Class and Ethnic Barriers to Feminist Perspectives in Toronto’s Jewish Labour Movement, 1919-1939

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The history of Toronto’s Jewish labour movement provides a critical context for examining the relationship between feminist and socialist currents in Canada’s past. It also illuminates the relationship between these currents and ethnic identity within a key section of the working class. In the 1920s and 1930s, Toronto’s Jewish labour movement was not only militant but also had a strong radical cast: the Jewish unions were led primarily by socialists and contained a significant socialist component within their rank and file as well. Furthermore, as in the United States, the Jewish labour movement was concentrated in the garment industry an industry with a highly unusual gender composition of labour. During most of the period under consideration, women constituted over half of Toronto’s garment workers. A significant number of the Jewish women were active not only as trade-union militants but also as socialists. An examination of the Jewish labour movement in the interwar period thus provides an opportunity to study the historical interaction between class and gender in the context of both trade-union and socialist politics.¹
This interaction was characterized by the systematic subordination of women's issues to class issues. Significantly, this subordination of the interests of female workers as women stands in marked contrast to the prominence which the Toronto Jewish labour movement accorded to Jewish workers' specific interest as Jews. Because the commitment to ethnic identity within the Jewish labour movement was not only powerful but also considered a legitimate characteristic of both trade-union politics and Jewish socialist ideology, it provides a counterpoint to the subordination of women's issues. In addition, the intensity of ethnic concerns provides part of the explanation for the subordination of women's issues. Within Toronto's Jewish labour movement, the emphasis on both class consciousness and ethnic identity inhibited the development of feminist perspectives.

While Jewish women were subordinated within their families, in the factories, in their unions, and within the Jewish left, there was hardly any awareness of this subordination and even less attempt to struggle against it. This was partly a product of deeply held assumptions about a woman's domestic responsibility and a man's responsibility as the primary breadwinner. These assumptions helped ensure that union activists did not fundamentally challenge discriminatory wage structures or the gender division of labour in the garment factories. At the same time, the nature of Jewish activists' class analysis meant that they generally focused on the common oppression of all workers and ignored the fact that female workers encountered special forms of oppression. Moreover, the Canadian women's movement, which was weak in these years and predominantly Anglo-Celtic and middle-class, did not ally with Jewish women workers and thus did not help these women develop feminist perspectives of their own experiences. Jewish women themselves stressed that which they held in common with Jewish men—their deep commitment to Jewish identity, and their experience of anti-Semitism—rather than interests they might have shared with non-Jewish women. For all these reasons, women's issues were systematically subordinated.
In the garment shops, Jewish workers often toiled side-by-side with non-Jews, and both groups frequently worked for Jewish manufacturers. The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the International Fur Workers’ Union, and the United Cloth Hat, Cap, and Millinery Workers’ International Union were known as the “Jewish unions.” While non-Jews constituted a significant minority within these four unions, a majority of the members and most of the leaders were Jews.

Although the term “Jewish unions” was sometimes used as a racial epithet in this period (particularly by the anti-labour English-language press and others who sought to prevent the non-Jewish clothing workers from uniting with the Jews in these organizations), much of the significance of the term lies in its use by Jews themselves. Despite the fact that these unions included non-Jews and despite Jewish labour activists’ need to appeal more successfully to their non-Jewish co-workers the Jews themselves characterized these four unions as the “Jewish unions.” The term reflects the distinctive stamp imparted to these particular unions, for Jewishness pervaded and shaped them in fundamental ways. Moreover, the activists commonly used the term “Jewish labour movement” to refer to the movement they forged largely through these garment unions and also through the related cultural institutions, particularly the Jewish socialist fraternal organizations (which did not include non-Jews) and the pro-labour Yiddish-language press (which, of course, non-Jews could not read).

The Jewish labour movement of Toronto, which emerged at the turn of the century and blossomed during the inter-war period, was broadly based in the immigrant community. These immigrants had fled to the New World in the early twentieth century to escape extreme poverty and virulent anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. By 1931, there were over 45,000 Jews in Toronto, where their occupational concentration in the garment industry, combined with a high degree of residential concentration, helped create a cohesive community basis for the Jewish labour movement.

Women’s position within this community, particularly as defined by family roles, significantly shaped their position
on the shop floor, in the unions, and in the Jewish left. Within the city’s East European Jewish community, as within Canadian society more broadly, housework and childrearing were female responsibilities. Like so many others in this period, immigrant Jewish women and men considered the man to be the family’s primary breadwinner and expected most women to leave the paid labour force upon marriage in order to concentrate on domestic tasks. It is significant, however, that women’s domestic responsibilities within the family did not change in cases which did not fit this pattern. If the husband’s income was not sufficient to support the family (and if there were no older children to help earn money), the married woman would go out to work, while continuing to shoulder the domestic responsibilities. In extended family arrangements where men did not have wives to keep house for them, unmarried female relatives often assumed the double burden of wage-earning and housekeeping. Moreover, although the many Jewish men who worked in the highly seasonal garment industry had considerable free time during the slow seasons, they typically did not use this time to help with the housework.

