

ON THE LINE : NOTEBOOK

" I think this strike is a good thing. They think we are just bluffing. They think we cannot stand with our own two feet. They say that in the history of Winnipeg, its been a long time since this kind of industry have a strike."

Winnipeg Garment Worker

Forty -six years to be exact.

In the summer of 1981, 140 garment workers struck their factory in suburban Winnipeg. It was the first year ~~since 1934~~ that

~~there had been a labor~~ a labor strike had occurred in the ~~garment~~ industry here since 1934. The workers were

mostly immigrant women from the Phillipines, India, Italy, Portugal, Vietnam and the West Indies. The company in

question, was a huge multinational, with a reputation for exploiting

~~workers and women~~ in almost as many countries as it drew its

cheap labour from, ~~Lorea, Hongkong or Winnipeg~~ Winnipeg.

I had heard about the dark inner coils of the Canadian garment

industry; about the garment ghettos of isolated, ~~isolated~~

~~unorganized~~ immigrant ~~workers~~ working for minimum wage to

make our blue jeans and pant suits. I had heard that for many of

them, going on strike was no less frighthening a concept than deportation

or prison. How ~~could~~ ^{had} they ever muster the courage, the hutzpah

the ~~where~~ where with all to take on their modern day Feudal lord?

I began to frequent their picketline and talk to the strikers, the women in blue jeans and suntops and sun hats, carrying placards, ~~and~~ umbrellas and babies. ^{And} I talked with the union organizers, loud flamboyant "Canadian" union ladies.

~~And I watched them picket Terry. And I watched them picket Terry. And I watched them picket Terry. And I watched them picket Terry. And I watched them picket Terry.~~

ON THE LINE is a play which, to pardon ^a the dreadful cliché, seemed to write itself, through the strong, humorous and often painful words of the women in the garment industry.

* * *

" I was just out of school....Terry was also new...we didn't know where these women were coming from. The first time I walked into the factory. they ~~talk just~~ looked ~~at me~~ looked me up and down as if to say, 'oh another Canadian union lady' and then went back to their lunch." ^{With the experience they'd had with the union, I don't blame them!"}

In the fall of 1980, two young women started to do union organizing within the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in Winnipeg. They were feminists, and to say to least, politically to the left of the present leadership within the union. ^(Of the 40,000)

(Both the ILGWU and the other major union representing garment workers, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, are American -run and looked upon with deep suspicion by their members. Each has a long history of being "company unions" which collude regularly with garment industry management.)

When the two organizers began to visit the factories, they found a workforce hopelessly disorganized and hostile from years of union ~~and~~ inactivity. Workers were pitted against one another racially, and competitively, through the piecework system.

Salaries were low, the threat of lay-offs constantly in the air.

Many ~~of the~~ workers were recent immigrants who were ignorant of even the minimal protection afforded them through Canadian labour laws and human rights legislation.

One of the first workers they met at this suburban garment factory was ~~xxx~~ Emma, a Filipino woman who had been brought over by the company in 1973. Like 1000's of Filipinos, she was lured to Canada by the hope and promise of a better future.

"When we first came here, the boss was always walking ~~through~~ through our factory. We ~~and~~ had our pictures taken with him to send home to our parents. I felt so grateful to be working here. We were the pioneers in this place.!"

(Insert or omit)

4)

But things changed for Emma. The boss visited less frequently, the ~~man~~ management became more patronizing, ~~and~~ and discriminatory towards the workers. ~~Any~~ ^{When} Emma complained about what was happening, her Supervisor told her, " We're not going to ~~hire~~ hire anymore Filipinos cause they're troublemakers. I like ~~the~~ the Chinese ^{better} because they don't speak English and they don't talk back!"

Each new wave of immigrants brought into the factory was used by management as a tool to keep the other workers divided.

~~divide the other workers who were in constant fear of being replaced by 'cheap foreign imports'. (They lived in constant fear of cheap foreign imports, both of the clothing and labour variety.)~~

Another ~~major~~ ^{everyone} problems facing ~~all the workers, wherever they came from,~~ under-
was the ~~steady~~ cutting of ^{piece} work rates. As workers increased their speed, the employer ~~would attempt to reduce the~~ ^{lowered} ~~also~~ ^{lower} the amount of time allowed to complete the same amount of work.

One worker from the West Indies complained that she ~~was~~ had been making \$1000. less each year because of piecework rate cuts. Another hemmer described her frustration with the system; " I've been here for 10 years and it takes me ^{60 seconds} ~~a minute~~ to do a skirt, and the poor girls upstairs ^{is} supposed to make it in 50 seconds. Where do they get their power to cut ~~the~~ it to 50 seconds?"

The union ~~began~~ started asking ^{that} questions out loud. ~~Then~~ ^{that} Emma, the West Indian woman and the hemmer, all started working for the union. [→] Through months of persistent nattering about piecework rates, maternity leaves, equal pay for equal work and better grievance procedures, the union ~~slowly~~ gained ground in the ~~factory~~ factory.

