

Document-based Essay: Why did New York City garment workers organize a labor union?

Directions:

1. Read all of the documents and answer the questions after each document.
2. Use the documents, your answers to the questions, and your knowledge of United States history, to answer the document-based essay question: Why did New York City garment workers organize a labor union? Your essay should have a clear introduction that states your views on the topic, at least three paragraphs that present supporting evidence, and a concluding paragraph that summarizes your ideas. It should be approximately 500 words long.

1. "Life in the Shop" by Clara Lemlich

Clara Lemlich, executive board member of Local 25, sparked the 1909 walkout of shirtwaistmakers with her call for a strike. This report was published in the *New York Evening Journal*, November 28, 1909.

There are two kinds of work - regular, that is salary work, and piecework. The regular work pays about \$6 a week and the girls have to be at their machines at 7 o'clock in the morning and they stay at them until 8 o'clock at night, with just one-half hour for lunch in that time. The shops [factories]. Well, there is just one row of machines that the daylight ever gets to - that is the front row, nearest the window. The girls at all the other rows of machines back in the shops have to work by gaslight, by day as well as by night. Oh, yes, the shops keep the work going at night, too. The bosses in the shops are hardly what you would call educated men, and the girls to them are part of the machines they are running. They yell at the girls and they "call them down" even worse than I imagine the Negro [Black] slaves were in the South. There are no dressing rooms for the girls in the shops. They have to hang up their hats and coats—such as they are—on hooks along the walls. Sometimes a girl has a new hat. It never is much to look at because it never costs more than 50 cents, that means that we have gone for weeks on two-cent lunches—dry cake and nothing else. The shops are unsanitary - that's the word that is generally used, but there ought to be a worse one used. Whenever we tear or damage any of the goods we sew on, or whenever it is found damaged after we are through with it, whether we have done it or not, we are charged for the piece and sometimes for a whole yard of the material. At the beginning of every slow season, \$2 is deducted from our salaries. We have never been able to find out what this is for.

Questions

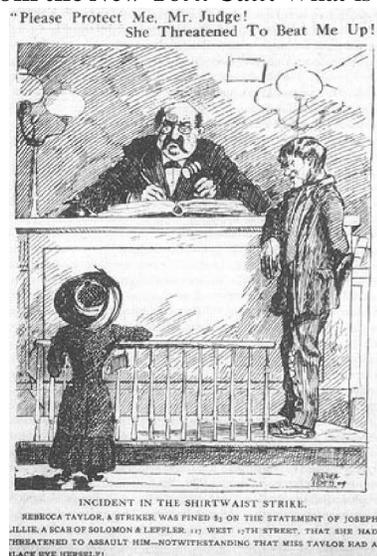
1. What are conditions like in the shops [factories]?
2. How do "bosses" treat workers?
3. In your opinion, what is life like for these workers?

2. Political Cartoons from the *New York Call*. What is the main idea of each cartoon?



December 24, 1909

Cartoons are available at <http://womhist.binghamton.edu/shirt/doclist.htm>



December 29, 1909



January 3, 1910

3. “The Cooper Union Meeting”, *New York Call*, November 23, 1909

Grievances common throughout the shirtwaist industry exploded into a general strike by garment workers. This article was published in the New York Call, a socialist newspaper, November 23, 1909.

The decision to strike was reached yesterday at the Cooper Union meeting which was addressed by Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL. . . . “A man would be less than human,” said Gompers, in opening, “if he were not impressed with your reception. I want you men and women not to give all your enthusiasm for a man, no matter who he may be. I would prefer that you put all of your enthusiasm into your union and your cause.” Continuing, Gompers said: “I have never declared a strike in all my life. I have done my share to prevent strikes, but there comes a time when not to strike is but to rivet the chains of slavery upon our wrists.”

Speaking of the possibility of a general strike, Gompers said: “Yes, Mr. Shirtwaist Manufacturer, it may be inconvenient for you if your boys and girls go out on strike, but there are things of more importance than your convenience and your profit. There are the lives of the boys and girls working in your business.” Appealing to the men and women to stand together, he declared: “If you had an organization before this, it would have stood there as a challenge to the employers who sought to impose such conditions as you bear. . . .”