Within the East European Jewish community, women and men were bound together not only by family ties but also by deep cultural bonds. Even those who questioned certain aspects of Jewish tradition commonly shared the community’s commitment to preserving Jewish identity and believed that the family played a central role in cultural preservation. In the context of significant anti-Semitism in Toronto as well as the more severe prejudice encountered before immigration, females and males within this community shared a sense of oppression as Jews. Because of the continuing threat of anti-Semitism and because of the positive valuation of Jewish identity, there was serious concern for the interest of the Jewish community as a whole.

Jewish identity was based on a tradition that was fundamentally patriarchal. In traditional East European Jewish culture, religion, which permeated every aspect of life, assigned women a distinctly subordinate role. Education in particular (especially since it was so closely tied to religion)
was a male preserve. Although the traditional way of life had been significantly transformed in other ways, women generally retained their "second-class" status within Toronto’s immigrant Jewish community in the inter-war period.7

This continuing subordination can be seen, for example, in the life of a Jewish woman who had come to Toronto from Eastern Europe when she was a small child and later went on to become an activist in the Jewish labour movement. During her early years in Toronto, her father did not ensure that she would learn to read or write Yiddish. This was not because her father was an assimilationist. He was reluctant to spend money on a basic Yiddish education for her not only because of tight financial circumstances but also because he felt that it was not important: she would get married, in any case, and that was all that mattered. Then, when she began to teach herself to read the Yiddish newspaper, her brother ridiculed her efforts. This woman had to cope with disapproving male relatives in later years as well, for her first husband would not “let” her be as politically active as she wanted to be. Cases such as hers were not unusual within the immigrant Jewish community.8

Jewish women were also at a significant disadvantage on the shop floor. In the needle trades, where so many immigrant women toiled, they were systematically confined to the lower-paying jobs which were deemed to be less skilled.9 Statistics available for the city’s garment industry in 1921, for example, illustrate the sharp difference between female and male wages. At that time, the average adult female worker earned only 58 percent of what her male counterpart earned.10 Fifteen years later, the average earnings for women in Toronto’s needle trades were a scant 52 to 53 percent of the average earnings of men.11 This differential is mainly attributable to the fact that the women were generally confined to low-paying female job ghettos within the industry, but unequal pay for equal work was also a factor.

One of the main rationales for this discrepancy in wage rates rested on the view of the woman garment worker as unskilled and temporary. The skills which women brought
to the job were generally based on their domestic sewing experience and were devalued not only because these were not scarce skills, but also because work done by women was generally devalued. Most needle trades women were young and single and were expected to leave the paid labour force upon marriage. The married women workers, who constituted a significant minority, were usually expected to leave the shop floor as soon as their husbands were no longer ill or unemployed or earning too little money. The woman worker’s temporary status was a rationale for excluding her from training for the better jobs.\textsuperscript{12}

Yet this “temporary” status could well last a considerable length of time. For those who did not marry at all, “temporary” status might last a lifetime. But even the young woman who had entered the garment shop when she was fifteen, for example, might not marry until her mid-twenties. One could presumably acquire considerable skills within such a time period, if one were not confined to the less valued jobs.

The significance of gender on the shop floor was graphically demonstrated in William Lyon Mackenzie King’s 1897 newspaper report on “Toronto and the Sweating System.” When King asked a manufacturer of ready-made clothing what he paid his help, the manufacturer replied: “I don’t treat the men bad, but I even up by taking advantage of the women. I have a girl who can do as much work, and as good work as a man; she gets $5 a week. The man who is standing next to her gets $11. The girls, however, average $3.50 a week, and some are as low as two dollars.”\textsuperscript{13}

In situations where women earned substantially less than men who did the exact same jobs, the perception of women as temporary workers usually meant that they were assumed to be less experienced on the job, so their work was presumably worth less. In the men’s fine clothing industry in 1920, for example, there were cases where women and men did the same work and the women earned considerably less. These women did have significantly less work experience. Male button-hole-makers, for example, had an average of 19 years of experience and received an average wage of $36 per week, while female button-hole-makers
had an average of only 7 years of experience and received an average wage of $22 per week, which amounted to 61 percent of the male wage for this job. In these shops, women who did basting (i.e. temporary stitching) and women who made collars and lapels found themselves in similar situations.\textsuperscript{14}

