

**Judaism, Socialism, Unionization, and Trauma:
How Meyer London Rose to Prominence in the Lower East Side**

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March 22, 2021

Throughout the tumultuous history of Eastern European Jews, there have been many events that can be considered horrific. This sad story of Jewry is at the heart of Ashkenazi culture and ideology. From the time of the first pogrom to the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), an increasing number of Jews from Eastern Europe had slowly but steadily moved to the political left after having to overcome these difficult traumas. The ideological shift of Eastern European Jewish people can therefore be traced through their history of traumatic events, each one radicalizing them further towards leftist political solutions. Three distinct traumatic events later culminated in the United States with the democratic election of a Socialist Jew to Congress: the pogroms of 1903-1906, the abysmal working conditions of the Lower East Side from 1903-1909, and finally, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911. By the time of the Russian Revolution of 1917, these three traumatic events had radicalized the Jewish community living in New York's Lower East Side so much so that they tapped into their deeply embedded history and culture of resistance that they brought with them from Eastern Europe and turned to a Marxist ideology made more familiar to them through the workings of the Socialist Party of America in order to embrace electoral socialism as an answer to their contemporary struggles. Whereas in Russia such political radicalization ultimately manifested itself in a revolution, in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Jewish cultural and political heritage manifested itself in the election of Meyer London, a Lithuanian Jew who was elected to Congress on the Socialist Party ticket in 1914.

For the Ashkenazi Jews living in New York's Lower East Side, their experience of trauma began much earlier than the late 19th century but the events that fueled the success of the political radicalization and organizing that led specifically to London's electoral success had more recent roots in 1897 with the creation of the General Jewish Labor Bund in Europe. The

Jewish Bund, named after its German counterpart,¹ was created primarily to organize the Jewish proletariat across Eastern Europe.² It then escalated into a stronghold for Jewish politics, championing “socialist democratic ideology as well as cultural Yiddishism and Jewish national autonomism.”³ In his book *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life Before World War II*, Hirsz Abramowicz explains the origins of the Bund by saying “the Jewish socialist Bund, founded in Vilna in 1897, brought political and economic struggle into the Jewish community in the form of anti-czarist agitation and strike activity. Bundism captured the imagination of a generation of Lithuanian Jewish youth, for whom it was a rebellion not only against the czar and capitalism but also against the conservatism and passivity of their parents.”⁴ Bundism to most of its members was not meant to be an organized effort to revel in orthodox-Marxism and seize the means of production, but a general big-tent party that allowed for a broad spectrum of participation and engagement with left-wing ideology. At its core though, it preached and practiced anti-authoritarianism and direct opposition to the czar.

Though the Jewish Bund began in 1897, its popularity and influence rose spectacularly during and directly due to the pogroms of 1903-1906. Pogroms were a series of state-sponsored violence in the Pale of Settlement that had started in the late 19th century but evolved from earlier anti-Semitic persecutions and massacres spanning the European continent for centuries.⁵ During the 1903-1906 pogroms, over two thousand Jews had been reported to have been killed, while

¹ Howard Morley Sacher, “Social and Cultural Ferment in The Immigrant World,” In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 225.

² Daniel Blatman, “Bund,” 2010. *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hirsz Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of Eastern European Jewish Life before World War II* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press in cooperation with YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1999), 14.

⁵ Howard Morley Sacher, “The East European Avalanche Begins,” In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 155 -157.

many more were either attacked, sexually assaulted, or had their property destroyed.⁶ These outbursts of violence were best exemplified in the Kishinev pogrom in Russia, where, on Easter Sunday of 1903, the townsfolk killed 49 Jews, raped countless women, and destroyed 1,500 homes.⁷ This trauma sparked a need for Jews to defend themselves, bringing many Jews to the already established fold of Bundism.⁸ Thus the Bund transformed from a movement solely dedicated to overthrowing the czar into an organization meant to defend Jews against the violent attacks that the crown encouraged and organized. Though in its early days the Bund was quite small and only attracted mostly Jewish scholars, students, and artists,⁹ its membership grew rapidly during the pogroms to include peasants and workers across the shtetls of Eastern Europe. By the end of the 1903-1906 pogroms, the Bund had developed into a massive party across Eastern Europe with over 34,000 members in 274 branches.¹⁰

Many Jewish immigrants who fled to the United States in the early 20th century did so to escape these pogroms¹¹ and they brought their experiences of that trauma—as well as their experiences in the Bund—with them. Once in the U.S., these Jewish immigrants drew upon the ideology and fraternity of the Bund to help establish a healthy community within their new country. The significance of the Bund on the rise of electoral socialism in America within their immigrant neighborhoods was two-fold. The primary significance that the Bund had was that it

⁶ Robert Weinberg, *The Revolution of 1905 in Odessa: Blood on the Steps* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 164.

⁷ Monty Noam Penkower, "The Kishinev Pogrom of 1903: A Turning Point in Jewish History," *Modern Judaism* 24, no. 3 (2004): 187-189.

⁸ Daniel Blatman, "Bund," 2010. *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.

<https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>; Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense & a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 16-19.

⁹ Daniel Katz, "Introduction" In *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2011), 1-16.

¹⁰ Daniel Blatman, "Bund," 2010. *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.
<https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>.

¹¹ Howard Morley Sacher, "The East European Avalanche Begins," In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 196 -198.

exposed many young Jews to Marxism and class solidarity. But while the Bund may have started as a strictly socialist and anti-czarist organization, during the pogroms it attracted many non-political Jews who sought it as a source of defense. Because the Bundist population was not made up solely of those who identified as socialists, there were many members—indeed the majority of members—who had no formal political education in Marxism. Thus, both the general anti-czarism of the Bund and the socialists who were also members contributed to the political radicalization of the Jews who were within the Bund’s orbit. In these ways, many of those Jews were first exposed to the ideology of Marxism as a beneficial ideology that could supplement their goals and help alleviate the suffering of the Jews. By the peak of the Bund’s popularity at the end of the pogroms this movement was made up of a diverse group of Jewish intellectuals, students, workers, peasants, and women.¹²

The reason that the Bund was the first time Jews were exposed to Marxism, and often the first time they were exposed to any political ideology, has to do with education within the *shtetl*, or the small Jewish villages within Eastern Europe. Though there was an emphasis on education in the *shtetl*, most Jews living in the Pale of Settlement received little to no secular education.¹³ A great example of this phenomenon is the story of Clara Lemlich, who became one of the most important union activists in the Jewish dominated garment industries in New York. In *Common Sense & a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965*, historian Annalise Oleck maps out what was a common story of the type of education women received in the Pale of Settlement. Raised in a traditional home, Lemlich was only allowed to

¹² Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense & a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 19-22; Daniel Blatman, “Bund,” 2010. *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>.

¹³ Samuel Kassow, “Shtetl,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. 2010. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Shtetl>

learn Yiddish, as families at this time “feared that once their daughters were exposed to a broader world they would be unable to control them.”¹⁴ Without this control, they “worried that young women would abandon religious traditions entirely, [so] anxious elders forbade them to learn Russian, the language of the oppressor, or attend lectures given by Socialists and Zionists.”¹⁵ The Bund, therefore, was often the first time many of these Jews were exposed to non-Talmudic texts and that exposure opened them up to radicalization. At the same time, Jews in Eastern Europe never received an education based on the supposed superiority of liberalism or capitalism (as did children in the United States), so they were also more easily able to accept and develop a Marxist ideology from the start. This educational process was especially important for those who were not politically active because the Bund was still the most popular and engaged group trying to help fight against anti-Semitic pogroms. So, regardless of the ignorance they may have had about the Russian political system around them, the Bund’s ideas of anti-czarism, unionism, and anti-capitalism became the only kind of political exposure many of these young Jews had ever had before coming to America and, therefore, fueled their radicalization once they arrived.¹⁶

The second most significant aspect of the Bund that contributed to its influence on the rise of electoral socialism in America was its cultural ideology. The Bund’s three main cultural tenets were Yiddishism, *Doikayt*, and national autonomy. Each of these ideologies played a major role in the rise of Yiddish Socialism in the Lower East Side. Yiddishism is an ideology that was particularly pertinent to Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe and stated that Yiddish should be the national language of the Jewish people and should be spoken instead of Russian to its greatest potential; *Doikayt* stated that the problem of anti-Semitism cannot be solved by

¹⁴ Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense & a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 20.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 23-30.

relocation, such as those proposed by early Zionists; and autonomism stated that Jews have a right to self-determination and legislative representation.¹⁷ Though the efforts by the Bund to overthrow the czar and create a new autonomous Jewish state within Eastern Europe during the 1905 Russian Revolution failed, their ideas remained implanted in the minds of Jews across the Pale of Settlement. All three of these ideologies were then brought over to America during the second wave of Jewish immigration and were combined with the existing ideologies of American socialism.

