

New Demands?

Part 1

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This collection of historical photographs depicts strikes, protests, rallies, and campaigns waged by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union between the turn of the 20th century and approximately 1985. Formed in New York City on June 3rd, 1900, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) was the largest union representing workers in the women's ready-to-wear clothing industry in the United States and Canada, numbering over 450,000 members at its peak. The ILGWU fought for and won some of the most historically significant rights for garment workers, including the right to freedom of assembly, union representation and collective bargaining, minimum hourly wages, the regulated work day and workweek, overtime and vacation pay, and pension benefits. By the 1960s, more than half of all American garment workers were unionized and earning good wages as a result of its campaigns. The Union also fought against racial segregation and for voting, civil, and immigration rights.

The ILGWU experienced substantial membership losses beginning in the 1970s as garment manufacturers relocated their operations, first to the southern United States — a region with few if any labor unions — and later to Mexico, Central America, and Asia. These losses were exacerbated by the marginalization of immigrant workers and workers of color, and by the union's failure to adopt more grassroots and inclusive structures. Over time the ILGWU went from representing mainly Jewish and Italian immigrant workers in its early years, to an increasingly diverse membership comprised of Black, Latinx, and Asian workers — yet its leadership remained primarily white and male, deliberately excluding workers of color from positions of power, leading rank and file members to lose confidence in the union's leaders and structures.

Small and mid-sized apparel factories and shops began to disappear during a massive wave of corporate mergers that swept through the garment industry in the 1980s and 1990s. Clothing manufacturing was concentrated in the hands of large retail chains and multinational corporations, and driven by automation, retail supply chains, outsourcing and subcontracting, making it incredibly difficult to organize and represent workers. Aided by new neoliberal trade policies, apparel multinationals moved production to offshore locations where wages and production costs are low, exporting sweatshop conditions to almost every corner of the global South. A lack of workplace protections and labor laws, combined with opaque subcontracting chains, deliberately make it impossible to enact or enforce



Shirtwaist makers, date unknown but probably early 20th century, unknown photographer.

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Workers holding placards that read "In Union Our Strength" in Yiddish, Italian, Russian, and English, c.1910, unknown photographer.

**YOU
TOO
CAN
JOIN**



Portrait of women shirtwaist strikers holding copies of "The Call," a New York socialist newspaper, 1910

The photo was probably taken during the "Uprising of the 20,000", a strike by approximately 20,000 mostly female shirtwaist makers in 1909-1910 in New York City. The ILGWU notes that the strike was notable for its size, duration, and support from middle class women. It followed the "Great Revolt", a 1909 strike of mostly male cloak makers in New York City. The strikes led to the Protocol of Peace, an agreement between the ILGWU and the garment industry that resulted in recognition of the union, reduced working hours, and higher wages in New York City.



Women pressers on strike for higher wages, date unknown, unknown photographer.



Workers from the Rose Dress Company on strike in Montreal, Canada, unknown photographer. The French-language placard reads "Rose Dress on Strike, Unfair to Labor", date unknown but probably taken during the 1937 Dressmakers' Strike / Grève des Midinettes.

**IN UNION
WE ARE
STRONG**



Mural of workers holding placards, date unknown (but after 1935 when the Social Security Act was passed), unknown photographer.



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Workers on W. 35th St. between 7th and 8th Ave., in New York, NY, strike for improved conditions, 1940. One sign suggests Franklin D. Roosevelt would say "End Starvation Wages" and Berger - Alenick [likely the manufacturer] would reply "Not in Our Sweat Shops", 1940 estimated, unknown photographer.

PEOPLE FIRST PROFITS LAST



ILGWU Local 415 picket in Miami, date unknown, unknown photographer.



ILGWU Labor Day parade float in Montreal featuring the Midinettes (Dressmakers), September 2, 1946, unknown photographer. Placards in French and English celebrate vacation pay, a health and sick fund, and the 40-hour work week — all gains won by dressmakers and the ILGWU as a result of the 1937 Dressmakers' Strike / Grève des Midinettes.

