SEWING WITH A DOUBLE THREAD:
THE NEEDLEWOMEN
OF NEW YORK
1825-1870

by

DOLORES ELIZABETH MARIE JANIEWSKI

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of History
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

August 1974

APPROVED: [redacted]
Jack Pendleton Maddex, Ph.D.

VITA

NAME OF AUTHOR: Dolores Elizabeth Marie Janiewski

PLACE OF BIRTH: Sanford, Florida

DATE OF BIRTH: February 8, 1948

UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

Florida State University
Sarah Lawrence College

DEGREES AWARDED:

Bachelor of Arts, 1970, Sarah Lawrence College

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

United States Labor History
United States Women's History

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Instructor, Division of Continuing Education, University of Oregon, Eugene, 1974

AWARDS AND HONORS:

Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, 1971-1972

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

I: CONDITIONS IN THE NEEDLE TRADES 8

II: POTENTIAL ALLIES 23

III: ORGANIZATION BEGINS 42

IV: THE MIDDLE YEARS 60

V: SOLIDARITY AND CONFLICT 76

VI: PROPAGANDA THEMES AND VARIATIONS 99

VII: CONCLUSION 117

BIBLIOGRAPHY 127

> "Stitch - Stitch - Stitch,
> In poverty, hunger and dirt,
> Sewing at once with a double thread,
> A shroud as well as a shirt."
>
> -- Thomas Hood,
> "The Song of the Shirt"

INTRODUCTION

The needlewomen of New York in the period 1825-1870 comprised the most numerous and the most degraded class of urban working women; yet they were also the most militant. Their societies -- the first organized efforts of American women to advance their own interests -- fought for their rights as women and as workers. The New York tailoresses in 1825[1] began their struggle with the first strike exclusively managed by women in American history. During the forty-five years that followed, seven successive groups of sewingwomen[2] organized to carry on that struggle outside the ranks of organized labor and organized feminism.

The experiences of the sewingwomen were representative of the first generation of urban wage-earners. Like most urban workers they were completely dependent upon their wages for survival. Like workingmen, the women often had to support a family with their scanty earnings. Consequently they were determined in labor battles, not only for their own sake, but for their children's. Oppressive conditions in the needle trades strengthened that determination and turned it into desperation, but did not make it fundamentally different from that expressed by other urban workers.

---

[1] John B. Andrews and W. D. P. Bliss, History of Women in Trade Unions: 1825 through the Knights of Labor, X of Report on the Condition of Women and Child Labor in the United States Senate Document 645, 61st Congress, 2nd Session, 1911. 21.

[2] The terms "needlewomen" and "sewingwomen" will be used interchangeably; the terms "tailoresses" and "seamstressess" will be used in their more restricted, contemporary sense to mean women who sewed vests, coats and cloaks and women who sewed shirts and underwear respectively.

The fact that these workers were women did make their lives significantly different from those of workingmen. Because they were women, they endured political and social restrictions which made their struggles more arduous than men's. Because they were women, their contemporaries, and, not infrequently, the sewingwomen themselves viewed their impoverishment as inevitable. Their sex often made them subject to the hostility and the fears of their fellow workers. Because they were both women and workers, the needlewomen of New York were doubly oppressed.

Isolated in tenement rooms, occupied with incessant toil, it was the rare sewingwoman who could perceive anything but her own misfortune. Yet there were sewingwomen, possessed of a broader vision and a more intrepid spirit than their sisters, who inspired the others to meet together and speak their pain. Because these women made the others aware of their common oppression, the needlewomen began to organize.

Burdened by their double oppression; however, the needlewomen found it difficult to organize independently. The development of alliances became vital to the survival of their organizations, and the allies they hoped to attract largely determined the form their struggles took. The propaganda themes they employed, the media they used, the rhetoric they espoused, spoke to potential allies, but also to the sewingwomen themselves. Propaganda strengthened their determination to fight or convinced them of their utter inability to defend themselves; confirmed their sense of identification with other oppressed groups or increased their sense of isolation and dependence. Class-conscious or sex-conscious themes appealed to working-class or feminist allies; piteous appeals won the attention of middle- and upper-class philanthropists. The allies, once secured, confirmed the organizational ideology and structure.

In spite of determined efforts, the sewingwomen never managed to overcome the pernicious effects of their dual status. That status necessitated alliances yet hindered their formation. Class separated women workers from other women and sex from other workers, in spite of all they presumably shared. Both factors separated the sewingwomen's interests still further from those of middle-class philanthropists. Contradictory expectations, wavering commitments, and misunderstandings frequently troubled the alliances. As a consequence, none of the societies permanently improved conditions in the garment trades. Yet, because results must be measured against obstacles to be overcome, even the short-lived successes of the needlewomen deserve an honored place in the history of the American working class.

The historical record that the sewingwomen left comes largely from the observations of others -- charity workers, reformers, journalists, feminists, and workingmen -- most of whom were clearly committed to the cause of the sewingwomen and the need for industrial reforms. The bulk of the testimony from observers and participants alike asserts that the women were severely victimized, that they were, in fact, "the worst paid, hardest worked, and most oppressed class of workingwomen in New York."[1] Opposing viewpoints -- the master tailors' for example -- rarely appeared in print. Sympathetic accounts; therefore, for all their evident biases, together with the preserved fragments of the sewingwomen's organizations furnish the record upon which their history must be based.

Their history gives valuable insights into the lives and consciousness of an important part of the urban working class during the years of its formation. Properly evaluated it offers a way to understand the meaning of sex and class oppression as experienced and as perceived by women who were the victims of both. Paradoxically for a group the labor historian, Norman Ware, described as the most degraded class[1] of urban workers, the sewingwomen's history is also a record of their repeated efforts to overcome both forms of exploitation.

---

[1] *Times*, March 17, 1869.

Their history is also a history of their allies during a crucial period in the development of organized labor, organized feminism, and philanthropy. During that era feminists and workingmen began to realize the need to heal the divisions in their own ranks. A few members of each group began to act upon that recognition by allying themselves with the needlewomen. Although neither party made a sustained effort to cooperate with the sewingwomen before the more enlightened policies of the Knights of Labor in the 1870's and 1880's, the sewingwomen did derive some benefit from their association. At the same time socially-conscious middle-class men and women began to turn from charity to philanthropy with their discovery that poverty was no longer a "necessary" evil.[2] Acting out of a complex set of motives which ranged from chivalry to the desire to forstall more militant forms of organization, the philanthropists helped the sewingwomen to organize. The complicated relationships between the needlewomen and their allies influenced all participants, but most seriously affected the needlewomen because they were the most vulnerable and the most desperate.

---

[1] Norman Ware, The Industrial Worker: 1840-1860 (Boston, 1924) 48.

[2] Robert H. Bremner, From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States (New York, 1956).

Their history thus is a study in desperation and failure. The sewingwomen, after all, never resolved the contradictions which plagued them or escaped the misery which afflicted them. They were the victims of an oppressive social and economic system beyond their unaided power to change. Their sex and their class doomed them to exploitation. Yet their story has its hopeful aspects because these women resisted their fate with all the force of body and mind they possessed. Premature feminists, class-conscious before male workers acknowledged their claim, the sewingwomen were overmatched and yet defiant. Reminding contemporaries of their victimization at the hands of male employers, the sewingwomen successfully undercut Victorian pretensions to chivalry. Their spirited resistence contradicted popular assumptions about woman's submissive nature. They thus made certain aspects of their oppression serve their cause. The first argument jolted the consciences of potential allies; the second challenged patronizing attitudes. The needlewomen did not acquiesce in their fate, but used every resource at their command in their struggle. If all their efforts met defeat, that fact condemns the oppressive nature of the economic order which caused their suffering rather than any failings in the women themselves. The needlewomen's courage deserves our respect at the same time their wretched circumstances invite our compassion.

I: CONDITIONS IN THE NEEDLE TRADES

> "When it is a boast that women do not labor, the encouragement and rewards of labor are not provided. It is so in America. In some parts there are now so many women dependent on their own exertions for a maintenance that this evil will give way before the force of circumstance. In the meantime, the lot of poor women is sad."
>
> --Harriet Martineau[1]

Throughout the period, 1825-1870, needlewomen faced subsistence-level wages, chronic unemployment, long hours, and the misery which attended these conditions. An unstable economy exacerbated those problems and seemed to confirm the hopelessness of their situation. Horace Greeley succinctly described their condition. "The worst features," he wrote, ". . . are its hopelessness and its constant tendency from bad to worse. Small as are the earnings of these seamstresses, they constantly tend to diminish . . . ."[2] Greeley was but one among many journalists to comment on the same phenomenon.

---

[1] Harriet Martineau, Society in America, (New York, 1837) I, 257.

[2] quoted in Helen L. Sumner, A History of Women in Industry, IX, of Report on the Condition of Women and Child Labor in the United States Senate Document 645, 61st Congress, 2nd Session, 1910, 136.

The factors which compelled women to become sewingwomen also remained constant throughout the period. One of the most crucial determining factors was a personal and yet a quite common experience -- the death of a father, husband, or brother. According to contemporary accounts, the sewingwomen were manless women -- widows, orphans, spinsters, the aged, or, less frequently, the daughters and wives of men unable or unwilling to fulfill their manly role by supporting them.[1] Perceptive observers like Catharine Beecher, the educational reformer, noted that any woman in a society which believed women could not be self-sufficient might become a seamstress if she lost male support.[2]

Often burdened by children, widows were hardpressed to live on the scanty wages doled out by the master tailors, but life on such meager earnings was not easy even for the young and comparatively energetic single woman. There were a considerable number of unattached women in New York because free white women outnumbered men in the city 119 to 100 in 1820 and the sexual imbalance continued through the 1860's.[1]

---

[1] Catharine Beecher, "The Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children" (New York, 1846) 5; Matthew Carey, "A Plea for the Poor: An Enquiry" (Philadelphia, 1836) 5; William Burns, Life in New York (New York, 1851) 14, 16-17; Charles Burdett, The Elliot Family, or, the Trials of New-York Seamstresses (New York, 1850) 10-11; New Yorker, December 26, 1840.

[2] Beecher, op. cit.

Widowhood, bankruptcies, drunken husbands, or no husbands at all explained why women had to work: the fact that there were few other occupations open to them explained why they became needlewomen. Custom and tradition together with the men who benefitted from both kept many trades closed to women. Not only did tradition militate against women entering new fields, but it also effectively denied to women the training necessary for skilled trades.

Only those skills necessary to domestic life were compatible with women's socially approved role and, consequently, the great majority of women were trained only for needlework or domestic service.

Daughters of the genteel or of those aspiring to gentility learned the skills necessary to manage a home, the social graces needed to secure a husband, and very little else. "A fashionable lady is as helpless with her hands as a Chinese woman is with her feet," wrote an early advocate of job training for women.[2] A little embroidery or decorative stitchwork passed as a fashionable accomplishment along with pianoplaying and a smattering of French. Nor did fashionable young women receive encouragement to become self-supporting.

---

[1] David Montgomery, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1820" Labor History 9 (Winter, 1968) 19; David Montgomery, Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872 (New York, 1967) 33; New Yorker, January 2, 1841; Times March 17, 1869; Beecher, loc. cit.

[2] Marie Louise Hankins, Women of New York (New York, 1861) 19-20.

Custom and industrial growth denied training to poor women. Male workers opposed their apprenticeship or admission into new trades. Small family-run shops where once those related to the masters and the journeymen might have learned a skilled craft gradually gave way in the East to larger shops and small factories from which women were excluded.

Domestic service, the other possible employment for untrained women, was socially degrading and entailed long hours under the often tyrannical command of the mistress of the house.[1] According to the Tribune "girls of education and fine feelings" dreaded to work where they were constantly reminded that they were inferiors.[2] Irish women did not disdain domestic employment, but were often unable to obtain it. They found in the needle trades the only other occupations open to them.[3]

Competition between native-born and immigrant labor added to the exploitation in the garment trades. Such competition helped to reduce real wages in all the trades between the 1830's and the Civil War,[1] but it began to affect the clothing industry severely in the 1840's and 1850's. The Irish began to enter the ready-made industry in the 1840's[2] and the Germans followed in the 1850's.[3] Native-born women, after the introduction of the sewing machine, began to work almost exclusively in the inside (and higher-paying) shops.[4] By 1855 two-thirds of the workforce were immigrants.[5] According to the New York Census of 1855, 6,606 seamstresses out of 8,819 were Irish and 935 were German.[6]

---

[1] Douglas T. Miller, Jacksonian Aristocracy: Class and Democracy in New York, 1830-1860. (New York, 1967) 53.

[2] Tribune, September 10, 1846.

[3] Robert Ernst, Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863 (New York, 1949) 68-69.

Contemporary reports on the sewing trades which rarely mentioned the deleterious effects of immigration upon women workers, more frequently cited competition from prosperous country women or from city women who, allegedly, were working for "pin-money", i.e. money to be used to buy luxuries such as a new bonnet or shawl, as injuring the interests of women who worked for self-support.[7] The *Times*, for example, in 1863 spoke of the dangers from "too many amateur workers."[1] It is difficult to give much weight to the "pin-money" argument, although it is possible that many families needed the small pittance that part-time needlework would bring, but hid their needs behind a facade of genteel prosperity.

---

[1] Douglas T. Miller, "Immigration and Social Stratification in Pre-Civil War New York," *New York History* 49 (April, 1968) 159.

[2] Mabel Hurd Willet, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade* (New York, 1902) 33.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Jesse Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York* (Columbia, Mo., 1905) 15.

[5] Ernst, p. 68.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.

[7] *Daily Sentinel*, March 9, 1831; *Tribune*, September ; 1845. *Tribune*, June 8, 1853.

The above factors combined to ensure a labor supply for the sewing trades always in excess of demand, which, in turn, made possible the intense exploitation of workers fortunate enough to find employment. Want and misery for the great majority of the sewingwomen was a necessary consequence. The ready-made clothing industry, the largest employer of women in New York City, was based on these very conditions -- upon a cheap, abundant, and expendable labor supply.

The clothing industry originated in the manufacture of cutrate clothing for sailors and other transients. "Slop shops" which produced the cheapest clothing and paid the lowest wages were the basic unit of the trade. As transportation improved in the 1820's and 1830's, New York manufacturers began to supply national markets[2] -- the western trade in clothing for pioneers and the southern trade in clothing for slaves.[3] The industry flourished and by 1835 New York dominated the trade in ready-made clothing for the whole country.[1] By that year some of the city's shops were employing from 300 to 500 workers -- largely women and largely "homeworkers" who worked in the so-called "outside shops" which were usually their own homes.[2] Journeymen tailors continued to dominate the custom trade[3] and those who took up the ready-made trade worked in the "inside shops" along with other skilled craftsmen such as cutters. The women homeworkers' attractiveness to employers lay in the cheapness of their labor rather than their skill.[4]

---

[1] Times, November 15, 1863.

[2] Egal Feldman, Fit for Men: A Study of New York's Clothing Trade (Washington, D.C., 1960) 3.

[3] Sumner, p. 120.

Gradually a market opened in cheap, but better quality clothing for the middle-class man[5] and the industry expanded still further. The New York trade contended with the industry of other cities for the patronage of out-of-town merchants. In order to meet the competition it had to supply liberal credit and keep labor costs low, and did so quite successfully. By 1855 New York was producing seventeen million dollars' worth of clothing per year and an additional ten million dollars produced by the shirtmaking and the hoopskirt manufacturing portions of the industry.[1]

---

[1] Feldman, p. 4.

[2] Ernst, p. 27.

[3] John . . Commons et al., History of Labour in the United States (New York, 1926) I, 344.

[4] Pope, p. 15.

[5] Ibid., p. 3.

The merchant capitalist who dominated the market during the 1830's and 40's distributed materials to the seamstresses or tailoresses either directly or indirectly through a middleman or master tailor. He paid them for the finished product by the piece.[2] In this way he achieved maximum output with minimum overhead. Setting very low rates ensured that each worker would turn out as many articles as were within her power.

With the introduction of job specialization in the 1840's industrial output increased still further. Shirts, for example, were now manufactured in parts by four kinds of seamstresses: body makers, stitchers, finishers, and embroiderers.[3] Until the 1850's the majority of workers continued to work at home when, with the introduction of the sewing machine, small factories appeared where most of the work was done on the premises. Handsewing continued on the same piecework, homework basis, although at reduced wages.[4] The sewing machine not only reduced the wages for homeworkers, but also reduced the number of women operatives according to the 1860 Census. Referring to the sudden displacement of workers, the Census writers remarked that it might have been injuriously felt by individuals without "on the whole damaging" the interests of the sewingwomen as a class.[1] After all, women who could afford to buy their own machines apparently were able to improve their position.[2] Mechanization, however, did not improve conditions for the vast majority. "Sewing," a labor newspaper observed in 1865, "is an unhealthy employment and kills by inches if not faster, while machine work if followed continuously is worse than the needle."[3] A seamstress, who had quit her occupation to become a gardener at better pay, concluded that same year that the introduction of the sewing machine had caused the discharge of nine out of every ten sewingwomen while the one who remained earned the same wages as before.[4]

---

[1] Carl Degler, "Labor in the Economy and Politics of New York City, 1850-1860: A Study of the Impact of Early Industrialization," Ph.D. Dissertation, (Columbia University, 1952), 5.

[2] Miller, Jacksonian Aristocracy, p. 32.

[3] Feldman, p. 100.

[4] Ibid., p. 107.

Low wages were a constant hazard faced by the women in the clothing trade. In America as in Europe, women's wages rarely equalled a half of men's. Seamstresses working in the slop shops in the early 1830's made trousers for as little as four cents a pair and shirts for seven cents, when three pairs of trousers or one shirt comprised a long day's work.[1] Matthew Carey reported in 1829 that it required unceasing toil and expert skill to earn a dollar and a half per week by sewing.[2] Unskilled male laborers at this time earned on the average one dollar per day. In 1836, Carey estimated that a seamstress could make no more than nine coarse shirts per week and earn from six to twelve and one-half cents per shirt. He claimed that the latter price was the highest price paid in the United States except for that given by three charitable societies, none of which was located in New York.[3]

---

[1] quoted in Feldman, p. 107.