It is a dubious assumption, however, that women's unequal pay was simply a product of fewer years of work experience. It is unlikely that these women were so much less skilled than their male counterparts as to merit such wide pay differentials. After all, one could learn to be an efficient button-hole-maker in far less than seven years. Indeed, according to a 1920 Ontario government publication on vocational opportunities in the needle trades, "the maximum speed on a single [sewing machine] operation will generally be attained in one or two years."\textsuperscript{15}

Moreover, in these men's fine clothing shops in 1920, there were cases where women and men performed the same jobs and where the women had experience equal to or greater than the men in those jobs. The women still earned dramatically less than the men. Consider the case of the pants operators. Men in this job averaged 7 years of experience and made on average $39 per week, while women in the same job averaged 14 years of experience and made an average of $22 per week, which constituted 56 percent of their male counterparts' wages. Similarly, male pocket-makers averaged 8 years of experience and made an average of $40, while female pocketmakers averaged 10 years of experience and made an average of $26, which constituted 65 percent of the men's wages.\textsuperscript{16}

A major rationale for the wage discrepancy was, of course, the expectation that male workers would be the primary breadwinners for their families. Women workers were not normally expected to fulfill this role. Instead they were expected to be dependent on men, and these expectations were married to necessity. In Toronto's needle trades, as in many other sectors in this period, low wages for female workers often meant that a woman could not support herself, let alone support children or aging parents.\textsuperscript{17} By making economic independence impossible for most women,
women's low wages reinforced, even as they reflected, the systematic subordination of women.

The conception that men were the family's primary breadwinners was so deeply ingrained in the thinking of the working-class Jewish community that little thought was given to the systematic super-exploitation of women. The cases of unequal pay mentioned above occurred in the unionized shops. There is no evidence that the union attempted to rectify these inequities. Although the garment unions may have sporadically and half-heartedly supported the equal-pay principle at some other points in time, the Jewish labour movement did not seriously criticise the discriminatory wage structure. Indeed, no one within the Jewish labour movement developed a critique of the gender division of labour on the shop floor. After reflecting on this issue during a recent interview, one male Jewish activist (who had been a union leader for years) declared: "Women knew their place" in the inter-war period, "insofar as the hierarchy of employment [was concerned]."18

The unions actually reinforced women's subordination, for union policies frequently increased the differential between women's pay and men's pay. In a period when the average female garment worker's wage usually amounted to between one half and two thirds of the average male garment worker's wage, unions such as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers often fought for an across-the-board percentage increase in wages for all workers.19 This common formula meant that the dollar difference between the average woman's wage and the average man's wage would widen. (In 1920, for example, when the average wage in the city's unionized men's clothing shops was $21 per week for women and $34 per week for men, the union demanded an across-the-board increase of 33 percent.20 Thus although the average woman's wage would have remained at 62 percent of the average man's wage, the absolute gap between her wage and his wage would have increased from $13 to $17.) Because women generally could not enter the better paid jobs, the very structure of these wage demands disadvantaged women further.
An examination of the Jewish unions' arrangements with respect to its own funds makes it clear that the unions were not simply forced to go along with the manufacturers' insistence on gender-based pay differentials. Union fees and strike-benefit payments constituted an area of policy where the unions were able to operate in relative freedom from the constraints imposed by the employers. If union activists had felt that it was unfair for women to earn so much less than men, they could have structured strike benefits so that female strikers received the same as male strikers. This seldom happened. The rationale for lower strike-pay for women was that women earned so much less than men on the shop floor. However, this did not necessarily mean that women paid lower union fees. In many cases, they had to pay the same fees as the men. Although the available evidence is fragmentary, it is clear that union policies in this area were far from consistently fair to female workers. Notwithstanding minor variations between the unions and within particular unions over time, the Jewish unions did not make a point of advancing progressive policies in these areas. The inequitable treatment of women was not imposed by the manufacturers alone; it was imposed as well by the unions themselves.

Women's subordination within the unions and on the shop floor was, of course, closely related to their subordination within the home. Significant household responsibilities on top of a full-time wage-earning job meant that the woman worker had less time and energy left over for union activities and shop-floor struggles. Even if the woman worker was single and not directly responsible for keeping house for male relatives, she often had to help her own mother with the housework, or if she had immigrated without her mother, she usually had to look after her own household needs. Moreover, in cases where the woman had been less well educated than her male siblings, she was at a disadvantage as a unionist, particularly if she was not literate in Yiddish. She faced further barriers if her father or husband disapproved of her activism.