“I ask you to stand together,” said Gompers in conclusion, “to have faith in yourselves, to be true to your comrades. If you strike, be cool, calm, collected and determined. Let your watchword be: Union and progress, and until then no surrender!” This was greeted with a storm of applause.

Clara Lemlich, who was badly beaten up by thugs during the strike in the shop of Louis Leiserson, interrupted Jacob Panken just as he started to speak, saying: “I wanted to say a few words.” Cries came from all parts of the hall, “Get up on the platform!” Willing hands lifted the frail little girl with flashing black eyes to the stage, and she said simply: “I have listened to all the speakers. I would not have further patience for talk, as I am one of those who feels and suffers from the things pictured. I move that we go on a general strike!” As the tremulous voice of the girl died away, the audience rose en masse and cheered her to the echo. A grim sea of faces, with high purpose and resolve, they shouted and cheered the declaration of war for living conditions hoarsely.

Questions

1. Who is Samuel Gompers?
2. What does Samuel Gompers mean when he says, “there comes a time when not to strike is but to rivet the chains of slavery upon our wrists”?
3. If you were in the audience, would you have supported Clara Lemlich’s call for a “general strike”? Explain

4. “A Half Day of Your Wages for the Strikers”

The Forwards was a Yiddish language Jewish daily newspaper. This article (January 12, 1910: 1) asks other workers to perform “your duty” as a worker and a Jew and send half of their daily wages to strikers.

Workers! Eight weeks, how thousands of sisters and brothers struggle. Among the battlers there are girls who earn for families; men who are fathers of large households. Before the strike broke out, they also had their little earnings -- this is still when one of the main great things of this great strike -- after, people need to declare how bad, how bitter they are now. Will we then tolerate that the strugglers should, on the threshold of their victory, which is the victory of all Jewish workers, must wear shame on the head for their tyranny?

We are not permitted to tolerate this. All Jewish workers from every city should break off a bite of their bites [a portion of their earnings] and send this to the strikers. The United Hebrew Trades, the mother of all Jewish unions, extends her begging hands to request help for her children, for the Ladies Waist Makers Union.

The United Hebrew Trades calls upon Jewish labor. This is the week from Saturday, the 15th until Saturday, the 22nd of January, every worker, man or woman, should give down a half day of his or her wages and send this through the workers’ union for the strikers.

Questions

1. What is the *Forwards*?
2. What “plea” is being made in this article?
3. Why are other workers being asked to pledge money to the strikers?
4. If read this article, would you support the pledge? Explain.

5. Rose Gollup becomes a Garment Worker

*Rose Gollup emigrated from a small village in western Russia in 1892 at the age of twelve. Her father, who had come to New York City earlier, paid for her ticket. She and her father lived in a rented room on the Lower East Side, saving money to bring over her mother and her younger brothers and sisters. Document 5 describes her first two days at work. Document 6 explains why she joined the garment workers' union (Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, NY: George H. Doran, 1918: 108-12, 123-27).*

My hands trembled so that I could not hold the needle properly. It took me a long while to do the coat. But at last it was done. I took it over to the boss and stood at the table waiting while he was examining it. He took long, trying every stitch with his needle. All day I took my finished work and laid it on the boss's table. He would glance at the clock and give me other work. Before the day was over I knew that this was a "piece work shop," that there were four machines and sixteen people were working. . . . Seven o'clock came and every one worked on. I wanted to rise as father had told me to do and go home. But I had not the courage to stand up alone. I kept putting off going from minute to minute. My neck felt stiff and my back ached. I wished there were a back to my chair so that I could rest against it a little. When the people began to go home it seemed to me that it had been night a long time.

The next morning when I came into the shop at seven o'clock, I saw at once that all the people were there and working as steadily as if they had been at work a long while. I had just time to put away my coat and go over to the table, when the boss shouted gruffly, "Look here, girl, if you want to work here you better come in early. No office hours in my shop." From this hour a hard life began for me. He refused to employ me except by the week. He paid me three dollars and for this he hurried me from early until late. He gave me only two coats at a time to do. When I took them over and as he handed me the new work he would say quickly and sharply, "Hurry!" And when he did not say it in words he looked at me and I seemed to hear even more plainly, "Hurry!" I hurried but he was never satisfied.