[2] Ibid., p. 109.

[3] Daily Evening Voice, May 25, 1865.

[4] "Herself", "Needle and Garden", Atlantic Monthly, 15, (February, 1865) 175.

The depression of 1837-1842 brought a drop in wages of between thirty and fifty per cent.[4] Upon recovery, the wages of needlewomen returned to approximately their previous level. In 1844 tailoresses earned thirty to forty cents for coats, twenty-five cents for pants and vests, and seamstresses earned the usual twelve and one-half cents for shirts and drawers.[5] Fine linen shirts that required fifteen to eighteen hours of steady work brought fifty cents to their makers.[6] Women were thus earning two dollars a week or less at a time when the average worker needed eleven dollars per week to sustain a family adequately.[1] Even skilled women operatives -- cloth trimmers, mantua makers, and coat makers -- earned only ten to fifteen dollars per month in 1855.[2]

---

[1] *Workingman's Advocate*, September 11, 1830.

[2] quoted in Sumner, p. 123.

[3] Carey, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[4] Miller, *Jacksonian Aristocracy*, p. 130.

[5] Sumner, p. 134.

[6] Miller, "Immigration", p. 159.

Wartime inflation increased workingmen's wages to an average of one dollar and sixty-two cents a day by 1865,[3] but women's wages, which also rose, did not keep pace with men's or with inflation.[4] Machine operators made shirts for sixty cents a dozen[5] on a piecework basis. Those who earned weekly salaries because they worked in the factory or inside shop averaged five to six dollars for machine work and four dollars for handsewing.[6]

Even at low wages many women could not find work. According to one observer at certain times of the year only half of those looking for work could find jobs.[1] "The class whose cause we plead," stated Carey in 1837, "is abundant beyond the demand . . . ."[2] His statement proved equally applicable to the entire forty-five year period. From the earliest days of the industry, when spinsters displaced by the introduction of the spinning jenny had taken up the needle, [3] women crowded the sewing trades.

---

[1] Miller, Jacksonian Aristocracy, pp. 132-133.

[2] Ernst, p. 77.

[3] Edith Abbott, "The Wages of Unskilled Labor in the United States, 1850-1900," Journal of Political Economy (June, 1905) 43, 24.

[4] Sumner, p. 24.

[5] Fincher's Trades Review, November 24, 1863.

[6] Pope, p. 331.

Depressions and recessions added to the precariousness of the sewingwomen's position. The depression that followed the Panic of 1837 was especially severe. Nine out of every ten factories closed; fifty thousand people were unemployed in New York alone, and two hundred thousand went without adequate means of support. The Advocate of Moral Reform, the organ of the New York Female Moral Reform Society, wrote of this depression that of the fifty thousand unemployed, "at least ten thousand, and most probably fifteen thousand are females, many of them widows with small children who have heretofore acquired a living by the use of their needles and now are left without support."[4] Even inflationary periods such as the Civil War years brought little relief from unemployment. Textile factories closed because they had no cotton to process. The wives and widows of soldiers poured into the needle trades along with unemployed factory workers to compete for the limited number of jobs.[1]

---

[1] Workingman's Advocate, June 27, 1835.

[2] Matthew Carey, "A Plea for the Poor: Particularly Females," (Philadelphia, 1837), 20.

[3] Sumner, p. 17.

[4] Advocate of Moral Reform, May 15, 1838.

Those conditions made the sewingwomen and their dependents a destitute class. The Reverend Joseph Tuckerman, a protegé of Matthew Carey, described their blighted lives in this manner: "Their clothing is hardly sufficient for warmth in the cold of autumn, and how much less in that of winter? And they know not how or where to obtain more. Their food is often scanty, as well as of the coarsest kind. They are dunned, and threatened, and harassed. "[2] The sewingwomen lived in slums like the notorious Five Points district of Manhattan, where George Templeton Strong, observed in his 1851 diary, "a life barren of hope and enjoyment" suffered by "swarms of seamstresses to whom their utmost toil in monotonous drudgery gives only a bare subsistence." Strong also remarked that the daughters of such women at the age of twelve were "brutalized already almost beyond redemption . . with thief written in their cunning eyes and whore on their depraved faces."[3]

---

[1] Sumner, p. 17.

[2] Rev. Joseph Tuckerman, "An Essay on the Wages Paid to Females for Their Labor," (Philadelphia, 1830), 26.

[3] Allan Nevins and Melton Halsey, eds. The Diary of George Templeton Strong, (New York, 1952), II, 56-57.

Like Strong, contemporary observers of the sewingwomen spoke of hunger, depravity, wretchedness, and wearisome toil without respite. They saw no way for the sewingwomen to escape degradation. Like Carey, they could see no alternative for the sewingwomen but a choice among evils. In Carey's words, their only choices were: "to beg, to depend on the overseers of the poor, a species of beggary; to steal, to starve - or to sell themselves to pollution - to misery and disease here and perhaps to misery hereafter."[1]

Some of their contemporaries saw prostitution as a necessary though regrettable consequence of the women's hopeless poverty. The police commissioner of New York[2] and the resident physician of the prison on Blackwell's Island, New York[3] shared the same conclusion -- many women were lost to virtue because of low wages and their inability to procure the necessities of life by honest industry.[4] Dr. William Sanger, who surveyed two thousand prostitutes imprisoned on Blackwell's Island in 1858, discovered that domestic service and needlework had been their principal occupations.[5] He cited cases in which employers had demanded intercourse before they would give a woman work.[1] In Sanger's report, the women typically had abandoned their former occupations once they had taken up prostitution.

---

[1] Matthew Carey, "Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia," (Philadelphia, 1830), 2.

[2] Workingman's Advocate, June 27, 1835.

[3] William Sanger, The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects throughout the World (New York, 1921)

[4] Ibid., p. 532.

[5] Ibid., p. 526.

Some women, however, apparently combined prostitution and needlework. The Tribune reported the case of four young women who sewed for an older woman six days a week, but earned only their food. The reporter asked the employer how they bought their clothes and paid for their lodging. She told him that dissolute men provided for them as well as many others in similar situations in her neighborhood.[2]

Every aspect of the sewingwomen's existence seemed to accord with one seamstress's description of her life in 1831. She saw her situation as hopeless "deprivation, without any other alternative but prayer to God and a submission to his will . . . ."[3] Yet her letter and the numerous pessimistic accounts of those conditions overlooked one possible alternative -- organization. Separated, the sewingwomen might indeed be powerless, but once united perhaps they could save themselves. Their poverty did not deprive them of that hope. Even though they were women, they might emulate their fellow workers by organizing in their own defense.

---

[1] Sanger, p. 526.

[2] Tribune, June 8, 1853.

[3] Evening Journal, March 31, 1831.

II: POTENTIAL ALLIES

Because the sewingwomen lived so near the subsistence level, their organizing efforts needed all the assistance available. The vast majority of New York City residents, however, whose lives were untouched by either the poverty or the profits from the clothing industry, were indifferent. But a few New Yorkers, aware of the sewingwomen's misery and degradation did feel obliged to take action. To these people -- and to others who might be persuaded to share their attitudes -- the sewingwomen turned in their search for allies.

Middle- and upper-class sympathizers concerned themselves with the needlewomen for a variety of reasons. Some individuals were troubled by the evident contradiction between conventional attitudes about the proper way to treat women and the way employers exploited the sewingwomen. Others fulfilled the stewardship obligations of the wealthy by patronizing the sewingwomen's efforts. Middle-class women, perhaps aware that they might in adverse circumstances become sewingwomen themselves, organized to help their less fortunate sisters. Critics of industrialization found in the immiseration of the sewingwomen strong evidence of the system's inhumanity and proposed reforms in the name of the sewingwomen. Proponents of the system, feeling a need to neutralize such criticisms, blamed the misery of the sewingwomen on the greed of their fellow workers and attempted to ease the worst aspects of their suffering.

The attitudes of urban workers, whose self-interest was directly involved, fluctuated from identification with working women as fellow workers, to pity for them as victimized and helpless women, to attempts to isolate them in an effort to protect male working conditions.

The motives and the class origins of the needlewomen's allies determined their mode of support. Three basic approaches developed -- the philanthropic, the reformist, and the class-conscious -- which influenced the organizations with which their adherents affiliated. The proponents of the three approaches differed most significantly in their attitudes to the American economic and social structure. Philanthropists accepted that order unquestioningly. Reformers criticized the system in its economic or social aspects. Some insisted on economic reforms to perpetuate a system of small, independent producers. Others -- the feminists -- focused on sexual oppression. Workers, at times, shared the reformers' critical attitudes and worked with them to set up alternate forms of economic organization. At other times, they organized trade unions to fight for their interests within the established order. Altogether these allies were not a very committed or steadfast group. Their own interests absorbed their primary energies, but even their half-hearted assistance gave the sewingwomen much needed strength.

THE PHILANTHROPISTS

Beginning in the 1820's, as part of an evangelical revival, concerned individuals in New York formed charitable societies and supported the building of municipal poorhouses.[1] The societies thus formed inquired into the cause and the cure for poverty only to determine which of the poor deserved aid.[2] Women, because they were conventionally assumed to be wholly dependent upon the care and protection of men, easily qualified for the meager relief that the societies dispensed.[3] A number of societies, therefore, began to minister to the needs of poor urban women -- among them the Female Assistance Society, The New York Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, The Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New York, the Mariners' Family Aid Society, the Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, the Women's Protective Emigrant Society, and the American Industrial

---

[1] Robert H. Bremner, American Philanthropy (Chicago, 1960) 62.

[2] Mary Bosworth Treudley, "The Benevolent Fair: A Study of Charitable Organizations among American Women in the First Third of the 19th Century," The Social Service Review (September, 1940), 14, 511.

[3] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Religion and the Rise of the American City, (Ithaca, New York, 1971), 2.

Association.[1]

The charitable or philanthropic societies differed only slightly in their methods. As the movement became more scientific in the 1840's, organizations like the Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor, whose members now called themselves philanthropists, prided itself on the order and efficiency of its methods. That organization divided the city into districts manned by an association member who determined the need and the worthiness of the poor who applied to him. But earlier societies such as the Female Assistance Society took a similarly toughminded attitude toward the poor. That society dispensed medicines and clothing to sick women while lecturing them on "due attention to industry, economy, and uprightness."[2] Societies such as the Mariners' Family Aid Society in the 1840's which supplied needlework to poor women paid wages at or below the industrial level to encourage the poor to look for jobs before turning to charity.[3]

In spite of wealthy patrons, none of the societies could assist all the women who applied to them. The representative of one society, for example, spoke of having to turn away more than a hundred women who were so desperate that they offered to "sew all day for food and shelter" alone.[1] The societies, while not content with their inability to aid all of the respectable poor, were satisfied with merely palliative measures. Their members did not believe that poverty could or should be eradicated , because it served as a stimulus to industriousness.[2] They did not intend to cure poverty, but to control its victims through a judicious application of charity and lectures on the virtues of thrift, prudence, and diligence. Through such measures the poor would come to rely on their patrons for guidance rather than take more radical measures to protect themselves. In 1850, for example, the House of Industry, a philanthropic institute for training women workers, announced that its goals included "lessening the distance between the rich and the poor," and "destroying in the germ the hatred of the rich."[3] Such were the conscious or unconscious motivations of the philanthropists of the period.

---

[1] Mercury, October 27, 1836; Smith-Rosenberg, p. 2; Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New York, "Brochure" (New York, 1820); Tribune, March 15, 1845, November 19, 1854; Degler, p. 227, 230.

[2] Commercial Advertiser, February 12, 1831.

[3] Tribune, March 14, 1845, July 10, 1845; Matthew Carey, "A Plea for the Poor: An Enquiry", p. 5.

The same attitudes guided the philanthropists' sponsorship of the sewingwomen's organizations. Their patronage molded the societies so that they differed very little from the charitable or philanthropic model. A board of managers, none of whom were sewingwomen, ran the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society and the Workingwomen's Protective Union for the women's benefit.

---

[1] quoted in Beecher, p. 7.

[2] Robert H. Bremner, From the Depths, p. 17.

[3] Herald, April 18, 1850.

THE REFORMERS

". . . [W]hy", asked Mike Walsh, "should society permit honest people to be robbed and outraged, until they are brought to the humiliating degradation of needing charity at all?"[1] Those, who along with the Loco Foco politician, began to question the fairness of a system which made charity necessary passed from philanthropy to reform.

Matthew Carey was one of the first to make the transition in so far as the sewingwomen were concerned. Although most of his contemporaries blamed poverty on immigration and intemperance, Carey ascribed that wretchedness to low wages and lack of work.[2] During his first four years of involvement with the sewingwomen's cause, Carey could offer no other solution but reliance upon philanthropy and the goodwill of employers. Carey's pamphlets containing his views on the subject received wide readership in New York.[3] By 1833, Carey was convinced that the women had to organize to protect themselves rather than depend upon the charity of others. Consequently he sponsored the organization of the Female Improvement Society of Philadelphia, the first city-wide union of women workers.[1]

---

[1] Subterranean, December 6, 1845.

[2] Smith-Rosenberg, p. 37, 40.

[3] Ibid.

The New York Female Moral Reform Society evolved from a philanthropic to a reformist society, but, unlike Carey, its members did not wholly abandon the philanthropic approach. The society began as a male-dominated effort to protect men and the community from the evils of prostitution.[2] As women gained control of the organization, they shifted the emphasis to the protection of women from the animal appetites of men.[3] Recognizing that low wages and unemployment made poor women vulnerable to male lusts, the society members began to search for ways to improve their situation. In 1836, two years after its founding, the society set up an employment agency for destitute, but virtuous women.[4] That same year the society's newspaper, the Advocate of Moral Reform, gave tacit approval to the formation of the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society by publishing a letter from a supporter of that organization.[5] In the 1850's the society opened a shelter for homeless women, began a training program for unskilled women workers, sold sewing machines at reduced prices, and continued to operate the employment bureau.[1]

---

[1] Workingman's Advocate, June 27, 1835.

[2] Smith-Rosenberg, p. 79.

[3] Keith Melder, "Ladies Bountiful: Organized Women's Benevolence in Early 19th Century America", New York History (July, 1967) 245.

[4] Smith-Rosenberg, p. 112.

[5] Advocate of Moral Reform, December 1, 1836.

The society's reformist aspects were more clearly expressed in its implicitly feminist critique of male-dominated society rather than in its activities. Editorials in the Advocate such as the 1836 editorial, "The Rights of Women", denounced chivalrous hypocrisy. "Might makes right," the editorial concluded, "and women being unable to demand her fair share of the advantage that results from labor must consent to be as she has been, the drudge and the slave of those who prate about her beauty and their chivalry."[2]

The sufferings of the sewingwomen also became a favorite topic for the editorials of crusading journalists. Two editors -- Horace Greeley and George Henry Evans -- were especially concerned with the rights and needs of such women. Evans in the pages of the Workingman's Advocate in the years 1829-1835 and 1844-1845 encouraged the organizing efforts of the sewingwomen with unflagging enthusiasm. In the later period, when land reform became his overriding interest, he proposed it as the solution to the problems of women workers as well as men.[3] Greeley, the editor of the New York Tribune, early began to manifest sympathy for the plight of the sewingwomen. Like Evans, he utilized the experiences of women workers as a justification for his favorite reforms -- "associationism" and cooperatives as well as tariff protection for domestic industry.[1] A constant thread underlying all his proposals was his belief that the "true interests" of capital and labor were identical. The two editors brought the oppression of the sewingwomen forcibly before the public. Greeley, in particular, in surveys published in the Tribune on conditions in the needle trades in 1845 and 1853, focused the attention of his readers on the degradation of women who worked in that industry. He also spoke and raised money for the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union in 1851.

---

[1] Smith-Rosenberg, pp. 200, 220.

[2] Advocate of Moral Reform, September 15, 1836.

[3] Workingman's Advocate, August 17, 1844.

The organized feminist movement made only passing reference to the needs of women workers until the late 1860's. The first feminist convention at Seneca Falls, New York, in July, 1848, asked for women equal participation in all trades, but it emphasized principally the achievement of political, legal, and social rights for women.[2] At the Rochester Convention two weeks later, a report on "Woman's Place and Pay in the World of Work" found them to be oppressive everywhere and especially so in the needle trades.[3] The woman's rights conventions continued to hear such reports and pass resolutions about women workers, but took no direct action.

---

[1] Tribune, March 27, 1845; July 9, 1845, November 21, 1845.

[2] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds. History of Woman Suffrage (Rochester, N.Y., 1887) I, 71, 73.

[3] Ibid., p. 78.

After feminists merged with portions of the abolitionist movement to form the American Equal Rights Association in the post-Civil War period, that association continued to hear similar reports. When feminists like Anthony and Stanton began to put the needs of women first in their commitments, they began to reach out to working women and working men for support. Anthony and Stanton in their newspaper, The Revolution, continually expressed their belief that the ballot would "secure to women equal place and equal wages in the world of work . . . ."[1] Through their newspaper, their participation in the conventions of the National Labor Union in 1868 and 1869, and through the formation of the Workingwomen's Association, they tried to win working people to the suffrage cause.

Reformers like Greeley, Anthony, Stanton, and Evans posited their ideas of freedom and equality in terms which they believed to be universally valid. Their reforms presupposed a denial of the existence of class antagonisms or indeed of the possibility of legitimate class conflicts. Consequently their proposals depended upon the good will of employers and promised no immediate improvement in job conditions. They opposed the organization of class-conscious trade unions which would bring women workers into direct conflict with their employers. Although the reformers deserve credit for their sincere desire to aid working women, they patronized the women rather than cooperated with them. However sympathetic the reformers tried to be, their class origins separated them from the experiences of the sewingwomen, and they failed to understand the urgency of their needs.