**WORKERS
WON'T BE
INTIMIDATED**

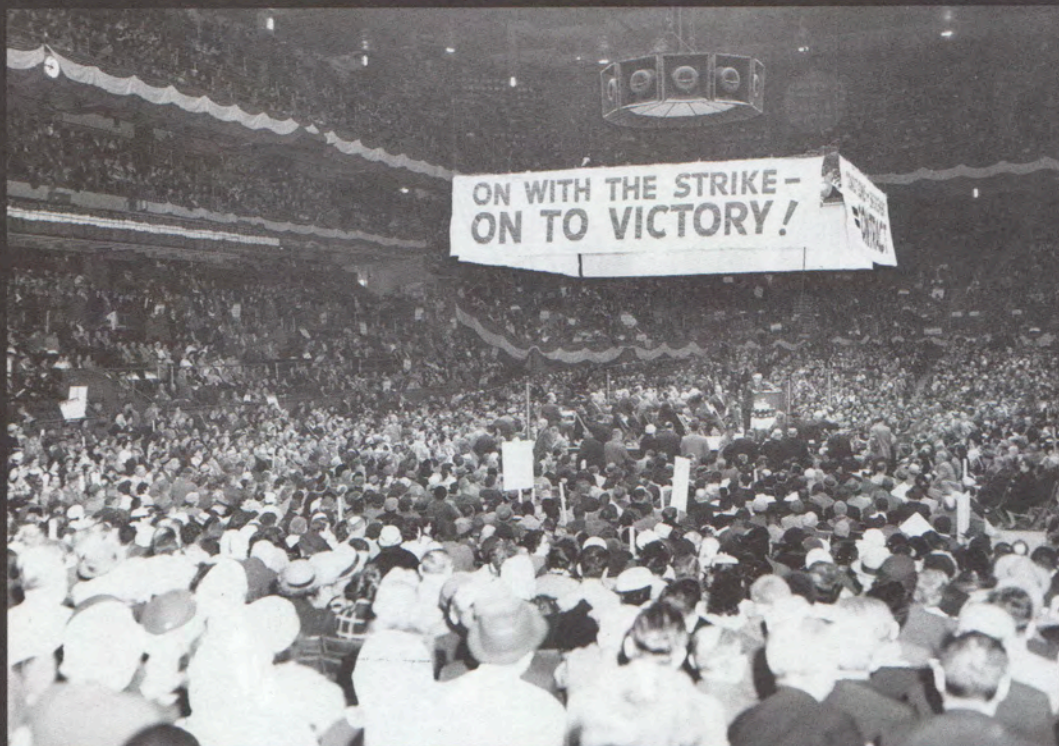
WE FIGHT WE WIN



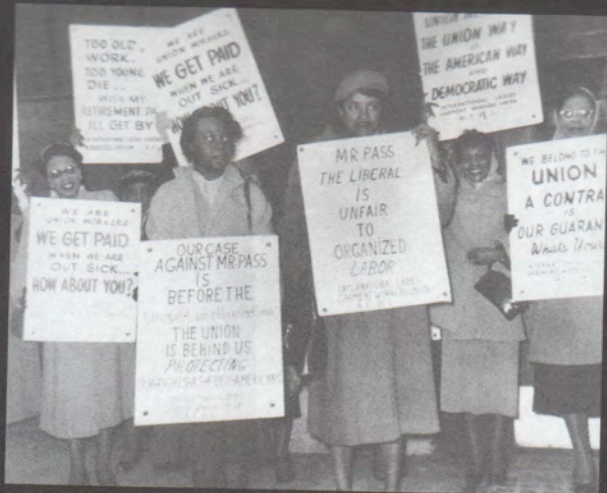
Business Agent Harry Milton and strikers prepare to relieve picketers on the line during the Scranton District Old Forge strike rally, March 5, 1958, unknown photographer.



Strikers from many companies form a picket line to support union-made goods, date unknown, photographer unknown.



ILGWU leaders address a crowded hall [Madison Square Garden?]. The banner above the podium reads: "On with the Strike — On to Victory!", 1958, unknown photographer.

