomas’ cooperation with commercial broadcasters did not

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<sup>458</sup> Vladeck to Aylesworth, April 26, 1927. NBC Records, Box 5, Folder 28; Merrill to Aylesworth, April 25, 1927. NBC Records, Box 5, Folder 28.

<sup>459</sup> Aylesworth to Vladeck, Vladeck Papers. January 16, 1929; Aylesworth to Vladeck, Feb 7, 1929; March 12, 1929.

<sup>460</sup> Gerber to “Friend,” November 10, 1927. FRC Records, Docket 969.

protect WEVD from the FRC's bullying in the name of the "public interest." Regulators spent several years hounding the fledgling station about its technical problems, pushing the non-profit station to spend large amounts of money to meet its demands, and preventing it from developing itself into a strong political force. This bred a relationship of dependency between WEVD and NBC. For example, Norman Thomas spent weeks trying to secure time for the 1928 SP convention. After explaining to Aylesworth that WEVD might be suspended during the convention, "pending an appeal for more funds for the special purpose of improving its equipment," Thomas received no response from the network, prompting him to write just four days before the start of the meeting,

Obviously your long delay in answering my first inquiry has made it impracticable to arrange for broadcasting this session. It would appear that by the simply expedient of delay the National Broadcasting Company has evaded the intent of the law and denied us even the opportunity to consider terms on which the Socialist Party might use the facilities of the company. The fact that we may be able to use WEVD to a limited extent does not, as you well know, solve the problem. While it may be too late even to consider arrangement for this convention it is not too late to make for the third time a request for a definite statement of the policy of the National Broadcasting Company during the coming campaign.<sup>461</sup>

Thomas understood this was not an ideal situation, but believed it was "inevitable." Testifying in 1931 before the FRC, the SP leader said,

I have been called...Mr. Merlin Aylesworth's pet radical...With all due respect to them and my relation with them, I may say I am a pet radical, always properly guarded when I appear so that the facilities for doing harm when I appear are exceedingly limited and the maximum of benefit accrues to the company for its great liberality in my appearance. Of this I do not complain.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Norman Thomas to Aylesworth, March 12, 1928; Thomas to McClelland, April 9, 1928. NBC Records, Box 5, Folder 28.

<sup>462</sup> Oral Argument In Re: Application of Debs Memorial Radio Fund, Inc. September 26, 1931, 37. FRC Records, Docket No. 969.

Less than a year after WEVD's first broadcasts, the Federal Radio Commission issued General Order No. 32 on May 25, 1928. The order placed the burden of proof on WEVD and over 160 other stations to "show cause why their license should not be revoked" at a hearing scheduled for July 9, or face deletion as of August 1. The SP argued that denying WEVD their license amounted to the suppression of minority rights to free speech. According to Nathan Godfried, this argument linked working class interests with being "dissident" rather than majoritarian, positioning itself as relatively marginal, and thus not a threat to the emerging commercial structure of radio.<sup>463</sup> Despite this significant limitation, however, WEVD and the Socialists were for a moment at the forefront of the movement for democracy on the air.

Of all the threatened stations, WEVD attracted the most attention. The *New York Times* reported that while it was questionable whether or not many of the stations would challenge the FRC's actions, but it was "taken as a foregone conclusion that Station WEVD will put up a fight." G. August Gerber announced that labor unions, liberal groups, and other organizations would register complaints with the Commission. The earliest responses came from the Jewish socialist community organization, the Workmen's Circle. At its National Executive Committee meeting at the *Forward* headquarters, the mutual aid society committed to support the station. Others were also quick to voice opposition to the FRC. The Society of Friends, for example, said "it would be a disaster to free speech if the station were to be closed." Far outside the reach of WEVD's signal, the General Committee of California Progressives passed a resolution in support of WEVD.<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> General Order No. 32. FRC Records, Docket 969; Godfried, *Legitimizing*, 130.

<sup>464</sup> "Commission Issues Challenge That Stirs 162 Broadcasters," *NYT*, June 3, 1928, 16; "Protests of closing order, Radio 'Church' Starts Services Tomorrow," *NYT*, June 2, 1928, 10; "Says Stations Here Broke Laws," *NYT*, June 5, 1928, 22; "Quakers Defend Station WEVD," *NYT*, July 1, 1928, 30; "California Progressives Back WEVD," *NYT*, June 13, 1928, 15.

Several members of Congress also voiced their opposition to the FRC's order in support of WEVD. They framed the issue as a need for diversity of opinion and the maintenance of democratic institutions. Agreeing to appear before the Commission's hearing, Rep. Emanuel Celler of Brooklyn noted that there are liberal newspapers, there should be liberal radio stations. "Take WEVD off the air and you have no liberal station," he said. Rep. Andrew Somers of Brooklyn said, "revocation of WEVD's license might not hurt the Socialist Party, but that it would gravely injure the cause of good government."<sup>465</sup>

By the end of June 1928, Gerber and the Debs Memorial Fund had built broad support for WEVD. The Social Justice committee of the Community Church at 34th Street and Park Avenue arranged for a mass meeting in preparation for the scheduled hearing. Gerber noted, "Tens of thousands of individuals have volunteered to give the Commission the cause they ask for," to show why the station should remain on the air. The sheer number of supporters demonstrated, according to Gerber, that "the maintenance of the station is, to our mind, sufficient proof that the public interest will be served by relicensing this station."<sup>466</sup>

Although 107 of the threatened stations protested the FRC's actions, the press dubbed WEVD as "the most militant" among them.<sup>467</sup> Norman Thomas went before the Commission and explained that the station had to remain on the air in order to discuss critical political issues. Deleting the station would, for Thomas, constitute censorship. "If WEVD is taken off the air and, in fact, is not treated on a parity with others who are richer and more influential," said Thomas,

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<sup>465</sup> "Gets Radio License for Plane Station," *NYT*, Jun 11, 1928, 26; "Thinks Television Available in Weeks," *NYT*, June 22, 1928, 20.

<sup>466</sup> "Radio Net to Trace Balloon Race June 30," *NYT*, June 18, 1928, 12; "Meeting to Protest Move to Bar WEVD," *NYT*, June 25, 1928, 26; "Opposes Closing WEVD," *NYT*, June 27, 1928, 28.

<sup>467</sup> "Tomorrow is 'Trial' Day for 162 Radio Stations," *NYT*, July 8, 1928, 120.



“the people of this nation can truly recognize that radio, which might be such a splendid force for the honest clash of ideas, is nothing but a tool to be used by the powerful against any form of disagreement or any species of protest.” Thomas and Gerber presented the FRC with petitions from 29 organizations, representing 850,000 persons, insisting that the station remain on the air. In addition, Gerber read a telegram sent by American Federation of Labor President William Green to the Commission.

Gerber and Thomas both understood that the Commission was doing the bidding of commercial interests. Gerber noted that, since the creation of the FRC, the total number of stations operated by business interests had gone from 58 to 75 percent. When the Commission called in representatives from all stations to Washington on one day “for docketing purposes,” while representatives of small stations believed their cases would be heard then and there, Thomas suggested that the agency might have been trying to “tire out” the smaller stations. “This procedure,” he said, “entails an almost impossible expense for smaller stations to be required to come all the way to Washington only to be told when the hearing will actually be held.”<sup>468</sup>

The lengthy hearing process allowed the stations slotted for deletion to continue broadcasting through September 1. One week prior to the new expiration date, the Commission announced that WEVD could retain its license. Gerber, Thomas and their thousands of supporters had made the case that the station was being operated in the public interest. According to the *New York Times*, “The commission announced that it will not draw the line on any station doing an altruistic work or which is the mouthpiece of a substantial political or religious minority, but

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<sup>468</sup> “107 Stations Seek to Remain on Air,” *NYT*, July 10, 1928, 16; “Is an Upheaval Pending in Radio?” *NYT*, July 15, 1928, 13.

such a station must comply with the law and must be conducted with due regard for the opinions of others.” The FRC determined that WEVD pursued, “a very satisfactory policy.”<sup>469</sup>

The commercial system being advanced by the FRC, however, remained intact. On the same day that WEVD claimed victory, the Commission denied the Chicago-based Radio Protective Association’s petition asking for the annulment of licenses for stations owned or operated by NBC, General Electric, RCA, and Westinghouse. Louis G. Caldwell, the FRC’s general counsel and attorney for the right-wing *Chicago Tribune*’s WGN station, argued that concerns about concentrated ownership of high power stations were unwarranted. “These charges,” he said, “are difficult to follow. They are, of course, based upon misunderstanding of the effect of high power, and represent the view of those who are not familiar with principles of engineering.”<sup>470</sup>

Through the next several years, WEVD struggled to compete in the emerging environment of commercial broadcasting. While a national movement that targeted the connections between the broadcasting networks (NBC and CBS) and the radio trust (GE, RCA, AT&T and Westinghouse) emerged, the Socialists remained cautious about attacking the corporate giants, even as the Hoover administration pursued antitrust action against RCA.<sup>471</sup> While Gerber and Thomas criticized the FRC, they stopped short of criticizing the commercial interests they served. Within the next few years, WEVD’s interests would be protected by a seemingly unlikely candidate, Louis G. Caldwell.

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<sup>469</sup> “Radio Plan Delayed as Board Adjourns,” *NYT*. August 1, 1928, 14; “Socialist Station Continued on Air,” *NYT*, August 23, 1928, 29.

<sup>470</sup> “Socialist Station Continued on Air,” *NYT*. August 23, 1928, 29.

<sup>471</sup> McChesney, *Telecommunications*, 93.

## **General Order 40 and the Politics of Strange Bedfellows**

While WEVD had already organized a successful campaign to keep its license, the FRC's failure to enforce General Order 32 led the body to call on the assistance of Louis Caldwell to draft a new reallocation plan. The result, General Order 40, was issued on August 30, 1928, and enacted that November. The plan created 40 exclusive clear channels, (37 of which went to the NBC and CBS- owned or affiliated stations), 34 regional channels, and gave the remaining frequencies to be shared at low-power local channels to be shared by 30 broadcasters in each zone. Aside from greatly empowering the commercial broadcasters, the order did two things that would greatly shape the future of WEVD over the next several years. First, it equated the public interest with technical sophistication. On the one hand, the FRC stated that "broadcasting stations are not given these great privileges by the United States government for the primary benefit of advertisers," and admitted that "advertising is usually offensive to the listening public." On the other hand, the need for up-to-date radio equipment and engineers put significant financial demands on non-commercial and non-profit stations. Thus, the FRC masked the ideological bias in its approach "to the public interest" by assuming the neutrality of the technology. Second, the FRC allowed any broadcaster to challenge an existing broadcaster for its frequency assignment at the end of its three-month license. This made it very difficult for stations given few hours to prove their worth, attract funding and stay on the air. Within a year of the implementation of General Order 40, 100 stations had been forced off the air.<sup>472</sup>

The order was a starting gun for the emergence of a nationwide media reform movement that bridged the ideological spectrum. While many of the those involved had an elitist bias

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<sup>472</sup> McChesney, *Telecommunications*, 25-6.

against mass culture, Edward Nockels at WCFL combined a critique of the commercial media system and of class power. A month following the implementation of General Order 40, Nockels began to seek “clear channel” for his labor station. In December 1928, Nockels wrote to Abe Baroff, again requesting support for WCFL in the face of a state-corporate attack. Stressing the need for solidarity before a hearing scheduled for the following month to determine whether or not WCFL would receive its own exclusive frequency, Nockels explained the situation to Baroff with stunning clarity.

This is a Battle of the Giants. On one side are the Radio Trust, the great corporate interests, the powerful metropolitan newspapers and all those who are seeking to monopolize the air-- the last great public domain-- for private commercial profit. On the other side stands Organized Labor, and to a considerable extent, organized Farmers, battling to maintain some measure of freedom of the air and freedom of speech. Never has there been a struggle of more far-reaching importance to the working men and women of our land. The newspapers of the country are being rapidly reduced in number by consolidation and are almost wholly dominated by capitalistic interests. The telegraph and telephone systems are complete monopolies. Now comes this new and marvelous means of communication by Radio, far outreaching all other means of influencing public opinion, and it is being seized body and soul by the same capitalistic group that already has a strange hold on all other effective means of communication.

There are 89 wave lengths available for broadcasting in the United States. Organized Labor, representing not only 5,000,000 of actual members, but also the many other millions of men and women who toil, has asked for only one of these 89 channels, and has been kicked down stairs. It is unbelievable.<sup>473</sup>

Socialist leaders, however, took a different approach. Rather than pushing the FRC to give WEVD its own frequency, August Gerber worked to meet the Commission’s technical demands. In September 1928, before General Order 40 even went into effect, Gerber applied for permission to move the station from Woodhaven to the basement of a residence in the Forest

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<sup>473</sup> John Fitzgerald and Nockels to Abe Baroff, December 15, 1928. Morris Sigman Papers, Box 2, Folder 11.

Hills neighborhood, just a short distance away.<sup>474</sup> But without ever receiving notification from the FRC, they proceeded to do so.

On January 31, 1929, FRC Commissioner O.H. Caldwell-- of no relation to Louis Caldwell-- informed the Debs Memorial Fund that they had never received permission to broadcast from the "crowded area." Caldwell suggested that the station lease another transmitter that broadcast at the same frequency during the hours that station was off the air. August Gerber listened to the Commissioner's suggestion, and wrote to the Department of Commerce in February 1929 inquiring for permission to broadcast over a transmitter in Carlstadt, New Jersey. The transmitter was licensed to station WHAP, operated by the Defenders of Truth Society, a Christian organization with which WEVD shared its frequency. Franklin Ford, the Society's leader, had agreed to the arrangement, and Gerber informed the Department of Commerce, in accordance with a recommendation and suggestion made by Federal Radio Commissioner O. H. Caldwell.<sup>475</sup>

Gerber became even more mired in red tape as he attempted to navigate the evolving bureaucratic structures. Despite Caldwell's recommendation, Department of Commerce officials informed Gerber that sharing frequency was only allowed when there was "a bona-fide consolidation of two or more stations." Gerber then took the matter to the district radio inspector, Arthur Batcheller. "Should any difficulties arise," Gerber ensured,

in the arrangement between the Debs Memorial Radio Fund, Inc. and the Defenders of Truth Society, Inc., or in the event that the WHAP management refuse to continue the arrangements which make possible the utilization of their transmitter by the management of WEVD, or, if the terms upon which they are willing to continue be such that the Debs

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<sup>474</sup> Henry Dogadus to Department of Commerce, September 20, 1928. FRC Records, Docket 969.

<sup>475</sup> O.H. Caldwell to Debs Memorial Fund, January 31, 1929. FRC Records, Docket 969; Franklin Ford to FRC, February 21, 1929; Gerber to Department of Commerce, February 23, 1929. FRC Records, Docket 969.

Memorial Radio Fund, Inc. cannot accept them, then the Debs Memorial Radio Fund, Inc. desires to retain its present right to erect or acquire and maintain and operate its own transmitting plant.

Batcheller then conveyed this information to the FRC by mid-March. By this point, though, WEVD's license was days away from expiration. The Commission renewed it with permission to broadcast from the Forest Hills location, so WEVD did not have to pursue its plan to share WHAP's transmitter.<sup>476</sup>

The Commission and its team of engineers, however, did not stop monitoring the station. They repeatedly issued warnings for technical mishaps and violations. On April 10, the FRC noted that WEVD was broadcasting at 1300.6 kilocycles, 600 cycles off its assigned frequency. Gerber explained to Henry Bogardus, the U.S. Supervisor of Radio, that they were in the process of reconstructing their transmitter. "Our crystal control was not delivered to us until Thursday, the 11th of the month, so that our check by crystal control will not be working until toward the end of the week." Technical problems, however, persisted. On November 29 and 30, WEVD went off-frequency again when it was discovered that its crystal was slightly chipped. The FRC recorded further violations in December. Al Waring, WEVD's chief engineer explained to Batcheller that the control crystal had fractured immediately upon installation, and requiring the station to rely on its initial crystal that needed replacement.<sup>477</sup>

By this point, the United States had plunged into the Depression creating a paradox for the labor movement. While organizing was more essential than ever, union budgets were getting tighter, making it difficult to carry out such work. In March 1930, the ILGWU told Gerber that it

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<sup>476</sup> W.D. Terrell to Gerber, February 27, 1929. FRC Records, Docket 969; Gerber to Arthur Batcheller, February 28, 1929. FRC Records, Docket 969; Batcheller to Commerce Department, March 12, 1929; W.E. Downey to Federal Radio Commission, March 13, 1929. FRC Records, Docket 969.

<sup>477</sup> Gerber to Boardus, April 16, 1929. FRC Records, Docket 969; Waring to Batchelder, December 10, 1929; Batchelder to Department of Commerce, January 3, 1930. FRC Records, Docket 969.

could no longer afford the electricity used by WEVD, and the station would have to arrange for a separate meter or lose its power supply. Gerber agreed to leave the premises within six to seven weeks, in part because the move required authorization from the FRC, and requested that the power supply be continued until that point. Ultimately, the station remained at the union headquarters until the following January when the ILGWU required the space for a Records Department. By this point, the relationship between Gerber and ILGWU Secretary-Treasurer David Dubinsky had soured. Insisting that WEVD evacuate after the move had been pending for a year, Dubinsky wrote “Shall you fail to comply with our request, we will be obliged to place the furniture necessary for the Department and the stenographers in that office...After the removal of the Station we will have an expense of approximately a thousand dollars to repair this office.”<sup>478</sup>

It was clear that WEVD was in dire need of assistance. The institutions of the Jewish labor movement were instrumental in breathing life into the station. In May 1930, representatives of the *Forward*, the SP, the Joint Board of the Cloak Markers’ Unions, the Furriers, the Leathersgoods Workers and other organizations met in Morris Hillquit’s office and decided to call a conference “to consider the possibility of building up the broadcasting station WEVD into an effective and powerful weapon for the service of these movements.” Like Nockels, the leadership of these organizations understood the potential for radio broadcasting in building a strong, progressive movement. As Hillquit told ILGWU President Ben Schlessinger,

Station WEVD has a very valuable franchise in the form of a permit from the Federal Radio Commission which authorizes it to increase its power. This franchise will become more valuable as time goes on and as radio broadcasting becomes the established and

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<sup>478</sup> David Dubinsky to Debs Radio Station, March 26, 1930. Dubinsky Papers, Box 171, Folder 2; Gerber to Dubinsky, April 3, 1930. Dubinsky Papers, Box 171, Folder 2; Dubinsky to Gerber, December 27, 1930. Dubinsky Papers, Box 171, Folder 2.

favorite medium of publicity. In many respects a good radio station can be as effective as a large metropolitan daily.

Unfortunately, Station WEVD has not had the means or facilities to make the necessary mechanical improvements, and the Labor and Liberal movements have not shown the interest in the enterprise which its possibilities merit.

Reports of competent radio engineers are now being prepared and will be submitted to the conference so as to enable it to determine whether the present station is susceptible of substantial improvements and the cost of such improvements. If it is found that the station has the possibilities which are claimed for it, the conference will then consider the advisability of creating a permanent organization representative of the most important labor and progressive movements of the city to operate and manage the station for the benefit of all such movements. I sincerely hope that your organization can find it possible to elect a representative to the conference and to cooperate in this effort to create a new powerful instrument for the cause of labor and progress.<sup>479</sup>

Unlike Nockels, however, the leadership at WEVD was less interested in creating a democratic system of broadcasting regulation, and solely invested in furthering their own station.