---

[1] quoted in Israel Kugler, "The Woman's Rights Movement and the National Labor Union, 1862-1872," Ph.D. Dissertation (New York University, 1954), 141.

THE WORKINGMEN

Workingmen, in the period 1825-1870, never absolutely ignored the existence of women workers, but the needs of such women took a prominent place in their concerns only at rare brief intervals. Workingmen might have helped women, especially the oppressed sewingwomen, to organize by encouraging their efforts, supporting them financially, or instructing them in tactics and goals. Their trade societies might have admitted women as members or as participants, but men never extended that privilege to the sewingwomen throughout the period. A more enlightened policy, by healing one of the most damaging splits in the working class, would have benefitted women and men, but the male labor movement took no sustained action along those lines. Its members, on the contrary, usually took the more prudent and less humane view that they had enough to do to protect their own immediate interests without taking on any additional burden.

The sewingwomen constituted an especially significant group of working women with which the male labor movement had to deal. In New York the sewingwomen were the most numerous class of women workers working in an industry which was very important to the city's economy. Those craftsmen most threatened by the competition of the seamstresses and tailoresses -- the journeymen tailors -- were quite obdurate in their relations with them. The first recorded strike of tailors in United States history, in 1819, was their response to an attempt to apprentice a woman into the trade.[1] In 1836, during a conspiracy trial, the master tailors accused the journeymen of refusing to work for those who employed women.[2] The Union Society of Journeymen Tailors, which struck that year, opened a shop which they advertised as having a "decided advantage over any other" for the "discerning public" who would therefore "not be under the necessity of resorting to the services of inferior workmen and women (out of their proper departments.)"[3] In 1850, according to the labor historian John Commons, the tailors along with other craftsmen took steps to rid themselves of the competition of women.[4] In the 1860's the tailors' union was one of the twenty-seven national craft unions (out of thirty) that did not admit women.[5] The policy of exclusion was a common practice of craft societies who tried thereby to maintain a monopoly in their trade for their members. Through the apprenticeship system and the closed shop, they strove to prevent the competition of the less skilled and cheaper worker.

---

[1] Andrews, p. 614.

[2] Commons, I, .p. 344.

[3] Evening Star, March 7, 1836.

[4] Commons, II, p. 596.

[5] Charlotte Todes, William H. Sylvis and the National Labor Union (New York, 1942) 82.

Only one recorded exception to the policy occurred during the period. It came, understandably enough, when the introduction of machinery had decreased the value of their skill and hence, the bargaining power of the tailors. In June, 1865, a meeting of German-speaking tailors resolved to persuade women to join their association. They based their decision upon a broader definition of their self-interest than other tailors held. They believed that admitting women to their organization would provide the "best protection for themselves" as well as for the women.[1]

The labor movement as a whole cooperated with women only at times of severe distress or economic dislocation such as that occasioned by the severe depression of the 1840's or the mechanization and war-time inflation of the 1860's.

In the mid-1830's, the National Trades' Union, a loose federation of craft societies, claimed that its members were "the natural guardians and protectors of the other, the weaker and better half of our species . . ."[2] while justifying effort to exclude women from the trades on that same principle.

---

[1] Andrews, p. 97.

[2] National Trades Union, July 26, 1834.

In 1835, the NTU suggested that workingmen call a meeting to consider "the measures necessary for bettering the condition of female laborers . . . ,"[1] but the ensuing convention did not mention organizing women. Instead, it described their destructive competition with men and resolved "to oppose by all means, the multiplying of all descriptions of labor for females."[2] A committee specifically appointed at the 1836 convention to study the question of female labor again warned of the dangers from the cheap competition of women saying that "each trade except it be of the most laborious character is in danger . . . ." It supported its warning by pointing to the New England states, where many trades "are in a certain measure governed by females," and to Philadelphia, where "of fifty-eight societies, twenty-four are severely afflicted by female labor to the impoverishment of whole families and the benefit of none but the employers. Fearing that women could not be contained within the home, the committee proposed to destroy by "gradual means, and with ? the active cooperation of the female operatives" the system of female labor. In the meantime they proposed to quarantine women in the "branches of female industry" which apparently included the less-skilled and lowest paying portions of the garment trades, and suggested that women be admitted in trade societies under the direction of men.[1] The component unions of the NTU did not act upon the last suggestion before the Panic of 1837 and the subsequent depression swallowed up all the trade societies.

---

[1] National Trades' Union, July 13, 1835.

[2] Ibid., October 10, 1835.

In the 1840's and early 1850's, men workers, influenced by reformers like Evans and Greeley, did attempt to organize and work with women. The Industrial Congress, an organization of reformers and unionists, declared at its national convention in 1850 that "women have the same rights as men on all subjects . . . ."[2] In July, 1850, the New York City Industrial Congress resolved to "adopt a system of general organization of Female Labor."[3] Early in 1851, the city congress admitted women as delegates after evidently helping to organize two associations of women workers -- the Straw and Pamela Makers and the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union.

After a decade in which men concentrated on advancing their own interests, the Workingmen's Union began to work with women again. Members of the Union joined with philanthropists to form the Workingwomen's Protective Union in 1863-1864. A year later the workingmen alone gave encouragement and support to the sewing machine operators who were forming the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union. The National Labor Union, which was the product of another attempt by the American labor movement to unite on the national level, at its 1866 convention firmly committed its members to support for "the sewing-women, factory operatives and daughters of toil."[1] Its 1867 address to the workers of the United States spoke of "the grand ennobling idea that the interests of labor are one . . . that there is but one dividing line -- that which separates mankind into two great classes, the class that labors and the class that lives by others' labor."[2]

---

[1] John Commons et al., A Documentary History of American Industrial Society (New York, 1958), VI, 282, 285, 286, 288.

[2] Tribune, June 17, 1850.

[3] Tribune, July 3, 1850.

Under the presidency of William Sylvis who took office in 1868, the NLU actively cooperated with women including middle-class feminists like Anthony and Stanton. At the 1868 convention, the Committee on Female Labor, which included Anthony, reported that women should be urged to "learn trades, engage in business, join our labor unions, or form protective unions of their own, secure the ballot and use every other honorable means to persuade or force their employers to do justice to women by paying them equal wages for equal work." Members of the NLU objected to the suffrage provision, but the rest of the resolution passed.[3]

Delegates from the NLU, including President Sylvis, fulfilled their commitment by attending the meetings of the Workingwomen's Associations, Nos. 1 and 2. They advised the women on the best course of action for them to follow and sponsored the formation of the New York Women's Typographical Union, No. 1 as a affiliate of the National Typographical Workers' Union.[1] But the women of that union found it impossible to survive as an independent local because even their fellow unionists were reluctant to admit women into their shops. They merged with the local men's union, New York Typographical Workers, No. 6,[2] ceasing their effort to organize independently.

---

[1] quoted in Foster Rhea Dulles, Labor in America (New York, 1966), 102.

[2] quoted in Montgomery, Beyond Equality, p. 180.

[3] The World, September 24, 1868.

Women workers attended the NLU as delegates. The Union's official paper, the Chicago Workingman's Advocate, carried a woman's column which declared that justice knew no sex. "The laboring man," it urged in 1870, "must make common cause with woman in her struggle for the rights of labor if he expects to obtain justice for himself. He must know that justice is not a one-sided principle."[3] In 1870, men from the NLU and the New York State Workingmen's Assembly announced the formation of a similar organization for women workers. Alexander Troup of the Typographical Workers became president of the new association whose purposes were to ameliorate conditions for women workers and to promote unity among the working class.[4] The sewingwomen, unlike the skilled women typographers who had been able to keep organized, were not represented in the new association.

---

[1] Kugler, p. 163.

[2] Ibid., p. 465.

[3] quoted in Kugler, p. 469.

[4] Tribune March [illegible], 1870.

During the forty-five year period, male workers, realizing that they could not safely ignore the existence of women workers, began to discuss the proper course of action they should take. Alternating between periods of exclusion and periods of cooperation, their leaders increasingly came to view cooperation between the sexes as vital to the success of the labor movement. But the more cautious rank and file reached that conclusion reluctantly, if at all. Declarations of class solidarity, therefore, did not easily translate into organizations based upon that principle.

The typographers, whose higher wages and greater skills, gave them increased bargaining power with other workers as well as their employers, managed to form alliances with their fellow workers. Their competition convincingly threatened their male colleagues. The sewingwomen, on the other hand, who possessed none of the typographers' advantages, received patronizing assistance at best. Their greater need denied them the strong support they required.

The sewingwomen could expect to form alliances only with those groups whose goals coincided with their own. They could appeal to philanthropists as victims, to feminists as women, and to workingmen as workers, but their appeals met with sympathetic response only when ideology and self-interest favored their cause. Such occasions, when the sewingwomen and their potential allies recognized their mutual needs and concerns, were brief and infrequent, but those rare intervals gave the sewingwomen the opportunity to organize.

III: ORGANIZATION BEGINS

New York tailoresses waged the earliest strike by working women in the United States in 1825. "What next!" exclaimed a journalist astonished by the termerity of women striking to protect themselves.[1] But no organization developed from that struggle.

The 1830's produced the first stable organizations of sewingwomen in New York. Established within half a decade of each other, the first two societies differed markedly in form and ideological content. The United Tailoresses Society was an early trade union; the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society, a benevolent society. The members of a trade union such as the United Tailoresses were class-conscious, that is, they identified themselves as workers in a necessarily adversary relationship with their employers. Tactics including the strike expressed their belief in the necessity for class struggle. The benevolent society, which in the case of the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society was managed by philanthropists for the sewingwomen's benefit, retarded the development of class consciousness. The cooperative -- the customary tactic of the benevolent society -- avoided direct confrontation with employers. Together these forms of organization comprised the two models that subsequent groups of sewingwomen used in the following forty years.

---

[1] Alice Henry, The Trade Union Woman (New York, 1915) 6.

The benevolent society proved to be the most durable form of organization. But the sewingwomen as often used the trade union form because durability was not the only quality they asked of a society. By organizing they hoped not only to improve their situation materially, but to acquire a sense of control over their own lives. During the 1830's, the women in the needle trades organized both types of societies responding to similar needs in markedly different fashions. A study of the two societies should illuminate their values and drawbacks.

THE UNITED TAILORESSES SOCIETY

In February, 1831, two or three hundred tailoresses met together and declared their intention to take measures to better their condition. The meeting examined "the present state of their business" and found it deplorable. The women then appointed a committee to frame a constitution and another to raise a strike fund.[1]

A few days later, a second meeting chose officers and ratified a constitution. At the request of a number of merchant tailors, the tailoresses appointed Dr. Cornelius Blatchly and his wife to collect donations for the strike fund. (Dr. Blatchly, a member of the New York Workingmen's Party,[1] was one of the few men to actively participate in the society's activities.)

---

[1] Daily Sentinel, February 12, 1831.

Lavinia Waight, the secretary of the tailoresses, addressed the second meeting. In her speech she argued that the tailoresses' oppression derived from the general oppression of all women who were "excluded from equal liberality in . . . education, incapacitated from the duties of legislation and other matters of like importance." She asserted, in addition, that women had been blinded "by a cunning and designing policy from a fair view of their own interests." Reflecting her own self-identification as a woman first rather than a worker, Waight did not describe the specific economic abuses suffered by the tailoresses; she argued that they were but links in a longer "chain of oppression against the truly dominated weaker sex."[2] The meeting then proceeded with a reading from the works of Matthew Carey, the self-appointed champion of sewingwomen, and an address by Daniel Graham,[3] a retired merchant tailor and member of the Workingmen's Party.[4]

Irritated by her boldness, the Boston Transcript probably expressed prevailing public sentiment when it criticized her "Clamorous and unfeminine declarations of personal rights which it is obvious a wise Providence never destined her to exercise."[1] Close on the heels of that criticism, the tailoresses chose a new secretary and president.[2]

---

[1] Walter Hugins, Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class (Stanford, Ca., 1960), 14.

[2] Daily Sentinel, February 17, 1831.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Hugins, loc. cit.

Whatever the reasons for the change in leadership, the society's resolve did not weaken. On February 24, 1831, the tailoresses announced the purposes of their new organization. " . . . [I]n the opinion of this society," they declared, "the prices of tailoresses ought to be advanced one-third, and in some cases doubled." They expressed confidence they would win their demands, predicting that they would be able to raise a fund "sufficient to relieve the necessities of the few who would require it" for the short time they expected the strike to last. They also expected that the "oppressed of our sex in other places" would organize and support the strike, and that once the strike was won, "self interest, if no higher motive" would keep the tailoresses loyal to the society. They resolved to draw up a price schedule and present it to every employer in the city. The tailoresses threatened to publish the names of those who would not grant their demands.[3] Their resolutions indicated that many felt themselves to be relatively well off in comparison to the more poorly paid seamstresses.

---

[1] quoted in Andrews, p. 36.

[2] Daily Sentinel, February 19, 1831.

[3] Daily Sentinel, March 3, 1831.

In their eyes, at least, the tailoresses were self-reliant and able to fight for themselves.

The spokeswoman who succeeded Waight tried to shore up the members' determination in the face of criticism and abuse. Sarah Monroe told the women to "turn a deaf ear to the slanders of our enemies" and asked the public to put themselves in the tailoresses' position. "Let them . . . endure all the confinement, fatigue, privation, and sufferings that we . . . endure . . . and I think they will be disposed to applaud rather than censure us." Monroe closed with a biblical flourish: "What does reason, religion and virtue require, but to unloose heavy burdens, to break every yoke of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, to do justice to the poor, the widow and the afflicted?"[1] The themes she evoked would be echoed by all the organizations that followed the United Tailoresses. But still she emphasized the potential strength of the women rather than their weaknesses. She asked for justice, not for pity or charity.

During the spring the society drew up a price list which would enable them to support themselves and "with prudence to guard against a rainy or winter's day." Their employers drew up another list, representing the prices they would offer, and began a campaign to convince the public that wages would be adequate under their list and exorbitant under the society's. The differences between the two wage scales were evident in in the following selection which the tailoresses supplied:

---

[1] Daily Sentinel, March 5, 1831.

Item	Tailoresses'	Employers'
fine cloth jackets	1.50	1.00
satinets, fine	1.25	.75
, coarse	1.00	.50
pantaloons, fine	.75	.62
, coarse	.50	.38
bombazines, lined	1.08	.75

The two lists differed an average of twenty-five per cent, reported the society, "and on those articles on which most females are employed, this difference is from thirty to one hundred per cent."[1]

A "Friend of Justice," who apparently was a part of the clothiers' propaganda campaign, argued that the prices the clothiers paid were generous. According to his estimate, a seamstress would be able to earn between $3.25 and $7.50 per week under the employers' rates, while by the society's prices she would be able to earn the extortionary amount of between $5.25 and $10.59. The pro-labor Daily Sentinel, which printed the "Friend's" letter in full, reported that on the contrary, at the highest prices the tailoresses demanded a woman could make at the most $4.50 per week.[2]

That June, the United Tailoresses and a smaller society, the New York Tailoresses Association, struck. The United Tailoresses appointed a committee to "wait upon the secretary of the employers' society and inform him of their determination to discontinue work until their bill is adopted."[1] Between 1400 and 1600 women participated in the "turn-out."[2]

---

[1] Workingman's Advocate, August 21, 1831.

[2] Daily Sentinel, July 12, 1831.

The new secretary, Louisa Mitchell, encouraged the tailoresses to remain steadfast in spite of their fears that mere women could not act without the help of men. After reminding them that men were their oppressors and hence not likely to help, she asked, "Have we not sufficient excitement to arouse [our] energies? Oppression! and its consequent attendant misery call loud for our utmost exertion. Can we resist so urgent an appeal to our feelings?"[3] Mitchell's rhetoric differed little from the ardent feminism of her predecessor, but spirit could not long prevail over the necessities of the flesh.

Whether their rhetoric described the reality of their isolation or helped to perpetuate it, the tailoresses carried on their strike alone, and failed to win it. The society ascribed the failure to the inadequacy of its strike fund.[4] Many tailoresses had to return to work at the old prices because they could not survive long unemployed. Although the society claimed to have organized half the women in their trade , it could not eliminate the competition of a multitude of part-time needlewomen.

---

[1] quoted in Andrews, p. 37.

[2] Daily Sentinel, July 19, 1831

[3] Daily Sentinel, June 21, 1831.

[4] Daily Sentinel, July 19, 1831.

The only hope that remained to the tailoresses lay in the generosity of the clothier society" which might "with the assistance of the public" establish "a place for sewing work on their own account." The society appointed a committee to discuss that proposal while they awaited "the final decision of the clothiers."[1]

Having received an unfavorable response from their employers, the society addressed the public in a last, carefully-constructed appeal. Gone was the feminist militance of Waight, Mitchell, and Monroe, who had chosen their words to arouse the women themselves to struggle. No longer did the tailoresses describe men and male-dominated society as their oppressors. Now they designated their employers alone as oppressors. They called upon the "good sense of the public" to judge whether the prosperity of the clothiers did not permit them to pay a "fair bill of prices." They praised those employers who were "both amiable and honorable" but they reported that a majority "have determined to fight our reasonable demands." They appealed for sympathy by describing those tailoresses who had "aged and decrepid parents to support or helpless and innocent children . . . . Must they be driven to supplicate for charity," asked the women, "or should they be sent to shelter in your almhouse?" They concluded that until the public should become more supportive and "our better organization shall enable us to act with more energy" they would "submit patiently to our wrongs."[1] Even in their bid for sympathy the women did not mention their own sufferings, but focused on the helplessness of their dependents. They were proud, independent women who faced defeat with the same dignified courage as they had displayed in their struggle.

---

[1] Daily Sentinel, July 19, 1831.

