

TEXTILE UNIONS TO UNITE

Daily News (New York)

May 14, 1995, Sunday

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Section: News

Length: 496 words

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Body

Two unions organized in the early years of this century to bring decent working conditions to immigrant garment workers are gearing up to do it all over again with a new generation of immigrants.

At a joint convention in Miami next month, two of the nation's most venerable unions both with roots in New York's long-vanished radical labor movement are poised to join forces.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union will merge to form a new organization that leaders say is their last best chance to organize the unorganized and meet the new global economy on its own terms.

UNITE Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees will bring together members ranging from Chinatown cutters to "Norma Rae"-style Southern textile workers.

It will be vying to overcome the labor-management odds with an organizing campaign aimed at the estimated 80% of apparel, garment and textile workers who work in nonunion shops.

"We have to continue to organize it's women workers, it's new immigrants, it's the nonunion South," said Jay Mazur, who will move from ILGWU chief to president of the merged union.

The new union will have its work cut out for it.

It will have to buck a trend that has seen union membership fall to less than 16% of the national work force, a figure that drops to 12% when government employees are excluded.

And it will have to cope with what labor experts say are increasingly sophisticated employer legal tactics and an often toothless and slow-footed National Labor Relations Board.

In the 1960s, there were more than a million members in the unions now composing the ILGWU and ACTWU, said Prof. Stanley Aronowitz of the City University Graduate Center.

But the delegates who will gather in Florida to ratify the merger will represent only a third of that number 355,000 members.

"They have both taken enormous hits from plant closings and contracting out to nonunion shops," said Aronowitz. "They are going to have to organize their way back into existence."

UNITE's new leaders said that is exactly what they intend to do. "People thought in the beginning no one could organize women in garment shops," said Mazur.

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Back then, the task was to organize thousands of Eastern European, mainly Jewish immigrants, laboring in the city's sweatshops. Bitter strikes and work place tragedies, such as the deadly 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire that claimed lives of 146 workers, helped make the ILGWU and the then-Amalgamated Clothing Workers powerful unions with political clout.

The merged union plans to kick off its founding with a \$ 10 million organizing campaign directed by ACTWU'S southern regional chief, Bruce Raynor, and New York ILGWU leader Edgar Romney.

The drive will target New York sweatshops and Southern nonunion plants.

"There is no shortage of workers asking for help," said Raynor. "It is going to be a question of how creative we can be."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: LABOR UNIONS (99%); GARMENT WORKERS (94%); FACTORY WORKERS (92%); IMMIGRATION (90%); SWEATSHOPS (89%); OUTSOURCING (78%); WOMEN WORKERS (78%); TRENDS (78%); LABOR FORCE (78%); WOMEN (76%); GLOBALIZATION (76%); LABOR DEPARTMENTS (73%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (62%); FACTORY FIRES (60%); JEWS & JUDAISM (50%); CLOSINGS (50%)

Company: UNITE HERE (83%)

Organization: UNITE HERE (83%)

Industry: GARMENT WORKERS (94%); FACTORY WORKERS (92%); TEXTILES (90%); APPAREL MFG (89%); CLOTHING & ACCESSORIES STORES (70%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (62%); FACTORY FIRES (60%)

Geographic: MIAMI, FL, USA (79%); NEW YORK, USA (91%); FLORIDA, USA (79%)