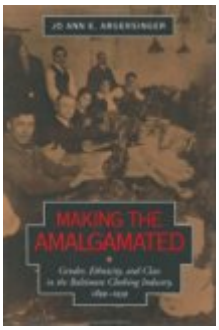
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jo Ann E. Argersinger. *Making the Amalgamated: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Baltimore Clothing Industry, 1899-1939.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. x + 229 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5989-2.

Reviewed by Howard R. Stanger

Published on EH.Net (November, 1999)

Both a business and labor history, *Making the Amalgamated* seeks to "shed new light on the role that gender and ethnicity played in the [Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union], the political arena, and the manufacturing process . . ." (p. 5). In doing so, author Jo Ann Argersinger examines the "forces for unity and the factors that led to division in the industry and the union while underscoring the role of power in both the Amalgamated's search for 'industrial democracy' and the garment industry's rise and decline" (p.5). This is a complex story, but one that Argersinger manages to tell with a high degree of clarity.

In 1890, Baltimore's men's garment industry ranked sixth in the nation. A decade later, it grew to fourth, employed 10,000 workers, and produced $17 million worth of clothing annually. Garment manufacturing, especially the men's segment, played a vital role in the city's economic development. Larger, efficient factories, owned by German Jews, operated in conjunction with a vast collection of contract shops, called "sweaters," known for their extremely low wages and deplorable working conditions. These shops produced specific parts of garments and often teetered on insolvency. They were run by newly-arrived Russian Jews and staffed mainly with Russian Jews, as well as other recent immigrants: Italians, Lithuanians and Bohemians. Over fifty percent of the local industry's workforce consisted of low-skilled women and teenage girls, who labored long hours, earned paltry wages, and resided in run-down ghettoes. Men occupied skilled positions in cutting, pressing and trimming, and sat atop the occupational ladder, but often were not much better off.

The first major strike in the city's men's garment industry occurred in 1892. Over 1,000 workers, many of them women, walked out of 54 shops demanding a ten-hour workday and weekly payment of wages. Employers organized an association and stood firm against union influence in their shops. In anticipating the struggles that would accompany the founding of the Amalgamated (ACWA) in 1914, this strike focused on the newly formed United Garment Workers' (UGW) attempt to dislodge Knights of Labor locals. The UGW, a union of skilled tailors, was part of the

American Federation of Labor and showed great disdain toward the less skilled, many of them Knights. Employers exploited union divisiveness and were aided by ethnic rivalries across the unions. For example, the UGW's Polish and Russian Jews fought with the Knights' Lithuanian Catholics. Workers gained little from this strike and a subsequent one in 1896. In the aftermath of the latter dispute, the Knights exited Baltimore's clothing industry. Minor legislative reforms resulted, but the problems of sweatshop conditions persisted.

Unable to eradicate sweatshop conditions, the UGW turned its attention to the "aristocrats" of labor-skilled cutters, trimmers, and pressers who enjoyed a privileged position in the workplace. They occupied critical positions in the production process and were difficult to replace. Women and newer immigrants-the least skilled-were neglected by the UGW. The UGW was slightly more receptive to newer immigrant tailors, mostly skilled men. Even without the UGW's support, immigrant tailors and women workers engaged in strikes that were often renounced by UGW leadership. Such conditions enabled the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to attempt to organize recent immigrants and women garment workers. In 1913 a battle ensued between the Wobblies and the conservative Baltimore Federation of Labor allied with the UGW. Close to 3,000 workers joined the IWW. Inspired by the labor activism of tailors in other cities, immigrant workers began building a more solid union movement. Their first test came in 1913 at L. Grief & Brother (Grief), one of the largest firms in Baltimore.

The Grief strike began when 300 workers, predominantly immigrant women and girls, walked out in protest of the company's alleged agreement to do scab work for a New York City firm. They also demanded union recognition, a nine-hour day, and higher wages. Leader and organizer for the city's UGW's immigrant buttonhole makers, Dorothy Jacobs, faced tough obstacles, from employer resistance to tepid UGW support. In the end, the workers won only a fifty-four-hour workweek. Many workers felt betrayed by the UGW's leadership. More battles followed the Grief strike, but in between the workers were energized by the founding of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America in 1914 in New York City.

The Amalgamated, headed by Sidney Hillman, organized along quasi-industrial lines and was immediately denounced by the AFL and the UGW as a rival union. But for the less skilled, the ACW offered high hopes and opportunities for immigrant and women workers alike. Soon after the birth of the ACWA, 3,000 workers struck Sonneborn's, one of Baltimore's largest clothing manufacturer. Immediately the UGW, supported by the Baltimore Federation of Labor (BFL), attempted to strike a deal covering only skilled cutters at the expense of the larger workforce. When the majority of the strikers stayed out after the UGW settlement, owner Henry Sonneborn realized the ACW's power and settled with Hillman, who demanded a settlement similar to the one he brokered with Hart, Schaffner & Marx in Chicago. Sonneborn agreed to an arbitration system, a pension plan, improved safety features, and a relaxation of Tayloristic interventions.