The determination that Yiddish must remain a cornerstone of Jewish life and shall not be replaced by any other language created an extremely insular community among the Jewish population of the Lower East Side. This population of Eastern European Jews were not only insular from the majority of Christian communities in New York and the United States, but also from the older generations of German and Sephardic Jews. For these Ashkenazi Jews, the use of the Yiddish language was central to their cultural identity and could be seen in almost every facet of life, including their newspapers, their theater, and their literature.¹⁸ That insular community, in turn, allowed for the development of radical ideologies without outside influences suppressing them.¹⁹ *Doikayt* was an attempt to fight the Zionist voices within the Jewish community that claimed anti-Semitism was inevitable and therefore the only reasonable solution was to return to a Jewish state within the Levant. *Doikayt*, or “here-ness” in Yiddish, also believed in the inevitability of anti-Semitism, but instead of the proposition of retreating to the holy land, its adherents advocated the reduction of anti-Semitic violence through self-isolation amongst Jews

¹⁷ Daniel Blatman, “Bund,” 2010. *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.
<https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>.

¹⁸ Ibid; Howard Morley Sacher, “Social and Cultural Ferment in The Immigrant World,” In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 313-314, 318-319, 326.

¹⁹ Ibid, 278.

in the land they currently inhabited, without forcing another Jewish relocation and therefore another diaspora.²⁰ Henryk Erlich, the leader of the Russian and Polish Bund from 1897 to 1917, explains Doikayt as “the essence of Bundism” and that “both the social and national problems of the Jewish masses can find their solutions only where the Jewish masses live and only as a result of a radical political and social upheaval.”²¹ This ideology would thus become essential in Yiddish Socialism because at its core was the belief that for Jews of the Lower East Side, the only path to solving their oppression was a creation of a socialist state, which would include the democratic values of Bundism.²² Lastly, the ideology of autonomism gave Jews hope to determine their own laws rather than being forced to live according to the laws of their oppressors.²³ This combination of pride in their Yiddish heritage and their assertion of self-determination in whatever place they live, set the groundwork for their politics once they arrived in the United States. Alongside their already established connection to socialist ideology, Bundist culture established a strong foundation for the mobilization of radicalized Jews to create change in their community, especially through the ballot box.

Though the seeds of Marxism and the foundation of organizing their proletariat comrades had already been implanted within the Jewish youth and intelligentsia in Eastern Europe, these seeds bloomed after repeated mistreatment of Jewish workers inside American factories and sweatshops. In his book *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism*, Daniel Katz explains this phenomenon by stating “Jews

²⁰ David Slucki, "The Bund Abroad in the Postwar Jewish World," *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 1 (2009): 111-144.

²¹ Henryk Erlich, “The Essence of Bundism,” in *Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter: Two Heroes and Martyrs for Jewish Socialism*, trans. Samuel Portnoy (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1990), 268.

²² Howard Morley Sacher, “Social and Cultural Ferment in The Immigrant World,” In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 179-182.

²³ *Ibid*, 316; Gerald Sorin, “Roots of Radicalism,” in *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 35.

responded [to American working conditions] in a multiplicity of ways, but the largest movement was a peculiar form of socialism based on the lives and idiom of Jewish folk, which began to develop in Russia in the early 1880s, just at the moment when Jews began to emigrate from Russia in massive numbers.”²⁴ The working-class Jewish population of the Lower East Side, already having a base in Bundism, soon realized that even working under Jewish bosses, their material and working conditions never improved. By the 1890s, around 600,000 Jews labored under the most brutal of conditions, even though they often worked for Jewish employers.²⁵

This reality challenged some of the ideology of the Jewish Bundist movement, which implied that if Jews were given the opportunity to be autonomous, free from anti-Semitic pogroms, and be able to work within an insular Jewish community, their lives would prosper. Although the Jewish Lower East Side of Manhattan was unquestionably insular and staunchly Yiddish—with the creation of schools with a curriculum taught exclusively in Yiddish, Yiddish theater and art, and a variety of Yiddish publications²⁶—the Jewish working-class was still suffering under the laissez-faire capitalism that characterized all of early 20th century New York City. The people soon realized that it was no longer sound to just advocate for a *Yiddishkeit* society, or strongly insular and Jewish community; they had to also advocate for an anticapitalistic one.

The specifically Marxist elements of these Bundist ideas then started to permeate all sectors of Jewish life, including their art, their mutual aid societies, and their press. The most famous example of this turn to socialism was the evolution of the Workmen’s Circle. Formed in

²⁴ Daniel Katz, "Introduction" In *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2011), 1-16.

²⁵ Daniel Katz, " Harmoniously Functioning Nationalities" In *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2011), 19-45.

²⁶ Ibid.

1892 by two cloakmakers with the intended purpose of creating a “mutual aid society for immigrants providing health insurance, burial and other benefits,”²⁷ this organization was not created by socialists or for the purposes of advancing socialism. But, after the Yiddish labor movement had conducted dozens of strikes during the late 1890s and early 1900s to fight against the abysmal conditions of factories and tenements and exorbitant food prices, the organization was soon taken over by former Bundists. The ultimate ideological takeover of the Workmen’s Circle was completed in 1908 when Jewish Bundist clubs across NYC “voted to join the Jewish fraternal organization, the Workmen’s Circle, ‘en masse,’” causing a massive 60% membership jump from “19,324 members to 31,581.”²⁸ These men thus transformed the Workmen’s Circle from one led by an “assimilationist intelligentsia” to one headed by those advocating for a Yiddishkeit society with an explicitly “radical, predominantly socialist, secularly inclined form of Yiddish culture.”²⁹ This transformation of formerly Yiddishist bodies into socialist ones took place throughout Jewish New York and included the establishment of the Hebrew Actors’ Union in the Yiddish Theater District in 1899 and the shift in readership of Orthodox and religious newspapers, such as the *Yiddishes Tageblatt* and the *Morgen Journal*, to proudly socialist press, such as the *Jewish Daily Forward*.³⁰

All of these transitions occurred not due to pressure from outside socialist agitators, as this group was incredibly insular, but from a progression of the ideology of the General Jewish Labor Bund into a new American amalgamation inspired by the material needs within New York

²⁷ Fruma Mohrer, *Guide to the YIVO Archives* (Armonk, NY: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1998), 1175-11176

²⁸ Daniel Katz, "Harmoniously Functioning Nationalities" In *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2011), 39.

²⁹ Ibid, 42.

³⁰ Ibid, 38; "Yidishes Tageblat ," 2021, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Encyclopedia.com. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/yidishes-tageblat>

City and the trauma that Jews encountered in the sweatshops. This social and economic strife is what ultimately encouraged these workers to organize and stand up to their bosses, and eventually led to the success of electoral socialism within the Lower East Side, including the election of Meyer London to Congress.