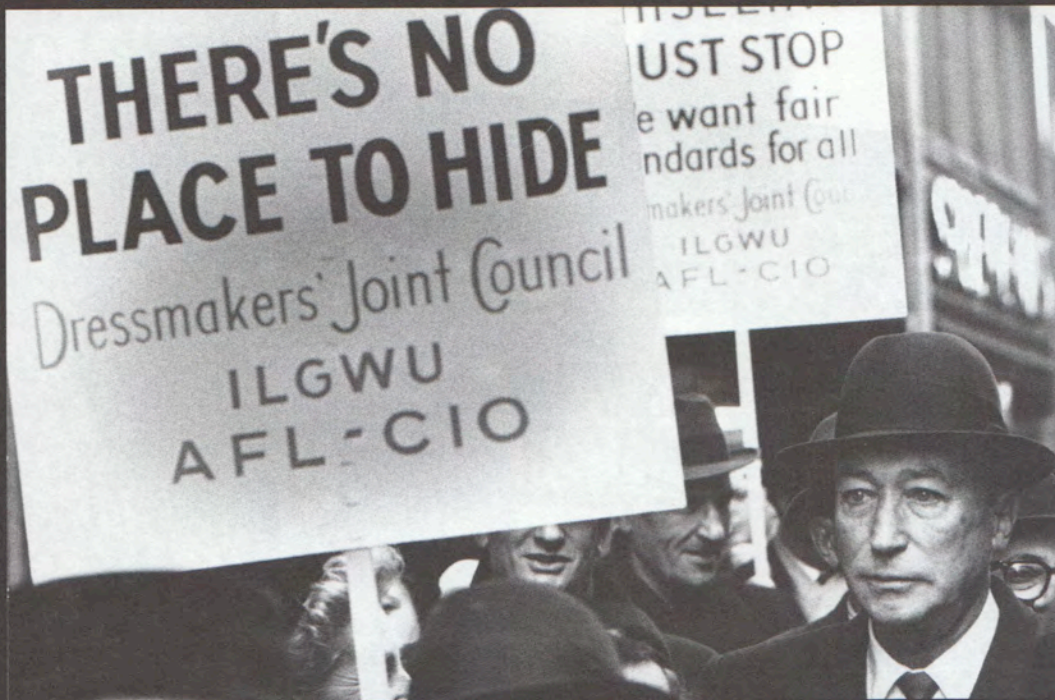


STOP THE ATTACKS ON WORKERS' RIGHTS

Women picketing for unionization, date unknown, photographer: ILGWU.



Men hold signs that read: "The Dress Shipping Clerks' Won't Cross the Picket Line. We Stand United with the Dressmakers Union!", 1958, unknown photographer



Local 22 (New York, NY) Manager Charles Zimmerman with a sign that reads: "There's no place to hide. Dressmakers' Joint Council ILGWU AFL-CIO," 1958, photographer: ILGWU.



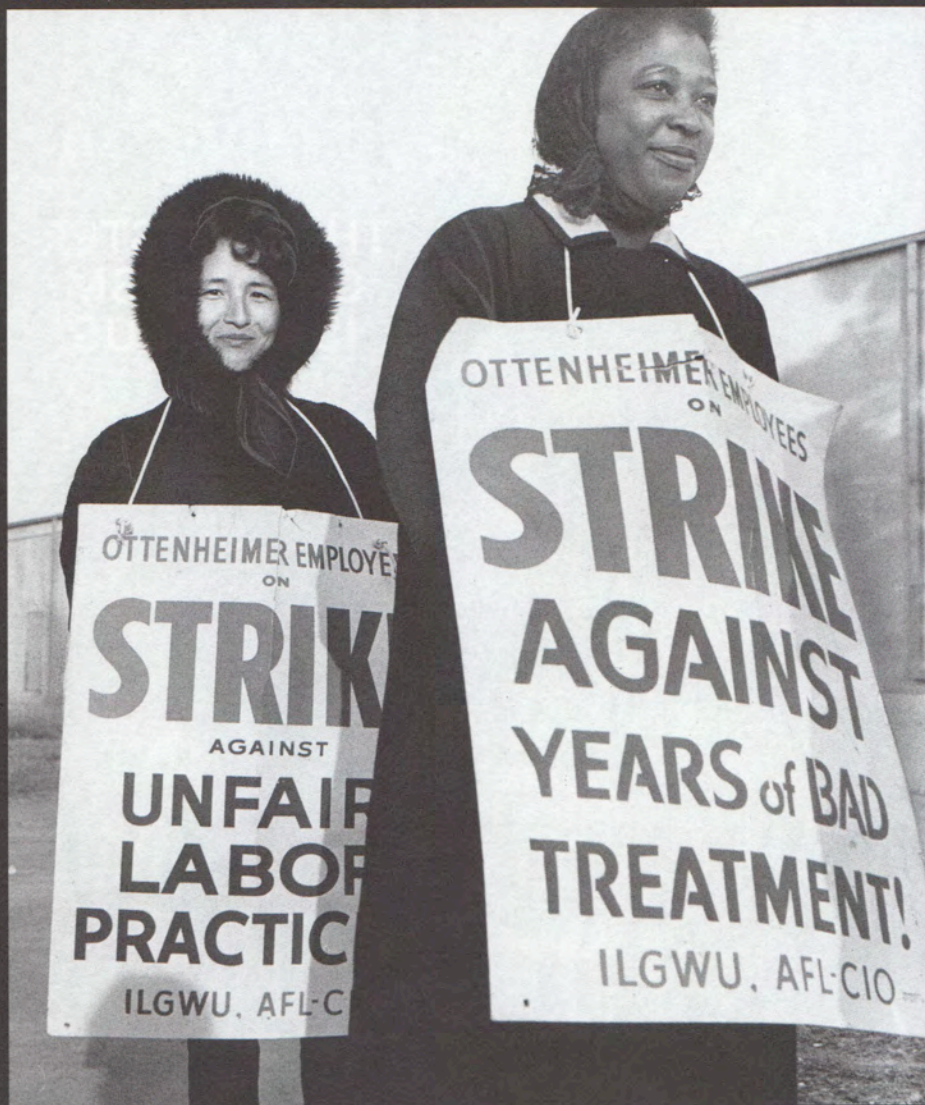
Members of ILGWU Local 105 (also known as the Snowsuits, Ski Wear, Leggings, Infants and Novelty Sportswear Union in New York City) picket against Woolworth's segregation and discrimination policies, 1963, unknown photographer.