Women's subordination within the Jewish labour movement was also a product of the male culture of the unions.
Although the Jewish men used to drop by the union halls to chat with their friends, sip coffee, and play dominoes, Jewish women did not take part in such informal socializing. This was not just because the woman worker usually had to hurry home from work to make supper or do the laundry. According to interviews with retired male garment workers, this informal social network at the union halls was perceived as a male domain where women did not fit. Since the male culture of the union hall gave the men greater opportunity to know each other and to discuss union issues, it reinforced a male-centered solidarity. The marginalization of women within Toronto's garment unions is also apparent in the fact that the overwhelming majority of the leaders of the different needle trades unions were men.

On the one hand, the unions reflected the dominant assumptions about gender roles: men "deserved" the better jobs and better pay because they were the primary breadwinners for their families, and women's responsibility for household labour remained unquestioned, shaping the women workers' position on the shop floor and in the unions in fundamental ways. The commonplace acceptance of these differences in gender roles helped to mask the discrimination against women. On the other hand, despite these fundamental assumptions about gender differences, union leaders did not distinguish between female and male workers at another level. The nature of the Jewish activists' class consciousness meant that they focused on what they saw as the common oppression of all workers, ignoring the fact that women workers faced special constraints. Thus when retired union activists were asked if the Jewish unions had had special policies to appeal to women workers, the question surprised them, for the notion of the special interests of women workers was foreign to their class analysis. Typically, the unions appealed to each person "just as a worker!," as one retired male union leader proudly exclaimed.

Yet this was not a gender-neutral construct, for the prototype of the worker was the male worker. Although men usually constituted less than half of Toronto's garment workers, the "masculine conception of class" (which scholars such as Joan Scott have recently emphasized in
other historical contexts) operated even in the labour movement in this sector. Men were able to shape the conception of the "typical" garment worker in their own image, partly because the female workers were seen as temporary and hence less "central" to both the industry and the unions. The male union leaders appeared to speak for and represent working-class interests as a whole, but the definition of class was gender-biased. This was a bias which was not questioned.

The Canadian women's movement was unable to provide a significant feminist counter-force, for it seldom reached the women garment workers. This was partly because the women's movement was weak in the inter-war years, the key period in the development of the Jewish labour movement. In addition, the Canadian women's movement was predominantly Anglo-Celtic and middle-class and hence did not appeal to working-class immigrant women. Although very little historical work has been done yet concerning the attitudes within the Canadian women's movement towards the plight of working-class women, the movement as a whole seems to have exhibited little understanding of working-class women's problems.

In the United States, in contrast, the Women's Trade Union League existed as an explicitly feminist organization, specifically concerned with the plight of female workers. Consisting of a cross-class alliance of women, the League sought to improve the conditions of American women workers, sometimes by organizing them into unions and sometimes by pushing for protective labour legislation. The League also tried to make the American women's movement more attractive to working-class women and to develop their awareness of feminist issues. Although the League's influence was limited, and although class and ethnic tensions emerged within the League itself, this organization had a significant impact on several exceptional Jewish women who were among the few females to enter the leadership of the garment unions in New York. Their heightened awareness of women's issues stands in sharp contrast to the situation in Toronto and contrasts, as well, with the situation of
the majority of immigrant Jewish women in the United States.\textsuperscript{28}

For a time, the Women's Trade Union League pioneered the development of special methods for organizing women workers in a few American cities, thus helping to pull women garment workers into the unions. The organization's Chicago branch, in particular, emphasized such woman-centered organizing strategies as home visits to educate women workers about the labour movement, special social gatherings to help solidify networks of women, personal testimonies of female labour activists, and special training for women unionists. Yet while the League's pioneering work was a fascinating development, its impact should not be exaggerated. In New York, the League's efforts had shifted away from these strategies to a focus on agitating for protective labour legislation as early as 1914, and in Chicago, where League emphasis on organizing women lasted significantly longer than elsewhere, it had shifted focus to protective legislation by 1925.\textsuperscript{29}

Yet the League had developed significant woman-centered organizing strategies for a time. In Toronto, by contrast, there were no similar concerted efforts either in the inter-war years or in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Toronto's Jewish unions rarely used a woman organizer to recruit women workers, and the general absence of special policies to organize Toronto's female garment workers is striking. Although there were minor exceptions, the activists in Toronto's Jewish labour movement attempted to organize men and women using the same methods instead of developing special techniques for organizing women.\textsuperscript{30}

The dearth of woman-centered organizing strategies was not simply a product of the nature of the Canadian women's movement and the absence of a women's trade union league in Toronto. Perhaps because Toronto's Jewish women felt more beleaguered \textit{as Jews} than did their counterparts in New York City, Toronto's female Jews may have been less inclined to develop gender-based alliances with Anglo-Celtic middle-class feminists or even with the non-Jewish women workers. Jewish women's close identification with Jewish men may have been heightened in Toronto not only
because Toronto’s Jewish population was so much smaller than New York’s but also because, in contrast to the high proportion of non-British immigrants in the major American cities where Jews congregated, Toronto’s population was so overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic. Moreover, Jews had significant political power in New York City, unlike the situation in Toronto in this period. These demographic and political differences probably increased the feeling of insecurity in Toronto and reduced Jewish women’s openness to alliances with non-Jewish women.31

