JENNIE MATYAS AND THE I.L.G.W.U.

An Interview Conducted by
Corinne L. Gilb
in 1955
INTRODUCTION

Jennie Matyas came to "Amerika" by steerage and spent her childhood in New York's Lower East Side. She left school at 14 to help support her family and became at that tender age one of the most ardent workers in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and in the Socialist party. But she could accept neither the philosophy nor the tactics of the Communists who invaded both union and party after the first World War, so she retreated to private life. Then she regained hope in the era of the New Deal, fought the battle of the picket line throughout the 1930's, and became a vice president of the ILGWU in 1941.

The following story of her experiences and her reactions to them was transcribed from a series of interviews tape-recorded at her beautiful home in Marin County, California on April 20, May 5, June 14, June 29, July 26, August 9, and October 28, 1955. She was at that time 60, but looked no more than 40, so cherubic of face was she, not quite five feet tall and somewhat chubby, well-dressed and pretty. She struck the interviewer as warm-hearted, idealistic,
Matyas: I want to make it very clear that my story is in no sense unique.

I remember one time an international president of another union was having coffee with me and with the vice-president of our union, Israel Feinberg. I was just a little organizer at the time, in the 30's; I was not then a vice-president and it didn't occur to me that I ever would be or could be. The president of this other international union asked whether I would quit my job and go to work in their union, and Feinberg, who was then a vice-president of our international, said, "If Jennie ever quits the ILG, she wouldn't work for another union."
The other man said, "Well, gosh, are there any more like Jennie?" Feinberg's answer was, "Pff, we have them in the thousands." (laughter) And I felt that that was correct.

Gilb: Then your story is important, because it has universality.

Matyas: Well, I think it does. For better or for worse, the only reason I'm interested in telling any of
honest, [rewd], articulate (even, at times, loquacious). A good hostess and a generous neighbor, she was also an ebullient mistress of ceremonies, thoroughly at home when addressing a crowd, at a political rally or a union meeting. Her union was her life.

The transcript was edited by the interviewer for continuity and clarity. Because "Jennie" could not take time from numerous pressing union duties to edit the transcript, she asked her good friend Helen (Mrs. Alexander) Meiklejohn to check it for accuracy of spirit. (Helen Meiklejohn had long been interested both in Jennie and workers' education.) No attempt has been made to verify factual details; in both content and form, the colloquial and extemporaneous nature of the manuscript has been preserved.

The interviews were planned and conducted by Corinne L. Gilb, originally for the Regional Cultural History Project at the University of California, a project gathering source material on California's cultural history by means of tape-recorded interviews. Mr. Sam Kagel, labor arbitrator, professor of law at the University of California, and informal advisor to the Regional Cultural History Project, had
recommended that Jennie Matyas be interviewed. Miss Matyas agreed to participate and the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

When the University's Institute of Industrial Relations began in the winter of 1956 to record a series of interviews with West Coast labor and management leaders, it was felt that Jennie Matyas' life story should be included in that series rather than as originally begun in the general interviews of the Regional Cultural History Project and Miss Matyas agreed to the change.

Corinne L. Gilb

University of California, Berkeley
August 27, 1957
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This story is because it lacks uniqueness. If I thought it were unique, then I would consider it particularly private and nobody's affair.

I'm aware of the fact that I'm one of a stream, that it takes a stream of individuals of all sorts to make any movement possible. I should hate to give the impression that I personally was influential to any very great extent upon the molding of any segment of our history.

But in this interview I have omitted names of other persons for two reasons. One of them is the fact that I have a very, very poor ability — I confess it because it's one of the things that's made me suffer a great deal — for remembering names, and I learned long ago that to mention some and not to mention others is almost worse than not mentioning any at all. I have omitted names and comments on those people who did not particularly inspire me because there are very few people in any movement who do not make a real contribution in spite of certain characteristics that one does not like about them, or in spite of certain acts of theirs that one could well wish were otherwise. If people are in the right movement, they usually radiate
I can illustrate that with a story. I came back from a picket line one time when the girls had had a terrific row and I was very concerned about the way the situation was going. The day before there had been a number of arrests among our strikers and I didn't know what effect the arrests would have on these young women who'd never been arrested and dreaded the thought of their families knowing they were arrested. I walked by a restaurant and saw one of our strikers sitting there alone, so I went in to join her; she was one of our better strikers. When she saw me her eyes just lit up and she was so delighted to see me; she said, "Oh Jennie, I'm so glad you're with us; you know, when you come on the picket line, we feel as though we can conquer the world!"

Well, I looked at the girl and I thought, "Now isn't that amazing!" They'd had a real row on the picket line that day, and here was I who was rather namby-pamby about things of that sort
Matyas: if not cowardly, and yet in spite of the fact that I couldn't do it, here was one of our members who had been actually involved in the persimmon throwing fracas saying, "Oh Jennie, when you come on the picket line, we just feel as though we can conquer the world."

I have thought of that often. And I have thought that what a person radiates is frequently infinitely greater and better than what he himself may be. Now frequently I have met people in my work -- people whose names are pretty well-known. people in the labor movement in general -- who I wished were a little different, from my point of view. And then I have remembered always that perhaps the good makes its contribution in spite of what I considered to be that person's drawbacks.

Gilb: And why, when I ask you about people, do you not wish to discuss what you consider to be the bad about them?

Matyas: Who am I to sit in judgment? I remember -- it's amazing the sort of things that influence one's life -- when I was a young Socialist, I attended a meeting at which nominations were to be made for
office, and a man whom I liked very much was
nominated to run for judge, and this man said,
"Please do not nominate me for judge; I don't
like sitting in judgment of other human beings."
Now strangely enough, that's influenced me
tremendously, and when the better "I" emerges, I
don't like to sit in judgment. I fight like mad
when I find events going in directions that I
think are wrong; I fight with all that's in me.
But I think that's more my emotionalism than my
better judgment and when I stop to think, I'm
just not too sure that my judgment would be
accurate anyhow; so I'd rather other individuals
would speak for themselves.
LIFE IN HUNGARY, 1895-1905

Matyas: I was born on September 27, 1895, in a little wee village in Transylvania. Transylvania was part of Hungary at that time. I don't know if it's considered Hungary or Rumania just now. It was a village in the Carpathian Mountains, I think.

Gilb: How long were you there?

Matyas: I was ten years old, I think, when I left. In 1905.

Gilb: What did your father do there, how did he support your family?

Matyas: I'm not sure my father supported his family.

Gilb: Did your mother work too?

Matyas: My mother worked too; I'm not sure how much support was involved. We were terribly poor. We had meat once a week, sparingly, at that time. Apropos of support, I remember my mother's answer if we cried when we were hungry, my mother would say, "What are you crying about? There's cornmeal bread and vinegar and water." The theory being that you made a mixture of diluted vinegar and a little bit of sugar and you dumped your cornmeal bread in it and that was
Matyas: as good a meal as many.

Gilb: Was the village poor in general?

Matyas: I think so. I don't remember enough about that. I was sort of too young to question. There were some rich people in the village and you took it for granted that they were rich people. Your neighbors were peasants and they were dressed like peasants, very picturesquely and beautifully, but the richer people were dressed like city folk. They had different homes, really. It was a great luxury to be allowed into one of those richer homes.

Gilb: What did your home look like?

Matyas: Our own home? We had a one room home built of all clay or something, but it was ... the floor was earthen. It used to be my job once a week to find cow manure or horse manure and mix that with clay and put that down on the floor instead of scrubbing the floor. It was almost sort of a new floor, once a week or once in two weeks. There was a big hearth and there was an oven where mother baked the cornbread once a week for the whole week. That's interesting because the vicinity there was wheat.
Matyas: country, but wheat was raised for commercial purposes. You ate corn if you were poor.

Gill: Did you grow your own corn?

Matyas: No, we didn't have any field. Mother would get it in exchange for doing something. It was very much a community sort of affair. Everybody, as I recall it, did work that belonged to everybody else. The youngsters, in the summer, would go around picking up feathers from geese and in the winter all the women in the neighborhood would gather and pluck those feathers, out of which covers and pillows were made. They'd meet in one home and then in another and another.

My father was a very popular person during those evenings, especially when the meetings were at our house, because he was quite a reader of fiction and he'd tell Arabian Night stories, and all the women would come to sit around the hearth and pluck the feathers and would just adore to listen to his stories. For the treat we'd eat hard corn. Not the soft corn we eat in this country, but corn Americans are in the habit of feeding pigs. We'd sort of take it off
Matyas: the cob and cook it for about two hours or three hours and then we'd just take a handful of kernels and eat them and that was our party.

Gilb: How many children were there in your family?

Matyas: Well, my mother and nine children. When mother married my father, he was a man of forty-five with four children. His wife had died. My mother was the oldest daughter in her family, but she was only fifteen when her father died. They were a very, very poor, but very genteel family. Mother had to go out to work, for there was no means of support in the family and she answered an ad to become a housekeeper for a man with four children. When she answered the ad, the man, who became my father, asked her if she could cook and my mother, all of fifteen years, said "Uh huh." He said, "Do you want to be married?" She thought, "Gee, that would be wonderful." Instead of working as a servant, she would become a respectable married woman. It wasn't considered very respectable for a girl to work, you know. The only kind of work that was open was housekeeping. And he said, "All right, go home and tell your mother. We'll be married
Maryas: next week." Her mother pleaded with her not to go through with it but she wasn't going to be a servant; she was going to be the mistress of the house, so she married my father, who had four children of his own. The children were almost the age of my mother.

The marriage had its subsequent difficulties. Before they were married a week, my father, I think, must have been confused between his daughters and his wife and treated my mother as though she were one of the daughters. He was raised to be very stern and he was pretty stern with my mother, for all I hear. His idea of bringing up children was that one would spoil the child if one spared the rod. The first week they were married he gave her a round thrashing in the spirit of not sparing the rod.

Gilb: And how many children did she have?

Maryas: She had nine. I was in the middle, but I was the oldest daughter. There were some before me who died. By virtue of being the oldest daughter (I think I was either the third or the fourth in the sequence), I had the responsibility, ever since I can recall, of taking care of the children, older or younger. The
Matyas: children came with great regularity. Every two years there was a child. I had a sister two years younger than I and her birthday was the twenty-seventh of September, same as mine.

Gilb: Did you all go to school there in Hungary?

Matyas: Yes, we ... schooling was compulsory, fortunately. It was lovely, in its way; because the school was miles away up on a hill and it was lovely in the summer. It was difficult in the winter, but I still recall the loveliness of the snowy hillside. Going to school through all the bad weather days was not exactly easy, but it had its fun except when it was cold. Shoes, of course, were a terrific problem and nobody had heard of stockings. We'd get papers, I don't think we had many newspapers, but just papers of any kind, and wrap them around our feet and then put our shoes on and that would keep our feet pretty warm. There were no such things as rubbers or galoshes. Of course, the minute the snow began to thaw, we just didn't get any shoes to wear because they were expensive and the upkeep on the shoes was expensive too.
TO "AMERIKA" AT AGE TEN

Matyas: My father came to America two years before the rest of the family did. I recall very vividly that we arrived on a beautiful late September day in 1905. It must have been about 3 o'clock in the afternoon when we were taken out of Ellis Island and we came on one of these open horse-drawn streetcars in New York City and I looked around to see the terribly tall buildings. I saw all these children, and they were dressed with shoes and stockings on, and they had pretty little dresses on. I was so bewildered and I asked my father what holiday it was and he answered, quite curtly, "It is no holiday at all." And I thought, "Imagine, he's lived in this country two years now and he doesn't know that it must be a holiday because how else would the children be allowed to wear shoes and stockings? If it weren't a holiday they'd be barefooted."

Gilb: How did you happen to come to this country?

Matyas: Well, we came like many, many others who were very poor and who thought that if they could only come
"to America", everything would be all right. They'd make money and everything would be fine. My father came to this country in the hope of earning enough money, heaven knows how he thought he would, to send for the rest of us.

How did he get the money to come? To pay his passage?

I don't recall that, but I do know that he was in New York City for two years when finally he evidently had earned enough money to put down a deposit on steamship tickets, and in those days you could buy steamship tickets on the installment plan, especially if you bought them for steerage. In those days there were first class, second class and steerage. Steerage was anything but too pleasant. At any rate, he saved enough money to put down a deposit, not quite enough though. He needed what seemed to us in Europe like a sizable amount. Interestingly enough, my mother borrowed the balance of the money, in our little village, from one of the so-called rich families. Such was the reputation of my family for terrific honesty that, although we were leaving the village forever, they didn't hesitate in lending my mother
We came steerage, of course, and I remember the trip across was ... I see it all clearly now. It was a sort of dormitory; the bowl of the ship... I don't know if that's the proper expression ... the very bottom of the ship had just a row of cots, one on top of another. No privacy of any sort, it was just very crowded. There was hardly room to walk around almost. My mother was very religious, Jewish, and wouldn't eat the food that was served. The only food that we had was the food she brought along with her in a basket, and the trip took three weeks. We had to live on that food and there wasn't very much of it, but it didn't matter.

I remember one time ... the crew of the ship was very nice to me, they sort of adopted me. One time I was very bold and asked them for a smoked white fish, which I brought in to my mother with great glee. It was a Friday night and I thought she'd celebrate the coming of the Sabbath by eating really fresh food. My younger sisters wanted it and my mother wanted to give it to them and I was so annoyed, (I wanted my mother to have it because she had always given us
Matyas: everything she had! that when she refused to eat it because she wanted the children to have it, I threw it overboard. It was a shame, now, as I think back, but I was so eager that my mother should have something really good to eat.

Gilb: Were there many Jewish families in your village?

Matyas: No, there were a few. It's strange, in spite of the fact that we were Jewish and raised quite Orthodox, so Orthodox that we weren't allowed to wash our faces or comb our hair on the Sabbath, still our neighbors and our friends were Christian.

Gilb: Catholic?

Matyas: Yes, they were Catholic. There was only one religion besides being Jewish and that was being Christian, as far as I knew. When I came to this country and learned that just saying Christian meant nothing, you had to say which denomination, that seemed very strange to me. When I learned later that there were so many denominations, I realized that our neighbors and our friends had been Catholic. While we were raised very Orthodox, still on Christmas morning, we'd be awakened
Matyas: at 4 o'clock in the morning to go with our neighbors
to church to see the Christmas tree.

Gilb: There was no persecution, then, in your village.

Matyas: No, we never had heard of persecution. There wasn't
much in Hungary anyhow. As a matter of fact, I think
Franz Joseph, who was then the Emperor of Hungary,
was prayed for by Jewish people. He was so friendly.
We felt we were just like anyone else; there was no
feeling of race discrimination at all.

Gilb: Were there any political lines or division of thought
in your village?

Matyas: I wouldn't know, I was much too young, and I'm very
certain that my family had no knowledge of political
affairs whatsoever. The only concern my mother had,
so far as I was ever able to make out, was to be
able to have enough bread for us, to be able to feed
us.

Gilb: Did many people in the village come to America at the
same time you did?

Matyas: No, we were the only ones who came to America. It was
a terrific event in the life of the village. I
remember the neighbors all gathered to say goodbye to
Matyas: us and to sing songs.

I had all sorts of visions of this wonderful America to which we were going. It had always been my job to bring up the water. We lived sort of up on top of a hill and the well was down below and I'd bring up the water in a big wooden container. Little as I was, I would prefer to bring it in two wooden containers because it would balance me if I had one in each hand. But we were going to a land that was so wonderful, the water was right inside your house.

Finally, when we got to New York, my father brought us into what was going to be our home. It was a tiny, tiny three room apartment on the lower east side of New York City. I think it was on 10th Street and C.

Gilb: Did your apartment seem poor to you?

Matyas: Oh, it was dark and dingy, which was unusual. I very early in life learned to accept what was without arguing.

Gilb: After you had gotten over the novelty, did your new surroundings seem more poverty stricken or less so
Gilb: than your old ones?

Matyas: Well, they were very different. I wouldn't say they were more poverty stricken. I didn't think in those terms. I accepted the fact that we were poor and that was that.

They were very dark and dingy. For about two years we had no bed to sleep on. The only table that we had was a table my father put together from some pieces of lumber that he got, and we had no chairs. We had a couple of benches that he made. We slept on the floor because both my father and mother believed they had a debt to pay to our village where we borrowed the money. So until every cent was paid back we all slept on the floor and lived rather austerely. The thought of eating fresh bread was an unheard of luxury, we walked blocks to where we could buy bread a few days old because it was cheaper. We walked blocks to where we could get milk a penny a quart cheaper than we could get in the immediate vicinity, until every cent of the money my mother borrowed for the steamship tickets was paid back.

And so there was a feeling of austerity and
Matyas: poverty about it, but I sort of took it for granted. I was used to the idea that if one was poor, one put up with things.

Gilb: What did your father and mother do for a living?

Matyas: My father tried teaching Hebrew to children privately, and he made two or three dollars a week that way. My mother went out to work almost instantly. She went out to do washing and housecleaning, whatever she got. I, being the oldest daughter, became the responsible person of the house. It became my job to clean and take care of the other children and do what cooking there was. I was supposed to be the grown-up woman of the family.

I remember, one time, I was about twelve, about a year and a half after we had arrived in this country, and by this time I had made a lot of friends in the neighborhood. My idea of a good time was to get out in the street and jump rope and play hop, skip and jump, any sort of game. One time my mother came home tired from washing other people's dirty linen and she saw me playing. She must have been very irritated over something because she scolded me and said, "Aren't you ashamed to be seen playing out in
Katya: the street with just children." Here I was all of twelve. I had responsibilities that went with being one of a large and poor family.

Gilb: What did the rest of the children in your family do? Did they work?

Katya: I had two older brothers. They either worked or looked for work. It seemed there was always the process of looking for work. The older boys were naturally unskilled.

We went to school, the younger ones.

Gilb: Were the schools good?

Katya: Of course, they were very different. The schools in Hungary were on top of a hill with beautiful surroundings and one played out in the open during recess and one sort of knew everybody. I attended a school called P.S. 36. It was very, very crowded. I had a feeling of being indoors and in terrific crowds all the time, but otherwise it was all very wonderful because one learned to speak English. It was my ambition to learn to speak English very well. I thought if I ever learned to say "Shad up" without hesitancy, I'd be doing very well. As a matter of
Fatyas: fact, I completely forgot how to speak Hungarian. For some strange reason I wished to forget it; I wished to forget everything that was European. I wished to learn only what was American.

Gilb: What did you think you wanted to be when you grew up?

Fatyas: I'm not sure. The one idea that was in my mind always, strangely enough, was to be a teacher. I don't know what gave me that idea, but when I had to learn my schoolwork, I always played teacher. I always wanted to learn very well whatever I learned so that subsequently I could teach it well.

Gilb: Did your parents have ambitions for the children?

Fatyas: I don't know what my father's ambitions were. Somehow we were all afraid of my father and didn't know what his thoughts were. It's amazing because my father was a tremendously respected person in the community, among the people who knew us. My mother was a tremendously respected person and they were both very fine people, but they just couldn't get along with each other. There must have been some kind of reaction the minute the two of them were together, which kept the atmosphere at home rather
rigid to say the least, at times frightening. My father had a concept that he was the lord-master of the house. When my mother worked, she handed the money over to him. He was very careful with it. He dished it back out to her to buy groceries, but still it had to go through the channel of his lordship.

Gilb: Did you encounter any anti-Jewish feeling as a child?

Matyas: I wasn't aware of it. I didn't have any feeling of Semitism or anti-Semitism, until I grew up. Later, when I left my immediate friends and environment, I began to feel that there was such a thing as anti-Semitism, because for some strange reason that I couldn't understand, people didn't recognize that I was Jewish and would say things to me that sort of put me on the spot. If I called them on it and told them that I was Jewish, it would be embarrassing to them and so I would keep quiet and then rebel at the thought that I had to listen to something that I thought was unjust. I thought the situation was unjust to the other persons too because if they had known that I was Jewish, they probably wouldn't have said what they did. There I was. It was quite
Matyas: a dilemma. That's when I came to recognize anti-Semitism.

Gilb: In your family were there views such as Socialism?

Matyas: Oh no, good gracious me. We had never heard the term until we came to this country. After I went to work, one of my brothers was told that he had to leave the home because he had adopted what seemed like some form of Socialism. Anyhow, my father thought he was a rebellious type of boy; he didn't say his prayers as often as he should, so my father told him he would either have to mend his ways or leave home. Much to my mother's sorrow, he chose to leave home. I subsequently heard that he became a Socialist. The word sounded very terrible to me and I thought, "Oh, what a nice boy he would be if only he hadn't adopted that awful philosophy."

Gilb: The family believed in the status quo?

Matyas: Oh yes. If we believed in anything at all. We were so busy making a living that there wasn't much thought. We believed in God and the justice that God dispensed and one didn't question. I remember one time I did put a few questions to my
Matyas:  Father, not about God but about a certain ritual that I couldn't quite understand. And he stamped his foot and pounded the table, "One mustn't ask questions." It was ugly to ask questions.

Gilb:  Have you remained Orthodox?

Matyas:  Well, I was Orthodox until I went to teach Sunday School. You see, when I believe in something, I believe in it very hard and when I lose the belief, I lose it. I taught Sunday school and when I heard myself teaching the story of Jacob and his ladder, somehow it didn't quite make sense to me. I hadn't learned to see things figuratively and I just lost my belief in conventional religion.

Gilb:  What eventually happened to your other brothers and sisters?

Matyas:  This brother who had to leave home, I don't know where he is. I would like very much to know.

When I went to work finally ... I went to work the day I was fourteen. That is, I went to work legally when I was fourteen. I worked in the summer before that and did a lot of commercial home work before that, but when I went to work officially,
then of course I came in contact with someone who tried to get me to join a union which I thought must be very dreadful. I heard street meetings and I stopped and listened and I was told the speakers were Socialists. I listened very eagerly to know what Socialism was and I remember I heard one of the speakers say, "All we're asking for is bread and butter." And I went away very disgusted because he talked for an hour on his right to have bread and butter. "Why wouldn't bread alone be sufficient?" I was between fourteen and fifteen at the time and butter seemed a terrific luxury to me.

When I was asked to join a union by one of the women who worked in the factory where I worked, I said, "A union, what is that?" She tried to tell me but she wasn't too articulate about it. I said, "Well, would the boss like it if I joined the union?" She said, "For Pete's sakes, don't ever let him know. You'd lose your job and I'd lose mine." Well, I thought about it and thought about it and finally I thought, "Well, maybe it makes sense." I didn't take it too seriously; my ambition in life was to
Katyas: get to be a good worker, because being the oldest daughter, it was my job to do the dress making for the family.
Gilb: In that how you happened to go into garment making?

Matyas: No, it was pure chance. As a matter of fact, my first job was in neck wear, a factory. I had just finished the fourth grade and the new term began in September and I was just going into 5 A, you call it lower fifth. Then I was fourteen and in those days when you were fourteen you were allowed to get working papers. I got my working papers and my teacher, Marie Mulqueen her name was (I thought she was a real queen, she was wonderful.), my teacher got me a job in a neck wear factory. Her aunt was a bookkeeper in that factory and she spoke to the employer and they put me on. My teacher felt very badly because I had to quit school but she was very relieved that I wouldn't have to go through the difficult time of looking for a job.

I got the job, it was sewing, so I liked that idea. Three and a half dollars a week was the customary wage for any beginner in 1911. Three and a half dollars a week seemed like a fairly good...
Matyas: amount as a contribution to the family because every dollar was important to buy bread, but I didn't really get three and a half dollars a week. There was a law that said children under sixteen may not work more than forty-eight hours a week, and I was under sixteen. My employer was a very law-abiding sort of individual and of course he wouldn't let me work more than forty-eight hours a week, so my three and a half became three-twenty. And I hated the law because I thought that extra thirty cents were much more important than my going home at the end of eight hours a day. We worked six days a week and the grown-ups worked nine hours a day plus, but theoretically the day was a nine hour day, and I had to go home at the end of eight hours.

Gilb: Did you feel the working conditions were very poor?

Matyas: All I thought about was that I would like to earn more than $3.20, because the family needed the money badly. My employer heard about the fact that we were a sizeable family and that I needed money desperately so, while he wouldn't let me break the law and work in the factory more than eight hours a day, I went
home with a bundle of work under my arm every night of the week.

The factory was about five miles away from where I lived. Of course, one didn't take a streetcar because that cost a nickel, and a nickel was a lot of money. I'd walk, summer or winter. I was eager to get home very quickly so as to get to work and make extra money. As soon as I got home, I'd open my bundle and go to work immediately and mother would have what we called supper ready and I'd eat while working. I'd work until about ten minutes of eight and then I'd run to night school because I wanted desperately to go on with my education. I'd stay in night school until ten and then rush back home and start to work again and work until about midnight and then go to bed. Then I'd get up about four o'clock in the morning and finish my work and I'd have my breakfast while wrapping up my package and then I'd go to work.

Gilb: That just gave you four hours sleep a night?

Matyas: Well, I had many, many nights of just four hours sleep. One week I made $6.80, my $3.20 plus my
Matyas: overtime. You can imagine how many hours of work that took.

My night school days were sort of mixed. I was too sleepy and too tired. My desire for learning was so terrific that, tired and sleepy as I was, I wouldn't miss a night. I remember one night, I was in class and my teacher asked a question and I raised my hand, and I fell asleep with my hand up. I'm afraid falling asleep was rather common to me.
JOINING THE UNION, 1912

Gilb: When this woman asked you to join a union, did you join?

Matyas: Not for quite awhile. No. I didn't think that was a very good idea at first.

After I found a job in a dress factory, I became a "learner" and I'd work for another worker. That was the custom in those days. Sub-contracting, it was called. An operator would take on as many learners as he could get. He couldn't pay less than $3.50 a week, and in my case again, it became $3.20 a week. This operator would keep a learner on one operation because it became profitable to him. He was a piece worker. The learner would become very proficient in one operation and would stay there. Well, I'd be very eager to learn more and more and as soon as I got so I knew one operation, I'd quit my job. He'd give me a raise. Maybe he'd bring me up to $4 or even up to $5. I'd quit my job and look for another job as a learner again so that I'd learn another operation, though I had to start at $3.50.
Matyas: again. Finally I got to the point where I really knew how to work and I could hold a job on my own.

I remember one time, I was very daring and I thought I'd try for a job on my own, to make the whole garment. I got the job and I was frightened day after day; I thought I'd lose my job. My mother was very concerned over the fact that I had a job on my own. I thought, "Oh, if only I could make as much as $8 a week, wouldn't that be wonderful." And my mother kept asking me day after day how much I would get. I said, "Mother, you know they never tell you until the end of the week. I don't know, maybe I'll get $8. I think I'm managing all right." Well, finally the week was up and I went to my employer, praying I would get $8 a week, and I asked him how much I would get and he said, "Well, what do you think you're worth?" I said, "I don't really know, but what do you think I'm worth?" He said, "Well, I tell you, you're not too bad. I'll start you on $11 a week and see what happens." I had to control my excitement so he wouldn't see that I didn't really expect that much.
Matyas: I almost ran home. I was worried all the way home. What if I told my mother I was getting so much and she began to count on it and plan on a higher standard of living. I knew I couldn't hold a job that paid so well and I didn't want to get her prepared for a standard I was afraid I couldn't live up to. Finally, when I got home, mother said, "How much are you going to get?" And I said quickly, "Well, I'm getting $11-a-week-but-don't-count-on-it. It's-sure-not-to-last." (laughter)

Well, it lasted for awhile but when I got so I thought I would like to learn a little more, I quit that job and went to work somewhere where they made a better quality garment and actually I got to the point where I became a sample maker and worked with the designer in a very large factory. I arrived at the point where I was treated magnificently and where I got a nice wage because my work was so top-notch.

Gilb: You sound like the ideal employee.

Matyas: Well, I was considered a very reliable and dependable employee, but I was very disturbed by how the other
Matyas: people were being treated. I realized that individually, nobody could do anything about it. The long hours we would work. My superiors spoke in my presence because I was a sample-maker and they thought surely my sympathies were not with the ordinary workers because here I was picked out to be a top-notch worker ... Gilb: How old were you at that time? Matyas: A little over fifteen. I made progress fast because I worked at it very hard.

Well, when I saw all that, I realized that no one could do anything individually to change conditions and that conditions would just have to be changed. And so when one of the workers asked me again whether I would go to a union meeting, I did, but it was surreptitious. The boss was not allowed to find out. The union was very poor at this time. I think it was in 1912 or 1913.
UNION ACTIVITIES

Hall Chairlady in the Strike of 1913

Matyas: I think I joined the union in 1912, Local 25. In 1913 there was a so-called "general strike" in New York City. An industry strike was called a general strike, and I attended a pre-general strike meeting and I heard a man speak about the conditions that existed in our factories. I knew that he was certainly not over-stating the abuses that existed because by now I was very aware of them and very eager to do something about it. But I was still only a youngster, you know. I was a little over 15. They said they would try to talk reason with the employers, but if the employers wouldn't listen to reason, we would just have to go out on strike.

This man, his name was Abraham Baroff, was then the secretary of the International ... Oh, he was a lovely human being, very poetic, he wore a flowing tie and he spoke in terms of changing conditions so that people who came after us would know a little bit more comfort and ease than we did.
That the children who followed ... instantly, I began to see myself as a grown-up who would have to change the world for the children who followed, for the generations that would come after us. He spoke of the idealism of the people who had come before us who had struck in this industry, and lost the strike, but they were great idealists and we would have to show that we too could do it.

Organization was taking place that night for volunteers to give out leaflets to workers. It was a bitter winter night. Our meeting was in back of a beer saloon. We had no money for rent anywhere else and we couldn't be seen in a regular meeting place or we'd lose our jobs. By this time I was completely sold on the idea that there had to be unified action if we were to get anywhere at all. I didn't dare tell my parents about it because I was sure my mother would be very disturbed and frightened if I told her that I was interested in anything like a union. For one thing, she would be concerned about the possibility of interruption of the pay envelope. She had learned to depend on
that. When this man finally asked if anyone would volunteer to give out the leaflets, that it would mean getting up at four o'clock in the morning and it was pretty cold, I sat there and thought, "Oh, I'll volunteer and, oh, I hope, I hope, I hope they take me. I want to show that I can take it too. If those volunteers before us were able to do it, I know I can do it too."

I raised my hand very timidly and when finally my name was mentioned as accepted on the committee to hand out leaflets, I felt pretty much like the time my name was called in school when I had fallen asleep. I sort of fell asleep dreaming that someday there would be a better world where poverty wouldn't be such a horrible monster among us. Where poverty would be regarded as an unnecessary economic evil. It was funny that I should have had these dreams when I was so young, but I did have them very strongly. When I was named to be on the committee, I thought heaven had opened up because I now was really grown-up enough to participate in the responsibility of
helping to change the world and wipe out misery and poverty and the degradation to self-respect that came with it.

There was a strike. I was in charge of a whole group of what we called "hall chairmen", by virtue of the fact that my English was good. I soon became very articulate and I was able to hold meetings with other people and talk and inspire them.

Gilb: What did the hall chairmen do?

Natyas: The hall frequently was an entire building which had a main hall, in which dances and balls and parties were held, and smaller halls, and in addition separate rooms. Workers from each shop were assigned to a hall according to the size of the shop and where it was located. It was the function of the hall chairlady (now the chairlady is called a steward) to keep a record of the attendance of the workers in each shop so that the main committee, the general strike committee, would know if there was defection or not. Sometimes workers just disappeared. We'd have the name of a shop on strike, but we really had
Matyas: no way of knowing whether all the workers were on strike or whether the workers went back to work, which we would have called "scabbing", or just went elsewhere. In order to know what the status, the pulse of the strike really was, it was essential that the record of each shop be as accurate as possible. A good hall chairman got the daily attendance record.

The shops would have individual meetings once a day and assign their own members to picket duty on a volunteer basis. They had a system. In the mornings and the evenings the entire shop was expected to be on picket duty. During the day the picket duty could be smaller, but frequently there were shops where there was defection and workers were not doing their share of picketing, in which case, the workers from other shops who had better devotion were asked to volunteer and go do picket duty in shops where there were not enough members.

Gilb: In a given shop, were all of the workers on strike?

Matyas: Yes, if the shop was on strike, all of the workers were expected to be on strike. In those days, all of the workers did not include the office employees.

Gilb: I wondered if all of the workers belonged to the union.
Matyas: They hadn't all belonged to the union. Remember, we're talking about 1913 when the union was very poor and very small, but the response to the strike call was colossal, it was infinitely bigger than anyone dreamed it would be. But the actual membership was very small. It was assumed that everyone on strike would belong to the union, but whether they had a book to indicate they already belonged or not was very unimportant at the time. The important thing was whether they declared their intention to become union members and whether they did their strike duty.

Gilb: I remember you said that some shops returned to work before others.

Matyas: An agreement was arrived at between the manufacturers' association and the union, but the association did not include all the manufacturers. Only manufacturers who wished to were members of the association and when the agreement was arrived at, then the workers at those association member shops were expected to return to work. A great many workers from factories that were not members were still to be out on strike
Katya: until their employers would sign individual contracts.

I, fortunately, was an operator in a factory
which was an association member and theoretically
I should have returned to work when the agreement
was reached. I didn't go back to work though
because I held a rather important spot as steward
of this hall where so many member shops congregated.

Gilb: This was an uncompensated position?

Katya: Oh yes, it was all volunteer and when I decided
not to go back to work, it simply meant that I
decided not to have my earnings. From that day on
I would have earned better than ever because we
would have gone back as a union shop under better
conditions, but I would have felt that I was
deserting the ship.

Gilb: How long did you stay out?

Katya: Several weeks longer. The workers who remained out
didn't all go back at the same time because independent
employers began to clamor for settlement right away.
It was a matter of how efficiently the union committees
could work to write up individual settlements with
all the employers. It was essential to have meetings
with every shop individually, the workers, to find out
It was important to incorporate the remedies of the specific grievances of each individual shop into the settlement.

One of my functions was to keep up the morale of the workers who were unlucky enough not to be included in the settlement that already existed and who would have to go on picketing. The desire, of course, was to get a job in one of the shops that did go back to work and it was essential to make workers see that if they did that, their employer wouldn't settle at all. He'd soon find other workers and go on working as a non-union shop and the effect of the entire strike might be lost. It was very important for workers to stay out until their individual shop was settled. And a great many shops were settled bit by bit. I stayed on until pretty nearly all of the shops were returned under union conditions.

I recall the problem of trying to give financial aid to the shops that continued the strike after the others were back to work. The union had borrowed money for the support of the strikers on the officers' own personal responsibility. They were very idealistic leaders and they were ready to sacrifice their own;
anything they had, for it. They were people of such integrity that it was not difficult for them to borrow money. They borrowed money from a Jewish newspaper called Forward and they borrowed money from some banks even. But even so, it wasn't anything like enough to give sustenance to so many people who were still out on strike. So we had to organize workers to go out with paper cans and ask the public for a nickel or dime so someone could pay the rent or the gas or buy some coal.

I remember when my shop went back to work and secretary Abraham Baroff came up to me and said, "Now look here, little one, if you're going to stay out, and it's wonderful because we'd like to have your help, you'd better get some help." And he offered me $5 for the week to give my mother to help pay our rent. I cried and wouldn't take it. I thought, "Well gracious me, doesn't he think I can do a little suffering for this great and wonderful cause." I never did accept help and I went out on strike a number of times subsequently. Many did accept strike benefit and should have. I urged it myself. I just
I never was able to accept it myself. I always had a vision of others who needed it much more badly.

Gilb: Your family was not very well off.

Matyas: My family was desperately poor. There was a time when we moved to Brooklyn and no one was working in the family except me. I had $3.50 a week and mine was the only income except that my mother had to take in a boarder who paid $6 a week and he was completely helpless and bed-ridden. That's how we lived. We were terribly poor. But I was going to help make a better world where that kind of poverty would be wiped out.

Gilb: When the union settlement came, you were not completely satisfied with it?

Matyas: I was very naive and inexperienced, naturally. The demands we made when we went out on strike were a great deal more than we subsequently got, and I didn't realize there was such a thing as demanding a great deal and then negotiating and negotiating and getting the very best that one could. I didn't understand the theory of making a modest beginning. So I felt very disappointed, especially as I had done a good bit of speaking to the workers in the shop meetings.
Maya: You asked me what the functions of a shop chairlady were. In addition to keeping the records, it was also essential to build the morale of each shop and you'd have individual shop meetings. In addition to that, you'd have daily so-called mass meetings of all the workers that met in that particular hall. You'd have them in the general assembly to get the report of what was going on from day to day and those days you'd have the very best outside speakers.

Fiorella LaGuardia was one of our outside speakers in the 1916 strike. At that time I didn't know who LaGuardia was, except that he was a very fiery somebody and he stood up there and talked very entertainingly and convincingly. He kept turning around and would say, "As Jennie here says ..." And I thought, "Now, isn't that funny. He doesn't know me. How does he know my name? How does he know what I say." I felt tremendously flattered. For all I know, it may have been an oratorical device.

But in these assembly meetings I was always the presiding person, naturally, and introduced the other speakers. And I had always said, and believed, that
Matyas: We would not go back to work until we got all our demands. Hell, when the agreement came and it was so far short of our original demands, my childish mind just couldn't get the importance of it and I couldn't see that a wonderful beginning was actually made.

Hib: You couldn't go back to your original shop when you finally did go back to work, could you?

Matyas: No. The employer wouldn't have me and I recognized the fairness of that because I had chosen not to go back to work and he put somebody else on the job. I didn't contest his decision not to re-hire me.

I didn't think it would be hard for me to find another job because by this time I was a very good worker and I thought there was always room for a good worker. I began to look for other jobs and I got them very easily, but unfortunately, I had worked up popularity as a hall chairlady and, as I came into a shop, I'd work for a day or two until somebody would say unwittingly, "Oh, there's Jennie. Don't you remember Jennie?" And the employer would find out who Jennie was and with no reason whatsoever, Jennie was just out of a job. It took me about two years before I succeeded
In overcoming that, it was a very trying thing for the family, but I somehow took it for granted as one of the prices one paid for progress. I didn't feel at all abused about it. My dream was that someday nobody would have to pay a price for wanting to abolish misery and poverty, but it was hard to persuade my mother. She knew we needed the money desperately.

Did you continue active in the union?

Oh yes, always.

What were your functions?

When the strike was on, I was a member of the general strike committee. When the strike was over, I was a member of the executive committee of my local, and the grievance committee. When I finally did find a job, I was elected a shop steward. I was always elected a shop steward before very long and I was always quite willing to accept the responsibility.

Shop Steward

Once again it meant giving up a good deal because a shop steward was a voluntary representative of the union in the shop, elected by the workers at a meeting,
Matyas: and her function was to take up any complaints in the shop and try to iron them out with the employer — whether the worker got the amount of work that was rightfully his or whether the price was right, or whether a girl had been fired for an unjustifiable reason. If there was no success in that, then she was to report back to the union officials for a union business agent to come up and settle the dispute. More than that, a good shop steward saw to it that the workers in the shop really became union conscious and paid their dues and were willing to help each other and were willing to divide their work when work was little and were willing to attend meetings and understand the aims and ideals of the union. I took my unionism very seriously. It was a religion -- the way that the world was going to be changed to a better world. So there was no limit to the amount that I thought a shop steward should do if he could.

Gilb: This cut into the time you could have been using to work for salary?

Matyas: Yes, it cut into my time tremendously. My earnings were ever so much less than anybody else's because
Katya: We were on piece work and any time there was anything wrong in the shop and a worker would come and complain to me, I would drop my work and go up to the employer and try to argue the thing out.