Workers from ILGWU Local 148 - 102 holding placards in English and Spanish, announcing their strike against unfair labor practices at Sears Roebuck, February 1965, unknown photographer. Local 148 was in Bergen, NJ, and Local 148 was in New York City, where it would have been cold in February, prompting possible questions about the date and/or location of the photo.



Pickers, with placards that urge people not to buy Judy Bond blouses, pose for a group photo outside the Gertz Center, 1965 estimated, unknown photographer



Original caption: "Women wearing signs that indicate that they are on strike against Ottenheimer for poor treatment and unfair labor practices." December 1, 1966, unknown photographer. Additional research reveals that Kellwood Company operated around 36 plants across the country and sold the majority of its products to Sears-Roebuck. The company's Ottenheimer Division consisted of three plants that produced garments in Little Rock, AR. In 1966, employees voted for collective bargaining representation by the ILGWU, this despite a strong anti-union campaign. After seven months of unsuccessful negotiations the workers went on strike; the company replaced the workers with non-union workers and declared that it no longer recognized the Union. The National Labor Relations Board determined that the company violated the National Labor Relations Act. In 1970 the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals denied a request by the Kellwood Company, Oppenheimer Division, to overturn the NLRB decision against the company.

THE RIGHT TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING



ILGWU parade celebrating newly naturalized and registered citizens, date unknown. (Author: George Colon). Placards read, "We Will Be Heard, Roll Back Imports", and (translated from Spanish) "We Want: Peace Not War, Equality Not Privilege, Jobs Not Unemployment, Social Justice Not Abuses, Wealth Not Misery".

THE MONSTER OF FASCISM IS UPON US



Boycotting the J.P. Stevens Company, late 1970s. (photographer unknown). Additional research reveals that the J. P. Stevens company was founded in 1899 by John Stevens, whose grandfather started in the textile industry during the War of 1812. The company was known for its textile products under the Utica, Laura Ashley, and Ralph Lauren brands. It was also known for being staunchly anti-union, finally bowing to pressure in 1980 after a 17-year union battle and a four-year boycott. Only 17 per cent of its workforce was ever unionized. Workers were represented by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers but the boycott campaign was supported by the ILGWU, as in this photo, likely taken in New York City. In 1988 J.P. Stevens was bought by one of its largest competitors, Georgia-based West Point-Pepperell, during a time of increased mergers in the garment and textile industry. (see Robert J. Cole, "3-Month Battle for J. P. Stevens Ends, The New York Times, April 26, 1988).