The abysmal working conditions of the sweatshops in the Lower East Side were often the biggest concern of union organizers and radical Jews. Activists like Pauline Newman often cited these working conditions as the reason it was necessary to strike and organize. In *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, Orleck chronicles the lives of women like Newman and the role they played in the Yiddish labor movement in the Lower East Side. Newman, the first female general organizer of the socialist needle trade union, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union or ILGWU, was introduced to Bundist ideology as a child back in Lithuania, but was inspired to join the socialist cause in New York City after seeing the horrendous working conditions of the sweatshops. As Orleck quotes Newman recalling those conditions:

Most of the so-called factories were located in old wooden walkups with rickety stairs, splintered and sagging floors. The few windows were never washed and their broken panes were mended with cardboard.... In the winter a stove stood in the middle of the floor, a concession to the need for heat, but its warmth rarely reached the workers seated near the windows. During the summer months the constant burning of gas jets added their unwelcome heat and smell to an atmosphere already intolerably humid and oppressive There was no drinking water available Dirt, smells and vermin were as much a part of the surroundings as were the machines and the workers.³¹

The environment that these women had to live and toil in was often the norm for the Lower East Side. Orleck states that these conditions, alongside the articles she read in the socialist *Jewish Daily Forward*, inspired Newman to join the socialist cause. To Newman, it seemed that Marxism was the only way to create a better life for herself and her community.³²

³¹Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense & a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 32.

³² *Ibid*, 57-60.

The traumatic and grotesque conditions of sweatshops of the Lower East Side thus sparked a new wave of radicalization among the working-class. Women like Newman, who had been initially radicalized by their exposure to Bundism while in the Pale of Settlement, took their Marxist sensitivities and applied them in the new context of the factory conditions within the Garment District as they participated in the Uprising of the 20,000, the largest strike by women in all of American history up to that point.³³ Also known as the New York Shirtwaist Strike of 1909, this massive general strike was spawned by the working conditions of the sweatshops, the abysmal pay, and the pay discrimination workers faced. That pay discrimination was based on gender, race, education level, and even religion, as some sweatshops paid workers less for not being able to labor on the Sabbath.³⁴ Many of these women, both in leadership and in rank and file, were previously involved in some capacity with the Bund back in Eastern Europe.³⁵ That experience contributed to their exposure to Marxist thinking, but it was the trauma and hardships of the miserable lifestyle of tenement living, sweatshop labor, and cost-of-living in New York City that sparked their membership in organizations such as the ILGWU and Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). Both their Marxist understanding of class conflict and the class struggle and their experiences in the shops pushed these women to strike.

This strike, organized by female labor trailblazers such as Clara Lemlich, Rose Schneiderman, and Pauline Newman, led to incredible gains for working-class women and their families. This massive general strike that spanned across the entire needle-trade industry, not only succeeded in securing their immediate demands but also ended up creating a snowball effect

³³ Ibid, 53.

³⁴ Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 26 & 174.

³⁵ Howard Morley Sachar, "Social and Cultural Ferment in the Immigrant World" In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.), 233.

of positive change for these workers.³⁶ Howard Morley Sachar writes in his book, *A History of the Jews in America*, that:

the employers accepted the principle of a fifty-hour workweek, ten paid legal holidays, payment of time and a half for overtime, the abolition of inside contracting, and a joint 'sanitary control' committee to monitor physical conditions in the factory. They even accepted the union shop, a favored [Louis] Brandeis [the mediator of these negotiations] scheme that offered preference in employment to union over nonunion members.³⁷

These gains led to the vast growth of the extremely left-wing ILGWU in the early 20th century, thus cementing the idea that union and socialist organizing along Jewish ethnic lines could create amazing change for the entire community. This precedent, having shown the success of a culturally strong, Yiddish speaking, socialist and insular community, had then become a successful model for left-wing socio-economic change, albeit here in the form of union organizing rather than electoral politics. After these said gains, the membership of the ILGWU rose from 7,800 members in 1908 to 58,000 members one year later, due explicitly to organizing during the Uprising of the 20,000.³⁸

But because of the insular nature of the Yiddish socialist community at this point, the new members of the ILGWU were now also engaged with a variety of different socialist organizations and became increasingly active in socialist politics in addition to their union organizing efforts.³⁹ The ILGWU was at this point extremely active in socialist causes, such as having many of its members participating in the Socialist Party (SP) and acting in direct collaboration with the socialist *Jewish Daily Forward*. The union leadership also often

³⁶ Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense & a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 57-63.

³⁷ Howard Morley Sachar, "Social and Cultural Ferment in the Immigrant World," In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 233.

³⁸ Gerald Sorin, "Jewish Radicalism in the New World," in *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 59.

³⁹ Howard Morley Sachar, "Social and Cultural Ferment in the Immigrant World," In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 227.

encouraged its members to be involved in the political sphere through attending SP general meetings, engaging in left-wing and socialist education at the Rand School, and joining in general organizing of other non-unionized garment workers coordinated, in part, by the party.⁴⁰ Just as Jews who were not seeking out radicalization in the Pale of Settlement were exposed to socialist ideology while defending their community with the Bund, these workers were now unwittingly exposed to a significant population of socialist activists within the ILGWU through their ties to the Socialist Party branches and their affiliates within the Lower East Side.

Though the gains of the Uprising of the 20,000 seemed amazing, what the unions gave up during mediation was also quite significant and became a source of controversy among the more radical in the rank-and-file, particularly among the extreme-left socialists and anarchists.⁴¹ During these negotiations between labor and capital, what resulted in the so-called *Protocols of Peace*, the ILGWU's leadership had severely handicapped their union's ability to strike in the future, even if faced with obvious safety concerns.⁴² Orleck describes these rollbacks in union power that were integrated into the *Protocols*, explaining how:

Many won pay increases and union recognition; others did not. And the contracts hammered out by ILGWU negotiators left a devastating legacy, for without consulting the strikers, male union negotiators decided that safety conditions were less important than other issues. Their concessions would come back to haunt the entire labor movement two years later, when the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory burned.⁴³

These concessions included an acceptance of many of the poor working conditions within the factories and a promise of taking all safety complaints to an official and management-approved

⁴⁰ Katz, *All Together Different*, 48, 64, 93.

⁴¹ Howard Morley Sachar, "Social and Cultural Ferment in the Immigrant World," In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 280; Gerald Sorin, "Jewish Radicalism in the New World," in *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 73.

⁴² Gerald Sorin, "Jewish Radicalism in the New World," in *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 59.

⁴³ Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense & a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 62.

Safety Board, where agreements would be reached in an out-of-court arbitration. Inherent in such a process was an agreement not to strike and for union leaders to suppress wildcat strikes. This essentially gave up the most powerful leverage unions had over industrial bosses, angering the more radical wing of the rank-and-file.⁴⁴ This one promise paved the way for a catastrophe that became the breaking point for this community and the final signal to them that only socialism, preferably through electoral means, could bring them salvation from such workplace oppression.

Although the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire may seem unprecedented, it was not surprising. Many people had warned that this sweatshop in particular was unsafe and reforming the safety conditions of factories like this was a leading demand made during the Uprising of the 20,000.⁴⁵ Sachar writes that a common practice of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory that contributed to such unsafe conditions was management's demand that workers must go outside the building to use the bathroom and locking the "steel doors leading outside as a precaution against 'interruption of work.'"⁴⁶ The entire workplace was also littered with flammable wicker baskets and linens, it had poor ventilation, and there was an absence of available flame retardant materials.⁴⁷ These conditions, though found frequently throughout the Lower East Side's Garment District, were especially egregious in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. So, when a used cigarette was carelessly discarded onto a pile of oil-soaked cut-aways, the factory floor made for a perfectly constructed kindling.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Richard Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire, Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), 57-93.

⁴⁵ Howard Morley Sachar, "Social and Cultural Ferment in the Immigrant World," In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 298.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ New York (State) Factory Investigating Commission, *Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Commission* (Albany, New York: The Argus Company, 1912), 29-33.

⁴⁸ Richard Greenwald, "'The Burning Building at 23 Washington Place': The Triangle Fire and the Transformation of Industrial Democracy," In *The Triangle Fire, Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 129.

