

# SEWING SOLIDARITY: THE EATON'S STRIKE OF 1912\*

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*La grève de 1912 dans l'usine du vêtement de la compagnie T. Eaton à Toronto fournit un des rares exemples de solidarité des hommes en appui à des travailleuses. Ruth A. Frager décrit pourquoi, en dépit de la puissante solidarité manifestée entre travailleurs et travailleuses, et malgré le solide appui de la communauté ouvrière juive, les travailleuses ont perdu leur lutte.*

"Mr. John C. Eaton, 'King of Canada' as he is generally called, is being taught the A. B. C.'s of Industrial Democracy by the striking Cloak Makers of Toronto," proclaimed the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU).<sup>1</sup> It was 1912, and the Jewish workers who laboured in the Toronto garment factory of the T. Eaton Company were locked in combat with one of the most powerful employers in the country. The ILGWU charged that:

*. . . in this very Kingdom of the Eaton Company, frail children of fourteen years, in busy seasons, work from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. . . .; in slack season, skilled working women, connected with the firm for six, eight or more years, can earn only Five, Four or even less Dollars per week; . . . girls are forced at times to take "homework" to do at night, after the long day in the factory; . . . foremen and forewomen have power to discriminate most flagrantly in favor of their friends, or vice versa, and may cut wages, ruinously, by intention, or from careless distribution of piece work; and this is not the half of the story of wrongs.<sup>2</sup>*

"Insults to Girls" (i.e. sexual harassment) and "Graft for Foremen" were other complaints against Eaton's.<sup>3</sup>

Eaton's was no worse than many other employers in this period. Nevertheless, this strike is outstanding because it provides a rare example of male solidarity in support of women workers. The strike began in one department of the firm's clothing factory when sixty-five male sewing machine operators refused to follow new orders to sew in the linings of women's coats on their machines. Although the large Eaton's garment factory was not a union shop, all of these men were members of the ILGWU. They

had been making 65¢ per garment without sewing in the linings, and they were now being asked to do the extra work without any increase in pay. Previously, the linings had been sewn in by hand by female workers who were known as finishers. So the new order from management amounted to more than a pay cut for the men – it meant women were going to lose their jobs. Male self-interest and female self-interest now coincided, and the strike became an expression of male solidarity with women workers.<sup>4</sup>

This solidarity was emphasized by the Toronto District Labour Council when it passed a resolution objecting to Eaton's locking out workers for refusing "in the interests of their sister workers, to do work which did not belong to them."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this solidarity between men and women became the main theme of the strike. "Remember," stated Joe Salsberg, a Jewish immigrant who became a left-wing labour activist, "the Jewish tailors in Toronto went on their first big strike in defense of *undzere shvester* – our sisters."<sup>6</sup> Salsberg explained that:

*The reasoning of the men who worked at Eaton's was a simple one: that these [women workers] will lose their jobs, and [ . . . ] maybe they felt they didn't want to do these jobs that the women are now doing, maybe their wages will come down [if the men were to sew in the linings by machine] because the rates fixed for those operations were always traditionally lower because women did [those operations] . . . I never rule out the element of selfishness and self-interest – which is also human.*

*But [one of the strike slogans] became the folksy expression of simple, honest working men . . . , in Yiddish particularly: "Mir vellen nisht aroycenemen dem bissle fun broyt fun di mayler fun undzere shvester." [In English:] "We will not take the morsel of bread from the mouths of our sisters."<sup>7</sup>*

The solidarity displayed by the men was not a simple matter of self-interest. According to the ILGWU's newspaper, union officials believed that "management would have increased the price of operating [on] the garment, but the operators, with admirable solidarity, insist that

the finishers shall not be deprived of their share of the work."<sup>8</sup>

When the sixty-five male operators refused to sew in the linings, Eaton's management fired them and physically threw them out onto the street. Almost immediately, over one thousand of their fellow workers from Eaton's factory went on strike to support them. About a third of these strikers were women, and the ILGWU's head office sent two women organizers to Toronto in order to help lead the women strikers. The sympathy strike spread beyond the ILGWU to include members of the United Garment Workers who worked in the men's clothing departments of the Eaton's factory. And it spread beyond Toronto: workers at the Eaton's clothing factory in Montreal also struck in sympathy with the Toronto workers, and Hamilton's garment workers threatened to join the strike if any of Hamilton's clothing firms attempted to do any work for the T. Eaton Company.<sup>9</sup>