Questions

1. How is Rose Gollup treated the first days on the job?
2. Why are the other workers working extra hours?

6. Rose Gollup Attends a Union Meeting

A young man was standing on the platform speaking. What he was saying now was something like this:

"Fourteen hours a day you sit on a chair, often without a back, felling coats. Fourteen hours you sit close to the other feller hand feeling the heat of her body against yours, her breath on your face. Fourteen hours with your back bent, your eyes close to your work you sit stitching in a dull room often by gas light. In the winter during all these hours as you sit stitching your body is numb with cold. In the summer, as far as you are concerned, there might be no sun, no green grass, no soft breezes. You with your eyes close to the coat on your lap are sitting and sweating the livelong day. The black cloth dust eats into your very pores. You are breathing the air that all the other bent and sweating bodies in the shop are throwing off, and the air that comes in from the yard heavy and disgusting with the filth and the odor of the open toilets . . .

Each one of you alone can do nothing. Organize! Demand decent wages that you may be able to live in a way fit for human beings, not for swine. See that your shop has pure air and sun, that your bodies may be healthy. Demand reasonable hours that you may have time to know your families, to think, to enjoy. Organize! Each one of you alone can do nothing. Together you can gain everything."

For a moment the room was perfectly still. Then there was a storm of applause and the people rose and began to press close to the platform. I went to a vacant seat in an out-of-the-way corner and watched the people going out in groups and talking excitedly. When the hall was almost empty I went over to the secretary's desk. "I want to join the union," I said.

Questions

1. Why does the speaker believe the workers should join the union?
2. In your opinion, why did Rose Gollup decide to join?
3. If you were a worker in this industry, would you have joined the union? Explain.

7. “Girl Strikers Tell the Rich Their Woes” *The New York Times*, (December, 16, 1909: 3)

The shirtwaist workers strike won the support of some wealthy New Yorkers, especially among “progressive” women, who were disturbed by conditions in the industry. This article tells why their union is important.

“Also, it is true that I made \$15 a week,” said little Clara Lemlich yesterday afternoon to 150 well-to-do women gathered in the Colony Club, Madison Avenue and Thirteenth Street, at the invitation of Miss Anne Morgan, Miss Elizabeth Marbury, and Mrs. Egerton L. Winthrop, Jr., to hear representatives of the striking shirtwaist makers tell their side of the fight, now in its fourth week.

“I did not strike because I myself was not getting enough,” the east side girl went on to tell her Fifth Avenue audience, “I struck because all the others should get enough. It was not for me; it was for the others.”

More of the strikers spoke, as well as several women and men sympathizers, and then Mrs. Philip M. Lydig and Elsie De Wolf passed around two hats, which brought back over \$1,300. It was announced, also, that the Shuberts would give 50 per cent of the receipts of one of their New York theatres all next week to the strikers, that percentage being the share of the Shuberts in the receipts.

Mrs. J. Borden Harriman, President of the club, opened the meeting by saying that it was not to be understood that the club was throwing its weight on one side or the other in this strike. The Colony Club was a social organization, she said, and though many of the members individually sympathized with the striking shirtwaist makers, the organization was not in the fight. Then she introduced Miss Mary Dreier of the Woman’s Trade Union League, as Chairman of the meeting. This league, which many women of wealth and social position are joining, is heartily in favor of the strikers. Its chief work is helping along trade unionism.

Miss Dreier, who has been in the thick of the fight for weeks, said she would tell something about what happened before the strike was officially declared on Nov. 22. Before that time some of the more courageous of the 40,000 shirtwaist makers, most of whom are girls, had joined the union. Up to Nov. 22 the union numbered hardly 1,000 members.

“Girls who were brave enough to join the union found that they were being discharged for that reason alone,” she went on. “A lot of the girls were discharged for asking others to join the union. One firm turned out, all at once, 140 shirtwaist makers solely because they had become union members. One by one and in groups they were being dropped, and the union members saw that they must risk all, that they must fight and win or surrender; that they must sink or swim.

“So they decided to fight. Already 231 manufacturers have agreed with the union, and their girls have gone back to work. I think if these employers were asked what concessions they had made it would be found that the girls are not asking anything unreasonable.