In this period, Toronto’s immigrant Jewish community faced pressing economic needs, and both the women and the men in the Jewish labour movement depended on class gains to improve their lot. Furthermore, while women faced gender-conditioned economic deprivations, this was obscured by the traditional emphasis on the welfare of the family as a whole. Instead of focusing on their own disadvantaged position in the paid labour force, women commonly focused on the family income, for they often benefited directly from the wages of their husbands and fathers. The authority and privileges of males,predicated on their role as primary breadwinner, were usually taken for granted, and these overlapped with and reinforced a male-centered class analysis.32

In contrast to the lack of concern for women’s issues within Toronto’s Jewish labour movement, there was serious concern about relations between Jewish and non-Jewish workers within the Jewish unions. Whereas women were generally not organized into separate locals, it was usually necessary to organize the Jews and the non-Jews into separate locals not only because of the language problem but also because of ethnocentrism and anti-Semitism. Because of ‘the Jew/Gentile problem,’ union leaders often made a point of using Jewish organizers to recruit the Jewish workers and non-Jewish organizers to recruit the non-Jews. Sometimes the leadership even found it necessary to set up a wholly separate office for mobilizing the non-Jewish garment workers. Furthermore, whereas there was little concern to include women within the union leadership, great care was taken to make sure that some non-Jews were included.
within the predominantly Jewish leadership of the Jewish unions. In Toronto's Amalgamated Clothing Workers, for example, it was common practice to have a Jewish business agent and a non-Jewish business agent; in contrast, the union lacked similar provisions to ensure that women would have ongoing representation in the leadership.33

Since members of Toronto's Jewish left played a key role in shaping union policies, it is particularly significant that their radicalism did not include a critique of conventional gender relations. Instead, they—like the other members of the immigrant Jewish community—viewed men as the primary breadwinners for the family and did not question the assignment of exclusive responsibility for housework and childcare to women. Even the female Jewish socialists shared these assumptions. There was very little awareness of the fact that Jewish women were subordinated within their homes, on the shop floor, within their unions, and also within the Jewish socialist organizations. There was even less attempt to struggle against this subordination.34

For the Jewish left, the central issues were class and ethnicity, not gender. Jewish radicalism had, in fact, a double dimension, for most of these Jewish socialists had been radicalized not only as workers but also specifically as Jews. In part, they were responding to the poverty and exploitation which working people experienced on both sides of the ocean. In addition, many had experienced harsh anti-Semitism before emigrating from Eastern Europe. Although less severe in Toronto, anti-Semitism was still significant: Toronto's Jews faced serious occupational, educational, recreational, and residential discrimination not only in the 1930s but in the earlier decades of the twentieth century as well. In both the Old World and the New, poverty and anti-Semitism were closely intertwined since prejudice often played an important role in barring Jews from access to better jobs. Immigrant Jewish radicals were deeply committed to socialism not only as a way to end class oppression but also because they felt that only socialism would bring real freedom and equality for the Jews.35

Typically, one woman activist, who had worked as a Toronto cloakmaker, explained that she had become a mem-

156
ber of the Communist Party not only in response to the hardships faced by working people but also in response to anti-Semitism. She stressed that she had been radicalized as a Jew:

I joined [the Communist movement] for [the] reason that [at] that time, we thought that the best solution for the Jew is in the Soviet Union. That was right after the revolution. And I joined for that reason, that I wanted my people should be equal with every other people. And that was the slogan of the Communist Party, that in the Soviet Union, all the citizens are the same.\(^{36}\)

Like many other Jewish socialists, her analysis of oppression was limited to class and ethnicity: it did not encompass an awareness of women’s subordination.

This woman’s descriptions of her own experiences as a female garment worker and female union member revealed significant differences from the experiences of her male counterparts: throughout her seventeen years in Toronto’s needle trades, she remained in a typically female job which was considered unskilled, and she used to rush back and forth between paid labour, union labour, and household labour. Yet her class analysis focused on the common oppression of all workers and denied these gender-based differences at the ideological level, obscuring the discrimination against women.\(^{37}\)

This courageous woman asserted herself not only as a worker and a Jew but also as a Communist who disagreed with the other political groupings within the Jewish left. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Jewish left was made up of a number of competing factions whose differences revolved around class and ethnic issues. In addition to Communist Party adherents, there were Trotskyists, Anarchists, and Labour Zionists (who sought to establish a Jewish socialist state in Palestine). There were also many Bundists, i.e. non-Zionists who wanted Jews to preserve their own culture within decentralized, multi-ethnic, socialist federations.\(^{38}\) Whereas gender was deeply subordinated to class, the same was not true of ethnicity. Among these different factions of the Jewish left, an ongoing debate took place.
concerning the precise relationship between the class struggle and the struggle to end the oppression of Jews. In contrast to the rich complexity and intensity of this debate, there was no comparable debate about the relationship between women’s rights and the class struggle. Gender was simply not considered an important issue.