In his crusade for a clear channel station, Nockels' great white whale was the *Chicago Tribune*, its radio station WGN, and perhaps chiefly, their attorney Louis Caldwell. Nathan Godfried writes that Nockels "may well have become obsessed with Caldwell." In September 1930, Nockels applied for a license to broadcast on WGN's frequency of 720 kilocycles with unlimited time and fifty thousand watts of power. According to Godfried, "The fact that the station was represented by an attorney whose use of the revolving door between the government and business sectors raised ethical questions-- at least in the eyes of Nockels-- made WGN an even more attractive target."<sup>480</sup>

By 1932, Nockels had convinced the conservative AFL leadership to advocate for a clear channel station for labor. There was no doubt that this station would be run by WCFL. Although

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<sup>479</sup> Morris Hillquit to Ben Schlessinger, ILGWU, May 9, 1930. Dubinsky Papers, Box 171, Folder 2.

<sup>480</sup> Godfried, *WCFL*, 94.



the CFL had a somewhat adversarial relationship with the broader AFL structure, the SP had long been opposed to the AFL leadership and the Jewish unions in the United Hebrew Trades (UHT) often butted heads with Samuel Gompers in prior decades. The AFL had little reason to promote the interests of a station that was dedicated to the memory of one of its most prominent critics. It is somewhat ironic, then, that WEVD's leadership-- by any conventional standard of ideological measurement in U.S. politics-- was to the left of the CFL and certainly the AFL. However, in terms of their analysis of the broadcasting situation, Nockels was the only major player in the labor or broadcasting reform movements who understood the battle for the airwaves as a major front in the class war, wresting precious public resources away from the hands of corporations and putting them to use in the service of labor.

Rather than attacking the property rights of specific private interests, WEVD and the Socialists sought only to defend their station within the corporate-liberal framework advanced by the FRC. As such, they were able to attain the legal services of the architect of that very framework, Louis Caldwell himself. On the one hand, this was a brilliant strategy on the part of the Debs Memorial Fund. In 1930 and 1931, WEVD was repeatedly threatened with deletion because of its technical violations. Caldwell filed persistent appeals through these years. WEVD stood before the FRC on October 14, 1930 after they could not determine whether the public interest would be served by granting the station its license. The FRC's Special Examiner Elmer Pratt recommended denial of the license on December 11, 1930. Caldwell appealed the denial and requested an oral argument. A new hearing was scheduled for March 3, 1931, but the license was denied again. After a new round of appeals, a third hearing before the Commission was set

for September 26, 1931, where the FRC finally determined that the application for renewal of WEVD's license be granted.<sup>481</sup>

At this hearing, Caldwell demonstrated that he had absolutely no qualms about defending the Socialists on their own terms in their battle to keep their license. He was a hired gun *par excellence*. While Caldwell's General Order 40 had placed emphasis on the necessity of technical supremacy, as WEVD's lawyer he indicated that these matters were not a true indication of how well a station served the public. He said, "There are regulations and regulations; and, there are violations and violations. Some violations have a serious public significance; others do not. It is my contention that the evidence of violations must be such as to give them some public significance some importance to for the public..."<sup>482</sup>

Thus, WEVD stood out as an exceptional case. Caldwell explained that WEVD's service to the public interest was rooted in its mission, its content and its unique structure. "[W]here you are considering refusing to renew a licensee because of alleged violations," said Caldwell,

you must take into account the program service rendered by the station. You can easily imagine two cases in which exactly the same violations are charged against two different stations. In one case the station may be rendering a mediocre service which is duplicated or bettered by other station in the same community, and there will be no serious loss to the public if it is eliminated. In the second case the station may be rendering an outstanding service in entertainment or education. In such a case the public would suffer a loss if the station were eliminated. Surely you will agree that you should take these matters into account.<sup>483</sup>

Caldwell did not argue against the rights of corporate broadcasters, but for protecting the rights of non-commercial broadcasters. His argument was not restricted, though, in terms of negative

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<sup>481</sup> Statement of Facts, Grounds for Decision and Order of the Commission In Re: Application for Debs Memorial Fund, Inc. FRC Records, Docket No. 969.

<sup>482</sup> Testimony In Re: Application for Debs Memorial Fund, Inc. FRC Records, Docket 969, 24.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

liberty, of the government not interfering with the socialist station's right to broadcast. Instead, Caldwell articulated a vision where WEVD functioned towards a greater communal good, where the notion of a "free press" was as much a social right as an individual right. He told the FRC,

WEVD is giving practical application to the time-honored principle which forms part of the ground work of our civilization-- freedom of speech, and of the press. The influence of this policy cannot be measured solely in terms of the advantages it offers to minorities. There is something more, intangible but important, the influence of its policy on other stations and on the press. The fact that there is such a station as WEVD in operation in our largest metropolis necessarily has an effect, unconscious though it may be, on the policies of other broadcasting stations and newspapers. They know that when they reject a speaker or a writer who desires to address the public, that speaker or writer may go to WEVD to get an audience. Who can say how much this knowledge contributes, in fact, has already contributed, to the building of higher standards among other stations?<sup>484</sup>

In the marketplace of ideas, WEVD would create competition and would encourage democratic conversation within a broadly commercialized environment. Ultimately, the corporate lawyer passionately embraced, at least in part, the vision of the SP.

WEVD is a monument to a great leader. It was built from the small wages of people in poor circumstances who loved him. So far as I know, it is the only monument of this kind. Instead of an imposing pile of marble, the followers of Gene Debs chose to honor him with the construction of a marvelous instrument of modern sciences through which the voice of men can reach the homes and hearts of thousands. I beg of you to think long and carefully before you lay destroying hands on this monument.<sup>485</sup>

WEVD's strategy was successful, in terms of self-preservation. As Norman Thomas made clear, the station meant absolutely no malice towards the commercial institutions. According to Thomas, the Debs Fund deserved its license because no other radio station was or could "be expected to be, primarily concerned with a fair presentation of...minority opinion...It is in the present unsettled state of world affairs and world opinion, of extraordinary significance that there

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid, 34-5.

should be an orderly process of expressing this opinion.” The SP leader went to great lengths to demonstrate that he was not attacking

existing radio stations. There was a time when I have attacked existing radio stations. There was a time, which some of you gentleman know about, when I had a very extraordinary experience in being invited to go on the air, and then barred from the air without any adequate reason...If and when we have the money, we can get a limited amount of time, but the charges necessarily are high.<sup>486</sup>

Thus, Thomas positioned the commercial dominance of radio as flawed but inevitable. This was a poor analysis at best, and an opportunistic strategy at worst. At the very moment that Louis Caldwell was defending the memory of Eugene V. Debs, he was hell bent on ensuring that WCFL would be taken off the air. As the *Federation News* reported, Caldwell argued before the FRC that WCFL “is not a labor station. It broadcasts cheap financial quackery and is an insult to the honest labor people of Chicago. It does not give fifteen minutes a day to labor.” WCFL’s effort to obtain a clear channel through an act of Congress was dubbed “a vicious piece of class legislation.”<sup>487</sup>

This must have produced irreconcilable, but seemingly unspoken, tension between WEVD and WCFL. On the very same page that they reported on Caldwell’s attacks on WCFL, the *Federation News* described an incident where after “[f]our days of bitter conflict in hearings” the unnamed lawyer for WEVD nearly got into a fistfight with the representative of station WFOX. “Manager Gerber and the attorney for WEVD fought every inch of the way, knowing that if once the Socialist station were shut off the air it would never be allowed back again under a Republican regime, due to prejudice in the commission against radicalism of any degree.”<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid, 36,

<sup>487</sup> “Ruthlessness of the Self-Styled World’s Greatest Newspaper,” *Federation News*. May 9, 1931, 9.

<sup>488</sup> “WEVD Lawyer and Opponent Near Fisticuffs at Hearing,” *Federation News*. May 9, 1931. Also cited in McChesney, *Telecommunications*, 26.

While WCFL did not sabotage WEVD's efforts to stay on the air, Norman Thomas played a critical role in hindering WCFL. In the fall of 1931, Caldwell, as chair of the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Communications, denounced all legislative efforts that would set aside a fixed percentage of the dial to special interests. While WCFL sent the progressive lawyer Frank Walsh to warn against the dangers of monopoly in broadcasting, at the committee's meeting at the ABA convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Gerber went to offer support to Caldwell. He testified that Caldwell was a man of integrity, and that the report did not reflect a conflict of interest.<sup>489</sup> Thus, Caldwell successfully divided the labor movement against itself in their attempts to provide alternatives to the commercial broadcasters.

The impact went beyond creating a rift between the New York socialists and Chicago labor. WEVD and the SP organized massive numbers of groups and individuals from across the country and the ideological spectrum to support their cause. Despite the limitations of their critique of the radio trust, their organizing efforts were impressive. However, without coordination between labor's radio efforts, the movement was significantly weaker.

WEVD solicited money, resolutions, and petition signatures to show the FRC that the station served the public interest. Gerber testified in March 1931 that,

the financial ability and capacity of WEVD cannot be measured by the yardstick which you would apply to the ordinary commercial station. We have something that is richer and more lasting, the faith, confidence, and support of liberal people and their organizations, a moral asset upon which we can rely for funds as long as we do our job well.

While WEVD projected that they would raise approximately \$68,000 that year from selling time, the Debs Memorial Fund had raised \$70,000 to date through contributions

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<sup>489</sup> Godfried, *WCFL*, 97.

by more than five thousand individuals, groups and organizations in sums ranging from 10 cents upwards. For the past several months a definite movement has been afoot, and has made satisfactory progress, sponsored by a large number of labor unions, civic and peace organizations, liberal newspapers and publications, to raise a very substantial fund and to provide for adequate periodical and continuous contributions to enable WEVD to operate on a plane and scope more adequate to its purpose.<sup>490</sup>

Submitting a list of one hundred organizations that would sponsor and support the station as evidence to the FRC, Gerber noted that a unanimous resolution was passed at a meeting of friends of the station, committed to raising \$50,000 to erect a new transmitter and make technical improvements. Although such support served as evidence of the station's public importance, Gerber noted,

I do not know whatever WEVD, with its limited time, can hope to be self-supporting from the sale of time and still serve its purpose as an American forum. I hope and believe that it can. But if it cannot, we do not propose to sacrifice our primary mission for the sake of advertising accounts. As long as we serve our proper mission, I know that we can confidently rely on our great moral asset, the support of liberals everywhere, for any funds we need.<sup>491</sup>

In order to raise these funds, the station made particular efforts were made to garner support for the station within the Jewish labor movement. Mary Fox of the League for Industrial Democracy asked ILGWU President Benjamin Schlessinger to do three things:

(1) Immediately send a wire or letter to the FRC at Washington, (2) Despite the depression and hard times recommend that your organization buy as many shares of preferred stock as possible in order to firmly establish the Debs Memorial Station as a university of the air for minority movements. It is understood that the money for preferred stock shall not be accepted unless the \$40,000-\$50,000 necessary for the proper operation of the station has been pledged. (3) That your union will plan one or two courses in trade unionism or allied subjects to be given over the station next year.<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>490</sup> Testimony In Re: Application for Debs Memorial Fund, Inc. FRC Records, Docket 969; 22.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid, 20; 22.

<sup>492</sup> Mary Fox to Ben Schlessinger, June 12, 1931. Ben Schlessinger Papers, Kheel Archives, Cornell University, Box 2, Folder 20.

In addition to pledging money, many organizations filed affidavits with and sent resolutions to the FRC, including local unions, churches, and educational groups. In April 1931, WEVD recorded 223 passed resolutions supporting the station, representing over one million members of different organizations. Support did not just come from traditional left-wing organizations. The Social Service Committee of the New York East Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which made frequent use of WEVD, received praise from taking such a stand. As one individual wrote to Rev. Paul DuBois, “Am mighty glad you are taking hold of this matter. In the present unrest so unjust an act against WEVD might be a spark in the powder-keg. Capitalism must be purged of its arrogance if it is to survive.” The Long Island Interscholastic Debating Society, comprised of seventeen Long Island secondary schools also defended the station, saying “from our own experience in the use of Station WEVD we were accorded every courtesy without suggestion or hint of restriction or censorship and were allowed complete expression of opinion.”<sup>493</sup> If they had not segregated themselves from other broadcasting reformers, WEVD could have brought a tremendous amount of power to the legislative efforts that Nockels pursued.

Gerber urged readers of the socialist publication *The New Leader* to cut out a petition heading printed in the publication, attach a sheet of white paper to it, collect signatures, and send the sheets to WEVD’s offices. The petition read: “To the Federal Radio Commission: We the undersigned, citizens of the United States, respectfully request the continuance of the broadcast license of station WEVD, a station dedicated to the dissemination of minority opinion.”

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<sup>493</sup> Petitions and Resolutions to the Federal Radio Commission. April 16, 1931; Jackson to Rev. Paul DuBois, Received by FRC on Feb 17, 1931. FRC Records, Docket 969; William T. Hade to Federal Radio Commission, March 2, 1931, FRC Records Docket 969.

The petition drive yielded 6,767 petitions with over one million signatures from 33 states and Canada.<sup>494</sup>

In September 1931, Caldwell submitted as evidence four “huge documents”-- a list of organizations who have sponsored WEVD; a list of speakers who have spoken over the station; a list of subject matters presented; and a record of talks over the station. Caldwell said,

You will find every school of thought is represented among the speakers, including representatives of organizations with which the Socialist party is constantly at war. You will find every worthy movement of civic, charitable, or philanthropic nature furthered and encouraged by this station.<sup>495</sup>

Ultimately, though, it was B.C. Vladeck and the *Jewish Daily Forward* who made the necessary contribution in order to prove to the FRC that the station would have the resources it needed manage WEVD in a professional way and adhere to strict technical requirements.

Caldwell explained at the September 1931 hearing that one week before, the *Forward* contributed \$70,000 to the station. “The organization has,” Caldwell explained,

in addition, agreed to underwrite a fund of at least \$200,000 for the operation of WEVD and will use its best endeavors to collect it within three years from the other organizations supporting WEVD. In case it should not succeed in getting all the money from the other organizations, it will appropriate its own money up to \$200,000. This, it seems to me, should remove all doubt on the question of finance. I am sorry that it has seemed to loom so large with the Examiner, and that the moral assets of the station, its good will and support among many reputable organizations, have counted for so little.<sup>496</sup>

As Vladeck stated in an affidavit, “The *Jewish Daily Forward* has at all times aided the WEVD Station because it maintained a free and open Forum which we believe was beneficial to the

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<sup>494</sup> “WEVD Seeks Petition to Aid in Fight for Radio Freedom,” in *The New Leader*; Petitions and Resolutions to the Federal Radio Commission. April 16, 1931. FRC Records, Docket 969.

<sup>495</sup> Testimony In Re: Application of Debs Memorial Radio Fund, Inc. Sept. 26, 1931, 29-30.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid*, 33



community. We would like to see the Station continue and prosper and are ready, willing and able to help it.”<sup>497</sup>

Finally, in October 1931, the FRC agreed to renew WEVD’s license. Although the chairman of the Commission dissented, claiming that “there is no reason to believe that the physical conditions at this station, or the lack of supervision by responsible officers of the licensee, will be corrected,” a majority of members believed that Caldwell and Gerber had demonstrated that WEVD rendered a public service and that they were “making dilligent effort to secure modern transmitting equipment which is in compliance with Commission regulations and modern engineering standards.” Given the *Jewish Daily Forward*’s financial bailout, however, the station would undergo dramatic transformations during the New Deal period. Having revived the *Forward* through the previous decade by relying on advertising, Vladeck applied similar techniques in the radio arena. As WEVD grew into a powerful cultural force through the 1930s, it moved away from its original socialist mission, rearticulating its identity along the lines of community and ethnicity.<sup>498</sup>

### **Moving “*Forward*”? : WEVD and Commodified Ethnicity**

In 1932, Vladeck, now chairman of the board of the Debs Memorial Fund, approached Morris Novik about becoming the station’s progamming manager. “I was very close to Mr. Vladeck,” said Novik in an interview. “He was a great orator. I admired the man actually for years. He was closer than my own father. We had something in common although he was older than I was. He was, as I say, one of my gods.” According to Ari Kelman, Novik would only take

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<sup>497</sup> In Re: Application of Debs Memorial Radio Fund, Inc., September 17, 1931. FRC Records, Docket No. 969.

<sup>498</sup> Statement of Facts, Grounds for Decision and Order of the Commission. October 30, 1931. FRC Papers, Docket No. 969.

the position after Vladeck assured him that Abraham Cahan and the *Forward* newspaper would exercise no control over the station.<sup>499</sup> Thus, WEVD maintained formal independence from the *Forward* although Vladeck's business decisions and strategies reshaped both institutions in similar ways.

Vladeck and Novik committed to establishing WEVD on a self-sustaining basis. Within two years, the station went from running losses of approximately 64 percent in 1933, to profits of nearly 22 percent in 1935. By 1938, the station was earning profits of nearly 47 percent. They accomplished this through the same strategy that Vladeck had used at the *Forward*-- bringing in advertising revenue. Although the station's expenses also increased, WEVD's income grew by 69 percent from 1933 to 1934. In September 1934, the station raised advertising rates, leading to projected increases in income for 1935. "The first month of the new year started off with a good stride," reported the WEVD Board of Directors in 1935. "The charges for advertising in January will probably be double that of a year ago... Our income for the first four months will be large enough to offset any precipitate drop which we cannot now foresee. On the other hand, conditions may improve and present opportunities for greater accomplishments."<sup>500</sup>

Vladeck and Novik worked to create what Kelman terms "a two-tiered station." On the one hand, they aimed to meet their public interest requirements and garner the respect of elites through English-language, educational programming. At the same time, they could only do this through broadcasting highly commercialized foreign-language content. Both of these genres, though, helped to preserve a space on the air where labor unions could work with the station to

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<sup>499</sup> Morris Novik. Interview with Burt Harrison, October 30 and November 1, 1978, 7; Kelman, *Station Identification*, 98.

<sup>500</sup> WEVD Report to Board of Directors, February 1939. Forward Association Papers, Box 12, Folder 164. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York; Report of Board of Directors, January 24, 1935. Forward Association Papers, Box 12, Folder 164.

develop programming. Thus, WEVD constructed a new public on the air for the CIO era, where ethnic identity was at once reinforced through commercial programming, and shed in the name of building a multiethnic trade union movement.

In the 1930s, WEVD derived most of its financing from and devoted most of its programming to ethnic audiences, delivering non-English language programs. While, as business manager of the *Forward*, Vladeck had become increasingly concerned with producing not simply a Yiddish-language, but a Jewish publication. Similarly, WEVD increasingly turned towards representing ethnicity on the air in order to meet advertiser demands. Yiddish entertainment, in particular, according to Nathan Godfried, “urged the consumption of everything from noodles to furniture to headache remedies to Coney Island excursions.”<sup>501</sup>

The attainment of these sponsored programs was most certainly linked to the station’s affiliation with the *Forward*, already branded by this point as a gateway to New York’s vast Jewish market, and the work of two advertising agencies-- the Joseph Jacobs Company and the Advertisers Broadcast Company (ABC). Joseph Jacobs, which would re-contract with the *Forward* and the *Day* by 1938, and ABC took on the task of “not only selling airtime and managing contracts but also producing and transcribing programs that it could distribute to stations that signed up for their service.” While the first Yiddish radio ads were, by and large, for companies such as Manischewitz, that specialized in Jewish foods, by the end of the 1930s major brands like Maxwell House and Carnation Milk were marketing themselves to audiences through sponsored Yiddish programs.<sup>502</sup> While Yiddish-language speakers had been listening to English-

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<sup>501</sup> Godfried, “Struggling,” 365.

<sup>502</sup> Kelman, *Station Identification*, 135; 135-9.

language programming for years, Yiddish language programming on WEVD helped to produce a commodity audience to sell products to a niche market.

This attention towards commercially viable ethnic programming was not out of desire, but out of necessity. “Let it not be assumed,” the WEVD’s board reported,

...that the absence of English commercials on WEVD is due to any lack of effort on the part of the management and its staff. The limited time schedule, the broken up time, as well as keen competitive conditions prevalent among local stations that cater to English commercials, render any progress in that direction difficult. Several English sponsors who tried out our English language time found it sadly unproductive. From all indications, our English audience at night is very small compared with our foreign language audience during the day.