The attack on "Fort Eaton" was reinforced by the call for a nation-wide boycott of the company's goods. The labour press warned its readers not to "go after cheap Eaton bargains" because "bargains at the expense of manhood, womanhood and childhood are expensive in the extreme."<sup>10</sup> The boycott was particularly effective within Toronto's immigrant Jewish community. This was due largely to the support of Jewish women, for they were the ones who were primarily responsible for the family shopping. Here, women's role as consumer was used strategically to support the struggles of male and female producers. In addition, Eaton's mail order business suffered as customers from across the country mailed back their Eaton's catalogues in protest.<sup>11</sup>

Further appeals for support were made to women's groups outside of the Jewish community. The Toronto District Labour Council asked "Women's Clubs [and] Suffrage Associations . . . to defend the rights of the [Eaton's] workers."<sup>12</sup> The ILGWU's newspaper optimistically reported that "Women's Lodges and Women's Auxiliaries of men's trade unions, and associations of leisure class women" promised to support the strike.<sup>13</sup>

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Working Girl: "Mr. Eaton, can't you please make life a little easier for us?"

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Meaningful solidarity between women appears to have stopped at the class border, however. Alice Chown, a women's rights activist, described the considerable difficulty she had when she tried to persuade non-working-class women's groups to support the Eaton's strikers:

*I tried to interest the various women's clubs, but I was amazed because they had no sympathy with the strikers, unless I had some tale of hardship to tell. The common, everyday longings for better conditions, for a life that would provide more than food, clothes and shelter, were not recognized as justifying a strike. I had to tell over and over the old, old story of the bosses who favored the girls whom they could take out even-*

*ings, girls who had to sell themselves as well as their labor to get sufficient work to earn a living.*<sup>14</sup>

Chown also indicated that many women suffragists were unwilling to support women strikers, fearing that strike support work would tarnish the appeal of their main cause:

*During the [Eaton's] strike I had to preside at a meeting of the Woman's Political League. I asked [the woman], who had been sent from New York to conduct the strike, to speak to our association. She made a very wise and illuminating speech. I did not expect an audience who had never considered that justice to working people was a higher virtue than charity, to respond any more cordially than it did. As soon as the discus-*

*sion started I closed the suffrage meeting, and asked all who were willing to try to awaken interest in the strike to remain. I thought I made it quite clear that with the adjournment of the suffrage meeting a new meeting came into existence, but I aroused a great deal of hard feeling amongst the zealous suffragists, who were afraid that their pet cause would be hurt through being linked with an unpopular one.*<sup>15</sup>

The unpopularity of the strikers' cause in Chown's circles was also because the vast majority of the Eaton's strikers were East European Jewish immigrants – and English Canadians were often intensely ethnocentric and suspicious of foreigners.<sup>16</sup>

The Jewish nature of the strike was a central issue. The ILGWU's newspaper was to the point:

*Those affected [by the dispute at Eaton's] are almost entirely Jewish: and the chief slogan by which it was hoped to cut off public sympathy was the report. . . that this is "only a strike of Jews." The appeal to race and creed prejudice has succeeded, too, in so far as it has prevented the Gentile Cloak Makers from joining in the sympathetic strike.*<sup>17</sup>

The failure of Eaton's non-Jewish workers to join the strike was part of a wider pattern of tension between Jews and non-Jews in Toronto's garment industry. Considerable ethnic tension also existed within the labour movement more generally. Garment manufacturers attempted to capitalize on these divisions, by trying to pit non-Jewish workers against Jewish workers, particularly in strike situations. In the Eaton's strike, the non-Jewish strike-breakers protected "Mr. Humpty Dumpty Eaton" from his downfall.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the formidable solidarity between male and female workers and despite the vigorous support of the working-class Jewish community, the "King of Canada" prevailed. After four months, the workers were forced to admit defeat. The effect on Jewish workers was devastating. The ILGWU was seriously weakened, and "for a long time [after this strike]," a union official recalled, "the T. Eaton Company would not hire any Jews."<sup>19</sup>

Workers' defeats were not uncommon in this period. What is outstanding here is the potential for working-class power that this strike illuminates. Without the unusual solidarity between men and women and without the mobilization of consumers to boycott Eaton's, the strike would

never have developed the powerful momentum it did. If the solidarity between the sexes and the solidarity between producers and consumers had been supported by greater solidarity between Jewish and non-Jewish workers, the "King of Canada" would indeed have gotten "the surprise of his life."<sup>20</sup>

This strike provides a glimmer of what might have been the basis of a much more powerful labour movement. It highlights the critical need to overcome the deep divisions within the working class. This is as crucial now as it was in 1912.

