



Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America Local 125 and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union Local 151, 1901-1990

Greater New Haven Labor History Association Archives
267 Chapel Street
New Haven, CT 06513

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

5.5 linear feet in five file drawers

ARRANGEMENT

The records are arranged in six series, with one addition:

I. Background Materials; II. Organizational Papers; III. Publicity and Flyers; IV. Newspaper Photographs; V. Personal Memorabilia; VI. Oversize Materials and Artifacts; and VII. Accession 2004: Nick Aiello Documents and Photographs.

BRIEF HISTORY

In 1932 and 1933, to combat sweat shop conditions in the clothing industry in New Haven, Ct., the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union cooperated in an organizing campaign which resulted in large scale unionization of the industry and improvements in wages, working conditions, and working hours for these workers. They formed two locals and continued to work together until the final demise of the industry in New Haven in the late 1980s and early 1990s. ([More about the history.](#))

SUMMARY

The records consist of background materials on the history of the unions; administrative records; personal memorabilia; correspondence; photographs; and organizational materials which document the political and social activities of the two locals from their inception until the decline of the garment industry in New Haven. There are also subject files which provide information on union organizing in general; minimum wage and plant losing legislation; and other matters of concern to unions.

PROVENANCE

Gift of several individual members and officers of Locals 125 and 151, 1992-1999

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, or to access the records, contact Joan Cavanagh, Project Archivist, at the Greater New Haven Labor History Association, 203-776-4098 or labor_history@hotmail.com

ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

New Haven, Connecticut has a long, often militant, labor history, dating back to the 19th century. As Frank Annunziato reports in his 1990 script for an exhibit about local garment workers, in 1886 alone there were strikes at 29 New Haven businesses, "involving thousands of workers in the carriage, hardware, rubber, garment, construction, iron and wire production industries." In 1889, New Haven's unions put together an Illustrated History of the Trades Council of New Haven and Affiliated Unions, which noted the growth of the city, with its population now at 108,000, as a center of industry and trade. This growth had largely been made possible by the arrival of waves of Irish, Polish, Swedish and Italian immigrants, as well as African Americans from other parts of the United States. These workers had a keen interest in and dedication to the labor movement.

One industry which grew quickly and became of crucial importance to New Haven's economy for a time was the clothing industry. Its history dates back to 1840, when Bavarian Jews organized the first synagogue, Mishkan Israel, in New Haven. Two influential members of this community, Max Adler and Isaac Strouse, soon became leaders of New Haven's corset industry. In 1860, Strouse bought out the McAlister and Smith Corset Manufacturing Business, and, with Adler, his employee, began to develop a home industry for corset production by selling newly minted Singer sewing machines door to door to Yankee, Irish, and German women. In 1866, Strouse established the first corset factory in the United States, a precursor to Strouse, Adler on Oak Street in New Haven. By 1890, there were nine corset firms operating in New Haven, making the city the largest manufacturer of corsets in the United States.

However, New York City remained the center of the clothing industry until the 1920s, when firms began relocating to nearby cities in New Jersey and Connecticut. They were seeking a cheaper, non-unionized labor market in the wake of successful organizing undertaken by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union throughout the entire New York garment industry by the beginning of the decade. New Haven offered cheap factory space, geographic proximity to the City, a large population of Italian and Italian American women, a largely un-organized work force, and an economy facing recession due to layoffs in the weapons and hardware industries. In "Shirts and Dresses: Made in New Haven," Frank Annunziato notes that "throughout the city, conditions forced women and children to find work in order to provide income for the economic survival of households."

Dress shops tended to be small, often employing less than 50 workers, while shirt manufacturers were large. In both, wages were low, hours were long (often fifteen hours days, six days a week and half days on Sundays), and working conditions were substandard, with dirty and unsanitary work areas, poor heating, lighting, and ventilation, and abusive supervisors. Female garment workers experienced sexual harassment and long periods of seasonal unemployment.

Early in the 1930s, prior to the industrial union victories of the Congress of Industrial Organizations later in the decade, New Haven's shirt and dress makers revolted against these conditions, and, writes Annunziato, "the result created what would become two of the city's, and Connecticut's, most important unions for more than fifty years, the Shirtmakers Union, Local 125 of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), and, in the dress industry, Local 151 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU)."