In addition to Yiddish, other languages were also represented on WEVD through sponsored programs. Kelman argues that “the reason for this was simple. No station could earn enough income from advertising solely to the Jewish community, so they carried whatever programs they could in whatever languages would garner the support of sponsors.”<sup>503</sup>

As the station’s board of directors noted in 1935, “Our income, as in the past, is almost entirely derived from foreign language commercials confined to the daytime hours, with the exception of Saturday night. Our operations now extend, in addition to English, three foreign languages-- Yiddish, Italian, Polish.” During the week of January 21, 1934, for example, WEVD carried 11 hours of Yiddish language, 12 hours of Italian language, and 3 hours of Polish language commercial programming, 70 percent of which was commercially sponsored. While nearly half of all programming, 24 of 50 total hours, was in English, 16.5 of those hours were sustaining programs.<sup>504</sup> Thus, the revenues from Yiddish and Italian language advertising

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<sup>503</sup> Report of Board of Directors, January 24, 1935. Forward Association Papers, Box 12, Folder 164; Kelman, *Station Identification*, 20.

<sup>504</sup> Report of Board of Directors, January 24, 1935. Forward Association Papers, Box 12, Folder 164.

allowed WEVD to remain afloat so that it could continue to broadcast English language, educational programs.

As the *Forward* had done, WEVD articulated Jewishness, consumerism and socialism in such a way that they were not necessarily at odds with each other. Demonstrating the continuity of political identity that could be maintained through light entertainment programming, one social worker living in Brooklyn wrote to Vladeck asking the station to rebroadcast “the Jewish wedding between the Socialist and his bride, which we had been eagerly looking forward to hearing,” after she and her family had tuned in to the station too late. “Your Jewish hours are indeed educational, progressive and entertaining not only to ‘old world Jews’ but also to American Jews such as me and my own little family.”<sup>505</sup>

Still, the new centrality that Jewishness occupied did cause some political stalwarts alarm. One friend wrote to Vladeck in 1936 after tuning in to WEVD and hearing “a familiar voice” wish listeners “*a guten Kosheren Pesach*,” or a good, kosher Passover.

Having definitely decided who it was since it could be no other, something happened which to me was astounding. The fact itself was simple enough but its implications to one who had been brought up on the East Side in the neighborhood of 175 East Broadway were truly revolutionary. I have not yet decided whether I should consider it was an expression of liberalism or one of the signs of surrender of the revolutionary spirit.<sup>506</sup>

Kelman argues that Yiddish radio programs produced an “aesthetic of intimacy” and reinforced communal bonds.<sup>507</sup> In prior decades, though, the Yiddish vaudeville theater, for example, also provided light entertainment while providing the opportunity to build political and social institutions through benefit performances. Yiddish radio, then, allowed major corporations

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<sup>505</sup> Letter March 4, 1934, Vladeck Papers Box Add 2, Folder 2.

<sup>506</sup> Benjamin Kramer, M.D. to Vladeck, April 8, 1936. Vladeck Papers, Box Add 2, Folder 9.

<sup>507</sup> Kelman, *Station Identification*, 107-21.

to capitalize on what had previously been non-commercial cultural forms. Thus, Yiddish language commercial broadcasting allowed WEVD to remain a presence within the Jewish community, but had contradictory implications for the maintenance of a broad Jewish working-class counterpublic.

### **Educational Broadcasting and the Decline of Socialism**

While Yiddish-language programming, by and large, lacked an explicitly political edge, the educational programming that had been the cornerstone of WEVD prior to 1932 became increasingly, through the decade, more reflective of a vaguely liberal politics. As Vladeck had insisted that the *Forward* was no longer a labor paper but a Jewish paper, Novik determined to play down the station's socialist origins. "We had given up the original direction," said Novik, "and become community oriented. At WEVD we broadcast debates of all sorts."<sup>508</sup> To some extent, this was a continuation of the station's long held policy that it would be a forum for discussion from a broad range of viewpoints. But Vladeck and Novik did not discuss this practice as reflective of a broader socialist perspective as the previous leadership (and even Louis Caldwell) had done before the FRC. Rather, WEVD sought to represent themselves as an educational station free of political bias.

This was, in part, because the FRC and later, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), failed to recognize non-English programming as serving "the public interest." This was not predicated on the highly commercial nature of most of this programming, but rather on the understanding that the public interest would be better served by "Americanization." Yiddish-

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<sup>508</sup> Novik, Interview with Harrison, 11.

language broadcasters other than WEVD all argued on behalf of serving their distinct communities, while regulators identified the “public interest” in national terms. In 1933, when Gerber served as the attorney for WBBC, one of four Brooklyn stations threatened with deletion, the former WEVD director argued that broadcasters serving areas with large immigrant populations were compelled to air programs in native languages in order to bring “foreign elements... into sympathy and consonance with the American scene, purposes and ideals...”<sup>509</sup>

Despite the high volume of foreign language content on WEVD, the station successfully avoided such scrutiny by touting its educational programming. While federal regulators were responsible for the commercialization of the airwaves, non-network stations were held to a higher standard than their corporate counterparts, having to meet public interest requirements that conflicted with sponsors’ interests. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Vladeck and Novik tried to raise enough revenue as an independent station through foreign language entertainment while highlighting their educational program. For example, *University of the Air* began broadcasting in 1932 when Novik arrived at the station. John Dewey and Hendrik Willem Van Loon were enlisted as deans. Fannie Hurst gave a series of lectures on literature, and Sigmund Spaeth, “the Tune Detective,” did a series on popular music. “Ultimately,” explained Novik, “we were hoping to be able to break through where one of the schools of learning would take on this business.” Before leaving the station in 1936, Novik was in conversation with New York University to get them to air their courses over the station.<sup>510</sup>

The program was not a particularly novel idea. Universities were among the first institutions to make use of broadcasting technology, and education advocates, such as Joy Elmer

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<sup>509</sup> Kelman, *Station Identification*, 62-69; 68.

<sup>510</sup> Novik, Interview with Harrison, 12.

Morgan of the National Committee on Education by Radio (NCER), were among the staunchest opponents of broadcasting's commercialization. In addition, the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education (NACRE), supported by network executives such as Merlin Aylesworth, worked strategically to divert attention and resources away from NCER while advocating for educational broadcasting within a commercial system.<sup>511</sup> *The University of the Air*, then, functioned to insulate the commercial broadcasting system from criticism, moving WEVD's image away from its SP roots and reorienting it towards association with a liberal elite.

The focus on educational programming functioned strategically in its battles with the FCC. Between 1934 and 1938, WEVD attempted to secure more time, not only to give the station a greater presence on the air, but also to make it more attractive to advertisers. In 1934, Alexander Kahn, Vice President of the Debs Memorial Fund and Vladeck's second-in-command at the *Forward*, filed an application for unlimited time, requesting that it be given "the facilities of Stations WBBC, WLTH, WARD, and WFOX," and that the stations that it shared time with be moved to the 1400 kilocycle frequency. "This change," Kahn argued, "will remove the time restriction now burdening applicant in the conduct of its policy of maintaining a free and open forum for the discussion of political, social, economic and educational questions and will thereby enable it to render a more complete public service than is possible with its present time limitations."<sup>512</sup>

At the hearing before the FCC, WEVD once again went up against seemingly natural allies. This time, though, Louis Caldwell and others from his Chicago-based law firm, Kirkland,

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<sup>511</sup> McChesney, *Telecommunications*, 38-56.

<sup>512</sup> Application for Modification of Radio Broadcast Station License, March 14, 1934. FCC Records, Docket No. 2343.



Fleming, Green and Martin, faced off against WEVD's former leader, G. August Gerber. Gerber provided counsel to WBBC, also arguing for the right to unlimited time at 1400 kilocycles.

According to the FCC Examiner's Report, between 30 and 50 percent of the programming on WBBC was commercial, "20 to 30% educational, religious and fraternal and about 30% to musical entertainment sustaining programs." The station broadcast in a wide variety of languages, and offered its facilities to a wide array of community organizations at no charge.<sup>513</sup>

WEVD did not have a significantly different schedule. However the Examiner's Report described them as offering 33% of their time to sponsored, and 67% to sustained programs-- seemingly skewed numbers based on WEVD Board of Directors' reports. Making no mention, either of the station's foreign-language programs, the Examiner noted the "outstanding regular educational features such as the 'University of the Air' in which groups of authorities on particular subjects are invited to participate in well organized and planned adult educational programming." WEVD suggested to the Commission that, if granted the license modification, they would "devote the additional evening hours after 6 p.m. to an extension of its educational and cultural broadcasts." Thus, WEVD argued that programming on WBBC and the other Brooklyn-based stations broadcasting at 1400 kilocycles offered fare that was "generally of poor quality and insufficiently meritorious to warrant their continued operation" in contrast to WEVD which claimed to offer "high-grade educational and cultural service of vital interest to the New York metropolitan area."<sup>514</sup>

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<sup>513</sup> FCC Examiner's Report, 2. FCC Records, Docket No. 2343.

<sup>514</sup> Report of Board of Directors, January 24, 1935. Forward Association Papers, Box 12, Folder 164; Examiner's Report, 20-1; Appearance of Applicant and Statement of Facts to be Proved, March 19, 1936. FCC Records, Docket No. 2343.

In an attempt to get unlimited time, Vladeck solicited the support of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Vladeck wrote to her in 1935 as a member of the New York City Housing Authority,

May I be permitted to thank you for the graciousness of your reception this morning. I don't know what is the greater honor-- to meet the First Lady of the Land, or to meet a First Lady of any land. Irrespective of whatever happens to the application of WEVD for the extension of time now pending before the Federal Communications Commission, I shall remain, always and humbly, yours...

Mrs. Roosevelt's office made several attempts, at least, to inquire into the FCC's proceedings around WEVD's application, and expressed regret that the results were "unfavorable."<sup>515</sup>

Red-baiting and political discrimination threatened these potential political alliances, and thus, the station's existential future. In 1934, when the FCC increased WEVD's power from 500 to 1000 watts, right-wing attacks prompted Eleanor Roosevelt and Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins to deny any knowledge of the station's existence, let alone helping the station secure a higher power allocation. In 1937, Vladeck defended against allegations of being "some kind of Communist outfit." [W]e are a decent lot," Vladeck said,

and...in fact we are more conservative than we should be... I don't know whether these gentlemen know anything about the *Forward* and the radio station we operate. But you can tell them about the *Forward* and as for Station WEVD, if they look up some of the reports of the Federal Communications Commission, they will see for themselves that we are rated the best of the smaller stations in the Metropolitan area.<sup>516</sup>

As such, Vladeck made sure that his enemies on the Left did not use the station in a way that would jeopardize his relationships with those in positions of political power. On one occasion, for example, Vladeck tried to dissuade the ILGWU from meeting in City Hall Plaza, after it had

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<sup>515</sup> Vladeck to Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt, May 9, 1935. Vladeck papers, Box Add 2, Folder 5; Prall to Mrs. Malovia Thompson Scheider, May 27, 1935, Vladeck papers, Box Add 2, Folder 5.; Scheider to Simkhovitch, October 8, 1935; Joan Root to Vladeck, October 9, 1935. Vladeck Papers, Box Add 2, Folder 6.

<sup>516</sup> "First Lady Denies Giving Aid to WEVD," *NYT*, December 29, 1934, 13. It should be noted that the first communications between Vladeck and Roosevelt regarding WEVD in the archives date from the following year; Vladeck to Billikopf, January 19, 1937. Vladeck Papers, Reel 12, WEVD Folder.

already been announced on WEVD. The announcement put Vladeck in an uncomfortable position with New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Vladeck denied knowledge of the meeting, and explained to the union that LaGuardia could not permit the event “because it would open the door to Communists and others...”<sup>517</sup>

Vladeck tried to protect the station from appearing to be too left wing, and jeopardizing its license and relationships with advertisers. Under Vladeck’s and Novik’s management, representatives of the SP were asked repeatedly to yield their time scheduled time on the station in order to leave room for sponsored programs. Discourse on the educational programs moved increasingly towards the center. At some points, this upset several key allies. In 1935, for example, Judge Charles Colden went on the air on station WEVD, despite the fact that Colden had presided over the case of Athos Torzani, an Italian anti-fascist who had been charged with murder. Liberal and radical organizations had formed a defense committee to garner support for Torzani. As Norman Thomas said, “There is no requirement in justice or in tactics that compels WEVD to give recognition to a man who so thoroughly has proved himself an enemy of justice as Colden, unless possibly a debate might show up his actions.”<sup>518</sup>

In another scenario, Judge Jacob Panken, a prominent socialist, told Vladeck that although he enjoyed the musical portion of the evening, he was “heart sore” that he had not been included on a University of the Air panel at a WEVD party. “I overheard several remarks commentary of the fact that no Socialist was in the University of the Air, excepting, of course, yourself which probably resulted because you could not easily be eliminated.” By 1936, when

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<sup>517</sup> Vladeck to Comrade Friedman, May 10, 1935. Vladeck Papers, Box Add 2, Folder 4.

<sup>518</sup> Papers of the Social Democratic Federation of America. Box 13, Folders 19-25. Tamiment Library; Morris Shapiro to Vladeck, July 26, 1935; Norman Thomas to Vladeck, August 8, 1935. Vladeck Papers, Reel 12, WEVD Folder.

Vladeck and the leaders of the garment unions formed the American Labor Party in order to endorse FDR and the New Deal without defecting all the way to the Democratic Party, the *Forward* and WEVD were no longer officially affiliated with the Socialist Party. As Henry Laidler wrote,

I wonder what Eugene V. Debs, if he were alive, would say about a Debs radio which gives any amount of time to those who were advocating the election of candidates of a capitalist party but which gave practically no chance for candidates of the Socialist party to present their message.<sup>519</sup>

But despite the station's loosening ties to its SP roots, Morris Novik helped WEVD reignite trade unionism in the 1930s as the engine of the New Deal.

### **Morris Novik and The Labor Education Tradition**

Although the garment unions had given institutional support to WEVD through its early years, it wasn't until the *Forward's* takeover of the station in 1932 that they began to play a greater role in developing programming. While WEVD developed light entertainment in foreign languages to pay the bills, and educational programs to demonstrate their commitment to the public interest, the station, under Novik, provided a space for labor programming that developed union culture during the New Deal period.

As the associate manager at the ILGWU's Unity House, prior to taking his position at WEVD, Novik forged "links between the labor movement and cultural organizations of artists and intellectuals." This was part of a broader strategy to remake these institutions in response to the shifting demographics and political demands of the moment. Novik had changed "the concept" of the hotel, in order to bring in growing numbers of workers from outside of the

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<sup>519</sup> Judge Panken to Vladeck, December 14, 1935. Vladeck Papers, Box Add 2, Folder 7; Laidler to Vladeck, October 9, 1936. Vladeck Papers. Box Add 3, Folder 3.

needletrades. He worked to bring prominent artists to entertain the resort's working-class guests and changed the language of the programming and the signs from Yiddish and Russian to English.<sup>520</sup> Similarly, although Novik oversaw the ethnicization of programming at WEVD in order to attract advertising revenue, he also continued the work he had started at Unity House of building a multiethnic, American labor movement that spoke to a broad audience in English.

Radio broadcasting became increasingly important to meet the national organizing demands spurred by the Great Depression, and the opportunities that opened with National Recovery Act (NRA) and the Wagner Act. Labor programs combined “live classical music, sketches, and prominent political and labor speakers,” bridging the worlds of high culture, popular culture and politics. Dramatized histories, speeches by labor leaders, and information about industrial struggles worked to educate new members about the labor movement, and draw them in to union life, bolstering a massive wave of organizing.<sup>521</sup>

Novik's home union, the ILGWU and its locals, took advantage of the possibilities of broadcasting more than any other union. While WEVD provided a base for these operations, Novik worked with labor leaders to develop programs that they could sponsor on commercial stations throughout the country. Thus, Novik and the ILGWU used radio to bring the cultural approaches that had been cultivated for decades within the Jewish working-class counterpublic to a broad, national audience.

In order to reach smaller cities, Novik recommended to ILGWU President David Dubinsky that they connect previously recorded programs to local leaders, such as a “mayor, head of N.R.A, or an outstanding Rabbi... Any particular message that might be necessary in the

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<sup>520</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 74, cited in Godfried, “Struggling,” 352; Novik interview with Burt Harrison, 9.

<sup>521</sup> Godfried, “Struggling,” 359.

specific community in which the record is used, can be covered by a script sent to the local station announcer or to the organizer if he is qualified.” In larger cities, like Chicago, Cleveland and St. Louis, Novik recommended soliciting the assistance of “the most prominent men and women who are associated with the general movement” in order to maximize publicity for the project. In the summer of 1935, a series of six broadcasts dramatizing the history of the union aired on WEVD on Wednesdays from 10 to 10:15 pm. The broadcasts were electrically transcribed so that they could be “reproduced in other localities so that union members throughout the country” could hear them.<sup>522</sup>

WEVD also provided a space for relatively broad range of debate about labor politics, all be it within the bounds of the non-Communist trade union movement. For example, in 1934, Charles Zimmerman of ILGWU Local 22 argued on air against the conservative approach AFL President William Green took towards the San Francisco General Strike. But during the following year, Vladeck told William Green that he was “very proud both of the militancy and lucidity” of his recent speech “coming over thru WEVD- a non-profit radio [station] devoted entirely to the interests of American Labor.”<sup>523</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, Novik and Vladeck hoped to ensure that the labor movement would remain a staunch anti-fascist force in the 1930s, rather than dividing along ethnic lines. The program *The Voice of Local 89*, was aimed at the Italian workers of ILGWU Local 89 led by Luigi Anotini, and worked to educate the large numbers of new members, “NRA babies.” Novik

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<sup>522</sup> Novik to Dubinsky, November 22, 1934. ILGWU Records, David Dubinsky Papers. Box 171, Folder 2; Novik to Hillman, July 3, 1935. ACWA Records, Sidney Hillman Papers.

<sup>523</sup> Vladeck to Green, March 8, 1935. Vladeck Papers, Box Add. 2, Folder 4.

suggested to Antonini to develop a radio program rather than having regular mass meetings at Madison Square Garden in order to accommodate the union's 30,000 members.

Of course, the Fascists were opposed to it. WEVD lost every Italian account. Every Italian commercial merchant got off the station because of the pressure by the Italian Consulate and the Government of Italy. But that didn't make a damn bit of difference to us. We lost \$20,000 in income. Vladeck said, "Don't worry about it. If we have to we can go out and beg \$20,000."<sup>524</sup>

But while Vladeck and Novik were quite comfortable losing revenue from fascist sympathizers, they actively sought to bring in as much revenue as possible from labor programs. From the beginning of Novik's tenure, it was the station's policy to urge labor unions to pay for air time when possible.

Corporate sponsorship of labor programming, however, was the ultimate goal, directly providing resources, rather than relying on the unions themselves, to help maintain the station. In 1937, for example, Novik "had Avalon Cigarettes convinced that we had an audience" for the American Federation of Labor convention "and they were going to sponsor the broadcast. The station was just beginning to get public recognition and commercial recognition..."<sup>525</sup> As Vladeck had done at the *Forward*, the advertising practices at WEVD demonstrated that trade unionism and consumerism were not mutually exclusive, laying the groundwork for the postwar consumer society.

## Conclusion

In 1938, WEVD's long quest for a full time license came to an end when the FCC allowed Fifth Avenue Broadcasting to sell WFAB, which had also specialized in foreign

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<sup>524</sup> Novik interview with Burt Harrison, 15.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid, 10.

language programming, and all of the station's "real and personal property to the Debs Memorial Radio Fund for \$85,000"-- the balance of the pledge the Forward Association still owed the Fund at that point. Proposing to use the new time for 20 percent commercial and 80 percent sustained programming, WEVD claimed that the allocation of the new station would allow for an expansion of the *University of the Air* and other public services, such as a regular period to air WPA Adult Education courses, of "special interest for housewives and foreign-born, on elementary subjects." As Novik told the FCC "there have been less broadcasts from public functions in the evening during 1937 than any year before, and that holds for the whole industry."<sup>526</sup> Certainly, the need for this brand of programming was greater than ever given the widespread commercialization of the medium that had taken place by this point.