In our shops most of the workers were on piece work. The prices for the making of the garment were arrived at, since there was a union agreement, between a price committee elected by the workers of the shop and the employer or his representative. Now, as shop steward, I always met with the price committee, sort of as an ex-officio member. I never had much interest in arriving at price per operation. I always let the other members arrive at a fair price for making the garment, but once they had arrived at it, I always helped them get it. If the price committee couldn't get it, I sort of took on a personal leadership in it and found all sorts of reasons and arguments I presented to the employer as to why the price should be granted.

**Union-Employer Relations**

Gilb: Were these employers large capitalists?

Katya: No, one of the characteristics of our work is that
Natyas: the employer is never remote. He is invariably right in the factory. Some employers had large factories and were a little more remote and had foremen or foreladies to do the actual bargaining in the shop, but others were little employers who argued and negotiated directly on the price of each garment.

Gilb: Usually the workers could recognize the employer by sight and he them?

Natyas: Oh yes, the employers were on the job every minute and they were right there. Everybody knew everybody else. He was the employer and we were the workers. He didn't particularly fraternize with us, but he worked with the workers and when negotiation for prices was on, even if he delegated the forelady to start arriving at prices, before too long he'd be right there.

Gilb: Was there any marked hostility on the part of the workers toward the employer?

Natyas: The interesting thing is, the more established a union is, the less hostility is evident. When the union realizes it doesn't have to fight for its
very existence, when the theory of unionism is accepted, that distrust disappears a good deal and workers recognize that it is in the employer's interest to get labor as cheaply as he can and it's in the workers' interest to get as good compensation as possible for the job.

In the early days, hostility was there in general, but not in particular. When the workers met with the employer, they felt they had to fight desperately hard for every penny that they got for the garment. The union officials felt, in those days, that the demands of the workers were right and must be fought for.

Sibl: What kind of demands were they?

Satyas: Once the agreement was arrived at, then the fight was to get as high an individual price for making the garment as possible within the limits of the agreement. The hours had been arrived at. It seems to me that in the 1913 strike we got a 48 hour week, only eight hours a day for six days a week.

Sibl: There was no union objection to piece work?

Satyas: Oh no, piece work was taken for granted. Some crafts
worked on week work. Cutters worked on week work, and there were floor girls who serviced the shop on week work. Examiners and drapers worked on week work, but the machine operators who made the garment all worked on piece work. In those days we didn't have section work. We made the entire garment. I worked on blouses most of the time.

I always wanted to work on quality garments and I looked for shops that made quality garments. One of the shops was called Webster, Aaron and Company. They made blouses which sold for $13 to $25 apiece and that was high in those days. We made beautiful chiffon and lace blouses, and chiffon was so flimsy and the lace was a bit heavy and accuracy was so important. As you recall, everything in those early days was so labored; your furnishings at home and the dresses and blouses you wore were labored. A blouse couldn't just be put under the machine and run together as it is today, it was pinned onto paper with hundreds of pins. Then you stitched it bit by bit, taking out the pin before you hit it, at a snail's pace, and then there was the problem of
takinq the paper off all that stitching. It required a tremendous amount of skill and I liked that.

And you don't think this system would have been adaptable to a weekly wage?

Oh yes it would have, very adaptable to a weekly wage. But it never occurred to anybody. It was piece work and that was it.

Did the union object to home work at that time?

Oh yes. Union shops didn't permit home work, but we were permitted to work overtime in the factory and the theory was that we were paid time and a half for overtime.

But you mean it wasn't actually paid?

In many shops it wasn't paid. Our union had suddenly grown pretty large and it took awhile for the machinery of the union to catch up with its newly gained recognition and power. So enforcement of wages was not very good.

Were there any demands for safety or improvement of working conditions like light and air?

We had always asked for better working conditions. The Triangle Fire epitomized the conditions that existed before the advent of the union. It was a
tremendous factory and the doors out of the factory were locked for two reasons, so girls could be examined when they went out to be sure they hadn't taken anything, and to keep union organizers from coming in to talk to workers. After the 1909 strike was lost, employers were very nervous that employees would join the union, so the doors of many factories would be locked and organizers couldn't get in. When the fire broke out, people became panicky, and because the doors were locked, 111 girls lost their lives. That had a terrific effect on the City of New York. A number of liberal persons outside of our industry organized to bring about sanitary and fire protection. Controls of that sort began as the result of that tragic Triangle Fire. I had just begun to work when the Triangle Fire broke out and I remember it vaguely.

Strike of 1916

Gilb: You spoke of the strike of 1913. What other strikes did you participate in in New York?

Katyas: I continued to be a very active member of the union, and in 1916 the union had new demands. The demands of the union were always arrived at by the workers.
Katya: The executive board of the union worked out the demands in response to the membership meetings of the workers in the shops. I think it was in 1916 when Wilson was running for the presidency. (Members of our union were pretty strongly anti-war.)

Our demands for the new agreement included a 41⁄2 hour week, half a day off on Saturday. That was a very novel demand. The greatest number of our members were women with the responsibilities of a home and children; the idea took fire of half a day off in which they could do the washing and cleaning and even some buying. During the working season, we had to put in long hours, more than eight hours a day. Especially in the winter we'd go to work before light and go home after dark and the chances of being with the children were very slim. We had the impression that there were enough workers in New York so that we could work 41⁄2 hours a week and still fill all the orders that the manufacturer could have. The manufacturers thought that was revolutionary, especially as no other union had that demand. They branded us Socialists or Anarchists.
Of course, whenever there's a demand for a shorter work week there are a lot of workers who are awfully hard to convince because they can't understand that one can work 44 hours a week and be more rested and therefore make more money than in 48 hours a week, just as I felt resentful against the law that children under 16 couldn't work over 48 hours a week. I hated the law because I was docked $30 a week. Workers thought they would lose four hours' worth of wages. We also asked for a higher minimum wage. The employers were absolutely convinced we were interested in ruining them. No union is interested in ruining an industry or how would workers earn a living?

The strike in 1916 lasted a good deal longer than the 1913 strike, which was settled rather quickly. As a matter of fact, the association in 1913 arrived at an agreement with the union before the strike was called. We workers weren't supposed to know that. When the association knew the strike was inevitable, they agreed that they would sign an agreement and would grant some demands because they remembered that,
Matyas: although the union sadly lost the 1909 strike, the employers lost too and they didn't want to risk that kind of a victory.

Hilb: Why did the union go on strike then?

Matyas: There was an agreement -- this was not generally known but it was tactfully done and showed the wonderful leadership of the union and some of the leadership of the association -- there was recognition of the fact that if the association members alone agreed to the union and paid the new wages and accepted the 48 hour week, that would put them at a terrific disadvantage in labor costs to the employers who wouldn't be in agreement with the union and could get labor at an uncontrolled wage. So in order to make sure that the other employers would come under the same labor costs, they were willing to agree that the strike should be held. That's how it happened that the strike was so quickly settled, and we couldn't understand. We went out prepared for a long endurance fight, and shortly we got the good news that the union won the fight.

We got less than we demanded but the union was very willing to accept far less in return for a positive
agreement among the association members. And that helped us to organize a large amount of the rest of the industry. Now, in 1916 there was no such agreement. Neither the association nor the independent employers were going to grant a 44 hour week, that was just unheard of. They fought us. I think it lasted 16 weeks or so.

Gilb: Were you very active?

Katyas: Oh yes, I was a hall chairman again and a very active leader. Webster Hall was the hall where I worked. In the first strike, I was a hall chairman at a hall way down in the lower east side of New York and most of the shops that gathered there were from the lower east side. In my new hall, the shops were the so-called better shops, association shops mostly, where most of the members spoke rather good English. They still needed someone to maintain order and morale. Whenever we had a strike, I was a hall chairman. By this time I was an executive board member.

Gilb: Were most of the members non-American in origin?

Katyas: Most of the union members were Jewish, Italian and many other nationalities, but primarily Jewish and
Italian. The English that was spoken in the shops
was the English of the street that was spoken among
foreign born persons. (I was always eager to speak
English well. When I had to quit school in the fifth
grade, I felt terribly abused though I accepted it
as a part of life for a girl of a poor family. I
wanted to learn English as it should be spoken, not
the English of the factories or the streets. I
continued night classes, even during the period when
I was very active in the union. I attended Columbia
University and took extension courses in English.)
SOCIALISM

Gilb: I wanted to ask you about the leaders of the union. What origin were they?

Natyas: Most of the leadership of the union was Jewish and Italian, and most of them were great idealists and had come from Europe in search of this wonderful America, this land of freedom, and when they came here they found abuse in our industry, sweat-shopism. A book by Shalem Asch called East River gives a picture of conditions in our industry at a given time, of sweat-shopism.

Gilb: Was it your impression that the leaders were radicals? Were they anarchists as they were charged with being?

Natyas: I didn't know any anarchists. I had heard of anarchists and had met some, but anarchism just didn't interest me. I couldn't visualize any country without a government. Perhaps it was a nice dream, for all I knew, but the thought of human beings so perfect that no government was essential just never made any sense to me. Socialists, on the other hand, did not seem unreasonable to me. They seemed extremely idealistic
Matyas: and reasonable.

Gilb: You mentioned in an earlier interview that your family was against Socialism.

Matyas: Oh, my family was desperately against Socialism.

Gilb: How did you make this transition, into thinking Socialism was an ideal ...

Matyas: At first I had more or less a child's concept of Socialism. I had heard a great many Socialist speakers on street corners. Of course, eventually I learned that the aims of Socialists were to have social ownership of the socially necessary industries, so that production would be for use, not for profit, and so that poverty would be abolished. And it made sense.

Gilb: Did you learn about this through the union leaders?

Matyas: No, not so much through the union leaders, although I knew that most of the union leaders were Socialists. They were more concerned with the immediate problems of the union, although I knew that fundamentally they had a Socialist approach. I began to read books like William Morris' *News from Nowhere* and Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and it had a great effect on me.
Hatyas: I had a vision of a beautiful world.

Hilb: Did you go to Socialist party meetings?

Hatyas: Yes, although I didn't join the Socialist party at that time. I wasn't old enough and I wasn't going to join the young people's Socialists because that would brand me as being young and I wouldn't admit that. Being young never had any premium for me. My desire always was to be grown-up, so the responsibility I carried would be in keeping with my age. I liked being trusted with responsibility.

Hilb: Were the Socialist meetings very large?

Hatyas: Some were large and some were small. The district meetings were very small; the general membership meetings were large. When I finally joined, when I was 18 years old, I soon became a member of the executive committee and the central committee. It was just taken for granted that I was a full-fledged person. The leadership in those days was very idealistic, just as in the union. Morris Hillquit, who was a brilliant corporation attorney, was one of the members of the executive committee, and Algernon Lee of the Rand School, who was a great ideal of mine.
Hilb: Did you meet many people from the unions at the Socialist meetings?

Katyas: Yes, I think pretty nearly everybody belonged to a union. I don't recall that they were from my union.

Hilb: But many of the shop members with whom you associated were not Socialists?

Katyas: Oh no. The members of the shops of my union were like a cross-section of any community. The cross-section of any community in this country was not Socialist. We rolled up a big Socialist vote once or twice nationally, but never enough to elect a Socialist in many cities. There were Socialist mayors here and there, and members of municipal councils, but the Socialists were never a party that could elect members to power.

Hilb: As a shop steward, did you try to encourage people to become Socialists?

Katyas: I don't recall that I did. I'm very certain it was known that I was a Socialist, but it had nothing to do with my function as a shop steward.

Hilb: I remember your saying that you had met Eugene Debs.
What were your impressions of him?

Oh yes, that was a wonderful thing. I was as faithful a Socialist party member as I was a union member, and I thought the Socialist party was the vehicle through which we would search for a better world and the union was the vehicle through which we would abolish immediate abuses, so the two had to go hand in hand. So I was very active in the Socialist party and was in on the inner circles. Whenever anyone outstanding came to town, I was there. I was always considered the child prodigy because of my devotion and assumption of responsibility.

This time Eugene Victor Debs was slated to come to a meeting by the Socialist party against the declaration of war in 1916. Eugene Debs was very peace loving and anti-war. That was like having a great hero, almost a god, come to New York City. When he arrived there were several private coffee cup sessions and I was always in on them. One time I remember being just thrilled when he asked me what I was doing and I told him I was a member of my union. He had a little talk with me over coffee, very informal,
and he put his arm around me and said, "Little girl, how I wish you could do the work you ought to do. You will when the world becomes a better world." I was in heaven. I thought, "This great man thinks there is something in me which will help to make a better world."

Then we had a great mass meeting at which he was the speaker. I sat in the audience and I saw this tall, lanky idealistic human being who leaned forward as though his very inner soul spoke to us. He said, "When I think of the cold, grey, glittering steel thrust into the warm, quivering flesh of man, I recoil with horror." And war to me was a terrible, terrible personal thing. And I became even more strongly anti-war after that time.

To me Socialism was the way we would bring the Golden Rule into being. Oh, the shock that came to me when I read George Bernard Shaw who said, "Don't do unto others as you would like to be done by. Tastes differ."
At this time, were you a suffragette?

I became very active in the Socialist suffrage campaign. I felt that as a working woman I should have the same right to exert my influence and to assume my responsibility of citizenship in the community as I had in my union. It was a matter of dignity. The right of women to vote, to me, was the right of women to learn and assume responsibilities.

You thought of voting as a matter of enlarged responsibility, rather than, as militant suffragettes did, as a matter of right in a sex war.

Yes, I didn't think of it in a sex war at all. I just thought there was a large segment of human beings, women, who were not to be deprived of being an integral part of the community in which we lived. And I wanted that right in order to make the world a better place, not just to have the right to vote.

In any of your activities, were you ever put in jail?

I was never put in jail, but I was arrested many times. I was put in cells. Once I was put into a
cel] for two or three days until I was released, and I saw what it was like and it was very horrible. But I was never convicted of anything more than disorderly conduct. I was arrested many times, and it was always a very harrowing experience.

In what connection were you arrested?

In union activities.

One time was early in 1915. I was going by to meet Mr. Charters, he was going to take me to lunch. I was all dressed up with a white hat and a blouse that I had just made with all lace and tucking, a copy of a blouse that I had made in the factory. I came out onto Madison Avenue and I saw a lot of women on a picket line. A policeman was throwing them into the hall; he was really manhandling them. I went up to the policeman and I stamped my foot and said, "Don't do that, you're not supposed to beat girls." He grabbed a hold of me and bodily threw me into the hall too.

Well, this was in early 1915 when I was very active in the suffrage campaign. He threw me into the hall of a big Madison Avenue building and before too
long, in New York City you just blink and there's a terrific crowd. Crowds are natural because they are always there anyhow. So when I was thrown into the hall along with these other girls, I knew he was waiting for the Maria to come, the wagon, and I was going to be arrested. I had never been arrested before, but I used the opportunity to talk suffrage to the people who were there.

Then, when the policewagon arrived, he just sort of threw people into the wagon and when he got a hold of me, his hands were sort of big and his grip was pretty tight and it hurt me and I said, "Let go, you big bully." And I began to beat him for all I was worth. It made me so mad to think that I beat him so hard and it didn't even make an impression.
When did you decide to leave New York City?

I think it was 1917. I was awarded a scholarship by my union to take six months off and go to the Rand School of Social Science, which was actually a Socialist school. I had my six months at the Rand School and I still came out with the very ideal concept that if one was a Socialist one did unto others as one wanted others to do unto you. I expected idealistic concepts to go hand in hand with educational concepts. I knew a great deal more than I knew before the six months, but wishful thinking still prevailed. I thought someday a wonderful human being would arise and isms wouldn't matter anymore because poverty wouldn't be there. I knew that human beings were sometimes dishonest, cheats, cruel but all of that was not an integral part of human beings and if poverty would depart, the true loveliness of humans would emerge.

At the Rand School we learned that the working class was really ready for the new world but there
were elements that held it back. There was the capitalist regime, and the conservative element, even in the trade union movement itself. The A.F. of L. even held back this yearning that the people all over had for a new world.

And I was a little bit dubious about that. I thought a goodly section of workers in New York City might be ready, and now I know it wasn't even so about a goodly number in New York City although once or twice we ran Morris Hillquit for mayor and he almost made it. I was dubious that the workers in the rest of the country felt the way the Socialist party had us believe. I had a suspicion that New York City was not really representative of America. I wanted to know what the United States was like.

Hib: So where did you go?

Sotyas: I started out by going to Chicago. I borrowed money; all my belongings fitted into less than one suitcase, which gave me a shock. I arrived in Chicago with another girl. We each had $12.

We were going to start to work. She was the daughter of a very wealthy family. She could have
had money, but she was eager to find out what it was like to work and live on nothing but what you earned. I didn't have to find that out. I was eager to find out why people were not in unions. I went to work in none but non-union shops for quite awhile. By this time my wage in New York was very good; war conditions were off and I was a good worker and I was making samples. I made $50 a week. I gave all that up because I was very eager to find out what the rest of the United States was like. I took a job working on cheap cotton dresses, a piece work job, and I couldn't make more than $14 a week. My friend couldn't make more than $7 a week, but we had to live on just what we were getting. I could have worked in a union shop because there were some union shops in Chicago, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to find out what workers thought and what conditions were like in non-union shops. This friend of mine, who had a keen sense of humor, would say, "From now on we have to live c. n. wise." I said, "What do you mean?" "Cheap and nutritious." We'd be very careful of every cent we'd spend.

From Chicago I went to St. Paul and then Seattle.
Katyas: Then the influenza epidemic broke out and I had a younger sister who was already married and pregnant. My sister died and my mother had influenza too and she went to the funeral anyhow. I got word from a friend about my family and I dropped everything and returned to New York City.

Ellb: In your travels, did you find that conditions in non-union shops were as bad as they had been pictured?

Katyas: I found that they were even worse. I found that workers were frightened to death to even talk about conditions for fear they would lose their jobs. I tried to talk unionism to several workers, although that was not my aim. I wanted to see what conditions were in non-union shops, not to convert workers to unionism. Invariably I found that the wages were very low; workers never had any savings and if they lost their jobs, they were in trouble. Unemployment compensation was only a dream of Socialists, and they were told that would be like a dole and no self-respecting person would want a dole. Unemployment insurance was thought to be very unrealistic. Workers went into debt and went hungry if they lost their jobs.
1918-1921

Selb: Did you go back to work in the garment trade in New York?

Katyas: Oh yes.

Selb: And back into union activities?

Katyas: Oh my, yes. The two were inseparable. Even my trip across the United States was actually, in my personal sort of way, a union activity because I wanted to understand what makes people union-minded or reject unionism so I'd be more effective in my organization. Since the very first day when I began to understand unionism, I began to feel unionism and it became part of my innermost being.

Selb: Did you come back after the war?

Katyas: I was on my way back when the first, false armistice declaration was on. I remember I came through Chicago where I had to change trains. I had several hours so I came out and walked about the street. The false armistice declaration was on and people were just going wild, absolutely wild. I was so in a daze because my sister had died and my mother was probably very, very
sick; the whole thing took on a "what's the use" feeling.

But when I got back I became again very active in my union. The international had agreed to undertake educational activities and to form an educational department.

I have a note here that Local 25 set up the first educational department in the I.L.G.W.U.

Let's say that mostly members of Local 25 and some others of the so-called women's locals, Local 62. A girl by the name of Mary Goff, a very dear friend who is still a business agent in Local 62, was one of the active persons. It was under the influence mostly of the "girls".

And I have a note that Juliet Stewart Poyntz was the first director. Now, did you know her?

Yes, Juliet Stewart Poyntz was the director of Local 25, but this educational movement we got through the international. The "girls" in Local 25 -- and when I say the "girls", we might have been of any age from in our teens to twenty-five, which in those days was quite an old woman -- got it through the
international because we wanted it for every local of the international. Members of Locals 25 and 22 and 62 were the ones who had pleaded with the international to set up educational activities.

In Local 25 we had Juliet Poyntz as the first educational director.

I have a date here, 1915.

I didn't realize she was there that early. Yes, I knew her.

Unity House

In addition to the educational activities, we wanted a place where our members could go for vacations. Vacation resorts to which workers could go in those days were pretty grim looking, filthy sort of affairs. They cost us a lot of money and they fed people a lot of food all right, but there was nothing much in the way of beauty. We were very eager to have a place where our members could go that would be beautiful and our own. I was not in on the original movement of this. I think I was at school, but a group of my colleagues in the movement worked for a vacation
They rented a very beautiful place, with the help of the international, in Pine Hill in the Catskill Mountains. It was a small place that could only take care of about thirty people at a time and money was of the essence and what to do for a cook. At first we thought we would do it cooperatively and each do our share, but we found that was difficult so I suggested that my mother would come and cook for us. She had never done that professionally but I knew that my mother was a very good cook and she had worked in homes. We asked her and she agreed to come and remained the summer cook for years and years in one summer resort or another. Philadelphia subsequently started a summer resort for its members, and my mother went over there.

Eventually, one of the times when I was away at school, our group of girls persuaded the international to buy a place in the Poconos in Pennsylvania, a place which was for sale. Some German people had this very beautiful resort that had thirty cottages and its own power plant, seven-hundred acres of ground and a lake. We bought it after Prohibition was declared and these
people couldn't make a go of it any more. I'm not sure now, but I think it had something to do with Prohibition. Anyway, we got the whole place for thirty thousand dollars and the international helped us get it.

When I came back I became active in the running of Unity House, which we called it at the time. I was the secretary to the educational committee whose function it was to supply entertainment. I helped get very top notch entertainment. I can't remember the names now but great actors would volunteer, Emmanuel Richert ... He had the Emmanuel Richert School, and his daughter was a great actress. She used to read Shakespearean parts. People of that calibre used to come to Unity House to entertain us. We'd have opera singers.

Unity House had mortgages that had to be met time after time, and the international kept subsidizing the place and finally they felt that they weren't going to subsidize it anymore. The membership paid, but no matter how much the membership paid, it couldn't pay for the upkeep of this very large place. Conditions
weren't very good. It was around 1921, I'm no good at remembering dates. Anyhow, the international decided this year that it couldn't spend the funds of the union for maintaining Unity House anymore.

A few of us got together and we were petrified at the thought of losing it. I personally was very disappointed and I wasn't going to let it happen. I persuaded the whole Unity House committee to run some sort of a bazaar to raise money. We needed ten thousand dollars. I didn't think we could raise anything like that, but I thought if we could raise a good portion of it, the international would come across with the balance. The committee was opposed to it, everybody was opposed to it, but my determination was so terrific that they finally voted with me just to get off the dime.

The 40-Hour-Week Strike

Katjas: In the meantime, while I had been away in the West -- I think during the great steel strike of 1919 -- some of the women in Local 22, of which I was a member, had started a movement for a 40 hour week, a five day
Even the president of the international couldn’t see it. I was told when I came back from the West that they had had some tough sessions with the president. You can’t have a strike and put out demands unless they are approved by the international. The president of the international finally lost patience with the women who wanted a 40 hour week and said, "What do you women know of the economics of an industry? You’d better go home and have babies.” This wasn’t easily forgotten.

That wasn’t very tactful in a union of that sort.

Well, tact was never one of our advantages. Our leadership was much more honest than tactful at any stage of the game. They were tactful in negotiation with employers but among ourselves and the membership, honesty was the all important thing, not tact.

You know, I never consider myself a feminist in any sense of the word. Feminine, but not a feminist. But at that time, and in my local, the more active and ideal members seemed to be women. Although most of the members were women, women had not been the most active part of our membership. But the women
tyas: seemed to have held on to their ideals and dreams; the men, although still idealistic, seemed to have compromised with reality more easily. I think we were the first group to demand a 40 hour week and we eventually got it.

Hilb: Who do you mean by "we"?

tyas: The dressmakers. Local 25. No, I think at that time we were already Local 22. Local 25 was predominantly women, about eighty-six percent. It originally comprised shirtwaist-makers and dressworkers (Dress-makers in local parlance are custom dressmakers.) Eventually it became so big that it was divided and the workers in the dress industry went into Local 22, and the shirtwaist-makers, who are now called blouse-makers, remained in Local 25.

Hilb: And what local was on strike?

tyas: I don't recall. I think at that time it was Local 22. The process of dividing and changing over from Local 25 to Local 22 took over a year and it seemed like a very artificial affair to us, because workers worked on blouses one season and worked on dresses the other. They were equally well suited to work on either,
But the strike -- I think it was the strike for the 40 hour week -- came in the midst of my working for this bazaar which was to be held on Washington's Birthday. We were going to make the bazaar a two day affair. I was on the executive board. I became the hall chairman of one of the halls and had to work on the bazaar at the same time. Well, the strike was won rather soon, in two or three weeks. Everybody was to go back to work, but because the work for the bazaar had so suffered while I was in charge of the strike, I decided not to go back to work. I decided to just stay out and work for the bazaar. I felt personally responsible, since I had gotten the union to make an investment of about fifteen hundred dollars to pay for the hall and the music and other things and I began to be pretty frightened myself by this time. So I decided to give all my time to trying to make a success of the bazaar.

A large committee volunteered to work with me, and the secretary, Ida Gold, who had been a
Wisconsin Girl and had become an education director in our union and I worked very hard. Finally the bazaar took place and we made not ten thousand but fourteen thousand dollars. All the goods that were sold were contributed through the efforts of all other I.L.G. unions and other unions not related to the I.L.G.W.U. From stores, wherever we could, we got furniture, books, dishes, anything we could get. We had a two day bazaar with dancing and entertainment and we made the money and we saved Unity House.

After the fair, I remember that the committee presented me with a watch and it said, "From the Unity Bazaar to J.M., 1921." I think the bazaar was held February 21, 1921.

**Division of Work**

Things got very bad in the garment trade in 1921. We had another strike. I don't recall just what it was, but it was a long and bitter strike.

Conditions had been pretty good during the war?

Yes, but they slipped back again very quickly. In 1921 we had a terrific problem of unemployment. I
remember a lot of our people were walking the street in absolute destitution. People who were lucky enough to have a job had part-time work and earned very little. I conceived the idea that our union ought to call upon our membership to divide work with people who were not attached to a shop. We ought to ask the people who did have a job to urge the employer to take on another person or two. I was considered quite unrealistic. How could we dare ask anybody who was already on part-time to agree to cut his earnings to take on another person in the shop? I kept on agitating for it and said, "I'm sure we can persuade the membership that it's the decent thing to do." I finally wrote a leaflet myself. I wonder if any of those leaflets could ever be found again or if there were even any minutes of it.

I broadcast this leaflet among our entire membership asking members who were lucky enough to have a bite to share that bite with somebody who was completely hungry. And it took. Many, many people who were completely unemployed were given a chance. The response was simply marvelous.
COMMUNIST INFIILTRATION

H1b: Did you find in the early 1920's that membership was falling off?

Katya: I think membership was falling off a great deal. Of course, people had no money to pay dues with. But we came back eventually. The effect of the Russian revolution was even worse on our membership.

H1b: When did you first become aware of the effects of the Russian revolution on your union?

Katya: The effects on our union started in the early 1920's.

H1b: I know that the Communist international actually organized a drive to take over American unions.

Katya: Yes. My acquaintance with it was in the early 1920's. I was naive and never believed anything bad until I came into contact with it personally. One time I went to another union on behalf of some cause or other. To my amazement, I saw a sign on the door that said, "Meeting of Members of Local 22." Well, I was a member of Local 22, so I went in. I saw that it was a meeting of some of our members, but the speakers, who were also members, were saying such
strange and dreadful things that I just couldn't believe them. They were encouraging revolution against the union itself and against the union leadership.

In those days they were very crude. I heard a woman, Ida Rothstein, later Ida Roth, who was just recently killed in an automobile accident, say, "Is there no spunk in among the people here? In Paris you ought to hear how members talk to their union leaders. They spit in their eyes." I couldn't begin to tell you the shock it was. The language was so crude and out of keeping with anything I had heard and the thought of that kind of disloyalty didn't make sense. I didn't hear any issues discussed, just the virtues of being rebellious.

Did they label themselves Communists?

No. I hadn't heard of a separate group in our union that labelled itself anything. There evidently was a growing group which I think subsequently labelled itself the Needle Trades Alliance.

I think it kept growing more and more and William Z. Foster became the leader, in the trade union field,
of all of the Alliances. I think these so-called Alliances were more active in the needle trades than anywhere else. They always find it easier to work in unions that are already liberal than in strong and conservative unions. They didn't go to many of the other A.F. of L. unions because they wouldn't have had a chance.

But Socialists are notoriously anti-Communist?

Oh, terrifically. But in the union we weren't Socialists; we were unionists who believed in democracy so strongly that we thought everyone naturally had a right to his opinion. The opinions were absolutely crazy and we had to show them up, but we thought they had a right to their opinion. We soon realized their opinions were poisonous and vile and very unscrupulous and the aim was to wreck our organization. There were leaders in our union who recognized that. I belonged to the group that found it very difficult to accept the theory that stupid as anyone was, he could not be allowed to express his opinion. I felt one couldn't go out and fight a fellow worker, ruinous as he was. You
could fight your boss, because it was fighting opposite interests, but to fight a fellow worker was emotionally impossible for me. There was a group of us women who felt that way. We didn't really truly understand that these people, who called themselves progressives, they never called themselves Communists even then...

I couldn't fight them, but I couldn't go with them either because they were so stupid and so bad. I realized that their work was very destructive. I couldn't quite understand how serious it was, but I knew it was very bad.

I have a note here that Juliet Poyntz became an active member of the Russian secret service.

Yes. I didn't know that. None of us knew that.

As a matter of fact, when we later learned about it, I was the most shocked person in the whole world. To us, she was just this wonderfully handsome person with a lovely character. She was teaching at Barnard College. She was very interested in helping us to become interested in educational activities. I remember Juliet Poyntz, in addition to wanting members
to be interested in the education movement, also wanted members to be more active even in the regular, local union functions. Of course, I sort of worked with Juliet Poyntz. I'm not sure if I worked with her or just kept admiring her. She was very beautiful and so intelligent.

Sib: Was she openly a Communist?

Katya: Not at the time. 1915, nobody knew anything about Communism. To me she was just somebody from Barnard College, this grand and lovely lady who was interested enough in the working class movement to come and be with us.

Sib: When did you learn she was with the Russians?

Katya: Oh, not until I left the union. She had already been gone from us years and years before that. I remember, one time she said to me, "Well, Jennie, your idealism is wonderful. But I just wonder, Jennie, what will happen. Will you be able to withstand the temptation of meeting a man and getting married and then you'll be out of all this activity." And I looked at her in the most amazed way and I said, "Well, I never thought of it, but I hope that even meeting a
...man and being in love will never take me out of my interest in my union."

For some reason that conversation comes back to me over and over again, because subsequently I learned that she was married and in my young way I thought her marriage was a wonderful sort of thing. She was evidently married to some other professor, whoever he was, we didn't know. She worked under her own name. He had a separate apartment and she had a separate apartment, and she worked in her field and he worked in his field. It was a very romantic thing to me, the idea of each having a separate apartment and living their own lives and getting together at weekends. I was very sure that indicated they were highly emancipated and cultured human beings. Well, years and years later, when I subsequently learned that Juliet Poyntz was a Communist, I found it hard to believe. And then when I learned that not only was she a Communist, but in the secret service of the Communist party, it was just the shock of my life.

Hilb: What did you do, in the early 20's, when you felt you could not fight the destructive element but you couldn't go along with them either?

Atyas: I ran away.
I had always wanted desperately to get an education. After I quit school, I went to night school but then my activity in the union kept me from it. I did continue to take classes in English for awhile, one night a week. Eventually even my class in English had to go by the board, because it was so important to give everything to the organization. To get a regular certificate of elementary school graduation and then a high school certificate, going at night, would take at least ten years. Ten years would be the end of the world. There was so much work to do that education began to assume a selfish aspect to me.

And now you decided to go back to school?

Now I decided here was my chance. If I couldn't go with these idiots and I couldn't fight them, I would just go to school. And a lot of my colleagues who felt as I did went out. Some got married; some went into some or another little business. They couldn't stay in the union and not be on one side
or the other.

It was in 1922 and we were in a very low ebb industrially speaking. There wasn't too much work and there was division of work. I consulted the rest of the shop and they agreed that I could do my share of the work at given hours and go to school.

In New York City they had what were called preparatory schools; commercial institutions that catered largely to adults who were foreign born and had had education in their own country but who had to learn English rapidly and take high school credits in this country in order to qualify for pre-med or dental or any of those things. Because they were commercial and because they dealt with adults who had had formal education, they didn't bother to really teach those subjects, they just crammed for state board exams.

Well, I was a little bit different from the average student. I hadn't had the formal education anywhere. I crammed, and in one year's time I passed almost all the subjects for a high school certificate, except that I flunked in algebra and
geometry and I didn't have time to take English IV.

Did you eventually get the certificate?

I didn't qualify because I flunked these subjects.

I tried to get into the University of Wisconsin as an Adult Special and I tried to get into Stanford or the University of California. I still had a great desire to see the country. Before, I wanted to see the country from the point of view of non-union shops. Now, I wanted to see the country from the point of view of just American human beings, regardless of economic problems. I thought in California I'd really see something. But Stanford turned me down as Adult Special, U.C. turned me down, Wisconsin -- I didn't wait to hear from Wisconsin.

In the meantime I met the acting Dean of Women of a small college in Illinois. When she met me I was a woman with thirteen years of union activity behind me ... Do you remember the great steel strike of 1919? I was so moved by it. It was such a great and wonderful thing that those steel strikers who'd been working 12 hours a day while we were already on
the 44 hour week had finally had courage to strike against the great steel corporations, that I volunteered my services. I quit my job and begged Abraham Baroff, who was secretary of the international, to subsidize me, if the steel strike would accept me, so that I could go and help in some way. The steel strikers said they could use me; my function was to go and speak in their behalf and gather money from the other unions.

My international, Abraham Baroff and Schlesinger agreed that they would pay the train fare and any living expenses I would have. I was desperately careful. I was gone for two months and traveled between New York City and Pittsburg and Philadelphia and Baltimore and Cleveland and Chicago and Gary, Indiana and all around and addressed meetings. I asked the unions to volunteer a day's pay to the support of the strikers. I had great success and raised about $75,000. I addressed classes at Goucher College and Johns Hopkins College and some of the churches. I had had all this experience.
When this woman from a small Illinois town met me, she thought it would be fun if I went to her school. She said, "You come to my college and we can give you college entrance exams and I think you can qualify as a fully matriculated student instead of an Adult Special." That thrilled me because I didn't want to be an Adult Special if I could possibly qualify as a fully matriculated student, and I had never dreamed I would have the opportunity to go to a small midwestern town where I would meet real, honest-to-goodness Americans. It was a Presbyterian College. One of my favorite professors was a Methodist who didn't believe one should play cards or dance. He was a great liberal in every other sense.

Did you work while you went to school?

I did dressmaking. I was an experienced dressmaker by then. I either had to work or take money from mother. Of course, my poor mother had no money. It would mean she would have to work that much harder. But the very fact that she wanted to ... in the earlier years, if she caught me reading during the night and thought I was being very wasteful in using electricity
to read. What good was it for a girl to read? A
girl needed to be married and reading would never
help her to get married. When finally I left New
York City to go to college, mother took me to the
train and she pleaded with me to let her support
me. She said, "After all, you supported the family
for so long and it would be nice to have one educated
person in the family." That was such a turn-about
and such a wonderful thing.

But that's how I met the Communist problem, I
went away to school.

Hlb: How long were you at that college?

I stayed there just my freshman year. I think that's
all. I had to earn money, you see. But the college
was a wonderful experience for me. It was a small
school, I think five hundred. Going to chapel three
times a week was an interesting experience. One
time I was invited to address chapel. Most of the
young people there were from the neighboring towns,
many of them farmer youngsters. I hadn't ever known
any youngsters of farmer families and I certainly
didn't know such very American, American people.
Etrus: For the first time in my life, I had the experience of going to a football game.

Ulb: Why didn't you go back to that school? Even if you had to work for awhile and then go back.

Etrus: I was interested in getting to know more people and more areas. Next, I went to Western Reserve in Cleveland. I worked during the summer and went to school at the same time. After that I went to Wisconsin. I just wanted to meet new situations, new people and find out their thinking.

Ulb: In other words, you were not undertaking a systematic preparation to be a teacher.

Etrus: I vaguely wanted to become a teacher, but very vaguely. Most of all, I wanted an education, an orthodox education that most people got and to understand what in the minds of the majority of human beings makes the world go the way it does.

Ulb: Were you disappointed with this formal academic education?

Etrus: It sounds almost like an either-or question. Nothing in life is that way. I was tremendously thrilled and at times I was disappointed.
Matyas: What sort of things disappointed you?

Bill: I remember a final examination we had at Wisconsin: it was a true and false, an objective examination, but you couldn't honestly answer those questions "yes" or "no". And you weren't permitted to answer "yes, but ..." or "no, but..." I thought it was tricky and unfair. I still can't understand why professors approve true and false type examinations. I still don't think anything can be answered "Yes" or "No".

Matyas: You finally came out to San Francisco and I wondered how you got here?

Bill: The problem of working while you go to college is not what it is cracked up to be. I think it is an unfair strain on any student. It certainly was too much for me. I had the handicap of not having had any of the prerequisites; I didn't know how to study; I didn't know how to take notes. Everything was so terrifically hard for me anyhow and I wanted to put every hour of my time into my books. Instead of that, I had to put my time into exactly what I did in the years and years before; I had to work in
order to just pay my room and board and it was a little too much. I finally sort of broke down and couldn't carry on and I decided to just give up school and go back to work and work long enough to earn and save enough money to go to school again.

Milb: You came back from your schooling to New York in the mid-twenties.

Matyas: Yes, I came back to New York and I went to work, but I was not active in the union because the Communists were. Not being active in the union was a little hard for me to take. I worked one season and then I decided to strike out again and go to school.

So I went to Colorado for a summer session and took philosophy and geology. I took geology because I wanted to understand something about the physical world, and I knew nothing whatever about mountains or sea. Besides, the syllabus said the class in geology would go into the mountains on hikes to search for rocks and things. I decided to combine play with learning. Philosophy, I thought one ought to take because when one goes to school,
One ought to learn all sorts of things. Besides, I thought philosophy might be sort of easy for me. I don’t know what gave me that idea.

The geology course really was very exciting. We went into the mountains. It was much harder work for me than I had anticipated. Most of the students were teachers who came back for refresher courses and knew a good deal. I had to learn what sandstone was and what granite was. I just didn’t know anything at all. I did learn a great deal about the movements of the earth, which was awfully exciting.

I enjoyed philosophy so much, and I didn’t do much reading. I didn’t know how much one ought to know and I just took it as it came. And I audited a course in paleontology. I concentrated on my geology for my final exam. To my amazement, my grade in philosophy was ninety-eight and my geology got a poor C. But I wouldn’t trade what I learned in geology for what I learned in philosophy, because there I really learned things that have helped me, even today, to understand how much there is to understand about.
TO SAN FRANCISCO;
MARRIAGE, 1925; AND PRIVATE DRESSMAKING

Milb: Then after your experience in Colorado, where did you go?

Katyas: Then I came to California. I hoped to go to U.C. or Stanford. But once again, the problem of money came up.

And besides, John Charters, who had always been Mr. Charters to me, came out and finally we were married in California.

Milb: When had you first met him?

Katyas: In 1915. When I was very active in suffrage activities, as I told you, not from the point of view of a mere suffragette which I thought was very bourgeois, but from the point of view of a working woman. I was a member of the Socialist Suffrage Committee. He knew people in the suffrage movement, though he was not active in it himself.

Milb: Well, you were quite a grown-up girl when you got married. Had you, in the midst of all your other intense activities, had love affairs off and on?
Katya: Well, yes I did. There was a fellow in the Socialist party, for example, who thought he loved me. My mother thought very highly of him. She was very eager that I should marry. I remember my mother pleading with me time and again that after all there were other people who could be active in the union. Why would I have to give up everything in the world for this ideal that I had? I kept arguing with her that, because there were many others who didn't do their share, those of us who understood our responsibility owed it to our understanding to assume responsibility. I'd say, "Well, sure, I'm like one tiny drop in the ocean but what is the ocean but a lot of drops?"