While not all Jewish socialist women were wholly unaware of women’s oppression, the limited awareness of this form of oppression contrasts with the strong commitment to fight for the elimination of class and ethnic oppression. Molly Fineberg, a long-time activist in Toronto’s Jewish labour movement, provides an instructive example. In a recent interview, Fineberg emphasized her deep political commitment and her activities in the Toronto branch of the Arbeiter Ring, a socialist Jewish fraternal organization which was an integral part of the Jewish labour movement. Within the Arbeiter Ring, Fineberg played an exceptional role for a woman, holding various executive positions on key committees over the years. She also worked with other women from this organization to provide picket-line support and food donations for local Jewish strikers. In addition, she supported Labour Zionist efforts and was active in other Jewish causes such as raising money for pogrom victims in Eastern Europe. Fineberg, an immigrant from Poland, believed deeply in socialism and stressed that she became a socialist mainly as a response to the poverty which working people encountered in both Poland and Canada.39

During the interview, Fineberg did not bring up the issue of women’s oppression when explaining why she had become a socialist. When she was directly asked if becoming a socialist had anything to do with women’s issues, however, she replied that one of the reasons she had been attracted to the socialists was because she felt they believed in equal rights for women. Yet, apart from expressing her general belief in women’s rights, she was largely unaware of the ways in which women were discriminated against during the inter-war years. When asked, for example, if she felt that women should have been more equally represented on the executive of the Arbeiter Ring, she replied that she had not felt this way. She found the question puzzling. Whereas
Fineberg’s description of her concrete political activities stressed her ongoing efforts to help relieve the oppression of workers and Jews, she did not mention any active involvement in women’s rights struggles.40 Ironically, Fineberg was one of the strongest supporters of women’s rights within Toronto’s Jewish labour movement.

To an important degree, the very class consciousness and intense ethnic identity of the Jewish socialists inhibited a stronger recognition or analysis of women’s subordination and hindered the development of feminism. Oriented toward class, they stressed the common interests of female and male workers, so that at the level of their articulated socialist ideology, there was little if any recognition that women workers faced special impediments. This point of view, taken to its logical extreme, was expressed by the Communist Party of Canada in 1931: “The women workers have no interests apart from those of the working class generally. There is no room for ‘feminism’ in our movement. There is only place for unity and solidarity on the basis of the joint struggle against capitalism.”41 “Exactly right!” exclaimed Joshua Gershman, the main leader of the Jewish Communist faction in the needle trades, when recently asked to comment on this quotation in the context of discussing his union activities in the inter-war years.42

Yet, for Gershman and so many others, while their class consciousness obstructed a strong awareness of women’s oppression, it did not obstruct a forceful emphasis on anti-Semitism. As the quotation from the Communist press indicates, the critique of feminism, from a class point of view, was that an emphasis on women’s rights would weaken the working class by dividing female and male workers. Furthermore, any vision of the common oppression of women, which transcended class, threatened to dilute the class struggle. But clearly the same argument could have been made about ethnicity. These socialists might have argued, but did not, that a focus on Jewish rights should be avoided because it would weaken the working class by dividing Jewish workers and non-Jewish workers. In fact, most Jewish socialists were intensely committed to Jewish rights, and they had a profound awareness of ethnic differences within
the working class. To a certain extent, Jewish socialists did
fear that an emphasis on the common oppression of Jews,
which transcended class, threatened to dilute the class strug-
gle. Yet this did not stop them from being deeply com-
mitt ed to the fight against anti-Semitism—a fight which
sometimes saw them allied with the Jewish garment
manufacturers.

While the socialists' emphasis on the common oppression
of all workers, regardless of gender, undermined the
development of a strong feminist perspective, the ethnic
concerns of the Jewish activists also undermined such a
development. Jewish working-class women were less apt to
develop a clear critique of their position as women within
the immigrant Jewish community because they shared a
common sense of oppression with most of the men in this
community, not only as fellow workers but also as fellow
Jews. Moreover, since the family was seen as so central to
the perpetuation of Jewish culture, a serious feminist chal-
lenge to the traditional norms and role structures of the
Jewish family would have been seen as a dangerous cultural
threat.