51

By June, ~~the union had~~ ^{they the ILGWU} negotiated a ~~new~~ new contract with the company ~~which would inst~~ ^{ing} establish basic wage scales, equal increases for workers on hourly rates or piecework rates, seniority clauses and layoff clauses.

But by the end of July The company had still refused to sign.

~~Instead, management dug in in an attempt to reestablish control on the shopfloor. The payphones were removed~~

Instead, ^{they took steps} ~~they took~~ ^{various intimidation tactics} to dampen enthusiasm for the union. The payphone was removed from the factory; (the women were bitter that they couldn't call their children at lunch time.) In-house filming of the shopfloor began. ~~and~~ Security guards were posted at the entrance and in the washrooms, to discourage union activity.

But their intimidation tactics backfired.

~~The union~~ The workers were insulted and offended by ~~these kinds~~ ^{their} actions. ~~The union called a strike vote~~ ~~at a downtown hotel.~~ ^{perhaps spoke for all the workers.} ~~The women~~ ^{The women} clearly showed that they

^{had finally had enough.}

" In the beginning, we were all grateful to be here. But they cut our piecework rates, they cheat us for minutes, they don't even do what they say they're going to do in the ~~contract~~ ^{Contract}... and now, I don't feel grateful anymore.... Now I think it is the company who

should be grateful for getting us so cheap!!" ^{the women} clearly showed through their vote that they'd had enough. Three days later, they turned off their machines; cleaned out their lockers, picked up their ~~books~~ ^{sandwiches} sweaters, ~~and~~ cushions and crucifixes, and walked out.

when the union called a strike vote at a downtown hotel,

The new modern garment industry began in Winnipeg only ten years ago. Although only 8 % of the Canadian industry is ~~is~~ located in Winnipeg, ~~it's~~ that segment is responsible for over 20% of the garment exports from Canada. Winnipeg is the cutting edge of automation within ~~the industry~~ an industry frantically scrambling ~~to keep up with the competition within a global industry with vast~~ ~~diffs~~ in the face of ^{to meet} ~~to keep up~~ with the low labour costs of their third world competition.

ON THE LINE

The first garment factory I toured in researching ~~the plant~~ was ~~an~~ ^{an} old family run ~~shantia~~ business. Few windows, wooden floors, machines and equipment ~~xxxxxxx~~ crammed together. ~~Yet kind of cheery~~ ~~in its xxxxxxxx red way~~ xxx The smell of ~~xx~~ half a century of lunches, ~~and~~ sweat and cloth residue. A sign hanging on a post in the middle of the shop floor read: IF THIS FACTORY BURNS DOWN, YOU'RE OUT OF A JOB. A section of older European workers sat at their machines beside ~~mountains~~ mountains of unfinished skijackets, eating ~~their~~ sunflower seeds and casting ^{aspersions at some} ~~insults towards the~~ ~~of~~ Vietnamese workers at centre shop floor. A sign hung on a post in a corner ~~which~~ read IF THIS FACTORY BURNS DOWN, YOUR'E OUT OF A JOB!"

7/

Here, computerized embroidery machines bang out 'native art work' for 12 parkas ~~in the space of~~ in the space of 60 seconds.

Factory Two: highly automated. Here, vacuum tables suck the

air out of three foot ~~high~~ stacks of polyester coat lining,

to facilitate easy cutting. ~~Once~~ The cutters ~~are wearing masks~~

~~seemed to be~~ ^{are} surrounded by a light halo of dust, ~~and~~ On questioning the

floor manager ~~once~~ about ~~the purpose of the masks~~ why they ~~were~~ wearing

~~masks~~, I ^{was} told ~~that~~ that these ~~of~~ Oriental people are so

polite that even if they have a cold t they ~~would~~ ^{would} wear a mask!"

Factory Three has an Eton Line, a system of overhead pulleys

which carry garments from one production ~~station~~ stage to another.

Slow moving rails encircle each workers ~~at their station~~ in a quietly

~~moving~~ cage of sleeves and pantlegs. The manager ~~proudly~~

^{proudly} displays the newest technology; " Before the Eton Line, the

~~women~~ girls had to call for another bundle, then get

up and put it in place. Now they don't have to move once from the

moment they walk in the door til they go for lunch."

In the summer of 1981, 140 women replaced the ~~job~~ joys of the

Eton Line for the joys of the picketline.

" I am not going to work this morning. I am going to strike. Since I have been in this country, I have heard about strikes, but I have never understood them. I would go on the bus and see people in front of their place of work with signs and shouting, and they look so discontent, so troublesome. Now it is me out here. I ~~am~~ am the striker. Now I am watching all the people passing by ME ~~and it~~...it is I here in front of my work looking troublesome and discontent. It is hard to be here. I think...what am I if I do not work? What are you Rubena, if you don't contribute to this great society? The buses come and go, and maybe all those faces are thinking that of me.....why is this woman not working?"

