

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 4: "City of Immigrants"

"Women in a Labor War" Article

This article was published in "Munsey's Magazine," a popular weekly magazine, in April 1910. The article describes the shirtwaist strike and the young women's efforts to win better working conditions and the right to organize labor unions. The article aims to show the women's strength and commitment—that they went without wages and sometimes even food, and refused to stop striking before all of their demands were met.

Women Using Men's Weapons

Times had changed, and women had been changed by them. The invention of the steam-engine and the introduction of machinery had compelled many women to seek to earn their living in a new way. They found themselves in a tight corner—pressed by hunger, pressed by cold, pressed by unfulfilled desires of many sorts. Concerted action promised the only hope of success. None could win unless all would stand together; and these Jewish girls fitted the old weapon to the new emergency. They invoked the subtle power of the ancient oath of their race.

Some of the richest women in the country felt it. Mrs. O.H.P. Belmont, mother of the Duchess of Marlborough, felt it. Miss Anne Morgan, daughter of J. Pierpont Morgan, felt it. Mrs. Belmont sat up nearly all night in the night court to save some accused strikers from the necessity of spending Sunday in the Tombs, and, at three o'clock in the morning gave her Fifth Avenue mansion as security for the appearance of the girls in court the following day.

The daughter of another rich woman induced (convinced) her mother to deed (transfer ownership of) the family mansion to her in order that she might sit in court, day after day, and give bail for arrested girls. Miss Morgan showed her interest by attending a demonstration given in honor of a poor girl returned from the workhouse. Girls from Vassar... showed their interest by giving up their holiday vacations, going on picket duty, and doing everything else that they could do to promote the cause of their suffering sisters.

But the spur [of economic necessity] did more. It caused the women whom it had driven into factories to act like men who work in factories. Men who thus work do not weep or mourn when things in the factories pass beyond what they conceive to be their endurance. They strike. Not only do they strike, but they stick to their colors and battle for their cause as long as they have strength to do so. Yet no man ever gave a greater exhibition of dogged determination to persevere in the end than did these girls not yet out of their teens.

A Typical Labor War

When they "picketed" the factories and tried to prevent other women from taking their places,



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there were excitement and some disorder in the streets. In the scuffling, some of the girls were grabbed by the hair, and their heads were bumped against the curbstones. Never mind—let the strike go on!

More than six hundred were arrested, and a score were sent to the workhouse. What of it? Merely incidents of industrial warfare—let the strike proceed!

The six thousand who stayed out to the bitter end after the other twenty-four thousand had won their victory were actually starving. One day, on a single street, out of thirty pickets, twenty-eight fell in their tracks. It was not magnificent—just industrial war. Forget it, and remember the strike!

Then came the day when the employers of the remaining six thousand offered terms of peace. Back to the Cooper Union—read the terms. What were they?

As terms go, they were liberal. Every demand was granted except one. But that one rejected grievance—no union! Not recognized! Spurned, ignored, thrown out of court!

Starving girls were called upon to say what they would do. They filled the hall. A patriarchal Jew of seventy began to speak. He told his hearers that he was one of the few men engaged in the shirtwaist industry. He was the father of nine children. he knew what hunger was; he knew what cold was; he knew what work was. Also, he knew what visions were made of, for he himself had dreamed of a happier day when the union should protect them all.

In the same simple Yiddish that Clara Lemlich had employed at the beginning of the strike, he counseled the most careful consideration. They had struck for the union, it was true; but winter had come. The valiant remnant of the strikers had been reduced to bread and soup. Some of them had only an apple for breakfast, and nothing afterward. If the strike were to be ended upon the proffered terms, conditions would be better than they had ever been before. If the strike were to go on, there would be an indefinite continuation of bread and soup—and, in a little while, there might be no bread. An advance (progress) of twenty years had been made in the last two months; wouldn't it be better to rest content for a while—even without the union?

When he finished speaking, no one replied. Three thousand girls sat in stunned silence. For twenty full seconds, there was not the rustling of a foot nor the sound of a voice. Then, in unison, as if the three thousand girls had been trained for a month to do what they were about to do, there swept over the hall a mighty sob. . . . But the assembled girls had not yet spoken.

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Having sobbed, they were ready to speak. And, what was the order that these starving strikers unanimously gave? Here it is:

"Burn the [offered] terms of the employers and go on with the strike."

And they went out again into the cold, with their shivering bodies, their empty stomachs, and their heavy hearts. They had kept their oath.

Yes, indeed, women have changed.

Fifty years ago, women would never have waged such a desperate fight, in mid-winter, against five hundred employers. They hadn't been prepared. They hadn't learned to fight the world as men fight it for a living. But they are learning—learning in the same school in which man learned.

Source: Allan L. Benson, "Women in a Labor War," *Munsey's Magazine* xliii:1 (April 1910): 68-76.