Appeals to reason and sympathy did not move their employers once they no longer feared a strike. Most employers refused to pay even the rates approved by the master tailors. Customers continued to patronize their favorite establishments. Conditions in the sewing trades returned to their normal state of acute distress for the needlewomen now that the United Tailoresses had disappeared.

THE TAILORESSES AND SEAMSTRESSES BENEVOLENT SOCIETY

In the spring of 1836 following a winter marked by soaring inflation the needlewomen once more began to organize. Reports of their new organizing effort attracted the warm if condescending interest of the New York Sun.

". . . [T]he seamstresses of this city," the Sun reported enthusiastically, "are going, one and all, to stick their needles in their cushions . . . take the yoke of oppression from their necks, shake the shreds from their laps and stand up on their footstools for higher prices." Editor Day reserved his greatest enthusiasm for the hope that the seamstresses "will render their strike more striking by exhibiting their striking beauties to the eyes of our own sex in a pretty procession around the park." But for all his facetious remarks, the editor was willing to reserve to women a right that he believed the courts had just denied to men -- the right to combine and strike.[1]

---

[1] Workingman's Advocate, August 6, 1831.

In April the sewingwomen began to organize formally. The Sun carried their notice of meeting which invited all "tailoresses working for piece masters, merchant tailors, southern shops, and clothing stores" to attend.[2] A subsequent meeting ratified a constitution, established a price schedule, and elected officers.[3]

In June the society, which had opened its meetings only to members and prospective members, invited "All ladies and gentlemen friendly to their society," adding the warning that "a collection will be taken up in aid of the society."[4] Collection-taking became a permanent function of the society's meetings from that point on.

---

[1] Sun March 15, 1836.

[2] Sun April 25, 1836.

[3] Sun, May 12, 1836.

[4] Sun, June 1, 1836.

Although the society invited journeymen tailors as well as merchants to participate in meetings[1], there is no evidence that any journeyman ever appeared. Some merchants did come and a few stayed to participate in the society. Contributions began to trickle in. One gentleman gave a hundred dollars and offered to match the donations of five other gentlemen if each would give a hundred.[2] But the donations did not come in sufficient quantities to establish the cooperative store that the society announced as its goal.[3]

Appeals which brought in little financial aid, did attract attention and criticism. The society members responded by declaring that they had "a just, if not a legal right, to demand assistance.. . . ." But its propagandists softened their assertion of natural rights with a characterization of its members as "the widow, the orphan, the innocent and defenceless female."[4] Unlike the United Tailoresses, propagandists for the Benevolent Society began to describe its members as helpless to protect themselves.

Subsequent appeals seeking funds for the cooperative no longer referred to "justice." Instead they spoke of "the suffering condition of the poor, oppressed, but needy tailoresses and seamstresses of this city." They warned that the "almhouse would be the fate of many if someone did not come to their relief."[1] They painted their employers in dark colors as those "who are gaining wealth and have all the luxuries that this great city can afford while the poor females toil so many hours and do not have even the common necessaries of life."[2] In their tactic of distinguishing between their own employers and potential benefactors from the employing class, the society followed the lead of the last, atypical address of the United Tailoresses. That tactic together with their theme of the sewingwomen as victims -- passive sufferers -- at the mercy of greedy employers brought results.

---

[1] Sun, August 15, 1836.

[2] Sun, August 26, 1836.

[3] Sun, September 15, 1836.

[4] Ibid.

In late November the society was able to acknowledge encouragement from several men and donations from others including James Gordon Bennett, owner and editor of the Herald.[3] Bennett began to champion their cause. He now found "in the distress of women, the privations of lovely women, a fit subject for oratory," as well as editorials.[4] He proceeded to elaborate on that theme for many months, almost seeming to take delight in the misery of "the frailer sex, pure, virtuous, honest females cast aside, sneered at, condemned, despised, and forgotten," except presumably by him.[1]

---

[1] Sun, November 24, 1836.

[2] Sun, November 14, 1836.

[3] Sun, November 26, 1836.

[4] Herald, December 6, 1836.

J.H.M., another supporter, appealed to the readers of the Advocate of Moral Reform using many of the themes previously used in the propaganda, but expressed in more emotionally-charged language. The writer stressed the virtue and the industriousness of the sewingwomen and "the cruel and iron-handed oppression" they suffered at the hands of their employers. J.H.M. was, however, careful to deny any radical intent on the society's part. "The object of this society," the writer emphasized, "is not resistance. They cannot strike if they would. Thousands of others would from necessity step in and take their place." The writer then went on to ask the readers not to patronize the stores that would not give the prices demanded by the society.[2]

Such appeals brought increased support for the society. At one meeting after the women had left, a group of men set up a committee to formulate a plan to assist the sewingwomen.[3] They put into action Bennett's pet scheme, a mass meeting sponsored by the "best citizens" and addressed by "our most eloquent and pleasing public speakers."[4] The committee arranged a meeting chaired by the former mayor of New York, Cornelius W. Lawrence, and addressed by a group of prominent New York orators. Wealthy merchant capitalists such as John Jacob Astor and Isaac Lawrence commended the objects of the meeting to the public.[1]

---

[1] Herald, December 6, 1836.

[2] Advocate of Moral Reform, December 1, 1836.

[3] Herald, December 15, 1836.

[4] Herald, December 9, 1836.

At the mass meeting, the speakers -- all men -- focused on the miserable and abject state of the seamstresses and tailoresses. This mode of appeal by a group of men nobly defending oppressed womanhood proved highly successful in securing public sympathy and support for the benevolent society. So successful was the approach, in fact, that the women themselves ceased all independent action and propaganda. They relinquished control of their society to committees of the benevolent. "Ladies of the highest respectability" began to administer the society treasury for the benefit of all the sewingwomen in the city rather than simply for the benefit of society members.[2] In February, 1837, the committee of gentlemen announced that they had rented a store to house the society's cooperative.[3]

Before the cooperative opened, supporters of the society had begun to quarrel among themselves. Bennett accused W. K. Hoyt, whom he identified as a patron of Maria Monk, and H. M.

---

[1] Sun, December 26, 1836.

[2] Herald, January 18, 1837.

[3] Herald February 24, 1837.

Western of attempting to embezzle the society's funds.[1] The officers of the society promptly defended Hoyt,[2] and Bennett, in turn, pronounced their statement a forgery.[3] The officers retorted that had it not been for Hoyt's "many donations . . . the society would inevitably have gone to pieces."[4]

The members began to argue over control of the treasury much to Bennett's dismay. "We are . . . chagrined," wrote the editor, "and almost begin to forswear all pretty tailoresses and sweet, engaging, starving seamstresses hereafter."[5] Ominously side-by-side with reports of the developing split in the society's ranks, the Herald began to report the failures of banks, brokerage houses, and the suspension of species payments as the great Panic of 1837 began.[6]

The Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Establishment prospered and moved to newer quarters while the society itself was dividing into two warring factions.[7] Elizabeth A. Rich, who had been treasurer since the society's inception, resigned her post with a protest of her innocence of all wrongdoing.[7]

---

[1] Herald, Janaury 1, 1837.

[2] Sun, January 27, 1837.

[3] Herald, January 28, 1837.

[4] Sun, January 31, 1837.

[5] Herald, March 20, 1837.

[6] Herald, May 4, 1837; May 10, 1837.

[7] Herald, May 27, 1837.

Supporters of Hoyt and Western including Rich resigned en masse from the Benevolent Society[1] and formed the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Charitable Society.[2]

Bennett raged on: "I will not stand by and see four-fifths of the humble and pretty seamstresses of New York defrauded of the benefits of their funds by a few acting under the mischievous influence of such men as Western and Hoyt."[3] Court disputes followed. Accusations and rebuttals filled the papers. The tailoresses were, in Bennett's words, "blowing up each other like so many pretty little tigresses."[4] The Vice Chancellor denied an injunction to the forces led by Hoyt and Western. Their side lost the battle to control the funds.[5]

The cooperative store continued to operate by advertising itself as serving the members of both societies and the sewingwomen unaffiliated with either.[6] But the collapse of the economy meant that the store would soon close.

Few sewingwomen attended the last public meeting of the Benevolent Society held in July, 1837. One speaker explained the poor attendance. They did not come, he said, because they understood that they would be coming in the character of supplicants, of beggars. A young lawyer spoke of the "unparalleled distress of the times . . . of the breaking up of the domestic, southern and western trade." Finally, the lady president rose to thank the men for their sympathy and their contributions to the society -- futile as they were to improve the women's condition.[1]

---

[1] Herald, June 6, 1837.

[2] Herald, June 5, 1837.

[3] Herald, June 2, 1837.

[4] Herald, June 27, 1837.

[5] Herald, July 14, 1837.

[6] Herald, July 29, 1837.

The distress of the times together with the greed and egotism exhibited by some of the society's patrons had destroyed the society, but the members themselves were not entirely blameless. Some of them had shown poor judgment in their choice of allies and all of them unwisely chose to argue their differences in public. There was never any hope that the society could survive the depression which engulfed the American economy in 1837, but harmony among the members might have prolonged its life.

The propaganda written by the benevolent society had been remarkably effective until pity could no longer elicit sympathy from those who were suffering themselves. The depression produced victims much closer to the homes of potential philanthropists than the sewingwomen. The theme of women as victims proved far more successful in organizing and sustaining a society of needlewomen than the theme of women as an oppressed group struggling to free themselves.

---

[1] Herald, July 22, 1837.

The benevolent society, moreover, had proved itself as a viable and practical form of organization for the sewingwomen of New York. Its disavowal of the more militant methods of the United Tailoresses had brought it increased longevity. Begun in April of 1836, the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society survived through July of 1837; the United Tailoresses which began in February, 1831, did not last out the summer. The benevolent society lived longer precisely because its aims were more limited and its emphasis upon women's victimization instead of upon their strength did not challenge societal attitudes toward women and thereby drive away any potential supporters. By the same token it left the women vulnerable to the caprice or the manipulations of their patrons. It did not teach the women how to defend themselves, but kept them in a state of dependence upon the goodwill of others. In spite of protestations to the contrary, the women served by the benevolent society were and remained beggars and supplicants. The trade union drew women out of isolation by engendering in them a sense of kinship with other workers and, in the case of the United Tailoresses, with other women. It taught its members to speak and act for themselves, because its purpose was resistance rather than submission. In the 1830's, the sewingwomen weighed the relative merits of both forms of organization and chose accordingly. Later, as their situation grew more desperate, their allies would choose for them.

IV: THE MIDDLE YEARS

During the decades of the 1840's and 1850's, the balance between the two forms of organization shifted in favor of the benevolent society. During those twenty years the sewingwomen organized only twice. The first organization -- the Ladies Industrial Association in 1845 -- followed the trade union model; the second -- the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union in 1851 -- was a benevolent society. The two societies differed most dramatically in their respective fates. The Ladies Industrial Association lasted a month; the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union survived for over two years. The disparity indicated that the sewingwomen were increasingly unable to organize or struggle independently. As a result, the benevolent society, which was the form preferred by most potential allies, became the dominant form of organization.

THE LADIES INDUSTRIAL ASSOCIATION

The depression precipitated by the Panic of 1837 lasted for five years. The economy did not recover sufficiently to justify a renewed organizing effort until the mid-1840's. The post-Panic labor movement, dominated by middle-class reformers, took up the cause of the sewingwomen with greater enthusiasm than before. The very first issue of the new Workingman's Advocate, which resumed publication in 1844 under the editorship of George Henry Evans, reprinted Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt." Hood's poem made its readers conscious of the miseries of the sewingwomen who sewed with a double thread,

> "A shroud as well as a shirt."[1]

Evans, in addition, encouraged the sewingwomen to set up co-operatives[2] and carried news of the combined strike of tailors and tailoresses in Boston that same year.[3]

The women in the needle trades did not need to be awakened to their desperate condition. Individuals frequently protested their exploitation to their employers, but without result. Finally, an effort by the straw manufacturers to reduce wages precipitated action. A few women, more discontented and more assertive than the rest, proposed the organization of all the women engaged in the needle trades.[4]

In March, 1845, the seamstresses of New York took action together with women engaged in other female trades -- book folders, cap makers, straw weavers, crimpers, fringe and lace makers.[5] The Sun published the call to meeting which invited

---

[1] Workingman's Advocate, March 16, 1844.

[2] Workingman's Advocate, May 11, 1844.

[3] Workingman's Advocate, August 3, 1844.

[4] Herald, June 7, 1853.

[5] Workingman's Advocate, March 8, 1845.

"young women of the city engaged in industrial pursuits" to be present in the park. The notice requested that men stay away "as those for whose benefit it is called prefer to deliberate by themselves."[1] Men, with the exception of a few reporters, obliged.

Elizabeth Grey, a seamstress, presided over the meeting. The City of New York graciously allowed the women to use the Supreme Court room so that they would not have to meet outside under the prying eyes of male passersby. Grey, after detailing conditions in her trade, set the tone of the organization with her declaration that the "time had arrived for the working women of all trades to strike for their rights." Following her speech, the meeting passed two resolutions and thanked the newspapers and the city for their help. The first resolution called upon the women of each trade to draw up a list of employers who refused to pay the Association's scale of prices and the second denied membership to any woman who worked for less than the scale.[2] Both resolutions expressed quite clearly the members' intention to form trade unions, establish closed shops, and strike if necessary.

The straw weavers were the first to strike. They met together in the workroom of an employer named King to discuss their proposed action, King warned them that they would be glad to return to work after two months for less than what they were presently making, but they remained steadfast.[1]

---

[1] _Sun,_ March 3, 1845.

[2] _Herald_, March 4, 1845.

The second meeting of the association discussed the strike of the weavers. "Don't give up the ship!" Grey advised them. She then proceeded to criticize employers who used "abusive and shameful language" against their employees and who paid extremely low wages. She praised one employer for agreeing to pay higher rates "after a strike of only two hours."[2] A Mrs. Storms stepped from the audience to offer a word of caution. Since, she declared, there were too many workers in the female trades, the association members could not hope to control wages in those trades. Women, she felt, should persuade employers to hire themselves as clerks, bookkeepers, saleswomen, and drapers and should pressure men to cease such unmanly employments. "Let those men go into the fields and seek their livelihood as men ought to do and leave the females to their legitimate employ." She thus argued that trade unions were impossible for women to organize successfully and, in effect, urged an alliance of convenience between women workers and employers to force out male workers.[3] The association then chose delegates from each trade to act as a committee to regulate future prices and proceedings in the trade.

---

[1] Express, March 7, 1845.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Workingman's Advocate, March 8, 1845.

The meeting closed with the reading and ratifying of a preamble and resolutions. The preamble declared that the members of the association were not beggars for charity, but advocates of justice. " . . . [O]ur object,"the women stated in their preamble, "is not extortion; our desire not to reap advantage which will be denied to our employers. The boon we ask is to be founded upon right alone." Then moving from the ideal to the practical, they appealed to their employers' self-interest by asserting that higher wages and shorter hours would render "labor only the more cheerful at their work and still more earnest and willing to serve their employers." They ended their preamble with a catalog of those dependent upon their exertions: "aged fathers and mothers, young brothers, helpless sisters . . . who must inevitably starve or betake themselves to the poor house" if their struggle were not to succeed. The resolutions called for an address on the subject of female labor to be drawn up by a committee consisting of Grey, Storms, and Ann S. Stephens, a popular writer and editor of the Ladies' National Magazine.[1] The women instantly rebuked a male reporter for his impertinence in offering to write the address[2], but they did accept the offer of Palmio's Opera House for a benefit performance.[1]

---

[1] Workingman's Advocate, March 8, 1845.

[2] Post, March 7, 1845.

The Ladies Industrial Association (also known as the Female Industrial Association) began to appeal to the straw manufacturers during the week following the second meeting. The Association called upon the manufacturers "in the name of justice, humanity and good morals" to accede "to the moderate prices" demanded by their striking workers.[2]

After the initial burst of militance, the association rapidly declined. The next meeting was poorly attended because of inclement weather. Grey, nevertheless, exhorted her fellow members "to stand shoulder to shoulder in this struggle." She assured them that the "strong force of public opinion" was with them in their effort, but evidently feeling that assistance would be slow in coming, she added, " . . . [W]ho will be free, themselves must strike the first blow."[3] The benefit at Palmio's raised only seventy-five dollars because (according to the Sun) "the upper 10,000 kept away."[4] Elizabeth Hone, an association member, was to deliver the address, which had been written by Stephens, Storms, and another writer, Mrs. Sawyer, but she fell ill. Charles Burdett, an ardent sympathizer and author of a book on the trials of New York seamstresses, read the speech in her place before a thin crowd.[1] His few listeners praised the speech's contents and requested another hearing in some public place,[2] but apparently that meeting never took place.[3] Meanwhile the straw weavers evidently lost their strike.

---

[1] Workingman's Advocate, March 8, 1845.

[2] Sun, March 8, 1845.

[3] Herald, March 15, 1845.

[4] Sun, March 15, 1845.

The association appears to have disappeared within a month of the initial meeting. The Tribune carried detailed reports on the sewingwomen in July and August of 1845 with no mention of any organization.[4] A report published eight years later attributed the association's sudden demise to "strong-minded women" and "political demagogues" whose machinations had brought the association into disrepute. According to that report, once the society had lost its defensive character and assumed a more militant posture under the influence of the above-mentioned radicals, it lost the support of "all right-thinking and fair-minded persons." The association thereupon lingered for a few more weeks and died from lack of support.[5]

The Sun and the Herald anticipated the demise of the Association in characteristic form. The Herald predicted its fate without visible regret. " . . . [W]e much doubt," it smugly commented, "whether it will terminate in much good to female labor of any description. There is too much literary parade and philosophical assumption and personal display connected with this movement . . . . All combinations end in nothing."[1] The Sun predicted the group's death with more reluctance. "We must say in sad earnestness," it reported, "that we fear the combination and pledge of the public-spirited women . . . will not have its just effect. There are more laborers than the market for labor demands."[2] The Sun's conclusion, unfortunately for the sewingwomen, proved correct.