The strike was critical in a number of respects, according to Argersinger. For one, it revealed the importance of similar (Jewish) religious and cultural ties between the striking workers and Sonneborn himself. The settlement also "articulated a brand of unionism that called for the organization of workers along quasi-industrial lines and emphasized cooperation between labor and management, governmental intervention in the affairs of business and unions, collective bargaining, rational industrial policies, increased efficiency in...production, and substantial concessions from management for the welfare of the workers" (p. 44).

However, not all employers or workers supported this brand of industrial relations. The

ACWA's power was soon tested when it launched a citywide organizing drive in 1915. One of the main targets was Grief, which continued to resist the union's advances. When 3,500 workers, again mostly women, struck, Grief quickly enlisted the support of both the BFL and the UGW. Together, they worked to divide the workforce by appealing to gender and ethnic differences, including the fomenting of anti-Semitism. Grief also dabbled with welfare capitalism and discriminated against union activists. The result was a riotous strike and a short-lived deal brokered by the Baltimore Industrial Council. Another ACWA strike soon followed when Grief struck a deal with the male-dominated UGW, in effect making the ACWA agreement worthless.

In the first Grief strike in 1916, the ACWA focused on ethnic unity at the expense of gender concerns. In the second strike, it employed more women organizers to garner support from the rank and file. But the union was foiled when the BFL helped the IWW scab on the ACWA at the same time it created ethnic divisions among the workers. Internecine union battles resumed in the summer of 1916, but this time the ACWA would exact revenge against the UGW.

When the UGW called a series of strikes in an attempt to organize another major manufacturer, Strouse & Brothers, the ACWA upheld its contract and crossed picket lines. The company appreciated the ACWA's assistance in rationalizing production and training tailors to fill in for UGW cutters on strike. That appreciation enabled the ACWA to organize cutters, but not without a physical confrontation, known as the "Battle of the Scissors." Once again Jewish ties between the workers and ownership helped the ACWA. These were good times for the Baltimore Amalgamated: "By the end of 1916, (it) was firmly established in Baltimore's men's garment industry. It had organized about 75 percent of the clothing workers and had challenged the UGW's control over the cutters at Strouse and Sonneborn" (p. 59).

This "new unionism" desired to bring industrial democracy to the workplace. Through union-management cooperation, the union would share control of the workplace, ensuring the welfare of the worker. It also aimed to enable its members to exercise their rights as worker-citizens in the political arena. By 1918, aided by Federal involvement in the economy during World War One, the ACWA attempted to consolidate its gains and bring a greater degree of economic concentration to the industry. After two strikes, it organized Schloss Brothers, one of the four largest local firms. Concluding a deal similar to those at Sonneborn and Strouse, the ACWA won a forty-eight-hour week, higher wages, union recognition, rights for shop chairmen, union-management cooperation, and a permanent arbitration system. Yet, the ACWA's gains were hard to sustain in the face of traditions of direct action on the shop floor, ethnic and gender divisions, and industry instability which made cordial owners turn defiant at times.

To unite its disparate membership, the national ACWA organized an education department in 1920. Locally, the Baltimore ACWA had a fairly extensive program, offering lectures, sponsoring the Baltimore Labor College, and imbuing union values to create "bonds of love" among fellow unionists. Women played vital and leading roles in these efforts, as well as in organizing and on the picket lines. Yet, as Argersinger tells us, "they received unequal treatment, little recognition, and considerable opposition on issues they regarded as crucial-issues that dealt with the Amalgamated's basic principles" (p. 81.). They were the "forgotten women" of the industry. Their staunch union activism, despite being second-class citizens at work and in the union, is what Argersinger wants to highlight. She contends that not all women "responded similarly to inequality in unions," nor did they aspire to "fantasies of mass culture or visions of home and hearth" (p. 5).

Women of the Amalgamated demanded that the ACWA live up to its claim as a union for all. They employed a number of tactics toward this objective. They allied with the city's middle-class women to gain suffrage and draw attention to their working conditions. They lobbied the ACWA, nationally and locally, for the appointment of full-time women organizers and requested a separate local union as a "necessary first step toward attaining complete integration in the union" (p. 99). They also argued that the organization of women would stop the degradation of men's wages and skills. In short, women objected to the "for men only" meaning of the new unionism and industrial democracy. And despite gaining access to the local's General Executive Board and winning a full-time women organizer around 1916, men still resisted in the union hall and on the shop floor. Thwarted by men, women's efforts to reconstruct the Amalgamated also were frustrated by the weak economy in the postwar years.

Employment and unionization peaked in Baltimore in 1919. The union had secured good contracts and stabilized the industry. But layoffs, inflation, the potential for open-shop campaigns and "profiteering" among the clothiers all boded ill for the ACWA. Over the next two years, local membership fell precipitously from 10,000 to 2,000. The economic crisis ravaged the industry nationally and "permanently transformed Baltimore's clothing economy, reducing its size and altering its structure. In 1920 Baltimore slipped from its prewar ranking of third in the nation in the production of men's clothes to fifth, where it remained throughout the 1920s and 1930s" (p. 123). Prominent and smaller factories closed their doors, while other firms ignored union contracts and/or used the "Red Scare" and anti-Semitism to avoid dealing with the ACWA. Even the BFL joined in on the attack against the ACWA.