The Triangle Shirtwaist fire was devastating for the Jewish community for many different reasons. First was the brutal carnage at the scene of the fire. Without any fire escapes or ladders tall enough to reach the 8th or 9th floor, where the factory was located, most workers had to choose either suffocation and burning to death or jumping nine stories straight onto the concrete sidewalk below.⁴⁹ With the numerous witnesses and journalists who gathered on the surrounding sidewalks that day, the gruesomeness of the scene was well documented by both mainstream outlets such as *The New York Times* and local socialist media such as the *Jewish Daily Forward*.⁵⁰ One journalist named William Shepherd who was a reporter for the *New York World* wrote:

The owners of the factory say 700 men and girls were at work. Before smoke came out of the windows, the loss of life had begun. The first sign that persons in the street knew that these three top stories had turned into red furnaces in which humans were being caught and incinerated was when screaming men and women and boys and girls crowded out on the window ledges and threw themselves into the streets far below. They jumped with their clothing ablaze. The hair of some of the girls streamed up aflame as they leaped. Thud after thud sounded on the sidewalks. It is a horrible fact that on both sides of the building there grew mounds of the dead and dying. And the worst horror of all was that in this mound of the dead an arm or leg moved or a cry sounded.⁵¹

Another element that added to the devastation of the event was that those on the 10th floor of the building, dedicated to the executives of the businesses below, were able to reach the roof and remain mostly unscathed by the fire.⁵² 146 people died on this day, consisting mostly of Jewish and Italian young women, and due to the nature of their deaths, most of the bodies were left

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Gerald Sorin, "Jewish Radicalism in the New World," in *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 83; Richard Greenwald, "'The Burning Building at 23 Washington Place': The Triangle Fire and the Transformation of Industrial Democracy," In *The Triangle Fire, Protocols Of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 129-153.

⁵¹ William Shepherd, "Minute by Minute: The World's Account of the Triangle Fire" *New York World*, March 26, 1911, 4.

⁵² Richard Greenwald, "'The Burning Building at 23 Washington Place': The Triangle Fire and the Transformation of Industrial Democracy," In *The Triangle Fire, Protocols Of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 130.

unrecognizable to their kin.⁵³ Because of Jewish funeral traditions, which dictate that burials should be as close to the time of death as possible, and because of the severity of the burns and physical trauma, many of the Jewish workers who died in this tragedy were buried in an unmarked and common grave in the Workmen's Circle Cemetery.⁵⁴

This trauma is often best remembered by labor historians as a turning point for union power and for the recognition of the need for Progressive reform of industry in the country. After this event, the ILGWU and many unions like it across the country grew dramatically, as the importance of union representation became gravely apparent in the wake of the fire.⁵⁵ Likewise, politicians and reformers lobbied for strong safety boards that would regulate the garment industry, such as the Committee on Public Safety and the Factory Investigating Commission, and they also secured the passage of stronger fire codes and safety protocols on the municipal and state level.⁵⁶ Though this singular event thus resulted in such legislative and regulatory changes,⁵⁷ it is sometimes forgotten how critical it was to catalyzing the radicalization of immigrant Jews in the Lower East Side.

In Gerald Sorin's book *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920*, he addresses this exact phenomenon by claiming that "no single development galvanized Jewish immigrants for militant unionism and socialism more than the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911."⁵⁸ He continues by explaining that of the dozens of Yiddish-speaking

⁵³ Howard Morley Sachar, "Social and Cultural Ferment in the Immigrant World," In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 298.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 298-300.

⁵⁶ Richard Greenwald, *The Triangle Fire, Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 170-188.

⁵⁷ Kheel Center, "INVESTIGATION & TRIAL," Cornell University - ILR School - The Triangle Factory Fire, 2018, <https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/story/investigationTrial.html>.

⁵⁸ Gerald Sorin, "Jewish Radicalism in the New World," in *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 83.

socialist agitators he reviewed, not a single one failed to mention the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire as a significant motivator for the work they did.⁵⁹ Sorin quotes Louis Waldman to capture the general opinion of the Ashkenazi Jewish workers at this time. Waldman said, “we all felt that the workers who had died in the plant of the Triangle Waist Company were not so much the victims of a holocaust of flame as they were the victims of stupid greed and criminal exploitation.” Sorin continues to cite famous socialist activists who came from the Jewish Lower East Side who all claimed that this singular traumatic event was either what sparked their interest in socialism or finally reassured them that Marxism was the only answer to their woes. These activists included Morris Hillquit, David Dubinsky, Fannia Cohn, and Rose Schneiderman.⁶⁰ David Dubinsky, a prominent future leader of the ILGWU, said “two weeks after I started working [early in 1911], I went to East Broadway to join the Socialist Party. But I was just a listener at its rallies until the horrible fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company,” while Fannia Cohn, who in “Russia... imbibed and participated in the revolutionary spirit,” said, “it was the triangle fire that decided my life’s course.”⁶¹ All of the traumas that had been building up within this community created a powder keg of anger towards the exploitative employers whom that community came to see as the consistent source of its misfortunes. This factory fire became the match that let loose the fury of these workers, sparked their mobilization, and created an unprecedented grassroots movement that soon led to the election of a lone socialist to Congress from their district in 1914.

Immediately in the aftermath of the fire, unions and socialist organizations grew substantially. In 1910 there were only 61 unions and 65,000 members associated with the United

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ibid, 85

Hebrew Trades in New York. By 1914 the number of unions grew to 104 with approximately 250,000 members strong.⁶² The Jewish trade unions also outpaced the growth of any other union in America at this time, with a “68 percent increase between 1910 and 1913” in the garment unions.⁶³ This expansion of engagement and activism did not just pertain to union membership and radicalization, but also to increased participation of radicalized workers in American democracy at both the local and national political levels. Sorin writes “between 1910 and 1914, Jewish Assembly districts in New York delivered 10-15 percent of their votes to Socialist office seekers, and after 1914 the figure climbed past 35 percent.” In 1917 Jewish socialist votes were responsible for the victories of “ten Socialist state assemblymen, seven Socialist aldermen, and a Socialist municipal judge.”⁶⁴

This rise in enthusiasm for left-wing politics and electoral socialism directly led to the labor lawyer Meyer London winning an unprecedented election to the United States Congress in 1914 and again in 1916 and 1920. Meyer London had been a central figure in the Lower East Side for around two decades before he had won the 12th congressional district of New York, mostly encompassing the Lower East Side of Manhattan and part of what is today the East Village.⁶⁵ Throughout all three of the traumas that had impacted his mostly Jewish constituents, London was seen by them as a primary activist figure who could help them address their needs through the political system.⁶⁶

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 85-86.

⁶⁵ Gordon Goldberg, “The Early Years: 1871-1901,” In *Meyer London: A Biography of the Socialist New York Congressman, 1871-1926* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013) 65.

⁶⁶ Howard Morley Sachar, “Social and Cultural Ferment in the Immigrant World,” In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 292.

Born in Kalvarija, Russia in 1871, London was exposed to radical politics at a very young age, as his father was not only involved in Talmudic studies⁶⁷ but also in anti-czarist and radical ideologies that were becoming common points of discussion in academic Jewish spaces at this time.⁶⁸ This was London's first exposure and experience with radical Jewish politics. While growing up in Kalvarija, which is in current day Lithuania, London was surrounded by the deep political influences of proto-Bundism that was flourishing in neighboring cities such as Vilna, Bialystok, and Minsk.⁶⁹ While his father, Ephraim London, was dedicated to learning radical ideologies, he was also strongly opposed to praxis⁷⁰ because there was a constant fear either of being purged from society by the Russian state or being exiled to Siberia for having radical sympathies.⁷¹ London said of this fear, "my father in America heard of my inclinations and wrote me that under no condition whatever, under no possible provocation, was I to commit myself on revolutionary matters. I must study, think, observe and wait until I knew very much more about conditions in the world."⁷² Despite his father's plea, Meyer started to participate in anti-czarist activities while tutoring at a local gymnasium.⁷³ In Gordon Goldman's biography of Meyer London, titled *Meyer London: A Biography of the Socialist New York Congressman, 1871-1926*, Goldman describes how Meyer ignored his father's extensive warnings after Ephraim fled Kalvarija for New York in 1888. Meyer started to associate with a group that he himself personally described as "talk[ing] a lot about the revolution and had not the slightest idea

⁶⁷ Gordon Goldberg, "The Early Years: 1871-1901," In *Meyer London: A Biography of the Socialist New York Congressman, 1871-1926* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013), 10–11.