Ilia: You were married on June 18, 1925. Then you did not go into union activities in California?

Katya: No, no. The union was terrifically divided here too and in the hands of Communists in San Francisco, I found.

Ilia: Was there a dressmakers' union, or was this the cloakmakers'? 

Katya: It was the cloakmakers' union. I got a job for a
very short while in a dress shop which naturally
was not a union shop, but I stayed there only a little
while. I worked in private dressmaking for a short
while, and also I soon began to take work from people
and began to do work myself.

Ellb: You didn't want to go into the union?

Katyas: I didn't want to go into the factories because that
meant going into the union, and it was Communist
controlled. In 1930 or '31 we went back East again.
I worked because I wanted my husband to develop some
printing ideas he had. I didn't want him to have to
work; I wanted him to spend all his time on his
invention. I didn't have much confidence in the
invention as a money-getter, but I didn't care.

Ellb: What invention was this?

Katyas: It was a colorless printing. Do you remember how
the Examiner and many other papers would have printing
that would just have the black ink outline and you'd
apply water to it and color would emerge?

Ellb: Was this his invention?

Katyas: There were three men. He and another fellow worked
on the invention and a third fellow worked on the
They put out little cards with just ink outline to put in loaves of bread. It was a terrific advertising stunt. Children would go for the bread so they could get this card which they painted with water and all the colors would emerge. John Charters was in business for this invisible color print organization, but he was never very happy and got out of it long before we were married.

Then, when we were married, he was interested in perfecting it, so there would be not even a black outline, so it would look like a completely blank paper and with water applied, color would emerge. He spent all the money he had on inventing machinery for it. He was a little disappointed that I wasn't too enthusiastic about the problem, but I didn't care whether it was going to be a money-getter or not. He was interested and I wanted him to be interested and I did all the dressmaking I could get privately so he wouldn't have to work so he could perfect it.

By the time he thought it was well enough perfected to be commercialized, he decided to go back East where
he had some friends in Chicago. We gave up our apartment and put all our belongings into the car and went East and he tried to market it and didn't succeed very well. Finally, both of us decided that if we had to be poor, we'd rather be poor in California than anywhere else. We both loved California and we liked San Francisco. And we came back in 1931.
You say you stopped working with the Socialist Party for the same reason that you stopped working with your union, because it had split into a Communist dominated group.

Yes. Well, it had split into groups ... at that time I didn't understand that the Communists were working at the dictates of a foreign government. I just thought their philosophy was destructive and very wrong. I had always believed in a genuinely democratic world. The idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat I accepted for awhile for Russia, on the theory that it was a temporary thing until Russia was transformed into a civilized nation that could take its place along side of industrial countries. For a short while some kind of organization from on top might be essential. They called it the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the word proletariat had always been so acceptable to me that I was willing to overlook the theory of dictatorship. But so far as the Communists in this country were concerned, they
Hetty: Just seemed like a destructive group of people to me. Their philosophy seemed more "down with" than "up with".

Hilb: So in the late 1920's, you found yourself unable to participate actively in the union or in the Socialist Party.

Hetty: Not in anything at all. That is one of the things that gave me the opportunity I had been waiting for.

Hilb: You did vote during this period?

Hetty: Oh yes, I voted Socialist. As a matter of fact, I did not vote for Roosevelt the first time he was elected. I think we voted for Norman Thomas. I can't remember if we voted for Al Smith in 1928, but I think by habit we would have voted for Norman Thomas.

Hilb: Did you vote for La Follette in 1924?

Hetty: No. I was for La Follette and I thought he was doing an excellent job, but I think I voted for Norman Thomas. I had voted for Eugene Debs, and then for Norman Thomas. Maybe my husband and I broke our habit and voted for Al Smith. We were for Smith.

Hilb: In 1934, California had the Upton Sinclair and E.P.I.C.
Socialist campaign. Did you participate in that?

No, I did not participate. I had been out of the Socialist party altogether. The movement sounded exciting to me, but I didn't think it had its feet on the ground too much. Neither my husband or I voted for it. We didn't see how one state could set itself off apart from the nation and have production for use rather than for profit in an environment where the profit motive was the governing motive and there was this terrific political and economic interdependence.

We didn't vote for Roosevelt, but when he made his inaugural speech, "Chase the money-changers out of the temple ..." I almost got goose-pimples yet when I think about that speech. My husband and I were both sitting in our little one-room and kitchen apartment ... we lived there until his death in 1945 ... and when we felt the understanding and deep sympathy Roosevelt had for the people as a whole and heard his concept that if the depression was to be cured at all, it would have to be done by a very fundamental change in the attitude of all America, it couldn't be done by the "trickling down" sort of
theory that Hoover had, that seven minutes of his inaugural speech just took the props right out from under us and from then on we were Roosevelt fans. It was the most amazing thing, I didn't believe it could have happened.

[ILB: Did this have anything to do with your decision to go back into the union?]

[ILYAS: Not \textit{per se}. That gave me a new faith and a new feeling of dedication that a new world was sure to come about, because the Socialists were not the only ones who had idealistic ideas. I had learned very early in the Socialist days that history was not made by individuals, that great heroes weren't the forces that made changes in mankind's thinking or status, and here was I suddenly obliged to think, "This is a man who can do it, a man who has big fundamentally democratic ideas." Don't forget that Roosevelt came at the same time as Hitler, at a time when almost everybody in this country thought that what we needed was a strong man.

During the years when I was out of the union and out of the Socialist Party, my friends became different
friends even. Because I was out of the union, I didn't associate with union members at all; I didn't want to get into arguments; I didn't want to meet people and find out later that they weren't democratic at all, that they were Communistic. So our friends became of a different category altogether, people who would have been classed as bourgeoisie. They were upper middle class, doctors and business people, all fairly cultured and interested in cultural things, but their political concepts ... well, they were even Republicans, they weren't even Democrats. Of course, to our way of thinking, the Democratic Party was not much ahead of the Republican Party. During the Hoover regime, and during the Hoover and Smith campaign, many of our acquaintances proclaimed that what this country needed was a strong man and look at Germany, the railroads were running on time now and all that.

Did this feeling pave the way for acceptance of Roosevelt as a personality?

It did and it didn't. When I found this man enunciating ideas that I could accept whole-heartedly, I became
frightened lest he were a strong man. As things developed, I saw the function of the administration was democratic. I know people accused Roosevelt of having been pretty dictatorial, I think every person in power is accused of that; nevertheless, I found that philosophies like Social Security, unemployment insurance compensation, things that we didn't even dare dream could ever happen, were coming to life, and they were being implemented because Roosevelt was surrounding himself with thinkers whose first concept was not a political victory. He was surrounding himself by professors, who subsequently were called the "brain trust" in derision.

Before Roosevelt, we saw bank after bank close down. (We personally had no money in banks). When the stockmarket crash came, for instance, you couldn't read a newspaper without finding suicide, suicide on every hand. When we were in Chicago, we found that the school teachers hadn't been paid in months and months. We heard of bankruptcies, foreclosures of poor people's mortgages. I saw people who looked
eyes: fairly well dressed opening up garbage cans and looking for what little food they could forage. I didn't see how human beings would ever emerge from it -- and then the New Deal came along.
Do you remember when the N.R.A. was passed, and Section 7A?

Oh, certainly. When the N.R.A. was passed, I suddenly came to life and thought, "My God, I wish I were back in the movement now." But I was dress-making and I was at home. As a matter of fact, I had a couple of girls working with me. They earned more than I did.

But the American Federation of Labor had its convention in San Francisco in 1934. When I read that, I couldn't resist the temptation to find out whether the I.L.G. had any delegates there. I was out of touch with the union completely. Even my former close friends in the union were out of the union. They had gone into different fields, and the people who remained were ones with whom I was not in correspondence. It was as though I had died and come to live in another life almost, I was so completely in another sort of world.
"Katya:"

Well, when the N.R.A. came into being and the American Federation of Labor convention came to San Francisco, I told my husband that I just had to find out whether any of my old colleagues were delegates to the convention. I went up to the union headquarters. By this time there was a little I.L.G. Evidently they had been through some fight and the needle trades, the Communist group, went out and the cloakmakers union of the I.L.G., Local 8, came back. I think dressmakers were already organized to some extent, Local 101.

I went up there and asked the woman in the office if she could tell me the names of the delegates and she couldn't, but she said, "You might ask the president. He's stopping at the Empire Hotel." I didn't even know who the president was. She told me it was President David Dubinsky. I called up Mr. David Dubinsky and wanted to know from him who the delegates were. He said, "Well, who is this talking?" I said, "Oh, you wouldn't know my name. I'm Jennie Katya and was a member of Local 22." He said, "Jennie Katya! Where in the hell are you?"
I was sort of surprised by that. You see, I was so active that many people, even out of our local, knew me. As a matter of fact, when I went out to see the world in 1917, I became the secretary of the local in Chicago the first night I arrived. A friend and I got as far as Chicago, this friend subsequently became a Communist, and the first night we arrived, before we looked for a place to stay or anything, I called the union office. I just had to feel that contact. The person in charge in Chicago knew who I was. He said, "We're having a meeting tonight. You come right over." I said, "But I haven't got a place to live yet." He said, "That's all right. We'll find you a place to live."

Of course I couldn't resist. Chicago had had a bitter strike and they had lost it. I was very eager to meet the people who had withstood the difficulties of that strike. The executive board had a meeting and they didn't have a secretary. There was great difficulty finding somebody who would be secretary of the local, and they said, "Well, what about Jennie? Would you be the secretary?" I
said, "Well, I'm not even a member of your local. I can't be." "A transfer is very easy. You be the secretary." I think Joel Seidman was in charge. And I was secretary of Local 100 all the time I was there, almost a year.

Dubinsky: Dubinsky had heard of you?

Hibb: He evidently had known who I was in New York and knew of all my activities. I called him and asked him if Luigi Antonini was a delegate. He had been a member of Local 25 along with me in the early days. He became an official in the union, but he had been a worker in the shop, as I was. And I wondered if Julius Hochman was a delegate. And when Dubinsky heard who I was, he said, "Yes, Luigi is a delegate and Hochman is a delegate. Never mind all of that. How about coming down and having dinner with me?"

I said, "Oh, I don't know. My husband and I are going to the theater tonight." We were going to the Opera House to see Mickey Rooney doing "Kiddishmer's Night Dream", and in those days I put on a dinner dress when I went to the theater. My husband never wore a dinner jacket, but I sort of got the habit.
during all these years that I was out of the movement. My associates all wore dinner gowns when they went to each other's house for dinner and, of course, when we went to the theater.

I went down in a flowing chiffon gown to meet David Dubinsky. I didn't know him from Adam, but he knew me very well. My husband and I went to his room and there he was with no collar on, his shirt sticking out, a little, pudgy guy, the president of the International. But he was a young person, full of verve. He said, "You know, all these years we often asked about you. We often wondered where you were. What are you doing now?" I told him I was just helping my husband to make a living, dressmaking. He said, "Are you coming to the sessions tomorrow?" And of course I was.

A few days later he was having a private dinner. He was elected as the vice-president of the American Federation of Labor, and for one of our international members to become the vice-president of the A.F. of L. was to me almost as wonderful as the advent of the New Deal. While Gompers had always had a lot of
admiration for the I.L.G. leadership, in the labor movement per se we didn't rate too high. We didn't go along with business unionism. Politically, we were sympathetic to the Socialist movement rather than the "reward your friends and punish your enemies" concept. So while we were always high in the esteem of Sam Gompers and Herbert Morrison, who was then the secretary and a very colorful person, in the American labor movement we were not accepted so warmly. Not only because our political concepts were so different, but because we were a union composed very largely of immigrants. We were called the "union of rag makers." The industry didn't rate quite so highly, for example, as machinists or printers. At any rate, we felt that way. Now that Dubinsky was being made a vice-president of the American Federation of Labor, it gave me the same feeling as the New Deal in the whole country. I had the feeling that there was a new attitude in the labor movement as well as in the entire nation.

When I attended the convention sessions, my husband said, "Jennie, that means you're going right
"back into the movement." I said, "Who, me? I died ten years ago, don't you know? I couldn't. Me, I'm dead." Well, needless to say, before the week was up Dubinsky asked whether I wouldn't come back. He pointed out how important it was, how much organizing was going on, and there was a lot of work still to be done. I thought, "Well, for awhile I ought to go back. Not for good." But this time I was coming back as an official, a full-paid organizer.

Tilb: Wasn't this the first time you had been paid?

Katras: No, I had been paid on and off. After every strike I was persuaded for a little while to stay on as a full time official until they could get a hold of the situation, because always after a strike there was a tremendous increase in union membership and union shops and a terrible insufficiency of personnel to handle it. I'd stay on, but I belonged to a group who made it a fetish not to be a paid official. Those paid roles, regarded as temporary. I'd stay on a few weeks and then run back to the factory, give up as soon as I thought I could be "spared".

This I also regarded as very temporary and I
told my husband so. It meant giving up all my customers for whom I was dressmaking, but I told them it would be just for a short while too. That I would be back in a little while, but now I had to help.

When Dubinsky asked whether I would consider going back on the job, he pointed out that with the influx of the new membership it would be very important to have somebody who knew our organization well enough, to be with the new members and to help organize the shops that were not yet organized. He asked me at the same time how I stood on the matter of Communism and working with the Communists. I was a bit surprised at the question. I took it for granted that he would know that I left the union because I couldn't go along with the Communists, but of course, a good many years had passed and he had no way of knowing whether I had changed in any way or not. I told him that of course I couldn't work with the Communists any more than I ever could. On the other hand, that I wouldn't be a good person to fight them either. I had left the union because I wasn't
Mayas: very good at that. I could neither work with them nor could I fight them. He said that was all right, he didn't expect me to fight them, just so long as he had it from me again that I couldn't possibly work with them.

Mill: Didn't he also mention that there were plenty of other people who could do the fighting?

Mayas: The International had been through a very bitter fight with the Communists; the Communists had almost wrecked the international so completely. The idealism of some of the old timers who held on in spite of everything is what gave life to the new I.L.G. that emerged in the '30's when the New Deal came in.

Mill: I wanted to ask if you had had any connections with or reactions to the San Francisco general strike of 1934.

Mayas: When the strike of '34 was on, my sympathies, of course, were terribly aroused, but I had no actual knowledge of what was going on. I was not yet in the movement. My husband was at work as a printing pressman. The streetcars had all stopped. Everything had stopped completely and there was a
Neyas: terrific quietude in the town. Our sympathy, of course, was with the strike.

Hib: But that in itself didn't make you want to get back into union activities?

Neyas: No, it was the N.R.A. and the fact that the American Federation of Labor had its convention here and my nostalgia to meet with our old timers, and then when I met with our old timers and I was asked to come back and I found that there was something more that I could do and that I could do it again, of course, I just couldn't be held back. I didn't need any urging to come back; I was delighted at the opportunity.

I remember this dinner Dubinsky had in the hotel for the delegates and a few friends. I was invited to the dinner, my husband and I. Dubinsky told a little of his own background, and of course, that endeared him to me forever. He has a wonderful sense of humor that isn't easily understood, but if you know him and he's in his more intimate moments, he's very lovely and easy to take. He told of the time when he was arrested in Russia and sent to Siberia.
He had become a member of the Socialist Party in Russia and he had been active as a very young boy. He was a baker because his father had a bakery and he worked for his father. There was a strike one time and his father's shop was affected. This was all in Russia. And he was out in front leading the strike against his father, not because he had anything against his father, but because he felt his duty was to be with the workers. Nevertheless, his father tried everything he could to keep the boy from being arrested, but he was arrested and sent to Siberia. He was in Siberia for some time. Someone asked him "How did you get out of Siberia?" "Well," said Dubinsky, "It was cold, and I went for a walk and just kept walking and I landed in the United States."

Even in his young days that was sort of his attitude. When he came to the United States he went to work as a baker too, because that had been his experience. He told my husband of the time when he remembered me. He had eventually gotten into our trade because he wanted to do so. Somebody had
Gotten him a job as an assistant cutter. First he was a member of the bakers' union. Then he got a job as an apprentice cutter and he became a very good cutter and remained one. All the time that he was sort of active in Local 10, the cutters' union, the headquarters were across the street from our local. But some of us always regarded Local 10 as a local whose concepts were very different. They were very distinctly a craft local, very interested in their craft pay, and their philosophy was more analogous to business unionism than to our concept of a union with a soul.

While he was active as just a member of the cutters' union, he was also active in the cooperative movement in New York. New York City had cooperative restaurants. There was one such restaurant on Second Avenue and he reminded me that I used to come into the restaurant. (One has to support a cooperative restaurant). He was the waiter in that restaurant, and he reminded me of the fellow who used to take me in there. He remembered the fellow much better than I did. He too was somebody who thought he was in love
with me, but my mind was on the union. Love just
had no room in those young days, there just was no
time for it. Bender used to take me to dances and
to the Ethical Culture Society and I used to love to
go to the Ethical Culture Society on Sunday morning
and hear their sermons and music, which was very
unusual for a person in my group. Most of the people
in my group would have considered that sort of thing
just bourgeois, "sop stuff." I always wanted to
understand why people think and feel and behave
differently, and I sort of liked the way people felt.

Dib: Dubinsky asked you to be an official. What title
was that?

Netys: He said, "I don't care. Take your title. Be what
you like, just so long as you're here and help the
organization".

Dib: Did you know David Gisnet and Rose Pesotta who were
working with Local 101?

Netys: Yes. I met them, I hadn't known them. Rose Pesotta
had known me, but I hadn't known Rose. She was in
the midst of fighting the Communists while I was at
school. She came in to activity in my union, I
think as an anarchist, after I went out of the union, in New York. But she had known me, evidently. When I came in here to Local 101, Rose Pesotta was in Los Angeles, I think.

She helped organize 101 in '33 and '34.

Yes, for a very short while. Feinberg did a great deal.

In what I've read, credit goes to Rose Pesotta and David Gisnet.

Gisnet too was an anarchist. He was employed to work with Rose Pesotta. When I came in, Rose Pesotta was not here. I met her quite awhile afterward. She came up from Los Angeles. Gisnet was here.

You regarded Feinberg as the leader?

Feinberg was the International representative, Israel Feinberg. He was one of the managers of the cloakmakers' union in New York City, and then he came out to the West Coast. He was both in Los Angeles and San Francisco; he was the director of anywhere on the coast. As a matter of fact, Feinberg staged the walk-out of the cloakmakers' local and when the cloakmakers got their agreement, Feinberg succeeded in getting the dress
This was in 1934?
Yes. I think he succeeded in persuading the dress manufacturers to come to an understanding, that the climate was now entirely pro-union, organization was on the march, and nobody could withstand it. That it would be much better to come to an agreement than it would be to have interruption in production. Because the cloakmakers had had middle of the day walk-outs. He persuaded the manufacturers and he got it. As a matter of fact, the shops were sent to him. The employers signed the agreement, and then the workers came in to join the union.

When Dubinsky got me to take on responsibility, Gisnet was sort of there, but a fellow by the name of Sam White was the man in charge. It was all very new, it was still small, and the Local 101 membership was completely raw. They didn't understand unionism at all. When I looked over the situation, I said to Dubinsky, "Look, I'll come in, but I'm more eager to bring unionism to the people who are in the union than I am in doing anything else."
You didn't want to be an organizer?

I didn't mind being an organizer. I was an organizer, but I wanted also to do educational work.

Dubinsky said, "You can do whatever you like, just so long as you're there." He knew me well enough to know that once I was there I'd wash dishes if necessary; it didn't matter what I was doing. Of course, unionism was my blood. I didn't have to be given guidance or directions. He thought once I was there he would have somebody on whom he could rely. Anyhow, he said, "You want to be educational director? You can call yourself organizer and educational director, anything you like." And I called myself organizer and educational director only in the hope that through that I'd have access to educational media that I'd be able to bring to the membership.

This was a brand new union. I'd like to explore with you just how it was organized, the step by step problems. First of all, it seems from what I've read that you got a certain kind of worker to come in, but the Chinese were largely unorganized and that they were tremendous competition.
I know where you got your information. The Chinese problem was a problem immediately. In fact, it was always a problem. The Chinese work was done in factories in Chinatown, but most of the work was done for manufacturers who had their offices and showrooms downtown in San Francisco. The factory work was contracted out to Chinatown. When I came in Dubinsky was very eager that Chinatown should be organized. He appointed a young Chinese boy, whom I subsequently suspected of being a Communist. The Communist Party was out of our union. The party did a very thorough job in smashing our union, but we succeeded eventually in getting the party activity out, and the I.L.G. activity came back in. But a lot of people who came back came back as Communists, only not openly so. They swore up and down they weren't Communists, but it didn't take too long to find out in some cases that they were.

Was this Chinese boy a Communist in the Russian rather than the Chinese sense?

Yes... well, I didn't know enough in those days to
Know about the Russian sense or the Chinese sense. He was a member of the Kuomintang. We thought that was Communist. At any rate, he made very little progress in Chinatown, and when we found that he was regarded in Chinatown as a Communist, we just had to let him go altogether. For awhile I tried to do what I could.

But my main concern for the time being was not Chinatown, it was to make the people who flocked to the union more than mere card holders, to bring unionism to them, to make them function as union members, and to make them understand what the union agreement was. I said at one of the conventions that San Francisco presented the spectacle of workers coming to the office of the union and saying, "My boss joined the union. Where do I buy a book?"

Mlb: You had had closed shop agreements with the manufacturers?

Hays: I don't like the terms closed shop or open shop. We had union shop agreements where workers were obliged to be members of the union.

We came to these workers with tenets that they
hadn't understood. The problem of equal distribution of work, for example, which was one of our old, old tenets in the days long before there was any unemployment compensation, when the end of the season meant starvation for many people. We had the philosophy that whatever little work there was should be shared. Well, we came with this tenet to the San Francisco membership too. The membership had had the philosophy always that when there was no more work, the old timers got the work, seniority, and the others were let go. We said this would be a case of punishing the one who had been punished all the time; a person who was the last person to find a job would be the first person to be thrown out of a job. We thought that was very unfair and we had to get our membership to accept and believe in the theory of equal distribution of work rather than the theory of seniority, even though the latter was accepted by the entire labor movement.

I wondered, were these people coming into the union in San Francisco native Americans, or were they a particular national group?
Matyas: A good many were native Americans. I mentioned Mrs. Ann McSprit, for example. She was one of the pioneers of 1934. There were others who were certainly native Americans. In the dress industry a good many were native Americans. I soon learned that a tremendous number were Spanish-speaking, Mexican, Costa Rican, all South of the border, but mostly Mexican.

Ellb: Weren't the Spanish-speaking people an entirely different problem, to organize them?

Matyas: Yes, they were a different problem, but that was not unusual to me because in New York City we had many languages, though the predominating language in New York City, beside English and Yiddish, was Italian. Now in San Francisco the predominating language, besides English, was Spanish.
ORGANIZING, THE 1930's

Amco Manufacturing Company - "Facing the Facts"

Katyas: But in addition to that, of course, many of the shops were not organized and it was my job to try to bring them into the union.

Milb: How did you do that?

Katyas: There were quite a number of dress shops and blouse shops that we tried to organize. We had strikes in some instances. We lost one particular shop strike. Others came in as soon as the workers walked out.

But take the case of an underwear shop. One day a man telephoned to me and said, "My wife works in an underwear shop and it's not in the union. What can be done about it?"

I said, "Well, I'd be very happy to talk to your wife." "Oh, she wouldn't go down to the union. She's afraid to be seen." I said, "Well, I'll come to your wife. I'll come to her house. How about the other people in the shop? Are they interested?"
"Well, she has a few people in the shop, but none of them would come down to the union because they are afraid of losing their jobs if they come down to the union." I said, "All right. Can you have your wife invite some of the other girls to your house and I'll come there."

He was very leery at first to even give me his name, but before the conversation was over he gave me his name and address and made an appointment for me for the very next evening to go to his house to meet his wife and two or three people whom she trusted. They said, "Well, that's fine. We'd like very much to have a union, but I'm afraid there isn't any hope because the employer is Syrian and all the people working there are his relatives. We'd never get away with anything."

I said, "How many people are not relatives? How about trying to call more people to your house?"

We had another meeting and more and more people came and pretty soon we had a goodly number of the people. It developed that the relatives of the firm were really just a handful, and the majority of the
people were just working people who hadn't the courage to trust each other, because naturally, in non-union shops there is always the fear that if the employer finds out that somebody is interested in unions, he will be fired.

Within about two weeks or so we succeeded in getting the majority of the workers to come to Julia's house ... she's still working in one of the shops ... Julia Dana. We had the majority of the workers persuaded that the only way they could get a union contract was to be determined that that's what they wanted. If the employer wouldn't give us the union contract, they would have to be willing to strike for it. They assured me they were.

So I contacted the employers, the Amco Manufacturing Company. Mr. Anthony was the employer. I since have learned to respect Mr. Anthony very much, but when I first approached him and advised him that his workers were members of the union and that they wished to negotiate for a union contract, he said, "Nothing doing. I should say not. I always treated my workers fair and my workers are happy. Let me
Katyas: know, who here wants the union shop?

I had to assure him that the majority of his workers did but that I wasn't able to divulge any names unless we had a union agreement or if he were willing to negotiate for the discussion of a union agreement. Well, he asked what we would want. I told him that for one thing we wanted a thirty-seven and a half hour week. The forty-hour week was already a fait accompli by the Wage and Hour Law. And we would want a scale of wages ranging from such and such a rate on up.

At that time the State of California had a minimum wage law for women of sixteen dollars a week; but when the Wage and Hour Law came in, instead of working forty-eight hours people in interstate commerce now worked forty hours. Then the Director of Industrial Welfare, whose name was Nabel Kinney, interpreted that to mean that since women could now only work forty hours, their wage came down to a proportion of the minimum wage, or $13.33. Well, of course the labor movement fought that very hard.
Thirteen dollars and thirty-three cents was the minimum for women in industry in the early '30's. The people working in that shop didn't make anything like thirteen dollars and thirty-three cents. They were doing piece work and Mr. Anthony said, "They can make a hundred a week if they can. If they don't make it, it's their fault."

The firm, of course, refused to negotiate and they refused to believe that their workers were interested in having a union shop. We couldn't persuade them to meet with us for the purposes of negotiating a union contract. We said, "Look, we suggest you think it over because if you absolutely refuse, there'll be no work." He laughed and said, "All right, let's see."

He didn't believe it for a moment. He was convinced that I was just a union organizer who came to threaten him, but had nothing to back it up with. The next day there was no work. I had a meeting with the workers and advised them. I said, "Put it to a vote. Where do you want to go from here? Are you ready to fight for it?" They voted a hundred
Katyas: percent that they were ready to fight for it, and
the next day, instead of going to work, we all met
in front of the shop at 737 Mission Street in San
Francisco, across the street from the Emporium.
Nobody went up to work. Even the few Syrians who
were theoretically relatives, I don't know if they
were or not, even they didn't go up.

Well, that strike was one of the easiest strikes
I ever had to conduct. It lasted ten days. The
employer refused to believe that it would last; he
thought he would soon have the people back. Nobody
reported for work. No scabs even reported for work.
We had our meetings at the union headquarters during
the day, and the union kitchen turned into a kitchen
for strikers. Pretty soon it got to be so easy that
we'd have very few pickets and we'd have picnics with
the other members. That was an exceptional case,
however, because there wasn't anybody scabbing and we
were able to take it easy.

Well, I contacted Mr. Anthony several times by
telephone and finally, ten days later, he agreed to
Matyas: I met me when he saw that every attempt ... of course, the Firm tried to contact the workers at home. At first there were threats that unless they came back, their jobs would be filled by other people. When he saw that there was nothing to do, that the workers were really determined to have a union contract, he called me in and said, "Well, Mr. Matyas, when I was a salesman and working for somebody else, there was a motto on my boss' door that said, 'Face Facts or Facts Will Face You.' And now I am facing a fact." And from then on I liked him.

And there we had the first contract on the West Coast for underwear workers.

Clib: They were to be a part of Local 101?

Matyas: Yes, we weren't going to make a local for one little shop.

Of course, it was quite something for this employer. At first he said, "Well, why do you single me out? I have to sell to the same Emporium, to the same buyers. If I have to give a thirty-seven and a half hour week and an increase in wages, I won't be able to produce." Of course, that's usually
a pretty telling argument with workers, but finally he just realized that he'd either sign or he'd have nothing at all.

Kaloof Corporation - When the Persimmons Flew

Well, when he signed, the workers wages began to go up. Kaloof Corporation, the other underwear shop, and incidentally, he was a relative of Anthony, was petrified that his workers might also join the union. Of course, we began to work on the Kaloof workers; we sent leaflets there and asked them to join the union. Kaloof became pretty nervous over that situation and as soon as we signed the agreement, he called his workers together and said, "Look, I know some of you were talking in terms of going to the union. You don't need to do that. These outside agitators, all they want is your money, your dues. If you want a union, you can make a union of your own right in the shop here. You can have your own president; you won't have to spend any money on anything at all. If you want to pay dues, pay it to yourselves and
Matyas: use the money for picnics or for Christmas presents. You can elect your own president, and if you have any shop grievances, you can have your meetings and bring them to me and we'll iron it out. That way you can have your own union with none of them there outsiders buttling in."

And the workers fell for it. After that the few who had shown an interest didn't come around any more at all.

Gilb: Did he offer better wages and hours?

Matyas: He offered them thirty-seven and a half hours. He said, "We'll give you the same thing that Amco gets. Whatever Amco's got, we'll give you too, and you won't need one of them outside unions."

They thought, "Well, gee, that's fine." And they got the thirty-seven and a half hour week and the increase in wages and the goose hung high for them. And for quite awhile there was nothing I could do, nothing any of us could do to interest the workers in the aloof Corporation in the organization. We tried to warn the workers that a company union is not a
genuine union, that sooner or later they would find out that they would not be able to adjust grievances even if they had the courage to want to have them adjusted unless they were in a genuine union, but we had very cold reception.

One evening, about seven o'clock ... I usually stayed late in my office to work because then I could do things that I couldn't do in the daytime with a lot of people around. I was always with people, always working, directing or doing and I couldn't do the quiet things that had to be done. And I was at my machine typing something when I looked up and lo and behold, there was a girl standing in front of me. I can't remember her name now.

She said, "Hello." I looked up at her and said, "Yes?" She said, "You the organizer?" I said, "Yes." "Well, I came to bring you some dirt. You interested?" I said, "No, I'm interested in organizing." "Well, I work in Maloof and if you want to do them dirt, I can sure give it to you." I said, "Sorry lady, I'm not interested."
She looked at me. She couldn't believe it. She said, "You are the organizer?" "Yes, but no organizer is ever interested in dirt. We're interested in organizing a shop, but dirt won't do it." She said, "Well, you know what I mean." I said, "I'm inclined to think that you have a grievance and if you want to tell me about it, I would certainly be glad to hear about it. I'd give anything to be able to organize Maloof. What is it?"

"Well, I'm the president of the union." Then, of course, I was tremendously interested. I said, "Well, glad to meet you. Sit right down and let's hear what gives."

"Well, I fell for all that stuff, when Maloof said we'd have everything the other shop had and that we wouldn't have to bother with outside business agents. I fell for all that and we elected a price committee. Gee, when I make any complaints about the prices, and that's what I'm supposed to do if they're not right, he wants to fire me."

Well, of course, I was very much interested. I made her feel comfortable and told her that when
people haven't the protection of an organization behind them, naturally the employer will try to get rid of any worker who threatens his price arrangement. He'd like to buy labor as cheaply as he can and when there's somebody who has the courage to say "No, this isn't adequate," he naturally will try to get rid of this person and hope that he'll then be able to go on with whatever conditions he wants.

"Yeah, sure. But that's not what he said. He said we could feel free to come and talk; and when I really do it, this is what I get for it. If you want to do dirt, I'm here to help you."

I said, "Look, just get it through your head that spite work won't organize anything. Now, if you think we can get the other workers in the shop to understand that through unionism they can get an agreement signed and get a collective agreement that will be binding whereby a union official can go up in case there's difficulty ... he can't fire the union official because he didn't employ the union official; he can fire the individual if she has no protection, but he can't fire me. If you can get
the workers to understand that and to understand that the only reason he promised that thirty-seven and a half hour week was because the girls at Amco had already gotten it through the union and so you just got it all for free ... If you can get your fellow workers to understand that and join the union, I'll help you every inch of the way."

"Well, I don't know, but I'll sure try. I know I can get all the girls in the zig-zag department." She was working on a zig-zag machine.

I said, "Well, that's hardly enough, but bring them up and I'll be very happy to speak with them."

So sure enough, the next evening the zig-zag girls came up and I spoke with them and I got them to sign up for a union shop. But they said they didn't know if they could get the others because now they elected another president and the other union would fight the idea especially hard. It wouldn't be only Kalee that would fight, but the company union, the other workers in the shop would fight it. I said, "Well, do what you can."

The next morning they went back to work and this
girl, Ada, went with them and lo and behold, Ada was fired. When she was fired, she came to me and said, "I can get all the zig-zag girls to stay out."

I called up Mallof and I said, "Look, Mr. Mallof, there are people in your shop who are in the union. They want a union agreement, but at any rate, at this moment you fired one of your workers and I suggest that this girl be back on the job."

"Certainly not. She can never work in my shop again." And I couldn't get anywhere with him.

I said, "Well, you know I have recourse. I can go to the N.L.R.B. and put in a complaint, but I think it would be better if we got together."

That evening Ada went to the shop and got all the zig-zag girls to come to the union and, with them, some others who were furious about the fact that she was fired. I said, "Look, you say it's very busy now." "Yes, it's terribly busy." "Unless we do something right away it'll be Christmas and then he won't give a damn." This was in November. "All the orders will be filled and then we can have months."

I said, "All right, I tried to get Mallof to see it, but I couldn't. Are you people game not to go
to work? You know it means taking on the rest of the shop."

Yes, they were game. Today it's she and tomorrow it may be one of us.

I pointed out -- I always did, I never believed in promising sure victory -- I pointed out that it would be terribly difficult since, although they were the key group in the shop, they were only a craft, and if the rest of the shop were fighting, or working, they might lead the employer to believe they could lick you and you might all be out of a job and all losing. It really means a fight this time! it's not a picnic. Well, they were game.

"O.K., if you're game, I'll call up Mr. Maloof tomorrow morning that he either puts Ada back or none of you go back to work."

Well, when he found that all the zig-zag girls were out, he became pretty panicky and he said, "All right, let them come back to work. Let Ada come too."

I said, "Let's make an appointment for a discussion of a union shop." "Well, I'm very busy now." etcetera.

I said, "Look girls, my advice to you is to go
Katya: back in the open and talk unionism, because he already knows you're in the union anyhow. You didn't get a union shop because you don't think we can get it with the other union in there, but you've won your victory because Ada is going back with you to work. Just openly ask people to join the union and explain what the union really is."

"Well, gee, we'll be fired."

"O.K., if you're fired we'll act, but in the meantime, go back with the full knowledge that you're sticking together. Even your little sticking together got you the reinstatement of Ada."

They went back. A lot of them were Mexican, but they spoke English. Fiery, lovely Mexican.

I couldn't get an appointment for a discussion of the union contract at all and life was made pretty miserable for them and somebody else was fired. This time they said, "We're not going back." And there was no point in their going back.

I could have filed with the N.L.R.B. to have these girls reinstated, but the girls were willing
Reinstated until the work was finished and then they'd all be out of luck. The international was ready to back them up in a fight. Of course, that meant that we'd have to support them and we knew it would mean arrests because in this case it would mean real fighting. Members of the company union would feel that their 'union' was challenged and they had to fight for their union as against this outside union. And it was a real fight. The shop was on 767 Market Street. The majority of the workers in this instance were upstairs working.

Actually, I went upstairs one time because during the fight somebody was hurt and they dared me to come up. I went up and one of the girls took her scissors and was going to stab me with it. I just looked at her and said, "Don't be foolish, don't be foolish." And she stopped, heavens knows why. They were all furious because somebody had been hurt, not too badly, and was bleeding.

You see, these girls downstairs on the picket
Matyas: Line were fighting for their jobs and they felt if they didn't win, they'd all be out of luck. They fought for fair, they weren't going to let anybody go to work.

Iliob: The fighting was when anybody would try to cross the line.

Matyas: They just wouldn't let anybody go up to scab, and they called them "scab" naturally.

But this shop was on Market Street. At that time, there was a market down there. Inside were groceries and meat, but outside was the vegetable part. It was late in November and it was persimmon time. The vegetable market owner was very sympathetic with the strikers, because he had known what their real earnings up there were. These workers had been his customers for many years. I don't know whether he was Italian or what, but he said, "Tomatoes or potatoes, helpa youself girls, helpa yourself."

Well, the girls were thrilled by that, so instead of helping themselves to tomatoes or potatoes, they helped themselves to good, ripe persimmons. And the persimmons flew. They just messed up everything.
I was on the line. As a matter of fact, I tried to keep order on the line. Quite frankly, I wasn't a bit disturbed by the potatoes or the tomatoes. I didn't care a bit if the girls did help themselves. I wasn't seeing that. Personally, I'm sort of cowardly about things like that. I never engaged in any fisticuffs in my life. As a matter of fact, in New York City once I was on a picket line and I was furious and this time I was just going to let a girl have it, because she was the one person who was keeping the shop from settling for weeks and weeks. There was nobody around and I was going to go up and beat her to keep her from going to work. I went up with my fist closed, ready to beat her and by the time I got to her, my fist opened wide and I just sort of patted her and said, "Oh, you little scab." She said, "You go away or I'll call the police." I said, "Well, call the police. I didn't do anything. I'm just telling you you're a little scab."

She called the police and I stood there like an idiot and I was arrested and had to pay a fine. But
Matyas: I never could indulge in anything physical, I haven't got it in me.

Gilb: You're kind of tiny.

Matyas: No, it isn't that, I told you before how I beat a policeman one time in New York when he mistreated a lot of girls.

In front of Maloofs, the policemen were there and the girls threw persimmons and threw a persimmon on one of the policemen, and of course he just arrested everybody, including me. He was quite furious. When we came up before the judge, he said, "Yes, Your Honor, they threw persimmons all over my uniform and I had to get it cleaned." And I talked up and said, "Oh, we'd be very pleased to pay for the cleaning, Your Honor. We didn't mean it at all." The judge was so entertained by that he turned around to the policeman and said, "Well, Officer, what do you say?" "Well, if they'll pay for the cleaning ..." and we were all dismissed, that day.

The next day I was arrested again, charged with disorderly conduct. That was a funny one because I was on the line that day to see to it that the girls
would go two by two. I was there to maintain order. Maloof came down and I saw him point to me. The policeman called me over, and I assumed that Maloof pointed out the fact that I was the official and he was calling me over to tell me that I had better make sure the girls walked on the outside of the sidewalk or something. I went over, thinking I was going over for instruction, and he said, "In there." I said, "What for?" He said, "In there."

He picked up a few more and took us for a ride. This time I really was furious, because everything was orderly and he just crooked his finger at me, said, "In there", and threw me in the police wagon. It used to be that when I was very furious I'd cry. This time I was so ashamed of myself because my fury made the tears come to my eyes. The idea of tears and crying in the presence of a policeman was just beneath my everything, whereupon the policeman chirped up and said, "You're a hell of an organizer. Gee, when I carried a card, I expected to be arrested. What kind of an organizer are you?" I looked at him and I grinned and said, "What card did you ever carry?"

"I was a member of the Teamsters' union", said my
Miss Katyas: police officer, but just the same I was arrested.