The contemporary potential for the mobilization of feminist groups in support of women workers is also crucial. In the recent strike of Eaton's retail workers, this support proved to be one of the main reasons why Eaton's was finally forced to grant union recognition. In comparison with Alice Chown's day, women's rights organizations today are more readily encompassing the interests of working-class women.

<sup>1</sup>ILGWU, *The Ladies' Garment Worker* (New York), April 1912, p.1.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

<sup>3</sup>United Garment Workers, *The Weekly Bulletin of the Clothing Trades* (New York), 29 March 1912, p.3.

<sup>4</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Gazette*, March 1912, pp. 856 & 897-901; *Toronto Daily News*, 15 Feb. 1912, p.13; *Toronto Star*, 15 Feb. 1912, p.5 & 16 Feb. 1912, p.2; *Industrial Banner* (London, Ontario), March 1912, p.1; Toronto ILGWU's Cloakmakers' Union, *Souvenir Journal*, 1911-1936, A. Kirzner's speech (in Yiddish) and Charles Shatz's speech (in Yiddish); & Toronto ILGWU's Cloakmakers' Union, *Souvenir Journal*, 1911-1961, S. Kraisman's address & Max Siegerman's address.

<sup>5</sup>Toronto District Labour Council Minutes, 15 Feb. 1912, Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto Collection, vol. 3, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa. See also, 7 March 1912.

<sup>6</sup>Interview with Joe Salsberg, Toronto, 1984.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*The Ladies' Garment Worker*, March 1912, p.14.

<sup>9</sup>Toronto District Labour Council Minutes, 7 March 1912; *The Weekly Bulletin of the Clothing Trades*, 22 March 1912, p.3, 29 March 1912, p.1 & 12 April 1912, p.1; *Industrial Banner*, March 1912, p.1; *Labour Gazette*, March 1912, pp.856 & 897-901; *Souvenir Journal*, 1911-1936, A. Kirzner's speech (in

Yiddish); *The Ladies' Garment Worker*, March 1912, p.14 & April 1912, pp.2 & 18; & *Toronto Daily News*, 15 Feb. 1912, p.13.

<sup>10</sup>*Hamilton Labour News*, cited in *The Weekly Bulletin of the Clothing Trades*, 3 May 1912, p.2 & *The Ladies' Garment Worker*, June 1912, p.25.

<sup>11</sup>*Souvenir Journal*, 1911-1936, A. Kirzner's speech (in Yiddish) & *Industrial Banner*, April 1912, p.4. On the ways in which immigrant Jewish women frequently made strategic use of their power as consumers, see Ruth A. Frager, "Uncloaking Vested Interests: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939," Ph.D. Thesis, York University, 1986.

<sup>12</sup>*The Ladies' Garment Worker*, April 1912, pp.2-3.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>14</sup>Alice A. Chown, *The Stairway* (Boston, 1921), pp.151-152.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>16</sup>On the prevalence of anti-Semitism in Toronto in this period, see Frager,

"Uncloaking Vested Interests."

<sup>17</sup>*The Ladies' Garment Worker*, April 1912, p.2.

<sup>18</sup>The reference to "Mr. Humpty Dumpty Eaton" is from *The Ladies' Garment Worker*, April 1912, p.4. On the tension between Jews and non-Jews in Toronto's garment industry, see Frager, "Uncloaking Vested Interests."

<sup>19</sup>*Souvenir Journal*, 1911-1936, A. Kirzner's speech (in Yiddish). (The translation from the Yiddish is my own.)

<sup>20</sup>The quotation is from *The Ladies' Garment Worker*, April 1912, p.2.

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## A WOMAN'S CIRCLE

Sometimes when I walk into a room where  
he is I feel I  
am standing trial for something  
unspecified I omitted to do.

No, that's a big step: I  
used to set  
all my inadequacies against all  
he expects of me.  
I used to set the dinner table  
early if dinner were going to be late  
to avoid the silent treatment but he would  
look at his watch, sigh and rap  
his fingers on the padded chair arm,  
anyway. Now  
he suspects there's someone else. There is. It's me, I  
got up off my knees and began to walk.

But sometimes when I walk into a room where  
he is I feel I  
am standing trial for something  
unspecified I omitted  
to do . . .

**Polly Fleck**  
Banff, Alberta