⁶⁸ Harry Rogoff, *An East Side Epic: The Life and Work of Meyer London* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1930), 8.

⁶⁹ Howard Morley Sachar, "Social and Cultural Ferment in the Immigrant World," In *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 278-285.

⁷⁰ Gordon Goldberg, "The Early Years: 1871-1901," In *Meyer London: A Biography of the Socialist New York Congressman, 1871-1926* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013) 12.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Harry Rogoff, *An East Side Epic: The Life and Work of Meyer London* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1930), 9.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 13.

what a revolution actually meant.”⁷⁴ This story of radicalization exemplified a common theme amongst Jewish radicals in the Lower East Side of New York. Though London was not a Marxist, as Marxism had not been fully developed among nor had a large following in Eastern European Jewish circles at this point, his interest in anti-czarist activity brought London into a radical space that would eventually form into the General Jewish Labor Bund in 1897.⁷⁵

Soon after in 1891, London emigrated to New York’s Lower East Side in order to join his father and brother. London worked in his father’s printing shop, where they were barely able to make ends meet producing the “radical Yiddish weekly, the *Morgenstern*.”⁷⁶ Again, he was exposed to the socialists of the Lower East Side, as many agitators and radicals would use the print shop as a social space. London recounts this experience saying, “the London printing shop was a gathering place for young Jewish radical intellectuals, who came there for the discussions that were more necessary to them than food.”⁷⁷ London, who was surrounded by the harsh reality that was tenement living in the 1890s and by a cast of extremely intelligent radicalized workers, developed his politics and oratory skills in this context in a way that led him to become one of the most prominent Jewish socialist lawyers and politicians of his time. Living in this poor, working-class environment, young London supplemented his income by tutoring his neighbors in English literature, showcasing his prodigious understanding of both history and its great works, an understanding that was far beyond what most of his semi-literate immigrant peers would ever have. His nascent socialist leanings were evident in the way he would often teach his students, using a Marxist lens through which to showcase what he understood to be the “revolutionary

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 14.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 13; Harry Rogoff, *An East Side Epic: The Life and Work of Meyer London* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1930), 10.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

instincts in Dickens and Carlyle,” all in order to increase class consciousness and help radicalize his community.⁷⁸ By 1896, he was accepted to New York University’s School of Law and was admitted to the bar in 1898.

The beginning of Meyer London’s rise to becoming a socialist icon in the Lower East Side followed the horrific events of the Kishinev pogrom of 1903. At this point in London’s life, he had already established an exceptionally union and worker-friendly law practice, dedicated to tackling cases against big businesses and protecting tenant rights, regardless of how unprofitable these cases may have been.⁷⁹ This focus becomes a theme in London’s life; he ended up developing a reputation for working pro-bono and refusing any sort of pay when he deemed cases as too important to his community to be monetized in any dollar amount.⁸⁰ The Jews living in London’s Lower East Side were almost entirely made up of very poor Eastern European Jewish immigrants and first-generation Jewish-Americans and became the focus of London’s community efforts. These people had a strong connection to their homeland; they were “still bound by ties of family and memory to their old home.”⁸¹ So, as the bloodiness of the pogroms was reported on in both American media and Yiddish media, Jewish workers in New York City mourned for their people. While some Jews tried to lobby Congress to take some sort of action (such as the famous 1907 Cohen report that officially recognized the many atrocities and appalling persecutions that were occurring to Jews in Russia at this time),⁸² many Jews took an alternative route by supporting their comrades more directly in their struggle. The people of the

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Gordon Goldberg, *Meyer London: A Biography of the Socialist New York Congressman, 1871-1926* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013), 23-24.

⁸¹ Rogoff, *An East Side Epic*, 24.

⁸² “Cowen Report - European Investigation Entry No. 9; 1906 – 1907.” File No. 51411/056. Subject and Policy Files, 1893 – 1957. Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/602984>

Lower East Side knew of the revolution that their Jewish community was trying to create back in the Pale of Settlement and organized to help them. London quickly placed himself at the center of this organizing effort.

Meyer London thrust himself into the spotlight within his community by hosting fundraisers and rallying support for the General Jewish Labor Bund and its ultimate cause of aiding the suffering Jews back in Russia. In Harry Rogoff's 1930 biography of Meyer London titled *An East Side Epic: The Life and Work of Meyer London*, he claims:

With his characteristic vigor and passion London threw himself into this new field of public and revolutionary activities. He instantly became greatly in demand for addressing relief mass meetings called to raise money for the pogrom victims and to gather the funds for the revolution. He considered it a privilege to serve in the best way he could. Before long he established a reputation for himself in revolutionary circles as the most effective speaker on the platform. His soul was on fire with the great events in Russia and that fire communicated itself to his audiences.⁸³

After a few months of London working around the clock in order to provide for the revolutionary cause, the Bund noticed and sent a delegate to assess London's capabilities. None other than Arcady Kremer, also known as the "father of the Bund" and one of the most influential Jewish socialists in Russia during this period, visited London at a mass meeting called on the Bund's behalf. Immediately after hearing his oratory and persuasive abilities, Kremer named London the "chief pleader for the Bund in this country."⁸⁴ At this point on until the end of this series of pogroms in 1906 "London made the work of the Bund his chief interest."⁸⁵

This work publicized London's skills as a lawyer and marked him as an important representative for labor within the local community. For the next half decade, London found himself pulled into almost every single labor dispute that erupted in the Garment District. No

⁸³ Rogoff, *An East Side Epic*, 24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

matter what the issue was, London found a way to help the cause either by inspiring strikers with his impassioned speeches, negotiating with capital, or defending picketers who were wrongly abused by the police and jailed unfairly.⁸⁶ The most prominent events that London had participated in, however, were the Uprising of the 20,000 and the Great Cloakmakers Revolt of 1910.⁸⁷ In these strikes, London was one of the prime agitators and organizers.⁸⁸ Along with other important members of the Jewish left and American unionism, such as Abraham Cahan, founder of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, London's passionate speeches at Madison Square Garden, Union Square, and Cooper Union were often deemed invaluable to the Jewish labor movement as a whole. The *New York Call* even stated that Meyer London was “the oracle, the prophet, the pillar of fire which lights the way for the 75,000 cloakmakers.”⁸⁹ London's oratory skills were so well developed that his speeches are often cited as prominent reasons that many hesitant and skeptical Jewish workers were convinced to change their vote to strike to a resounding YES in both the Uprising of the 20,000 and the Great Revolt.⁹⁰

When London was not convincing crowds to strike until workers received the living wages they required, he was in the courtroom defending strikers, spearheading the settlements between labor and capital in the negotiations that ended the strikes, and raising money for the general fund of these strikers. Alongside London's role as chief union counsel for the ILGWU,⁹¹ he represented many workers in various court cases, including a few important suits in which he defended strikers against Julius Henry Cohen, the lawyer representing the manufacturers. Cohen

⁸⁶ Ibid, 29-36.

⁸⁷ Ibid. Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 25 & 47.

⁸⁸ Rogoff, *East Side Epic*, 23-26.

⁸⁹ “Meyer London: A Story of the Cloak Makers' Guide,” *New York Call*, August 8, 1911, 2.

⁹⁰ Rogoff, *East Side Epic*, 25-27.

⁹¹ Gordon Goldberg, *Meyer London: A Biography of the Socialist New York Congressman, 1871-1926* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013), 26 & 35.

tried to contest strikers by blaming them for violent interactions with the police and he also alleged that the strikes were, in essence, a grand conspiracy against trade and capital. In defending against the first claim, London won outright. In the case that grappled with the conspiracy charge it ended with a split ruling for both labor and industrial bosses.⁹² In addition to his work in the courtroom, London was also a master at the negotiating table. When he was acting as the lead negotiator for reefer makers, the lowest paid garment workers in the entire needle-trade industry, London was able to craft an incredibly worker-friendly agreement. In 1907 when 1200 reefer makers went on strike, London, the then head lawyer of the ILGWU's New York Joint Board, fought for a settlement with the Reefer Manufacturers' Association for "a closed shop, [that] reduced workweek from fifty-nine to fifty-five hours, freed the workers from paying for needles, straps, and shuttles, specified that the employers would provide sewing machines, and abolished inside sub-contracting among the pressers."⁹³ Rounding out his seemingly untiring efforts for the workers in his community, when Abraham Rosenberg, a president of the ILGWU from 1908-1914, gave London a check of \$2,000 for his work during the Cloakmakers' strike, London preceded to donate the entirety of this check to a strike fund for defense against future lockouts and labor disputes.⁹⁴ These various actions gave him ample opportunity to interact with these workers on a one-on-one basis in the courtroom, as a public figure during his speeches, and as a successful fighter at the negotiating table.