Well, the judge had all the girls there and he asked me how long I had been in San Francisco. I told him I had been there since 1925. He said, "Since 1925? Were you ever arrested before?" And before I had a chance to answer, the assistant prosecuting attorney, a woman, said, "Miss Katyas was arrested dozens of times, Your Honor, dozens of times." And I said, "Oh no, Your Honor, not dozens of times. Maybe one dozen times." That was very funny and subsequently a reported from the News, a woman by the name of Ethel Sorardus, who is dead since, had quite an article on it. "Jennie Katyas protests, not dozens of times, maybe one dozen times."

Well, I was put on probation. I was furious because other times I was guilty, but this time I hadn't done anything, the girls hadn't done anything. Just a crook of the finger, a nod of the boss and there I was and put on probation.

Well, the next day I was around the corner on the picket line. I had another strike on, the Carey Plouse Shop. It was also quite a fight. I was on
the picket line and a policeman came around and arrested me from that shop, and it was also a quiet picket line. The day before I had been put on probation and probation means that the next time you come up, you automatically "hit it" if you're found guilty. So I was frightened and disturbed. I didn't mind being arrested, I didn't mind if they sentenced me, but I had these two strikes on my hands and it was too important that I be present all the time. I couldn't afford the time of being sent away. I got the Labor Council to look into the matter and when my case came up ten days later, to my surprise, case dismissed. Just dismissed. It wasn't even heard much even.

This Kaloof fight went on for some time and became pretty nasty, but eventually, while the others in the company union didn't join the union, they didn't go to work. They sort of lost courage about going to work and Kaloof finally signed an agreement. Of course, shortly after that the season was over and there wasn't much work and when the season began, that firm tried in every way possible to live up to the letter of the agreement, but certainly not the spirit of it. In fact, he tried even to get around the letter
of the agreement. There were constant, constant complaints in that shop. I almost had to live in the shop. The fights were over a sixteenth of a penny, but they used to be quite terrific. But the girls who were in the union originally not to be very good union girls and they not to be pretty understanding people. They were able to work with the others. I had to work very hard to get the firm to understand that the agreement would expire in one year and we would have to have a renewal and that they had better win the other girls over. Well, there were two or three renewals, but each time it was very difficult. We didn't have to have a strike again, but finally the firm went out of business altogether. It was a very penny ante affair.

Well, that sort of work had to go on a great deal to get the other shops that were not in the union into the union on a one by one basis.

Gib: They didn't belong to an employers' group?

Katya: No. Those who belonged to the employers' association were in the union, but there were many employers, there are even today who do not belong to their association.
You would have preferred to have bargained collectively with them?

Yes, the union would prefer to bargain with associations, naturally.

But you couldn't do it when they didn't belong.

When they didn't belong, we had no alternative.

Help of Other Unions

Were you helped during all this striking by other unions?

Oh yes. We had quite a number of strikes after that and whenever we wanted help, we got help. The Teamsters always helped us. They never crossed the picket line. They were wonderful, always. Also, the International helped because the local here didn't have any money yet. In the early days of the union, when we went on strike we just had no help and we just went hungry. In the '30's pretty nearly everybody was in dire need because it came right after that depression, and the International didn't have money. We gave out regular strike relief. I think it was something like five dollars a week; subsequently it went up to eight dollars a week. But
Katyas: When people went out on strike, I never promised that there would be relief. I always said, "If they have to be relieved, they will be relieved." I always wanted the people to feel that it was their fight, that they really wanted unionism badly enough to fight for it if they couldn't get it through negotiations which we always tried first.

Jilb: Did Local 8 help you also?

Katyas: Oh yes, they helped. We always asked Local 8 people to come and help on the picket line, for example, before they went to work.

Jilb: You never had any jurisdictional problems?

Katyas: Oh no, we never had any jurisdictional problems in San Francisco. In our International, we had very few jurisdictional problems. We had very few in New York City. There were some problems between Local 1 and 117, but that is ironed out. A jurisdictional problem in our International was a rare thing.

The Sirella Sit-Down Strike

Katyas: The Sirella sit-down strike was a very interesting situation. This time also a group of people came to
Matyas: It's interesting, I'm always giving you organizational activity that was so easy, when people came to me. Other times it was difficult, we had to go to the homes of people and try to persuade them, but the fact is that organization is always successful when the people themselves feel some injury so badly that of their own volition they are ready for help.

They came to me and asked me to help them get a better wage. They were all ready to join the union because their wage was much too low. This was in '36 or so. I had a number of meetings with the workers. I found a nice group of workers, all Americans; I had no problem with the language whatever. They were all eager to join the union; they all felt that they were underpaid. We had the certification cards, and we went to the employer and asked him to negotiate and he said he couldn't negotiate, that there never was a union shop in his shop and there wasn't going to be any. I advised him that unless he changed his mind and would talk to us, the facts would face him, to quote Mr. Anthony.

Nothing would persuade him. Finally he said,
"Ah, there's nothing I can do. It comes from the East. This is just a branch, I'm just the manager, and the answer is, well, I don't see what right anybody has to complain. People are well off here. We don't want any outside interference." There's always that 'outside interference' business that is thrown at one.

I assured him that it was the wish of his workers that there be a union contract and that unless he agreed to bargain for the best terms that he could get, that there would be no work at all. He naturally didn't believe it, or perhaps it was quite true that he had no power to do anything about it, but the answer so far as the workers were concerned was "No."

I had a meeting with the workers in the shop and I had to tell them that the answer was absolutely "No", I couldn't budge the employer at all. One of them got up and said, "Well, if he refuses to recognize our right to join a union, if he refused to negotiate for a union shop, we'll refuse to work." I said, "Do you think you're willing to stay out?" They were
very enthusiastic and they said, "We certainly are."

They were all very aggrieved and felt they were working for much less than they should have been getting and they couldn't make a living on what they were earning. Something entered my head out of the clear and I said, "Well, do you think you might be willing to stay in?" It caught their imagination.

You had never tried a sit-down strike before?

No, but the papers were filled with sit-down strikes. And I thought, "Well, staying in might produce better results than going out." I didn't think they would go along with it, and I didn't take it seriously either. Something just sort of possessed me to say "Do you think you would be willing to stay in?"

They all said, "Yes, we will." Well, I'm pretty sure none of them thought they would really need to carry through.

We went to see the employer again in an attempt to get him to talk. He didn't say that what we were asking for was too much. He didn't say that he wouldn't recognize the right of the workers to have a union negotiate for them. He agreed to meet them
individually, but he wouldn't negotiate with the union. I suppose the main office was afraid that if this shop organized, their eastern shops would also organize.

At any rate, when I reported it back to the shop, they agreed to go back the next morning and just sit down and not work, and they did. They went and they just sat down and they didn't come out at quitting time. They brought their lunches with them ... I said "Maybe you'd better stick a nightgown in your bag." There were men and women and they came prepared to stay. I didn't know what to do with it myself, but there it was. I didn't know how to meet with the workers because they were in the factory. It was an entirely new situation.

Well, that evening I went there and I waited outside until I saw the employer leave the factory and then I sneaked in and I had a meeting with the workers and I said, "Well, how about it? Still want to stay in?" "Oh yes, we're going to stay until he changes his mind."

Well, actually, it was a much better situation
Miyas: because there was no picketing on the outside, there was no disturbance, there was no scuffling. It was just a case of their ability to stick it out inside. Then came the question of food, how to get food to them. I've forgotten how many workers were involved, about sixty or eighty workers. Some were younger, some were older. It would mean sleeping on the concrete factory floor. I was a little bit nervous lest some of them might get sick. But nothing would change their minds. They had a right to a union contract, the employer refused to meet that right, and they were going to fight it out.

Well, the whole town, the whole labor movement was interested. It was the only sit-down strike in the area.

Hlb: Was it the first one in San Francisco?

Miyas: I think so. Certainly, it was the only one as far as I know of in our I.L.G. and I hadn't heard of any other in the area.

The town of Emeryville, where the strike was on, was interested. The townspeople offered food. I'd sneak in to meet with them at midnight, because the
employer would have somebody around pretty late.
Sometimes the employer would come around even after midnight. The workers had a big empty box all fitted out for me so that if the employer was anywhere near, I could hide in the box, and I had to hide several times. But actually I conducted some classes in there. I invited some other people to come in and read poetry and all sorts of things, midnight meetings.

Jibb: How long did it last?

Katyas: It lasted about six weeks.

Jibb: The people weren't there all that time?

Katyas: They were there all that time. We managed to smuggle some out to go home and take a shower and come back occasionally.

Jibb: What about children and families?

Katyas: Other people looked after them. And they won their strike. They all got their increases finally, but once again, after a year or two or three the place was shut down, but it didn't last too long.

Jibb: Did you ever try a sit-down strike again?

Katyas: No.

Jibb: Did you think it was an effective way of striking?
Matyas: Well, it was effective at that period, during that time.

Gilb: But not for ordinary circumstances?

Matyas: No. You see, that factory was so situated, it was a one story cottage affair and not too difficult to get food into it. They were the only tenants of the building. Now, in a regular factory building I think it would be very difficult. But anyhow, to everybody's surprise, it lasted five or six weeks and I think the manager of the plant himself was a very helpless and unhappy person. I think when finally he got word from the East that he could concede, he was as happy as the workers were.

**Organizing the Chinese Workers**

Matyas: In 1937 the Wagner Act came into being. After the repeal of the N.R.A., for awhile things didn't look too good. When the Wagner Act was passed, organization took a new spirit. At this time, the Chinese workers, whom we had tried to organize for years ...

Gilb: I remember Rose Pesotta had investigated Chinatown in 1934 and the convention in 1934 had given the
Gilb: officials permission to go ahead and organize. But it wasn't done at that time?

Katya: We tried. No, Rose Pesotta was in Los Angeles at the time. I was here, but Rose Pesotta had been here before '34 and she tried to organize the workers in Chinatown with no success. It was no reflection on her ability. It was just very difficult to organize the Chinese workers.

I tried for a couple of years or more to do everything in my power to arouse the interest of the Chinese workers for unionization. I couldn't get to first base with it at all. I talked to a number of Chinese intellectuals who spoke English and who were very interested in the welfare of their people. They would have liked to have seen unionization among the Chinese workers in so-called Chinatown. I hate that term, Chinatown. I don't think they like it either, but they just sort of take it for granted. I know that a Chinese doesn't like to be called a "Chinaman". But we had heard of conditions in so-called Chinatown where people worked all hours for six or seven dollars a week and worked at home.
Bill: Child labor?

Katye: I don't know. I learned that the Chinese love their children tremendously and I'm not sure if there was child labor. But they themselves worked all hours of the night and worked at home. While part of the legislation that came in with the N.R.A. forbade home work, still it existed because there was no policing of the matter.

But we couldn't organize them. I remember, Feinberg, the Coast director, and I spoke to a very fine young Chinese intellectual who I think was a graduate of the University of California. He understood the situation very well and wished that the Chinese could come under the protection of unionism, but when we offered him a job and asked him to help organize, he wouldn't do it. We couldn't understand why. We said, "But look, you say you recognize that the workers will go on suffering these dreadful conditions until they do organize and have the benefit of unionism and yet you won't help. Who can? We can't speak to them. Will you explain why you won't?" He said, "Well, you don't know the tradition of Chinese. If ever, ever, ever anything were to go
Slys: wrong, I wouldn't be forgiven, my children wouldn't be forgiven, my children's children wouldn't be forgiven by the Chinese."

Sib: What kind of thing did he expect to go wrong?

Satyas: Well, they believed implicitly in the fact, they used to say, so to me many times, they believed they had to be cheap labor in order to be employed at all. They thought that if they were to put a value on their labor commensurate with the labor of the rest of us, "why would the employers give work to Chinatown; why wouldn't they keep the work for the whites, since the employers were in most instances white."

Sib: I remember your saying that many uptown factories had contracted this work out to Chinatown.

Satyas: The manufacturers in town contracted their work out to Chinatown.

Sib: Then their argument was a good one, don't you think?

Satyas: No, their argument was not a good one. It was a good one only in so much as they had no protection. Even the finest of employers wanted the labor as cheaply as they could get it. We tried to point out to this man who understood so well, and to anyone who
Matyas: represented Chinese people who would listen to us, that we would sign a contract with the Chinese workers providing that whatever work was then going to Chinatown would have to continue to go to Chinatown.

Gilb: How were you going to guarantee this?

Matyas: We could guarantee that we wouldn't permit it to come into any other of our union shops. The work had to be done. The employers had these orders and were willing to guarantee that we would not permit any of our other workers to do the work that belonged to the Chinese.

Gilb: It still sounds to me as if that would be difficult to enforce. How would you know what work would ordinarily go to Chinatown?

Matyas: It wouldn't be nearly so difficult as it seems. Certain manufacturers who were giving their work to Chinese contractors had no inside shops... what we called inside shops. They made their samples in their main factory, and they did the cutting in the main factory, but they 'bundled' the unmade garments and sent them to Chinatown. Now, they would have to
open new shops if they were to take the work away from the Chinese workers and have it made by white workers. Their own shops were not equipped with the machinery, even. They'd have to open new shops or they would have to contract it to other shops, and we could prevent any of our people from taking that work.

We were willing to go even further. We said that if the contractors and the workers both would agree to come under union protection (they would, of course, in the final instance, have to withhold, to be on strike if necessary in order to get a contract from the manufacturer), we were willing to agree that we would not write any contract with the manufacturer that didn't guarantee that the work would continue to go to the Chinese contractors and so to the Chinese workers.

But despite this promise, they weren't reassured? Despite this promise, they didn't believe it. They were absolutely convinced that the only reason the work went to them was because they were cheaper. I tried to point out the fact that if the industry had sufficient
work, say for three thousand workers, and one thousand of those workers were Chinese, the work would have to be done and if there were no more than two thousand white workers and there was work enough for three thousand workers, what difference would it make to the employer whether the work was done by Chinese or whites, he had to have his work done if he had that many orders. Evidently, the industry at the time had sufficient to supply three thousand workers.

Gilb: Now, I know that California labor leaders had for several generations been very anti-Chinese. Were there many people in the labor movement who opposed this organization of the Chinese?

Katya: Within their own unions, yes.

Gilb: But not in your union?

Katya: Well, they had no say in our union.

Let me confess a fact that is very little known. There was a time, in the nineteenth century, when some of the shops organized into a union which was subsequently an I.L.G. organization and were opposed to admitting Chinese. But that was a very
Katya: Long time ago and it was in the days when the anti-Oriental feeling was so terrific and there was very little organization anyhow. The only workers that were organized were the most highly skilled, even in our industry.

Silb: But in the '30's there was no opposition to Chinese organization in your union?

Katya: Oh no, no. Not only was there no opposition, but ever since its inception, our International as a whole was always completely of the opinion that all workers, black or white or yellow or whatever, were entitled to all the dignity of being human beings.

Silb: Of course, it was self protection too, because as long as the Chinese weren't organized...

Katya: Yes, there was that. Most of all, we had the firm belief that race discrimination was a very bad thing morally, aside from the economic.

Silb: Did you eventually succeed in organizing the Chinese?

Katya: Eventually we succeeded and fortunately for me, I happened to be on the scene and I had the opportunity to help organize the Chinese workers.
When was this?

In '36 or '37. I think this started in '36.

Let me tell you how it started. Japan and China were at war. The Chinese people were organized very strongly to help the Chinese back home. Most of the Chinese here had relatives back home. They all felt very loyal to their home relatives and wanted to support them. China was very poor. Sending money back to China was a very serious matter with them.

There was one shop in Chinatown called the National Dollar Factory. The National Dollar is still in existence, but now it is in existency by its stores, its outlets. At that time, while the business of National Dollar was retail, they had this one factory on Washington Street near Kearny. The factory was finally torn down and it's being built into a church by Chinese volunteers.

Well, the people working for the National Dollar worked directly for a Chinese employer, Chinese workers working for a Chinese employer. The factory had about eighty or a hundred workers. Interestingly
enough, the workers in the National Dollar Factory found themselves underbid by other workers in Chinatown. They found that the work went to other Chinese contractors who did the work cheaper than they did.

There was no unionism anywhere, but the National Dollar factory, instead of having all of the work done by the workers in this large, rather nice factory, sent the work out to contractors where it could be done even cheaper. The workers began to feel very hurt over that. So they got together and formed an organization of some sort, not a union. They just got together in somebody's house and decided to write a letter to the owner of the factory. They never saw the owner, it was run by foremen, but all Chinese. They decided to supplicate the owner to remember that they needed money to send home to China and wouldn't he provide them with more work.

In the meantime, some of them came up to my office and met me and told me about it and asked whether we could do anything to help. Well, I thought heaven had opened up. I assured them that we would do
Katyas: everything in our power to help. By this time I understood that I'd better let the initiative be theirs always, and better just say that I was available and that our organization was very eager to help in any way possible. They didn't want anything more. They wanted to wait for the answer from this employer. They had given some address or another to which the employer was to write.

Now, interestingly enough, when I became an official in the I.L.G. office, Dubinsky put on a young Chinese who was recommended by somebody also to try to organize Chinese workers. We became suspicious subsequently that he was connected with Communism. We had no way of knowing whether he really was or not, but I became more and more suspicious as time went on, although I had no proof of anything. Finally he was discharged. I don't remember on what basis, whether because of no productivity or whether we became pretty satisfied that he had Communist connections. Anyhow, he was discharged.

When these workers from the National Dollar Factory
came to see me, they told me that they had hesitated a long time before coming to us because they thought we were a Communist union and they based their thinking on the fact that they knew this fellow and they had suspected that he was a Communist.

Was it your feeling that at this time there was very little pro-Communism in Chinatown?

There was some pro-Communism and a good deal of anti-Communism. Much more anti- than pro-. The workers in general were much more anti-Communist and they didn't like to come anywhere near the union because they thought the union must be sympathetic somehow, but when they heard that this fellow was discharged, they began to think that perhaps we were all right.

When they came to me, I didn't press them, but bit by bit I gained their confidence and they began to believe me, and more and more came to me. I began to be invited to their homes and I began to be invited to talk to workers who agreed to come to other homes in Chinatown, but not downtown to the union.

Let me confess that when I first began to work
with the Chinese, in spite of all my convictions and beliefs in non-discrimination, the Chinese were people I didn't really know. I hadn't known any Orientals and, without realizing it, I believe I was more influenced by the propaganda about smoking opium pipes than I knew. I was almost ... I had a sort of a little shaky feeling inside when I went to Chinatown at night alone and when I came away from their homes at eleven or twelve or later and walked through Chinatown alone. My husband didn't like the idea either, yet he was a person who was completely without race feeling of any kind. But one just can't help certain influences, I suppose.

I met with the Chinese in their homes a good deal, met them in restaurants after awhile, and always through an interpreter. There were a few who spoke English but the majority didn't. Not a word of English.

Well, finally they began to organize very strongly, and the employer found out that organization was going on. The man who was most active in trying to organize the other workers was an American-born Chinese whose wife didn't speak any English; she was a recent-comer
to this country, but while he was American born, his English was not too understandable either. He was a fellow who was greatly respected by everybody in the shop. Strangely enough, he happened to be the brother-in-law of the man in charge of the factory. He himself was receiving a pretty good wage, but he recognized the situation and he was quite willing to persuade as many workers as he could to come and discuss the matter of forming a union.

Finally, we got the majority of workers to sign certification cards in favor of wanting a union shop. We then wrote the employer and asked for an appointment for a meeting. We had a meeting with him and the meeting was productive of practically nothing at all, but at any rate, we felt that organization could go on. He promised that we would have a meeting again.

In the meantime, this man who was so active in organizing, whose job was not making dresses, but fixing the machines for the dress operators, this man was demoted. His wages were not reduced, but he was given a job that took him away from being in constant
contact with the workers. The workers felt so outraged by that. They felt that that was dishonest, that he was being punished, and they came to a meeting and advised me that that couldn't be. They wanted to strike right away.

I advised against the strike and advised that we had better have a meeting with the employer again and have this fellow, Willie Go, reinstated to his job. It was before Christmas and the employer agreed to put Willie back on the job and promised that after Christmas we would sit down and negotiate for a union contract and wages and so forth.

Well, time passed and the workers felt more and more that they were being discriminated against, or that people who had joined the union were being given raw deals. The workers pressed for action.

At that time we were not in the A.F. of L. We were not in the C.I.O. either. We had already withdrawn from the C.I.O., but had not yet gone back to the A.F. of L. One of our own people, a man who was a member of Local 8 was eager to get a job as an organizer. He couldn't get it with us because we didn't think too much of his calibre. Although we
needed organizers badly, we didn't think enough of his character to trust him with organization. Since we were out of the A.F. of L., he went to the State Federation and offered to organize in Chinatown for the A.F. of L. Vandeleur, who was then the Secretary of the State Federation of Labor, engaged this fellow and he went to Chinatown and tried to intimidate our members not to join our union, but to join a so-called A.F. of L. union.

By this time the workers had complete confidence in us and wouldn't break away, so that we could go on to negotiate. He actually threatened the workers that the Teamsters wouldn't permit them to go to work. And they didn't care. They felt they were with people they had complete confidence in and they told me about it. I was disturbed by it, but I was glad they had the wisdom to stay where they were.

Well, we tried to negotiate for the agreement after Christmas and we made no headway whatsoever. In the meantime, with the indignities that were going on, the workers were becoming more and more impatient.
Katya: and they were beginning to almost lose confidence in me, they were beginning to think that I was not ready to back them up in a fight.

Gilb: When you negotiated, did you negotiate directly with the employer?

Katya: With representatives of the employer. Sam Kagel was then working for the National Labor Bureau and he was our representative on the negotiations in this Chinese Dollar situation.

Gilb: Then you had an outside person, Sam Kagel, represent you?

Katya: Oh yes, and the employers had their representatives. I was there and, of course, a committee of the workers, but the spokesman was Sam Kagel; or rather, Sam Kagel was working for the National Labor Bureau and I was the organizer for the Chinese workers.

Gilb: Did the employer belong to any employers' association?

Katya: No, I don't think so.

We got nowhere at all and finally we declared a strike. That was an extraordinary thing in Chinatown. It was the first time, to my knowledge, that there
ever was an organized strike of Chinese workers. Fortunately, it was a strike of Chinese workers against a Chinese employer. Here were workers demanding the right to organize and the employer saying "No". White or black or yellow, it didn't make any difference. The issues were the same and the methods to handle them were also the same.

Well, people who thought they knew Chinese tried to discourage me. They kept saying that there was no use, the Chinese were not dependable, the Chinese fought among themselves, they'd never stick to anything, they wouldn't do any picket duty. They tried to discourage me in every possible way.

But by this time, I had gotten to know the Chinese too and I learned to have tremendous respect for their character. I got to feel that if they said something, it was so. I accepted their word for anything they said and I learned also that people were just people, there were those who could be depended upon and those who couldn't be depended upon. But by and large, I was very satisfied that the Chinese were at least as
Latinas: good as the rest of us were. The fact that they happened to be Chinese was aside from the issue. They had their other characteristics, but from the point of view of dependability and integrity and all that, they were certainly as good as anybody else I knew.

The strike was finally declared and it will interest you to know that while I think we demanded something like $16 or $17 a week, I don't remember, actually the hope was that at least they would get $13.33 a week. That was the minimum wage for women in California for a forty hour week, after the $16 minimum had been interpreted as applying to a forty-eight hour week and so there was a proportionate cut. You would be shocked to know how many people worked for much less than $13.33 even. While the figure was brought down to $13.33 and while theoretically, no woman could work for less than $13.33 a week, there was a tremendous amount of chiseling and in shops where the appearances were that the employer wanted to be very law-abiding and pay the wage, there was a tremendous amount of kick-back.
In other words, this was a law that was unenforceable?

Unenforced, not unenforceable. It was very enforceable.

What would have been the medium by which it could have been enforced?

Only through unionism. Any worker had a right to go and complain to the State Department of Industrial Welfare, or on wages, I think they would have had to go to the Labor Department. The Industrial Welfare was a part of the Labor Department, but the matter of wages and hours was a function of the Labor Department. But a worker in an unorganized shop wouldn't have the courage to complain, because he or she would lose his job immediately.

Couldn't it have been done anonymously?

No, you can't fight ... you go to the government and you say, "I was employed but I wasn't getting $13.33." Well, they had to take it up and in the final analysis go to court. You can't go to court in behalf of nobody. There has to be a specific complaint. That's why we always point out and contend that the best law is valueless unless it can be properly policed, and unless the workers who use it can be
properly protected. While there was a law that said that women cannot work more than eight hours a day and may not work for less than $16 a week for the forty-eight hours, there was no law to oblige the employer not to fire the worker who availed himself of the law. So that the law became a mythical affair actually.

Sib: As a result of this National Dollar strike, you did get $13.33 a week?

Matyas: Well, it wasn’t that simple. We were out on strike for thirteen weeks, a terrifically long time. For one thing, it proved to everybody that they were very wrong about Chinese not sticking to their intention. Incidentally, this was the one strike I had in which I was able to turn almost everything over to the Chinese members themselves. They arranged their picketing schedules; they arranged who was to be on what shift. It was all very democratically done. They took turns, they lived up to it completely. The first shift had to meet at headquarters at six o’clock in the morning. We were there and served coffee at six o’clock so
that the workers could be on the picket line at
seven o'clock in the morning. And these Chinese, who
allegedly never get up until ten o'clock in the
morning, were there on the picket line.

The whole city became tremendously interested.
Everybody was anxious to help these Chinese workers
in this Chinese strike and see to it that they won
their fight. As a matter of fact, it was essential
to picket the downtown stores, the retail business of
the National Dollar Store. That involved the Depart-
ment Store Employees' Union, which had just been
organized and was very precarious too. But when the
Chinese workers went on strike and the strike was
official and was thoroughly endorsed by the Labor
Council, because ... we were not yet out of the Labor
Council. We were out of the A.F. of L. and out of
the C.I.O., I don't remember the exact chronology,
but the Department Store Employees' Union called upon
their employees in the National Dollar Store not to
go through the picket line. The Department Store
Employees' Union was threatened with a suit by the
Matyas: National Dollar Store because they had a contract for the sales people to work. When our people were on the picket line, the clerks refused to go through the picket line and they were supported financially by their union. It was a wonderful thing. Very inspiring. Here were white workers jeopardizing their jobs and their union to help these Chinese workers who were not in their industry, who were in manufacturing, not in selling.

Gilb: What was the reaction of the other Chinese in Chinatown?

Matyas: At the same time that all this was going on, unfortunately, this fellow who went to the A.F. of L. was very active in Chinatown and went from white employer to white employer, the employers who contracted their work out in Chinatown, and practically intimidated them into signing a union agreement, with a so-called A.F. of L. local, in order to keep "Jennie out of it." He went to employer after employer and said, "You had better sign up, or Jennie will get you."

Gilb: That's flattering.

Matyas: So far as I was concerned, well, for one thing I didn't know about it until one day some of the workers
Katyas: "came to me and said, "Workers in Chinatown, him organized." I said, "What do you mean? 'Him organized'? Well, speak up, man, what do you mean, 'Workers in Chinatown, him organized'? They're not in the union." "No worry, no worry. Him only sign piece of paper. Nothing say, nothing say. Him only sign piece of paper."

Well, I asked them to bring me the piece of paper. They couldn't bring me any piece of paper, but I learned subsequently that this fellow, Ted Goldstein, got the employers to sign up with him and to say that all the workers in the contracting shops would have to belong to the union.

Silb: Did he get any better wages, or conditions?

Katyas: No, nothing at all.

Silb: That sounds like company unionism.

Katyas: Well, that's all right. The workers got nothing, they gained nothing. They didn't pay anything. Workers in Chinatown felt very uncomfortable because the National Dollar Chinese workers were on strike, and they, who were working for the white employers, continued to work
for the same old reasons. Naturally, when I heard about the other union I was petrified. I thought that that would definitely undercut the possibility of the strike.

Shortly thereafter an injunction was issued against our Chinese. Incidentally, we organized the Chinese into a separate local, but not because we believed in segregation. We offered to the Chinese that they could either have a separate local or they could come in with 101, but if they thought that it would prove to their Chinese people that they were autonomous, that we weren't meaning to take any advantages away from them to give to white workers, that that would definitely undercut the possibility of the strike.

They wanted their own local. They had their own local. They had their own local. They had their own officials. I was the organizer and the International representative, but they had their own local with headquarters in Chinatown, on Stockton Street. This, of course, came after the strike was settled, but while they were on
Natya: strike they met in our headquarters down on Mason Street. At that time we were at 149 Mason Street, not 345 Mason. We were up on the top floor and one Saturday morning we received word that an injunction was coming. We were having a meeting. We were all pretty concerned about the fact that the injunction would prohibit picketing around the stores. We didn't know if it would prohibit picketing around the factory. I was worried about what effect the injunction would have on the strikers.

Gilb: Well, this was peaceful picketing, wasn't it? Had there been any violence?

Natya: Oh yes, it was perfectly peaceful, but the employer ... well, there were a few umbrella incidents, but by and large it was very peaceful. At any rate, I think the reason for the injunction was that the stores were not involved, the retail stores. At least so we thought. I don't remember now whether the injunction was served on the entire thing or not.

At any rate, it was very interesting. It was a Saturday morning that we got wind of it. Saturday
afternoon we were having a meeting. Somebody said that they were coming up to headquarters to serve us with the injunction papers. One of the Chinese workers said, "Let's lock the door downstairs." I said, "Well, how about it. If we lock the door downstairs, how long do you want to be up here?"

"Well, we won't go out. We won't let them serve us, and as long as they don't serve us, we're not under any injunction."

We stayed in headquarters until about eight o'clock that night, never went out for anything at all. We had people at the window watching to see whether it looked as though anybody was coming to serve us. I don't remember what happened.

"I don't know how you'd recognize a process-server."

"I don't know how either, but it was very exciting. Instead of encouraging me, they tried to encourage me. They said, "No worry, Jennie. Him no can make dresses. Injunction, him no can make dresses."

Well, the injunction was served anyhow and we took our people off the stores, off picketing the retail outlets, but we continued to fight in front
It was one of the most inspiring experiences I've ever had. The workers in that strike ... I'm thinking of one man, for example, who was the janitor. He was the father of seven children, as poor as he could be. He stuck to the very last. He did all of his picket duties. We tried to relieve him, we tried to tell him that if he could find a job somewhere else, he could do it, but no, he had pledged that he would stay to the end and he stayed to the end. He wouldn't desert.

We had one girl, her name was Edna Lee. Pretty as could be. No parents, she was an orphan, and she had younger sisters or brothers. Anyhow, she was sort of the head of the family. I was told one day that she couldn't be on picket duty because she was sick, so I went to her house to see whether I could do anything. I saw the house in which she lived. It was one room somewhere right on Grant Avenue, a kitchen was shared by the other tenants on the floor. When I went in to see Edna, she was in bed. I asked
her how sick she was. "Oh," she said, "I'm not sick at all." I said, "Well, why are you in bed if you're not sick at all?" "Well, you know, it's funny, but if I stay in bed I don't get hungry. And so I often stay in bed because then I don't get hungry."

Now, the International helped with strike relief, but it was just relief, it wasn't wages. This girl, Edna, said, "You see, before the strike I could buy groceries on credit. Now, none of the merchants will give us credit." There are two instances. I could repeat more. Finally, after thirteen weeks ... there was intercession and we got the employer to negotiate again and he finally agreed to recognize the union and to make $13.33 the official wage.

During the strike had you been helped by any other union besides the Department Store Employees?

We had the sympathy of the other unions.

No financial help?

No, no. We didn't ask for financial help. The International was ready to help. I could have given Edna, this girl, some more money. I gave her a little
Katya: more, but she wouldn't take it. She was very proud. She said that if that was all the others got, that's all she got.

At the end of the thirteenth week, when we had a compromise offer of a settlement which would assure everybody their job and assure everybody the $13.33, I had the time of my life to get the workers to accept that settlement. They thought it was very insufficient, that $13.33 was way below what they ought to have. Some of the members upon whom I relied very greatly and who had become personal friends left the union because they thought the acceptance of such a settlement was a hurt to their pride, it was so much less than they had hoped to get. Others, the more rational among them, argued that if they had a union, bit by bit they'd be able to raise their standards, and anyhow, with a union contract, they'd be able to insist upon work being there and not going out. They would be certain of fair treatment in general and they'd have a right to a price committee to help make the price of the garments. They thought that while it was a modest
Matyas: beginning, it was a very decidedly good beginning. That finally prevailed after hours and hours and hours of discussion whether or not the agreement should be accepted. It prevailed, but some of my very best friends just quit the union altogether, and as a matter of fact, I never saw them again.

But the shop as a whole went back to work under a union agreement and for about a year they did well enough. They had work. Work was not sent to contracting shops, but the employer just couldn't take it, evidently, and he decided to close the factory at the end of a year.

Gilb: Perhaps the competition was still paying much lower wages, which would make it difficult for him.

Matyas: Well, no, because his competition actually came ... well, that may have been one thing, but this factory didn't do all the supplying. He bought in the same places that other people did. I don't think it was that. I think that his pride was just as great to him as to have won a union was to the workers. I don't really know just what it was, but at the end of a year, the employer closed the factory. Then, of
Katyas: course, we had all these workers unemployed and the problem was, what to do. It was terrific.

In the meantime, I had tried very hard to get Chinese workers into the regular American shops. It wasn't too easy because many of them couldn't speak the language at all, but worse than that, in Chinatown they had machinery that was a little bit different from the machinery they had in the regular factories. For example, with the regular machines on which all the rest of us worked, the garments were pulled right from the person. In the Chinese shops, they were pulled horizontally, so that is a different machine altogether. I don't know how it happened, but that's how it is. And many of the workers were afraid to venture into the other factories, even if they could.

Little by little, we did succeed in getting them into other shops, but the race discrimination problem was not an easy one to overcome. Everybody pulled hard for the Chinese to win their fight, all the rest of our union was very sympathetic. Theoretically, we
had overcome race prejudice among the other workers and among employers, but only theoretically.

Quite a bit after this strike, some of the workers had succeeded in getting into a shop related to the Amco, a shop under George Anthony. Quite a few Chinese workers got in there as operators and some as pressers. One time the workers who were opposed to the idea of Chinese workers in their shop threatened to strike. They came to the union and said it was all right while there were just a few, but the Chinese were getting to be so many. The outbreak against the Chinese workers came because the employer intended to hire a Chinese man to be in charge of the cutting department. One of the fellows in the cutting department who had his eye on being in charge when the opportunity arose was furious. This fellow went to the other workers and cooked up a nice little readiness for a strike. They were going to walk out.

I didn't know what to do. I was afraid of hurting the feelings of the Chinese workers who were there, but I felt that a meeting had to be called. I had to
Matyas: decide whether to have the Chinese workers present at the meeting or not, and I decided that they may as well be present and learn the facts of life.

Milb: Also, they might interpret their absence ...

Matyas: Well, I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking that they may as well be present and learn what facts are facts. And the whole shop came to the meeting and I had a long talk with them on the basis of "haven't all workers a right to a job? Haven't all workers a right to live? Etc. Etc." I made no impression whatsoever. The workers were just not going to have so many Chinese working there.

Interestingly enough, the agitation for the strike was led by an Italian girl. I don't know whether I like to say this. Unless you know the situation very well. It might have been an all-American girl, it might have been a Greek girl, it might have been anybody, but it just so happened that this girl was an Italian girl. She was the spokesman for the opposition to so many Chinese in the shop.

Well, finally, I could make no impression on the
Matyas: basis of human rights. I pointed out the fact that
if they were insistent that no Chinese should work in
their shop, if the employer had more work than the
workers in the shop could do, what would be his next
step? His next step would be to contract the work
out. Where would he contract it out? He would contract
it out to Chinatown, where there would be no control
whatsoever, where he could pay whatever he liked, and
the cheaper he got his work done in Chinatown, the
less likelihood there would be that the work would
be done in the factory by them.

Silb: Do you mean to say that there was a scarcity of workers
during the depression?

Matyas: Not at that time. When the season was on. Our industry
is very seasonal, this was already in '37 or '38,
and in our industry at that time and in that particular
season there was no depression.

Silb: So there was a scarcity for you.

Matyas: A scarcity of skilled workers. Not a scarcity of
labor, but of skilled workers, and these were skilled
workers. Operators, pressers, cutters.
Finally, the argument that their work would be sent where there would be no control over the wages that were paid convinced them and I suppose the next day the thought did enter their heads that human beings were human beings and who were they to set themselves up as superior to another group of human beings.

The key man in this situation, however, was not convinced. I was nervous as the dickens. I was afraid all the decision would be undone the next day, unless he would be convinced. I called him into my office and had some more talk with him. I made no impression.

Finally, I decided to do what through all my married life I was certain I would never do. I decided I would bring my husband into it. This fellow was tall and blond; my husband was tall and had been blond -- he was grey by this time. This fellow was Irish; my husband was Scottish. I thought maybe they could talk to each other as perhaps I couldn't. I asked whether he would come to my house for dinner. He said he didn't think his wife would like it. So I called his
wife and asked for permission for Larry to come to my house for dinner. I called up my husband quickly and I explained. He said, "Sure, bring the boy along."

We had a very nice dinner. Then we went on to discuss the issue. My husband just radiated fineness, he radiated status too; and coming from my husband, I had a feeling that it would be very different than coming from me whom Larry would consider a professional union official. My husband was in no way related to our industry.

The evening went very nicely and I thought perhaps it was all right, that Larry was convinced. As Larry was going out, I said, "Well, Larry, how about it?" "Well," said Larry, "I'll tell you what. I won't quit the job, but I'm not convinced." Just so long as he agreed not to quit the job and not to engage in any dissatisfied agitation in the shop, I was satisfied. The thing cooled down for awhile.

But still this was about the only shop that was accepting Chinese workers and I was very eager to get more of the Chinese workers integrated and into our
regular shops. Progress was very slow. It was almost nil.

One day one of our factories, a blouse factory called me up for a presser. I knew that we had all these Chinese pressers unemployed. We had our own people unemployed too, but we had these Chinese girls from the National Dollar factory unemployed.

I said, "Well, I have a very good presser. She's Chinese. Of course, that wouldn't make any difference to you. She's a very good presser and I'll send her up." "Oh, no," said the employer, "Don't send me a Chinese." I asked him what difference it made to him, why he should care, that she was an excellent presser. "Yes, I know, but don't send me a Chinese."

I tried to persuade him as gently as I knew how that after all he wouldn't want to be accused of having race prejudice, that I could guarantee that the work would be well done and if not, he could fire the girl just as he could fire a white girl. What difference should it make to him? "Well, yes, you're right. I guess you're right." I thought I had him thoroughly convinced... "but send me a white presser." So I said, "Well, I'll try."
But, may the Lord forgive me, I didn't try for three days. According to the agreement, he was obliged to call the union for workers. He kept calling me, and I kept telling him that I was awfully sorry, that I was trying, but all the pressers were working; that I had these good Chinese pressers and he could have his pick if he liked, but if he didn't, I didn't know what I could do about it.

Finally he said, "Well, you know. Even if I would agree, the workers wouldn't." I assured him that I would take care of that. If he would agree, it would be all right. "Well, he said, "If you positively can't find me a white presser send me a Chinese, but don't blame me if the workers object."

I assured him I wouldn't blame him and that the workers would not object, but while I assured him, I must say, I held my fingers crossed and I was as nervous as a kitten over what the workers might do, having remembered the other situation. I decided that I had better prepare the ground.

This was just about lunch time and I ran down to the factory and waited for some of the girls to
come out for lunch. I went to have lunch with them. I spoke to one person who was sort of the leader in the shop, who was the most influential in the shop, and I said, "Look, of course I can't talk to everybody, but you're different and you understand what a marvelous opportunity it is for this girl." The girl I had in mind was Edna. "This girl is a wonderful worker and she was out on strike to make a union shop. In fact, you didn't have to go out on strike because they were out on strike and your employer knew he'd better sign an agreement without risk of a strike. We really owe it to people like that to do something for them. She's a lovely girl. What I'd like you to do, Nelly, is to sort of take her under your wing because when she comes in, she might feel very shy about meeting a lot of white people. If you take her under your wing and get her to meet the other girls, I think it will be an awfully nice thing for you to do."