Women unionists became more militant, striking and assisting the national ACWA in its attempt to organize the growing nonunion shops in Baltimore. But they also angered men with their renewed demands for a separate local union. In some cases, male shop chairmen ignored women's grievances, ridiculed them in public, and openly questioned their competence. After failing to achieve a separate local, women opted instead for "class solidarity." Argersinger argues that their failure "signaled a stark repudiation of an equal and fully active role for women in the union. As women attempted collective efforts within the framework of the new unionism and confronted boycotts of their activities, they painfully learned of the absence of working-class unity and witnessed the rejection of their initiatives at self-help and mutual assistance" (p. 118). They settled for junior partnership in the union because, as the author contends, "they believed the cause of the union was worth the sacrifice" (p. 119).

During the 1920s, depressed economic conditions put both the industry and union in hardship, locally and nationally. Competition was intense and, with each new fashion season, fresh labor battles developed. One of the biggest clothing houses in the city, Sonnenborn, fell victim to the poor economy and eventually closed its doors in 1931, despite the ACWA's help. Five hundred workers lost their jobs. The Baltimore ACWA suffered financially and continued to lose members, but by the end of the decade, it had managed to bring some stability to the industry by organizing the smaller contract shops continually springing up. Still, ethnic, gender and skill divisions sapped the union's energies. But it was the Great Depression that permanently damaged the Baltimore union. During this time, less than 10 percent of the local industry fell under union control.

At the Depression's low point in 1932, Baltimore's clothing industry was known for paying the lowest wages in the industry and having the lowest levels of capitalization. Local industry unemployment reached 30 percent. Baltimore's once vibrant industry was now considered by the national ACWA as a "menace" to union standards ev-

erywhere. And while women worked hard to bring a number of smaller shops under contract, Grief and other large shops fought the union and ignored New Deal reforms. Companies resorted to producing cheap clothing and employing black workers for the first time, paying them terribly low wages. Women did win a small victory during these years when they organized a separate local, becoming the largest in Baltimore's joint board.

Nonetheless, neither the Wagner Act nor the emergent Congress of Industrial Organizations could overcome employer resistance to unionization in the forms of company unions, runaway shops, the threat of plant closings, and red-baiting. Moreover, racial divisions joined the more chronic gender, ethnic, and skill fractures to limit union effectiveness. The ACWA experienced some revitalization through the merging of educational and political activism, in which women played key roles in mustering support for FDR's re-election in 1936. According to Argersinger, "by 1939, the ACWA had succeeded in rebuilding the union" (p. 175), but they lost the industry. Between 1933 and 1939 fourteen major shops left the city, and it only got worse: "By 1947 Baltimore's garment workers numbered nearly 20 percent fewer than at the end of the 1930s" (p. 178). Anti-union bastions such as Grief and Schoeneman finally signed union contracts in 1943 and 1950, respectively. Conditions worsened for workers after 1950, accelerating over the next few decades. Problems included: the birth of international sweatshops, automation, corporate takeovers by outside interests, low pay, poor working conditions, and job insecurity. Present industry conditions have become eerily reminiscent of the 1890s. In the end, the union has been unable to eradicate the eternal sweatshop.

Making the Amalgamated is an excellent example of how gender, ethnicity and class interacted in the growth and decline of Baltimore's men's clothing industry and union. Argersinger does a terrific job of mining union records, personal papers, government documents and, to a lesser extent, trade publications to support her thesis. However, the dearth of company records limits her ability to reconstruct the microeconomic conditions that may have explained clothing manufacturers' responses to labor unions. For example, was it different cost structures and business strategies or religious and cultural ties that account for some employers' willingness and unwillingness to sign contracts with the ACWA?

The dynamics of labor relations, specifically how arbitration and the "new unionism" worked is given little attention. For example, the reader may be interested in knowing what issues arbitrators resolved; what principles guided their decisions; and if their decisions established precedents locally and elsewhere? I also feel the author missed a good opportunity to address broader issues, such as trade union philosophy. For example, what does her story say about the viability of the "new unionism," in general, and labor-management cooperation, in particular? For example, some employers, who earlier signed union contracts, sought to escape the union later when economic conditions changed. Was industry volatility the key factor responsible for killing cooperative efforts? What can this case study suggest about the best ways to build and preserve unions given certain industry characteristics?

Overall, *Making the Amalgamated* is an excellent example of the "New" labor history but, until good corporate records become available, is not a complete business history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://eh.net/

Citation: Howard R. Stanger. Review of Argersinger, Jo Ann E. *Making the Amalgamated: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Baltimore Clothing Industry, 1899-1939.* EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3567