Never, though, during the previous decade did the leadership at WEVD work in any fundamental way to stop the onslaught of commercialism that ultimately constrained the station. While the Socialists received a massive showing of support for WEVD from Jewish labor organizations and a wide coalition of other progressive interests as early as 1928, they chose not to work alongside the broader labor movement and other broadcasting reformers to build radio broadcasting as a non-commercial medium. While Edward Nockels fought in the early 1930s for legislation that would guarantee a space for working-class voices on the air, the Socialists cultivated comfortable relationships with David Sarnoff, Merlin Aylesworth, and perhaps most importantly, Louis Caldwell. After 1932, under the direction of B.C. Vladeck, WEVD turned against other small stations, similar to itself, that had been badly injured by the FRC's General Order 40 in order to attain its own license for unlimited time.

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<sup>526</sup> FCC In the Matter of Fifth Avenue Broadcasting (WFAB), September 6, 1938. FCC Records, Docket 4969; Before the Federal Communications Commission, March 1, 1938, 64. FCC Records, Docket 4969.



Although Gerber, Thomas, Vladeck and Novik failed to demonstrate a strong commitment to the principles of solidarity in their struggles with federal regulators and the commercial broadcasting industry, they were able to produce new forms of solidarity on the air. Labor programming in the 1930s helped to educate new members of the ILGWU about their union's history, and brought them into the union's culture. In particular, *The Voice of Local 89* worked to hold union members together despite divisive international politics. Although labor programming was subject to the pressures of commercialism, its continued presence set the stage for a boom in union broadcasting in the late 1940s spearheaded by Novik, the ILGWU and the United Auto Workers, in their quest for a FM station, WFDR.<sup>527</sup>

WEVD's sustained, educational programming also provided a public service with important residual effects. Distinct from political programming, the *University of the Air* brought non-commercial programming to a broadly defined public. Rather than advocating particular candidates or political positions, educational programming on WEVD often included discussion regarding controversial issues without taking an explicit side. This model of broadcasting, along with WEVD's arguments in defense of its license, embodied notions of the "public interest" that would become encoded in later years in the FCC's "fairness doctrine."<sup>528</sup>

Novik's development of educational programs at WEVD also helped to define the nature of "public broadcasting" that would emerge over the next several decades. He left the station in 1938 at the request of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia to serve as the Commissioner of

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<sup>527</sup> Novik interview; Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Waves of Opposition: Labor and the Struggle for Democratic Radio*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Michael Stamm, "Anti-Semitism, Prior Restraint, and the Politics of Post-WWII Broadcasting In New York City." Presented at the American Journalism Historians Association Annual Meeting, Seattle, WA, October 2008.

<sup>528</sup> Before the Federal Communications Commission, March 1, 1938, 55; Gullifor and Carlson, 213-4.

Communications of the City of New York and as programming director at the municipal station WNYC where he first coined the term “public broadcasting.” He said,

Our programs were constantly an expansion of the fertile minds of young people as to how to serve people best, or how to serve them most. When you have that opportunity in a place like New York, or for that matter, anywhere, it’s your vision, it’s your brain that can think up programs that will permit other people to share their talent with you and with the station.

Although Novik continued to serve the labor movement throughout his life, he saw his work at WNYC as part of a more important commitment to democracy in the broadest sense, solidified by Hitler’s move into Czechoslovakia.<sup>529</sup> As a staunch anti-Communist and anti-fascist, Novik developed public broadcasting as a uniquely liberal enterprise, theoretically free of commercial and state influence or of explicit party ideology. Public broadcasting would thus attempt to represent and produce a Habermasian space of rational public discourse as commercialism encroached on the bulk of American social life.

By the 1980s, however, Novik was quite critical of how public broadcasting had developed. “[M]any of those who are now running the public stations really aren’t aware of the history and the public consciousness...” said Novik.

I can see it in the operation of Channel 13 [New York’s WPBS]. When you start getting into an operation which has \$15,000,000- \$16,000,000 a year you fall into all sorts of traps, because you’re looking for perfection of a product that will win you awards and that will get you recognition... so that you may become a vice president of something else, not just maybe staying with your station.<sup>530</sup>

To some extent though, this course had been set by WEVD. The compromises that Vladeck, Thomas, Gerber and Novik made at the get go helped to ensure the dominance of a commercial media system. Rather than working with Nockels and other media policy reformers to ensure that

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<sup>529</sup> Novik, Interview with Harrison, 16; 11.

<sup>530</sup> Novik, Interview with Robertson, 40.

non-commercial broadcasting would play a significant role in the broad media landscape, WEVD's founders-- having already become comfortable with advertising through their relationship to the *Forward* and developing relationships with leaders in the radio trust-- helped to create a situation where public broadcasting in the U.S. would not be the standard in the U.S., but would be relegated to ameliorating the externalities produced by a for-profit system.<sup>531</sup>

Although WEVD claimed publicly to be most interested in developing educational programs, the economic realities brought by the pressures of operating within a commercial system compelled the station to devote large portions of its schedule to foreign language, sponsored entertainment. This trend continued beyond WEVD's attainment of a full time license and acquisition of WFAB, despite the fact that its rationale for being allowed the extra time was to increase educational programming. While this did happen, the 1939 Board of Directors Report demonstrates that commercial broadcasting also increased. "The thirty-six acquired new hours made possible a reallocation and expansion of our foreign language programs, giving us a larger block of time in each language for more advantageous commercial exploitation," yielding higher income figures for the last quarter of 1938. "There remains a good portion of time for commercial purposes," the report declared, "and every effort is now devoted toward building and promoting programs that would attract and maintain new commercial sponsors. In 1938, WEVD earned over \$85,000 in net profits, a far cry from its early days where it was consistently in the red. Ironically, as Nathan Godfried notes, the new programming director George Field had to rely

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<sup>531</sup> McChesney, "The Case for U.S. Public Broadcasting and Implications for Philanthropists." In *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 455-6.

increasingly on sponsored programs after the purchase of WFAB in order to fill its schedule, limiting the time that could be devoted to labor programs.<sup>532</sup>

Foreign language programming on WEVD had contradictory implications, both breaking down and solidifying social barriers. While labor programming addressed immigrants and their families as workers, sponsored foreign language entertainment served to rearticulate the importance of ethnic community. By positioning different ethnic groups alongside each other on the air-- Jewish, Italian, Polish-- WEVD's commercial imperatives yielded a representation of the emerging coalition of "white ethnic" workers. Thus, WEVD helped to construct a multiethnic public of "hyphenated Americans." Reflecting the tensions at the Hotel Claridge, however, the formation of this new identity through ethnic radio, as Derek Vaillant suggests, worked to solidify racial hierarchies at the expense of African Americans, mirroring many of the New Deal's limitations.<sup>533</sup>

In addition, WEVD's distinctions between foreign language entertainment and labor programming, served to segment the politics of ethnicity from the politics of labor. Rather than being identified with oppositional politics as it was in the early decades of the Jewish working class counterpublic, ethnicity as represented on WEVD, was becoming a consumer identity. Thus, in helping to build a national labor movement, the Jewish-led trade unions were instrumental in building an institution that ultimately fragmented the ethno-political identity that was central to the early counterpublic. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, the tensions would

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<sup>532</sup> Report to Board of Directors, February 1939. Forward Association, Box 12, Folder 7; Godfried, "Struggling," 366.

<sup>533</sup> Derek W. Vaillant, "Sounds of Whiteness: Local Radio, Racial Formation, and Public Culture in Chicago, 1921-1935." in *American Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2002): 25-66; David R. Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Become White. The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*. (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

become more apparent as the Newspaper Guild came into conflict with the old unions within the Yiddish newspaper industry.

## Chapter Seven:

### Organizing the Organizers: The Newspaper Guild and Jewish Working Class Media in the CIO Era

Sometimes I think I may be as good a tailor in the Newspaper Guild as I am sure I am a writer in the tailor's union.-- J.B.S. Hardman<sup>534</sup>

Before the 'Guild' came into existence, the newspaper writer and other employees were among the most exploited and suppressed of the so-called 'white collar' workers... We are talking here about the American newspaper professions, not of the Yiddish, because in the Jewish newspaper world there exists a union of writers for over a quarter of a century, widely known as the I.L. Peretz Writer Verein. The union of Yiddish writers raised the journalistic profession to the highest level, and it was no other than the founder of the Newspaper Guild Heywood Broun that stated at one of the 'Guild' conventions that the Yiddish Writers Union should serve as an example to the American newspaperman. In passing, it will not be superfluous to recall that the Yiddish Writers Union helped materially and in other ways the 'Newspaper Guild' when it was still young and was not standing firm on its feet. How the 'Newspaper Guild' expressed its thanks to the Yiddish Writers Union is a chapter that we don't wish to go into.<sup>535</sup>

In an emerging atmosphere of red-baiting and anti-Communism, tensions emerged during the lead up to the Second World War between the institutions of the Jewish working-class counterpublic and the new unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In 1941, the Newspaper Guild of New York brought eleven members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union's newspaper staff to trial. As Guild members, workers at the ILGWU's *Justice* had objected to their union's decision to call a strike at the Yiddish language newspaper, *Der tog*, or the *Day*. In their mind, the Guild was raiding an already standing union, the I.L. Peretz Verein, or Jewish Writers Union (JWU). While Guild organizers deemed the JWU a "company union," JWU supporters at *Justice* claimed that the Guild was raiding the organization and trying to take over *Der tog* in the service of Moscow.

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<sup>534</sup> 1936 ACWA Convention, Documentary History 1934-36, 429.

<sup>535</sup> "Report of the Lefts in 'The Guild,' October 17, 1940. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 19. Tamiment Library, New York University.

This conflict between the old institutions of Yiddish socialism and the Guild should be understood within the context of the changing dynamics of the media industry and the politics of the Popular Front era. Michael Denning locates the Newspaper Guild's formation within a broader context of proletarianization at sites of cultural production. He argues that rank-and-file workers in the culture industry became "largely responsible for the Popular Front's influence on mass culture" as artists "saw their work cut, cropped, and censored." Industry unions, such as the Screen Actor's Guild (SAG), the American Federation of Radio Artists (AFRA), and the National Association of Broadcast Engineers and Technicians (NABET) emerged in Hollywood and New York in response to the consolidation of an oligopolistic mass media system amidst the organizing drives of the New Deal era. This "laboring" of culture helped to produce "socially significant" films and radio programs through the commercial system, leading ultimately to Congress' suspicion of the entertainment industry in the early years of the Cold War and the crackdown on the left by the film studios and union leaders.<sup>536</sup>

While workers in the entertainment industry gained, if only for a brief while, a relatively high level of creative agency through union activism, the American Newspaper Guild (ANG) was the union most overtly concerned with the role of the public in a democracy. Ben Scott argues that news workers played an important role in shaping the future of journalism at a "critical juncture" in both the media system and the broader political economy. Between 1933 and 1941, the ANG became a tenacious component of the CIO movement, presenting a threat to the economic order of the newsroom and challenging the ideology and conventions of professional journalism that had evolved over the previous several decades. Its leaders

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<sup>536</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*. (New York: Verso, 1997), 85-90.

understood the First Amendment as a public rather than a private right.<sup>537</sup> But unlike individuals such as B.C. Vladeck, J.B.S. Hardman, Fannia Cohn, and Morris Novik, who worked to build media institutions for a working class public, the ANG approached the fight for a democratic public sphere from inside the belly of the beast-- the commercial newspaper industry, or what is commonly referred to today as “the mainstream media.”

“[L]abor’s fight with the newspapers in the 1930s,” Scott writes, “was an attempt to win back the reigns of power over political communication for the public, in pursuit of a majoritarian view of the First Amendment.” The Guild’s aim was to restore balance in the power relationship between workers and owners in the newsrooms of the commercial press. The rise of the CIO in the 1930s allowed working people to imagine themselves as the public itself, and allowed the broader public to identify themselves alongside labor through a “broad vision of one-big-union with a transformative social vision was a powerful unifying force rooted in public power over labor and democratic discourse.”<sup>538</sup>

In essence, the Guild resisted what Habermas called the refeudalization of the public sphere-- the creation of a “pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption” by a minority class interest. Poor working conditions in newsrooms, and the political hegemony of moguls like William Randolph Hearst exposed professionalism as a myth during the 1930s. But early Guild leaders believed that through unionization they could, on behalf of the public, decentralize the power of the publishers “by distributing some of it to an economically autonomous, unionized newsroom...[insisting that publishers and workers alike] had a role to

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<sup>537</sup> Ben Scott, “Labor’s New Deal for Journalism: The Newspaper Guild in the 1930s.” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 2009. Scott borrows the idea of “critical junctures” from Robert W. McChesney, *Communication Revolution* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

<sup>538</sup> Scott, “Organizing the Media System,” Chapter 3 in “Labor’s New Deal,” 9; 11.



play in a balance of positive and negative speech rights that best served the public interest.” Far from a full rejection of the notion of professionalism, Guild members wanted “to be reporters of impartial integrity representing all classes and interests in the society.”<sup>539</sup>

This claim to professional authority and ability to represent “all classes and interests” begs the question, what is the role, in such a system, of a labor press? What should be the relationship between the public sphere and counterpublics, between dominant and alternative media? The actions of the radical organizers at the Newspaper Guild of New York demonstrate a severe blind spot in their ideology of professionalism. They did not comprehend the importance of the labor and ethnic press to maintaining a broader, democratic public sphere, nor did they take into account the ethnic bonds that remained in tact after years of building a Jewish working class movement.

Jewish working class institutions-- the *Forward*, the garment unions, and WEVD-- had helped to build a national labor movement, embodied by the CIO. This national movement ultimately supplanted the community orientation that had characterized Jewish labor’s early history. But by the 1940s, these institutions no longer represented the vanguard of the U.S. labor. Boggled down in political divisions and ideological debates that no longer had resonance, and unable or unwilling to come to grips with the commodification processes that had taken hold within the Yiddish press, the leaders within the Jewish working class counterpublic had become in many respects a force of conservatism. As they had set the stage for the rise of the New Deal and the CIO in the 1920s, they now set the stage for the Cold War backlash against the left.

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<sup>539</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. by Thomas Burger. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 160; Scott, “Critical Juncture: The Morris Watson Case,” Ch. 5 in “Labor’s New Deal,” 41; 52.

In this chapter, I offer a denouement to my longer narrative by focusing on the debates around the Newspaper Guild's strike at *Der tog* in 1941. This history helps to illustrate the collapse of the Jewish working class media system in the years just prior to World War Two. As professional newspaper workers came to think of themselves as stewards of the national public interest through the Newspaper Guild, they demonstrated a lack of appreciation for the important role of community media, of counterpublics, of the working-class press itself. While the commodification processes that had occurred throughout the previous two decades within the Jewish left press, the political turmoil within the garment unions, and the institutionalization of WEVD as an essentially commercial broadcaster had all helped to breed a national labor movement, they also worked to normalize the prevalence of commercial media institutions and forms. Thus, the Guild's efforts to organize workers within the Jewish labor press shows the final struggles around the dissolution of the early Yiddish newspaper culture into the general commercial U.S. media system, and the dissolution of a hegemonic Jewishness centered on socialism, into a broader working-class American public committed to liberal anti-Communism.

### **The Newspaper Guild and the Peretz Verein**

The ANG first organized in 1933 in response to the increasingly tight control that owners exerted over newspapers and their workers, and the possibilities opened up by New Deal legislation. Uncertain whether they were a true labor union or a professional organization, Guild leaders initially sought to have a voice in the development of a Newspaper Code through the National Recovery Administration (NRA) to regulate their industry. Under the leadership of columnist Heywood Broun and other core organizers in New York, they argued for a code that

would mandate basic wage and hour protections. Although the publishers won this initial fight using the First Amendment as a shield against any interference, the nascent Guild introduced important debates regarding the role of the press, the government, and labor and was radicalized by the experience.<sup>540</sup>

By the time of the ANG's first convention in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1934, there were 70 local guilds representing more than 7000 journalists, and they had won their first contract at the *Philadelphia Record*. The delegates passed resolutions that intimately linked the struggle for labor with the struggle for a democratic press and fair, responsible journalism. Although many Guild members still saw themselves as in a privileged position as white collar workers, this began to change with the Supreme Court's 1935 ruling that the NRA was unconstitutional. At Broun's urging, the Guild became a bona fide part of the labor movement, and affiliated with the AFL at their second annual convention in Cleveland.<sup>541</sup>

According to Scott, the Guild reached its apex of radicalism between 1936 and 1938. This was constituted not only by a commitment to industrial organizing and affiliation with the CIO, but through a broader social vision that it articulated regarding the role of the press. Attorney Morris Ernst exemplified this vision in an *amicus curiae* brief submitted to the Supreme Court in the case *AP vs. NLRB*. In defense of Morris Watson, "a conscious and calculated martyr" who had been fired from the Associated Press due to his Guild activism, Ernst argued that labor law and the First Amendment were intimately intertwined, that a free press was impossible if

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<sup>540</sup> Scott, "Labor and the Press in the 1930s," Ch. 4 in "Labor's New Deal for Journalism," 19-34.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid*, 41-8.

journalists did not have the right to organize. As they understood it, the First Amendment was for the public, not for the publishers.<sup>542</sup>

Not surprisingly, many within the Jewish socialist and labor press were attracted to the Guild's vision. The Guild's commitment to the values of a free press and democracy especially resonated within the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. In 1936, the ACWA passed a resolution at their convention supporting the Guild's ongoing strike at Hearst's Milwaukee newspapers, and pledged funding to assist them. Charles Ervin, an *Advance* writer, said,

I have been spared to see over five thousand of my craft, the newspaper men of America, organize a labor union. At first, most of them thought that they were different from the ordinary workers...but before many months went on... they were being banged up by the police and sent to the station house the same as some of you have been, in strikes, in the Amalgamated... We now know that we are part of the struggle. We now know that we are just workers.<sup>543</sup>

But Jewish labor's interest in the Guild went beyond a shared ideology. The material conditions workers faced within the Yiddish press by the mid-1930s necessitated an organized response. The vast changes that had taken place at the *Forward*, in particular, under B.C. Vladeck's management had bred significant discontent, prompting writers to consider the need for organized response. What's more, the shared contract between the *Forward*, the *Day* and the *Morning Journal* with the Joseph Jacobs Advertising Agency meant that these three 'competitors' were linked to each other, not only politically and culturally, but economically as well. In this context, the Guild's industrial organizing and collective bargaining had a lot to offer.

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<sup>542</sup> Scott, "Critical Juncture: The Morris Watson Case," Ch. 5 in "Labor's New Deal," 1; 1-55.

<sup>543</sup> Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. Report of the General Executive Board, 1936, 440, 428.