---

[1] Tribune, March 18, 1845; Herald, June 7, 1853.

[2] Tribune, March 18, 1845.

[3] Herald, June 7, 1853.

[4] Tribune, July 9, 1845; August 14, 1845; August 19, 1845.

[5] Herald, June 7, 1853.

A year later the sewingwomen gathered once again in a mass meeting. Participants complained bitterly that prostitution offered "ease and plenty" while shirtmaking provided a bare subsistence at best. "This," said one of the seamstresses, "is what makes us so radical. This is what makes us want to see rich men hoeing corn and rich ladies at the washtub."[3] No organization, however, developed from the meeting.

The Ladies Industrial Association was an audacious endeavor, but of necessity, it was stillborn. Difficult as it was to organize even one of the female trades, associating the women in the different trades together only compounded the difficulty. Only a minority in each trade attended the initial meeting of the association and that minority dwindled with each successive meeting. Newspapers treated the organizing effort with sympathy for the most part, but the association never managed to use the press to attract other supporters. The address it commissioned never received a full public hearing. And the strike of its members failed. The association died because it was premature -- an organization of unorganized trades, a feminist movement three years before Seneca Falls, a trade unionist effort at a time when reformers dominated the labor movement.

---

[1] Herald, March 19, 1845.

[2] Sun, March 16, 1845.

[3] quoted in Andrews, p. 59.

THE SHIRTSEWERS COOPERATIVE UNION

The Shirtsewers Cooperative Union grew directly from the labor reform movement at a time when the introduction of the sewing machine was beginning to transform the clothing industry. In spite of its partially working-class origins, the Union did not deviate from the benevolent society model. Organized and managed by members of the New York City Industrial Congress with the assistance of three appointed women, it rarely allowed the shirtsewers themselves to speak or act.

In 1850, the New York City Industrial Congress, a loose association of trade organizations and reform groups, established itself.[1] No women delegates attended its sessions, but later that summer the congress recommended that all trades form producers' and consumers' cooperatives, and resolved "to adopt a system of general organization of Female Labor."[2] In September, the congress issued a special invitation to women to attend the next meeting because it would discuss admitting them as delegates.[3] The body apparently decided in favor of women, for by February, 1851, the Straw and Pamela Sewers' Association was sending two delegates to the Congress.[4]

The Congress did not attempt to organize the seamstresses until a rival organization threatened to take the initiative away from it. In May, 1850, A. W. Goff founded the American Industrial Union ostensibly to aid the sewingwomen.[5] In August Goff lectured on behalf of his organization. Labor reformers present in the audience disputed his statements and impugned his sincerity.[6] Five days later the Industrial Congress denounced the AIU and cautioned the "Friends of Labor" against it. But in view of Goff's appeals for the seamstresses, P. E. Day proposed a committee to consider the best mode of aiding them.[1]

---

[1] Tribune, June 7, 1850.

[2] Tribune, July 3, 1850.

[3] Tribune, September 10, 1850.

[4] Tribune, February 8, 1851.

[5] Tribune, July 1, 1850.

[6] Tribune, August 17, 1850.

That committee's fervor evidently lagged. In January, 1851, J. D. Hennessey of the Carpenters suggested a new committee to investigate the possibility of setting up an organization similar to the Straw and Pamela Sewers. Hennessey served on the new committee together with Day and Captain Turner.[2] In February a meeting of women workers gathered in the Carpenters' Hall. E. Paul, secretary of the carpenters, occupied the chair while Hennessey stated the proposed object of the meeting -- to save the shirtsewers from "the ruthless grasp of sordid capitalists." Two women delegates from the Straw and Pamela workers offered their assistance to the shirtmakers. Other reformers and unionists described the women's miseries and their need to organize. At last the chairman called upon the women to state their grievances. A woman, "whose appearance showed strong symptoms of poverty" answered his call. She said, "It was an ease to her long sufferings to hear" the Industrial Congress take up her cause. She reported that she could only afford dry bread and tea on the wages she received. Captain Turner ordered a collection taken up for her. After her, other women spoke of their own situations, which they insisted were better than the first woman's because they at least had friends. At the meeting's end, four committees of men formed to write a constitution and by-laws, to draft resolutions, to thank the Carpenters, and to invite friends of labor reform to help the new organization.[1]

---

[1] Tribune, August 22, 1850.

[2] Tribune, January 4, 1851.

The Industrial Congress did not cease its concern for the sewingwomen once the association had begun, but considered asking the state legislature to grant a subsidy to help the women organize. In its appeal the congress spoke of "the state of abject poverty" which afflicted the shirtsewers and which might degenerate into "helpless destitution" without governmental intervention. Henry Crate who was then serving on the board of the new organization, opposed that action because it smacked of charity at public expense. He assured the congress that humane capitalists would lend the women the money to buy a few sewing machines which would enable them to protect themselves without relying on governmental subsidy.[2] The next session of the congress returned to the subject. A committee advocated appealing to the legislature on the grounds that a republican government should be "the Protector of the People's Rights and Liberties" and the shirtmakers particularly needed protection because "the newly introduced sewing machines threatened to reduce this large group of female operatives still lower in the social scale."

---

[1] Tribune, February 5, 1851.

[2] Tribune, April 9, 1851.

The committee asked the legislature to incorporate the association and give it money to purchase sewing machines and stocks of cloth and thread.[1] But the legislature rejected their appeal.

The Board of Managers of the Shirt-Sewers Association -- seven men and three middle-class women -- rented a store on Henry Street for the use of the society.[2] They then began a campaign to raise funds. Their first broadside bore on one side a copy of "The Song of the Shirt" with the question, "Will the men of New York allow the unfortunate shirtsewers to stitch their own shrouds that they may have shirts for a little less than the real value, or will they by buying of the Shirtsewer's Society RELIEVE THEIR UNCEASING AND ILL-PAID TOIL?" The other side offered a declaration of the association's faith in the good will of its supporters and announced its intention to sell scrip and fill all shirt orders.[3]

The men of New York did not support the society as the managers had so confidently expected. In July, the managers again addressed the public. "We are too poor to make our case known by paid advertisement," they said with a note of increased desperation, "and now we make this last appeal to you, believing that it will not pass unheeded." They reported that their work was falling off and that the women they served were bearing "in silence, sufferings and trials that would chill the sternest hearts to recount." They closed with a piteous question: "Who will hear? Who will regard our humble and earnest appeal?"[1] This time their appeal met with a sympathetic response.

---

[1] *Tribune*, April 23, 1851.

[2] *Tribune*, April 18, 1851.

[3] Shirt-Sewers Association of the City of New-York, "Circular," (New York, 1851).

A wealthy man who identified himself only as a philanthropic capitalist came to their aid. He asked why such associations usually failed, and laid the cause not to the hardheartedness of the public, but to the lack of skill, capital, and managerial ability of those who usually organized them. He appealed to the vanity of potential donors of his own class. "A more loved, if not a prouder name than [Stephen] Girard's, [John Jacob] Astor's, or Stewart's would be his . . . who . . .would . . . bring experience and energy to the advantage and independence of the Needlewomen of New York City."[2] His support and the support of others like him enabled the cooperative to operate.

At a public meeting in November, William C. Kessel reported on the state of the Union which he considered a resounding success. (The cooperative then employed forty women out of an estimated total of six thousand shirtmakers in New York City.) "We have demonstrated the fact," he claimed, " . . . that full double the wages can be earned by less hours of toil under our new plan of combination." He asked for still greater support from the public to assist more women. Another speaker warned of the dreadful alternatives to decent wages. "Not often the prison door and the madhouse close upon them, and oftener the house of shame affords an asylum." They called upon their audience to recognize the women as their "weak and defenceless sisters." Horace Greeley and the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, pastor of Plymouth Church and social reformer, spoke at the meeting's close. They volunteered to serve on a committee to collect money and each personally pledged himself to raise a hundred dollars.[1]

---

[1] Shirtsewers Cooperative Union, "Address," (New York, 1851.)

[2] Tribune, September 11, 1851.

In the view of their contemporaries the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union was now successfully underway. It thrived sufficiently to move to better quarters and to live past its second birthday. In June, 1853, the Union store was prospering on Bleeker Street,[2] but it still employed only forty to fifty women. Moreover, the philanthropists who managed it were still waiting to relinquish control until the women could repay the original loans.[3] Such was the extent of its success. Forty or fity women had been enabled to earn four dollars per week instead of the industrial average of two dollars and fifty cents.

---

[1] Tribune, October 7, 1851.

[2] Tribune, June 8, 1853.

[3] Herald, June 11, 1853.

The so-called success of the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union clearly demonstrated the limitations of the benevolent society; yet the more militant endeavors of the United Tailoresses or the Ladies Industrial Association had brought no material advantage to the sewingwomen at all. Both strikes failed. Both sets of appeals to sex or class loyalties met with insufficient response from other women or other workers. Indeed the record left by the Industrial Association was more disheartening than that of the United Tailoresses. Whatever its failings the benevolent society at least promised immediate and tangible benefits to a few women while trade union militance left them isolated and defeated. The sewingwomen were forced, therefore, to depend upon the benevolence of those who considered them suitable objects for charity until male workers or feminists recognized and acted upon their shared needs and common oppression.

V: SOLIDARITY AND CONFLICT

The Civil War brought no improvement in the economic position of the sewingwomen. Instead, the inflation it generated intensified their hardships. Textile factories closed because there was no Southern cotton to weave into cloth. Unemployed factory workers were forced into the needle trades. War widows and women whose men had gone to fight also poured into the already crowded sewing trades.

The ferment of the war years did produce circumstances more favorable to alliances between the sewingwomen and their feminist and working-class contemporaries. Male workers became more conscious of the necessity for class unity in a time of social and economic upheaval. Labor leaders -- notably men from the New York Workingmen's Union and, following the war, the New York State Workingmen's Assembly, and the National Labor Union -- recognized the interests of women workers and pledged support. The labor newspapers, Boston's Daily Evening Voice and Philadelphia's Fincher's Trades Review, enthusiastically concurred. Feminists, who had concentrated their energies on rallying public support for the war effort and emancipation during the early 1860's, renewed their own campaign for women's rights at a convention in New York City in May,

1866. At that convention the feminists -- including Caroline Dall, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Wendell Phillips -- gave a great deal of attention to the plight of working women, particularly seamstresses.[1] The Revolution, which began publication in 1868 under the direction of Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, consistently supported the cause of "the poor toiling sisterhood" who had sung "'The Song of the Shirt' so long that their throats became parched . . . ."[2]

The war years also intensified the philanthropic impulses of middle- and upper-class Americans and their uneasiness in the face of social unrest. Organized to relieve war victims,[3] they began to look for other causes and other victims to support once the war was over. The sewingwomen, whose plight was sympathetically reported by the newspapers which served these philanthropists --the World, the Times, the Sun, and the Tribune -- became obvious candidates for organized benevolence.

Yet the experiences of the three organizations formed during the 1860's revealed the narrow range of alternatives actually open to the sewingwomen. No organization managed to overcome the effects of adverse economic conditions or the tensions inherent in the women's doubly oppressed status. The first organization of the period, the Working Women's Protective Union, although initiated by women workers, quickly became nothing more than a charitable society under the absolute domination of middle-class philanthropists. The second, the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union, demonstrated that working-class cooperation was possible, but its tangible results were negligible or nonexistent. Class and sex antagonisms split the third group, the Working Women's Association. Thus ended the last effort to organize the women in the sewing trades until the Knights of Labor, inspired by a vision of working-class solidarity, began to organize working women in the mid-1880's.[1]

---

[1] Kugler, pp. 42, 46, 48, 50.

[2] quoted in Kugler, p. 137.

[3] Bremner, American Philanthropry, p. 77, 79.

THE WORKING WOMEN'S PROTECTIVE UNION

In November, 1863, New York hoopskirt makers went out on strike.[2] The cloak makers who worked in one shop decided to take action on their own behalf as well. They sent a deputation to Moses Beach of the Sun[3] to ask for his advice and support. He suggested that a public meeting be called. The Working Women's Protective Union, the longest-lived of any of the women's organizations of the forty-five year period, developed from that meeting.

---

[1] Dulles, pp. 128, 131, 141.

[2] Fincher's Trades Review, November 21, 1863.

[3] Tribune, November 19, 1863; Times, November 22, 1863.

Daniel Walford of the Workingmen's Union presided over the initial meeting. He stated the meeting's intent to ameliorate conditions for working women in New York, who, unlike male workers, were unable to protect themselves. Walford was careful to deny that the new organization had any intention to instigate strikes, but said that its organizers hoped only to bring about a situation where women would "not be wholly at the mercy of their employers." But the tactics he proposed contradicted his denial of militant intentions. The women in each trade were to hold out for higher wages while being supported by by the other members of the association.[1] He then called upon the women present to describe their condition. After their statements, which indicated that women workers including sewing women did not earn enough to sustain life,[2] a philanthropic woman moved that a central assembly be formed to which delegates from each shop would be sent. Her motion carried and the chairman asked that each trade select delegates to attend the next meeting. A speaker then ended the meeting with a recital of "The Song of the Shirt."[3]

---

[1] Fincher's Trades Review, November 21, 1863.

[2] Times, November 15, 1863.

[3] Fincher's Trades Review, loc. cit.

The paternalistic character of the society as well as the inability of the women to assert themselves emerged more clearly in later proceedings. At the second meeting a woman, evidently a worker, rose to make a motion, but had to rely upon a reporter to coach her in proper procedure. The other women spoke only to answer a call for yeas. Walford asked all non-delegates to leave, but because the members had had no "definite idea of what a delegate was or how she was appointed" no one had been officially delegated to attend the meeting. Fortunately for the success of the meeting, many women interpreted the chairman's instructions liberally and remained. He then sent members of the audience around the room to collect names of suitable representatives from each shop. After the delegates were chosen, Walford dismissed everyone else including Susan B. Anthony. He specifically requested her departure after remarking that he was opposed to the presence of strong-minded women because their speeches would only confuse their listeners.[1] He also announced that a public meeting would soon take place in Cooper Institute where the wrongs of working women would be "fully ventilated", and thanked the carpenters and dry goods clerks for their donations of two hundred and ten dollars.[2]

---

[1] Tribune, November 19, 1863; Times, November 19, 1863.

[2] Tribune, loc. cit.

A woman occupied the chair for a portion of the third meeting, which approved the preamble and constitution of the new society. In those documents, the members dedicated the Working Women's Union to protect women from frauds, to ask employers for shorter hours and wages proportional to the cost of living, to seek new fields of employment for women by establishing an employment bureau, and to appeal to the public to support their cause.[1]

The mass meeting that Walford had predicted did not materialize until March of the following year, after sponsorship of the Union had passed from workingmen to philanthropists. Judge Charles P. Daly now presided over the meetings. Judge Daly indicated that the goals of the organization, now known as the Working Women's Protective Union, had changed. The Union would make no effort to raise wages, he declared, but would try to ensure that women received the wages employers owed to them.[2]

At the end of 1864, the Union celebrated its anniversary with another meeting at Cooper Institute. In that time, it had more fully defined its new objectives. As President Daly described them,the Union now saw its mission as the prevention of poverty and crime by providing employment.[3] He announced the opening of an employment bureau under the direction of a middle-class woman to advance that end. Following Daly, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, a congressman, and an attorney spoke, "each of whom opened a fountain of sympathy and made a splendid forsenic display"out of the sufferings of women workers.[1] Although Walford and Joseph Beech of the Dry Goods Clerks[2] still served on the executive board of the Union, workers no longer played a role in determining the Union's policies.

---

[1] Tribune, November 25, 1863.

[2] Tribune, March 22, 1864.

[3] Times, December 15, 1864.

In its annual report, published in 1868, the Union's managers confirmed the dominance of middle-class philanthropists. According to the officers of the Union, efforts to let the women run their own organization had failed[3] because of "their want of experience in the management of business affairs and some already evident machinations among the evilly disposed of their own sex." The report declared "honest self-dependence", rather than mutual protection to be the objective of the Union.[4]

---

[1] Fincher's Trades Review, December 24, 1864.

[2] Times, February 14, 1865.

[3] There is no other evidence that the officers ever made such an attempt.

[4] Working Women's Protective Union, "Annual Report," (New York, 1868).

The work of the Working Women's Protective Union continued into the 1890's,[1] but any claims it had to being a working-women's association or even a reformist society had faded before its first year's end. The Union had become a philanthropic society which reduced women workers to objects of applied benevolence.

THE SEWINGWOMEN'S PROTECTIVE AND BENEVOLENT UNION

During the spring of 1864, a group of sewingwomen organized the Sewing Machine Operators Benevolent Society which later became the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union. Contrary to the implications of its original name, the new society combined elements of both the benevolent society and trade union forms of organization. Because of its spontaneous working-class origins, the New York City dailies ignored its formation and subsequent history. Only the Trades'Review and the Daily Evening Voice recorded its existence.

Ellen Patterson, secretary of the society, announced its formation in a letter to readers of the labor press. According to Patterson, the one hundred members wished to improve their social condition, maintain their wage rates, and "as soon as we have the numbers and the funds to have an advance of wages and shorter hours." They also hoped to encourage women in other cities to organize by their example and correspond with their society.[1] The appearance of this and further communications from the society in the labor press indicated the strong sense of solidarity the organizers felt for the rest of the labor movement as well as the hostility of the regular press.

---

[1] Working Women's Protective Union, "Thirtieth Annual Report," (New York, 1894).