By 1910, London was thus well known throughout the Lower East Side as a man who both dedicated his life to promoting the socialist ideas that the Bund was fighting for back in the old country and to helping labor in myriad ways in his local community. By this point in his life,

⁹² Ibid, 25, 29-35, 37.

⁹³ Ibid, 24.

⁹⁴ Gordon Goldberg, *Meyer London: A Biography of the Socialist New York Congressman, 1871-1926* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013), 24.

London had also run unsuccessfully for many different municipal and state elections, often for the sole purpose of educating the masses instead of actually winning the election.⁹⁵ Running under Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor party, London received anywhere from a few hundred votes to a few thousand votes in these different campaigns, until he broke with the party in 1904 to join Eugene V. Debs' Socialist Party of America (SP).⁹⁶ His primary motivation for switching to this new party developed from his time as a delegate to the Social Democratic National Convention in Indianapolis, where he was elected to the platform committee alongside both Victor Berger, another Socialist congressman from Wisconsin, and Eugene Debs.⁹⁷ London's association with his new peers convinced him of Berger's and Debs' absolute devotion to the working-class. He agreed with this strategy for democratic socialism over the revolutionary instincts of De Leon and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) who had influence within the SLP.⁹⁸

By 1914 London was then inspired to run for federal office after witnessing Victor Berger's unprecedented victory as the first socialist ever elected to Congress and Eugene Debs' relatively successful presidential campaigns, in which he garnered half a million to a million national votes each presidential cycle from 1904 to 1912.⁹⁹ When London decided to run for the 12th congressional district, his home district, he was able to secure the nomination after the local New York Branch chose him over Morris Hillquit, one of the leading figures of the Socialist Party nationally, due to an apparent need for a congressional candidate that more "closely

⁹⁵ Ibid, 50-51

⁹⁶ Ibid, 50-52.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 19; Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 110-112.

⁹⁸ Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 24.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 56, 63, 67 & 81.

identified with the Jewish immigrants,”¹⁰⁰ was “firmly tied to the Lower East Side,”¹⁰¹ and had a deep, personal bond with these constituents. London perfectly fit that bill.

London clearly had the best chance of winning this district because of his deep roots in the neighborhood and the community’s recognition of London as someone who was an important leader and ally during its recent traumas. These associations can be easily seen in the posters from London’s campaign in 1914. Almost every poster, letter, or speech discussing London’s political campaign celebrates his strong history of having worked with these community labor unions for over a decade. One such example was the material sent out by the Merchant’s and Professional’s League, an organization of “about 120 of the ‘most prominent’ professional men in the district,”¹⁰² all of which detailed why the 12th congressional district constituents should vote for London on the Socialist Party ticket. In every single poster, they never fail to mention his tireless work with unions during the Great Revolt or The Uprising of the 20,000. In one poster titled “MEYER LONDON Study His Life and His Work and you will find him,” the first sentence completes this thought by noting how you will find him “with a record of twenty-five years of tireless service for the masses” and “a leader and pioneer in thought and action.” It refers both to his work during the negotiations and strikes within the garment industry and his ability to acquire unprecedented wins at the bargaining table, perhaps securing the labor peace so valued by these particular members of the community.¹⁰³ This exact same poster can then be found translated into Yiddish, including a transliteration of the street and address where his constituents could find him, even though these street names would not be in Yiddish on the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 48.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 54-55

¹⁰² Ibid, 58.

¹⁰³ “MEYER LONDON Study His Life and His Work and you will find him,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

actual avenues.¹⁰⁴ Another piece put out by the Professional Men’s League describes how “old party politicians” are rigging the system against London, in the same vein that industrial bosses rigged the economic system against working-class Jews.¹⁰⁵ Here, the Professional Men’s League taps into the socialist and anti-authoritarian culture of their fellow Jews, showing how neither major political party faithfully represents them and arguing that only the Socialist Party can properly represent them in Congress. This piece, like the Merchant’s and Professional’s League pamphlet, is translated and transliterated into Yiddish to make it accessible to all of the constituents of the 12th district.¹⁰⁶

Another three-page pamphlet created by London supporters and the Allied Printing Trade Council was distributed entirely in Yiddish and titled *ווארום מײער לאנדאן דארף ווידער ערוועהלט* ווארום מײער לאנדאן דארף ווידער ערוועהלט *ווארום מײער לאנדאן דארף ווידער ערוועהלט* roughly translating to “Why Meyer London Needs to be Re-elected to Congress.” It shows how deep London’s connection to his community truly was. In it, the Allied Printing Trade Council describes in detail the hundreds of hours London had spent dedicating himself to the labor community before he was elected to Congress and how his opponent, Henry Goldfogle of the Democratic Party, has never truly worked with this community, especially during the difficulties of the strikes.¹⁰⁷

This same theme can be seen through every single letter, poster, or pamphlet relating to London’s 1914 campaign, and every campaign thereafter. In one anonymously made poster titled “NINE good reasons why you should vote for *Meyer London*, the clean, honest and fearless labor

¹⁰⁴ מאיר לאנדאן שטודירט זיין לעבען אין זיין ארבייט, און איהר וועט איהם געפינען, folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

¹⁰⁵ “For Re-election Meyer London To Congress,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

¹⁰⁶ Untitled Yiddish translation of “For Re-election Meyer London To Congress,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

¹⁰⁷ ווארום מײער לאנדאן דארף ווידער ערוועהלט ווערען אין קאנגרעס, Tamiment Library folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

leader,” eight of these reasons are mainly due to his work helping labor during their strikes. These included: “Second: Because since he became a lawyer in 1896, he successfully used his great talent as an orator and lawyer to strengthen trade unionism and defend the labor unions against the attacks of their enemies; Third: Because in 1910 at a great sacrifice of time, health and labor, he led 60,000 cloakmakers to a glorious and complete victory, thereby gaining the love and admiration of the employees;” and, “Fourth: - Because in 1912 he carried to a successful conclusion, the bitterly fought Furriers’ strike in which 9,000 Furriers were engaged, as he did before then, the Garment Workers’ Strike.”¹⁰⁸ The Jewish voters in his district responded so positively to London because they valued his work with and for them in the past, especially when it came to supporting the strikes in the Garment District, because, in so doing, he had done something to mitigate a difficult trauma that they had faced—the appalling conditions in the sweatshops. London’s dedication to and grass-roots involvement with this cause, and his ability to address the two other traumas that had so heavily impacted this community, had created a trust between him and his community and proved his value as a labor ally. This confidence in his previous work then was able to evolve into a belief that he would faithfully represent them and their interests in Congress. By 1914, this community had come to embrace electoral socialism as one solution to their problems, and therefore London became the obvious choice when he ran for office on the SP ticket.

So while it was during London’s work with the Garment District strikes and his representation of labor during the Protocols of Peace that he had become a celebrated figure throughout the Lower East Side, London’s role as a governmental representative for his community’s socialist-leaning ideology could not have become a reality until after the Triangle

¹⁰⁸ “NINE good reasons why you should vote for *Meyer London*, the clean, honest and fearless labor leader,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911. This singular event transformed a community that had a deeply embedded culture of socialist ideology into a mobilized unit determined to achieve a truly egalitarian society through the democratic process. That transformation sparked many different local political wins for the Socialist Party but by far the most impressive was the congressional win Meyer London would receive in 1914. Although he had previously run multiple failed municipal and state level campaigns on the Socialist party ticket, it would be in 1914 when he secured his first victory.