“There are, however, some 7,000 girls still out. The employers of these are determined that they will not recognize the union. The battle between these girls and these most determined employers has begun in earnest. It is a question, which will win--the employers with plenty of money or the girls with none. The girls have one advantage now in the fact that a very busy part of the shirtwaist making season is about to begin, when those shops that are idle or running on part time will lose considerable trade.”

Questions

1. Where are Clara Lemlich and the strikers telling their story?
2. Why are they speaking with this group?
3. What does this group do to help the strikers?
4. In your opinion, why would a group of wealthy women support the strikers?

8. “Eyewitness at the Triangle” (*Milwaukee Journal*, March 27, 1911).

William G. Shepherd, a United Press reporter, was present at the scene of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire that killed 146 young immigrant Jewish and Italian working girls.

“I was walking through Washington Square when a puff of smoke issuing from the factory building caught my eye. I reached the building before the alarm was turned in. I saw every feature of the tragedy visible from outside the building. I learned a new sound—a more horrible sound than description can picture. It was the thud of a speeding, living body on a stone sidewalk.

Thud—dead, thud—dead, thud—dead, thud—dead. Sixty-two thud—deads. I call them that, because the sound and the thought of death came to me each time, at the same instant. There was plenty of chance to watch them as they came down. The height was eighty feet.

The first ten thud—deads shocked me. I looked up—saw that there were scores of girls at the windows. The flames from the floor below were beating in their faces. Somehow I knew that they, too, must come down, and something within me—something that I didn’t know was there—steemed me.

I even watched one girl falling. Waving her arms, trying to keep her body upright until the very instant she struck the sidewalk, she was trying to balance herself. Then came the thud--then a silent, unmoving pile of clothing and twisted, broken limbs.

As I reached the scene of the fire, a cloud of smoke hung over the building. . . . I looked up to the seventh floor. There was a living picture in each window—four screaming heads of girls waving their arms.

“Call the firemen,” they screamed—scores of them. “Get a ladder,” cried others. They were all as alive and whole and sound as were we who stood on the sidewalk. I couldn’t help thinking of that. We cried to them not to jump. We heard the siren of a fire engine in the distance. The other sirens sounded from several directions.

“Here they come,” we yelled. “Don’t jump; stay there.”

One girl climbed onto the window sash. Those behind her tried to hold her back. Then she dropped into space. I didn’t notice whether those above watched her drop because I had turned away. Then came that first thud. I looked up, another girl was climbing onto the window sill; others were crowding behind her. She dropped. I watched her fall, and again the dreadful sound. Two windows away two girls were climbing onto the sill; they were fighting each other and crowding for air. Behind them I saw many screaming heads. They fell almost together, but I heard two distinct thuds. Then the flames burst out through the windows on the floor below them, and curled up into their faces.

The firemen began to raise a ladder. Others took out a life net and, while they were rushing to the sidewalk with it, two more girls shot down. The firemen held it under them; the bodies broke it; the grotesque simile of a dog jumping through a hoop struck me. Before they could move the net another girl’s body flashed through it. The thuds were just as loud, it seemed, as if there had been no net there. It seemed to me that the thuds were so loud that they might have been heard all over the city.

As I looked up I saw a love affair in the midst of all the horror. A young man helped a girl to the window sill. Then he held her out, deliberately away from the building and let her drop. He seemed cool and calculating. He held out a second girl the same way and let her drop. Then he held out a third girl who did not resist. I noticed that. They were as unresisting as if he were helping them onto a streetcar instead of into eternity. Undoubtedly he saw that a terrible death awaited them in the flames, and his was only a terrible chivalry.

Then came the love amid the flames. He brought another girl to the window. Those of us who were looking saw her put her arms about him and kiss him. Then he held her out into space and dropped her. But quick as a flash he was on the window sill himself. His coat fluttered upward—the air filled his trouser legs. I could see that he wore tan shoes and hose. His hat remained on his head.

Questions

1. What caught the attention of the author of this newspaper article?
2. Why were the firefighters unable to help the girls caught in the fire?
3. Why did the young man help the girls jump to their deaths?
4. How do you think the people of New York City and the nation responded to this story? Why?