Yet this emphasis on the welfare of the Jewish community
as a whole, this perceived need for Jews to pull together
in the face of serious anti-Semitism, did not prevent Jewish
workers from pursuing their own class interests in opposi-
tion to the Jewish manufacturers. Fierce conflicts often
broke out in the Toronto garment industry between these
two classes of Jews. Numerous strikes and lock-outs meant
that there were bitter fights between fellow Jews who, while
divided by their class interests, were often relatives, neigh-
bours, and members of the same Jewish community or-
ganizations.

The immigrant Jewish activists fought tenaciously for
justice for working people and for Jews. Their dedication
and courage were remarkable in a situation where such dis-
sidence meant heightened vulnerability to repression. Many
of these activists had a radical vision of a new kind of
society which, they felt, would truly liberate them from
class exploitation and anti-Semitism. Yet their deep two-fold
commitment to egalitarianism did not encompass a com-
mitment to women's rights. Both class and ethnicity were definitive in shaping the politics and the identity of Toronto's Jewish labour movement, despite the fact that class issues functioned divisively within the Jewish community and ethnic issues functioned divisively within the working class. In contrast, feminism did not emerge, perhaps partly because of its divisive potential both within the Jewish community and within the working class. Working-class Jewish women sacrificed their own potential for full equality to male-dominated, male-defined collectivities of family, nationality, and class.

Notes

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1. These issues are examined in detail in Ruth A. Frager, "Uncloaking Vested Interests: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939," Ph.D. Thesis, York University, 1986. In 1921, 62 percent of Toronto's garment workers were women, and this proportion dropped to 55 percent in 1931. These calculations are based on the Census of Canada, 1921, Vol. IV, pp. 534-535 and 538; and 1931, Vol. VII, pp. 288-289.

2. On the significance attached to the Jewishness of the Jewish unions and the Jewish labour movement, see, for example, Der Yiddisher Zhurnal, 1 March 1921, p. 5; 23 Oct. 1924, p. 5; and 3 Feb. 1925, p. 3. See, also, Abraham Rhinewine, Der Id in Kanade [The Jew in Canada], (Toronto: 1925), p. 205.


4. This attitude was stressed, for example, in an interview with Moe Levin, 1984. (In order to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees, pseudonyms and minimal citations are used in reference to interviews throughout this article.)
5. This was apparent, for example, in the interviews with Bessie Kramer, 1984, and Sadie Hoffman, 1978 and 1985.


7. On the patriarchal nature of traditional Judaism, see, for example, Susan Weidman Schneider, *Jewish and Female* (New York: 1984), pp. 33-41. The conclusion about women’s “second-class” status in Toronto’s immigrant Jewish community is based on interviews with women and men who were active in the city’s Jewish labour movement.


9. On the fact that women garment workers were commonly in the unskilled job categories, see, for example, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, *Handbook of Trade Union Methods* (New York: 1937), pp. 23-24.

10. This percentage is based on weekly wage statistics listed in Michael J. Piva, *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto 1900-1921* (Ottawa: 1979), pp. 34 and 40.


12. In 1931, only one quarter of Toronto's women garment workers were married. This statistic is based on the Annual Report of the Ontario Minimum Wage Board, in the Ontario Legislative Assembly's *Sessional Papers, 1933*, part VI, paper #39, p. 16. However, the proportion of married women in the garment industry was higher than in many other sectors. A mere 10 percent of all women who were in the Canadian paid labour force in 1931 were married. On this, see Canada, Department of Labour, *Women at Work in Canada, Ottawa: 1965*, p. 21.


15. The quotation is from Ontario, Department of Labour, *Vocational Opportunities in the Industries of Ontario: A Survey: Bulletin No. 4: Garment Making* (1920) p. 10


17. Early evidence of women garment workers' inability to earn a living wage is provided by Mackenzie King's 1897 investigation of government clothing contracts in Toronto, Hamilton, and Montreal. See W.L. Mackenzie King, *Report to the Honourable the Postmaster General of the Methods Adopted in Canada in the Carrying Out of Government Clothing Contracts* (1900) p. 21. Recent interviews disclosed similar situations. For example, Ida Abel, who worked as a finisher in the
Toronto dress trade from 1926 until she got married in 1933, could not live on what she herself earned. Her parents had remained in Eastern Europe, so Ida Abel shared her lodging with another young woman in those years. Although Ida Abel's life-style was humble, her two brothers had to supplement her own earnings in order to cover her living expenses. This information is available in the interview with Ida Abel, 1983. Similar information is contained in the interview with Bessie Kramer, 1984.