Well, Nelly thought it was wonderful that I came to her and asked for her help. And I sent in Edna. I wanted to send in a good worker, a girl who
Katya: could speak English, and a girl who was pretty and very personable. Somebody whom everybody would love, they just couldn't help it. And it took.

And after that, I had the employer call me for workers and say, "If you can send me somebody like Edna, it will be all right." And I must confess that every time I sent in a Chinese worker, I picked one who in addition to being a good worker would also have other qualifications that would make him very acceptable. I thought that during the transition period, anyhow, let it be as easy as possible.

Gilb: Were Chinese workers eventually accepted on a widespread basis?

Katya: Eventually, when the war broke out and there was a shortage of workers anyhow, Chinese standing rose in general. Even before that, bit by bit, Chinese workers went in to work in regular shops.

Gilb: Has there been a recession in this situation after the war?

Katya: Of Chinese workers being accepted? No, Chinese workers now will be accepted in any of our factories.
Matyas: It depends on whether they can do the work. But a great many of our Chinese workers still prefer to work in Chinatown.

Gilb: Did you gradually get more Chinese people into the union?

Matyas: Oh yes, we gradually gave up the separate local. When the National Dollar shop went out of existence, the local had no real reason for being in existence either and they voted themselves that they would abandon the charter and come in to Local 101. They were dress operators and dress finishers, they were dress workers. As a matter of fact, there is absolutely no anti-Chinese feeling now at all. A Chinese worker can get a job, and pretty nearly all of the workers that were on the executive committee of the Chinese local are working in very very good jobs in white factories.

You know that in our union a secretary and a president are volunteer, not professional workers. They are workers in the factory who have been elected to preside at meetings and to take minutes at meetings. The secretary of Local 101 ... I'm a
Member of 101... the secretary of my local is my dear old Chinese friend, Sue Lee, and she's not only the secretary of my local, she's secretary of the Joint Board as well.

Well, she's one of my best friends, certainly, and she's one of the finest union members we have. Interestingly enough, she's not only employed in one of these white factories, but she's in charge of quite a department. She's still a member of the union and a very active member because she has nothing to do with the problems of hiring and firing. She's one of the rare people who accepted responsibility and accepted a job in a supervisory capacity and yet remained a genuinely true and loyal union member.

Negroes and the Union

Filb: You were going to say something about organizing the Negroes back in New York.

Matyas: Oh, that was way back in 1914 or 1915 or maybe even before that. I think it was 1914, after the 1913 strike, my first strike.
Katyas: I was working in a blouse shop in New York City on a very expensive line of blouses. I was an operator. The finishers, those who sew on hooks and eyes and do whatever hand work needs to be done on the garment, were all Negroes in this factory. Finishers, by shop organization, always sit together in a separate spot, but in this instance there was actually a sort of a fence around the finishing department that reminded me of a cage.

At that time we didn't have a complete union shop agreement, as you remember. We had so-called preferential hiring, and none of the finishers belonged to the union. I was the shop chairlady. I didn't like the idea of those girls being what I regarded as caged-off. Why the employer had this big fence around them right inside the shop, I can't tell.

Gilb: Were they the only Negroes in the shop?

Katyas: The only Negroes in the shop were in the finishing department. I thought I'd like to try to get those girls to join the union. It was a union shop, but
not everybody had to join the union, and none of these girls were members of the union. I wanted to know how much they were earning, but you couldn’t go in there because it was closed in, and I was not a finisher, I was an operator.

So for a long time I waited and finally succeeded in making friends. I used to wait for one of the little girls outside the factory at quitting time and I finally made friends with her. Her name was Edith Ransom. I tell you her name because it might come up another time. I would take long walks with Edith after work and talk unionism with her. She was very hesitant. She too believed that the reason they had a job was that they worked cheaper. They worked very cheaply. Some of them were getting three and four and five dollars a week while we were already making fourteen, fifteen and sixteen dollars a week.

I invited her to my house for dinner. At that time too, I felt a little bit queer about inviting a Negro girl. You see, my theory was of course all for it, but deep inside there was something lurking. At
any rate, I invited her to my house and I invited her to an Easter dinner at that. I got my mother's consent. Although my mother had no feeling about Negroes, a person was a person, to invite somebody to a family's house for a festive dinner was something. But she knew what I was trying to do and she thought there was no point arguing with me. She said okay, let the girl come.

I became very friendly with Edith and bit by bit Edith accepted the theory that a union would be a terrific help for them. Bit by bit she agreed to get the other girls to join the union. Edith, I think, was the first Negro girl to join the union in Local 25, and bit by bit the whole finishing department came in. As a result of that, I was fired from my job. The union took up the case and had me reinstated, but my reinstatement was not too happy and before too long I just had to quit myself, it was made very uncomfortable for me.

I want to tell you a little bit more about the race situation in San Francisco.
You know, race prejudice is a strange thing. I don't think many people would admit that they have race prejudice, but I don't think there are many people without it. I think the most emancipated human being is not sure that he doesn't have a germ of race prejudice in him which he wouldn't admit intellectually, which he would fight, of course, if he recognized it, but somehow that sort of thing is inbibed.

Now, in our union we recognize that, and when the Negroes came in during the war, in great numbers, we had our problem there too. The official pronouncement of our union always was that all members of the union are brothers or sisters and have the right to be a full member, regardless of color, creed or nationality, but that was the official standing of the officials of the union.

Now, the membership of the union itself is like the membership of any cross-section of society. Just because a person belongs to a union doesn't mean that he checks his prejudices at the door when he
Katyas: comes into the shop or into the meeting. When shop after shop began to take on more Negro workers, for example, I had members come to me over and over again and say, "Well, Jennie, you know, that's all very well, but pretty soon they'll be taking over. I don't mind, but the others do." It was always, "I don't mind, but the others do." Which, of course, to me indicated that they were a little bit ashamed of minding.

We had problems, also, where Negro workers, for example, took advantage of the fact that they belonged to a minority race and if anything happened, if they were shown that they were wrong somewhere, if their work was not satisfactory, the question wasn't whether the work was satisfactory or not, but 'he's picking on me because I'm a Negro'.

I did a lot of speaking on the platform, and I used to tell how our union in philosophy was opposed to any race discrimination, that race discrimination was injurious, aside from the fact that it wasn't the decent thing to have, that we were all God's children,
etc. But while I strongly urged all our members to remember that there's no difference between people because of color, creed or nationality, I also stressed that there isn't any advantage coming to anybody because of color, creed or nationality; that under our union contract an employer was entitled to have workers live up to their end of the bargain; and our end of the bargain was that we were to be present whenever work was available, that we were to do good work, and if the work was proven not-satisfactory, we couldn't hide behind the fact that we happened to be of some color or another. We were as good as we were, any of us, but no better.

Gilb: I'd like you to answer this frankly. Was there any indication that the Negroes, as a group, were less likely to be good workers?

Katyas: It's not easy to answer that question categorically. Let me say this. A tremendous number of Negroes came in from areas where they hadn't had the work experience.

Gilb: They hadn't had the tradition of discipline either?

Katyas: They hadn't had factory experience. They had worked
Hisyas: in housework, or in laundries, or in many unrelated segments where there wasn't the discipline of a factory, or a modern factory. The Negro workers who were new in the industry were no different from white workers who were new in the industry, but they were more outstanding because of their color, naturally. They worked as hard as they knew how, but working hard and being inexperienced didn't necessarily spell production until they had their experience. When their production was called not up to par, in spite of the fact that some of them worked very hard, it was natural that some believed that it was prejudice against their color.

We had quite a job. Some of them, because of lack of experience, developed a sort of belligerence. As a matter of fact, the way the Negroes have been treated all through the years, it's a miracle to me that they weren't more belligerent than they were. But it was our official job to point out, always, the two-fold proposition. Number one, they were entitled to all the conditions that anybody else
...was and that it was something not to be proud of if our members entertained any prejudice; and number two, on the other hand, the worker had to perform and had to really give to the full measure of what a worker should give.

Well, you'd think that only white workers had prejudice. I had a very entertaining experience, but it opened my eyes a good deal. One day a girl came to our office and went to the dues paying window and she complained that she was fired. I was called in on it. I asked her a number of questions about her work. Before too long I was rather suspicious that her work wouldn't stand up on examination. I didn't want to say, "Look, if your work isn't any good, we can't do anything for you." because at the moment she was too emotionally upset and she would be absolutely certain that her work was perfect. If she were a white girl, I would have said it, but since she was a Negro and very strung-up emotionally, very tense, I was afraid saying that would give her the feeling that even the union official was down on her because
Yatyas: she was a Negro.

Instead of telling her that I was afraid that maybe her work, judging from what she herself told me, might not be as good as it ought to be, I suggested that perhaps ... I asked her if she was very eager to work right in that shop or wouldn't she perhaps like to have another job, if I could find her another job?

It was very cute. She was so excited that her hair almost stood up. She had very kinky hair and it was braided on top of her head, almost like a vaudeville picture of a Southern Negro girl, with a ribbon on top of the braid that stood right up in the air. When I asked if she wouldn't just as leave have another job if I could find her another job, she said, "Oh yes, indeed I would." She lisped too. "I'd much rather work somewhere else. You know, this shop ain't no good at all. There ain't no white people there no how. They's all Portuguese and Mexicans." To make matters even worse, the girl to whom she said it was a Mexican. (laughs.)
Matyas: Fortunately, the Mexican girl, who was our office worker, saw that the girl was very excited and she didn't say anything about it.

Gilb: Was there much prejudice against the Mexicans up there?

Matyas: I think there was more of that down South than there was up here. But the thing that interested me was that here was this Negro girl, whose problem we had to work on all the time, who said she would like to work somewhere else because there were "no white people no how in that shop. They was all Portuguese and Mexicans."

Trouble with a Knit-Goods Factory

Gilb: You've told us about some of your organizing activities. I wondered if there were any other shops where you had outstanding difficulties?

Matyas: Of course, we organized right along. There were quite a number of shops that were still unorganized and it was our function to try to get as many people into the union as possible. We wanted to bring
everybody under union conditions that we could. In spite of the fact that the N.R.A. was on, there were a great many people in our industry still working for very poor wages. In spite of the fact that throughout the country we had either the 35 or the 37½ hour week, there were many shops that still worked longer hours if they were not yet in the union. During the depression, you remember, the wages were depressed rather considerably. When unionization became effective in our industry, there were minimums established in every craft of our industry and there were many shops without union contracts where nevertheless the employers did try to pay wages somewhat commensurate with the wages we gained through union fighting and union contracts.

When the N.R.A. was repealed, we couldn't make much progress. Then in 1937 the Wagner Act came into being and organization began again.

Many shops were still unorganized. There was, for example, a corset factory on the Alameda side of the Bay. There was the Gantner knit-goods shop in
San Francisco that had about three or four hundred people working for it. Quite a few people from that factory came to me and asked me to help organize them because the conditions there were rather unsatisfactory. The wages were low. I tried to have meetings with them and to encourage them to persuade other workers to join the union. I advised them that the sooner we could get a majority of the workers to agree that they would like to have their shop unionized, the sooner we'd be able to approach the employer and ask for negotiations for a union contract.

Progress was very slow in this instance. It seemed the workers wanted better conditions and wages, but they hesitated. They seemed to be afraid to be seen even talking to people who were known to be interested in the union. The people who did come to the meeting also told me that they were afraid they'd lose their jobs. Subsequently quite a number of them did lose their jobs, ostensibly because there wasn't any work. They could have gone to the N.L.R.B. and made a case of the fact that they lost their jobs.
Fatyas: because they were trying to persuade other people to join the union, but they felt too weak to do anything about it. For quite a while organization was dormant in this knit-goods factory.

Gilb: Were the wages there much lower than they were in the union shops?

Fatyas: The wages in that factory were a great deal lower than they were in the knit-goods industry that was organized back East. They were what I would consider very low, but they were the going rates for an unorganized factory where a great many women were employed.

Gilb: Wasn't there a question of jurisdiction? Were you taking corset makers and knit wear people into a dressmakers' local?

Fatyas: I was a representative of the International, working for the San Francisco Joint Board. My wages came from the International, but I was working for the Joint Board. As we organized people we could either ask for a charter for a new group of another industry or go along with the Joint Board and have the new group taken into one of the locals. The I.L.G. does that
Matyas: pretty often where there aren't enough to form a local, where it isn't considered advisable to form a local. A related local will take workers in.

Sib: So these were going into Local 101?

Matyas: They were going into Local 101 at the time. But they were not yet members. We didn't have people actually go into any local until we signed a contract with the employer. Up til then, we didn't want people's dues; we didn't want their money. They signed a card certifying that they wanted the I.L.O. to be their representatives for collective bargaining purposes. In this knit-goods shop, they lost their jobs as a result of it.

In 1937 when the Wagner Act was passed, that gave organizational work an impetus again. There was a new spurt of organization. I was attending a convention in Atlantic City when I got word that a woman in the C.I.O. was having meetings with the workers from this knit-goods factory, that they had come, a spontaneous move, to our union headquarters.
Matyas: We had permitted the C.I.O. Textile Workers to use our building, because we were at that time in the C.I.O. While I was back East the workers in this factory came in droves, not just five or six as they had done the year before, but in droves, for organization. This woman from the Textile Workers Union was taking ahold of it. I wasn't here. And she was promising the workers the "sky".

Well, that put fear and panic in me, because since it was a knit-goods factory, I knew that probably it belonged to both the Textile Workers and to us. Some of the workers knit the fabric and others made the garments, and by virtue of both of us being in the C.I.O., the theory was that the people who made the textiles belonged to the Textile Workers and the others would belong to us. Anyhow, we were both in the C.I.O. and she was going ahead and organizing and promising these workers, and whipping them up to expect very high and, I was certain, very unattainable goals. Dubinsky got word of this and he thought I'd better take a plane and come back and take ahold of the situation. I left the convention and
flew back. I found workers demanding unattainable conditions.

I succeeded in getting a meeting with the employer. I didn't succeed really. Actually, the situation was so tense and the workers were so ready to erupt that the Employers' Association prevailed upon the employer to meet with us. They recognized that the situation was now in the hands of more or less moderation and that the employer better sign up.

Well, it was a terrific situation to persuade workers who were led to believe that they could get anything they wanted if they went on strike for it, to get them to agree to accept a more realistic possible basis. The agreement that was finally worked out was anything but good. It wasn't anything that I would have recommended in any other situation, except this. And the employer, on the other hand, in making even this amount of concession, thought he was making colossal concessions.

What we finally got in our agreement was that sixteen dollars a week should be the minimum wage.
Matyas: This was in '37. We raised the wage up to sixteen dollars a week. The argument was that a lot of these people were just girls and they were working for pin-money.

Gibb: That was the old argument in New England years, centuries ago.

Matyas: East and West, everywhere, it still is, where there is no organization. Women are working for pin-money.

Well, these girls were surely just working for pin-money, and no amount of evidence to the contrary could prove otherwise! I wasn't interested in proving that girls were working for one reason or another. They were producing; and for producers, for workers making the kinds of articles that were made elsewhere, sixteen dollars a week was little enough to demand. Of course, sixteen dollars was the minimum scale we finally got. It ranged on up so that people who already got sixteen or more would get ten per cent increase, and the hours were fixed at forty.

Well, that was a good deal less than the knit-goods
Matyas: industry was paying where it was organized, terrifically less, but realistically speaking, it wasn't possible to raise the standards all at once. You can imagine that in a shop where you brought the shop up to $16, for the minimum, you couldn't suddenly bring people up to what they were paying back East. And of course, I had the problem of this girl from the Textile Workers, who I'm fairly certain was a Communist. She was working terribly against the I.L.G. and especially against me as its representative. She steamed up the workers to insist on more and more and more. I almost didn't succeed in getting the workers to accept the agreement, but the majority did go for it.

Gilb: You said the Employers' Association tried to get the employer to agree. I know the old Industrial Association was absolutely against trying to negotiate at all with the unions. Had the attitude of the employers' organizations changed?

Matyas: Yes, the change was when the Wagner Act came in. They just accepted the fact that unionism had to be dealt with.
Gilb: You would attribute this to the N.R.A. and the Wagner Act, this change in the attitude of employers?

Katyas: Yes, and the tremendous organizational upsurge.

Gilb: They had no other choice.

Katyas: They had no other alternative. There were some people in the Employers' Association who were intelligent, very intelligent. Paul St. Sure, who represented the employer's side in the sit-down strike, the Spirella strike, was a very, very top-notch person. He did his level best to get his client to see that sooner or later he would have to grant a union shop, that he'd better persuade his higher officials back East that they were wasting money. Just as Mr. Eliel, who was representing the Employers' Council in San Francisco, fought unions on behalf of his clients, but recognized when the situation was such, when the workers were really organized and more than a majority of them really demanded a union contract, he recognized that sooner or later agreements would have to be arrived at and wasting all that time was costing the industry as well as the workers a lot of needless loss.
Gilb: Now, in discussing organizing, you talked about organizing individual shops such as the Amco Company and the Maloof Company. Was this the rule, to negotiate directly with individual shops, or were most of the agreements with employers done through multiple employer bargaining?

Katyas: Where there was an employers' association, we dealt with the employers' association. Where there was no employers' association, we dealt with the employer. Everywhere throughout the United States, we accepted situations as they were.

Now, the Amco Manufacturing, for example, was an underwear factory. It belonged to no association for labor ... it may have belonged to an employers' association for its own, but not for the purpose of labor relations. We were able to organize the workers of that shop alone and so we dealt with the employer directly. In the case of the knit-goods industry, on the other hand, our negotiations were with the employers' association and with the owner of this large knit-goods firm. But the owner didn't talk to us
directly at all, he was represented by the Employers' Council and when a labor problem came up, he had them represent him.

In the case of Kaloo, of Amco, of Spirella, they were not ...

They were outsiders.

As far as labor relations were concerned, they didn't call upon their association, so we naturally dealt with the employers of the workers involved.

To continue with the knit-goods industry, we finally got the agreement and it was with a good bit of struggle. We got the workers to accept the agreement which yielded not too much. That agreement went for about a year or maybe two; it provided for two years. The agreement was to continue in force and effect unless either side gave notice of termination.

It was some time in '39 when it was time to give notice of termination or let it ride again. The workers, the members of the union of this knit-goods group, were very eager to give notice of termination. They felt that there were still many abuses, they
wanted more money, they wanted to correct many conditions that they didn't like which were certainly hard to take. For example, they had a system that was not what was usual in our industry. They did not have a piece work system; they had a so-called bonus system which none of the workers understood. It seemed to them that they'd get a bonus once in a long while for no reason that they understood and on the other hand, they'd usually get pink slips in their envelope saying that they hadn't produced up to the agreed amount. The workers, for the most part, were so irked by those pink slips which they couldn't understand that they insisted upon a demand for a change in the agreement. They wanted an out and out piece work system.

The members kept coming to me furious with those pink slips that gave them notice that they hadn't produced the amount that they were paid for. I used to say, "Now, look here. According to the agreement you are supposed to work forty hours a week, you are
Hayas: suposed to give good, honest work. More than that you can't do. There was no agreement on what the value of the operation that you performed was to be. You are responsible only for putting in an honest day's work. After that, what do you care what the notices are?" But the emotional resentment was terrific and the tensions were terrific. I was very sympathetic with the workers who wanted to get away from what they called the "humiliating, everlasting slip in their envelope". Occasionally they'd get a bonus which they didn't understand either.

However I advised against giving notice of change.

The industry was not busy. Nationally the economic situation was not good in the knit-goods industry and I thought this would be a poor time to terminate the agreement or to go out for anything more, although the workers were justified in wanting more. I finally persuaded the workers to let it ride. It didn't occur to me that the employers would say anything. I was just convinced that this was not a good time to demand more.
While the majority of the workers voted with me, there was a stiff minority who thought that I was just being pretty soft to let them go on suffering the conditions they were suffering instead of going out to fight. They were ready to fight for more. Why was I discouraging it? Must be because there was something wrong with me.

In the meantime, conditions in the knit-goods industry became slower and slower. As a matter of fact, by this time, I was rather ready to quit my job. I felt that I had accomplished about as much as I had to offer and I was ready to quit. Besides, in Local 101, there was a small group of Communists whom I had to fight pretty consistently. They were everlastingly interested in bringing in resolutions about not selling scrap iron or about having friendly trade with Russia. I don't recall all the thousands of resolutions that were in vogue at that time. They were everlastingly interested in helping organizations that the more experienced among us recognized as front organizations. I, for my part, succeeded in fighting
them off very well but I became rather tired of the fight which I thought was useless.

There was a girl who was the leader of the group who came in to work in our industry. I don't think she was an integral part of the industry. I think she was instructed to come into the industry. She had the gift of gab and everything else. But all of her gift of gab and all her ability, and she had undeniable ability, didn't really help her. Whenever she took on any issue, the membership always voted her down finally, but it took a lot out of me to have to fight that sort of thing.

I finally thought that I had organized about as much as needed to be organized and the union could stand on its feet very well and I thought I'd like to get out of the union. I wrote to Dubinsky and asked him to accept my resignation. He wrote back and reminded me that after all, while there was no doubt about my value as an organizer, I shouldn't forget that I took some training too and he asked whether I thought it was cricket, now that I was so
much more experienced, to quit.

I was going to quit purely because I thought I had done my job. I had never intended to become a perennial official of the union. I came back to do a job and I thought that was done and I was getting tired of these fights. In spite of his very nice and flattering answer, I still was determined I was going to go out. I had already persuaded the knit-goods local not to give notice of termination, to wait awhile on that ... I thought everything was pretty much in order and I could go out.

During this period a letter came to me from the Workers' Education in New York City asking me whether I knew of a worker who could go to Europe on a Workers' Education scholarship, that they had a single scholarship to be given to one woman in the United States to attend four weeks of workers' education in England and two weeks in a Scandinavian country, and could I recommend anyone. I read it and, vaguely, the thought entered my mind, "No, I don't know anybody that I could recommend. Of course, I could recommend
myself. I don't know anybody who would be as good for it as I would be." And I threw the letter into the waste-basket. That thought just went through my mind, sort of, well, isn't this funny, and I threw the letter away.

About a week later I received a letter from Helen Meiklejohn back East. It was addressed "Dear Jennie, Here's a marvelous opportunity for somebody who's had such and such a background. I know the perfect candidate. P.S. I hope you wouldn't turn it down if it came to you".

Well, that seemed too funny too. It seemed especially funny since the thought had crossed my mind, but I threw the letter away. Naturally I wouldn't recommend myself, but when this letter came, I began to think again. The letter urged me very strongly to write a biographic sketch and to apply. It cautioned me that there were many people throughout the United States who would apply. I did apply and when I actually got it, when I was advised that I was the one woman who got it -- the scholarship asked for one woman in the United States labor movement --

That really was an honor.
Well, it was something. It meant that I had some friends who worked very hard. I couldn't understand it, but it didn't matter much. Here it was; I had this terrific opportunity to go to Europe. I didn't understand what it was all about but I was very delighted.

Then I thought that I couldn't very well go and avail myself of that sort of opportunity and then come back and waste it, not use it. So I wrote to Dubinsky and said, "Well, now that I'm going to Europe and I'm going to be learning a great deal, if you want me to continue on, I'd better decide to stay on where I'll be able to return to the movement what I will have received from another phase of the movement." And so I stayed on.

While I was in school in London I received a telegram from Dubinsky saying that the knit-goods firm insisted on negotiations and Dubinsky had offered somebody else to start negotiations and the firm said "No", they'd rather have me there. So he suggested that I come home.
That was very interesting because this firm had never indicated in any way that they thought that I was any sort of union representative. On the contrary, they had always seemed to feel that I was very rigid and that conditions in no other union were as rigid as they were here. Strangely enough too, when I went to England, I received a very nice letter from the owner of the firm and a box of nylon stockings and a lovely sweater. I was bewildered because there had never been any indication of any regard for me as a person at all. To receive a present -- and I don't generally believe in accepting gifts anyhow -- I didn't know what to do. It was a small gift, I didn't want to offend the employer, I thought he was very gracious to have done it and yet I couldn't very well accept it. I finally wrote him a note and I said I would be very glad to accept the sweater because it was made by our members and I would be very proud to wear something that I could say was made by union labor and show England what a union made sweater was like. But if he would forgive me, I would prefer to return the
lovely nylon hose because it was against my custom to receive anything, but I appreciated the spirit very much.

Dubinsky wrote me that he had offered the services of the head of the knit-goods union in New York City to go there and negotiate in my place, but the employer said he preferred to have me back. Well, when I got that, I had just one week before the class would terminate and I hated to go away before it was over, so I wired back and asked Dubinsky whether they couldn't nevertheless send Louis Nelson, who was the New York representative, or, failing that, whether Dubinsky couldn't get a postponement so that I could finish the course, as I had only one week. After all, I was sent there by people to whom I had a responsibility too. So we waited.

When I came back, and we started negotiations, I learned why the employer preferred to have me back ... it was just a case of stalling; we were able to make no headway whatsoever in our negotiations. When the firm found out that we were ready not to reopen the
agreement, the firm felt it was good for them to reopen it and ask for regression, that is, to take back conditions that they had already granted. We negotiated for the longest time. Then, of course, when he reopened negotiations we began to demand the elimination of this bonus system under which the workers suffered so much, but we made no headway whatsoever. I almost had a feeling that the firm was sitting in negotiations because the law required that a firm negotiate when the majority of the workers wished representation, that he was complying with the letter of the law but never with the spirit of it at all, just as while the agreement was in existence, I felt always that the firm was abiding by the letter of the agreement -- not a single bit was being violated from the point of view of the letter of the agreement -- but he never, never, never accepted the spirit, or the theory that the workers had a right as human beings, as dignified entities, to have collective bargaining.

It was a peculiar situation. I think the owner of the factory was the son of the former owner. He
Matyas: was probably a very fine young man, but the impression I had of him was that he was a young man who had had the idea that when he grew up he would inherit the factory and with it would come everything, the people and all.

Gilb: Feudalism.

Matyas: Yes, pretty much that feeling, that it was his duty to be a good patron, but that his goodness was not to be questioned, it was to be accepted. I think he felt a personal hurt -- that's my impression, how can one tell what another person's motives are, you can only tell what the acts are -- but my impression was that he felt almost as if it were an affront, as though the people didn't appreciate him at all or else they wouldn't have chosen to organize.

All through the life of the agreement, I was the manager of the local. I was not yet a vice-president. When the members would come and complain about these pink slips, I used to try to calm them down and say, "Look, this is the first time the firm has had to deal with outside representation. It is evidently
"Matyas: against the grain of this firm to deal with outside representatives. Let's go easy." I tried to minimize every complaint that came in because I thought this firm was emotionally anti-union. I may be right; I may be wrong. I'm just giving my impressions of the matter. My impression was that the employer was emotionally opposed to the idea that workers had a right to organize and to speak for themselves. I thought we ought to go easy and get the firm to realize that this was something that ought to be welcomed rather than fought. We didn't succeed in it.

As a matter of fact, through all the ostensible negotiations, I say ostensible because the firm just sat there -- the lawyer spoke but no matter what proposition we put, it met with no interest whatsoever, and the counter-proposals were such as to be utterly impossible -- it almost looked as though the firm was ready to have us go on strike. Times were bad anyhow and it would have been a good time to have us go on strike. I think the firm thought they would be
Matyas: able to lick the idea of unionism altogether.

The members of the union thought that I was very weak. As a matter of fact, they organized a committee to call on Dubinsky when he was in San Francisco. I knew that. They went and told him, "Well, Jennie is all right, but she's just too weak for him." I had advised against a strike in the first place and then advised going easy and now the firm wasn't giving anything at all. They were impatient and wanted to go out on strike. I was afraid that a strike would be lost. Times were not good.

Gilb: '39 was a recession time.

Matyas: In the knit-goods industry it was bad.

Of course, Dubinsky saw my point very well and he tried to meet with the firm, but the firm wouldn't meet him at all. The attorney for the firm came to see Dubinsky, but the representative of the firm did not.

Finally -- the history of it was in all the papers -- in October of '39 or so, all at once the janitors' union, the Maintenance Employees' Union,
called me up and said they were going to throw a picket-line around the "joint". I didn't know who they were. I said, "Wait a minute. What do you mean, you're going to throw a picket line around the 'joint'? Whom have you got in there?" "Well, we've got a janitor in there and he fired the guy and he wouldn't even see us to talk about him."

I said, "Look, we have four hundred members in there. You'd better hold your horses on that. I don't want a strike there now."

"Well, he fired the guy, no reason and he wouldn't even speak to us about it."

I said, "Well, let's wait and see. Did you call Jack Shelley? Maybe he can help." Shelley was then the president of the Labor Council.

"Yes, we called Jack Shelley and he won't see Jack Shelley either."

So I called Jack Shelley and he said, "Well, Jennie. I went to try to see the guy, I sent in my card, but he wouldn't see me."

So I held it off for two or three days and finally the Maintenance Employees' Union said, "Nuts
Katyas: to you. He won't see anybody. We're throwing a picket line around the 'joint'."

I went to see the firm's attorney and I said, "What are you trying to do? You know perfectly well that if there's a picket line our people can't go through it."

"Oh sure, Jennie. We know that. We know there's nothing you can do to help, but there was no work for the man so we let him go."

I said, "Is that what it was? No work. Well, that's all right. That means when there will be work, you'll take him back. I'll tell the janitors' union."

"Well, no, you'd better not. I don't say that we'll take him back."

So no matter which way I tried ...  

Gilb: It sounds as though they wanted a strike.

Katyas: Yes, it sounded for all the world like they wanted a strike.

Well, the janitors' union put out a picket line and of course our people wouldn't go through. Our
people rejoiced over the fact that at last something broke, because they were pent-up with all this resentment anyhow. The firm was not negotiating in good faith, they considered that the firm was just putting up a front of negotiations, and they had all the resentment about this bonus system, and the firm had said, "It's not up to the workers to either object or anything else about the bonus system. That's something we want to give." That attitude, you know.

The workers were thrilled silly, not only the members in our union but even the machinists in the factory who had never belonged to our factory, who belonged to the Machinists' Union. They came out too, they wouldn't go through the picket line. Although we were in the C.I.O., a committee was formed of the Machinists, the Maintenance Employees, and us to see what could be done, but we couldn't get to first base. There was this one man who was fired, so the Maintenance Employees' Union had to have a picket line. That meant nothing to them.
Matyas: because it didn't require many people. But none of our people would go to work.

Well, eventually, late in December or early in January, I kept going back to the Labor Council and I begged the Maintenance Employees to call off their strike. Call it off, call it done, so that our people could go to work because I was sure that the whole thing was against us, not against that janitor at all, that the janitor was used as the medium through which a picket line was forced on us. I said, "I'm sure the strike is against us. The employer doesn't want our members back on the job. Call off the picket line and we'll send them back to work. I'm sure our people won't be taken back. But at least let's know where we stand. And then we'll form a picket line of our people and it will really be a strike where the strike belongs."

At that time there was a fellow by the name of Harry Hook, who was in charge of the Machinists, and he refused to agree to have the line called off. Why, heaven only knows. He had eight machinists.
Katya: No, he refused to permit me to negotiate for the whole factory. I said, "Look what's happening when there are two unions. One janitor, and four hundred people are outside because of him. If we have one agreement, we'll take care of everybody. We'll see to it that the rates and everything for your machinists will be exactly as you want them to be, and you can have the dues, but let there be one agreement." For some cock-eyed reason he wouldn't go for it. And interestingly enough, that fellow posed as an ultra-ultra-radical, too.

Finally John O'Connell, who was then the secretary of the Labor Council, I think, prevailed upon the janitors to call off their line. By this time the janitor had long since found another job or disappeared from union membership anyhow.

Well, exactly what I suspected happened. When the janitors called off the line, I wrote the firm a letter and said that I realized that the factory must be thoroughly disorganized and would probably not be able to re-employ all the workers at once, and
I'd be very happy to meet with the firm to work out a schedule for the return of the workers. I received an answer saying, "We will re-hire such workers as we need when we need them." and refusing to meet with us. Well, that obviously said "go to hell." Still I felt that it would be better to swallow it and let people go to work and then call a strike when we were ready for it. But how to get it over to the members was the difficult part; I called the members together and had a meeting -- we had meetings almost daily. "What do you mean, let some people go to work when they call them, and the rest of us ... what'll happen to the rest of us?", the workers said. And I said, "In the first place, you don't know who 'the rest of us' is likely to be, but in the second place I think we can agree now that whoever is called back should go back to work, but that the first time the firm bypasses one of its old workers and hires (pause) a new worker from the outside while one of his own workers is still unemployed, that we then definitely declare a strike." And the members
Hayas: voted on that and agreed to it.

Well, sure enough, another worker was eventually hired while a former worker who could do the work was out, and we protested, called a meeting; they found one reason or another for it, and finally we were able to build a case that they were definitely "locking out", not re-hiring eighty workers. Strangely enough, the eighty workers that they were not re-hiring were among the oldest workers there. One woman who had been there thirty-one years and was then getting $31 a week, a knitter, and others like her were not re-hired, because they were getting not merely an adequate rate of pay, but the highest rate. It occurred to us that the firm wanted to hire cheaper labor and wanted no union. Ostensibly they met with us.

We could get nowhere with the firm at all. We called the other workers who had returned to work -- about forty had returned; the others had disappeared -- and they all agreed that the firm was to be given notice that unless the workers were re-hired, the
Natyas: others would come out on strike. The firm paid no attention whatsoever and so the other workers gave up their jobs and came out on strike. That was one of the most noble demonstrations I ever saw, because these workers had been unemployed for such a long time, and then some of them were called back; they saw that the picture was a pretty bad picture, and still they voluntarily gave up and joined the workers who we considered were locked out.

For almost two years we carried on the fight.

Gilb: You struck that long?

Natyas: Yes. Finally it got so that it was just the committee. We didn't get anywhere; it's still not a union shop.

Gilb: What were they doing, employing other people?

Natyas: Oh, yes, employing other people. Of course we got the whole labor movement sympathetic to us; we were outside of the Labor Council but the Labor Council gave us all the help they -- it was such an obvious case of ruthless anti-unionism. I don't know whether these people were being martyred because the firm believed they could get cheaper workers or whether the firm just didn't want to have a union to contend with.
Matyas: We tried to show, through the N.L.R.B., that these people were being locked out because of their union activities, and the employer contended they were left out because their productivity was not good enough. All the time they had pink slips in the workers' pay envelopes, and I said, "Look, there's nothing we can do about it; they have a right to conclude whatever they like; all you can do is do your day's honest work." But the firm kept a record of every ... built up a long, long record. Our workers didn't do any building up; I didn't know enough to anticipate that sort of thing, and our workers' contention was that they, being the old workers, were used to train new employees at the beginning of every season, so that their productivity was lowered because they had to stop what they were doing to teach the others. Also, they were given a lot of repair work -- a lot of work was done in the East, and they had to do repair work, and they were given a lot of new samples to make, and all that sort of thing, which kept productivity down. But the firm built up a record over the whole period of union
relationship to indicate that the productivity of the workers fell down. So the N.L.R.B. ruled that the workers were not discriminated against for union activity, that they were not being re-hired because of their lack of productivity.

We conducted a campaign all over the United States; we went to the stores and asked them not to patronize this firm, but it didn't help very much. Finally the firm decided to sue the union for damages done to its reputation; they claimed that our saying they locked out the workers damaged their reputation. In one instance they claimed that somebody or other said that the workmanship under the non-union conditions was inferior workmanship. So they were suing us for something like three-quarters of a million dollars. (I'm not sure of the amount). They sued the International; they sued me as the manager of the local; and they sued me as an individual. I remember one time I said to my husband, "John, are you worried about the suit?" He said, "Three-quarters of a million? Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars?"
Matyas: If it were seven hundred and fifty dollars I'd be worried, but not seven hundred and fifty thousand." (laughter) But anyhow, that's one of the situations that shows how a great fervor didn't work out so well; the workers had terrific fervor.

During this time, in 1941, I begged Dubinsky to let me go again, and I said, "Look, the strike by now is just a committee; Henry Zacharin, the manager of the Joint Board can certainly handle it well; I'm really not needed; there's really no reason why I should be on any more, and as a matter of fact, I'm sure the strikers would be delighted not to see me around any more, and I'd be relieved myself. Two years is really an awfully long time in one situation." And he said, "All right, if that's what you want." Then Dubinsky had a meeting with the executive board of the strikers. I took it for granted that everything was finished that I didn't even go into the meeting; I stayed out in my office to clean my drawers and empty my desk and be ready to leave. Lo and behold, he came out and said, "No go, Jennie, I
Matyas: haven't got the heart." I said, "The heart for what?" "They don't want you to go." I said (rising inflection) "But I'm sure they'd be delighted; after all, there's nothing--" "No, they don't want you to go; they feel that if you go, it would be desertion; they just don't want you to go." So I just didn't know what in thunder to do. I really truly thought they'd be glad to have me go.

Finally I said, "I'd be glad to stay on my terms." Dubinsky said, "What are they?" I said, "I'm really not needed, but I'll stay if I can stay part time."

Gilb: Your question was staying with the union at all.

Matyas: At all, because the other work -- organizing -- was more or less done, and this was not at the point that I could do much at all. All of the situations were at a point where they could run more or less routinely. '41 wasn't a very good year either. Finally I said, "I'll stay if I can stay half time." Dubinsky said, "Name your own terms; if that's what you want, that's what it'll be." He wanted to know why I wanted half time. I said, "D.D., it's my conscience; I haven't
Katyas: got enough to do all day long; I'll find something to do, as I do now, but at least I won't feel that I'm on the job all the time; I'll feel I'm on my own." So he said "Okay," and my wages were promptly cut in two. But that's all it meant. (laughter) I couldn't take any specific time off anyhow; you never can, you know, so that it really just meant that I had the feeling I was on half time pay.

Out-of-Town Organizing

Katyas: Subsequently, a few months later, came this situation in Los Angeles. (It was shortly after Pearl Harbor, I think.) Dubinsky asked me to go to Los Angeles and help. I pleaded with him that I didn't think I was the right person, but he insisted that he was a better judge of a person's ability than I was. I agreed with him once again to go for a short time to Los Angeles. Of course, he forgot all about the fact that I was on part time; I then had to write him that I was no longer on part time. (laughter) But I had to stay there, oh, about five or six months, not only to organize the situation, but a strike developed and
Matyas: I had to stay through and help that until an agreement was arrived at.

Gilb: I remember -- maybe you don't want to discuss this -- Rose Pesotta said that she had wanted to have the strike confined to just a few industries and Feinberg had without --

Matyas: At that time Levy.

Gilb: Well, anyhow, someone, without informing her, had made it a more general strike, and she was very resentful of the fact that she hadn't been informed. Do you remember anything about that situation?

Matyas: The strike was broadened. Originally, when I went there, I thought the matter was one of organization of the dress industry and it subsequently became not only the dress industry but the dress and sports wear and miscellaneous workers. As a matter of fact, as things developed it was fortunate that Levy did include all the others in the strike call, because as a result of that the sports wear workers are now pretty well organized. Negotiations were going on for just the dress group and the organized section of
Matyas: the dress group was a rather small section, but the sports wear and the so-called miscellaneous group were tremendously underpaid.

I don't think Levy himself realized how great the response would be, but if we could get any of the shops to respond it would be all to the good. Well, it surprised him and everybody else how great the response was. Actually, negotiations began for the sports wear workers but it turned into a strike because the employers didn't want to negotiate. They thought they could lick the situation. It meant that another building had to be rented and Rose Pesotta bought the other building to make room for the colossal response of the sports wear workers, there were so many of them.