The Trades Review greeted enthusiastically the society's announcement of a picnic at Fort Lee, New Jersey, whose proceeds would go to the society's treasury. Asserting that "Self-defence is the first law of nature," the editor hoped that once the trade society had acquired a strike fund it would be better able to stand up to "dogmatical employers."[2]

By February, 1865, the society had become the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union. Daniel Walford of the Workingmen's Union, presided at the only recorded meeting of the organization, but M. Trimble, a woman, served as president. Men, including Walford, dominated the first half of the proccedings. He announced the society's objectives: to obtain work for its members and to protect them in their efforts to obtain fair remuneration. A machinist spoke of the employers' failure to pass on the benefits derived from the sewing machine to the sewingwomen. " . . .[W]hile the profits of the business are doubled, " he asserted, " . . . the wages of labor are as low as ever." He ended with a call for workingmen and women to unite in the "system known as cooperation . . . ." The president of the Workingmen's Union then spoke. After declaring that the interests of labor and capital were "perfectly identical", he invited the operators to a mass meeting of workers. The women took over the rest of the meeting to initiate new members into the society. Eighteen initiates took part while the members greeted them with a sisterly refrain:

---

[1] Fincher's Trades Review, June 4, 1864.

[2] Ibid., June 25, 1864.

> "Welcome, sister, to our number,
> Welcome to our heart and hand,
> At our post we will not slumber,
> Strong in Union, we shall stand."

President Trimble informed the new members of their responsibilities to attend meetings and to observe "our laws by the strongest of human ties." She referred to the human chain which older members had formed in the welcoming ceremony as a symbol of "that union that should always exist among working women." She closed with another bit of sororal doggerel:

> "No angry passions here shall mar our peace;
> Or, sever our sacred band,
> For friendship is our bosom star,
> Our motto, hand in hand."[1]

A delegation of the Sewingwomen's Union did attend the subsequent meeting of workingmen "amid great applause." They heard the president of the Workingmen's Union again appeal to men and women to make common cause and ask that employer and employee "come together in the spirit of mutual and common interest."[1] Thus the spokesmen for the Workingmen's Union did not intend that working-class solidarity be used as a weapon in class struggle but as a way of resolving it harmoniously.

---

[1] Fincher's Trades Review, February 4, 1865.

In December of that same year, the Sewingwomen hosted a concert attended by trade society members and their families. The correspondent from the Voice,who reported the affair, added that it would be "a day of jubilee for workingmen" when female trades were organized as frequently as men's.[2] After the concert, however, the society disappeared even from the pages of the labor press.

The society was self-conscious enough to formulate an idea, and perhaps, the brief reality of sisterhood among its members. The sewingwomen reached out to working-class men, to women workers in other cities, but did not appeal to those outside their class. The rituals of initiation, a form of propaganda unique to the Union, helped to instill in its members the idea of sisterhood without raising the issue of feminism which might have driven its male supporters away. Thus it managed to secure the assistance of male workers without, apparently, sacrificing its own autonomy -- a feat not matched by any other sewingwomen's organization.

---

[1] Fincher's Trades Review, March 4, 1865; Daily Evening Voice, February 23, 1865.

[2] Daily Evening Voice, December 23, 1865.

In spite of the impressive growth in class consciousness and class solidarity evidenced by the Union's development, the Union itself left no record of concrete achievement. Its survival for over a year and a half testified to the determination and the intelligence of its members, but to little else. There is no way to determine whether the Union supported a strike which failed, established a cooperative which went bankrupt, or died because its members lost interest. The record does indicate that conditions in the sewing trades did not improve during the year and a half of the Union's existence.

THE WORKING WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

A conflict between two different conceptions of solidarity shaped the history of the Working Women's Association. The question of working-class commitment versus feminist commitment arose at the first meeting of Working Women's Association, Number 1, and continued as an undercurrent throughout the association's history. Ultimately that conflict doomed the association and the sewingwomen's organization which formed under its sponsorship.

In September, 1868, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton formed the Working Women's Association. They were motivated by a compound of principle and expedience. Anthony, in particular, who was herself self-supporting, had long been concerned with the exploitation of women workers. The association was a natural outgrowth of her concern. More practical considerations determined the timing for the formation of the organization. Anthony and Stanton hoped to persuade the National Labor Union to endorse woman's suffrage, but first they had to find or found a labor organization which would delegate Anthony to attend the National Labor Union Convention scheduled for the following week. The Working Women's Association was the answer to their dilemma.

Anthony held the first meeting of the association in the office of her newspaper, The Revolution. Most of the women workers who attended worked as typesetters, clerks, and bookkeepers in her or nearby newspaper offices. Anthony and Stanton proposed that the new society be called the Working Women's Suffrage Association, but Augusta "Gussie" Lewis, a typesetter, objected that the word "suffrage" "would couple the association . . . with short hair and bloomers and other vagaries." Other women workers sided with Lewis, and their objections carried the meeting. Anthony responded to their argument patronizingly, saying she was sorry they felt that way but she did not "desire them to pass resolutely beyond what their present mental status sanctioned."[1] The meeting then elected Anthony delegate to the N.L.U. convention and president of the association. After the meeting, the typesetters made plans to establish a cooperative printing shop to be operated exclusively by women.[1]

---

[1] Times, September 18, 1868.

On the next day, residents of the Workingwomen's Home, a boardinghouse established by philanthropists, formed Working Women's Association, Number 2. They, too, delegated a member to attend the NLU convention, Mary Kellogg Putnam,[2] the daughter of Edward Kellogg, the famous propagandist for monetary reform.[3] Anthony addressed the women of Number 2 at this and successive meetings on their need for suffrage and her hope that women in other trades would form cooperatives like the one then being formed by the typesetters.[4]

Meanwhile the refusal of the National Labor Union to go on record in support of woman's suffrage thwarted Anthony's plans.[5] The convention delegates did not agree with her contention that "complaints, petitions, strikes and protective unions" were of no avail to women "until they hold the ballot in their own hands . . . ."[6] Members did, however, accept her invitation to attend the meetings of the Associations, Numbers 1 and 2. In spite of her disappointment, Anthony continued her activities in the associations, perhaps expecting that she could persuade women workers to her views. She continued to argue that only through the suffrage could woman become "the controller of her person and her own earnings."[1]

---

[1] The World, September 18, 1868.

[2] The Revolution, September 24, 1868.

[3] Commons, History, II, pp. 119, 127.

[4] The Revolution, loc. cit.; Times, September 23, 1868.

[5] The World, September 24, 1868.

[6] quoted in Kugler, p. 141.

In October, the women of Number 2 decided to follow the example of the typesetters by organizing themselves. Because six sewing machine operators constituted the largest bloc of women workers present, Anthony suggested that they be the first to organize. She advised them to draw up a wage scale, find a suitable hall for meetings and then elect officers.[2] At their next meeting the Sewing Machine Operators Union approved a constitution defining themselves as a cooperative and elected officers. H. M. Shepherd, one of the operators present, described her experiences operating a sewing machine. She drew from her talk the moral that the lot of a seamstress was hard and the only way to protect oneself was cooperation. Anthony cheered on the women of the new union with her prediction that money would soon be flowing in from philanthropic capitalists.[3]

Subsequently, the Union disappeared. The consolidation of its parent organization with Working Women's Association, Number 1 and the accompanying change in orientation absorbed the energies of its feminist sponsors. Unlike the typesetters,[1] the sewing machine operators received no direct aid or encouragement from the men in their trade. Unaided, the operators' society which had less than twenty members apparently could not muster enough energy or resources to continue on its own.

---

[1] The World, May 20, 1869.

[2] Tribune, October 7, 1868.

[3] The Revolution, October 29, 1868.

The newly consolidated Working Women's National Association shifted its emphasis from economic struggle and organization to philosophical discussions on the oppression of women workers. It invited to membership all women workers who were "proud of the name which distinguishes them from the multitudes of idlers and dependents,"[2] but most of the women who accepted its invitation were middle-class professionals, members of Sorosis, the New York women's club, or feminists like Anthony and Stanton. Working-class women who desperately needed immediate action to better job conditions lost interest in mere discussions of their oppression as Anthony herself later admitted.[3]

At Anthony's request, the national association appointed committees to examine the conditions of work in the female trades.[4] The very need to appoint such committees indicated the distance that was growing between working-class women and the association. Indeed, in January, 1869, the Times reported that working women were leaving the association because it was not composed of or directed by "real workers" and because discussion of their own immediate wrongs and experiences had been replaced by a discussion "of the fancied rights of women."[1]

---

[1] The World, September 22, 1868; The Revolution, October 1, 1868, October 8, 1868.

[2] The Revolution, November 5, 1868.

[3] The World, August 18, 1869.

[4] The World, November 12, 1868.

Anthony then alienated the only group of workingmen who had actively aided her association -- the men of New York Typographical Union, No. 6. When they went on strike, she asked their employers to contribute to a training school for women and then hire the trainees at lower wages than the strikers were demanding. The typographers and their fellow trade unionists severely criticized her action.[2]

By May, 1869, even Anthony had to admit that workers were no longer attending meetings. She, however, ascribed their absence to their fatigue and inability to pay carfare.[3] Having absolved herself, she did nothing to make the association more appealing or helpful to women workers. Women's rights and self-improvement through education and hygiene became the main topics of conversation at the meetings.

In June, Eleanor Kirk, one of the founding members of the original association, voiced working-class criticisms. "I tell you there is a question deeper than suffrage," she said, "and that is -- suffering . . . . There are thousands of women in this city who want food and clothing a great deal more than the ballot . . . ." She demanded that the association adopt a rule to keep its meetings strictly to the subject of women's work and wages and warned that if it did not, she would start another society. "Unless we do something to insure these girls decent wages for decent work," she insisted, "our association is a dead, flat failure." The majority defeated her motion[1], but she failed to carry out her threat to set up a rival organization.

---

[1] Times, January 10, 1869.

[2] The World, January 30, 1869; February 1, 1869.

[3] The World, May 20, 1869.

Fewer and fewer women workers attended the meetings. When Gussie Lewis, president of the New York Women's Typographical Union, Number 1, invited Kate Mullaney of the Troy collarmakers union to address the association, she half apologized to the members for her effrontery. Acknowledging that there was a feeling against trade unions in the association, Lewis still insisted that they should listen to what Mullaney had to say. Mullaney, in her turn, expressed amazement at seeing no one at the Working Women's National Association who resembled the working women she knew. "She had to work all day in the shop, and this, she did not think, judging from their appearance, that they did." She described the strike the collarmakers were waging and asked for contributions.[1] The thirty-one dollars she received were the last tangible benefits the association conferred upon working women.

---

[1] The World, June 18, 1869.

The gulf between workers and middle-class members of the association widened. Lewis resigned from the association shortly after Mullaney's appearance before it. The 1869 convention of the National Labor Union rejected Anthony's credentials as a delegate on the grounds that she did not represent a bona fide labor organization. A delegate from the New York Typographical Workers, Mike Walsh, proclaimed her "a determined enemy to labor, to the workingmen and women who toil from morning to night." He charged that she was the proprietor of a newspaper printed in a "rat" (non-union) office, that she had tried to break the typographers' strike, and that her "rat" printer had fired Gussie Lewis for union activities.[2]

Anthony defended herself against the charges. She said she could not afford to pay union rates and insisted that she had no control over whom her printer hired or fired. She admitted that she had tried to get women hired in the place of striking printers, but she justified her action. "Shall we let those women starve in garrets or do worse," she asked her critics, "when the selfishness of employers in the printing or other business seems to open a way to them to honorable independence?"[1] Her arguments did not mollify the typographical workers, who threatened to walk out of the convention if it should seat her.

---

[1] The World, July 2, 1869.

[2] The World, August 17, 1869.

Three days of impassioned debate ensued. The debate revealed the opposition of some male workers to feminist demands. When Anthony defended her appeal to employers on the grounds that she was trying to "help women out of the kitchen and the sewing room,"[2] Walsh asked who would take woman's place in the kitchen and at the washtub. He added, "I believe in a man doing his work and taking a wife and supporting her and their children . . . ."[3] The debate also revealed Anthony's failure to understand trade union principles on even such a basic level as the importance of paying union rates.

In the midst of the debate came a letter from Lewis demanding that Anthony not be seated because she had not the interests of "workingwomen or men at heart."[4] Anthony was beaten, but she closed defiantly. "There is an antagonism between men and women workers," she declared, "and there must continue to be until men and women occupy an equal platform." With that clear statement of her principles, she withdrew from the convention feeling misunderstood and ill-used.[1]

---

[1] The World, August 17, 1869.

[2] Ibid.

[3] The World, August 18, 1869.

[4] Ibid.

In October, 1869, Eleanor Kirk succeeded Anthony as president of the newly incorporated association. Kirk immediately resigned because the association had not, in her judgment, been "in the interest of workingwomen but . . . has been used as a forum for a discussion of all the irrelevant issues and social problems." She also complained of the "frequent insinuations from women that the real enemies of the honest efforts of workingwomen are workingmen . . . ."[2] Her disaffection marked the end of the association because the loss of support from even skilled women workers had effectively destroyed its claim to being a working women's association. It lingered on for another month and died officially in December, 1869.[3]

The Sewing Machine Operators Union and its parent society, the Workingwomen's Association, fell victim to a clash between ideological commitments and a consequent disagreement over tactics. Middle-class members placed their commitment to women first. They were willing to accomodate employers at the expense of other workers if the interests of working women were served thereby. As middle-class women, they opposed the trade union and the strike, because they sought harmony between the classes rather than struggle. As feminists, they opposed a patriarchal social structure rather than a capitalistic economic system. Women workers, on the other hand, designated their employers as their chief adversaries. They saw working-class men as their brother workers not as their oppressors. Consequently, they looked to alliance with other workers to aid them in the struggle with their employers. They favored the use of militant organizations and tactics such as the trade union and the strike. A split between two groups of women whose aims were so divergent was inevitable, and once working women withdrew, the association became an absurdity. The only hope for the association's success rested in the ability of its middle-class members to understand and articulate the concerns of those whom they were trying to organize. Instead, Anthony and her supporters, however noble their intentions, attempted to coerce women workers into accepting the goals and the methods they prescribed. Their attempt failed and that failure destroyed the Working Women's Association.

---

[1] The World, August 19, 1869.

[2] The World, November 15, 1869.

[3] The World, December 24, 1869.

None of the sewingwomen's organizations in the 1860's escaped the problems created by the sewingwomen's double oppression. The conflict which split the Working Women's Association was a manifestation of that doubly oppressed status. Yet the fact that both parties to the dispute had become conscious that working women were oppressed indicated that progress at the level of consciousness had occurred. Similarly the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union demonstrated that the consciousness of workers had evolved to include a more expanded definition of working-class unity. Workers' and feminists' recognition of the importance of cooperation with working women, although never implemented adequately enough to benefit the sewingwomen of the period, was essential to the eventual success of their struggle. During the same period, women workers, already aware of their oppression as women and as workers, began to determine their own priorities and act accordingly. Thus the 1860's, though a period marked by the frustration and ultimate defeat of all the sewingwomen's efforts, also witnessed the birth of alliances and the growth of class and sex consciousness which would contribute to the sewingwomen's later success.

VI: PROPAGANDA THEMES AND VARIATIONS

Organizing and sustaining an organization proved to be beyond the unaided stength of the sewingwomen. Only by attracting support outside their ranks were they able to construct societies that were at all stable and effective. By their efforts to secure allies, therefore, the sewingwomen tried to exercise a measure of control over their destiny. By propaganda they attracted and kept the allies they needed to survive. Thus the dissemination of propaganda became one of the most important functions of the needlewomen societies. Propaganda, moreover, was not only an appeal for outside support; it was at the same time a method of maintaining the needlewomen's morale. Because supporters and members were not always held by the same appeals, difficulties frequently arose for the women's organizations. Their propagandists never overcame the hazards of this dual audience, but by their propaganda appeals they derived considerable benefit for their societies and for themselves.

The kinds of newspapers to which the needlewomen had access influenced the type of propaganda they wrote. Propaganda, if it were to be published, had to satisfy the requirements of either the labor or the popular press. Only at brief intervals in 1831 and again in the 1860's, when a functioning labor press existed along with a labor movement cohesive enough to demand attention from the popular press, did the sewingwomen's propaganda appear in both types of newspapers.

Labor newspapers -- the Workingman's Advocate, The Man, and the Daily Sentinel in the 1830's, and the Daily Evening Voice and Fincher's Trades Review thirty years later -- usually approved and even urged women workers to use the same militant tactics as men. Material that appeared in those papers praised the workingwomen's efforts to organize[1] and appealed to male workers to understand and support the women's actions.[2] The Advocate emphasized the tailoresses' natural rights and native abilities to such an extent that its editor criticized them for not acting in their own defense. "We think," editor George Henry Evans wrote, "that the seamstresses may consider themselves mainly indebted to their neglect in associating in their own defense for the evils under which they now suffer."[3] The Sentinel took a more sentimental approach. When the editor exhorted tailoresses during a strike, he sought to shame them into joining and continuing the strike by reminding them of the despair the widows and orphans among them would face if the strike were lost. "They might point to their sunken cheeks and tattered garments," he warned, "and say, with truth, 'From this you might have saved us, had you united with us in demanding justice.'"[1] In the 1860's, labor papers continued to accord women the respect of giving them the same advice they gave men. Jonathan Fincher, for example, told the working women of New York not to forget one fact: " . . . that no concessions will be made to them unless they extort it by combination . . . ."[2] In addition, the labor editors of that period concerned themselves with the need for unity in the entire working class. Editor Fincher insisted that cooperation would benefit men as well as women because they shared "a common interest and a common destiny."[3] He also tried to harden class loyalties against the interference of middle-class philanthropists by warning women workers that to rely upon those "inexperienced and impracticable" men would be foolhardy. The solutions they proposed, he said, would never go to the root of the evil -- the unequal relationship between labor and capital.[4]

---

[1] see Workingman's Advocate, March 15, 1831; The Man, June 19, 1835; Workingman's Advocate, March 8, 1845; Fincher's Trades Review, June 4, 1864.

[2] see Daily Sentinel, March 1, 1831; Workingman's Advocate, August 13, 1831; The Man, loc. cit.

[3] Workingman's Advocate, March 5, 1831.

---

[1] Daily Sentinel, June 27, 1831.

[2] Fincher's Trades Review, April 2, 1864.