Beginning in 1937, the Guild established contracts with the three Yiddish papers covering more than 100 workers.<sup>544</sup>

Editorial workers, however, could not join the Guild, because they were already members of the I.L. Peretz Verein, or the Jewish Writers Union (JWU). While the JWU did negotiate working conditions, it functioned quite differently than the ANG and the emerging industrial unions, as more of a professional literary society than a trade union. In addition, the organization consisted of members who were not regularly employed at a newspaper, but were in other professions who might have, at one point, made a brief contribution to one of the journals. The JWU did not reflect the adversarial relationship that characterized CIO unions with their employers, but rather a communal mentality that understood both workers and employers as being joined together through a commitment to a political-cultural movement. But the expansion of commodification processes at the newspapers had made the JWU, in the minds of some members, outdated and ineffectual. As one *Forward* writer told an official from the Newspaper Guild of New York, “We are members of a union-- and we are not in the real sense. The union which is recognized in the Editorial Department does not have any official relations with us and in a sense we are step-children.”<sup>545</sup>

By October 1936, the Guild Executive Committee had drawn up a plan to bring the Jewish Writers Union into the Newspaper Guild of New York. The Guild Executive Committee recognized the “pioneering” work of the JWU “in the organization of editorial departments,” and “in the establishment of minimum wages, security of employment and in participating in the

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<sup>544</sup> Contract between Jacobs, Jewish Day and the Jewish Forward, Feb 26 1938. Forward Association Papers. Box 3, Folder 39.; Memo Re: Joseph Jacobs, March 3, 1938. Vladeck Papers, Reel 4, Business Folder; “For Immediate Release,” January 28, 1940 (sic). Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 13.

<sup>545</sup> L. Sperling to Carl Randau, July 29, 1936. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 27, Folder 18.

cultural life of the community.” But it was the organization’s role within the community that particularly caused a problem for the emerging Guild. Although the Guild noted that it had “no objection to preserving the integrity of the Peretz Verein as an organization carrying on, as in the past, its cultural work and in maintaining its system of relief to the unemployed,” doing so “would entail... changes in the constitution of the Peretz Verein” in order to comply with that of the ANG.<sup>546</sup>

Although it allowed unit members to play the role of observers during negotiations, the Guild’s constitution gave negotiating power to the Executive Committee. Some JWU members feared that this would mean a decline in their working conditions. Despite problems in the Yiddish newspaper field, workers were generally better treated and better paid than in the general English language press. Guild leaders refuted such concerns:

The Newspaper Guild does not hold to the view that affiliation of the Newspaper Guild will jeopardize the higher standards of employment now enjoyed by the Yiddish language newspaper workers. On the contrary, we are convinced that joining organizationally with the majority of newspaper editorial employees in NYC and thus entering the ranks of an increasingly important national organization of newspapermen and women will serve as a further guarantee that such standards as have been achieved will be preserved and improved. On the one hand improving the general conditions of employment on all newspapers remove gradually the threat to the higher-paid; on the other hand, the unity of all newspapermen will safeguard the gain that have been made.<sup>547</sup>

The JWU did not respond to the Guild until December. At that point, they explained that since his union was in negotiations with all publishers at that point, they were not prepared to make a decision. Writers at the *Forward*, however, had already begun to affiliate with the Guild,

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<sup>546</sup> Kaufman to Edlin, October 10, 1936. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 27, Folder 18.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

leading to the prospect of joint collaboration.<sup>548</sup> It seemed as though the media system that sustained Yiddish socialist culture and politics was becoming integrated into the broader labor movement, and the broader public sphere. This process, however, was disrupted by several ideological fractures.

### **Anti-Communism and Warring Factions in the Late 1930s**

By the end of 1938, the Guild's radicalism was being tempered by an onslaught by right-wing publishers, conservative AFL leaders, and allegations of Communist affiliations. During a critical strike at Hearst's *Herald-Examiner* and *Evening American* in Chicago, AFL-affiliated printers broke the Guild strike, and the Federation created company unions at the two newspapers, helping Hearst to break the CIO union. The enormous defeat paved the way for the magnification of internal political divisions. Patriotism became increasingly central to political discourse as Roosevelt abandoned his left-wing base and concentrated on preparing for war. The Dies Committee in Congress began investigations of Communism within the New Deal bureaucracy. By 1940, the Guild's radical leadership in New York had come under fire with red-baiting and charges of un-Americanism.<sup>549</sup>

The Jewish labor movement, and particularly the garment unions, had longstanding complex relationships with the AFL and the CIO. On the one hand, the garment unions had always had been in tension with the AFL, dating back to the early 1910s and Gompers' involvement in propagandizing the East Side during World War One. The Amalgamated Clothing

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<sup>548</sup> Kaufman to Edlin, November 11, 1936; Edlin to Kaufman, December 19, 1936; Kaufman to Edlin, December 21, 1936; Kaufman to Sperling, January 15, 1937. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 27, Folder 18.

<sup>549</sup> Scott, "Change and Dissolution of the Radical Guild, 1938-1941," Ch. 6. in "Labor's New Deal for Journalism," 14-40.

Workers had been founded in direct opposition to the Federation- backed United Garment Workers in Chicago. But despite the fact that their organizational approach, their social unionism, and their use of culture all became highly influential within the broader CIO, President David Dubinsky of the ILGWU decided to remain with the AFL after John Lewis of the United Mine Workers determined that the CIO unions should make a full break in 1936.<sup>550</sup> Although Sidney Hillman and the ACWA remained with the CIO, they retained a strong relationship with their sister union.

Like the AFL leaders, Dubinsky had been in long-standing opposition to Communist Party collaboration. Within the context of the highly combative Jewish labor movement, though, this anti-Communism had a different valance. The old Socialists, the Yiddish “right,” had established its antipathy towards the CP during the Communists’ stridently uncompromising “third period.” Indeed, the *Forward*, the ACWA, and the ILGWU had all been critical of Communism’s tendency towards ideological orthodoxy that stifles a broad discussion among the left. This frustration existed not only among the top bureaucrats, but among those most genuinely concerned for union democracy as well-- J.B.S. Hardman and Fannia Cohn among them. By 1937, however, the Comintern had developed its Popular Front strategy, encouraging Communists to work with liberal movements in order to combat the rise of fascism. In the United States, the new CP’s mantra that “Communism is twentieth century Americanism” signaled a new fluidity within left-- a sense that liberalism, trade unionism, socialism and Communism were all in relatively friendly conversation with each other.<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>550</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this, see Robert D. Parmet, *The Master of Seventh Avenue: David Dubinsky and the American Labor Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 171-7.

<sup>551</sup> Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 222.



The spirit of social unionism that the Jewish working class counterpublic had pioneered was now at the core of the national left. But the hostility towards the CP that had developed among the socialist leaders placed the Jewish labor organizations at the margins of the movement that so closely represented itself. In 1939, the formation of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the collapse of the Popular Front legitimated anti-Communist sentiment, particularly among Jewish workers. Since Hitler's rise to power, the garment unions, Jewish labor leaders, and the Yiddish socialist press had been at the forefront of pressing for American intervention against fascism. Through B.C. Vladeck's Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), founded in 1934, they called for boycotts of German goods and gave aid to victims in Europe. Unlike the onset of the First World War, by the time the Pearl Harbor was bombed, the "entire Jewish population vigorously responded to every call to strengthen the country's hand in the war against Nazism." Large numbers of Jewish unionists enlisted or supported the war effort from the home front.<sup>552</sup> While the government had to persuade Jewish labor to support war in 1917, Jewish labor leaders had been seeking greater government intervention in Europe for years by 1941.

The unholy alliance between Nazis and Soviets, and the subsequent invasion of Poland demanded that Communists cast the war not as a struggle between fascism and democracy, but as merely another squabble between imperialist powers. Roosevelt's support of Britain through the lend-lease program drew comparisons between him and Hitler. By and large, the Jewish left-- Communist, Socialist, and New Deal-- objected to these politics. Melech Epstein of the Yiddish Communist paper *Di frayhayt* organized a group of Jewish defectors to leave the CP. Jewish membership in the Party plummeted, destroying Earl Browder's chances in his 1940

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<sup>552</sup> Epstein, *Jewish Labor Vol. 2*, 285-94.

congressional campaign to represent the Lower East Side. Meanwhile, radicals in the labor movement, decried the political influence of the “Dubinsky-Hillman war-mongering machine.”<sup>553</sup>

By the time the war had begun in Europe, the Jewish labor movement saw itself as committed to American liberal values, and was more skeptical than ever of other labor organizations’ ties to, or sympathies towards, Moscow. This fueled a new consensus with some of the most conservative aspects of the labor movement around the politics of anti-Communism. At the ANG, Heywood Broun’s death late in 1939 created a leadership vacuum. A conservative minority challenged the Guild leadership, and put forth anti-radical, patriotic resolutions at the 1940 convention in Memphis. At the New York Newspaper Guild, a slate of “Progressive” insurgents campaigned to become delegates to the convention against those supported by the New York’s more radical Representative Assembly. The slate signaled an odd alliance between some well-paid reactionary journalists and Max Danish of *Justice*, Harry Lopatin of the *Forward*, and Victor Riesel of the English-language Socialist journal, *The New Leader*. The Old Guard of the Guild accused the progressives of attempting to disrupt and break the Guild so that it could come under the control of David Dubinsky and the ILGWU. They alleged that Dubinsky had done this a few years earlier at the Union of Office and Professional Workers, Local 16, where ILGWU office staff were members.<sup>554</sup>

Despite these efforts, the radicals retained control of the international offices. Donal Sullivan, a 29 year-old Boston lawyer won the presidency by a close vote. But conservative

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<sup>553</sup> Klehr, *Heyday*, 386-409; Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were you On?: The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 56; “Representative Assembly Staff, Chosen by Unit Delegates, Deserves Your Support.” Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 17.

<sup>554</sup> Scott, “Change and Dissolution,” 19-25; “Representative Assembly Staff, Chosen by Unit Delegates, Deserves Your Support.” Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 17.

forces continued to gain power, passing anti-Communist resolutions at the local level. By 1941, they would be positioned to take over the Guild.<sup>555</sup> This transformation at the ANG would be shaped by, and would provide the context for, battles between the Guild and the Jewish unions and newspapers in New York.

### **Trouble at the Labor Press and *Der Tog***

The complex political relationships became a source of severe controversy and division. The New York Newspaper Guild, the bastion of radicalism within the broader ANG, looked to organize workers at the ILGWU and ACWA publications. As Nat Einhorn, the New York Guild's executive secretary, wrote to David Dubinsky and Sidney Hillman late in 1939, "Our purpose is to equalize as nearly as possible conditions at trade union papers in New York City. We look forward to those conferences as a natural and logical consequence of the cordial and fraternal relations which have existed between organized labor and the Newspaper Guild of New York and its members."<sup>556</sup>

Despite the rapid organization of members at these two unions, they were quickly marked as dissidents. Max Danish wanted to break from the Labor Press Unit and function as an independent unit with thirteen members in good standing. As such, the ILGWU staff would have their own delegate at the Guild's Representative Assembly, and would be able to present a challenge to the political leadership. Danish's motion was initially rejected by the Labor Press Unit, as well as the New York Representative Assembly. By May, however, the members from

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<sup>555</sup> Scott, "Change and Dissolution," 23.

<sup>556</sup> Nat Einhorn to David Dubinsky and Sidney Hillman (two separate letters), November 20, 1939. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 44, Folder 19.

the ILGWU had appealed the decision, and the ANG's International Executive Board, finding itself under growing scrutiny from conservatives within and outside of the Guild, approved the change.<sup>557</sup>

Hostilities between the Newspaper Guild of New York and the Jewish labor organizations compounded as the Guild continued its organizing drives and brought about a jurisdictional battle. The Guild continued to try to bring the editorial writers at the Yiddish papers into its ranks. At *Der tog*, according to the Guild, the Jewish Writers Union were unable to protect the staff writers' interests, agreeing to pay cuts and reductions in staff, contrary to a membership vote. This undemocratic action prompted ten members of the paper's staff to join the Guild in December 1940.

The JWU did not look kindly upon this action. The organization's leadership suspended the writers for "dual unionism." In part reflecting the Socialists' history of struggles with Communist infiltration in the 1920s, and in part the editor's own economic interests, the *Forward*, the *Morning Journal* and *Der tog* accused the Guild of subversively trying to take over the Yiddish press as part of a broader Communist strategy.

The New York Guild shot back, turning the published charges over to attorneys in order to pursue a libel case. Guild organizer John T. Ryan, said, "The charge that the Guild is conspiring to take over the Yiddish Press on behalf of Moscow is fantastic and is being used to cover up the real facts which the authors of the statement are afraid to face publicly." Lawyers demanded that the members be reinstated, noting that the only constitutional grounds for expulsion from the JWU was non-payment of dues, and moved towards getting an injunction

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<sup>557</sup> Max Danish to Nat Einhorn, February 23, 1940; March 5, 1940; Danish to Victor Pasche, April 3, 1940; Einhorn to Pasche, April 12, 1940; Pasche to Einhorn, May 6, 1940; Harry Crone to the IEB, May 15, 1940. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 17.

from the New York State Supreme Court. The editors of the Yiddish papers were also accused of defamation of character.<sup>558</sup>

Up to this point, it seems that the leaders at the three newspapers were working together to defend their own power against industrial unionism, not so differently than they might have in the general English-language commercial press. On February 14, the Guild called a strike at *Der tog*. It lasted for six months, until August 18. While only between 33 and 65 workers participated in the strike (the *Day* employed 140 people, but the majority of these were “mechanical” workers, ineligible for Guild membership), the conflict resulted in approximately two dozen arrests, division and animosity.<sup>559</sup>

The Guild claimed that the *Day* had fired six members and cut the pay of seven others, ranging between 10 and 55 percent; that the Guild made every effort to avoid a strike including going to arbitration; and that the aims of the strike were to simply reinstate the laid off workers, restore pay cuts, and settle grievances. Editor Sam Margoshes disputed these claims in the *New York Times*.

We dismissed three, one of them B.Z. Goldberg, former managing editor, and two others, who had been doing part-time work and were no longer necessary to the paper. There were 4 or 5 others, who had been receiving \$83 a week each and whose salaries were readjusted to \$35, for the reason that they had been unable to perform any work for a long time. They were really pensioned off with the understanding that they would contribute an occasional article.<sup>560</sup>

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<sup>558</sup> Letter to Yiddish Writer’s Union president, B. Hoffman. December 23, 1940; “For Immediate Release,” January 28, 1940 (sic); Isserman, Isserman and Kapelsohn to Hoffman, January 29, 1941; Memo Re: Newspaper Guild of New York vs. Jewish Day. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 13.

<sup>559</sup> “Jewish Day Strike” List of Arrests, Newspaper Guild of New York, Box 41, Folder 16.

<sup>560</sup> “The Jewish Day Strike,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 23.

In the meantime, striking writers created their own strike newspaper, *Der tog shtrayker*, with columns printed in Yiddish and in English to inform the community about their struggle and refute the claims of management. Responding to charges of Communist infiltration to destroy the newspaper for political reasons, they wrote that such accusations were

ridiculous to any thinking person on the face of it. It implies that the striking workers are seeking to commit economic suicide by destroying their own source of livelihood... If the Guild is Communist, then so are such members as Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lewis Gannett of the *New York Herald-Tribune*, F.P.A. of the *New York Post*, and countless other newspapermen and women working for papers in every part of the country.

Pointing to the outdated function of the JWU, the strikers embraced the virtues of bona fide modern trade unionism, saying:

The Peretz Verein is not a union. You will find it listed in the telephone book as “Jewish Writers’ Club... The Peretz Verein has no affiliation with any representative organization of labor-- neither with the AFL or CIO. We are cognizant of the contributions the Peretz Verein made in the early years of its existence towards raising and maintaining the standards of Yiddish newspaper writers. But it no longer fulfills that function. It has degenerated to the position of a management-dominated organization, unable and unwilling to protect Yiddish writers against wage cuts and other management action.<sup>561</sup>

This perspective propelled the Guild towards a massive failure. After half a year, Guild members had to go back to work, renounce their membership, and reapply for membership in the JWU. The Guild agreed as part of the settlement terms that they would only represent members in the office and commercial departments of *Der tog*, and that the editorial department was the sole jurisdiction of the Jewish Writers Union. Further, they agreed to a reduction in payroll of \$3650.<sup>562</sup>

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<sup>561</sup> “The Real Issue in the Strike on the Day,” *Der tog shtrayker*. February 17, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 23.

<sup>562</sup> “Memorandum of Agreement,” New York Newspaper Guild Records, Box 41, Folder 3.

The strike did not generate solidarity between the Guild and the Jewish labor movement. Over 1700 delegates from the various unions with their roots in the Jewish community, including the CIO-affiliated ACWA, convened a conference to support the JWU and condemn the strike. Members of the Guild at the *Forward* and at the ILGWU publications also condemned the action, labeling the industrial organizers as union busters and CP stooges. The Guild's Jewish Daily Forward Unit went on record opposing the strike as the Guild's "attempt to break the Peretz Verein and to trespass upon the Verein's properly established conditions of employment and contractual relations," and called upon the Guild to "devote itself to friendly negotiation" with the JWU to join or develop a better working relationship.<sup>563</sup>

The ILGWU Publications Unit levied even harsher criticism. The Unit's leader, Harry Crone wrote to Einhorn, explaining that the ILGWU Publications Unit had voted to "condemn the action of the NY Guild leadership in precipitating the *Day* strike" on several grounds. First, the ILGWU Unit understood the Guild's strike as "irresponsible and divorced from any legitimate principle of economic action in that it gambles with the jobs and livelihood of more than 200 people in a rapidly shrinking field." In other words, the precarious nature of the Yiddish press meant that it could not be dealt with in the same way as other profitable English language publications. The ILGWU writers understood this, and saw the importance of maintaining these publications as part of a larger movement and community.<sup>564</sup>

Crone invoked this community, indicating a sense of solidarity among the Jewish institutions. "Large sections of the community," Crone noted, believed "that the Guild must

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<sup>563</sup> Resolution Adopted by the Jewish Daily Forward Unit, February 4, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 3.

<sup>564</sup> ILGWU Publications Unit to Nat Einhorn, February 15, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 19.

answer the charge that *The Freiheit* (sic), the Jewish Communist Daily, is using our union as a tool to smash a competing newspaper.” The ILGWU unit defended the JWU as a “bona fide trade union which has done a magnificent job of protecting its membership and has a quarter century of admirable service to its credit.” They implied that the Guild organizers had little understanding of or respect for the JWUs importance and history, and branded them union busters.<sup>565</sup> While the allegations seem dubious, the Guild was blind to the specific political feuds and divisions that had been at the heart of Jewish working class politics for decades.

The Guild’s response to these criticisms only exacerbated tensions. Einhorn wrote back to Crone, ordering the Unit to rescind their comments within five days. After meeting with the rest of the unit, Crone refused, and told him that this request violated “every tradition of trade union democracy and the rights of constituent bodies and rank-and-file members to express an opinion.” To them, it was “an unwarranted and autocratic assumption of power.” On March 18, the Newspaper Guild of New York brought charges against eleven members of the ILGWU Unit for allegedly interfering with the strike.<sup>566</sup>

The economic mandates of the Yiddish press had forced the newspapers to assume an increasingly commercial model of production and management, outmoding its original community orientation. Many workers at the *Day* were no longer content with the JWU, and had come to see themselves, as a result of their working conditions, as laborers more so than participants in a broader movement. This view, however, remained contested among the writers at the *Forward* and at *Justice*. The stakes of the *Day* strike, then, went far beyond the working

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<sup>565</sup> Ibid.

<sup>566</sup> Nat Einhorn to Harry Crone, February 16; Crone to Einhorn, February 19, 1941; Herman Wolf to Nat Einhorn, March 28, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York, Box 40, Folder 19.



conditions at that particular newspaper. It had implications for the relationship between the old institutions of the Jewish labor movement and the emerging CIO, as well as between the media of radical counterpublics and the normative conception of public interest journalism. Central to both of these concerns was an overarching theme: to what extent could the liberal consensus-- comprised of trade unions, commercial interests and the state, and mediated by professional journalism-- allow for democratic expression and participation? The *Day* strike precipitated decisions by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the Newspaper Guild International Executive Board, and the New York courts, to set the limits of democracy and media activism around anti-Communism.