And it was a good thing that Levy decided that.

Gilb: Rose Pesotta has given an account in her book, *Bread Upon the Waters*, of two incidents where you were involved in out-of-town organizing; Seattle in 1935; and then Los Angeles, in 1941.

Matyas: I don't remember what Rose Pesotta said about those
incidents. I went up to Seattle to help when she
wanted me, she asked me to come and I did. I was
there for quite awhile. That was really a very
interesting situation.

The workers there needed organization very badly.
They were badly underpaid and they were finally
organized. Rose did a magnificent job of organizing
the workers. Unfortunately, the employers were
adamant and economically well able to hold out, and
they held out a long time. Unionization on a large
scale did not materialize from the strike.

There was a rather interesting incident, a by-
issue of that situation. An editorial about me in
one of the papers, I've forgotten which one, spoke
about my ability as an orator, etc., and ended by
accusing me of being a Communist. I didn't see the
editorial. When I finally felt there was nothing
more I could do to help, I left Seattle. You see,
every time I was away from home I was away from my
husband, I didn't like it though I would never let
it keep me from being where I thought I could be of
Natyas: help or where somebody else felt I could be of help.

When I came back, Rose Pesotta sent me a clipping of this editorial and I was furious. I remember, there was a girl who I think was a member of the Communist Party standing right near me when I got this letter with the clipping in it. I teased her. I said, "Look, here's an editorial. I think I'll sue the paper. They accuse me of being a Communist." And this girl said, "You'll sue them? Why should you sue them. You're not a Communist, but the idea of them saying that you are. I think we should sue them."

Gilb: Were these the only two instances where you went out to organize, the Seattle instance and the Los Angeles, or did you go other times?

Natyas: I think those were the only two ... well, in the early times, in New York City, after every strike I stayed out awhile and went into outlying districts. But I think those were the only times here, locally.

Gilb: Did you, from what you know, think the Seattle and Los Angeles regions were more poorly organized than the San Francisco region?
Katya: Yes. But don't get a wrong impression of that. It happens that San Francisco is more or less a so-called "union town" anyhow, but the market in San Francisco is a very small market compared with the market in Los Angeles. We're fairly well organized in San Francisco and our membership is only a little over three thousand at that, whereas in Los Angeles they now have over ten thousand and they haven't begun to touch the surface of it.

Gilb: So their problem is much bigger there?

Katya: Oh yes. The market is terrific and the city itself has an anti-union history.
Gilb: We've been talking for a long time about your organizing activities. Now I'd like to ask some questions about how the I.L.G.W.U. is governed and its relations with other unions.

Locals 8 and 101

Matyas: The I.L.G.W.U. is the parent body which issues charters to any group of workers engaged in the apparel industry in an area where no charter exists. In San Francisco, the I.L.G.W.U. first chartered Local 8, the cloakmakers' union although there was a dress and sports wear industry, not quite to the extent that there is now, but that was never organized. The workers in the cloak industry however, were organized more or less feebly way back in 1908. Now once a charter is issued, to a group of more than seven members banded together for the purpose of organizing the balance of the trade, (it always must be confined to the work over which the I.L.G. has jurisdiction), that group becomes a local of the
Matyas: I.L.G.W.U. and is completely autonomous, not in any way governed by the parent body. There are certain principles, that any local must abide by, principles adopted by convention (conventions were at one time held annually, then biennially, now once in three years; any law adopted by the convention is for the entire I.L.G.W.U.). Except for these fundamental laws, there's complete autonomy.

I remember an interesting story about how Local 8 was revived in 1933-34 and how 101 came into existence. Local 8 had been out of existence because of the struggle between the Communist group and them. But when they were re-establishing themselves, they wanted an agreement from their employers. The employers were not ready to sign an agreement, and so the workers in the cloak industry stopped work. It didn't take long for the employers to recognize that an industrial stoppage throughout the city was not a good idea, and they recognized that it would be better to sign up with Local 8. A formal
collective bargaining agreement was entered into between the employers of the cloak industry and Local 8 of the I.L.G.W.U.

Then Vice-President Feinberg who was director of the Pacific Coast area, contacted the dress employers in San Francisco and had a number of conferences with them, and suggested that they sign up with the union without incurring the possibility of a cessation of production. The employers recognized that the movement was toward collective bargaining agreements, and an agreement was arrived at. Although the increase in wages was not so much, having a collective bargaining agreement in the dress industry in San Francisco was a history-making event. Workers flocked to the union offices to sign up and take out books. Many of them, of course, didn't know too much of what a union was. Workers actually came to our office saying, "My boss signed up with this union; where do I buy a book?" So 101 was established.

Coast Directors

Silb: Feinberg was paid by the International?
Katyas: Yes. He was in Los Angeles and in San Francisco.
Matyas: There were locals all along the coast and in Seattle and Portland also.

Hilb: He remained Coast Director for how long?

Matyas: For quite a while; I think it was in 1941 that he went back to New York City and assumed the management of the Cloak Joint Board in New York City. Vice-President Levy took up residence in Los Angeles, and he was the director of activities up and down the coast.

Executive Committees of the Locals and the Joint Board

Matyas: Subsequently the I.L.G. continued organization and had more locals. Interestingly enough, you know the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union always had a form of unionism that was more akin to industrial unionism than to craft unionism. For example, in a factory where women's garments are made there are many crafts. There are hand finishers, pressers, operators ... the term operators to us means a machine worker ... there are packers ... there are many, many crafts.
Matyas: Now, my husband was a printing pressman and the printing line has, as you know, many crafts and each craft has its own union. Each craft has its own negotiations with the employer so that an employer who had a print shop might have agreements terminating at different times, one agreement with the printing pressmen, one with the type-setters, one with the book-binders and so on. All of those agreements might coincide or they might terminate at different times and there might be labor difficulty at different times.

That has never been so in any of our International Ladies Garment Workers' shops. We have an agreement that covers the entire shop, all the workers that are engaged in the manufacture of a woman's garment are covered by the one agreement, finishers, pressers, cutters. However, in some cities there were crafts that insisted that they wanted to be off by themselves for reasons of their own, they felt more at home. The cutters, considered the most highly skilled craft in our industry and consequently also the highest
Matyas: paid, felt that they ought to have locals of their own. In New York City, for example, Local 10, of which Dubinsky was a member, was organized on a craft basis a long time ago. But, while it was organized on a craft basis for the purpose of meeting and discussing its own problems, no agreement was written between the employers and the craft by itself. Wherever a craft was organized and had a charter it became compulsory to form a Joint Board with similar crafts so that when an agreement was signed, it was signed for the entire shop of all the manufacturing employees.

In San Francisco, incidentally, a Joint Board was formed right away between 101 and Local 8. A Joint Board is an administrative board but nothing else. It meant that both Local 101 and Local 8 would share the responsibility of the administration of the union in San Francisco. The two locals had a total membership at the time of little more than 1,000. It would have been very unwise to have employed separate business agents for each, separate
Managers, separate headquarters. A Joint Board was formed so that one administrative body could take care of the collective agreements of the cloak industry and the dress industry.

Who were the officials of this Joint Board?

Let me give you the structure in general. When a local is organized, the executive board or executive committee of the local is its policy-making body. The executive committee is composed of workers themselves, workers in the shop. The general membership of the entire local elect the executive committee once every year or every two or three years. Usually an executive committee is elected about the same time delegates to the I.L.G.W.U. convention are elected. The work of the executive committee is all volunteer. The members of the executive committee work in the shop all day long and then come to headquarters, it used to be once a week, to receive the report of what's going on, the complaints, and so forth. The executive committee is supposed to make the policy, receive the report, approve the report, make suggestions of how the work of the local is to go on.
Silb: You say "supposed to." Do you find that they are often "yes men" to paid administrative officials?

Matyas: It depends upon the character of the executive board members. The executive board or any of the members have a complete and absolute right to criticize in whatever way they see fit and to make whatever policy they see fit. If they know what a union is, they might criticize a report very intelligently. Criticism doesn't necessarily mean adverse criticism; it might be constructive criticism. If the members who receive a report do not have the know-how -- if they're new or don't care, they're likely to become "yes men" in the traditional sense of the word.

However, in an organization like ours, we are eager for genuine participation on the part of the membership; we do everything in our power to stimulate members to think of the union as their union and of the officials elected or employed by them, as there to work for the good of the union as a whole. If the members try to become vitally aware, it's good, and if they don't, then it follows as night and day
Matyas: that the officials will be charged with the responsibility.

Gilb: Do you find that more men than women tend to be elected to the executive board?

Matyas: Well, it all depends. For example, in Local 8, which has a membership of about 85% women, at one time had hardly any women in the executive committee. That's because the men in Local 8 in the earlier days were old timers who had come here, many of them, from New York City and who had had very thoroughgoing union know-how, they fought for the union, they helped make the union back East, when they came here they were pretty much union men. When they got up to speak, they were articulate, naturally, and the membership just automatically elected them.

It was all volunteer work; it involved coming together after they had done a hard day's work at the factory. They did all that additional work, all the executive committee work and the grievance committee -- there are many subcommittees of the executive committee; all of that was done without any remuneration whatsoever. In our International
there wasn't even such a thing as "committee expense."

Now that we're much better off, there is committee expense. If any members have to take time off from work, they naturally are reimbursed for the time they lose. When they have an evening meeting, they are allowed $1.50 dinner money, so they can have dinner downtown.

But in 101 the executive board members were practically always mostly women because there were very few men engaged in that work. In 101 the executive committee did not know too much about unionism; it was usually pretty idealistic. It had an atmosphere at the meetings of coming to do its share, but whatever the officials urged was always more or less accepted almost as the Bible. That was one of the things that used to irk me very much. It still does; I'm everlastingly trying to get it over to our membership that the membership is all of us, they and I and the other officers of the union. Not the officers or the executive committee only, but all of us. Each of us is elected in a democratic organization to perform specific functions, and the volunteer
representatives are supposed to assume the responsibility of fully expressing their point of view. But it's not easy to bring about a transfer from an attitude where the employer was the sole master to an attitude where workers, who never had any say in their conditions of work whatsoever, suddenly have a full and complete say in how the business of the union is to be conducted. It's not simple for me to explain it; I'm not a psychologist. The feeling all through the International of the I.L.G.W.U., and probably all through the labor movement is that the union is the membership. But if the membership is a lethargic membership, or is convinced against its will, they let the officials run the business.

Gilb: Who were the officials of the Joint Board?

Matyas: At that time the Joint Board was composed of representatives from the executive board of Local 101 and Local 8, seven from each. The officials of the union reported to the Joint Board, and the delegates theoretically reported back to their locals, but the officials also met with local executive committees of 101 and 8 as well.
Joint Board Managers: Gisnet, White, Zacharim

Matyas: At that time David Gisnet was manager of the San Francisco Joint Board; later another man, Sam White, replaced Gisnet. Sam White was not a man of the industry at all; he was a graduate of Reed College in Portland, about 30, interested in the labor movement. He had been, I think, a member of the Young Socialist League --

Gilb: That's the Norman Thomas group.

Matyas: Yes. White was the manager of the San Francisco Joint Board for quite a while. There were some in the Joint Board and some in the cloak union who made capital of the fact that he was an "outsider". They were a Communist group who came back to the union theoretically reformed and very much interested in the welfare of the new I.L.G.W.U. in San Francisco, but they didn't like the idea one bit of having a Socialist in as manager. Sam White's interests were completely on behalf of the union. The Communists were trying to "bore from within" in the hope of taking over. They carried on a campaign of "he's a
Natyas: charming fellow, but he's an outsider and just doesn't understand.

Gilb: Was it your feeling that he didn't understand?

Natyas: No, no. Eventually some people who were non-Communist and who should have known better fell for this campaign. Subsequently Sam White lost out. Henry Zacharin was asked to come in and take over. He was a cutter in one of the shops, one of the very skilled occupations.

Gilb: I would like to ask you about the personality, especially the background, of Henry Zacharian, who's been so influential in this region. You mentioned that he was Jewish and came from Poland?

Natyas: I'm never too sure which part is Poland and which part is Russia. From what I know of his background, he came from a rather middle-class, I think business, background, but I'm not absolutely sure. His bent was always intellectual. I remember one time he called himself a "Yiddishist". His interest in the trade union movement is much more recent than mine. When he came to this country and he entered our
trade, he became a cutter, but I think his interest in the movement in general was more in the Jewish intelligentsia movement. He was interested in children's camps at one time; finally when he joined the union, after it was reorganized in 1934, he became active here in the dress local; he was a cutter in a dress factory; he was a volunteer secretary.

Gilb: I remember you described him to me as being short, slight, dark ...

Matyas: Yes, he's about as short as I am, and I'm 4'11", and very slight, rather good looking, with an intellectual bent, of a radical sort. He has a very good mind, a little bit on the sloganistic side, exceedingly honest, and very able to meet with the employers, who have terrific confidence in him. I'm very sorry to say he doesn't have quite the patience with the membership that I would like to see.

Gilb: You mentioned that he had more a paternalistic attitude toward the workers rather than being of them.

Matyas: Yes, but there are all kinds of fathers. There are fathers that are friends of the children, and there
Matyas: are fathers that remember that they're the father. He loves to remember that he's the father. While he wants to be very democratic, I think his paternalism out-weighs that trait.

Gilb: Maybe his drawbacks in the realm of democracy stem from the belief that he really does know what's best for these people.

Matyas: He really does know. Anybody in responsible positions knows better than a general membership. That's not unique, but it's one thing to recognize that you know better because of experience, and another thing to be ... just above. I'd be a little more inclined to wish that ...

Gilb: I'd like to work out a vivid description of the man without putting you in any spot.

Matyas: It's not just a matter of putting me on the spot; I don't like to judge people, and ... I think it's all right to know that here's a fellow who's capable, who loves to consider himself the right man in the right spot.

Gilb: What I want to get clear is the kind of man you would
find in the job of manager in San Francisco. Having this sort of middle-class orientation is not common to all the officials in the union; you yourself have more of an identification with the workers.

Matyas: That's right. But there was Sam White, for example, who had a college background. Now Henry is a person of terrific integrity, has the complete confidence of the employers.

Gilb: You don't have to pass judgment. These are just different types of leaders. How was the manager selected? Was he elected?

Matyas: The manager—when Henry Zacharin became manager in '35 or '36, he was asked by Feinberg to come in; it was in the middle of the term. He accepted and came in as manager. But he was not in the pay of the International. The only reason he was appointed was because it was between elections. Sam White had resigned.

Communist Activity

Gilb: You mentioned the Communist pressures which helped bring about White's resignation. Can you tell us more about Communist activity in the union in the early 1930's?
In 191 there were quite a group of women who were very definite members of the Communist Party. At that time, you remember, the whole atmosphere of the country was, "Let's get together and work together; let bygones be bygones." The I.L.G., too, since the Communists decided to give up their industrial needle alliances, had accepted some Communists, who got themselves elected to the executive boards. The executive boards included members who were completely naive and didn't know anything at all on one hand, and on the other, those who knew too much for the good of the union and were weeded to the Communist Party. There was one woman who I believe was sent by the Party to join the industry, a young woman named Minnie Carson, with great oratorical ability and great charm, who generally made herself very acceptable. Soon she was on the executive board; I realized soon that she was the leader of the group in 191. This group, being highly articulate, got themselves elected to the Joint Board.

There were a number of other people, who were
fully aware of what the Communists were still doing, like Kenoff (not Minoff from New York City), who was an odd-time trade unionist, a Socialist in his political affiliations. He had accepted the United Front completely; he was a very honest person and believed that there really was a united front. Before long, the members of the Joint Board had a meeting in Fresno at which they decided what was to transpire in our union in San Francisco. I shall never forget when Kenoff, who was a presser in a cloak factory and who was considered one of the leaders in the San Francisco office (he had been many years in the union back East and had terrific love for the International), found out that this group of Joint Board members had met with others from other unions in Fresno (or maybe it was Merced) to decide what should take place in our executive board—the tears came to his eyes, and I shall never forget the chagrin he felt that he had misplaced his confidence. Then he put me on guard, told me about it.

We were being very careful. Although we knew
there were Communists, we had no way out, really, because it was a democratic organization and they had the vote. The measures they kept voting for were not measures that pertained particularly to the union; resolutions such as "deal with Russia" or other matters outside the union kept being introduced, and they had the majority on the executive boards as well as on the Joint Boards. By their vote, the I.L.G. in San Francisco got itself affiliated with so-called fellow traveler organizations all the time, willy-nilly. When Encoff saw that—I say Encoff because he understood more clearly than the others, although there were quite a group of people who saw what was going on--

Gilb: Was he on the Joint Board?

Katya: Oh, yes, he was on the Joint Board, and there were others, such as Charlie Silvers, who knew what was going on but who didn't have the clarity Encoff had. Encoff then suggested that somehow we'd have to find a method whereby they wouldn't have the majority so that they wouldn't always pass all the measures that were extraneous to the
union problems. He suggested that a cutters' local be organized, that the cutters from both 6 and 101 be organized into a separate local. He did that purely because he figured that a cutters' union would send in seven members to the Joint Board, making 21, and he was pretty sure the cutters would not be communistically inclined and would cancel the Communist majority.

It was simple to persuade the cutters that they ought to have a local of their own, as they were the highly skilled people, not for the purpose of making any agreements but to facilitate the discussion of problems peculiar to cutters. It is an old custom in the I.L.G. to have separate cutters' unions; Dubinsky himself is a member of the cutters' Local 110 in New York City. It was very simple to get the charter. The I.L.G. back East was advised as to why the charter was sought. The membership itself, when talking about the desire for a cutters' local, was told about how homogeneity of interests in discussing problems would be a good idea, and they accepted that very readily.
From that time on, the Communists had harder sledding.

Silb: Didn't they suspect?

Matyas: They did but they couldn't do anything about it. They fought it, but the charter came from the International. Any group can appeal to an International for a charter. For example, in some cities, the local is divided into a number of groups, such as the operators, the finishers, the pressers, and the cutters. That's so in Los Angeles. (There was a lot of activity in Los Angeles because of Communists and non-Communists, too.) Locals are for purposes of discussing common problems; agreements are not signed by locals but by the entire trade and the Joint Board. When the cutters came in, we had three locals, 8, 101, and 213.

Business Agents: More on Communist Influences

Silb: Were any of the paid officials Communist?

Matyas: We had a business agent at the time, a man by the name of Sam Diner. I was very heartsick when...

Sam Diner was appointed by the International at the same time Henry Zacharin was appointed manager. The appointments had to be ratified by the membership. The International used its good offices
because it was able to recognize who might be able to function and carry on. When Sam Diner, who was the only candidate available who would accept, came in as business agent, I felt sad about it because I didn't trust the fellow. I didn't have too much reason for not trusting him (pause) I don't know why, but I just had no confidence in him. He was exceedingly charming and nice to me, but somehow it didn't ring true, and I soon learned that he played with the Communists. I didn't know that he was a Communist Party member, but I soon learned that he was one of the group of Communist Party members, and when he came on, I went to Feinberg and pleaded with Feinberg not to let him come on as an officer. I told Feinberg my apprehensions; I was afraid that the fellow just wasn't honest. It wasn't only that I didn't like his political point of view. Feinberg told me that I was being very naive about it, that nobody that's not honest can last in our organization, and so far as his political affiliations were concerned, so long as we know what they were, we could watch it. But I was very disturbed about it. We had
a strike on in San Jose. I refused to let Diner in on any meetings that I thought should be confidential. I tried to keep material from him, although he was then an officer.

I think I remember now why I didn't trust him. We had had a strike on Mission Street, a strike in dresses, an individual shop strike; Jocelyn, I think it was called. I tried to conduct the strike the way I thought it should be conducted. I tried to keep the pickets in the line behaving in accordance with the law so that we wouldn't get into difficulty, but Sam Diner and another fellow whose name I have forgotten now, another leader of the Communist Party, used to insist on coming on the line all the time. I didn't want those two on the line, because I knew they were Communists. This other man was a brilliant young man; I would have liked him personally if he hadn't been a Communist; but I knew enough by now to know that no Communist was a disinterested unionist but a Communist first. I didn't want either of them on the line because I didn't want to hurt the
welfare of the strike by permitting it to be called a Communist fight. No matter what I did, no matter how often I told them that I didn't want them on the line, they persisted on coming to do picket duty nevertheless.

Gilb: They would have preferred to have it labelled a Communist strike?

Natyas: I didn't know whether they preferred to have it labelled a Communist strike, but they preferred to be in on everything and get to be known by all the members and get to be liked by the members so they could get them to vote for whatever it was that they wanted. And of course as soon as there were arrests, they didn't mind being arrested, because they would not be arrested as Communists but as unionists. And while that suited their purpose, we didn't want it because we didn't want to involve the welfare of the workers in their political gyrations. Do what I might, it was almost impossible to keep them off the line. I'd want small picket lines; I didn't see the importance of having large picket lines. They insisted on having mass picket lines, and they got all their other fellow-
travelers to come on the line.

I knew that was as much Sam Pinier's work as anything, so when he became business agent, I was very deeply hurt by it. In addition to not liking his political affiliations, I was just skeptical about the man's plain straight honesty. Feinberg kept advising me that I was very unwise to be so concerned and that if he was dishonest, it would be found out soon enough. As I said, dishonest people in the I.L.G. just don't last.

Strangely enough, it turned out that he really was dishonest, that he accepted loans from employers. By a coincidence, we got one of the employers to give us a returned check of a loan he accepted. Then of course it was brought to the membership, and the Communists were defending him like fury in spite of the returned check; they charged blackmail and everything else. They charged that we were being political, that we were getting him out just because he was a Communist, in spite of the fact that we had the evidence of dishonesty.

Sill: They came out in the open about this Communist issue?
Hayes: Oh yes. At that time it was very fashionable to call the rest of us "red bairers," as they called all people who didn't go along with them hook, line, and sinker. Sure, they came out, and the first vote was to hold him. Feinberg asked that a committee be elected to try him, and to give him all the opportunities in the world to give evidence of the fact that it was not money accepted from the employer. Or that he even paid it back. And on the committee we saw to it that a good many of his Communist friends would be elected. They didn't have the majority. And when the evidence came out it was so clear cut that the committee just had to make the findings that he had accepted bribe. Still the Communists defended him. But of course the membership upheld Diner's dismissal, by a small margin. The Communists are terrific elocutionists, and they can almost persuade people that Monday is really Tuesday if they set themselves to it very hard. Well anyhow, he finally got out.

Jack Taub, who is at present the business
Gilb: Was there only one business agent?
Katynas: Yes. I, as a matter of fact, had asked Jack to come in. He had also at one time been a Communist. But that meant nothing to me, because I believed him to be very honest. I believe in all sincerity he severed his relations with the Communists, and that he was really honestly interested in the union. I had faith in his honesty, and I asked him to accept office.

Jack Taub is a very devoted, very sincere person. He had been in the labor movement...he was born in Russia, entered the labor movement in Russia, such as it was; I think he ran away from Russia--I don't know what the circumstances were, but I know he was in Paris and in the French labor movement, but always as a very sincere and very devoted worker at the bench. In this country he had worked in men's clothing and was active in his union, the Amalgamated. Then he came into the I.L.G. He always had impressed me as being very simple, devoted, and honest. While I didn't think he had a tremendous amount of oomph, I knew that his
sincerity and devotion would make up for what he might lack in a literary sense. Whatever little education he had, was self-education; his English—he can read English well enough; his writing is pretty poor, as is his spoken English, but...

Silb:  Don't some of these drawbacks affect his effectiveness with the employers?

Matyas: They do in a measure, but not too much. After all, many of our employers were workers themselves yesterday in the same business; some were and some were not. But his honesty, and he knows the trade, you see, the trade and the agreements. Jack Teub can sit down in the factory and show a worker how to make things, although that's not part of his function. He will sit down and say, "Look, if you do it this way, you'll probably get along better."

Silb: You say that you invited him to be a business manager. That would have had to be ratified, I guess.

Matyas: Oh yes.

Silb: But could any one of the officials, such as the manager, or somebody in the International, have appointed him?
Matyas: Could have invited him to be a candidate; then
the membership would have to indicate their approval
of our candidate before he could take office.

Sib: Do these people come up for re-election?

Matyas: Yes, as soon as election time came up, he was up
for re-election, and he might have been defeated
if the membership hadn't wanted him, but they did...
Now election is once every three years.

Sib: This applies to every official?

Matyas: Every official that's elected.

As a matter of fact, because of this terrific
experience we had with the Communists, as well
as some other experiences that were not too good,
we decided that any person who was elected to office
in the I.L.G. had to present his resignation the
day he assumed office, so that if at any time he
was found guilty by the entire membership of any
kind of misdemeanor, his resignation would become
effective; it would be in the desk of the manager.

Jennie Matyas, Representative of the International

Sib: You've described the manager and the business agents;
now what was your role?

Mattyas: I was an official appointed by Dubinsky and the International. I was organizer and educational director and my wages came from the International.

When the lingerie workers were organized—you remember about Amco and Malcof—there was no separate local for them, although they were in a different industry, so they were taken into Local 101; but subsequently when this knit goods shop was being organized—that was a large shop and a definitely different part of the industry—it became Local 191. Then when the Chinese were organized, we wanted them to be autonomous so that they might encourage the other Chinese workers to join unions. So I became not only an International representative, but also a manager of the Chinese local and manager of the knit-goods workers' local. But that was just a title, and titles never meant anything to me, except that it entitled me to sign an official document.

Gilb: Were you the only appointed official in San Francisco?

Mattyas: Yes, Ordinarily the International didn't have to
put an official like me on, but the International agreed to lend personnel wherever personnel was needed. When a community didn't have enough to support personnel by itself, it applied to the International for help. In this instance, the International appointed me to come in and assist Local 101 and Local 8.

Gilb: But your position was also ratified by the membership?

Katya: My position didn't need to be ratified, but it always is. As a matter of fact, I kept telling our membership both in Local 101 and in Local 8 and in 341 and 191 that by virtue of the fact that I was appointed rather than elected, any time any of them chose not to have me, all they needed to do was to write to the International and say "We don't want Jennie Katya," and Jennie Katya would be fired.

Gilb: The Chinese people didn't have to accept you as their manager?

Katya: Oh no, but of course I saw the local all through its formation and negotiations and strike, and it
just followed--I think the Chinese members would have felt hurt if I had not been able to stay on until they had grown large enough to be able to elect somebody of their own and pay for that person.

Sylb: They didn't have to participate in the Joint Board if they didn't want to?

Natyas: They didn't go into the Joint Board because they were completely supported by the International. You see, I became their manager. I negotiated the agreement as organizer and then just carried on. There wasn't enough income from these locals even to be a part of the Joint Board. They had to be subsidized, members did pay dues though. The Chinese local started out to be a local of over 100 members; before long the membership dropped to 30 or 40, especially when the factory closed. Eventually the local went out of existence. By this time, bit by bit, the members were able to find jobs in regular factories managed by white people.

Sylb: Why weren't they a part of the Joint Board?
Because this would have entailed additional expenses?

Katya: At that time 15 cents had to be paid to the International by every local for every member, no matter what their individual dues were. The individual dues of a local are determined by the local itself and might have been anything over 15 cents, whatever the local thought it took to conduct its affairs. The dues of Local 341, the Chinese local, were 25 cents a week. Of the 25 cents a week, 15 cents went to the International. That left them 10 cents. Out of the 10 cents, they wanted to have a headquarters of their own, in Chinatown. That's quite a bit of rent. They didn't have to pay my wages (as manager) because my wages continued to come from New York City. But it took a little bit of stationery and a little rent and other expense.

Locals that were part of the Joint Board, divided their money as follows: 15 cents to the International; part of the support of the administration of the Joint Board (rent, phone, business manager, and business agent).

Gilb: You’ve told us about the internal workings of the I.L.G. here. Now we'd like to know more about your union's relationship to the rest of the labor movement. The I.L.G.W.U. reacted to the formation of the C.I.O. with some sympathy, did it not?

Natyas: Yes. We had no particular axe to grind in the case of the formation of the C.I.O. We were interested in bringing the benefits of unionism and collective bargaining to as many workers in as many industries as possible. There were many industries where the workers had no benefits of unionism, in spite of the fact that the N.R.A. was in existence, which was to help workers to be free to choose organization if they saw fit. We agreed that it would not be possible to organize workers in very large mass production industries on the traditional craft basis, but many of the unions that had craft organization were reluctant to go along with that theory because they were afraid it would undermine the conditions they had gained in their respective crafts.
The birth of the C.I.O. came about after a resolution was introduced in 1935, in the A.F. of L. convention, which was not adopted. In 1936 the resolution was introduced again and it was not adopted, but more support did come its way. When the resolution was defeated, in 1936, John L. Lewis called together such national and international unions as would be interested in spreading education for that method of organization in the hope that at the subsequent convention the resolution would go over. My I.L.G.W.U. was one of the ten internationals which became part of the Committee for Industrial Organization.

There were some vice-presidents in our I.L.G.W.U. who didn't approve of our being part of the committee. They were afraid the committee would become a permanent body, dual in character to the A.F. of L. Dubinsky's opinion was that if that occurred we could draw out, but that in the meantime it was very important to form a committee that would try to educate the labor movement to the importance of organizing mass production workers
who were not organized and who, in his opinion and the opinions of others, could not be organized on a craft basis.

The Committee for Industrial Organization was organized; and as soon as the letters C.I.O. were widely publicized and the reason for the committee became popularly known, I think that stimulated steel workers and subsequently automobile workers and so forth to desire organization. It took fire, just like during the days of the N.R.A. the theory of organization went like wild-fire.

The committee began to lend itself to organizing workers into unions. Dubinsky's opinion at that time was that so long as the committee organized where there was no organization in existence, that was all right, but that he would not go along with any movement to organize in dual capacity to the A.F. of L., that it was not the function of anybody to organize the already organized.

We went along. The Committee began to issue charters bit by bit even in fields where unions were already in existence. Dubinsky didn't like it,
but there was a terrific amount of work done in organizing the unorganized. Dubinsky was still pretty satisfied that the Committee would go out of existence as soon as the American Federation of Labor recognized that it was possible to have industrial unionism side by side with its craft unionism, just as we were more or less an industrial union, always, since our inception, and there were other industries that were that way right in the A.F. of L.

But we failed to educate the rest of the A.F. of L. to accept the theory of the C.I.O. Instead, before the next convention the executive board of the American Federation of Labor decided to oust the ten international unions. As a matter of fact, they didn't oust all ten internationals. The I.L.G. was one of the internationals that was ousted much later than that. We remained in the A.F. of L. for quite a while.

I remember, finally the I.L.G. was ousted, the term was "suspended". If I'm not mistaken, I think some were really crossed off and others
were suspended. I don't recall whether all the unions were suspended—anyhow the I.L.W.U. was suspended from the American Federation of Labor.

The knit-goods industry, for example, and the Chinese workers here in San Francisco were being organized during the days when we were part of the C.I.O.

By virtue of the fact that we were suspended only, the feeling of the rest of the labor movement in San Francisco, so far as we were concerned at any rate, was one of sympathy, more or less.

The C.I.O. and A.F. of L. conflict became almost as bitter in San Francisco as I think the Communist situation had been in New York in our I.L.G. I think the feeling here between the C.I.O. and the A.F. of L. was very bitter for quite a while.

Silb: But your union was not regarded with such bitterness?

Natyas: No, our union was not regarded—as a matter of fact, not all of the C.I.O. unions were regarded with the same bitterness. The waterfront unions were regarded with bitterness because there had
been quite a bit of friction, even when Bridges was in the Labor Council. I think it was before the knit goods strike was on—when the A.F. of L. actually suspended our union. Then for several meetings we continued to be a part of the San Francisco Labor Council, but finally we were dismissed as an affiliate...

Riley: By Labor Council vote June 4, 1937.

Katysa: Well, that was a very harrowing experience for me. Our affiliation with the Labor Council I regarded as a very precious one. I felt we were part of the A.F. of L. through and through. I felt that our affiliation with the C.I.O. was rather an idealistic one. We had no axe to grind; we had nothing to gain through it. We were perhaps the only one of the large unions that formed the Committee that had no vested interest in it at all. Being divorced from the rest of the labor movement that the Council represented here was a very painful proposition. When I knew that that was going to happen, I knew that we were going to be read out of the Council, I was particularly badly
hurt.

That very day—you remember at that time there were constant purges in Russia. It would seem that any time a Russian dared to tell the truth about anything, he was purged. At that time there was a whole group of Russians, old-time Socialists, who were I believe the old-time democrats, who were being purged and tortured into making confessions of one sort or another. That day, when I sent to the Labor Council the headlines had news of another purge and when we were being read out of the Council, I took the floor and I said that I accepted fate and I accepted the decision of the rest of the Labor Council, but that I was very saddened by it, that it reminded me a great deal of the purges that were going on in a very unpopular country. (Speaking very slowly, haltingly, and with obvious feeling.)

I said that I felt that the C.I.O., in spite of the fact that it did issue charters where it shouldn't have, had done a tremendous amount of good. I asked the Council to consider who among us
was not proud of the fact that at that time fourteen million rather than eight million workers were eligible to wear union buttons. I think the entire Council delegation, although they voted with the resolution to oust us because it was a request from the A.P. of L., I think they felt a little bit the way I did.

The next day the newspapers carried a story which annoyed me very much. They said that I spoke with tears in my eyes or that I wept or some such thing and I was annoyed at that. I didn't think that I had wept, but the truth of the matter is that I suppose I did weep. As a matter of fact, I was told that there were many moist eyes among men and women there.

But at any rate we were out of the Labor Council. I threw a kiss to the delegates, as a matter of fact, as we walked out (laughter) and they said, "Bye Jennie", very friendly, in unison...strange, you know, I hurt now even as I tell this story.
Gilb: You are even hurting me.

Katyas: It's amazing how memories come back.

But I must hasten to say that while we were out of the Labor Council, our relationship was always good. Whenever we needed help, we were able to go to the Labor Council and ask for it and it was forthcoming.

Gilb: What sort of help?

Katyas: For example, when we had that big knit-goods strike and we had that picket line for quite a while, the rest of the labor movement supported us right to the hilt. People like Jack Shelley even, who today is a Congressman, came on the picket line. Many of the labor leaders of the American Federation of Labor came on the picket line.

Strangely enough, I didn't go for help to any of the C.I.C. unions. Whenever I needed help, I went back to my Labor Council and asked for help and it was forthcoming magnificently. I think there was the feeling always that we were temporarily out and that it wouldn't be long before we would come in.
Of course, Dubinsky and my International always hoped that eventually there would be union between the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O., that the A.F. of L. would adopt mass organization for mass workers on industrial basis. When I read the news, finally, that there was a tentative merger agreement, I was very happy about it and my mind went back to Dubinsky very strongly, because he really worked very hard to bring about peace. Now, I'm not saying that Dubinsky brought about any peace, I'm saying that it was one of his great ambitions to be instrumental in bringing about the unity of the labor movement.

Mlb: You have given me the impression that not only were you more favorable to the A.F. of L. people, you felt more in sympathy with them, but that you had some positive antagonism toward some of the local C.I.O. people.

Mayes: Yes, I did. I don't like to get on any bandwagons. I thought that John L. Lewis had a tremendous number of Communists in his organization, I thought that the great John L. was very certain
that he could use Communists for organizational purposes, but that he could control them and keep them from doing anything that shouldn't be done. I didn't at the time think that that could be done. I still don't think that can ever be done. I do think that the loyalty of Communists is to another government and I think it always has been; not only to another ideal but actually to the government of that ideal. I think that Communists, although they are ostensibly interested in the labor movement, are interested in any movement whatsoever, labor or parent-teachers, it doesn't matter what the organization is, they are interested in any movement through which they can bring their own ideas to bear to make people sympathetic to the nation, to Russia, which sponsors their idealism.

Hal: Was it your feeling that there were a number of Communists in the C.I.O. unions here, locally?

Haynes: Yes, it was my feeling. There was no doubt in my mind, but the fact that there was no doubt in my mind didn't either make it so or not make it so
because I probably went on prejudice. I have no way of knowing who is a Communist and who isn't.

Silb: Of course not.

Meyss: I never was a Communist myself and consequently I wouldn't be in a position to positively say that there are Communists here or Communists there, but from their general behavior, any experienced trade-unionist would recognize the difference between a unionist who verbalizes certain things and a unionist who is a genuine unionist. In my opinion, many of the C.I.O. unions here had a tremendous number of Communists in them and I think that was really the reason why there was so much friction between the Labor Council unions and the C.I.O. unions.

Silb: I know that around 1938 there was a complete divorce between the I.L.G. and the C.I.O., while the I.L.G. was out of the A.P. of L. too.

Meyss: Although I was not a vice president of the I.L.G. at the time, I knew that the general executive board, the vice presidents, were not very unanimous in their desire to go along with the
C.I.O. because some of them feared that it might lead to our participation in activities dual to the A.F. of L. I was told that Dubinsky had promised that that would never happen, that if the C.I.O. ever took on functions that were dual in character to the A.F. of L., we would not be a part of it. Then when the C.I.O. did begin to issue charters that were dual in character to A.F. of L. charters, we said that we would not go along. When the Committee for Industrial Organizations decided to become a permanent body--a Congress for Industrial Organization, using the same letters, C.I.O., we then definitely withdrew from C.I.O.

Did you feel a sense of relief at this?

I personally felt a sense of relief at it; I didn't approve of a great deal of what the committee was doing, although I recognized also that the committee was doing much to organize unorganized workers in the mass-production industries. I was very grateful and proud of that, but I was sad it had to be done at such a cost, internal strife between organized workers and workers still
to be organized, among the leadership of the trade union movement.

Eilb: Did it solve any of your problems locally when you severed relationships?

Metyas: No, it didn't do anything locally. Locally, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union was never too involved in any dual activities; it became involved a little bit during the Chinese situation, when Ted Goldstein tried to organize and get an agreement from the employers on the threat that unless they signed up with him, and he clothed it in the terms of the A.F. of L., "Jennie would get them." He succeeded in getting an agreement from the employers, an agreement which purely put an okay on the status quo, because none of the conditions were changed an iota; the Chinese who became members of the dual local--at that time the A.F. of L. was dual to us--didn't have to pay any initiation fee or dues or anything at all; the employers took all that on.

Then when the San Francisco Labor Council was instructed by the American Federation of Labor
executive council that we were to be suspended locally as well as nationally, that was for me a very sad moment. But it was sad not because of the effect it had on the union here locally, but because one wants to be part of the whole.

Silb: How about when you finally broke with the C.I.O. too?

Matyas: When we broke with the C.I.O., there was just a feeling of, well, we're not in the A.F. of L. but at least we are not helping to create any further friction. I knew that friction was going to continue as long as there was a dual union, but at least we weren't a part of that.

Silb: So you felt it was a step forward.

Matyas: Yes. I felt it was the only thing the I.L.G. could consistently do.

Silb: And then of course when you went back with the A.F. of L. in 1940, you were very happy.

Matyas: For quite a while, the fact that we were out of the C.I.O. still didn't mean that we were in the A.F. of L. Finally at the convention in 1940, in New York City, a vote was taken on what to do,
and the membership agreed that we'd better go back
to the A.F. of L.

Sillb: Were you accepted back in the Labor Council?

Stryss: Yes, of course. There was great joy throughout
the convention at our being part of the movement,
of which we had been a member since 1900, since
its very inception.
Sible: I had a series of questions to ask you about politics. Perhaps I might ask them now. You have described your great enthusiasm for Roosevelt, and I'd like to trace your political views from the mid-thirties on. You didn't share this same enthusiasm for California's Democratic governor, Governor Olson, I gather?

Seyes: You mean the enthusiasm I had for Roosevelt?