[3] Fincher's Trades Review, April 30, 1864.

[4] Ibid.

The popular, or middle-class press, which provided almost the only forum available to the sewingwomen between 1836 and 1860, did not encourage the development of working-class unity. The editors of the Herald and the Sun did not analyze the causes of the sewingwomen's immiseration very deeply, but contented themselves with harrowing descriptions of their suffering and occasional praise for their own chivalrous concern. The women, however, were able to derive some benefit from editorial sentimentality. Their organizing efforts received more sympathetic attention from the editors than similar efforts by workingmen. Horace Greeley of the Tribune, who devoted the greatest amount of space and energy to the sewingwomen's cause, articulated the most fervent opposition to class conflict. He consistently warned against militant tactics such as strikes or trade unions which might provoke class antagonisms. Greeley proposed forming cooperatives rather than class-conscious trade unions as the ideal form of labor organization. The Times followed, less passionately, the lead of the Tribune. Also in the 1860's, The World continued in the more flamboyant tradition of the Herald. Throughout most of the period the sewingwomen had to adapt their propaganda to the demands of the popular press by reticence in expressing opinions that contradicted those of their newspaper publishers.

The sewingwomen were not immune to the influences which shaped their contemporaries' opinions. When a strong and aggressive labor movement existed, the sewingwomen undoubtedly drew much of the inspiration for their own propaganda appeals from other workers' communications as well as editorials in the labor press. Like other workers, they insisted on using the word "price" instead of "wage" to refer to the payment for their labor. More than a semantic distinction was at issue in this choice of words. Using the word "price" instead of "wage" meant that they considered themselves craftswomen who sold the product of their labor rather than wage-earners who sold the labor itself. Like other workers, they spoke of their "right" to organize. Like other workers, they likened their employers' tyranny to that of King George by referring to the American Revolution and the nation's revolutionary heritage. When the labor movement deteriorated, the sewingwomen looked for inspiration to the middle-class press and middle-class philanthropists and reformers. Thus they began to warn of the dangers of prostitution threatening their members just as middle-class reformers had begun to organize to combat that evil. Their propaganda appeals used pathetic descriptions of their members identical to those used in the public relations efforts of charitable societies.

The audience to which the sewingwomen addressed their propaganda also greatly influenced its content. In 1831, the United Tailoresses directed their appeals to the working-class readers of the labor press. The tailoresses emphasized the justice of their cause rather than their desperation or their helplessness. Because they knew their readers already supported the right of workers to organize, they sought to convince them that that right applied equally to women. Their spokeswomen denounced in blunt and direct language as "the most flagrant abuses that disgrace the policies of man"[1] a system of sex and class oppression. On the other hand, the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society based its appeals upon the "suffering condition of the poor, oppressed, but needy"[2] tailoresses and seamstresses, rather than upon a demand for justice. Its propagandists did not discuss sex and class oppression in their structural aspects because they were seeking aid from those who benefitted from both. Pity rather than outrage was the emotion they intended to evoke in their audience.

Crucial to their choice of audience and propaganda themes was the sense of identification, i.e., sex or class consciousness, the women felt with other workers and other women. Those groups of sewingwomen -- the United Tailoresses, the Ladies Industrial Association, the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union, and the Working Women's Association -- which identified their members as part of an oppressed class or sex, used propaganda to build a feeling of solidarity among their members and between them and those who were their allies by class or sex. Their appeals,whether primarily feminist or class-conscious, emphasized the sewingwomen's strength and dignity. They asked respect and support from those whom they addressed as equals. Other groups -- the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society, the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union, the Working Women's Protective Union -- who traded control over their organizations for support from middle-class philanthropists, inhibited the development and expression of sex- and class-consciousness in their members. Their propagandists addressed potential benefactors rather than the women themselves.

---

[1] Lavinia Waight, quoted in Daily Sentinel, February 17, 1831.

[2] quoted in Sun, August 26, 1836.

Influenced by these considerations, the sewingwomen utilized two distinct types of appeals: "militance" and "dependence." "Militance" appeals expressed the determination of the women to fight for and by themselves if necessary. Those appeals defended the right of women to organize and urged them to struggle. "If we do not come forth in our own defense," asked Sarah Monroe of the United Tailoresses, "what will become of us?"[1] "The time has come," said Elizabeth Grey of the Ladies Industrial Association in another militant appeal, "for the workingwomen of all trades to strike for their rights . . . ."[1] By contrast, "dependence" appeals characterized the sewingwoman as "the widow, the orphan, the innocent and defencesless female."[2] The organizers of the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union spoke of "the state of abject poverty" which afflicted the women and which might degenerate to "helpless destitution" without governmental intervention.[3] One of the spokesmen for that organization summarized the ultimate goal implicit in such appeals when he said that the shirtsewers wanted the opportunity "to earn, in honest and decent poverty."[4]

---

[1] quoted in Daily Sentinel, March 5, 1831.

Unfortunately for the needlewomen, the dependence themes more accurately described their circumstances. At the same time they more effectively served their purpose of securing and keeping allies perhaps because their greater accuracy made them more persuasive and because the philanthropists such appeals attracted were better able to support an organization financially. Certainly the organizations which used dependence themes in their propaganda survived longer and managed to establish cooperatives, other institutions such as employment bureaus, or legal services which directly benefitted the sewingwomen. Yet, to the extent that the sewingwomen controlled their own societies, they usually adopted militance themes. They evidently believed that such words as "independence," "rights," "justice," and "liberty" gave a meaning to their struggle which such words as "suffering", "oppression," "helpless," could not. The words they preferred accurately described their goals if not their short-term chances for achieving them. The spokeswomen, however, usually assured the listeners that they would prevail. Louisa Mitchell of the United Tailoresses spoke of "a mighty work begun namely that of gaining our liberty . . ." which she insisted would succeed ". . . if we persevere."[1] Other speakers used less exalted language to describe their cause. Ellen Patterson of the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union, for example, spoke simply of improving "our social condition", but she expressed the same confidence in the ability of the needlewomen to accomplish their purpose.[2] Even when militance appeals acknowledged the odds against the needlewomen's success, they still expressed the needlewomen's determination to resist. "If we fail, my friends," said another tailoress, "it will not be without a good cause, but because its advocates are poor and inexperienced."[3] The opportunity that such propaganda offered the women to transcend their degraded existence, if only for a short period, meant more to them than a chance to ameliorate their conditions by humbling themselves. Even the founders of the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society, before their patrons took control, conceived of themselves as the "advocates of justice and humanity" rather than "beggars and dependents."[1] Begging favors, the militants correctly believed, exchanged one form of dependence for another.

---

[1] quoted in Herald, March 4, 1845.

[2] Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society quoted in Sun, September 17, 1836.

[3] quoted in Tribune, April 9, 1851.

[4] quoted in Tribune, October 7, 1851.

---

[1] quoted in Daily Sentinel, June 25, 1831.

[2] Fincher's Trades Review, June 4, 1864.

[3] Sarah Monroe, quoted in Daily Sentinel, March 5, 1831.

The propaganda efforts of each society appeared to have been self-contained, without reference to the experiences of their predecessors with the possible exception of the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society. Within the lifetime of each society, however, propaganda underwent an evolution usually in a direction away from militance and toward dependence. Organizations, existing on such a thin margin, found it necessary to compromise, to mask their members' consciousness in order to survive; for the most part they did so reluctantly. The United Tailoresses, whose leaders were strongly sex- and class-conscious, tempered its militant rhetoric only in a last desperate effort to avert imminent collapse of their organization. The Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society, whose members apparently held their convictions less deeply, made a smoother transition from a qualified militance to an enthusiastic use of dependence themes. The Ladies

---

[1] quoted in Sun, September 17, 1836.

Industrial Association did not last long enough to modify its propaganda appeals, but its official pronouncements were milder than the speeches delivered to its members. The Shirtsewers Cooperative Union, as befitted an organization initiated and run by patrons, began with dependence appeals which grew progressively more piteous through the first year of its life. The shirtmakers appeared in all its propaganda as the passive victims of fate bearing "in silence, sufferings and trials that would chill the sternest hearts to recount."[1] The Working Women's Protective Union followed much the same progression. The women it "protected" became more and more reduced in its propaganda to the level of charitable objects. Only the last two organizations--the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union and the Working Women's' Association--seemed not to have conformed to the general pattern. In its first published announcement, the Sewingwomen's organization, expressed the hope that its members would communicate and cooperate with women workers in other cities. The emphasis on the sisterhood of working women continued as the major theme of its propaganda. The history of the Working Women's Association involved a conflict between different conceptions of militance put forth by the two classes of women who belonged to the organization. Only one side of the dispute appeared in the official propaganda of the association

---

[1] Shirtsewers Cooperative Union, "Address."

-- the middle-class feminist side. But the disagreements emerged. Both sides held firmly to their own opposing views of solidarity and conflict. Feminists advocated sex solidarity between all women regardless of class. Lillie Deveraux Blake ennunciated the feminist viewpoint. "It is for us to maintain the dignity of labor," she said. "It is for us to denounce all antagonism between different classes of work."[1] Women workers, who advocated working-class solidarity, left the organization alienated by the "wholesale denunciation of men"[2] and the discussion of issues they considered "irrelevant"[3] to their own immediate needs.

Although each organization apparently constructed its own propaganda appeals without connection to previous efforts, a number of significant themes kept reappearing because they represented truthfully some unchanging aspect of the sewingwomen's experience, because they compelled attention and support, or because they expressed the sewingwomen's self-image. A number of themes satisfied more than one condition.

In accord with the overall division of propaganda into dependence and militance appeals, individual themes either reinforced the traditional view of women as passive, dependent creatures or contradicted that view. Dependence appeals used the "widow and orphan" motif and repeated such adjectives as "defenceless" and "helpless" which accorded with the popular view of women as unable to survive without men's aid and protection. Inevitably, the appeals suggested, women would be preyed upon and forced to choose between "sad and fearful alternatives"[1] unless chivalrous men stepped into the breach. In addition to their blatant appeal to chivalrous sentiments, perhaps those who used such images intended to distinguish the sewingwomen from the supposedly rowdy, insubordinate, scheming men who led the trade union struggles. Certainly these appeals gave the impression that the victimized women could not possibly pose a threat to property rights or the stability of the class system. Such themes jarred no middle- or upper-class man's sensibilities and provoked no hostility. Woman in the role of victim and supplicant was a congenial and a sympathetic image for middle-class minds of that era to handle.

---

[1] quoted in The World, November 29, 1869.

[2] Eleanor Kirk, quoted in Tribune, June 18, 1869.

[3] Eleanor Kirk, quoted in The World, November 15, 1869.

The temptation to prostitution could be used as part of the "victim" theme, but it had to be handled with great delicacy. The "house of shame" offered an asylum to the beleaguered sewingwoman far more horrifying to Victorian sensibilities than the "poorhouse, the madhouse" or even the "prison."[2] Appeals which used this motif had to be phrased carefully to avoid any suggestion of indecent or purient interest.

---

[1] Shirtsewers Cooperative Union, "Address."

[2] Shirtsewers Cooperative Union quoted in Tribune, October 7, 1851.

No other theme, however, could equal its dramatic effect. Accordingly, warnings of the dangers of prostitution appeared in the militant communications of the Ladies Industrial Association as well as in the dependence appeals of the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society and the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union.

Other militance themes contradicted the traditional view of women's nature and women's role. Militant groups' open expression of hostility toward male prerogatives certainly offended contemporary notions of propriety. The spokeswomen for the United Tailoresses were notable for the frankness with which they proclaimed that men were their "oppressors" and "that it would be worse than useless to seek redress through their instrumentality."[1] Speakers for the Ladies Industrial Association took up the same theme with a different emphasis. Storms, and later Grey, urged women to take work away from men and told the displaced men "to go into the field and seek their livelihood as men ought to do . . . ."[2] Man-hating was one of the many areas of disagreement between working-class and feminist members that split the Working Women's Association.

The converse of hostility toward men was the feminist expression of solidarity among women which the same three organizations also displayed. The leaders of the United Tailoresses straight-forwardly avowed their feelings of sisterhood for all women. Lavinia Waight, in particular, linked the tailoresses' struggle with that of all women and traced them to a common oppression. Elizabeth Grey narrowed her expressions of solidarity to "workingwomen of all trades,"[1] but her association implicitly recognized its members' kinship to middle-class women when it invited women writers to help prepare its proposed address. The Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union like the working-class members of the Working Women's Association alone managed to express feelings of solidarity with other women without expressing hostility toward men.

---

[1] Louisa Mitchell, quoted in Daily Sentinel, June 25, 1831.

[2] Storms, quoted in Workingman's Advocate, March 8, 1845; Grey, quoted in Herald, March 15, 1845.

Militant sewingwomen took the word "dependent" itself and turned it to their own, strikingly different, purposes, which contradicted traditional assumptions about roles. They spoke of their own dependents -- "aged fathers and mothers, young brothers, helpless sisters,"[2] or of the "dignity of self-dependence and self-protection."[3]

Bitter attacks on employers, on the other hand, were comparatively rare for women whose degraded condition seemed easily traceable to the greed of their employers. The United Tailoresses included their employers with other masculine oppressors, but tried to shame them by asking finally whether their emloyers were "destitute of manly feelings?"[1] The women of the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society in their early and more independent phase denounced employers who grew rich while "the poor females . . . do not have even the common ncessaries of life."[2] One of their supporters decried the "cruel and iron-handed oppression"[3] exerted by their employers using stronger language than more militant societies. Elizabeth Grey called the employers "tyrants"[4] and "oppressors"[5], but the Ladies Industrial Association wrote its official demands in a more concilliatory tone which appealed to employers' self-interest. Its propagandists promised in their preamble that higher wages and shorter hours would benefit capitalists by rendering workers "more cheerful at their work and still more earnest and willing to serve their employers."[6] The Shirtsewers Cooperative Union and the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union did not directly attack employers or the employing class, nor did propagandists for the Working Women's Association.

---

[1] quoted in Herald, March 4, 1845.

[2] Ladies Industrial Association, quoted in Workingman's Advocate, March 8, 1845.

[3] Working Women's Association, quoted in The World, November 12, 1868.

---

[1] quoted in Workingman's Advocate, August 6, 1831.

[2] quoted in Sun, November 14, 1836.

[3] quoted in Advocate of Moral Reform, December 1, 1836.

[4] quoted in Express, March 7, 1845.

[5] quoted in Herald, March 4, 1845.

[6] quoted in Workingman's Advocate, March 8, 1845.

The militance themes that the sewingwomen used characteristically expressed their recognition of their position, their consciousness of themselves as an oppressed class or sex, and their efforts to persuade others to the truth of their convictions. Propaganda written by their allies or written solely in an effort to attract philanthropic allies, described the reality of the sewingwomen's degradation, corresponded with contemporary opinions of women's nature, and was apparently more tactically effective than militance because the organizations which employed dependence propaganda did secure allies and survive longer. But dependence appeals neglected a very important function of organizational propaganda. Such appeals did not communicate to the sewingwomen any image of themselves than as dependent, degraded, weak, and defenceless women. The Tailoresses and Seamstressses Benevolent Society, the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union, and the Working Women's Protective Union left the sewingwomen as helpless, as inarticulate, and as defeated as they had been before the advent of the organizations. Yet militance appeals tended to anger or discourage prospective supporters. The United Tailoresses and the Ladies Industrial Association, as an apparent result of their militant propaganda together with adverse economic conditions, waged isolated and short-lived struggles. In the needlewomen's struggle, as in any other effort to raise an oppressed class, it was as important to inspire the women to unite in their own behalf as to secure the allies who would help them succeed. None of the sewingwomen's organizations, with the short-lived exception of the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union, successfully combined the two equally necessary functions in their propaganda appeals. That failure, as an inevitable consequence, thwarted the efforts of the sewingwomen to achieve self-determination.

VII: CONCLUSION

The most significant trend in the history of the sewingwomen's organizations was the decline in militance accompanied by an increasing dependence upon allies. The earliest societies -- the United Tailoresses (1831), the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society (1836-1837), and the Ladies Industrial Association (1845) -- were all movements of working women who organized themselves. The women determined organizational structure and goals; although, in its later history, the Benevolent Society became completely controlled by its patrons. The later societies -- the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union (1851-1853), the Working Women's Protective Union (1863-1894), and the Working Women's Association (1868-1869) -- were largely initiated and controlled by outsiders. The case of the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union (1864-1865) is in doubt; it was probably the only self-generated organization in the later period. Those later organizations, dominated or heavily influenced by their patrons, deviated from one another in conformity to the sex and class interests of their sponsors rather than in response to the sewingwomen's decisions.

At the level of consciousness, there was not so sharp a break between the earlier and later organizations. Two organizations in the early period -- the United Tailoresses and the Ladies Industrial Association -- were feminist and class-conscious but so were the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union and the Working Women's Association in the later period. Yet the balance between the two types of commitment had shifted so far as working-class women were concerned. The Tailoresses and members of the Industrial Association identified themselves first as women and then as workers. In the 1860's women workers reversed that order.

At the juncture where consciousness translated into action, a noticeable deterioration had occurred. Two of the first three societies were militant, that is, their members identified and confronted directly those who were oppressing them. The spokeswomen for the United Tailoresses identified their enemy as the system of male domination -- patriarchy -- and more specifically, as their employers. Through their trade union, the tailoresses fought against that system. The Ladies Industrial Association challenged male employers and male workers to move over and make way for women. These women, too, attempted to form unions in their member trades and chose the strike as their weapon. By organizing themselves and conducting their meetings those women found an alternative, if only for a little while, to being the passive victims of fate and society. The Tailoresses and the Industrial Association members refused to abandon their militance, and for that they paid with the foreshortened lives of their organizations.