### **The National Labor Relations Board and The ILGWU Eleven**

In the midst of the strike, the Newspaper Guild filed an unfair labor practice with the NLRB against *Der tog*, on the grounds of discrimination. The Guild claimed that strike leader B.Z. Goldberg, the former business manager, had been fired due to his Guild affiliation. At the NLRB hearings, however, it was revealed that Goldberg had given *Day* credentials to a secret representative of the Comintern to operate as a Soviet agent in Europe. The agent, Schaeno Epstein, had authored several pro-Soviet articles for *Der tog* under the pseudonym A.S. Schmindler, his passport name while in the United States. Goldberg issued checks made out to Schmindler as payment for the articles. Although Goldberg claimed that the publisher knew about this activity at the time, he had since died. Thus, it was difficult to prove one way or the other if Goldberg had been guilty of a dismissible offense.<sup>567</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> "NLRB Ruling on Jewish Day," *World Telegram*, June 3, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 23.

Further, Leo Feinberg, an ex-Communist and writer for *Di frayhayt*, noted that in October 1938 a Guild organizer named M. Yushevitz had been at a Communist Central Committee meeting held at *Di frayhayt*'s offices, where they allegedly discussed taking over the JWU. Yushevitz denied the charges. Again, there was little way to determine who was being honest in the situation. The accusation of Communist activity, though, was enough to vindicate the *Day* of discrimination and ennoble the reputation of the JWU.<sup>568</sup>

It is unclear from the evidence as to whether or not such a plan to take over the JWU actually existed. But what is striking either way is how the NLRB approved of the *Day* firing workers on the grounds of Communist activity. Here, the Board implicitly constructed a dichotomy: firing a worker based on trade union affiliation was an unfair labor practice. Firing a worker discriminatorily based on Communist support was justifiable action.

Liberal anti-Communism also served as the basis for the ILGWU's arguments against the Guild during the strike at *Der tog*. Two members of the *Brooklyn Eagle* Unit brought charges against the ILGWU Unit members for opposing the strike. The plaintiffs argued that the *Justice* writers had violated the ANG constitution and the Newspaper Guild of New York's bylaws, by undermining the union's potential to win the strike.<sup>569</sup>

In April, the Executive Committee of the Newspaper Guild of New York recommended the creation of a trial board, comprised of five members. The trial took place at the New York Guild's midtown Manhattan offices over the course of six hearings between June 4 through

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<sup>568</sup> Ibid.

<sup>569</sup> "Garment Men Face News Guild Charges," n.d., Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 19; Answer of Eleven Members of the Newspaper Guild of New York, March 27, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 19.

September 3, 1941. The Guild dissidents were charged with four violations, and twelve subdivisions.<sup>570</sup>

The defendants noted, however, that these charges all boiled down to one issue: “Whether members or a unit of the Newspaper Guild of New York may express an opinion on an action taken or to be taken by their employees or elected representatives constituting the Executive Committee of the Newspaper Guild of New York.” As Harry Crone explained, “We sincerely believe that *if* by any chance these charges should be sustained against us-- it will establish a precedent for possible action against you or any other member of the Guild in the future.”<sup>571</sup>

The New York Guild leaders, of course, saw the issue a bit differently. *Der tog* published the ILGWU Unit’s statement, prompting some to believe they had passed the resolution and given it to the editors in order to assist breaking the strike. Further, the letter was distributed to the *Guild Reporter*, presumably to be published and stir debate, and among *Der tog* advertisers, in order to persuade them to maintain their financial support because it was not a legitimate strike. From the Guild’s perspective, *Justice* writers were acting in accord with their boss, David Dubinsky, who had also spoken in opposition to the strike. They believed opposition to the strike was part of a broader conspiracy, led by Dubinsky, to take over the Guild.

This characterization, however, demonstrated the Guild’s poor understanding of the Yiddish press, the JWU, and the political history of the Jewish labor movement. While the relationships between the ILGWU, the *Forward* and the *Day* were economic and political, they were also rooted in a long history of movement building, of cooperation, and of culture. One of

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<sup>570</sup> Nat Einhorn to Harry Crone, April 11, 1941, Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 19.

<sup>571</sup> Answer of Eleven Members of the Newspaper Guild of New York, March 27, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 19. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 19.

the ILGWU Unit members, Sam Romer, wrote to the Guild's Executive Committee in March, calling the strike "unjustifiable and foolish," and claiming that it was "alienating a great part of the Yiddish-speaking community, traditionally pro-labor, from the Guild and from the CIO...The strike is evidence of an irresponsible leadership in the New York Guild which evidently neither understands nor seeks understanding of the basic problems of the newspaper workers."<sup>572</sup>

Overlooking the profound commitment the ILGWU had made to the cause of labor was a severe insult. As another defendant, Bernard Breslaw, said,

the defendants are not merely members of a trade union-- they work for and represent unions. The defendants are union fiduciaries, hired by their union employers by virtue of their pro-labor activities and sympathies. To call such people strikebreakers or company unionists at a union meeting is equivalent to announcement by the Guild that members X Y and Z rated incompetent by his fellow craftsmen? What union would trust A B or C branded anti-union by their own union?"<sup>573</sup>

Such an attempt to silence dissent flew in the face of any notion of democratic trade unionism, much less a union that prided itself on fighting for First Amendment freedoms. The defendants feared that these practices would ultimately damage the organization. Breslaw wrote,

If the Board concludes that the facts do fit a crime, it is officially pronouncing a death sentence upon the bare minimum of trade union liberty-- the right to tell the Executive Secretary that the Guild has committed an act that smells to high heavens. It will constitute the surest official notice to the thousands of unorganized newspapermen of America that in joining the ANG they had better check their minds outside. And if not their minds, at least their voices. If the acts of the defendants do not constitute a crime, then a rebuke of the Executive Committee is in order. It is in order to demonstrate to guildsmen that democracy may be made to function in the ANG, that these things need not happen here.

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<sup>572</sup> Sam Romer to the Executive Committee of the Newspaper Guild of New York, March 21, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 18.

<sup>573</sup> Statement of Defendant Bernard Breslaw to the Trial Board (To be read in his behalf by Harry Crone) Newspaper Guild of New York, Box 40, Folder 19.

Arguing for freedom of expression, the defendants pointed out the hypocrisy evident in the Newspaper Guild's draconian measures against its own members. "If the stigma is not removed... so that freedom of expression is clearly made an axiom in the Guild rather than an objective, then no honorable person will care to have his name associated with the ANG."<sup>574</sup>

The ILGWU Unit believed that the outcome of their case would have significant implications for the democratic nature of the labor movement. Much like J.B.S Hardman and Fania Cohn, Harry Crone argued for the essential need to criticize the direction of labor organizations from within. "When it is considered that the only basis for the charges are from the fact that we wrote a letter of criticism to our paid Executive Secretary," he wrote, "it is obvious that the charges are entirely baseless and absurd; they are unconstitutional in that they aim to penalize us for a routine and moderate exercise of the right of criticism *within* the Guild itself."<sup>575</sup>

Through the course of the trial, the deep-seated skepticism and suspicion between the garment unions and the New York Guild were laid to bare. According to the trial board's report, "It was obviously the cause of some rancor, disputes and name-calling during the hearings, all of which was discarded by this Board and was not considered in the slightest during its deliberation." While the defendants argued that the details of the strike should be a moot point, since the only issue was whether or not it was criminal to voice disagreement with the union leadership, the trial board instead determined that the strike provided necessary context in order to understand the case. Questions concerning the strike were of paramount importance in that they sought to establish possible intent of the defendants in the action they took, and that intent

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<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

<sup>575</sup> Harry Crone to Guild members, May 1, 1941, Newspaper Guild of New York, Box 40, Folder 19.

in the charges on which they were being tried was one of the most important factors to be considered by the Board in reaching a verdict.<sup>576</sup>

Crone wanted to argue the case in strictly liberal terms-- in favor of the right to free expression, and opposed to totalitarianism on the left and the right. He drew an analogy between the charges and “a typical Communist-Nazi purge tactic,” indicating a “totalitarian structure.” He said,

[O]nce Communist-Nazi policy is made by its Executive Committee all members of the party must strictly adhere and will be liable to dire punishment if they are heard to express even the slightest criticism. Likewise, members of the Communist Party are not permitted to associate, socially or otherwise with any individual or group who might conceivably be considered as opposed to the Communist Party. It appears that...by their charges...maintain just that, namely, that we may not even speak to personal friends if by chance such friends are members of the Jewish Writers Union.

Continuing with the comparisons of the Guild leaders to fascists, Breslaw noted, “It is not a far cry from the repression of criticism to the goose-steps. It is not a great distance from a point barring minority criticism to a point barring the integration of members in groups of twos and threes.”<sup>577</sup>

Thus, the ILGWU workers wrapped themselves in the flag. They claimed their allegiance to the Guild and to the United States, positioning themselves as good union citizens while implying that the Newspaper Guild of New York’s leadership was un-American. Crone said that members had an implicit duty to express their opinions on union matters, and that the charges against him and his compatriots were “based on a concept of dictatorship control.” The Executive Committee, he argued, “should declare the policy of this Union to be in conformity

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<sup>576</sup> Trial Board’s Report, Newspaper Guild of New York, Box 40, Folder 20.

<sup>577</sup> Answer of Eleven Members of the Newspaper Guild of NY to Charges Filed by Ed Hughes and Catherine Cole, Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 19; Statement of Defendant Bernard Breslaw to the Trial Board (To be read in his behalf by Harry Crone), Newspaper Guild of New York, Box 40, Folder 19.

with the policy of the United State Government on the right of its citizenry to criticize and express their opinion publicly.” Indeed, the record demonstrated that the ILGWU members had, in fact, supported the Guild, raised “considerable sums of money for them,” and hadn’t acted during their time with the Labor Press Unit “as anything other than good trade unionists.”<sup>578</sup>

Two significant events had occurred before the Guild trial board handed down its decision. First, the June 1941 ANG convention marked the official end of the radical Guild. The international leadership avoided the formation of a committee to investigate potential Communist sympathies by the narrowest of margins. But conservative forces were able to change the constitution so that international officers would be elected not at the convention, but through referendum of the entire membership. This helped to give voice to the staunchly anti-Communist minority faction in New York, building a majority vote with many medium-sized conservative locals. By October 1941, the radical leaders were defeated by a 2 to 1 margin in a referendum vote, turning every spot on the international board and every executive position over to the conservative faction.<sup>579</sup>

Amidst this enormous political transformation, the strike at *Der tog* ended in August 1941. It was a devastating loss for the Guild. Upon returning to work, strikers were forced to rescind their Guild membership and rejoin the JWU. While the Guild continued to represent commercial and office workers, it was restricted from organizing editorial employees were the JWU retained its rights as the sole bargaining agent. Further, the Guild agreed to a reduction in payroll for the commercial employees, totaling \$3650 of *Der tog*’s operating budget, and to drop

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<sup>578</sup> Answer of Eleven Members of the Newspaper Guild of NY to Charges Filed by Ed Hughes and Catherine Cole, Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 19; Trial Board’s Report, Newspaper Guild of New York, Box 40, Folder 20.

<sup>579</sup> Scott, “Change and Dissolution,” 24-5.

legal suits against the JWU and the publisher. Finally, the Guild and the JWU agreed to begin cooperating through a joint committee, and to move towards a possible merger.<sup>580</sup>

The settlement reflected many of the claims of the ILGWU members regarding the nature of the JWU, and the flawed organizing strategies of the New York Guild. As one of the trial board members noted, the settlement helped to confirm the position of the ILGWU unit. “Any dispassionate analysis of the *Day* strike,” the member wrote, “will show that it cost the Guild a great deal of money and energy, which might have been more usefully employed, antagonized number of important labor unions, and did absolutely nothing in the way of augmenting Guild strength or influence. It was because ILGWU unit members were convinced that these would be the results that they passed the resolution for which they have been brought up on charges.”<sup>581</sup>

The ILGWU members were acquitted on all charges. But the trial board’s official decision did not reflect this acknowledgement of difference in the particularities of local organizing, at the resistance to a one-size-fits-all model of trade unionism. Instead, it adhered to the liberal logic the defendants had used in their arguments. The board concluded that although they believed the defendants had been “mistaken in their action,” calling it “hasty” and “ill-considered,” they had the right to act in such a manner. “Whether they were right or wrong” was not as important as “whether, within our union, men have a right to be what the Executive Committee, or any other group, even a majority of the membership conceive to be wrong. Unless we recognize that, we violate our faith as democrats and we are untrue to both ourselves and you [the membership].” Displaying ideological unity between the aims of labor and the aims of the state, the trial board concluded, “Every member of the Newspaper Guild of New York can expect

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<sup>580</sup> “Memorandum of Agreement,” New York Newspaper Guild Records, Box 41, Folder 3.

<sup>581</sup> Will Chasan to William Ucker, August 19, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 20.



from his union the same true and impartial justice as that given him by the state. More he cannot ask; less he must never be given.”<sup>582</sup>

### **The Day Strike, Advertising, and the Foundations of Taft-Hartley**

Although the strike against the *Day* was counterproductive for the Newspaper Guild of New York and inter-union relationships, the Guild’s approach to the strike acknowledged the extent to which the Yiddish press was integrated into a media political economy rooted in capitalism and commodification processes. One of the primary tactics they used was to picket not only the *Day* offices at 183 East Broadway, but at its advertisers as well. These “secondary boycotts” led to greater controversy and tension, as members of the Jewish Writers Union pressed for the arrest of Guild members targeting these businesses. Ultimately, the JWU’s hostility towards the Guild led to court rulings that would lay the foundation for the strict limitations to be put on the labor movement through the Taft-Hartley Act following the war, while making the politics of advertising invisible within media economics.

On March 28, more than one month into the strike at *Der tog*, Louis Fleischmann was arrested outside of Sussman’s Bakery on Clinton Street, just around the corner from the *Day* headquarters. Standing barely five feet tall, the 65 year-old writer was convicted of disorderly conduct and sentenced to a five dollar fine. He had been carrying a sign that read, on one side in English and on the other in Yiddish, “Unfair!-- This Place Advertises in the “Day” Which Is on Strike.” The complaining witness, another *Day* employee named Elias Ginsburg, advised Fleischmann “that we would be obliged to make an arrest” on behalf of the newspaper, consulted

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<sup>582</sup> Trial Board’s Statement, Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 40, Folder 20.

with several police officers, and then initiated the arrest by placing his hand on the shoulder of the defendant saying, “You are under arrest.”<sup>583</sup>

None of Fleischmann’s claims were untrue. The bakery, in fact, had advertised in *Der tog* that day, and strike-breaking employees from *Der tog*’s advertising department had visited Sussman’s to discuss changing the copy. In no way was there any indication that Fleischmann presented any kind of violent threat. Ginsburg, however, argued that Fleischmann had been in violation of a vague statute that forbade acting “in such a manner as to annoy, interfere with, and be offensive to others, with intent to provoke a breach of the peace...”

The defendant’s lawyers argued that this law was in direct violation of First and Fourteenth Amendment protections. So long as the picketers claims were not libelous, the law could not interfere.<sup>584</sup>

Other arrests followed. Joseph Landau and Morris Cohen were arrested outside of the Borden Company, a dairy producer who also advertised in *Der tog*. They had been carrying signs that read, “Elsie Died of a Broken Heart Because Bordens Advertises in the Scab ‘Day.’” with a picture of a dead cow. In defense of the charged picketers, their lawyer used truth as a defense. He argued, “Unless this Court is to take the judicial notice of the love life of cows, we do not see how this issue is to be determined on this record.”<sup>585</sup>

The picketers’ actions were legally questionable for another set of reasons as well. Ginsburg insisted that Fleischmann, Landau and Cohen had been involved in “secondary

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<sup>583</sup> “Appellant’s Brief”; “Opinion, Court of Special Session of the City of New York.” Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 16.

<sup>584</sup> “Summary of Facts,” Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 16.

<sup>585</sup> “Defendant’s Memorandum: People of the State of New York vs. Landau and Cohen,” Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 16.

boycotts"-- industrial actions aimed at an employer or business not directly involved in a labor dispute. Secondary boycotts had long been the source of controversy, and were often stymied by court injunctions. While the federal Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932 sanctioned either "direct or indirect picketing," New York statute permitted secondary actions only "when the case involves persons who are engaged in the same industry, trade, craft, or occupation." In 1937, a court ruling in the case *Goldfinger v. Feintuch* stated that secondary boycotts were legal where "unity of interest existed."<sup>586</sup> Thus, the strike at *Der tog* prompted an important question about the political economy of media-- was there "unity of interest" between advertisers and newspapers?

For the Guild, these arrests presented a clear threat to free expression, to the rights of workers, and to the prospect of a just media system. As Guild lawyer Abraham Isserman noted, "The case presents a clear cut issue on what is perhaps the Guild's most important strike tactic-- the peaceful picketing of advertisers." In court, Isserman tried to explain how advertisers and publishers did, in fact, share a "unity of interest," and how both parties benefited from the labor of others. He said,

The bakery which was picketed patronized the struck newspaper. The advertising department directly involved in the strike serviced the bakery by checking and preparing the advertising copy through visits to the bakery premises. The business department directly involved in the strike undoubtedly took care of the accounting side of the advertising transaction. The circulation department directly involved in the strike delivered the papers which contained the Sussman's Bakery ad which were on sale 'next door' as well as elsewhere. The editorial department directly involved in the strike made possible the sale of the struck newspaper which contained the bakery ad, through the preparation of news and editorial material which provides the reader interest. Thus, the Sussman Bakery was serviced by all the struck departments of the newspaper and in turn gave financial support to the employer against whom the strike was in progress.<sup>587</sup>

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<sup>586</sup> "Defendant's Memorandum: People of the State of New York vs. Fleishman (sic)," Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 16.

<sup>587</sup> Isserman to Einhorn, May 9, 1941. Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 16; "Appellant's Brief," Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 16.

Isserman's arguments did not hold water with either the Magistrates' Court of the City of New York, nor with the appellate court one year later. Instead, the court determined that picketing an advertiser was in violation of New York law. Fundamentally, bakeries and dairy producers were not in the same industry as newspapers. As Isserman noted, "The complaint's memorandum is devoted to the proposition that it is *ipso facto* 'unlawful intimidation' and a 'secondary boycott' to picket a newspaper advertiser and that such picketing is disorderly conduct as a matter of law without regard to the manner in which it is done."<sup>588</sup> Together, the court and the JWU were paving the way for the stringent federal restrictions that would be put on labor unions in the postwar era.

If the Jewish working class counterpublic had helped to lay the groundwork for the New Deal and the CIO during the 1920s, it was laying the groundwork for its demise by the beginning of World War II. Although the Guild had intended to appeal the Fleischmann decision for a second time, bureaucratic confusion prevented Isserman from filing the paperwork in time. But by that point, in 1942, the height of New Deal optimism and the potential for progressive change had waned. "In view of the preoccupation with the war effort and the present temper of the courts in respect to labor disputes," Isserman explained to the Guild, "it might be just as well that the appeal was not taken at this time. The matter of principle involved will have to be settled at a later time in some other case.

"We are closing our file."<sup>589</sup>

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<sup>588</sup> "Defendant's Reply Memorandum," Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 16.

<sup>589</sup> Memo Re: The People of the State of New York vs. Louis Fleischman," October 21, 1942, Newspaper Guild of New York Records, Box 41, Folder 16.

## Conclusion

Through the struggles that emerged between the Jewish labor movement and the Newspaper Guild, the state and the growing labor bureaucracy appropriated the anti-Communism of the Jewish socialist movement. From these new institutional perspectives, anti-Communism took on a fundamentally different meaning than it had in Yiddish socialist circles. For the ILGWU, the ACWA, the *Forward* and the Jewish Writers Union, anti-Communism emerged both as political strategy for self-preservation in the 1920s, as well as a commitment to democracy among the left-- the ability to freely express, debate and publish. It was part of a multi-decade struggle to, on the one hand curry favor with politicians and advertisers in order to avoid institutional annihilation, and on the other hand prevent dogmatic Communists from controlling the discourse and actions among the Jewish working class. But for government and union bureaucrats, anti-Communism would become in the coming years a way to discipline all worker activity and to unite all classes behind U.S. Cold War policies.