No, I did not. I didn't know Olson well. You see, Roosevelt is perhaps the only person that was able to take me away from my own fundamental belief that individuals are not great shapers of events. In the case of Roosevelt, I went along with him and I believed that he made a terrific contribution. I hadn't voted for Roosevelt the first time he ran, I voted for Norman Thomas. But the second time he ran, I not only voted for Roosevelt but I worked for him. His Inauguration Address, of course, was something that those of us who had the privilege to live through will never forget. From then on I knew that we were in a new era.
Roosevelt himself was not responsible for all the subsequent great things that changed the complexion and thinking of the United States. I think that adult education was one of the greatest contributions of the Roosevelt era, more than anything else. Up to that time, if a man or a woman was unemployed and eventually was destitute, he was considered just a bum and the responsibility his own. According to the concepts of the time, any person could have laid away for a rainy day and any person who was good could find a job anytime. Well, the Roosevelt era made it very clear that in a society that produced jobs for a hundred people, where a thousand were unemployed, you couldn't blame the other nine hundred for not being able to get jobs.

My husband, for example, was among the best printing pressmen in the country. He was one of the first color pressmen in Chicago. Well, that in the days when four color presses came out was considered something. He always had the reputation of being an excellent worker. When the depression was on, my husband had to look for a job. He
honeycombed the city. When employers met him they said that they regretted tremendously that they didn't have an opening for a man like him. They invited him into the office and offered him their best cigar, but there was no job. Now, my husband was so eager and willing for a job, he had such top-notch qualifications for a job, but the job wasn't there to be had. And what happened to my husband happened to fifteen million other working men and women.

The Roosevelt era, in my opinion, did this colossal job of retraining, of making us recognize that society as a whole had a responsibility.

I was active in the Olson campaign. Oh yes, I was very active. I had my reservations, but Olson carried on for California the traditions of the New Deal. I was never active before that, I never could see that Sinclair E.P.I.C. movement although he was theoretically a Socialist, but I thought--well, I couldn't become interested so I was out of all activity. But I was active in the Olson campaign for several reasons, one, he was in favor
of compulsory health insurance and I was very much interested in that. I think health is important to the entire nation—the health or lack of health of one individual affects the entire community. The idea of not seeing that, not understanding that, and the idea of giving it such a silly name as "socialized medicine", whatever that means. No country in the world has "socialized medicine", nobody wants whatever that means. But Olson was in favor of compulsory health insurance, for the creation of a fund through which medical bills could be paid, and other such things. Olson realized that if people were destitute it was not necessarily their fault and that society owed it to all of us to keep people at least in the minimum essentials of life.

Sibb: You say you worked for him. What did you do specifically for him?

Natyas: I didn't work for him. He happened to be the candidate for governor and I worked for all of the candidates of labor's Non-Partisan League because all of them, so far as I knew, were for
all the measures that the New Deal had brought in: unemployment compensation, old age security rather than just old age assistance, all of these things that one hardly dreamed would come into being in our lives.

Silb: Did you take an interest in the campaigns for San Francisco mayors?

Yes: When Ravenner ran for mayor, of course I was tremendously interested in that and I was very active. I was active when Ravenner ran for Congress. I was active in the Shelley campaign, naturally, both when he ran for the State Assembly, the State Senate, and when he ran for Congress. But always because they were the candidates of the issues, of the programs that I believed in.

As a matter of fact, in this last gubernatorial campaign, I was in quite a spot. I wasn't very strongly in favor of Graves but I felt that the Democratic party was the party of the "New Deal and subsequently the party of the Fair Deal; it was the party that by and large fought to keep the country on a concept of social responsibility.
Gilb: Of course, the State Federation of Labor hasn't always agreed with you.

Matyas: No. I was in complete disagreement with the State Federation of Labor in this last gubernatorial campaign. Not that I was in favor of Graves. I didn't know Graves. But I felt we ought not knife the party that fought to give us progressive legislation and laws.

Gilb: Was your political activity solely as an individual or was it ever as a union representative?

Matyas: As an individual one doesn't count. As an individual, it's only one vote. The important thing for a person in a position is to have access to talk to the entire membership. Now in this last gubernatorial campaign, for example, our I.L.G. was divided. The Pacific Coast director, a colleague of mine, who was also a vice-president of the International, was in favor of Knight, and while he didn't ask the organization definitely to come out in favor of Knight, he got the organization to agree to make no endorsements. On the other hand
when I took the floor, and spoke to our membership up north here, I always told the membership that down south my colleague was in favor of Knight but he was also in favor of the organization making no endorsements whatsoever. "I'll go along with the idea of making no endorsement so far as the organization was concerned," I said. But my personal opinion—and I said this on the platform—was that we owed our affiliation, not to the Democratic Party because it was the Democratic Party, but to the Party that gave us the New Deal and the Fair Deal. Now that that Party was down, it didn't seem right for us to help kick it a little lower.

Silb: Well then, your political activity did take the form of urging your members to vote.

Netys: Oh yes. Always. I always felt it very important for every adult to become aware that what happens in the capital of the state or of the nation affects the everyday lives of every man, woman and child.

Silb: Did the union ever contribute funds to campaigns?

Netys: The Taft-Hartley Act prohibits any such contributions.
Gilb: Prior to that time?

Katyes: Prior to that time we did; but since that time we definitely have not contributed funds to any national campaign. But we did get our membership to contribute voluntarily money to Labor's League for Political Education. I urge our members always to contribute money to Labor's League for Political Education because I think every man, woman, and child should understand that we all benefit or suffer from what our representatives in the capital of the nation do. I explain to our membership that it is important for every man and woman to be interested in what's going on in Washington, not only to tell if there's to be a war or not a war, high tariffs or low tariffs, soil conservation, etc., but also because the pay envelope is not only what you get for the actual garments that you make, but now it must be considered also to include unemployment insurance, disability insurance, and several of those things which happened either in Washington or in the state or in both and could unhappen just as well.
These are obvious illustrations, and I try to carry that further. (I hate to keep saying I; it doesn't matter what I did, it's what we did; but since it's my story, I'll just keep on using the first person, although it goes against the grain.)

But I've always felt that participation was every great privilege as well as a responsibility.

I don't go along with the theory that if all the workers would vote, we'd have the kind of congress or senate or state legislature we wished. I don't think it follows. I don't know why we think that workers will vote more intelligently than just the average citizen at all; the worker is the average citizen. Certainly I shouldn't expect workers to vote more intelligently than people in your intellectual group would. I'm afraid if we took a census on how people voted in your intellectual group, we would find them pretty well divided too.

And if there is a division among people who are trained to regard issues, why wouldn't there be among workers? Nevertheless, I think it's the responsibility of every person to avail himself of the
great privilege he has of voting.

I had the great privilege of going to Germany in 1952. One day I came home from the East and I found a letter addressed to me, and it was in German. I offered it to one of the girls in the office, who read German, and said "Look, I'm busy, just type it out and I'll read it later." (We had a meeting of the United Crusade at our office.) She said, "Jennie, you're being invited to come to Germany." I said, "Yes, just type it out and let me read it later." Then she said, "Jennie, it's also translated into English; you can read it yourself; you're invited to come to Germany all expenses paid." Then I became interested and said, "What!"

I read it and found that they were inviting "100 outstanding Americans" in groups of eight to receive the appreciation of their nation for what the United States was doing for their nationals in the Four Point program, bring people over to this country. Well, I'd been very active in this program. I was called upon by Washington often to sponsor people from Germany, Italy, and
France and anywhere at all; usually when I did, I invited them to my house because I thought people ought to know how people lived rather than just the theory of things. And out of nowhere came this invitation for me to be one of the hundred people to visit Germany for a month. From New York City my plane fare would be covered and per diem for every day I would be there. I didn't know what it was and I had to make up my mind in a few days, what to do.

I called up Dubinsky and I thought he probably had suggested my name, but he didn't know anything about it. He asked me to send him the letter. I said, "Look, I've got to give an answer in four days." He said, "Send me the letter." And I sent the letter.

He inquired. I didn't realize that the letter had been signed by Professor Hallstein who was the State Secretary of Germany. It didn't mean anything to me at the time. Well, his answer was, "If you think your absence wouldn't lessen the Stevenson campaign, you may go."

Well, I loved Adlai Stevenson and I would
have given a lot to have seen him elected as President because I thought Stevenson was simply wonderful, all his ideals, but I didn't kid myself into thinking that my activities would make any difference. Besides, I didn't think Stevenson had a chance at all. Nevertheless, I was five hundred degrees for Stevenson. When the answer came like that from Dubinsky, of course I prepared to go.

I was in Germany for a month. It was a very exciting experience, but the sad part of it was--I was in Germany the month of October and the election here was in November--that I thought I would be back in time to vote. So I didn't bother to prepare for an absentee ballot. And when I was through in Germany I learned that on the same airplane ticket I could have gone to Paris or to England or Italy or anywhere I wished; it would have cost, oh, so little more. And do you know, because I didn't prepare for an absentee ballot, I couldn't face myself, meeting our members saying "No excuse is a good enough excuse for not voting." So I came back.
Well, that's loyalty.

It isn't a case of loyalty. I can't ask other people to do what I wouldn't do myself. I believe in the fact that it is the responsibility of every citizen to exercise the privilege of voting.

Gilb: Does the San Francisco Labor Council take part in politics?

Katyas: No, no labor council takes part in politics. But there is a United Labor Party organized of San Francisco affiliates.

Gilb: Is it very effective?

Katyas: Yes, I think it is more or less effective. For example, I have been asked for endorsements of people who ran for judgeships and assemblymen and senators and Congressmen and so forth. I generally say that I can make no endorsements that the United Labor Party hasn't also endorsed, because I wouldn't make an endorsement that wasn't consummated with the rest of the labor movement. I might prefer not to endorse at all.

Gilb: Does your membership take a vote on whom it is going to endorse?
Metyas: Well, not necessarily. After all, a vote wouldn't have too much value because each person is a free citizen, as you know, and when one goes into the ballot box, one goes with oneself, so what value would a vote of the membership be?

Milb: Do you speak for the membership then without having taken such a vote?

Metyas: I speak for the union only in giving my opinion and only in knowing that I would be willing to come and recommend such action to our membership. And our membership can either agree, can either vote to support that...for example, a union may endorse a state candidate if it wishes. It might vote that it is willing to lend its name and perhaps even financial assistance, to endorse such a candidate, but each person is free to vote as he or she sees fit.

Milb: Then you can endorse as an individual. You also urge your membership to vote certain ways, and sometimes the membership votes to endorse in certain ways.

Metyas: That's right.
There are all those alternatives.

Yes, and the chief thing is that here is a medium, a colossal medium whereby an individual or a representative has access to a ready-made audience. Now, what happens with that access is up to the individual listener. I'm not among the people who believe that labor can deliver so many votes, but I do believe that labor has a colossal opportunity in bringing to its membership audibly and through its press the values of whatever its leadership considers is valuable.

Well, say the United Labor Party in San Francisco or the State Federation endorsed someone whom you personally did not favor.

Look what happened. The State Federation of Labor endorsed Knight for governor in the last campaign. I personally did not. Of course Knight was elected, but I personally stood up every chance I had and advised our membership that while we made no endorsements this time, the Labor's League for Political Education, which is made up of the same personnel as the State Federation but is not the
same organization, did endorse Knight. Our union
didn't go along with it and didn't endorse anybody
for the governorship, but I said that I personally
was endorsing Graves because he stood for the issues
that I believed in.

Milb: I want to get this right. Say, if the United Labor
Party or Labor's League does make an endorsement, if
your union disagrees, it doesn't make a contrary
endorsement...
Natyas: It does if it feels like it.
Milb: Oh, it does.
Natyas: It does if it feels like it, but part of the con-
stitution of the United Labor Party is that any
affiliate that makes a contrary endorsement must
be out of the United Labor Party, not out of the
Labor Council, but out of that political segment,
which is neither here nor there.

Milb: Then you would hesitate to make a contrary endorsement.

Natyas: No, I wouldn't hesitate to make a contrary endorsement
if I really thought it was right to do so. I
haven't found so far that a definite contrary
endorsement would be good. Now, you see, in this
instance it isn't only that we didn't endorse Knight, but our own I.L.G. was divided. But personally, every chance I had to speak to the membership, and I made many chances. I sought the chances to go before all of the locals of our membership. And I must say that the membership seemed very sympathetic with my point of view.

But how they voted was just up to them. It always is. Remember when John L. Lewis was peeved at Roosevelt, the last time Roosevelt ran, and John L. Lewis came out the night before election and urged the membership to vote against Roosevelt. As a matter of fact, I think he threatened that if Roosevelt would be re-elected, he would resign as president of the C.I.O. Well, Lewis's own membership, his own mine workers, adore him, but there were a colossal number of votes in favor of Roosevelt in the district that was 90 per cent mine workers. They adore John L. Lewis, their president, but they thought more of Roosevelt and the things Roosevelt stood for.

Milb: Have you ever wished there was a national labor
party?

Katras: Let me tell you this: During the latter part of the Scandinavian Institute in Oslo, which I attended in 1939, I was asked to answer questions on the American labor movement and the evening was given to me to talk about the American scene and labor movement. One of the questions was, and it almost seemed loaded, "How long will the A.F. of L. go on in this silly theory of endorsing your friends and punishing your enemies instead of having a party of its own?"

And I lost all the friends I had made that night because I assured them that both the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O. have the same philosophy about the capitalist system and the same philosophy about how to solve political problems; that when the C.I.O. went into politics, so-called, it went in with a non-partisan league, that it was not a workers' party in any sense of the word, it was non-partisan endorsing either Republicans or Democrats, whichever one they thought would carry out labor's platform better. The difference
was that the C.I.C. had this feeling of newness about it and it had the energy that was characteristic of the period, but fundamentally there was not much difference between the approach of the old A.F.of L. or the new C.I.O.

Well, there were many whispers and many shrugs of the shoulders and they were very certain that I just didn't know what I was talking about. In their minds they were absolutely certain that the C.I.O. was a Socialist organization and the A.F. of L. was the old reactionary capitalist-endorsed institution. I think perhaps they have learned differently by now, but it almost took all the courage I had to tell them the facts of life as I saw them. Not only did they think I didn't know what I was talking about, but they suspected that I must be very reactionary.

Silb: Had you been active in the Non-Partisan League?

Sanyas: Yes, I was active in labor's Non-Partisan League out here, not too active. At one time I was wishing we had a party of our own, but I knew better. I had wished that there was a labor party
as England had a labor party, but I realized that in this country the two-party system really is so thoroughly established that I didn't believe really truly, that a third party was possible.

Actually, I think the Communists out here got a hold of labor's Non-Partisan League and that's what I didn't like about it, but I went along with it anyhow because I thought it was a medium for more political education among the people. I didn't have the great hopes for it that most of the liberal people here did.

Milb: Did your interest in particular issues ever take the form of lobbying? Either in Sacramento or Washington?

Matyas: Yes, I lobbied in Sacramento when there was danger of nullifying an ordinance that outlawed homework--commercial homework--in our industry, and fortunately we won, so that homework is still prohibited in our industry.

Milb: You went directly to Sacramento.

Matyas: To Sacramento, and talked to legislators; I sent a letter to every legislator. The motion had been
carried and I asked for a reconsideration... I say I... the State Federation of Labor did, but I personally was very active. I stayed there for three weeks and devoted my time entirely to it, because it involved our membership, and I know the evils of homework very, very well; I lived with it for quite a long time. The motion was made to reconsider and it was unanimously carried.

Syl\: Did you ever lobby for any other issue?

Sty\: I did, for one or two other issues. I'm not a lobbyist in the usual sense of the word. My work has always been in the union. All of these other activities I consider are the responsibility of citizens.
In Europe, 1939

Gilb: You have told us how, as a child, you always had a deep desire for education. Have you ever lost that appetite for learning new things?

Wytta: I'd like to tell you about my six weeks in Europe the latter part of 1939. You remember Chamberlain had met with Hitler. Chamberlain and his umbrella... you remember the play the I.L.G. gave, "Pins and Needles"? Well, the third time we revised it, we had a skit about Chamberlain, and it went something to the effect, "If at first you don't succeed, fly, fly again." During all of that fever, I was going to Europe. Feinberg...vice-president Feinberg, who was the director of the entire Pacific Coast...didn't want me to go. He, I think, was a little bit afraid that if I went I might not come back to the job again. He tried in every way he could to make me change my mind, not to go to Europe. He said, "It's not safe;" he advised me that it wasn't safe to go at that time, but he soon realized that no matter how he felt about it that
I was going to go anyhow.

I was very glad I went. I wouldn't take an additional ten years of life for that experience. I was in...not in London...I think I was in Surrey or somewhere where the...I don't remember, Sussex or Surrey...it doesn't matter; the London school had a summer session somewhere about 30 miles outside of London and news of the pact between Russia and Germany came, and it was so shocking to think that Russia would make a pact with Hitler! It was so unbelievable even to me! (rising inflection). I just...it was just the most unnerving sort of experience. I was so tremendously interested to see how the British men and women who were at the school there, who were all workers (it was a workers' education summer school), how they were taking it. They were not nearly so surprised as I. Before this pact, there was much talk in the United States of war being imminent, absolutely imminent. You hardly heard about it over there. And when I tried to speak about it to the English people all around me, they couldn't understand our panic. Well, they all
felt it, all right; but you see, the English just didn't do as much talking as we did.

Jilb: Perhaps they had accepted it a lot longer.

Ktyas: A lot longer, perhaps. And then I'll never forget the night when the news came of the pact, and over the wireless (they called the radio "wireless," at least, so they did then) came hourly news that all persons were to go back home from whatever holiday they had. Schoolmasters (we call them schoolteachers, they call them schoolmasters) were instructed to return home. And we had just two days to go before the term would end. Many of the so-called students there were mothers. It was put to a vote whether they would want to go right home then to be with their families and their children, or whether they would finish the course. And they voted like one to finish the course...two more days to go.

I'm not sure that I would have or could have.

I think I would have wanted to run home to be with my husband, or with my child if I had one. But the stoicism was just terrific.

Jilb: Of course, all during the war the British exhibited that.
Metyas: Just terrific. I was so impressed by it that I went into another room and just bawled and bawled and bawled; I was sort of embarrassed to let my emotions be evident because obviously it wasn't done; one didn't show one's emotions.

Hilb: Did you go to Scandinavia first, or to England?

Metyas: No, first I went to England. My first fortnight, so-called, was at Oxford. I was so impressed by the tutorial system there, their method of education, the importance of the individual. As a matter of fact, I wanted to learn something about the British labor movement. That wasn't part of their course, but they got one of the professors to give me a course all to myself on the British labor movement. Their form of education consisted mostly of guiding the student what books to read, what particular material to hunt for in reference books, and then to come and discuss such questions as were difficult for them with their teacher.

From there I went to Oslo.

Hilb: How long did you stay in Oslo?

Metyas: At Oslo there was a British-Scandinavian institute which I was to attend also, and that was an
experience I shall never forget either; it was the most marvelous experience I've ever had. On the way to Oslo I stopped in Denmark, just because I wanted to see Denmark and I had heard a great deal about the social institutions of Denmark. I took three or four days. I wanted to know something about their medical program. Do you remember at that time, in '39 especially, I think, there was tremendous agitation for compulsory health insurance in this country, and do you remember the American Medical Association's propaganda that it would be socialized medicine, and research would die, and why would doctors be interested in doing anything if they were to be put on a salary, they'd soldier on the job...all sorts of silly, insane propaganda was quite the rage.

But I knew that Denmark had compulsory health insurance. I kept thinking of myself as a labor representative, and I was interested tremendously in finding out what the institutions of each of these countries were. Wherever I went, I contacted the trade union movement to find out something of
what they were doing. I contacted Workers' Education of Denmark and I told them that I'd like to see something of how they solved their old-age problem, their medical problem, and so forth. I recall they took me to the city hall and introduced me to the Mayor of Copenhagen, who was simply lovely. Of course he spoke Danish and I had an interpreter; the director of Workers' Education was with me...the Mayor wanted to know, did everybody in the United States work 8 hours a day and was the 5-day week a universal thing? I had a vision of the Mayor of San Francisco meeting a visitor from some other country and asking him what the working conditions of the other country were. It seemed so incongruous almost, for a mayor to be so interested, and of course to me very pleasing.

Copenhagen was the most exciting city! I had a room in the Grand Hotel, facing that great big avenue. And just as we have a flow of automobile traffic, so they have a flow of bicycles. And all these lovely blondes, that were not from
day to day but the real thing, in this deep river of bicycle traffic...in the morning all in one direction, going to work; during the day, women bicycle with children in their baskets in front of the bicycle. And the streetcars had white curtains on the windows inside, sort of a boudoir effect drawn on the side...(laughter) it was a clean, beautiful city.

The Mayor appointed two or three guides, one for each day. One day I was taken to see their schools; the schools looked so lovely, and they were so proud of the newness of them and the cleanliness of them and the fact that the children had ample place for play in their yard. Then they took me to what they called their "old people's town," not a "home". It sort of resembled a town because it had one large building like a hotel where people who so chose lived in rooms—they had a common dining room, and then the surrounding grounds were parcelled out so that each person could have a parcel of land with a little bitty shack on it in which to keep tools. They used this
land just as they felt like.

As I walked past these parcels of land with their little bitty shacks, many of these old people came up to me, and someone brought me a beautiful rose and said, "No other rose like this was grown anywhere," that was their rose, and others brought me prize strawberries which they raised. For all the world I kept thinking of a suburb, like Burlington or Sen Kato where the neighbors vied with each other in the sort of things they produced; and here were these old people, 70 or 80 some of them, and there wasn't any of the feeling that they were in an old people's home.

Right near there were also government-subsidized apartment houses for old folks and the rent was very low; there was a community kitchen so that if they didn't want to bother to do any of their own cooking, they could buy their dinners and bring it up hot all made and eat it in their own--

3ilb: Sort of like Bellamy's Looking Backward.

Katyas: I didn't read Bellamy but I read William Morris's News from Nowhere. But they could eat in their own
homes in their own privacy. The dignity with which the Danish deal with the problem of their aging population is something which I hope we will be able to attain in this country.

Then I was taken through their hospital. That was another marvellous experience. It was a colossal place. Beautifully modern hospital. Simply beautiful. I hadn't seen anything like it out West. One thing that impressed me as I got into the grounds of the hospital was the complete lack of institutionalism that one associates with any county hospital or state hospital. You had the feeling once again that you were going to some estate. The man who was showing me around was one of the big executives of the hospital and there was this "hail fellow well met" between the maintenance people who were on the grounds and this executive who was showing me around. They exchanged greetings as though they were old friends.

As I was taken through the hospital, I said, "In my country now the question of health insurance is being very hotly debated and hotly contested too."
The theory is that initiative would be completely killed and the doctors would become very mediocre if they didn't have competition to drive them to better knowledge and so forth."

"Oh," he said, "We don't have that problem at all. In the first place if our medical students survive three years of medical education, they must be pretty good because they are weeded out very early in their medical training years. But if they survive it, and if they get their degrees, they can't come into this hospital and practice right away. They have to have their clientele in clinics first."

Clinics in Denmark don't mean what clinics mean here. I said, "Well, what are clinics?" He said, "Well, the only persons that are eligible for treatment in this hospital are people who are covered by insurance, people who have earned no more than four thousand kronen a year. The others are not covered and so they have to have their own private doctors. They have their own private clinics and their own private doctors, these people
who are in the upper economic strata, new doctors have to have three years experience in those clinics before they are admitted here." (laughter)

Jilb: A reverse...

Estrin: Oh, I thought that was simply wonderful.

Then he showed me the research institute that they had there, but he said before a doctor becomes a member of the staff, he is pretty high calibre and pretty well trained. And I did think it was quite a reversal of what we were in the habit of thinking of.

Then I saw some of their housing and some of their schools and the time was up. I took one day only to see Stockholm. I was impressed by its beauty but that's all I knew about it. I didn't get the feeling of warmth that I had in Copenhagen.

Then I was the only American who went to join the British-Scandinavian Institute, to Oslo. I was met by a man who is now very well known internationally and who was then the director of the Volkschule. This was seven miles outside of Oslo. Halbert Lange. He became the prime-minister of Norway and subsequently he was a delegate to the United Nations for many years. He was then the
director and a most charming person, you have never met a person more charming than he. He was then about to be married to the girl who is now Mrs. Lange, a girl by the name of Osa. She was a very shy young girl and she didn't want to come to visit any of the classes but we became friends and I dragged her in to visit our class and she came and was very interested.

The exciting thing was when we were given our rooms, and all our rooms were very small, just big enough for a studio couch and a little bitty desk and a chair, but each person was given routinely a place in the storage room where her scrubbing pail and wash mop was held. I said, "What's this?" My guide said, "Every room has a mop and pail. One mops one's floor before one goes to classes." I looked at her and I said, "You mean you wash your floor every morning?" She said, "You won't have to do it. We'll do it for you." I said, "Oh no you don't. If it's done, I do it." They were all very wonderful and they wanted to do almost anything for this Amerikanske.

I had ten days at the British-Scandinavian
Institute and then went back to Oxford and then came home.

At the University of California and Serving the War Manpower Commission, the 1940's

After the Chinese were organized, and after the business of the knit-goods industry that I told you about, I felt that I had pretty well done my job and that I could return to my own home and my husband and just be a private citizen. I asked Dubinsky whether I could resign...I was tired of fighting the undercurrent of what the Communists were trying to do, and while there was still some work to be done, I felt that somebody else could do it. I think I told you how I then went down to Los Angeles in 1941. When I came back, I tried to persuade Dubinsky that it was time for me to leave the job. He finally accepted my resignation.

When he accepted my resignation, I began to wonder what I could do. I didn't know whether to go back to the factory or whether to just stay home for a while. But I couldn't just stay home all day, even though I was happily married. I
thought it would be a good time for me to go back to school. I applied at U.C. to be readmitted. Ten years had passed since I had last been in school, and I was pretty much concerned that I might not be able to get back into the routine. I was finally admitted as a regular student. They wanted to take me as an Adult Special, and I didn't want that. I found school very, very difficult. All they tell you about an adult with a lot of experience going back to school and getting a lot more out of it is nonsense, because experience in one field doesn't qualify one for another field.

I decided to go into economics as a start. (When I had first gone to school, I had thought I wanted to major in history.) I'll never forget my complete bewilderment in Econ. 100, in Dr. Fellner's class, when he told the class that money was not necessarily actual dollars in the Federal Reserve Bank, but credit. I asked, "you mean money can be created out of whole cloth, just because someone says so?" I found this idea and others very hard to take in, and it took the strongest willpower
to keep on with my studies.

While I was going through all this travail of trying to understand economics—I had left school without knowing what to do with a decimal point, so I had to have private lessons in algebra and geometry in order to pass statistics; also, I was a slow, word-by-word reader and could hardly get through my assignments—I got a telegram from the union office. I was officially out of the union, but I used to get messages from them; people running for office would sometimes want me to sponsor their candidacy. I had called the office, and Henry Zacharin told me that there was a telegram for me from McNutt. I said, "Who's Mc Nutt?" He said, "What do you mean, who's McNutt?" I said, "The only McNutt I know of is the McNutt, and he wouldn't sent me a telegram." He said, "Well, it is from Paul V. McNutt, Director of the Manpower Commission." He was inviting me to join a ten-women advisory board which would advise him on major politics affecting women in war industry. I thought, "This is a
mistake; it can't be." But he did mean me. He had asked me partly because I would represent the A.F. of L. and partly because of my own personal background and experience.

Sibb: You sound like the ideal, logical candidate.

Natyas: It didn't seem so to me, and I was a bit puzzled about what to do, as I was just beginning to learn my way around at school, and here I was being invited to be on a committee in Washington that I would have to go to once a month.

Sibb: Expenses paid?

Natyas: The fare would be paid, with $10 per diem for hotel and other expenses. I knew that it would mean flying to Washington every month. In those days, it took 24 hours to fly to Washington. That meant a day going, a day coming back, and the meetings would be two or three days. So that meant one week out of every four. I nevertheless accepted, as I felt very much honored; still I felt that he was mistaken, but I didn't want to question it. I was very happy to be able to serve in any capacity in the war. (I had started school before Pearl Harbor;
this invitation came shortly afterwards.)

When I got this invitation, it was just the week of finals. The professor wouldn't let me take the exam early, before my trip, so I had to take it the following September. I studied hard for it; I was petrified. To my terrific amazement, although the exam included everything but the kitchen sink, I made the grade. I think it was an A paper or something like that.

Any how, I served on the War Manpower Commission all through the war and all through my college. I had to take the plane to Washington right after my graduation. Subsequently, I found out that I had graduated cum laude, and I didn't know what cum laude meant! (laughter). I said "What's that--is it good?" It was not until weeks afterwards that I was told that I had made Phi Beta Kappa; I received a telegram about it in Washington. Although my marks were by no means straight A's, my other activities at the University helped get me elected. I used to meet with professors and graduate students who were interested and we
discussed the labor movement whenever we had a chance to. Some professors told me—and I'm quoting them now—that my being there was a contribution to the University. The YMCA used to ask me to come and address groups there very often, on either unionism or on race relations.
VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE I.L.G.W.U.

Hilah: How did you get to be a vice president of the International?

Mayas: When I was through with school, Dubinsky asked what I planned to do afterward. By this time, I felt that perhaps I ought to come back to work; since the war, the membership had increased, and once again there was the problem of education and organization. So I told him that I would be available if needed, and he said, "That's all I want to know." I told Zacharin that "I was willing to come back to the Joint Board in San Francisco, and he communicated with Dubinsky about having me assigned to work with them again.

Dubinsky asked me to become a vice president. Very reluctantly I agreed to, because I felt there were a great many other women who could hold that position. Rose Pesotta was going out; she had been a vice president when she had tried to organize Chinatown. I felt fortunate that I was there when the conditions were such that they lent themselves to organization, but as I often told Dubinsky, it was sheer luck that I happened to be
on the scene when organization could materialize and culminate, but it was all the work that went before it that made organization possible.

Gillb: Your success in organizing Chinatown was one of the factors that made them want to make you a vice president?

Ketyas: No, no, no; that was purely incidental; it was everything—my years of background, the years in the I.L.G.W.U. I was considered as much a part of the International as anybody could be...I felt that Sadie Reisch in New Jersey, an old-timer, good, and eager to be a vice president, was a logical candidate. There was a woman named Mary Goff, an old timer just like me, whom I felt was a good and logical candidate. I felt these others deserved the vice presidency more, as they were in all the time and I was out for a time.

I have my own opinions as to why I was selected to be a vice president. You see, despite the fact that 66 percent of our membership is female, the "official family" is largely a male family. Now I don't like to indulge in feminist propaganda, for I don't think things are as simple as that, but
it just happens that by and large, officials are men. There are all sorts of problems that enter in. For example, two vice presidents in a given area run into matters of dividing authority that make for complication. I'm inclined to think that because there was no vice president in San Francisco—there are twenty-three vice presidents all told—a woman vice president wouldn't be likely to be in another vice president's hair. I think that I was chosen, not only because of my background and experience, but because I was far away and in a spot where I wouldn't be likely to have to divide authority with another vice president.

Ilb: I don't quite understand.

Kstyas: Let me put it another way. Being a vice president involves being responsible for a large segment of the workings of the International. The positions includes authority and responsibility. Take, for example, Feinberg, who was a vice president. He was a manager of the New York Joint Cloak Board, which is a terrific position. The Cloakmakers' Union is made up of fifty or sixty thousand members
in various locals. You might think that all a
vice president has to do is make policy. But
policy has to be implemented, so it must be real-
istic. It should be made by people who are in a
position subsequently to implement policy.

Sib: Were you not?

Setyas: I was not. I was manager of the Chinese local and
the knit goods local, but both of them were tiny
little bitty things.

Sib: You suspect that you were chosen because...

Setyas: I was chosen because I was a woman. The Internation-
al got to the point where it recognized a long
time ago that a union that had a membership of at
least 86 per cent women without a single woman on
the board didn't sound right.

Sib: I am getting the impression that you were chosen
to symbolize—to pacify their need to feel that
women had some representation; at the same time
your very lack of power was considered an asset
because you wouldn't speak up too well or have too
much influence.

Setyas: No, you haven't got it quite right. I was not
chosen to pacify the membership. Let us say that
a woman became vice president—and I'm not the first; there was never more than one at a time...

Sonya Kohn was the first woman vice president, and she was elected at a time when the movement for women to be on boards was very terrific. And it was good that it was so. Sonya Kohn was a vice president for a number of terms, and then Polly Friedman was elected. She too was a sort of minister without portfolio. After Polly Friedman, Rose Pesotta was a vice president, and after Rose Pesotta, I was elected. Elected, not chosen. Always, you know, before an election there's a choice. Some organizations have what they call a nomination committee, but in organizations as important as the union, the responsible officials generally decide on whom to sponsor.

MILB: You feel that they wanted a woman representative, but at the same time they did not particularly expect you to be a very strong, active, policy-making member of the executive board.

ESTYAS: On the executive board, I had as much right to policy making as anybody else. Anybody had
as much right as anybody else. But you can understand that somebody that gets up and is known, somebody who has an opinion based on the day-to-day functions, who has to cope with large problems every day—such a person's opinion would carry more weight than that of someone with less responsibility.

In organizations that are composed of 86 percent of women, if the men happen to be at the helm, it must be because women want it that way. I think there are as many qualified women as there are qualified men. Let's say "potentially qualified." Men are more in the habit of reaching out for those opportunities; women, by the habit of ages, have learned to regard men as the suitable persons to be in positions of responsibility. I was never of the opinion that men deprived women of the possibility of having full recognition. Men liked being chosen to represent people and be given responsibility. I feel that more women ought to assume responsibility so that they would be justifiably on the highest policy-making board. But so long as
the membership chooses always to elect men, it's hardly right to say that there ought to be more women on the board. And you find over and over again, that women by and large do not have sufficient confidence in putting responsibility in the hands of women.

Gilb: Did you find, that having become a vice president made a difference in your status in this region?

Matyas: Well, no. No, I don't think it did, and I am as responsible for that as anybody. I was in the slightly difficult spot of being a vice president in an area where the Joint Board had a manager. I didn't want my vice presidency to detract in any way from the importance of the position of the manager. Of course, in all the negotiations in which I participated, the fact that I appeared as a vice president lent prestige to any opinion that I expressed and was accepted by the employer as giving the word not only of the local manager but also of the International.

Gilb: Then it rendered you more effective with employers.

Matyas: I was effective enough before. It just lent
more prestige.

Mlb: Did it create any problems of conflict of authority?

Stryes: I chose especially not to let it (long pause) come up that I was a vice president. I accepted the prestige that came with the office, the honor, and hoped always that that prestige would be used for the good of the union and would always be in the background. Except in cases where it became necessary to say, "Yes, the International is back of something. Otherwise I always, kept in mind that Henry Zacharin was the manager of the Joint Board. There was never any conflict. In negotiations we were always both present and both participated in arguments. It was assumed that I was arguing in both my capacities.

Mlb: But your position was not deemed to be one of authority over...

Stryes: No, No vice president has authority over any manager unless the vice president is also an official of the local area, by choice of the local area. But there's a division of authority between national
and local authority. For example, Isidore Segler, who took Isidore Heinberg's place, is the manager of the New York Cloak Joint Board. He's a vice president of the International, but he's chosen by the local managers. In New York City all the locals themselves have managers, they're so large. He's chosen by the local managers to be the manager of the managers.

Sibb: So his authority stems from that rather than from being vice president at all.

Yesyes: Yes. He's not chosen to be a member of the Joint Board because he's a vice president. The other way around would be rather the case.
I have been told that you were largely responsible for initiating the union's health and welfare program in this area. I'd like to discuss the union's problem for health care of the workers, when it started here in San Francisco and what it has consisted of.

Mays: It's important to remember that while each locality has full autonomy, it nevertheless influences other localities and is influenced by what other localities have done. San Francisco was not the first to have health and welfare funds. Although we boast constantly that we got the funds on our own power and our own strength; these systems had already been successful in New York, so it was easier for us to get them than it would be to put through a plan that was all our own.

Mils: Among San Francisco unions yours was one of the first to get these benefits, wasn't it?

Mays: Yes. As a union in San Francisco, we were one of the first to have a welfare fund, and that largely because of our history, because elsewhere our locals had already had it. We began to strike for it
in keeping with the rest of our International. I think it was in 1943—I'm not too certain of the date—during the years when labor was not able to get increases in wages because of the war situation. So we asked for the establishment of health, welfare, and vacation funds. How we did it as it was done in other markets, in other segments of our International Ladies Garment Workers Union; we negotiated for and finally succeeded in persuading the employers to agree to it. We got a percentage of the payroll including all manufacturing employees. I think the percentage we got on our first agreement was two percent of the payroll... 

Mqb: That's lower than some other places.

Metysa: It increased here too. As we went on, we got more and more. The employers were to pay a percentage of the payroll into a special fund, and at that time the fund was to be managed and administered by the union, but the fund was to be used for nothing except health and welfare purposes and vacation. It was a fund that couldn't by contract...
be used for any union functions whatsoever. We got that through the cloak industry agreements and subsequently we got it through in the dress industry. Now even before we had such a fund, our union had done some health and welfare fund saving out of the dues. If one of our members had T.B., we usually helped them with the fare to some institution like the City of Hope, or if members were in the East and didn't need to come as far, we'd help them with the fare as far as Liberty, where there is another such institution, or Denver; there are several institutions which we had contributed to always very heavily. When we sent a T.B. patient to an institution, we gave them the fare, an allowance, and compelled them to take out a withdrawal card until the doctor could certify that they were cured and that they could safely work again without contaminating any other members.

When the new fund came into being, as a result of the agreement, then we elected a board of trustees of our own and began to accumulate a little money.
Milb: Now I want to ask you first, did you have difficulty getting this agreement from the employers?

Katyes: The difficulties were not great, because money was not a terrific object in those days; business was very good. Wage increases were not to be had and employers didn't have very great objections.

Milb: A very strategic time to bring it up.

Katyes: A good time to break the soil for it. When we got this fund, we agreed by contract also that the fund should be divided so that one third of the money would be used for the vacation allowances, and the balance would be used for so-called health and welfare.

**Vacation Allowances**

Milb: How did these vacation allowances work?

Katyes: In other localities, in New York City, for example, the beginning of this vacation, health and welfare fund came with the children's dressmakers.

Milb: You mean the concept?

Katyes: The concept and the agreement for it came with Local 91; Vice President Greenberg demanded welfare funds from the employers for vacations, health and welfare benefits, and he succeeded in getting it
way back in the thirties. Then of course the fund was managed by the union entirely. The board of trustees that was elected from the members had decided to make an allowance of so much per member. I think the first vacation checks that were given out were something like $17 per member during vacation time, and that was about what the usual member in those days earned in a week, in the thirties, on the basis of a 52-week average.

In those days, employment was not too plentiful; getting people definitely out on vacation was a rather important matter because they couldn't have the money otherwise. There was plenty of time during the summer when there wasn't enough work, but people would just not go anywhere for a change or a rest, because they couldn't afford it. So this vacation allowance, the idea of giving each member a check once a year out of this fund which was theirs by agreement, was a revelation in our industry.

Subsequently other locals in New York City fought for and won health, welfare and vacation funds, and most of the locals in New York City
decided on flat allowance for all the membership, so much per capita. Some of the higher earning locals decided to allow what would seem to be the average for, say, all operators, then for all cutters, the cutters being among the highest paid. But it wasn't arrived at in any scientific way.

Silb: And you took over this whole system here?

