

LABOR

Letters from a Bintel Brief



Young laborers strike for better working conditions, 1909. Library of Congress.

1907

Dear Editor,

I am one of those unfortunate girls thrown by fate into a dark and dismal shop and I need your counsel.

Along with my parents, sisters and brothers, I came from Russian Poland where I has been well educated. But because of the terrible things going on in Russia we were forced to emigrate to American...I went to work in a shop. In this shop there is a foreman who is an exploiter, and he sets the prices on the work. He figures it out so that the wages so that the wages are very low, he insults and reviles the workers, he fires them and then takes them back. And worse than all of this, in spite of the fact that he has a wife and several children, he often allows himself to “have fun” with some of the working girls. It was my bad luck to be one of the girls that he tried to make advances to....

Though my hard-earned dollars mean a lot to my family of eight souls, I didn't want to accept the foreman's vulgar advances. He started to pick on me, said my work was no good, and when I proved he was wrong, he started to shout at me in the vilest language. He insulted me in Yiddish and then in English, so the American workers could understand too. Then, as if the Devil were in me, I ran home.

I am left without a job. Can you imagine my circumstances and that of my parents who depend on my earnings? The girls in the shop were very upset over the foreman's vulgarity but they don't want him to throw them out, so they are afraid to be witnesses against him. What can be done about this? I beg you to answer me.

Respectfully,

A Shopgirl

1910

Dear Editor,

I am an operator on ladies' waists for the past four years and I earn good wages. I work steady but haven't saved money, because I have a sick wife. I had to put her in the hospital where she lay for four weeks, and then I had to bring her home.

Just after I brought her home, the General Strike began and I could see that I was in trouble. I had to go to the union to beg them not to let me down in my situation. I just asked for some money to have a little soup for my sick wife, but they answered that there wasn't any money. I struggled along with my wife for four weeks, and when I saw that I might lose her I had to go back to work at the shop where we were striking. Now my conscience bothers me because I am a scab.

I am working now, I bring home fifteen, sometimes sixteen dollars a week. But I am not happy, because I was a scab and left the union. I want to state here that I was always a good union man.

Dear Editor, how can I go back to the union and salve my conscience? I am ready to swear that I will remain a loyal union man forever.

GLOSSARY

Operator on Ladies' Waists:

This refers to a person who operates a sewing machine. "Ladies' waists", or shirtwaists, were a popular style of women's blouses in the early 1900's.

General Strike:

In 910, trolley workers in Philadelphia went on strike. They refused to work until they received better pay and regulated work hours. In an act of solidarity over 60,000 workers in other industries joined the trolley workers in the strike.

Union:

When a group of workers in a particular trade or industry join together for the purpose of securing improvements in worker's pay, safety conditions and benefits.

Scab:

A derogatory term for a person who works despite an