Because the Guild did not understand the history of the Jewish working class counterpublic-- its specific ideological contours and factions, its values and its practices--it inadvertently positioned itself against organizations that had been central to the institutional and spiritual development of the CIO. As a result, a new consensus emerged between the remnants of the counterpublic and the new conservative, national leadership of the Newspaper Guild. As Ben Scott notes, it was at this point by 1941 that the Guild began to shy away from its broad social mission and adamant commitment to a press uninhibited by capital, and settled into a more moderate politics of trade unionism and commercial professional journalism.

The Fleischmann case demonstrates even further reaching implications. The “postwar settlement” for journalism mirrored the postwar settlement between labor and capital. As Victor Pickard describes it, the years immediately following the Second World War saw the possibility of the emergence of a progressive social contract between the public, the state and the press, alongside broader political upheaval.<sup>590</sup> But this episode demonstrates that the conservative tendencies within the labor movement, with implications for both union rights and press freedoms. As courts sought to protect advertisers from the risks of labor disputes with the media, laying the groundwork for the strict provisions against unions that would be passed amidst controversy in the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act.

Yet it would be a misnomer to dub the leadership of the Yiddish press and the garment unions as conservative. To do so is to erase the decades of hard work, ingenuity and struggle that they endured in order to preserve and build working-class activism during the darkest days of the 1920s. It is to erase the commitment that many of them had in theory, if not always in practice, to participatory cultural production and open, democratic debate. It is to erase the important particularities of ethnic perspectives that sometimes shed light on universal moral injustices. Given the privileges of hindsight, it would be difficult to argue that support for Stalin was a “conservative” position when it implied a lack of opposition Hitler.

By World War II, the Jewish working class counterpublic had outlasted its own utility as a democratic force. The emerging national system of professional journalism against a backdrop of lightly regulated “free enterprise” promised a level of social responsibility within the public sphere and the private economy that would make counterpublics, their media and their

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<sup>590</sup> Victor Pickard, “Media Democracy Deferred: The Postwar Settlement for U.S. Communications, 1945-1949,” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2008.

movements unnecessary. But without independent sites of democratic discourse, it would be difficult to challenge the institutions of the U.S. political economy-- the corporations, the government, the trade unions, and the media-- in the coming decades.

**Conclusion:  
The Uses of Counterpublic Histories in Moments of Crisis**

My tongue is not long enough to express what I think of the FCC. I am a former network radio actor, news announcer and director. Today whilst scanning the radio dial, my stomach gets sicker and sicker with what I hear...The Empire of the Rat now...[has] bought WEVD. I understood the *Forward's* need to sell the station, but to do so to a corporation founded by a rabid antisemite (sic) who supported Gerald L. K. Welsch, Bilbo, Fr. Coughlin and the *Dearborne* (sic) *Independent* not to mention the most anti- union company in the country now owns a station named for labour leader Eugene V. Debbs (sic) is a crime against nature.

The world of corporate radio must end.

-- Ira Shprintzen<sup>591</sup>

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.

-- Walter Benjamin<sup>592</sup>

A group of protesters gathered outside of the Forward Association's midtown Manhattan offices on June 28, 2001. As Communist sympathizers had done upon Morris Novik's arrival as station manager seventy years before, WEVD listeners once again objected to changes on the horizon at the station. The Forward Association, still WEVD's proprietor, was about to sell the former Socialist institution to one of the half-dozen major global media conglomerates, the Walt Disney Company. The mega-corporation would convert the local AM talk radio station which still offered daily broadcasts in Yiddish, into the flagship station of the ESPN Sports Radio Network.<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>591</sup> Ira Shprintzen, "Feedback from an XM Supporter," Received May 28, 2004. Proceeding Number 04-160. Federal Communications Commission Electronic Comment Filing System. Accessed at <http://fjallfoss.fcc.gov/ecfs/comment/view?id=5511351618> on May 22, 2011.

<sup>592</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1968), 257.

<sup>593</sup> David Hinckley, "WEVD Fans Will Rally to Thwart Sale." *New York Daily News*, July 27, 2001. Accessed at [http://articles.nydailynews.com/2001-06-27/entertainment/18179422\\_1\\_radio-disney-espn-show-espn-radio-network](http://articles.nydailynews.com/2001-06-27/entertainment/18179422_1_radio-disney-espn-show-espn-radio-network), May 22, 2011.



The *Forward*, by that point a weekly publication, had seen its circulation drop and its losses increase to more than \$2 million annually. Undeterred by community anger, the Forward Association sold the marginally profitable station for \$78 million amidst a wave of merger mania in the radio industry. The amount, however, was estimated to be enough to keep the staple of news for the Jewish community afloat for another four decades. But as liberal commentator Alan Combs, who had a program on the station, told the *New York Times*, “If the goal is to use WEVD as a way to help the financial underpinnings of the *Forward*, that can be done without selling the radio station. To let go of this would be a true shame in a marketplace where there are so few independent voices.”<sup>594</sup>

Former New York Mayor Ed Koch, also a WEVD host, claimed that the station was “as much a New York landmark as City Hall.” “WEVD is an institution that goes back as far as I can remember in giving voice to ethnic groups and giving voice to the poor,” he said. “And the call letters say it all-- it is for the great Socialists.”<sup>595</sup>

Although the *Forward* and WEVD had long abandoned their socialist politics, their audiences still wanted them to offer perspectives and programming determined by something other than profit motive. Much as it had often done under B.C. Vlodeck’s management in the 1920s and 1930s, the *Forward* compromised the interests of at least some of their loyal supporters in response to market demands. The demonstration, planned through a website by

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<sup>594</sup> Jayson Blair, “Liberal Radio Mainstay May Sell to Make Way for ESPN.” *New York Times*, June 26, 2001. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/26/nyregion/liberal-radio-mainstay-may-sell-to-make-way-for-espn.html>, May 22, 2011; Paul Colfrod, “Disney Buys WEVD for 78M.” *New York Daily News*, September 7, 2002. Accessed at [http://articles.nydailynews.com/2002-09-07/news/18207413\\_1\\_marketing-costs-buys-spanish-broadcasting-system](http://articles.nydailynews.com/2002-09-07/news/18207413_1_marketing-costs-buys-spanish-broadcasting-system), May 22, 2011.

<sup>595</sup> Jayson Blair, “Liberal Radio Mainstay May Sell to Make Way for ESPN.” *New York Times*, June 26, 2001. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/26/nyregion/liberal-radio-mainstay-may-sell-to-make-way-for-espn.html>, May 22, 2011; Paul Colfrod, “Disney Buys WEVD for 78M.” *New York Daily News*, September 7, 2002. Accessed at [http://articles.nydailynews.com/2002-09-07/news/18207413\\_1\\_marketing-costs-buys-spanish-broadcasting-system](http://articles.nydailynews.com/2002-09-07/news/18207413_1_marketing-costs-buys-spanish-broadcasting-system), May 22, 2011.

postal worker Charles Zlatkin, brought the struggle for a more democratic *Forward* into its third century. Once again, members of the public felt the need to preserve the institutions of the old Jewish working-class counterpublic based on a mythology of what they once were, and a hope for what they could be.<sup>596</sup>

While opponents of WEVD's sale invoked the history of Jewish labor in the U.S., the Jewish working-class counterpublic had disintegrated during the postwar era of commercial mass media to become an institutionalized component of U.S. society. With the expansion of a Jewish middle-class, the idea of a politics based in an ethnic working-class culture no longer made sense. What remained, according to Irving Howe, were merely "warm memories, large and unforeseen practical achievements, an intellectual tradition..." a "sentiment."<sup>597</sup>

That sentiment, however, as demonstrated by people's frustration with the *Forward* and WEVD in 2001, retains political potential. In calling for resistance to whiteness and the creation of multiracial democracy, Karen Brodtkin argues that *Yiddishkayt* and other "ethnoracial cultures of many subordinated peoples...embed funds of experience and alternatives to modernity." Drawing on the "hegemonic Jewishness" of the past can still bring about progressive change. But this dissertation is in no way an instruction manual. "We should look at our histories not as models to emulate," she argues, "but for insights, new ideas and conversations-- for resources and tools for thinking with-- for beginning to envision alternatives to whiteness, capitalism, modernism, and the stultifying organizations of social life they support."<sup>598</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> Blair, "Liberal Radio."

<sup>597</sup> Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 356-7

<sup>598</sup> Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 185-6; 187.

In this conclusion, I draw out lessons from the history of the Jewish working class counterpublic in order to understand contemporary issues in media politics. First, I present a brief narrative of the decline of the counterpublic in the postwar era, and its residual impact to the present day. Next, I discuss implications of this narrative for media historiography, future research and activism. Finally, heeding Walter Benjamin's call, I argue that we must think through ways in which the history of counterpublics might help us "bring about a real state of emergency."<sup>599</sup>

### **The Counterpublic's Decline**

By the time the United States entered the Second World War, the Jewish labor movement had become a central part of a governing coalition under the New Deal. At this point, the lines between the Jewish working class, the American working class, and "the public" writ large become somewhat difficult to distinguish. The Jewish working class' labor in forging the New Deal yielded economic and cultural rewards. They became beneficiaries of policies that allowed them to attain middle class lifestyles. In the postwar era, they left the urban spaces that had allowed for the development of close communities and oppositional political movements. Jewish Americans began to purchase homes in the more atomized suburbs with the help of federal programs like the GI Bill and FHA loans. The government did not afford these privileges to African Americans, further enabling Jews to see themselves as part of the white middle class. But the suburbs did not provide an environment conducive to creating a sense of Jewish community. According to Irving Howe, the central institution of Jewish identity was no longer

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<sup>599</sup> Benjamin, "Theses," 257.

the Workmen's Circle or the Yiddish theater; it was "the temple, modernized, bland, affluent well staffed, sumptuously built," shaping the conformist landscape of the new "consumer's republic."<sup>600</sup>

In addition, the Jewish socialist unions were neither Jewish nor socialist any longer. Leaders such as David Dubinsky and Sidney Hillman cared less about ideological goals, and fit their strategies neatly into the framework of the welfare state. The ILGWU and the ACWA no longer represented primarily Jewish workers. The garment industry had expanded far beyond its New York base, and second- and third- generation Jews moved into middle-class professions. By 1950, Jewish workers comprised only between 25 and 30 percent of the garment unions. Increasingly, members were African American and Puerto Rican. Still, the ILGWU in particular remained a "social union," and continued to strive to place itself at the center of members' lives.<sup>601</sup>

In order to extend the influence of the labor movement and the spirit of New Deal liberalism into the Cold War era, the ILGWU maintained a strong interest in shaping public opinion through the use of their own media. In the late 1940s, they fought for licenses to the FM spectrum. Michael Stamm has demonstrated that the union won the license for its New York station, WFDR, after the People's Radio Foundation (PRF) and the American Jewish Committee challenged the FCC for awarding it to the *Daily News*. With labor's support, the PRF criticized the *Daily News* because of its class politics. The AJC feared the *Daily News* operating a station

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<sup>600</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 613-21; Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 44-50; Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950-1970* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001). Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

<sup>601</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 356.

because of the paper's anti-Semitism.<sup>602</sup> Thus, the politics of class and Jewishness became largely disarticulated from each other.

Labor's attention increasingly turned towards fighting for the right to participate in public discourse mediated by capitalist interests. The commercial broadcasting system, legitimated by Congress and the FCC, remained a point of contestation. Liz Fones-Wolf writes, "For industrial unionists, access to radio was critical because the 'thinking of the American people on labor, social, and political issues is influenced more than almost anything else by what they read in the papers or hear on the air.'" The CIO Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC), co-founded by Hillman, battled the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) code for the right to airtime on commercial radio stations. Their political muscle meant that the networks had to cooperate to some extent. In 1942, for example, NBC granted the AFL and CIO a fifteen-minute weekly sustaining program, *Labor for Victory*, with the two federations alternating weeks. The program was the first produced by labor to use professional writers and entertainers, and provided a national, rather than a local, platform. While the CIO's productions, in particular, focused on some controversial themes, including racial equality, *Labor for Victory* points also to the emerging consensus between capital and labor on the uses of mass culture, than towards a vastly different wartime ideology.<sup>603</sup>

Despite the significant shortcomings of *Pins and Needles* and in the ILGWU's organizational culture with regard to race, they did use mass media to promote tolerance through World War II and into the late 1940s. These campaigns highlighted the fact that the union was no

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<sup>602</sup> Liz Fones-Wolf, *Waves of Opposition: Labor and Radio in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 165-6; Michael Stamm, "Anti-Semitism, Prior Restraint, and the Politics of Post-WWII Broadcasting in New York City." Paper given at the Convention of the American Journalism Historian's Association, Seattle. October 3, 2008.

<sup>603</sup> Fones-Wolf, *Waves of Opposition*, 102-18.

longer at the core of a decidedly Jewish movement. Rather, they cast Americans as either black or white, making Jewishness invisible. By the 1960s, though, some critics and union members charged the organization with being a “racist autocracy,” actively preventing people of color from advancing to leadership positions.<sup>604</sup>

While Jews gained greater access to capital and power and turned away from socialist politics and *Yiddishkayt*, the far right waged a vicious war against the New Deal through red-baiting, often linking Jews to Communism. More than a hundred leaders of the Communist Party were convicted of violating the Smith Act. Fellow travelers’ of the Popular Front era were also suspect, as the House Un-American Activities Committee’s (HUAC) launched its witch hunt against the Hollywood Left in 1947, particularly impacting Jewish screenwriters. Of the Hollywood Ten, six were Jewish. Four years later, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg’s execution showed Jews the dangers of having left-wing affiliations at a moment when a white, middle-class lifestyle was increasingly available to them.<sup>605</sup>

As a result of these attacks, labor unions lost considerable strength. The backlash against the New Deal shifted the balance of power back towards corporate America and support for “free enterprise.” Most significantly, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947-- prefaced in some ways by the controversy of the Guild strike at the *Day* in 1941-- placed new restrictions on unions in organizing and striking. The CIO era, which the garment unions had played a central role in

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<sup>604</sup> Barbara D. Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 21-63; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 636.

<sup>605</sup> Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 244-56; Steven Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Brodtkin, 2; 9. For an interesting discussion of the Rosenberg case and the politics of Jewishness and mass consumption, see Nathan Abrams, “Mother’s Old Fashioned Gefilte Fish,” *Containing America: Cultural Production and Consumption in ‘50s America*. (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham Press, 2000), 76-90.

shaping with their pioneering attention to industrial organizing and to culture, came to an official end in 1955, with the re-merging of both bodies. Weakened by new legal and cultural changes, the AFL-CIO reestablished conservative trade unionism under the leadership of George Meany. Having risen through the ranks of the building trades, Meany came out of a distinctly different tradition of unionism than his Jewish counterparts, but cold war politics ultimately brought them together. Now, Meany “was the highest possible position within the labor movement, leader of a united-- if also thoroughly purged and terribly weakened--house of labor.” It was now difficult to see the garment unions as resembling a component of the left at all. Paul Buhle writes, “The American Legion’s National Commander J. Addington Wagner voiced the common sentiments of more fanatical delegates [to the AFL-CIO’s founding convention] from the building trades to the ILGWU that despite the rapidly accelerating arms race and domestic McCarthyism, President Eisenhower’s administration was ‘soft on communism.’”<sup>606</sup>

In addition to domestic political transformations, several global events also had an impact on the remaking of Jewish working-class institutions and identity in postwar America. First, the aftermath of the Holocaust contributed to a crisis in Jewish identity, because it seemed beyond comprehension and incongruous with the new prosperity Jews were finding in the United States. This stifled discussion around the politics and economics of genocide. For many, the Holocaust served as a mark of shame which “set limits to assimilation.” Some have argued that the Holocaust took on the character in collective memory as “an event of great moral significance” rather than something of particular significance to Jews. Others have noted it spurred a

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<sup>606</sup> Liz Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), 91-145; 135-6; 134-5.

recommitment to Jewish identification as “a matter of honor.”<sup>607</sup> Significantly, though, the Holocaust has never been widely understood within the framework of Jewish socialism.

Second, the founding of Israel in 1948 “sped the dissolution of the ideologies that had prevailed among immigrant Jews.” Debate around Zionism essentially ceased, and the institutions of the old Jewish labor movement—and the labor movement as a whole—positioned themselves as supporters of the new state, alongside the U.S. federal government. While Israel helped strengthen the sense of self-worth among Jews after the Holocaust, it also made it more difficult for secular Jews to understand the meaning of their identity, as they were no longer united by the common, politicized culture of *Yiddishkayt*. Instead, Jews “preferred to see themselves as good Americans, or good liberals, or good human beings.”<sup>608</sup>

Finally, Khrushchev’s revelations about the nature of Stalin’s regime in 1956 further discredited Communism among American Jews. Among the criticisms that emerged of Stalin were the suppression of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union. While the CP in the United States might have provided space to place renewed emphasis on democratic rights within a left-wing framework, dissenters went in all directions towards various shades of liberalism, Marxism, and neoconservatism. The Party now had little influence, and the Communists who had come of age during the Popular Front had been lost to other political movements.<sup>609</sup>

By the 1960s, one could no longer speak of a Jewish working-class counterpublic, of a hegemonic Jewishness centered on socialism, because the institutions which had comprised it

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<sup>607</sup> Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) 207; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 626-7; Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 140-1.

<sup>608</sup> Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 628-9.

<sup>609</sup> Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade*. (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 254.



were weakened and no longer represented Jews. While significant numbers of young Jews—sometimes “Red Diaper babies”—supported civil rights causes and helped establish the New Left and the feminist movements, the ideologies, cultures, and institutions of these movements were of a new breed. Their participants were, by and large, middle class and displayed little explicit connection to their Jewishness through their political work. Jewish radicals and liberals now tried to communicate their messages within the broader public sphere, represented by the commercial mass media.<sup>610</sup>

Yet, as Paul Buhle notes, “even as the proportionate role of Jewish participation (Jewish workers especially) declined, the stamp of multigenerational Jewish participation remained” within left and liberal activism after 1980. Despite the rise of Jews within the ranks of the Republican Party and neoconservative circles, Jewish progressive identity continues to inspire calls for a more democratic public sphere. For example, the Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ), an organization that “[invests] in low-income communities and grassroots organizations” and “[engages] Jews as partners, allies, and leaders in social change work” by linking its efforts to Jewish faith, history and culture, claimed victory in ousting Glenn Beck from the Fox News Network. JFSJ generated 10,000 petition signatures in January 2011, calling on Fox to pull the plug on the right-wing propagandist. JFSJ charged Beck, the complete antithesis of the Habermasian ideal, with abusing the history of the Holocaust and perpetuating anti-Semitic conspiracy theories as a part of a political strategy to maintain economic inequality. As a result of this effort, alongside a successful advertiser boycott organized by the African American civil

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<sup>610</sup> Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 138-88. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) is an excellent study of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and their relationship to commercial media. Some prominent New Left activists have discussed the Jewishness of the movement, for example, Mark Rudd, “Why Were So Many Jews in SDS? (or, The Ordeal of Civility)” Accessed at <http://www.markrudd.com/?about-mark-rudd/why-were-there-so-many-jews-in-sds-or-the-ordeal-of-civility.html> on May 25, 2011.

rights organization Color of Change and the media watchdog Media Matters for America, Beck lost his cable program on the eve of the Passover holiday. JSFJ proclaimed,

This Passover, let us celebrate the expanded freedom in our public discourse. We hope that the space Beck leaves behind will be filled with a more constructive commentator, willing to address the serious challenges facing our country. In the meantime, we will keep investing in solutions to the economic challenges facing millions of Americans while standing up to demagogues like Beck who seek to divide us through scapegoating.<sup>611</sup>

But while Buhle notes that Jews remain “vastly overrepresented at every level and age group within all progressive movements” in the U.S., this will not be enough to transform the country’s political, economic, and cultural system.<sup>612</sup> The development of new working class counterpublics will be an essential component in the struggles for economic justice and democracy. Critical communications scholars must try to understand the conditions that might bring about these spaces.