By the 1914 election, the radicalized workers of the Lower East Side were tired of the machine politics of Tammany Hall and had come to see London as the man best fitted to represent them. In the anonymous piece titled “Good Reasons Why You Should Vote For MEYER LONDON,” for example, the author compares London’s background of “his knowledge, his energy, his devotion and integrity” towards “every union man,” and how he “spent twelve years of the best part of his life in organizing the East Side workers into a militant, well-organized, intelligent labor organization,” to his opponent Henry Goldfogle’s sketchy voting history, describing him as a “vote dodger.”¹⁰⁹ The flyer explains how, “On June 9, 1910, a bill to establish postal saving banks came up in Congress. This Bill was to ensure the saving of the people. Goldfogle although the Representative from one of the poorest districts, did not vote for the bill.”¹¹⁰ The author continues to condemn Goldfogle’s record by listing all the bills that Goldfogle “dodged” that specifically targeted working-class people. Ultimately the piece states how “on February 18, 1907, Mr. Goldfogle DID NOT DODGE the vote making Railroad workers and Telegraphers work SIXTEEN HOURS A DAY,” solidifying the author’s view that

¹⁰⁹ “Good Reasons Why You Should Vote For MEYER LONDON,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

even though Goldfogle “pledged himself to work and fight against them [trusts and corporations],” only Meyer London of the Socialist Party would actually tackle these issues and fight for the poorest of workers.¹¹¹

London’s celebrity-like status was unmatched at this time in the Lower East Side. His constituents were radicalized and angry; they wanted radical change and they wanted it now. Because of the insularity and poverty that was so explicit in the Lower East Side during this period, many workers and Jews were abundantly radicalized but either did not fully understand how voting worked, were skeptical of government altogether, or did not understand what the Socialist Party even stood for, as there were dozens of different left-wing parties that had popped up and then immediately vanished during the early 20th century.¹¹² After the tremendous effort of London and his committee to create sample ballots, written in both English and Yiddish,¹¹³ and to show Yiddish-speaking working men how to vote, London was able to mobilize them to the polls, especially after ensuring that every voter received explicit directions at least three different times on when, where, and how to vote.¹¹⁴ But London’s success was officially sealed, in large part, after a major endorsement by one of the most prominent labor activists in America, and possibly the world, at this time.

Samuel Gompers was the founder and president of the American Federation of Labor, the most powerful federal alliance of trade unions in the country. Although the organization’s philosophy was rooted in “Pure and Simple Unionism,” which focused on economic organization in the workplace rather than political action, and Gompers himself publicly claimed his strong

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 51 & 68.

¹¹³“Vote A Straight Socialist Ballot,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

¹¹⁴ Untitled General Letter of Instructions to Voters, folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York; Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 60.

opposition of socialism and all of its tenets, Gompers broke with this latter line by publicly endorsing Meyer London of the Socialist Party for the 12th district of New York in 1914.

Gompers explained his reasoning in a letter to a cloak maker asking for his advice on how to vote:

I have no hesitation whatever in saying that Mr. Meyer London is deserving of the highest credit for his services in connection with the Cloak Makers' strike. His devotion to the cause of Labor has rarely been equaled by any man, and never exceeded, in my opinion, by any attorney engaged to look after the interests of the workers. Mr. London did not hesitate one moment when he saw his duty and where he could be of service to the Cloak Makers in that gigantic struggle, and for his services and for his devotion, it is my candid, and outspoken opinion that you as a striking Cloak Maker, are in duty bound to give Mr. London every possible support within your power. An attorney with such a clear grasp and intelligent conception of the working-class struggle would be a wonderful power for good in the interest of Labor and the whole people, should he be elected to Congress. His knowledge, his energy, his devotion and his integrity should win for him the undying devotion of every union man living within the 12th Congressional District in the N. Y. City.¹¹⁵

Regardless of the fact that London was an outspoken socialist running on the Socialist Party ticket, Gompers' time with him during the Uprising of the 20,000 and the Cloakmakers' Strike solidified his view that London was more than qualified to serve in Congress and would be a true representative of labor in that role. Another important element of London's politics was his practicality, something that Gompers greatly admired. London knew that he could not single-handedly turn over the private possession of property to a collective ownership. He did believe though that he had a duty to help mitigate the errors of capitalism and raise workers' standards of living as much as he could. He was a moderate and pragmatic socialist that even the most conservative of unionists could get behind.

Meyer London used Samuel Gompers to portray his own devotion to labor by stamping and plastering their pictures side by side in almost every single piece of political advertising he

¹¹⁵ Samuel Gompers to Samuel Levy, September 27, 1912, folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

produced throughout all five of his congressional campaigns for the 12th district.¹¹⁶ He also asked his constituents to vote for the “Arm and Torch” (the symbol of the Socialist Party), because of “What Mr. Samuel Gompers Says About Meyer London Socialist Candidate For Congress.”¹¹⁷ He took this quote, and a handful of others, from Gompers, including one that stated, “organized labor needs Meyer London in Congress to fight the battles of every man and woman who toils for a living,” and used it in speeches and on posters to the highest extent possible, including translating it into Yiddish.¹¹⁸ London used Gompers as a way of showing the working-class people of his district that even the most conservative of labor organizers believe in his socialist cause. London never pointed out Gompers’s anti-socialist stances to his audiences, most likely seeing it as an unnecessary distraction that could undermine his campaign. With such savvy campaigning, London swooped to victory with a plurality of the vote and over “2000 personal votes, a personal vote larger than any candidate ever received in that district,”¹¹⁹ meaning that he had successfully peeled away thousands of voters who otherwise voted for Democratic or Progressive candidates for every other vote on their ballot, showcasing London’s incredible popularity in his district even for those who would otherwise not identify as socialists.

When London was elected in 1914, a large party gathered outside, watching the vote counts get updated through a stereopticon projection on the wall of the *Forverts* building,

¹¹⁶ “SOCIALIST PARTY Vote Under The Arm And Torch,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York; “To The Post Office Workers of Greater New York and Vicinity,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York; Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 47, 56-57, 65, 128.

¹¹⁷ “SOCIALIST PARTY Vote Under The Arm And Torch,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

¹¹⁸ “ווארום מײער לאנדאן דארף ווידער ערוועהלט ווערען אין קאנגרעס,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York; Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 56-57.

¹¹⁹ “Good reasons why you should vote for MEYER LONDON,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

alongside the busts of Marx and Engels.¹²⁰ With a crowd of 40,000 to 50,000 onlookers, London's victory was sealed at around 4 AM to the sound of roaring applause and cheers. In the *New York Times* article "SOCIALIST'S VICTORY SETS A CITY RECORD," Meyer London is described as "well known throughout the east side and in Socialist circles. He was counsel for the Cloakmakers' Union at the time of their strike and was practically the leader of the 50,000 workers."¹²¹ The votes in the 12th district stood at "Goldfogle, 4944; Borowky, Republican, 1133; London, 5868."¹²² London was now the hero of the working-class. As people danced in the street, listening to the Marseilles and kissing their loved ones,¹²³ London had successfully translated a deep culture of resistance and leftism into realized gains at the ballot box.

London understood that his time in Congress was dependent on how well he addressed the trauma that his constituents had endured. While representing his district, London's main objective as a third-party candidate was not actually to accomplish significant legislative change or even enact much of the policy that the Socialist Party had on its official 1914 platform. London explained this approach to a crowd of cheering socialists in Madison Square Garden soon after his victory. He said to them, "when I take my seat in Congress I do not expect to accomplish wonders. What I expect to do is to take to Washington the message of the people, to give expression there to the philosophy of socialism."¹²⁴ Though he knew that he would not accomplish all of his goals, he wanted to bring attention to the issues that the Jews of the Lower East Side had faced throughout all of their traumas and educate the country through the lens of the Socialist Party's official party platform.

¹²⁰ "דער היסטארישער אבענד אען אידישען קווארטאל" *The Jewish Daily Forward*, November 5, 1914, 4; Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 160.

