

NEEDLE TRADES CRISIS

The needle trades industry is a significant part of American Jewish history -- and we are not ones to forget our history. That is why a number of Jews are especially interested in U.S. Senate Resolution 122 and House Resolution 172.

It is not just that the needle trades industry was the most Jewish industry in the U.S., in terms of numbers, although that is true. The big migration of Jews around the turn of the 20th century coincided with a great expansion of garment manufacturing. Before that time, garment manufacturing had largely been either a custom-made or home-made operation. As a matter of fact, standard sizes were developed only during the mass manufacturing of uniforms during the Civil War.

In addition, garment-making was a good ghetto industry because it did not require high skill, although Jews brought some experience with them from Europe, and cheap labor was applicable. So, such employment was readily available to immigrant Jews in the ghettos.

However, the needle trades became "Jewish" in a qualitative sense as well. Working conditions were worse than deplorable. In the 1890s, working hours ranged from 14 to 16 hours a day, for six days a week. Wages were a few cents an hour. The word "sweatshop" was invented for lofts in which garment workers labored. They were crowded, unsanitary, and extreme fire hazards. Jewish workers became avid union members, and in the first decade of the century, historic strikes were held which changed the face of labor-management relations in this country. Social values were altered, not just for the needle trades, but for the working force of America.

This was a contribution of American Jews -- and of their values -- to the health and prosperity of the American society, as well as serving as an entry into the economy. Today, the needle trades industry still provides an important entry into the society for immigrants, Latino, Asian and others. But that entry is being cut off. In

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"Needle Trades Crisis"
page 2

the last two decades, over a half million job opportunities have been lost in the garment industry, and unemployment of garment workers is over 15 per cent, and growing.

In 1982, clothing imports expanded by 6 per cent, while domestic production was falling by 10 per cent. The basic reason is one that the earlier Jewish workers would have understood. Wages paid to garment workers in Hong Kong and South Korea and China average six times lower than the minimum wage in this country.

At the present time, America law restricts the importation of apparel to 41 per cent of the consumption in this country. That, according to the ILGWU, is not enough to halt the destructive tide of imports in that field. So, the above-mentioned resolutions in the Senate and House call on the law to be changed to restrict the importation of apparel to 25 per cent of the consumption in this country. The ILGWU figures that will save over 300 thousand jobs this year, and prevent the total annihilation of the American industry.

Protectionism is a tricky business, and, in general, there are pros and cons. But, in this case, the unfair import competition is based so squarely on depressed wages abroad, that in addition to looking for union labels, some of you might want to ask your Congressmen to support the resolutions in question.