### **Critical Junctures, Counterpublics, and the Politics of Periodization**

During the 1920s, organic intellectuals within the Jewish working class counterpublic helped to maintain an alternative ideology, a hegemonic Jewishness centered on socialism, through a variety of approaches to alternative media, culture and communication. By the 1930s, these efforts proved significant in building a broad, national labor movement and a new historical bloc. What institutions and practices might provide the basis for a twenty-first century movement

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<sup>611</sup> Paul Buhle, “Jewish Americans,” *Encyclopedia of the American Left*. Ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 2nd Edition, 399; Jewish Funds for Justice website. <http://www.jewishjustice.org/who-we-are>. Accessed May 23, 2011; Ed Pilkington, “Call for Fox News to Drop Glenn Beck,” *The Guardian*, 13 January, 2011. Accessed at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/jan/13/glenn-beck-petition-fox> on May 25, 2011; James Rucker, “How an Advertiser Boycott Campaign Helped Push Glenn Beck Off the Air,” *AlterNet*, April 13, 2011. Accessed at [http://www.alternet.org/story/150601/how\\_an\\_advertiser\\_boycott\\_campaign\\_helped\\_push\\_glenn\\_beck\\_off\\_the\\_air/](http://www.alternet.org/story/150601/how_an_advertiser_boycott_campaign_helped_push_glenn_beck_off_the_air/) on May 25, 2011; Jewish Funds For Justice, “Glenn Beck Dayenu! It Would Have Been Enough!” Accessed at <http://www.jewishjustice.org/dayenu> on May 25, 2011.

<sup>612</sup> Buhle, “Jewish Americans,” 400.

culture? What can we create now in order to maximize our power in the ongoing struggle for democracy? Where do we turn amidst our current crisis?

Bob McChesney argues that we now are in a “critical juncture,” a moment in which we have the potential to remake the total media system. These moments arise with the emergence of new technologies, dissatisfaction with the current media system, and broad “social upheaval and reform in the society as a whole.” This third component is crucial in shaping the outcome of a critical juncture. For example, McChesney notes that if key debates about broadcasting had occurred in 1937 at the height of CIO organizing instead of a few years prior, the radical zeitgeist might have yielded different results.<sup>613</sup>

How can social movements garner support in an undemocratic environment? Quoting former FCC commissioner Nicholas Johnson, McChesney writes, “Whatever your issue of concern is...media reform has got to be your second. Because unless the media system is changed, it will be much harder, if not impossible, to win popular awareness and support for the first issue.”<sup>614</sup> Thus, counterpublics, operating at the margins of the media system, are necessary in order to produce broad social upheaval and forge a critical juncture. If the dominant media system will not permit full democratic discussion around issues of labor, institutional racism, militarism, the environment, and the general political economy, there must be vibrant spaces outside of the dominant system for counter-discourses to emerge and flourish. By understanding how to create and preserve these spaces, we can begin to remake the public and the media that represent it.

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<sup>613</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *Communication Revolution*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2007), 149; *Telecommunications, Mass Media and Democracy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 262.

<sup>614</sup> McChesney, *Communication Revolution*, 149.

It is just as important, then, for communications historians to understand critical junctures as it is to understand the periods between critical junctures. Organic intellectuals such as B.C. Vladeck, J.B.S. Hardman, Fannia Cohn, and Morris Novik all helped to keep the light on for working people during the largely dark days of the 1920s. They opened a small but significant and powerful space for democratic discourse and action, challenging the enclosure of the state-corporate nexus. They took a variety of strategies and approaches, all of them problematic and never complete, but in sum, quite effective.

While B.C. Vladeck was overly comfortable with reliance on advertising, allowing the demand for revenue to jeopardize the credibility of the *Forward* among much of its audience, his willingness to compromise helped to sustain an alternative voice to the dominant politics of the day. In founding radio station WEVD, this proclivity helped fracture a robust reform movement. J.B.S. Hardman's struggle for an alternative to the *Forward* produced vibrant debate within the Jewish labor movement, but he was repeatedly marginalized throughout his career due to his staunch adherence to impractical principles. Fannia Cohn's efforts at worker education through drama and direct participation drew new people, particularly women, into the labor movement, but were easily appropriated by the culture industry. Morris Novik helped to create public service broadcasting on WEVD, but he also turned ethnicity from a political identity into a commodity. The conflict that emerged with the formation of the Newspaper Guild demonstrated the problematic relationships between the politics of ethnicity and class, between the nature of dominant and alternative media.

As Benjamin reminds us, crises under capitalism are constant. Attention to the history of counterpublics and alternative media lets us learn not just from those who acted when crises

were apparent to the many, but also from society's most marginalized groups who experience crisis perpetually. With this fuller understanding of U.S. media history we might have a better sense of problems and possibilities, dilemmas and debates that media activists encounter today regarding their structure, their funding, their tactics and their alliances.<sup>615</sup>

The history of the Jewish working-class counterpublic highlights the tensions between commodification and community, between entertainment and information, between individual savvy and collective solidarity, all within the realm of media activism. Activists affiliated with media reform and media justice movements must grasp how these dynamics have played out in the past so that they may develop enlightened strategies. The experiences of the *Forward* and WEVD demonstrate the need for policies that promote minority views rather than leaving them to the market. The experiences of the ACWA and the ILGWU show the important role that media can play in building trade unions. And the story of the Newspaper Guild and the strike at *Der tog* demonstrates the complex ways ethnicity, class, and culture can intersect to make or break political alliances.

Certainly, there are more lessons to learn. C. Riley Snorton argues for greater historical attention towards the African American press, and African American criticism of the dominant

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<sup>615</sup> Benjamin, "Theses," 257; Dan Berger offers an analysis of the distinction between media reform and media justice, and begins to address problematics in current "populist" coalitions in the contemporary media reform movement. "Defining Democracy: Coalition Politics and the Struggle for Media Reform," *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 3, 23 – 41, (2009). The Communication Workers of America's and much of the establishment civil rights community's opposition to network neutrality legislation ) also serve as examples of contemporary issues within the movement that would benefit from historical illumination. See Brian Dolber, "Missing the Boat?: The CWA's Approach to Media Policy, 1984-2006." Presented at Social Science Research Council's Conference on Media Policy, Free Press Conference. January 17, 2007. Memphis, TN; and Dolber, "Divide and Conquer: The Racial Politics of the COPE Act and the Network Neutrality Debate," Presented at SSRC Academic Pre-Conference at the National Media Reform Conference. June 2008. Minneapolis, MN. Victor Pickard discusses the debate within the Independent Media Center as to whether to take a grant from the Ford Foundation. "United Yet Autonomous: Indymedia and the Struggle to Sustain a Radical Democratic Network," *Media, Culture & Society* 28 (3), 315-336. See Robert W. McChesney, "Understanding the Media Reform Movement," *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 3, 23 – 41, (2009) for a discussion of history's role in assessing these problems.

U.S. media system through the “long civil rights movement” beginning in the 1920s.<sup>616</sup> Groups of Latino, Asian and white ethnic and non-ethnic workers also used media and developed communities of resistance. Knowing what counterpublics existed, what institutions supported them, what their media looked like, and what problems emerged might help us understand what produced the moments of upheaval in the 1930s, the 1960s, and perhaps the near future.

The efforts of the Jewish working-class counterpublic helped to make the U.S. more egalitarian, and its dominant media system more representative of society at large. But that system made it more difficult to sustain forms of media that reflected a radical democratic ethos. The Keynesian compromise between capital, labor and the state mirrored the “postwar settlement” around a commercial media system that operated in the public interest, partially regulated by the federal government. This representation, though, constituted commodification with deep social consequences. As Armand Mattelart observed,

[The people] no more participate in the determination of televised, radio broadcast or printed products than they do in the decisions affecting the nature and hierarchy of material consumer goods; all this escapes the alienated and atomised consumer. This passivity, resulting from the process of alienation, affects the transmitter as much as it does the receiver, given that the alienated consumer is also an agent of production.<sup>617</sup>

More than a lack of diversity of perspectives in mass media, the most pressing problem related to the culture industry is that it works to turn all communication into sites of accumulation within a broader capitalist political economy. In this setting, communication reproduces economic

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<sup>616</sup> C. Riley Snorton, “New Beginnings: Racing Histories, Democracy and Media Reform.” Special issue on media reform co-edited by Dan Berger and C. Riley Snorton. *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 3, 23 – 41, (2009).

<sup>617</sup> Victor Pickard, “Media Democracy Deferred: The Postwar Settlement for U.S. Communications, 1945-49,” Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2009; Armand Mattelart, “Communication Ideology and Class Practice,” in *Communication and Class Struggle. Vol 1: Capitalism, Imperialism*. Ed. by Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub. (New York: International General, 1979), 118.

inequality and social alienation, rather than encouraging democratic engagement and creating community.

By claiming to serve the public interest through professional codes and a notion of social responsibility, the postwar media system worked to turn citizens into consumers. Drawing from the mass culture critiques, the New Left and a plethora of social movements emerged, demonstrating the fragmented nature of the public sphere. Histories of counterpublics in this period might help explain the role organic intellectuals and commercial culture played in shaping political expression within the anti-war, civil rights, Black Power, feminist, Chicano, American Indian, gay liberation and environmentalist movements. Perhaps the pervasive nature of corporate media and the institutional limits of alternative media made it difficult for these movements to combat the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>618</sup>

Over the last 35 years, the social contract established during the 1930s and 1940s has been rewritten, with particular consequences for media and democracy. WEVD's sale to Disney did not occur in a vacuum. Under the banner of "de-regulation," the state re-regulated the

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<sup>618</sup> For an explanation of social responsibility theory, see Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur S. Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956). For critiques see William E. Berry, et. al, *Last Rights: Revisiting Four Theories of the Press*. Ed. by John Nerone. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). Examining the role of policy and the Federal Trade Commission, Molly Niesen's ongoing research demonstrates that the limitations of the consumer's movement in the 1970s helped to produce the neoliberal consensus. See, for example, "Selling Free Speech: Advertising and the First Amendment," Presented at the Meeting of the International Communications Association. Chicago, May 2009. This work can be potentially linked to the wide range of social movements in that period. John Nerone argues that the radical papers of the 1960s "showed little interest in entering the 'marketplace of ideas,'" instead seeking "to present a different and competing marketplace, one with different actors, different events, and a different agenda." The strategies employed and the relationships among these various marketplaces needs scholarly investigation. See *Violence Against the Press: Policing the Public Sphere in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 191. Some work that might provide a basis for a more systematic examination of media and the civil rights and Black Power movements include Stephen Walsh, "Black-Oriented Radio and the Civil Rights Movement," in *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* ed. by Brian Ward (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001); Robert E. Weems, Jr. "The Revolution Will be Marketed: American Corporations and Black Consumers During the 1960s," *Radical History Review* Vol 59 (Spring 1994): 94-107; Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); William Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Susan E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

communications industries, allowing increased consolidation in the pursuit of accumulation, and doing away with virtually any regard for the public interest. The 1996 Telecommunications Act heralded an age of hypercommercialism on the air. Although President Bill Clinton pledged that the legislation would create competition, offering consumers lower prices for cable and telephone services and encouraging “a diversity of voices and viewpoints in radio, television, and the print media,” it did exactly the opposite.<sup>619</sup>

Since the mid-1990s, well over half of the radio stations in the country have been sold. Within a year, Clear Channel, Viacom and Disney swallowed “small broadcasters and minority-owned stations while showing little interest in local content, whether it be news reporting or music programming” and came to dominate the field, as owners could now control an unlimited number of stations nationwide. The logic of neoliberalism completely turned the notion of federal regulation in the public interest on its head. The FCC now placed the burden of proof on the public to demonstrate the necessity for existing ownership caps and protective rules.<sup>620</sup>

In response to this shift, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of a media reform movement, originating with calls for the FCC to open up low power FM stations as well as stricter ownership rules. The growth of the internet brought new hope for democratic communication, as radio broadcasting had in the 1920s, and global web-based networks such as the Independent Media Centers (IMC) developed. In 2003, organizations such as Free Press,

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<sup>619</sup> Robert W. McChesney, “Theses on Media Deregulation,” in *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 415-24; Eric Klinenberg, *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America’s Media*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 224.

<sup>620</sup> McChesney, “Theses on Media Deregulation,” 415-24; Eric Klinenberg, *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America’s Media*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 224; Jeff Chester, *Digital Destiny: New Media and the Future of Democracy*. (New York: New Press, 2007), 16-45.



Common Cause, Consumers Union and MoveOn.org successfully helped push Congress to halt further stripping of media ownership laws.<sup>621</sup>

Michael Denning notes that these years also witnessed the birth of “a militant new service industry unionism.” Unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) often drew on the cultural backgrounds of immigrant workers in their organizing campaigns. These efforts coincided with “the emergence of a student movement against sweatshops, a brief wave of labor teach-ins on college campuses, the recruitment of student activists to union organizing campaigns, and the rebirth of new forms of culture industry unionism (like the campaigns of graduate and adjunct teachers in the universities)” and large-scale protests against the institutions of global capitalism such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). At times, these actions forced critical discussion in the corporate media about the politics of globalization.<sup>622</sup>

While the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent rush to war in Afghanistan and Iraq largely halted this emerging movement, the following years demonstrated the ever increasing need for structural changes in the media system. Between 2001 and 2003, the commercial pressures on professional journalism allowed for widespread misinformation by official sources and public relations agencies, leading the United States into expensive,

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<sup>621</sup> Robert W. McChesney, “The Escalating War Against Corporate Media,” in *The Political Economy of Media*, 461-90.

<sup>622</sup> Denning, “Afterword,” in *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 2010). It bares mentioning that my own participation in these movements, coupled with my disillusion with the commercial press and the tenets of “objectivity” I learned as a journalism major, set me on the course to write this dissertation. In this way, it is a product of what Denning calls “this new ‘laboring of American culture,’” 473. For discussions of media coverage of this movement, see Deepa Kumar, *Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization and the UPS Strike* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), and Christopher Martin, *Framed!: Labor and the Corporate Media* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 162-202.

destructive and seemingly unending invasions in the Middle East. In 2005, the Supreme Court's *Brand X* ruling brought a potential end to the principle of network neutrality, which protects online content from the political and profit motives of the telecommunications giants. And in 2008, the global financial system collapsed, plummeting the U.S. into the worst economic slump since the Great Depression and sending the remnants of the newspaper industry into a free fall.<sup>623</sup>

Where are the democratic spaces today that can generate the outcry necessary to transform the failed political economy and media system? Working class resistance over the last few years has been meaningful but sporadic. Immigrant rights protests swept the U.S. in 2006, culminating on May Day with “virtual strikes” in cities with large Latino populations such as Chicago and Los Angeles. Labor unions, ethnic organizations, Catholic parishes, and worker centers for undocumented immigrants mobilized their members through ethnic media and new communications technologies. As one commentator argued, “Whether or not unions have proved capable of playing a significant role in the immigrant movement, this is an overwhelmingly working class movement whose base is made up of restaurant and hotel workers, farm workers, and construction workers.”<sup>624</sup>

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<sup>623</sup> Bob McChesney, “Telling the Truth at a Moment of Truth: U.S. News Media and the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq,” *The Political Economy of Media*, 97-117; McChesney, *Communication Revolution*, 181-86; McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution That Will Begin the World Again*. (New York: Nation Books, 2010).

<sup>624</sup> Dan LaBotz, “Millions March for Immigrant Rights; Virtual Strike in Some Cities.” *LaborNotes*, May 1, 2006. Accessed at <http://labornotes.org/node/221>, on May 23, 2011. Interestingly, one of the most involved unions was UNITE HERE, the descendent of the ILGWU and ACWA, which represents workers in the garment as well as hotel and restaurant industries. The position taken by UNITE HERE, however, on President Bush's proposed guest worker program was controversial. See Ruth Milkman, “Labor and the New Immigrant Rights Movement: Lessons from California.” July 28, 2006. Accessed at <http://borderbattles.ssrc.org/Milkman/> on May 23, 2011. For discussions about the use of new technologies in organizing the demonstrations and the need for a systematic critique of corporate control of the Internet from within this movement, see Sasha Costanza-Chock, “The Immigrant Rights Movement on the Net: Between ‘Web 2.0’ and Comunicacion Popular,” *American Quarterly*, 60(3), (2008): 851-864.

In late 2008, Barack Obama's election and the financial collapse gave yet another glimmer of possibility for renewed industrial action. Two hundred fifty laid off workers at Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago, most of them black and Latino, staged a sit-down strike reminiscent of the CIO era in order to receive just compensation. Their efforts captured the ear of the president-elect, and prompted recently bailed-out creditors JP Morgan Chase and Bank of America to offer workers a \$1.75 million package.<sup>625</sup>

The spirit of Republic Windows and Doors did not last long, though, as President Obama failed to live up to progressives' expectations and conservative forces capitalized on dissatisfaction with the economy and latent racism and nativism to harness control of the political agenda. But in February and March 2011, hundreds of thousands of union members, farmers, workers and their allies protested at the capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin in order to protect their basic right to collective bargaining. In the name of balancing the state budget, Governor Scott Walker, elected as part of a corporate-back, right-populist "Tea Party" movement, pointed a final dagger at the heart of opposition to the neoliberal agenda. The rapid mobilization of mostly white workers in the American heartland, sparked conversation about the potential for a bona fide social movement that could reverse the tide of plutocracy amidst a global economy in shambles. For a moment, the first general strike in the U.S. since 1937 seemed possible.<sup>626</sup>

These three events beg the question, what cultural institutions and practices will Latino, African American and white workers draw on to forge a new progressive movement? What are

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<sup>625</sup> Kari Lydersen, *Revolt on Goose Island: The Chicago Factory Takeover and What it Says About the Economic Crisis*. (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2009).

<sup>626</sup> See, for example, John Nichols, "The Spirit of Wisconsin," *The Nation*. March 21, 2011. Accessed at <http://www.thenation.com/article/158990/spirit-wisconsin> on May 26, 2011.

the prospects for our critical juncture in communications and the political economy as a whole? While it is widely acknowledged across the political spectrum that the status quo in the U.S. is not sustainable, it is unclear whether or not our political culture will enable us to change gears. Structural histories of alternative media and counterpublics can provide a wealth of knowledge, helping us think about how we can build that culture ourselves. The twin pursuits of social justice and media democracy will require an enormous amount of knowledge and labor in the neoliberal, digital age. McChesney writes,

[W]e have to use our intellects, imaginations, and research skills to develop alternative models for media organizations. Perhaps the most important lesson we have learned in the past decade has been that doing good media, even in the digital era, requires resources and institutional support. The Internet does many things, but it does not wave a magic wand over media bank accounts.<sup>627</sup>

The lessons from this dissertation for developing counterpublics, alternative media and working class movements cannot be reduced to universal theories. Media history is not a science. Or, as John Nerone puts it, “It’s jazz, not rock. It’s baseball.” But while we can never predict with certainty what a soloist might do, aficionados are less likely to be surprised than novices. Mookie Wilson’s grounder going through Bill Buckner’s legs in Game Six stands as a reminder that at any moment, anything can happen. “We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future,” noted Walter Benjamin. “This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter.”<sup>628</sup>

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<sup>627</sup> McChesney, *Communication Revolution*, 211.

<sup>628</sup> John Nerone, “Approaches to Media History,” in *A Companion to Media Studies*. Ed. Angharad N. Valdivia. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 111; Benjamin, 266.

Benjamin's proclamation brings hope to those who stand on the side of justice, and trepidation to those who don't. But history offers us no pattern to follow. The future is not ready-made. Rather, history challenges us to engage in skilled craftsmanship. We take threads from the past, stitch together fabrics of the present, and hope that through our labor we create not only value, but beauty.

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