East Indian garment worker.

~~Garment worker:~~

"Today, it started ~~raining~~ raining as soon as we got here. Our placards got soggy and starting ripping along the holes. The ~~words~~ words began to run like blood....and we were wet right through to our underpants. People going by had these big unfriendly faces looking out at us through wet windows...and they would splash us and then drive on.....Canadians look even more foreign in the rain."

Filipino Garment worker

The strike lasted for three weeks. As soon as it started, found many ~~back to find~~ night jobs ~~which they went to~~ ^{to go to} after picket duty.

Chambermaid, all night ~~cashier~~, other assembly ~~line~~ line jobs.

Their lives became even more difficult than before; problems ~~were~~ with husbands ~~and children at home, who didn't want anything to change, who were~~ who wanted mom around at night; problems with ~~babysitting~~ childcare pressure from their communities and religious leaders to not step out of line.

Yet the anecdotes remembered at the end of each day were of the gutsy, outrageous variety...all those things they have never dared to do before.

Tales of scab hunting, up and down back alleys; ^{tales of} of crawling through long
 grass with binoculars to ~~look~~ ^{count the number of} find out how many scab workers ~~scab~~
~~REALLY~~ going in to the factory ^{From} in those windowless vans;
 and gails of laughter over comments made to the security guards
 torment the
 (there were four of them nicknamed Small, Medium, Large and
 Extra Large). There was instant recall of the insults and
~~bravado~~ bravado demonstrated towards
 management.

But there was also the blacklisting by other garment factories; ~~and~~
 telephone
 and the calls from mysterious 'Immigration Officers'
 to the homes of the Vietnamese workers; and the ^{passengers in cars} ~~people who drive~~
~~by in cars~~ ^{who} yelled out " Why don't you go back
 to where you came from you little slant-eyed....." the rest slurred
 in the wind....but not lost.

"The low point of the strike was around the 12th day," recalled one of
 the union organizers. "There was no news, it looked like they were
 running the place without us. But we just kept pumping each other
 up. When one faded, another gave a little strength. "

" They need our hands. We produce the work.....the super can't
 seam serge." "They can't even sew one whole garment
 without us ^{our} ~~skills~~ " ~~They~~

" There are only two people who can run my machine...." one
 workers said, " and we're both out here!"

They held on.

Three weeks after the strike began, ~~the company's~~ ^{Company} managers and ~~supervisors~~ supervisors hand-delivered letters to the ~~workers~~ ^{striker's} ~~workers~~ ^{shams} appealing to them to return to work.

~~But by this time, the workers were~~ The next morning, the workers held a mass rip-up ^{of the letters} in front of the factory.

" I guess you could call it a symbolic 'screw you!'"
The company could not break the union.
The following day, ~~the company~~ ^{the company} agreed to go back to the table and a settlement was reached. The strike was over.

The women went back in.

~~One year later, one summer day in 1982, I met with a group of the workers to get an update~~

* * *

One summer day in 1982, I met with a group of ~~the~~ workers to get an update on ~~what had occurred~~ ^{conditions in the factory} since the strike.

The East Indian woman had ~~just~~ been in court that morning testifying about ~~an incident which had occurred on the~~ ^a picketline ^{incident} ~~which has occurred~~ one whole year earlier.

" In this country, it takes justice a long time to even appear to be done."

How do you feel now, after all this time? "I ~~keep~~ ^{keep} asking them over and over, ~~over~~

The East Indian woman:

" Before the strike, no one ever talked to one another inside.... Now if there are 3 people on one operation, ~~whenever~~ ^{and} one has a problem, we all get up from our machines and talk about it together."

Emma, the Filipino shop steward: "I think we took some of the power back from the supervisors. ~~They know~~ They know the union's here and they can't ignore us anymore. We're winning grievances now we never would have even tried before."

Another woman listening: " Nothing ~~changes~~, everything goes on the same; nothing changes , except everything has,in here and in here." She points to her head and her heart.

Postscript: One and one half years after the strike, the play ON THE LINE has been written and performed and I am on to other things; at the time of writing this article, one third of the garment workers in this city are out of work. (~~Many of the workers involved in the 1981 strike have been laid off~~) Yesterday, in the middle of the garment district, I saw one of the union organizers , her collar up against the cold, on her way to visit one of the factories.

" We have to keep on putting out little fires, or else the whole forest will burn down." ^{ON THE LINE} The play is over, but the ^{story} painful, ~~gutsy and incredible story~~ of immigrant garment workers in Canada continues.

END

Emma, the Filipino shop steward

Career Disease

Culture / Arts
- conceptions

What emerged
during workshopping
of play

- backgrounds & factors
how they've changed...
their lives..

- the people who have
been central of play
- who works with

- mother, performance
had an effect

Nov. 30 = deadline.

Jan 30 = next deadline.

-- that which actually
exists and the lives of
human beings. In their
many aspects