In the 1850's the pattern of organization became almost exclusively one of control from the outside and decreasing militance in thought and action. In the case of the Shirtsewers Cooperative Union, males in the labor reform movement exercised that control. The Working Women's Protective Union, like the Tailoresses and Seamstresses Benevolent Society, became dominated by prominent businessmen and community leaders. Women workers soon lost all voice in that organization, which then began to urge individual "self-dependence" rather than "mutual protection." The Working Woman's Association, established by Susan B. Anthony, encouraged women workers to participate in its deliberations, but on terms set by Anthony and her middle-class associates. Anthony, in particular, opposed the wishes of working-class members by emphasizing the suffrage and education as the solution to the problems of women workers. For the short term the Working Women's Association, like the Cooperative Union, suggested producers' cooperatives, which would avert direct confrontation with employers. Only the Sewingwomen's Protective and Benevolent Union may have deviated from the post-1850 pattern of outside control. Men, including representatives from the Workingmen's Union, ran half the proceedings of the one recorded meeting, but women at least took charge of the initiation of new members into the society.

Propaganda, which served as a means of communication among the sewingwomen and between them and prospective allies and supporters, reflected the general decline in militance. Speakers for the later organizations ceased to criticize forthrightly the economic and social system which had produced the sewingwomen's oppression. The tone of passionate outrage which had characterized the early speeches disappeared. Even the militance themes used by propagandists for the Sewingwomen's Union or the Working Women's Association found expression in more moderate language. Although the former organization inisted on the necessary unity of the working class, its spokesmen also urged the necessity for harmony between the employing and the working class. Propagandists for the Working Women's Association evenhandedly divided criticism between "unjust and avaricious employers" and workers who made "exorbitent demands."[1] Limited expectations cautiously phrased had replaced the formerly more optimistic and aggressive predictions that their organizations could set the sewingwomen free.

Susan Anthony, like Lavinia Waight of the United Tailoresses, spoke of transforming society for women's sake, but Anthony spoke to women workers rather than speaking for them as Waight, herself a tailoress, had done. Even though women workers in the Association resisted Anthony's control, only the typesetters among them (the most elite group) appeared able to organize themselves to accomplish their goals. The sewing machine operators who belonged to the Association evidently could not survive without Anthony's aid and encouragement. Both objectively and subjectively, in action and in attitudes, organizing efforts displayed a progressive deterioration in group solidarity and militance among the sewingwomen, but the causes for the decline are not easy to explain.

---

[1] quoted in The Revolution, November 5, 1868.

The members of the United Tailoresses may have known from their own lives or those of their parents about other ways of living besides the oppressive and circumscribed life of the sewingwoman. Indeed, they resisted in the name of an idealized form of existence--a society compatible with the ideals of the American Revolution, which they audaciously extended to women. "Is this not a free country?" asked Sarah Monroe in 1831. She continued, "Then why may we not enjoy this freedom?"[1] Elizabeth Grey of the Industrial Association referred to the same revolutionary tradition,[2] but after the 1840's that source of inspiration faded. Isolation, fatigue, a culture of poverty passed from mother to daughter, sapped the vitality of those who had never known any other way of life.

Another factor inhibiting the expression of militance was the growing influence of the Victorian conception of womanhood as a passive, dependent, man-centered state. While the crippling effects of that conception upon the lives of middle- and upper-class ladies have received scholarly attention,[1] no one has examined the effects of the "cult of true womanhood" upon working-class women. But the increasing passivity of the sewingwomen and their increasing inability to govern their own organizations and to speak for themselves suggest that ideas of female gentility may have penetrated into their class. Although many tailoresses in the United Tailoresses Society were reluctant to speak in public, other tailoresses prodded them into action. In 1845, the women in the Industrial Association indignantly rejected the proffered aid of a male reporter, but working women generally spoke at meetings of the later organizations only upon request. Certainly the sewingwomen of the 1860's appeared more submissive, less articulate, and self-reliant than their counterparts in the 1830's.

---

[1] Quoted in Daily Sentinel, March 5, 1831.

[2] Herald, March 15, 1845.

While these subjective factors partially explain the decline in militance, objective factors probably played the more decisive role. Conditions in the sewing trades worsened during the forty-year period; and the downward trend set in in full force in the 1840's following the depression precipitated by the Panic of 1837. The decrease in the buying power of wages thereafter and the competition of immigrants who began arriving in large numbers in the 1840's worked against the needlewomen. If Robert Ernst is correct in his estimate that by 1855 two-thirds of the workforce in the clothing trades were Irish and German immigrants, immigrant competition must have played a large role. The presence of immigrant men and women could only increase the divisions in an already fragmented labor force. The economic distress created by depressions, inflation, and war exacerbated conditions for the minority of American-born women who continued to try to organize. The introduction of the sewing machine took work from many; others, still employed, were required to supply their own machines as well as needles and thread. Wages did not increase proportionally to output. Those who continued handsewing faced an accelerating depreciation of their work because of the competition of the machine.

---

[1] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," American Quarterly (Summer, 1966), 18, 151-174; Arthur Calhoun, A Social History of the American Family, (Cleveland, 1918) II; Clifton Joseph Furness, ed., The Genteel Female, (New York, 1931); Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in Age of Jackson," American Studies Journal (Spring, 1969) 5-15.

Facing a staggering and increasingly difficult task those who sought to organize were thrown into reliance on outside allies. Middle-class philanthropists, feminists, and workingmen served at times as allies. Each group sought to mold organizations they assisted as they believed best, and often they inhibited the development of militant thought or action, Businessmen and community leaders who were the most persistent allies were also the most consistent opponents of class-conscious militance. Typically their attitude toward the women was extremely paternalistic. They wanted to protect the victims of economic struggle and alleviate some of their suffering but not to eradicate its causes, which they believed lay in the very nature of womanhood and economic society. In their view women were unequal to the competitve economic struggle and therefore dependent on the manly protection of husbands and fathers, or, failing that, on benevolent men like themselves. Because working-class men generally shared the same low opinion of women's abilities as that held by middle-class men, their methods typically did not differ significantly from the paternalism espoused by philanthropists. Although they encouraged the development of class solidarity, they usually advised the sewingwomen to form cooperatives in preference to militant trade unions. Feminists, who shared may of the anti-trade union prejudices of other middle- and upper-class people, proposed the cooperative as a short-term remedy and held up the vote as the long-term panacea to the problems of women workers. They concentrated their organizational energies upon achieving reforms that would benefit primarily the women of their class. Feminists sincerely but mistakenly believed that a common womanhood guaranteed identical needs, aspirations, and mutual understanding with working-class women. Thus the sewingwomen's allies usually manipulated the women they helped to organize rather than encouraged them to articulate their own demands and act upon them.

The results of militant actions may have been equally inhibiting. Strikes the tailoresses undertook in 1825 and 1831 failed. The Ladies Industrial Association, whose straw weavers went on strike, survived for only a month. Apparently their allies were tactically correct for the short run: the sewingwomen were too weak to defend themselves or to confront their employers. If this was so; the decline in militance may have stemmed from a realistic appraisal by the sewingwomen of the weaknesses of their position. Without help from outside, their organizations and their struggles had no chance to succeed. With that help they would be encouraged to retreat from struggle to passive dependence upon the good will of others. Their lives were circumscribed by that desperate paradox.

The severity of the needlewomen's exploitation intensified during this forty-five years of their history. In the urban United States as a whole, the gulf between the classes widened as economic power became more concentrated. The working class grew more fragmented under the pressures of immigration, mechanization, and economic instability. Pitted against such odds, the fragile alliances which served the needlewomen could not better their condition. The potential that through an alliance -- a partnership of equals -- the needlewomen might be able to create the free existence their earlier leaders had demanded, remained dormant.

Yet their struggle was a remarkable effort. As Sarah Monroe of the United Tailoresses said, "It needed no small share of courage" for women like herself "who have been used to impoverishment and oppression from our youth . . . to go before the public in defence of our rights."[1] It required enormous courage and tenacity for the needlewomen to resist by any means the full weight of their oppression. Failure was always a more likely outcome than success, and, yet, the needlewomen tried again and again to organize. Courage born of desperation is no less brave for its source. The needlewomen of New York were valiant and persistent fighters in a struggle that has yet to be won.

---

[1] quoted in Daily Sentinel, March 5, 1831.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Articles

"Herself." "Needle and Garden." *Atlantic Monthly*. XV January-February, 1865.

Books

Burdett, Charles. *The Elliot Family, or, the Trials of New York Seamstresses*. New York: Baker & Scribner, 1850.

Burns, William. *Life in New York*. New York: Bunce & Brothers, 1851.

Commons, John R. et al. *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1958.

Dall, Caroline. *Woman's Right to Labor, or, Low Wages and Hard Work*. Boston: Walker, Wise & Co., 1860.

Emerson, M. Farley. *Woman in America: Her Character and Position*. Cincinnatti: M. Farley Emerson, 1857.

Graves, A. J. *Woman in America.* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841.

Grimke, Sarah M. *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women.* New York: Source Book Press, 1970.

Hankins, Marie Louise. *Women of New York*. New York: Marie Louise Hankins & Co., 1861.

Inglis, Paul. *A Letter to Mechanics and Working Men, on the Wages of Labor*. New York, 1840.

McIntosh, Maria J. *Woman in America: Her Work and Her Reward.* New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1850.

Martineau, Harriet. *Society in America*. I New York: Saunders & Otley, 1837.

Penny, Virginia. The Employments of Women. Boston: Walker, Wise, & Co., 1863.

Richmond, Reverend J. New York and Its Institutions: 1609-1872. New York: E. B. Treat, 1872.

Sanford, Mrs. John. Woman, in Her Social and Domestic Character. Boston: Otis, Broader, & Co., 1842.

Sanger, William M. The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects throughout the World. New York: The Medical Publishing Co., 1921.

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds. History of Woman Suffrage I, II Rochester, New York: Charles Mann Printing Co., 1887.

Magazines

Godey's Lady's Book, 1839-1850.

The Ladies Garland, 1837-1838.

Ladies Literary Cabinet, 1819.

Ladies Magazine and Literary Gazette, 1830.

New Yorker, 1840-1841.

Newspapers

Advocate of Moral Reform, 1835-1849.

Commercial Advertiser, 1828-1836.

Daily Evening Voice, 1864-1865.

Daily Sentinel, 1831.

Evening Journal, 1830.

Evening Post, 1834-1836.

Evening Star, 1836.

Express, 1845.

Fincher's Trades Review, 1863-1865.

The Free Enquirer, 1829.

Journal of Commerce, 1835-1845.

The Man, 1835.

National Trades' Union, 1835.

New York *Herald*, 1836-1838, 1844-1853, 1864.

New York *Sun*, 1836-1837, 1845.

New York *Times*, 1863-1869.

New York *Tribune*, 1842-1853, 1863-1870.

The Revolution, 1868-1870.

Voice of Industry, 1845.

The World, 1868-1869.

Workingman's Advocate,

Pamphlets and Broadsides

Beecher, Catharine. "The Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children: The Causes and the Remedy." New York: Harper & Bros., 1846.

Carey, Matthew. "Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia." Philadelphia: Clark & Raser, 1830.

Carey, Matthew. "A Plea for the Poor: An Enquiry into How Far the Charges against them of Improvidence, Idleness, and Dissipation Are Founded in Truth." Philadelphia: 1836.

Carey, Matthew. "A Plea for the Poor, Particularly Females." Philadelphia: L. R. Bailey, 1837.

Griscom, John H., M.D. "The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York." New York: Harpers & Bros., 1845.

Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New York, Pamphlet. New York: E. Conrad, 1820.

Tuckerman, Joseph. "An Essay on the Wages Paid to Females for Their Labour." Philadelphia: Griggs & Dickinson, 1830.

Shirt-Sewers Association of the City of New-York. "Circular." New York: 1851.

Shirtsewers Cooperative Union. Broadside. New York: 1851.

Working Women's Protective Union. "Annual Report." New York: John A. Gray & Green, 1868.

Working Women's Protective Union. "Twelth Annual Report." New York, 1876.

Working Women's Protective Union. "Thirtieth Year Report." New York, 1894.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Articles

Abbott, Edith. "The Wages of Unskilled Labor in the United States, 1850-1900." *Journal of Political Economy* XXIII June, 1905.

Kugler, Israel. "The Trade Union Career of Susan B. Anthony." *Labor History* XX. Winter, 1961.

Melder, Keith. "Ladies Bountiful: Organized Woman's Benevolence in Early 19th Century America." *New York History* XXVIII July, 1967.

Miller, Douglas T. "Immigration and Social Stratification in Pre-Civil War New York." *New York History* XLIX April, 1968.

Montgomery, David. "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1830." *Labor History* IX Winter, 1968.

Rezneck, Samuel. "The Depression of 1819-1922: A Social History." *American Historical Review* XXXIX October, 1933.

Rezneck, Samuel. "The Social History of an American Depression, 1837-1843." *American Historical Review* XL July, 1935.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America." *American Quarterly* XXIII Summer, 1971.

Taylor, William R. and Christopher Lasch. "Two 'Kindred' Spirits': Sorority and Family in New England, 1839-1846." New England Quarterly XXXVI March, 1963.

Treudley, Mary Bosworth. "The Benevolent Fair: A Study in Charitable Organization among American Women in the First Third of the Nineteenth Century." The Social Service Review. XIV September, 1940.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860." American Quarterly XVIII Summer, 1966.

Books

Abbott, Edith. Women in Industry. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1909.

Andrews, John B. and W.D.P. Bliss. History of Women in Trade Unions from 1825 through the Knights of Labor. X in Report on the Condition of Women and Child Wage-earners in the United States, Senate Document 645, 61st Congress, 2nd Session. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911.

Beard, Mary. The American Labor Movement. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931.

Benson, Lee. The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

Bimba, Anthony. The History of the American Working Class. New York: International Publishers, 1927.

Bremner, Robert H. American Philanthropy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

Bremner, Robert H. From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States. New York; New York University Press, 1956, 1964.

Brooks, Thomas. Toil and Trouble. New York: Delacorte Press Book, 1964.

Calhoun, Arthur W. A Social History of the American Family. II Cleveland, Ohio: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1918.

Carlton, Frank T. The History and the Problems of Organized Labor. Boston: D. C. Heath & Company, 1911.

Carlton, Frank T. Organized Labor in American History. New

York: D. Appleton & Co., 1920.

Commons, John R. et al. History of Labour in the United States I, II New York: The Macmillan Co., 1918, 1926.

Dulles, Foster Rhea. Labor in America. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1966.

Ely, Richard T. The Labor Movement in America. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1886.

Ernst, Robert. Immigrant Life in New York: 1825-1863. Columbia, Mo.: King's Crown Press, 1949.

Feldman, Egal. Fit for Men: A Study of New York's Clothing Trade. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1960.

Fish, Carl R. The Rise of the Common Man, 1830-1850. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927.

Fite, Emerson David. Social and Industrial Conditions in the North during the Civil War. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1910.

Foner, Philip S. History of the Labor Movement in the United States. New York: International Publishers, 1947.

Fox, Dixon Ryan. The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York, 1801-1840. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965.

Furness, Clifton Joseph, ed. The Genteel Female. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931.

Grob, Gerald N. Workers and Utopia: A Study of Ideology and Conflict in the American Labor Movement, 1865-1900.

Groves, Ernest R. The American Woman: The Feminine Side of A Masculine Civilization. New York: Emerson Books, Inc., 1944.

Harper, Ida Harsted. The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony. I Indianapolis: The Hollenbeck Press, 1898.

Heilbroner, Robert L. The Making of Economic Society. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962.

Henry, Alice. The Trade Union Woman. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1915.

Hourwich, Isaac A. Immigration and Labor. New York: B. W.

Huebsch, Inc., 1922.

Hugins, Walter. Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingmen's Movement, 1829-1837. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960.

Klein, Viola. The Feminine Character. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.

Levine, Louis. The Women's Garment Workers. New York: B. W. Huebsch, Inc., 1924.

Lutz, Alma. Susan B. Anthony: Rebel, Crusader, Humanitarian. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960.

Martin, Edgar W. The Standard of Living in 1860. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942.

McNeill, George E. The Labor Movement: The Problems of Today. Boston: A. M. Bridgeman & Co., 1887.

Miller, Douglas T. Jacksonian Aristocracy, Class and Democracy in New York, 1830-1860. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Montgomery, David. Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872. New York: 1967.

Nevins, Allan and Melton Halsey Thomas, eds. The Diary of George Templeton Strong. II New York: The Macmillan Co., 1952.

Pattee, Fred Lewis. The Feminine Fifties. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1940.

Perlman, Selig. A History of Trade Unionism in the United States. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1922.

Pessen, Edward. Jacksonian America: Society, Personality and Politics. Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1969.

Pope, Jesse E. The Clothing Industry in New York. Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Studies, 1905.

Rayback, Joseph G. A History of American Labor. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964.

Riegel, Robert E. American Women: A Study in Social Change Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970.

Sinclair, Andrew. *The Better Half: The Emancipation of Amercan Woman*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. *Religion and the Rise of the Amercan City.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.

Sullivan, William. *The Industrial Worker in Pennsylvania: 1800-1840*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commisssion.

Sumner, Helen L. *History of Women in Industry in the United States* IX of *Report on Condition of Women and Child Wage Earners in the United States*. Senate Document 645, 61st Congress, 2nd Session. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910.

Todes, Charlotte. *William H. Sylvis and the National Labor Union.* New York: International Publishers, 1942.

Ware, Norman J. *The Industrial Worker, 1840-1860.* Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1924.

Ware, Norman J. *Labor in Modern Industrial Society.* New York: Russell & Russell, 1935.

Willet, Mabel Hurd. *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1902.

Zahler, Helene S. *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy, 1829-1862*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1941.

Dissertations

Degler, Carl N. "Labor in the Economy and Poltics of New York City, 1850-1860: A Study of the Impact of Early Industrialization." Ph.D. Dissertation: Columbia University, 1952.

Kugler, Israel. "The Woman's Rights Movement and the National Labor Union, 1866-1872." Ph.D. Dissertation: New York University, 1954.