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WHAT WOMEN STRIKERS WON

(Miriam Firin Scott in The Outlook.)

Any day last winter, from early morning till late at night, in rain or snow or sleet, in the district west of Fifth Avenue and south of Thirty-third street, in New York, you could have seen hundreds of thin, pale-faced, ill-clad girls marching like sentinels up and down the sidewalk in front of certain doorways. And every day, had you watched, you could have seen scores of these half-starved girls beaten up by thugs and policemen, arrested, fined by magistrates, and even sent to the workhouse. These young girls, ever marching to and fro—if they stopped they were liable to arrest—were the pickets of the Ladies' Waist-Makers Union, which was a strike forty thousand strong—the biggest strike of women this country has known. The contest was a bitter one; the odds seemed all against the girls. But, despite the menace and brutality of the police, despite cold and hunger, you would not have seen the number of these young sentinels decrease. Some fell out, but there were volunteers in plenty to take their places; and for a hundred days this desperate marching to and fro went on unbroken.

Had you stood on Fifth Avenue in this same region on May Day, the international holiday of workers, you would have seen a strangely different procession. Past you there would have tramped, as part of the May Day Parade, an army of girls uniformed in white shirt-waists and red neckties—an army three miles long. These were the girls who had desperately paced this same neighborhood half starved only a few months before; but now, as they marched, they sang the workers' "Marseillaise," and on thousands of faces was the look of victory, for they had won their strikers.

This contest is an equitome of what these girl strikers have achieved. To show more definitely the extent and full significance of their victory it will be necessary to recall briefly the working conditions that existed prior to the strike, and also to recall the girl's equipment for a struggle. While in many shops the conditions were good, in the majority the girls worked amid most pernicious sanitary surroundings; they were the victims of a system of fines (for being late or damaging goods) that were vastly disproportionate to any loss suffered by the employer; there was in existence a subcontracting system which enabled the employer to pay as low as two dollars a week of sixty hours; they worked ten, twelve, and even more hours a day; in the busy season they did not get even one day's rest a week; and at the best the majority of these girls could count on nothing better than a four month's season of tense overwork, and eight months in which they would be more or less idle. As to the preparedness of these girls for a great strike, perhaps I can suggest that by saying that when I went to the office of the union a few days before the strike was called, I found that the headquarters of the Ladies' Waist-Makers Union of New York was a corner, mere "deskroom," in one very small office, and that the general organizer, secretary, treasurer, and walking delegate were all combined in one not very large man. This hard-working Pooh-Bah informed me that his union had an irregular, unenthusiastic membership of about eight hundred, scattered throughout Greater New York, that ninety per cent were of foreign birth, more than half did not speak English, and that practically none of them had any knowledge or experience in union organization. Such was the fighting condition of the union when the long struggle with the four hundred manufacturers began.

With the struggle that followed, with the girls' sacrifice, suffering, and heroic spirit, I have already acquainted the readers of The Outlook in a previous article. Though the union was so weak, the girls were ripe for revolt—and unyielding revolt—and for fourteen weeks amid the greatest hardships, they carried on the fight, and at length carried it on to complete victory. At the time the strike was declared off, 354 employers had signed the union's contract, and with a very few exceptions all had agreed to a closed shop, to a fifty-two-hour week, to a raise of wages from twelve to fifteen per cent, to do away with the sub-contracting system and many other abuses, to limit night-work to two hours per day and not more than twice a week, to pay week-workers for legal holidays, and in the slack season to divide the work among all workers, instead of giving it to a favored few.

Important as are the direct economic results of the victory, there is another result of even greater significance, and that is the existence of a real union where before there had been but the shadow of one. Very recently I had occasion to view the new headquarters of the union, and the contrast with the headquarters before the fight was enough in itself to tell what a different thing the Ladies' Waist-Makers

Union now is from the union of six months ago. Instead of a corner in one room, the union has a suit of two rooms, which it already finds too small for its purpose; instead of a few hundred scattered members, there are now twenty thousand girls in good standing, with new ones coming in daily, instead of the entire staff of officers being incorporated in one man, the union now has two organizers, two recording secretaries, two financial secretaries, nine walking delegates, one bookkeeper, and three stenographers. Besides, each organized shop has a voluntary chairman, and once a week all the chairmen meet with the walking delegates to report the conditions of the shops. In this way the union is kept in constant touch with each individual shop. Instead of an income of but little better than nothing a week, the average weekly income from dues and initiation fees is \$2,400. The union has also established an employment bureau in its offices. When any girl is out of work, instead of tramping from shop to shop, she need only come to the bureau at the union's offices.

And, besides, the strike has had another result. There has been a tradition that women cannot strike. These young inexperienced girls have proved that women can strike, and strike successfully.

LITTLE LABOR NOTES.

Gleaned From the Field Where Labor Is Exploited.

Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, has notified the San Francisco Labor Council that it will be impossible for him to accept the invitations of that body to deliver the Labor Day address at San Francisco.

Appeals to their brethren of the American railroad employees' orders reached Douglas, Ariz., on August 5, from Conductors Parish, Haley, Chatlin and Englehart of the Southern Pacific lines in Mexico, who have been imprisoned at Guaymas for nearly a month.

A permanent arbitration board composed of twelve representatives each of labor and capital was formed at San Francisco on August 4. The board is organized under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce and the Labor Council and Building Trades Council.

The eight-hour day for freight conductors and trainmen and the mileage basis for passenger crews are the most important propositions that will be submitted to the Order of Railway Conductors and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen in the next ten or fifteen days.

Charles H. Moyer was re-elected President of the Western Federation of Miners by a large majority at the convention held at Denver on August 1, and it was voted to hold the next convention at Butte. A committee was appointed to confer with the American Federation of Labor with a view to affiliation.

STRIKES AND BENEFITS.

Greatest Battles of Labor Have Been Waged Without Funds.

John B. Lennon, treasurer of the American Federation of Labor and general secretary of the Journeymen Tailors' Union of America, has placed before the members of the latter organization some interesting opinions on the question of strikes and benefits. Mr. Lennon has been secretary-treasurer of the Tailors' union for twenty-five years, and his opportunities for observation at close range have been unlimited.

In cases of strikes or lockouts involving only a few journeymen, Mr. Lennon says, it is a mistake to permit the displaced workmen to take employment in other tailor shops in the town or to go to other towns. Where a union has had the power and courage to say, "No, you cannot leave our city, nor can you accept work in any other shop until this contest is settled," they have in nearly all cases won, according to Mr. Lennon. But if the strikers leave town or accept work in other shops the result is almost as bad as if they went "scabbing," he says, and under such circumstances success is practically impossible.

Mr. Lennon also thinks it is a mistake for local unions to pay or attempt to pay strike benefits. He holds that the benefit paid by the national union is sufficient. He says that the members who strike because they are guaranteed the combined benefits of national and local organizations do not make good strikers. When the local treasuries are exhausted, which sometimes is an early result of the special demands made upon them, such strikers become disgruntled and weak-kneed.

To clinch the point under both these heads Mr. Lennon suggests that if any one doubts his assertions he should study the history of the world's labor struggles. He declares "they will discover that the greatest battles of labor have been made by those who had scarcely enough from day to day to keep them alive."

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