¹²¹ "SOCIALIST'S VICTORY SETS A CITY RECORD," *New York Times*, November 5, 1914, 6.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ "דער היסטארישער אבענד אען אידישען קווארטאל" *The Jewish Daily Forward*, November 5, 1914, 4.

¹²⁴ "Socialist Cheer London's Victory," folder 2, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

That official party platform could be broken down into five main parts: establishing collective ownership, addressing unemployment, making industrial demands, voicing political demands, and shaping specific policy opposition or reforms currently in place in America.¹²⁵ London throughout all three of his terms advocated publicly, extensively, and consistently in Congress for four out of the five parts of the SP's platform—all except the collective ownership plank, which was so politically fringe that its advocacy was often scoffed at or simply censured within the Capitol.¹²⁶ Such mocking and attempts at silencing sadly did happen to London occasionally.¹²⁷ Though London may not have called for the federal seizure of the means of production, he was touted as “dwelling on the need of public ownership of public utilities and on the necessity of preparing for the introduction of the democratic principle in industry.”¹²⁸ Such efforts may have been mocked by his political opponents in Washington, but they were more than good enough for his socialist constituents. Addressing the inequities that had been at the heart of Jewish trauma in the Lower East Side, including the extreme poverty and unsafe working and living conditions, was exactly what they had elected him to do for them.

When it came to shaping specific opposition or reforms to existing policy, London also worked with his Lower East Side constituents in mind. According to the SP platform of 1914 on specific policy opposition in the category of “Restrictions on Citizenship,” the party “enters its most emphatic protest against such procedure [immigration restrictions on “anarchists”] and points out that the denial of the right of citizenship to foreign born applicants not anarchist because they hold progressive ideas.” This policy of immigration restriction was of the utmost

¹²⁵ Socialist Party (U.S.), Carl D Thompson, and Ralph Korngold, *Socialist Congressional Campaign Book* (Chicago, IL: The Socialist Party, 1914), 21-29.

¹²⁶ Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 201-202.

¹²⁷ “Congressional Record - House,” May 20, 1916, 7476-7477, folder 9, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

¹²⁸ “MEYER LONDON Study His Life and His Work and you will find him,” folder 18, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

importance to the Jews of the Lower East Side, who were displaced during the pogroms in Russia and continued to be oppressed by whichever European country they inhabited. Because most of these Jews were from Eastern Europe, the policy excluding radicals often targeted their exact communities, due to the high occurrence of radicalization there. This policy put an almost full stop to Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, even though they had no other place to turn.¹²⁹ London opposed this ban on anarchists and stated that he would “fight every effort in Congress to limit immigration.”¹³⁰ He also criticized the philosophy of union leaders like Samuel Gompers, who believed that “the influx of immigrants was harmful to local workers and unions.”¹³¹ In the *New York Call* article “Meyer London Defends Russian Soviets and Alien Workers in U.S.,” London is quoted saying “it will neither be new nor original to say that this republic had its birth in rebellion against an oppressive form of government. The great majority of the men who have built up this country were men who had fled from some form of oppression. They were rebels, bringing with them a love of liberty.”¹³² He thus attempted to connect political radicals of all stripes as belonging in the United States as part of his objection to the policies and forces supporting immigration restriction. While in Congress, London would “accept nothing less than unrestricted immigration,”¹³³ because he knew that his Jewish socialist comrades would be the first to be rejected citizenship. In taking this stand, London worked to alleviate his Jewish constituents’ trauma of the continued pogroms by attempting to maintain a path for them to escape to America.

¹²⁹ Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 75-76.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 82.

¹³¹ *Ibid*.

¹³² “Meyer London Defends Russian Soviets and Alien Workers in U.S.,” folder 2, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

¹³³ Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 54.

Next was London's effort to alleviate poverty and improve working conditions. According to the SP platform of 1914 under their section on unemployment, there should be "immediate government relief of the unemployed by the extension of all useful public works. All persons employed on such works to be engaged directly by the government under a workday of not more than eight hours and at not less than the prevailing union wages."¹³⁴ This policy was of particular pertinence to the garment workers, which by the nature of the industry was extremely seasonal, often having most workers be fully unemployed for many months out of the year only to start a boom of employment at the beginning of a new garment season.¹³⁵ London would spend much of his energy every congressional session fighting for "a national system of unemployment exchanges, a national insurance system and an extensive system of public works."¹³⁶ These actions would all of course alleviate the second trauma that the Lower East Side Jews had faced and continued to grapple with and that had spurred their radicalization: the abysmal working conditions and tenement living that they had to endure.

Lastly, London had also worked tirelessly to showcase the importance of "a minimum wage, a child labor law, a shorter working day and the overall improvement of working conditions."¹³⁷ As per the industrial demands of the Socialist Party platform of 1914, socialists should be advocating for "shortening the workday in keeping with the increased productiveness of machinery," "securing a more effective inspection of workshops, factories and mines," and "forbidding the employment of children under sixteen." All of these issues were so vital to the Jewish community because they were at the core of their trauma, especially the third trauma at

¹³⁴ Socialist Party (U.S.), Carl D Thompson, and Ralph Korngold, *Socialist Congressional Campaign Book* (Chicago, IL: The Socialist Party, 1914), 24.

¹³⁵ Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 24, 35 & 258.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 131.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 82.

the Triangle Shirtwaist factory. In this trauma, very young and exhausted girls had jumped to their death after poor workshop safety conditions and a dangerous system that kept these girls as productive as humanly possible, all of which led to one of the deadliest industrial disasters in American history. Throughout London's time in Congress, he was at the vanguard fighting for all these issues, even going so far as to debate with members of both mainstream political parties to convince them of the depravity of child labor. London went to such extremes to fight child labor that he even argued at one point that the Supreme Court should be stripped of its power in order for Congress to be able to pass through what was then seen as an unconstitutional child labor law.¹³⁸

In all of these ways, London was thus able to represent his socialist and Jewish constituency faithfully during all three of his terms. Even though most of his legislative reforms and political philosophy would not become even partially mainstream until after his death, when during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal such legislation began to address workplace safety, union recognition, and business regulation in a serious way, London had been at the forefront of those fights during his time in Congress. When London finally lost re-election in 1922, mostly due to partisan gerrymandering,¹³⁹ he had left Congress believing he had accomplished his goals. London had tapped into his communities' deep ties to Marxist ideology, educated his congressional peers in Washington D.C., and worked to help alleviate all three of his constituents' traumas that had radicalized them in the first place and moved them to vote him into office.

¹³⁸ "REPRESENTATIVE MEYER LONDON, SOCIALIST, CRITICIZES U.S. SUPREME COURT FOR DECLARING FEDERAL CHILD LABOR LAW UNCONSTITUTIONAL," folder 13, box 2, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

¹³⁹ "Railroaded Bill Cuts Socialist Votes in 12th," folder 2, box 1; "Gerrymander of London's District Bared," folder 2, box 1; "Labor Demands Public Hearing in Gerrymander," folder 2, box 1; "Politicians Plan Gerrymander to Defeat Rep. Meyer London, folder 2, box 1; "Assail Koenig at Hearing on Gerrymander," folder 2, box 1, Meyer London Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, New York.

In the long run, many of London's ideas would be recycled into future legislation, such as his recommendation for Social Security,¹⁴⁰ and his ideas that later would become the basis of "Medicare, Medicaid and the Affordable Health Care Act,"¹⁴¹ even though these bills' writers most likely would have never heard of him. London had a deep connection to the Lower East Side, whether it was fighting for unions, radicalizing his neighbors, or representing them in Washington. London delivered on his promise to his community, to fight for the working-class Jew that most representatives in Congress have never seen before or cared about. Though his legacy was not cemented with the passage of any specific "socialist" legislation, his work as an educator to the masses and his endless effort to fight for what is right made him a beloved man in his community. London is now remembered by an elementary school in the Lower East Side named in his honor, and friends, family, and academics that try to keep his name alive. London's goals in life can be summed up as not trying to make a living but to have an effect on the world around him, an accomplishment that can never be taken from him.

¹⁴⁰ Goldberg, *Meyer London*, 283.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 8-9.

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