Matyas: No. We didn't take over the whole system. Los Angeles, the I.L.G. in Los Angeles, also negotiated for the health and welfare fund. They agreed to make the vacation theoretically a week's vacation or to make it two per cent of each person's earnings. It was fixed by agreement that each worker was entitled to claim a vacation check if he or she was in good standing with the union and was a legitimate member of the industry or available for a job. You can understand when these welfare funds began to come in, people who didn't intend to continue to be members of the union were glad to remain members of the union because they got more cash out of it than the dues cost. But this was a fund that was raised by payroll contribution, entirely on the part of the employer, who was
obliged to pay it on all manufacturing employees whether they were members of the union or not. So the members were very pleased that they had this extra check. But then, suppose a good worker got $5,000 a year. He would get two percent of that extra ($100), whereas someone who had been sick or unemployed might get nothing, or only $5 or something. This didn't seem right to some of us. The theory of the I.L.G. was that those who didn't have as much should be helped along.

Zilb: Why did you depart from that theory in this instance?

Hetysa: That's how the negotiating committee down in Los Angeles did it, and San Francisco just followed. I didn't approve of it, but...

Zilb: Did you object vocally to it?

Hetysa: Yes. I subsequently objected quite hard and I finally persuaded our manager and business agent to change it. We had to make provisions so those who were poor earners or who had had no chance at any earning for a good part of the year through no fault of their own would nevertheless get a little help at vacation time and be able to go off on a
vacation. We finally agreed to have a minimum and a maximum. The only way we could have a minimum is if we cut... People who earned in a bracket up to $2,500 would get so much, and each $500 more earnings would get another allowance. The maximum went up to $64 and the minimum was $20.

Now of course every year there was a clamor on the part of those whose allowance was cut because of the provision for maximum, and every year we had a fight. But of course we had to make some provision for the people who hadn't been earning. So finally it was agreed to. To come a little closer to the idea that this was not by percentage but that this was a fund obtained by the union for the benefit of all the members, the thing was broken down again. The new arrangement didn't really come closer to the idea; all it really did was to make the gradations $250 instead of $500.

And any earner up to $1,200 got the minimum, nevertheless, and over that, every $250 was the dividing line. I think the maximum now is a good deal higher. Each year the board of trustees decided what it should be.
Mr. B: It changes year to year?

Mr. Y: Yes. But the theory is still the same.

Mr. B: Who are on this board of trustees?

Mr. Y: I am; so is Henry Zacharin, the manager of the Joint Board; there are I think two other members of the union, not officials. Since the Taft-Hartley Act came in, the funds had to be jointly administered with the employers, which I think is perfectly fair. The board of trustees is an equal number of employers and union members.

Mr. B: Do the employers change every year?

Mr. Y: They have a right to change every year, yes.

Mr. B: But they have been more or less the same ones?

Mr. Y: Yes. And we have the impartial chairman of the industry who sits as the public member.

Mr. B: And who is this?

Mr. Y: Sam Kagel.

That's in the cloak fund. Now the dress fund operates that way too, more or less, but it's another group, so far as the employers are concerned. In the dress fund, it's just Henry Zacharin and I and two employers. The representative of the association sits in; I don't see that he has a voice or a vote. We've never had it too formal. It's formal
enough in decisions, but that's all. In the administration of the fund, however, the policies are made jointly.

Tilb: I'd like to know how these employers are selected.

Blyye: By the Employers' Association.

We have several funds: the cloak fund, to which the employers elect their representatives; the dress agreement, which has its fund and the employers elect their representatives; same with the sportswear, also with a so-called independent miscellaneous group. This last, the employers don't sit in on; it's very small; the union administers that. Now that's the vacation allowance I'm talking about. In each of the funds, the same thing happens. The board of trustees gets together and decides whether it can increase the allowance on vacations, and if it can, it does. I think now, in the cloak industry, the maximum goes up to $90.

Tilb: This varies from industry to industry?

Blyye: Now in the cloak industry, it's the highest. The minimum in the cloak industry is $30, regardless
of earnings. In the dress industry and the sports-wear industry, the minimum is $25 and up till recently the maximum was $64 but I think that has been increased recently. That's the vacation part of the fund.

Welfare Fund

The other part of the fund is the welfare fund. Now in New York City we had had a tremendous health clinic, and the welfare conference used to subsidize the health clinic to enable our members to participate and get the benefit of it. Health clinics grew up throughout the country, wherever funds were obtained and the market was sufficiently large to justify it. You probably read during the recent flood back East about one of our health clinics that has a mobile unit—because there are shops all over the state (Pennsylvania)—completely equipped, with X-ray machines and a doctor and a nurse.

Bill: Does San Francisco have anything like that?

Kathy: Oh, no, no. Well, when the flood came on, the
I.L.G. volunteered the use of its mobile unit and of course the governor accepted it. So it just went all over, administering shots, giving first aid and a lot of wonderful work.

Now in San Francisco, our total membership is only a little over 3,000, and when the fund came on, Local 352, the lower end of the industry, making house dresses, didn't have a welfare fund yet, so the funds would only cover about 2,000 people. Well, 2,000 people wouldn't justify any sort of a clinic. But as soon as we had enough money accumulated in the fund, we wanted to put that money to work. The question of what to do was very much discussed, and I was tremendously interested in our membership getting Blue Cross.

It so happens that my husband had been very ill, in the hospital, and I was so impressed by the value of Blue Cross, which paid for the X-rays and the hospital bill, that I felt that it would be a terrific gain if our members could be relieved of the dreadful worry and fear of the cost of
hospitalization, and we persuaded our members--
oh, there were lots of insurance companies that
came over and had brilliant ideas, and our own
members had ideas too, plans that they were
affiliated with. I was authorized to study the
possibilities and I concluded that nothing would
equal the value of Blue Cross for hospital service.
At that time it covered just hospital service;
subsequently it went into other things.

At that time, the cost was something like
$1.25 a month per member. Nothing like what it
is now. In order to be able to get even that,
we had to come to our members and ask them to
sacrifice some of the vacation allowance so that
we could have enough money to be able to purchase
Blue Cross for the membership. Always remember,
that to be eligible for any of these advantages,
a member must have been with the union at least
six months and must be either on the job or
available for employment. In order to be able
to purchase Blue Cross, we had to ask the members
to give up some of the vacation funds. That's
when we started the idea of a minimum and a maximum instead of two per cent. It took quite a lot of convincing but it finally went over.

Then came the question of a little more medical aid than just Blue Cross. When we examined our fund, we found that all we could possibly have was 75 cents per capita per month per member, and that wouldn't do very much. We didn't know what to do. All sorts of ideas were advanced to us.

I almost forgot something very important: it is a cardinal principle with the I.L.G. that the funds must build a reserve sufficient to cover a three-year emergency, so if the industry were to go bankrupt or something, or if we were to have a depression, we wouldn't suddenly be left with no aid at all, so there must be a reserve built; we can't use up everything of the current income.

Gilib: This reserve is invested?

Matyas: Yes, in Government bonds; this year we agreed to invest it in banks that carry up to $10,000 insurance with the government. We get either
3½ per cent or 2.9 per cent interest on the bonds. With these principles to guide us, we couldn't spend whatever money we had currently, as we had to put money in the reserve. We had this very small amount in the local 101 funds, but we were eager to do something. What to do with so little money was a terrific problem. (By this time, my husband had died, but I had a great respect for the doctors who took care of him.) One of these doctors recommended that I consult a certain group of doctors. Remember that there was a movement on in the thirties of doctors who realized that there must be a little more social responsibility among the medical group. We had a group of about ten doctors meet Henry Zacharin and me for advice. They suggested that since we could spend a maximum of $10 per year per member, we should give them just one history and physical. At that time, a history and physical actually cost much more than $10. But the theory was that if you are 40 or over, you'd better get an annual checkup, that prevention is better than cure.
Gilb: So this could be called a preventive medicine program.

Matyas: Yes. We finally agreed on that; we had to get the agreement of the employers and the membership, because all sorts of tempting plans came up. Insurance companies offered all sorts of things; several group medicines came up and offered things such as 25 cents per month per member and they'd give us all the medical care we needed. I investigated it and found that it just couldn't be done.

Gilb: You mean they wouldn't give what they claimed to give?

Matyas: That's just it; it was just bench medicine. We didn't think that was what we wanted. We wanted to introduce our members to really good medicine.

Gilb: Now this annual checkup was to be given by a certain designated group of doctors?

Matyas: We made arrangements with ten internists, top-notch internists; we made certain that they were people with very good training and the right attitude, as they got more than $10 from other patients. They were ten doctors who were not
related at all. They each had their own office. But we picked these ten doctors in the city because they were recommended to us as being both sympathetic and good doctors. They agreed that they would give the history and physical and a follow-up visit, really two visits for $10, plus a urinalysis.

Gilb: Oh, that's really quite a lot!

Matyas: Yes, it really is. These doctors agreed, because they believed in it too, and they were sort of carried away by the sincerity of the idea.

Gilb: Now this was a benefit. Was it compulsory? It couldn't be made compulsory.

Matyas: No, no, it wasn't compulsory. But the fund didn't have very much money. So we had to say that if the members wished to avail themselves of a complete history and physical, they could go to any of these doctors whom they chose.

Gilb: How many did wish?

Matyas: That's the problem. When I put forth the program, it was fought very hard, especially by some of the employers, who were sure that every one of the employees would want to go to a doctor because
it was free. I had no experience, but I was willing
to bet that the problem would not be that too many
would go, but that we'd have to urge people to go.
And that was the case.

Gilb: I thought it might be.

Katyas: I had to do a lot of talking and urge and urge
people to go for their history and physical. Not
enough people availed themselves of it, but those
who did found it very excellent.

Gilb: Did the doctors, any of the A.M.A., oppose the
plan?

Katyas: No, it was kept very quiet. I never gave any
publicity for just that reason. I didn't want
any fights with the A.M.A. Subsequently, little
by little, the county people called me up, and so
forth, but we never gave this thing any publicity.

Subsequently, Local 8 built up a greater fund
than did 101; the earnings in the cloak industry
are much better, and the payrolls were bigger, so
they had a good deal more money. Then the question
was what to do. Once again all sorts of insurance
companies and plans came up. It was not easy; for
example, when we got the membership to agree, we
had to contrast the one-history-and-physical plan with the 25-cents-a-month-for-everything plan, and it was not easy. I believed in our plan so strongly that I believed that we could get the members to see it, and it did carry.

3lb: I don't quite understand—what was the program for Local 8?

Katya: When Local 8 came along and wanted a plan, we had had this good experience with this group of ten doctors and the history-and-physical for $10. But Local 8 had far more money than Local 101, and they could afford much more than that. This was after Local 101 had tried our plan for a year or two, and the experience was excellent. So we went to some of these doctors for advice again. C.P.S.—California Physicians Service—had put in a strong bid, but we turned them down even though they offered a tremendous amount. It included Blue Cross, a choice of almost any doctor, all X-rays and laboratories. The cost was more than we could afford; my real objection was that the patient had to pay for the first two visits.
himself. I thought that was very wrong, because it just encouraged people to put off going to a doctor. We wanted to encourage people to go to a doctor as soon as any symptoms arose or even if they had no symptoms. I think since then doctors have changed their minds about people going to a doctor if they had no symptoms. But we definitely wanted people to go if they had any symptoms and not be afraid that they would have to pay for the first two visits. It was the first two visits on every ailment! And chronic ailments were out after three months.

Gilb: They certainly weren't risking much!

Matyas: That's how we felt, and we recommended against that.

We finally agreed that we would carry our own plan, just as we had done for 101, and we enlarged the scope. To these ten internists we added ear, nose and throat specialists and gynecologists and dermatologists, and we allowed $50 worth of office visits. The doctors on our list agreed to charge $2.50 per visit. In those days, that's what the California Physicians allowed. The X-ray people agreed to charge what C.P.S. paid also. We allowed, in addition to $50 worth of office visits, $50 worth of X-rays and laboratory tests, making a
possible $100 that a member might receive. Then if they exhausted that, if they were really sick and needed more, the doctors agreed that they would continue to treat the patient for the same fee that we paid. The patient bought a ticket from the fund and paid whatever the fund would have to pay.

Silb: Did this cover all ailments?

Matyas: Any ailment whatsoever.

Silb: How about pregnancy?

Matyas: No, it didn't cover pregnancy. It didn't cover T.B. either, because if a person had T.B., they couldn't stay in the industry, and we generally helped them get to an institution.

Silb: Has this Local 8 plan changed in any way since it started?

Matyas: Yes. At that time, Local 8, unlike the other locals, had been giving something like $8 a week sick benefit. When we reviewed our program, after the members had agreed to it... It was a very satisfactory arrangement. The doctors were not united; they had their own offices in separate buildings and their own patients who paid the regular fees;
the only thing they did was to add some of our people to their patients. It was a doctor-patient relationship; I never knew anything about what would be the matter with a patient. The I.L.G. got the bills instead of the patient getting them.

Sib: Did many people go for this medical aid?

Katyas: Yes. Not all. The people who wanted to go to their own doctors wanted to get a cash allowance. But that couldn't be. The fund was able to pay under this program only on the basis that there was never a 100 per cent or even a 75 per cent participation.

Sib: How do you feel about the participation? Was it more than you had expected?

Katyas: It grew constantly. Now it's so big that we are beginning to be worried about it. When we re-examined our fund at the end of a year or two, we found ourselves in difficulty; we weren't able to have the reserve that we needed, and we were beginning to use a good deal of the current income beyond what we had a right to do. We had the option of either cutting down or something. We couldn't cut down on the reserve, although that
was the hardest part for our members to understand. I was in favor of abandoning the $8 a week sick benefit, because by now the state adopted disability insurance, and I urged that we not pay this sick benefit in order to continue with our medical arrangements. This would give us even more than we needed and would allow us to offer more services; I suggested eye conservation as a worthy benefit.

Glib: In the garment trade, it would certainly be a factor.

Matyas: In any trade where there are human beings, it would be a factor. I suggested that we add the additional benefit of eye conservation, abandon the cash allowance for the sick benefit--I never liked the cash allowance--and that took a terrific amount of convincing. But finally when the counsel of the eye conservation came on, that helped to carry the idea. The eye conservation also had all kinds of proponents. But my medical advisers and I thought the best thing to do was to have ophthalmologists added to our list of doctors in our plan not to commit our members to go to just optometrists, as I had heard that optometrists did not have the
facilities for complete examinations, and we persuaded our membership to accept this idea, adding that we would make an allowance for filling prescriptions for glasses. We made an arrangement with a top-notch optical concern that gave us a good break on price; it has a pretty high rating, and we chose it after we had considered several optical concerns—not optometrists. We made arrangements with three ophthalmologists; two were associated with Stanford, and one was with the University of California, and they agreed to give us complete refraction for $10. In those days they charged $15 privately. Now, as a matter of fact, many of them charge $25 for refraction, but we still get service for $10.

Gilb: How is all this policy made by the trustees?

Matyas: The trustees recommend and the members pass.

Gilb: Did you find that the employers and the trustees of the union disagreed?

Matyas: In Local 8, all this policy was made by the union trustees alone. Even now, the employers just leave it to the union.
They don't care?

They don't care. We give complete reports on what happens to every cent of the money, and they are satisfied with it. They arrive at broad policies. At that time, when we changed from the cash allowance to the eye conservation program, we were not a joint administrative with the employers; it was before the Taft-Hartley Act. But subsequently we were able to get the dress group and the sportswear group to have the eye conservation. As we renewed our agreements, we kept getting more allowance. I think it is now a 6 per cent or a six and a half per cent of the payroll allowance, but that includes retirement fund too.

In Local 8, our medical aid went up to $150 per year, which really means about $300, as the fee service which we pay is much lower than the member would ordinarily pay. The dress group and the sportswear group went from one history and physical up to $75 a year allowance with the same group of doctors.

Our doctors have proved exceedingly good. One or two have dropped out.
Gilb: They quit of their own accord?

Katya: Yes, because the members just didn't go to them. The minute we found out that members just didn't go to them, we discouraged new members and encouraged them to go to the doctors who are very popular. There are several doctors who are so popular that it's just too bad. But on all this, we haven't provided for home visits, on the theory that our fund was insufficient to take care of everything, and home visits might abuse the fund more than anything else. So our funds provide for care in the doctor's office and care in the hospital up to the limit of their allowance. The year for members is when their year starts, not on a fiscal basis. A fiscal basis might be more convenient for bookkeeping, but it started the other way, so that's how it goes.

Well now in the sportswear and the dress industry I finally got it over that they can have glasses whenever a doctor prescribes them. This business of once every two years is another one of those idea slogans that people used to have, and we found that some people need new glasses in six
months and others don't need new glasses in six years. So in 101 we succeeded in changing it to glasses whenever a doctor prescribes them; in Local 8, it's still on a two-year basis.

Retirement Fund

Now the retirement fund came in; it also has to have a reserve; it must be enough, on an actuarial basis, so that once a person retires, he can count on the fund giving him whatever monthly allowance is decided on for the rest of his life.

Gilb: This must have taken an awful lot of figuring. How did you work that?

Matyas: Of course, New York City had had experience before we did. The Los Angeles group had started to retire before we did, and they had hired an actuary, to figure out that 65-year-olds had a life expectancy of so much, a little higher for women than for men, et cetera. We arrived at a basis—I think it is too high—of $7,000 per retiree before he could retire.

Gilb: Did you have difficulty persuading the employers to agree? Was this something separate or did it come out of the same funds?
Natyas: No, we didn't have too much difficulty. You remember the night we had our banquet celebrating the first retirement checks, Adolf Schumann of the Lilli Ann Corporation protested that there had been no discussion on that; his memory was a little bit short. There was plenty of discussion of that; it was not as easy as all that to get the retirement contribution. But there's no point going back. Now that the employers are giving such a percentage of their payroll, including a percentage for retirement, they're so proud of it that they forget that they ever opposed it! But one thing is certain: there isn't a union gain that the union ever get without good, stiff fighting for it. Sometimes it was essential to strike; that hasn't been very essential in a great many years, but...

Gilb: How did you determine to ask for this particular thing?

Natya: When agreements expire. We can't very well ask for more during the life of an agreement because it is all signed that that's what we agree to work for. Most of our agreements now are three-year
agreements.

Gilb: Would you say it was the example of Los Angeles that impelled you to add this new benefit?

Matyas: No, no; that was an idea that had come into being during the thirties. I guess a little later, 1941, when we entered the war. I was in New York City attending a meeting. I was representing the Women's Advisory Committee of the War Manpower Commission, of which I was a member, and I met Vice President Feinberg, who is now dead. I had breakfast with him, and he said, "Jennie, I've got a brand new idea that I'm working on, a retirement fund." I said, "But Social Security has that as part of its function." He replied, "What Social Security offers isn't enough. I think I can get the employers to put up a retirement fund for our cloakmakers so that when they reach 65 they can have a pension in addition to Social Security."

Gilb: This was in New York.

Matyas: Yes, the cloak industry of New York. I thought it was a far-fetched dream.

Gilb: So short a time ago?
I didn't think he could get it over, but he did. Anything that's gained in one segment of the industry or of the union usually becomes a model for other unions. And as the Local 91 vacation and health fund became a model for the others, so the retirement fund instantly took as a model to shoot at, and local after local was inspired.

We concluded that there would have to be a 3 per cent contribution to make retirement possible. You couldn't get 3 percent. So we started out with 1/3 of 1 per cent. And when we had 1 1/2 per cent, it was given a half a per cent every six months, during the life of an agreement, not all at once. Now I think all of our funds in San Francisco have 3 per cent. In the cloak industry, as you know, we have begun to retire people. We have retired 21 people, seven women and 14 men. As we project the picture, it won't be long before there will be more women retired than men, naturally enough, because our organization is composed mostly of women, 86 per cent. But the old old-timers are largely men.
The experience in New York City of the retirement fund helps us a great deal here. New York City began to retire people quite a while ago. The retirement board in New York City is composed of an equal number of employers and union representatives plus a public member also. The rules were pretty lenient: 11 years' membership was required. Subsequently they found that there were more applicants who qualified than they could possibly retire. So they had to take people according to age or to need. A great many people couldn't get retirement when they needed it or when they were eligible for it. So they worked it out that these people would be the first to be considered the next year instead of the new application. But the demands were terrific. The unions of their own accord decided to make the requirements more stringent, and a year ago, or two years ago, at a board meeting in Los Angeles, the matter of retirement was discussed, and we concluded that we'd have to require 20 years' membership, the last ten years of which were to be consecutive. We knew we couldn't ask the
industry for more money, and it was in line with being able to make it available to more people. There's no use having a liberal policy if there isn't the money. All the membership here accepted the 20-year rule; we operate on that in San Francisco.

Also, we had to provide for mobility of workers and their not losing their rights if they moved from one area to another. A person might have had 50 years in the trade, but might be relatively new to New York or Chicago, or wherever it was. So we agreed on having a reciprocity fund. So for a person who had been ten years in New York City and the last ten years in San Francisco or Los Angeles, New York would pay ten years and San Francisco or Los Angeles would pay the other ten. That was not an easy thing to get over. For example, the employers in Chicago said, "Who is that person? He was on somebody's payroll ten years ago who has since gone bankrupt; why should we tax this fund to pay for somebody who is now in Los Angeles or in San Francisco who you
say used to work here ten years ago? We don't have any evidence of it, and any how, why should he?"

Gilb: Wouldn't they have evidence of his union membership?

Matyas: Yes, but--you can get even more evidence, the Social Security they paid where they worked--but they just didn't want to tax their fund to support others, and of course we tried to argue that it sort of balanced out, that people move from one direction to another.

Gilb: Now you're talking about "we"; was the idea of reciprocity initiated here?

Matyas: No, it was initiated in the I.L.G.W.U.'s General Executive Board.

Gilb: By this time you were a vice president?

Matyas: Oh yes; I've been a vice president over ten years now. My it's a long time, I hadn't realized! The president, Dubinsky, was very keen that any benefits that were available should be spread to all members. Oh yes, and also, we administer our own funds; we don't spend any money on brokerage or on private insurances. The worker gets the
complete and full benefit of whatever funds there are. When we were still the sole administrators of the funds, we wanted to make very certain that nobody would be tempted to be free with the funds, and so we on the General Executive Board decided that none of our funds, unless they got special permission from the General Executive Board, may spend more than 5% for administration. And that, of course, was a very stiff self-disciplinary measure also, especially in markets where the income was small. In markets where the market was small, 5% would hardly be enough; in such instances, application could be made for study of the situation, and if it were necessary to have more than 5%, it was granted.

Silb: What sort of costs would be considered administration?

Natyas: You have to hire clerks to receive the payroll funds and enter it and make certain that the employers have made their contributions, keep a record of the medical accounts, the Blue Cross accounts, how much the members have used, how much they're
allowed to.

Gilb: You managed to do all that here on 5%?

Matyas: Yes. But then, we did a lot of work ourselves; the union did a lot of work for which it didn't charge anything at all. Now the union is charging 2%.

Education

Gilb: You said once, when we first started talking, that your title here was, among other things, education director, and we haven't gone into any of your duties or contributions in that realm. Could you say something about that?

Matyas: Yes, I can say something about it. I don't like to, but I can. (laughter) I don't like to mostly because it's not a very encouraging picture that I can paint.

Gilb: Oh, really?

Matyas: When I first began, in the thirties, you know, when the unions came into being, education was pretty much in the air, workers' education, adult education, with New Dealism. We had a history for educational activities; I'm one of the pioneers
in New York City that asked for an educational activity in the New York City group. But I found before too long that organized and formal classroom activity was very difficult. I tried very hard to have topics that members themselves would choose and show a desire for. Current events was usually desired, a quick interpretation.

We formed classes that used to meet Saturdays, because that was a day of no work, and the people would be coming downtown for shopping anyhow, so they would be able to get to a class. In that class we had not only current events but explanations of things like the new Social Security Act, the new Employment Act, all that sort of thing.

We had authorities, wonderful authorities, to come down and speak to our members. The members went for the theory of it in a big way. When it came to actually attending classes—well, at the beginning of the series, as many as fifty people would attend. By the time the series was over, I found some people were trying to do me a personal favor by coming and sitting down in the class.
They'd come to headquarters and stand around and talk about all sorts of things; but when it came to asking people to come in and sit down and be in the class, it was like asking them to do me a favor. When they did, they always liked it, because we always had topnotch people. There we organized quite a number of classes, for example, there was one in economics in which Stuart Chase's *Economy of Abundance* was used. We had Mrs. Helen Keiklejohn be the leader of the class. That class went along for about a season, and it diminished tremendously too. Inspite of the exciting book and the exciting instructor the class diminished very badly (rising inflection). That was my experience time after time; we tried to organize classes in English, in citizenship. To start with, I'd generally get a pretty good turnout. Evenso, it meant individual work, buttonholing people and saying, "Now you want to join the class, don't you?" "Oh yes, I'd like to know all about it." To translate the desire to actionseems to be a difficult thing.

Gilb: Did you ever think of sponsoring vocational
training?

Matyas: No, I didn't think that vocational training was the function of the union. I thought our function was to help our members to understand the world in which we live. Vocational training, I thought, was something that people would go for anyhow.

Gilb: I was wondering if perhaps you might not have been able to work in some of this...

Matyas: (firmly) No. No. It just doesn't work that way. Now people often want vocational training; I find a lot of members who come to me for excuse for not having attended meetings, and their reason is, "I attend school." "Oh, do you? What kind?" "I'm going to become a beauty operator, so I can't attend the meetings." It's not of particular interest of the union.

Gilb: I thought you might perhaps have organized something increasing their skills in the garment trade.

Matyas: Some of the locals have tried that, and even that becomes difficult. Of course, you need a good deal of machinery and all that. Actually, in-plant training is the best for that sort of thing. I
always felt, and I think our concept has always been, that the union should inspire its members to want to understand the world in which we live, how it is composed, why it functions as it does, and to think of whether it ought to function better or what.

Gilb: But your experience was that it just didn't take.

Matyas: It didn't take well enough. That's pretty universal, as we are told when we ask around at other unions. For a while, I became discouraged and I thought, in New York City they have so many people attending and so many classes. But when I began to think in terms of proportion, I realized that the proportion was just about nil. I finally wrote to the National Educational Director, or maybe it was to Dubinsky and said, "Take me off the roll as an educational director, because the amount of good I do as an educational director would make a noise in a peanut shell." I feel that one radiates education as much as anything. Every time we get up to speak at a meeting, instead of talking about just the complaints of the day, we use the
daily complaints to interpret them in the light of social forces, and stimulate that way. We invite people to come to the union every once in a while and they talk on specific issues.

Gilb: I was thinking of another possible approach, the public relations approach, such as running a column in the labor papers, or sending out pamphlets from time to time.

Matyas: Unfortunately, I hate to admit it, but the fact of the matter is, people don't read. Now one of the things I did was to get out a magazine, mimeographed. We tried to have in it stimulating editorials and special news items that we thought were stimulating, and we had columns of who's who and why, and what happened to Mary's baby, you know, personal columns also.

Gilb: Oh, you've tried everything, haven't you?

Matyas: Oh yes. The novelty of the thing generally takes. Then it sloughs off. I'm afraid that's awfully universal. That's not to say that effort should not continue to be made; it should nevertheless still be made, and where education can be stimulated, it must be stimulated; our whole International
believes that very strongly. We spend a lot of money in that direction. We have institutes in California—we used to have a so-called "workers' school" that used to meet in the summertime—and it petered out finally. I never thought much of taking a worker out for a six-weeks' course; I don't think you learn much in six weeks, even if you have had a lot of prerequisites. We've had people come to these courses who said, "Yes, I read a book once," along with people who were very highly read. I don't think it was worth the effort, really; still, because education is so important, it must be continued to be tried. We still have institutes, in Wisconsin, for example, and other parts of the country.
"THE UNION DOESN'T FIGHT PROGRESS"

Gilb: I have a couple of general questions to ask you. There must have been new inventions for the manufacture of clothing, and I know that there have been new synthetic materials, and so forth. Have these affected a major change in the labor side of the industry?

Matyas: We have long since given up fighting progress. When these things come in, they often affect labor. For example, people who were skilled in overlock machines. All at once there's no need for overlock machines. Sure, it affects the people who know how to overlock, but we feel that if overlocking isn't the thing anymore, there's nothing that can be done about it. We have tried in many instances where for example...in New York City the pressing department went through quite a revolutionary situation. There we insisted on severance pay. We didn't fight the machines; we didn't fight progress.

Gilb: Just trying to help people adjust.

Matyas: Just trying to help people adjust. We insisted on severance pay and we insisted the employer give
the workers who were displaced a first chance at learning another craft.

Gilb: Has anything like that been done here?

Matyas: Well, yes; in our agreements here we say that if the craft of any given group of workers is out, the workers must be given a first opportunity at a new craft to take its place.

Gilb: Has this happened often?

Matyas: Yes, every once in a while it happens.

Gilb: The employers, of course, try to mechanize all they can, don't they?

Matyas: Yes, they do. All they can or all they can afford. We are very flexible. In the cloak industry, for example, the whole garment was made. The worker had to be a skilled worker and know how to make a whole suit or a whole coat. Of course, it was sectionalized to the extent that the cutters did the cutting and the finishers did the finishing. Subsequently, take a shop like the Lilli Ann Corporation, for example. They employ about 800 workers now, and they make a very top-notch suit and it's done entirely on section work. Now we had a stiff battle, our own workers fought it,
the executive board, our own industry fought it furiously...

Gilb: On what grounds?

Katya: Well, on the ground that the skilled laborers would lose out, that the garments would be made at a cheaper labor cost, and that people who had put all their lives into acquiring skill would go wanting. It so happened that in San Francisco the Lilli Ann shop grew from less than 50 to what we now have, several hundred. We went along; we persuaded our membership bit by bit. The leadership persuaded the membership that we can't fight management on how it's to do its work. We can fight the price of the work and be fair and equitable.

Gilb: Is there a tendency that the more skilled people are gradually losing out?

Katya: There is. But it also happens to be true that there are fewer and fewer very skilled people.
THE FUTURE AND UNION LEADERSHIP

Gilb: I notice that in your talk about people in the union and about you yourself—you come from a Jewish background, a rather poor background in an economic sense—this seems to be true about many people out here; also a lot of them seem to come from New York, the leaders. Is this generally true?

Matyas: We have a girl in the office now who's a business agent who's not Jewish, does not come from New York...The history of our union is such that the leadership as well as the membership was pretty much in New York City, where it all started—a foreign element. Jewish and Italian largely, and we have a great number of Italian leaders, Luigi Antonini is a very colorful and picturesque Italian, for example, and he's the first vice president.

Gilb: How about out here:

Matyas: Out here, by mere chance, in San Francisco—it just happens the way I said. I'm Jewish, of Jewish parents. I was married to a Presbyterian, the twenty happiest years of my life. I only remember that I'm Jewish when I'm asked the question.
Gilb: This is a sociological point, you see.
Matyas: Now my husband was an active trade unionist and was an official in his union; he was not Jewish.
Gilb: But in the I.L.G.W.U. your people, many of them were Jewish, weren't they?
Matyas: Yes. Because you see, here, the union was organized, since '34, with the help of the more experienced.
Gilb: And they had come from places like New York.
Matyas: And they came from where the union was in existence, such as New York. The executive board of Local 101 I don't think has a single Jewish member on it now; one or two on Local 8's board.
Gilb: I don't want to stress the Jewish; the important thing is that many, at least one generation back, came from abroad. The new people coming in, do they come from a different type of background? The leaders especially?
Matyas: San Francisco has a very small active Jewish membership.
Gilb: In the future do you think the union is likely to draw its leadership from college-trained people rather than people without the college background?
Matyas: It's my hope that the union will always elect its leadership from its own ranks, but as the nation becomes more educated, I mean in a formal sense, so the union membership will be composed of more so-called formally educated groups. It's very important to remember that any union reflects a cross-section of the community in which it exists. The members of the union are the residents of that community, and whatever the cross-section of that community is, that will be the cross-section of the union.

Gilb: So by sheer democratic processes, with more college- or formally-educated people in the union...

Matyas: With more formally-educated people in the community, there will be more of them in the trade, and it is my hope that a union will always be led from itself.

Gilb: You wouldn't like to see leaders picked right from the schools, you mean, without experience in the shop.

Matyas: I think the unions should learn that to become a union representative today requires a good deal
more formal education and knowledge than it did at one time, because our government is a much more intricate affair. Our union must become composed of people who understand the complexity of the relationship of any segment of the community and its government. The union, I hope as the days go on, will be accepted as an integral part of the society in which we live, and as such, it has its connections with the government of the community and the nation.

Gilb: Would you be for such things as actual college training for union leadership?

Matyas: I think far more we ought to recognize that our union leadership should have a good deal of training.

Gilb: But you still think leaders should come from worker background.

Matyas: It would be better if leaders came from worker background. I hope that our workers will understand that in giving responsibility to any representative, they will have a right to expect that that representative will have acquainted himself with all the intricate elements that go into
negotiations now.

Gilb: Do you think that there is any tendency in your union to prefer to employ lawyers or have them representatives?

Matyas: We employ lawyers frequently to negotiate, because the employers have lawyers.

Gilb: In the old days, they used labor counselors who were not necessarily attorneys.

Matyas: You still may; we use labor counselors in some instances. Still, in the old days we used nobody, neither labor counselors nor lawyers. We must have used our own thinking, because there weren't all the governmental agencies that claimed a right in the affairs of a union. In those days the union was a sheer two-way proposition, with the workers on one side and the employers on the other. The leadership among the workers felt that they knew the answers; they knew what we workers wanted. It now is a good deal more than that. Contracts became subject to negotiations and subject to court procedures...

Gilb: And you need lawyers more and more.

Matyas: Lawyers or labor counselors. Labor counselors
usually consult attorneys where essential. Take, for example, the development of the welfare fund. Most unions now have them as part of their union gains. There they come under scrutiny. The Taft-Hartley act, for example. I think as the nation progresses, that the everyday people are more likely to be people who've had the opportunities to go to high school and maybe even to go to college, and then come into our industry. I hope they will; our industry is no longer the industry it was when I began work. There aren't many industries today that have such conditions where a seven-hour day and a five-day week prevail; where democracy on the job is as great a factor as the workers wish to have it be, because of their union contract which guarantees it. We have good welfare funds; we were the leaders among the unions in the drive for health, welfare, and educational activities. I think to work in our industry these days is something to be desired.

* * * * *
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* * * * *
JENNIE MATYAS AND THE I.L.G.W.U. - Addendum

Following her retirement in 1962 Jennie Matyas Charters took several courses under the auspices of California State University, San Francisco, in order to qualify for a teaching credential in adult education. She received her adult education credential in 1964, at the age of 68, and was employed by the San Francisco Unified School District, first as a substitute teacher and then as teacher of world affairs for senior citizens.

Now at 80, Mrs. Charters lives in The Sequoias, a retirement residence in San Francisco, and continues to teach world affairs for senior citizens under the San Francisco Community College district. She is a member of the San Francisco Community College Federation of Teachers Union, Local 212.

Willa Klug Baum
Department Head
Regional Oral History Office
3 June 1976

Mrs. Charters asked that the corrections listed below be made in her memoir:

p. 44, top line - of a hall

p. 342, next to last line - policies not politics

p. 350, 1. 3 and 1. 6 - Fania Cohen not Sonya Kohn
the strike was settled in three weeks, far short of many of the union's demands, she remained to help those still on strike. When it was all over it took her almost a year to find another steady job. All this time, off and on, she kept at her second great ambition. For a while she attended night classes in English at Columbia. However, her activities in her union were so all-absorbing—membership on the Executive Committee, Grievance Committee, Organization Committee etc.—that it was not until 1922 when she again thought she could implement her great desire for more

JENNIE MATYAS, Vice President
International Ladies' Garment Workers Union
Ambitious for Education, America Gave Her Opportunity

By Record Staff Writer

IF YOU WERE TOLD that you were going to meet the only woman vice-president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, what would you expect to see? We very much doubt if the picture to rise in your mind would fit Jennie Matyas, a chic and dainty little person, with short silver hair and a clear golden tan, enormous charm and distinction.

This, nevertheless, is what she is, and if her looks belie her almost incredible achievements in the rugged field of labor, the intangible aura of distinction does not. For this petite and gracious woman, who came to America from Hungary at the age of ten, has done more for her fellow Americans, in the course of her working career, than can be readily calculated, even now.

TYPICAL IMMIGRANT
She was a typical immigrant, traveling steerage with her mother and several brothers and sisters, and after finding a tenement home in New York, all of them slept on the floor until the mother, out of the family's meagre and spasmodic earnings, was able to pay back their borrowed passage money.

Jennie went to work in a garment factory before she was fourteen, hiding when the inspector came around, so that he wouldn't find out she was under age. The time came, however, when she was able to earn openly the customary $3.20 for a full work week of forty-eight hours. The standard work-week for adults was 54 hours but it was illegal to work children under 16 years more than 48 hours!

TWO AMBITIONS
She had two ambitions at this time, to learn how to do dressmaking really well, and to master the English language. So she brought home extra piece work to do while she ate her supper, and then scampared off to night school until 10 p.m. "In my own mind I knew I was going to do it," says Jennie Matyas. She even cherished the audacious thought of going to college sometime.

She was hardly more than fifteen, however, when destiny interrupted this routine. She had advanced to the colossal wage of $11.50 a week, when a fellow worker broached the idea to her of joining a union. "What's that?" asked young Jennie, and when she heard, her next innocent question was, "Would the boss like it?"

In a negative reply, she

A WOMAN OF DISTINCTION
a small and surreptitious gathering in an obscure back room. She came away with a burning desire to do her share in improving the lot of all workers, and the conviction that this could not be done individually. When a general strike was planned, she prayed to be called upon to do her share, and she was; her job was the distribution of leaflets in the wee hours of the frosty mornings. During the 1913 strike, she had charge of one

knowledge and formal education. "It's an ill wind that blows no good," said Jennie. When the Communists became active and disruptive in her union, Jennie decided to quit and try once more for school. She attended private "prep" schools and in one year of part-time work and school she cramned in her 4 year equivalent of high school and passed the New York State of Regents college entrance examinations.

September, 1933...
Redwood Empire Beauty Sample!

Jennie Matyas, Vice President, ILGW

(Continued from page 5)

women's part in the manpower program. But this unbelievably able and valiant little Person managed it all, graduating cum laude, later was notified she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

In 1944 she attended an ILGWU convention in Boston, and emerged as one of the twenty-three vice-presidents of this great union, with its approximately 440,000 members in the United States and Canada. On her return to San Francisco she was given a testimonial banquet attended by labor leaders and many distinguished educators. In 1939 she was chosen to go to England and the Scandinavian countries on a worker's Education Scholarship. In 1952 she was invited, as one of "100 Outstanding Americans" to visit Germany with other union and industrial officials.

Through it all she has kept her simplicity and selflessness, her burning ardor and deep faith in the cause to which her life has been dedicated. Her goal has been economic sustenance for the people who work, the adequate wages and good working conditions to which they are entitled. This has come about, she says, "not because of calendar changes, but by the devotion of intelligent men and women, through their collective effort and enlightened program." To Jennie the great vocation of Unionism was, "the dignity gained through the union, the security of individual value and worth of the job, in the factory as well as in the community."

A great light went out for Jennie Matyas. Changes when her husband died, but the light bears high for other women will never go out. She left Marin County, where she had to work in her garden, and her house in welcome order. Yes, she still makes clothes, not for herself anymore—for her children. But a week days will find her in her office at ILGWU headquarters Mason Street, and no one who sees it can remain-long unaware that he has contact a truly great American—a woman of extinction!

NICE AND NAUTICAL—Pretty Nancy Wilkins peers charmingly through a hawser to invite YOU and YOU and YOU to attend the Ninth Annual Sausalito Regatta, one of the colorful aquatic events staged yearly in the Redwood Empire. The Regatta, sponsored by the Sausalito Chamber of Commerce, will be held on September 17 and 18 and comes as a climax to the Sausalito Salmon Derby which ends September 16.

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