19. Many examples could be cited to document this practice. For a few typical examples see: Der Yiddisher Zhurnal, 17 April 1919, p. 1; Der Yiddisher Zhurnal, 14 August 1919, p. 1; Minutes of the Associated Clothing Manufacturers (in the private collection at the organization's office in Toronto) 2 August 1933, 19 February 1935, and 27 April 1937; Canada, Department of Labour, Labour Gazette, August 1933, p. 767; and Labour Gazette, July 1934, pp. 625-626.


21. This is based, in part, on an analysis of the benefits which are recorded in the Minutes of the Toronto Joint Board, Amalgamated Clothing Workers Collection, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa. It is also based on scattered material in a wide variety of other sources.

22. See, for example, Der Yiddisher Zhurnal, 31 March 1919, p. 1; 27 July 1920, p. 1; 1 August 1920, p. 8; 30 October 1922, p. 1; 7 November 1922, p. 5; and 17 October 1924, p. 1.

23. This is apparent, for example, in the interviews with Bessie Kramer, 1984; Ida and Sol Abel, 1983; and Abe Hertzman, 1984.

24. The minutes of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, for example, indicate that, throughout the inter-war period, the union's Joint Board (which was composed of approximately twenty representatives from the various locals) usually included only one woman. In fact, at a number of points during these years, there were no women at all on this Joint Board for months on end. In this period, women constituted about a third of the union's membership. On this, see the lists of Joint Board members appearing regularly in Minutes of the Toronto Joint Board, Amalgamated Clothing Workers Collection.

25. The quotation is from the interview with Moe Levin, 1984. Other relevant interviews include those with: Bessie Kramer, 1984; Joshua Gershman (not a pseudonym), 1984; Ed Hammerstein, 1984; and Molly Fineberg, 1984.

26. For Scott's discussion of the "masculine conception of class," see Joan W. Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," International Labor and Working-Class History, No. 31 (Spring 1987) pp. 1-13. Material on the Jewish labour movement in Der Yiddisher Zhurnal provides some typical evidence that the prototype of the worker was the male worker. See, for example, Der Yiddisher Zhurnal, 9 December 1919, p. 6.

27. For a detailed discussion of the class and ethnic composition of the suffrage leaders, see Carol Lee Bacchi, Liberation Deferred?: The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918 (Toronto: 1983) pp.
Studie in Political Economy

3-12. Bacchi argues briefly that the suffragists "remained suspicious of labour organization" and did not "take more than a token interest in the problems of working-class women." (On this, see p. 123.) There has not yet been much work done on the feminists in the inter-war period, but see Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: The Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: 1988) pp. 24 and 189-190, for relevant material on this period. In general, ethnic women's history is just beginning to emerge.


30. This conclusion is based on a wide variety of sources, including the minutes, newspapers, and correspondence files of the various unions.

31. In 1921, immigrants from continental Europe constituted less than 6 percent of Toronto's population. (At that time, Toronto contained very few other immigrants who had come from outside Britain or the United States.) In a number of major American cities in 1920, the proportions of immigrants from continental Europe were significantly higher than in Toronto. In that year, those who had been born in continental Europe comprised 15 percent of Boston's population and 16 percent of Philadelphia's population. In Chicago, Cleveland, and New York City, at least one quarter of each city's total population had come from continental Europe. These statistics are drawn from the *Census of Canada, 1921*, Vol. II, pp. 364-365; and the *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920* (Washington: 1922) Vol. II, pp. 47 and 732-736.

32. These attitudes were apparent, for example, in the interviews with Bessie Kramer, 1984, and Sadie Hoffman, 1985.

33. The interview is from H.D. Langer to D. Dubinsky, from Toronto, 6 July 1937, Box 88, File 1b, David Dubinsky Papers, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union Collection, Labor-Management Documentation Center, M.P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. For a detailed discussion of relations between Jews and non-Jews within the Jewish unions, see Frager, "Uncloaking Vested Interests..." pp. 153-190.

34. The interview with Bessie Kramer (1984) is particularly interesting regarding these issues.

42. Interview with Joshua Gershman, 1984. Gershman explained that this quotation accurately expressed how he, together with the other Communist-oriented needle trades activists, felt about women’s issues in this period.
43. This concern is apparent, for example, in the interview with Ed Tannenbaum, 1984. Tannenbaum grappled with this issue in his distinction between “bourgeois Zionism” and Labour Zionism.
44. See, for example, *Der Yiddisher Zhurnal*, 9 December 1919, p. 1; 29 March 1933, p. 1; and 31 March 1933, p. 1. Further evidence is provided in the interviews with Jacob Black, 1971 and 1984, and Ed Hammerstein, 1977.
45. See Frager “Uncloaking Vested Interests...” pp. 110-153, for a detailed discussion of the relations between Jewish workers and Jewish manufacturers in Toronto’s needle trades.