In the fall of 1932, ACWA manager Aldo Cursi came to Connecticut to organize workers in the state. The Amalgamated successfully gained members and negotiated with the Shirt Contractors' Association, an organization of employers who made shirts on contract for manufacturers. Under this system, the

contractors had to bid against each other, which reduced profits as well as wages. These negotiations resulted in many union agreements, including contracts with the Par-Ex Shirt Company, the D & I Shirt Company, the Ideal Shirt Company, and the Creighton Shirt Company, all of New Haven.

At the same time, the ILGWU sent an organizer from New York, Bernard Schub, to head up the organizing campaign among the dressmakers. The two unions began a pattern of cooperation which persisted throughout their history in New Haven. They shared office space, and occasionally even exchanged organizers.

But strikes were not to be avoided, and in April of 1933 the Amalgamated called for a general, nationwide strike of the non-union shirt industry. Annunziato writes that "by Monday, April 24, most of the contracting shops in Connecticut were closed." By May 3rd, Lesnow's of New Haven signed its first ever union contract with ACWA representatives Sidney Hillman and Jacob Potofsky." And "within the span of six weeks, all of the New haven shirt shops joined the union ranks."

In August, ILGWU called for a general strike. The result in New Haven was that there were strikes in all of the city's dress shops, and that, after two weeks of rallies, pickets, and a total shut down of the industry city-wide, the ILGWU was recognized by all of the city's dress manufacturers and contractors.

In both cases, the strikers involved were mostly Italian-, Polish- and African-American women, who became the core membership of the two new local unions born of these victories, Amalgamated Local 125 of the Shirtmakers Union and ILGWU Local 151. Annunziato writes that "wages were increased by an average of 10%," and "within a year, the National Industrial Relations Act, for which both unions lobbied extensively, resulted in a garment industry code that reduced the hours of work to thirty-five per week in the dress industry and forty for the shirt workers."

The two locals became centers of social and political activities for their members, involving them in the decision-making process and in union cultural activities. Material gains were made in the lives and working conditions of clothing workers in New Haven. The locals' affiliation with two powerful national unions was a major source of strength, as the Amalgamated and ILGWU negotiated national agreements for their members on issues such as health and pension coverage, grievance procedures, and decision-making regarding job responsibilities.

Annunziato writes that, by 1960, "every shirt and dress shop" in New Haven joined either Local 125 or 151— making them two of the largest local unions in Connecticut." But the garment industry in New Haven declined rapidly, and today no longer exists. The following is Frank Annunziato's poignant conclusion to his article, "Shirts and Dresses: Made in New Haven:

"In 1959, eighty-two apparel manufacturing shops existed in New Haven, of which thirty-seven produced either shirts or dresses. Thirty years later, in 1989, the last shirt shop closed; and in 1991, the last dress factory shut down. Just as the garment industry came to New Haven as runaway shops from New York during the 1920s, the industry sought other low wage and non-union areas to increase profitability. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, shirt and dress employers, confronted with competition from foreign-made garments, 'ran away' from New Haven to set up production in the non-union Southern states. Later, much of the American garment workers left the United States altogether and built shops in Asia and the Pacific rim, where workers were paid less than a fifth of the wages and fringe benefits won over the years by the Amalgamated and the ILGWU.

“Very little remains of New Haven’s shirt and dress industry past, except for the memories of the workers who earned their living making our clothes.”

The sources used to compile this organizational history are:

Frank Annunziato, “Shirts and Dresses: Made in New Haven,” *Labor Heritage* (Winter 1992): 21-33.

Frank Annunziato, “Chronology: Highlights in New Haven Labor and Industrial History,” *Labor Almanac: New Haven’s Unions in the 1990s* (1995): 44-52.

David Montgomery, “160 Years of Labor’s Struggles for a Better New Haven,” *Labor Almanac: New Haven’s Unions in the 1990s* (1995): 17-18.

ACWA, *The Shirt and Clothing Workers of Connecticut, 1933-1943* (ACWA Local 125 Tenth Anniversary pamphlet, 1943): 8-9.

ILGWU, *News: History 1900-1950* (Golden Jubilee Convention pamphlet, May 1950): 1.

Interview with Nicholas Aiello, January 3, 2002.