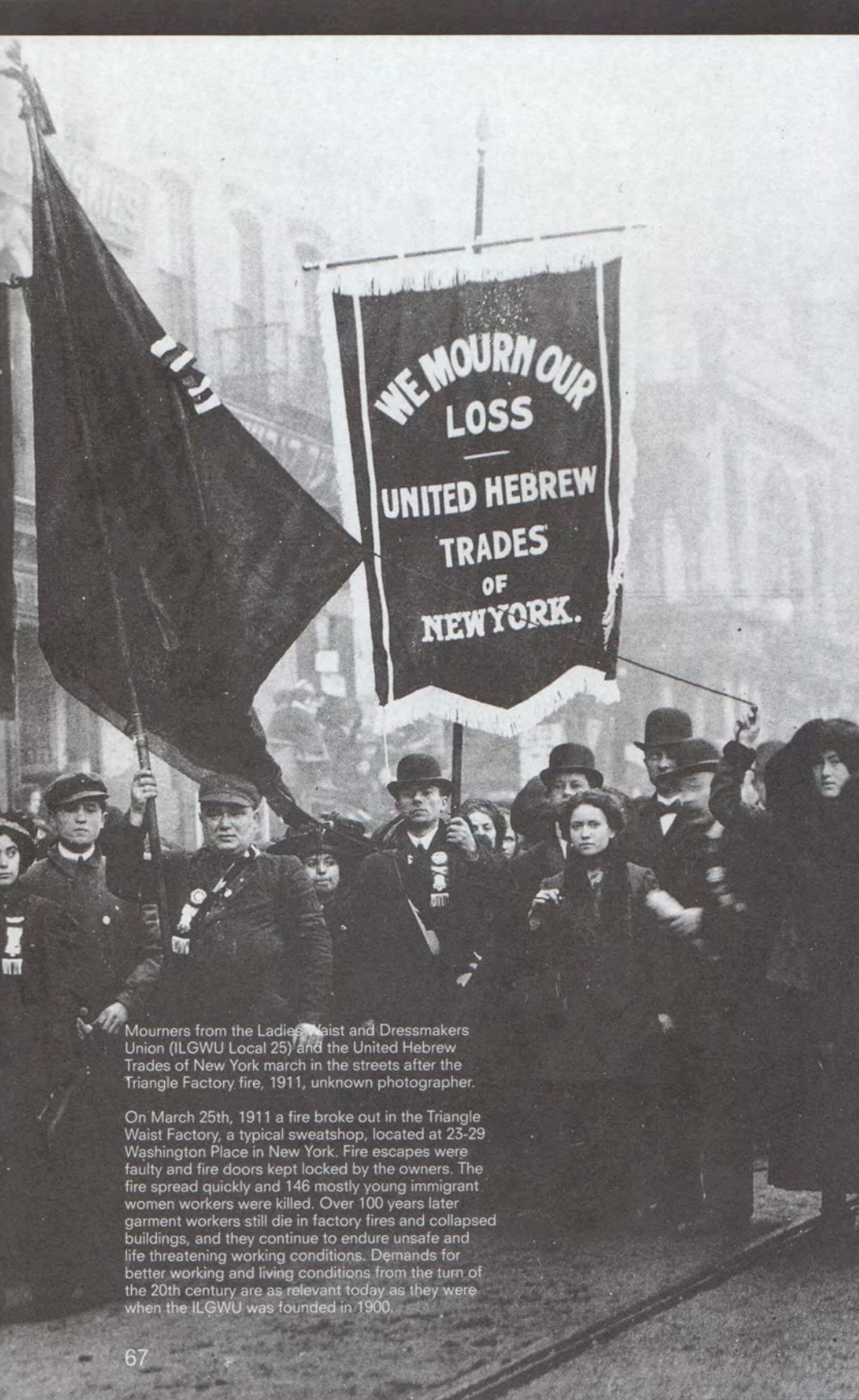


Members of ILGWU Local 23-35 on strike in Chinatown, New York. In June 1982 over 20,000 immigrant women garment workers went on strike to demand a union contract, which they won. The placard on the left reads, "Protect Our Union Contract" and the placard in the center reads, "We Are Standing Together (We Are One)." Photographer unknown.



Crowd at the import rollback rally in Florida, May, 1985, unknown photographer.





Mourners from the Ladies Waist and Dressmakers Union (ILGWU Local 25) and the United Hebrew Trades of New York march in the streets after the Triangle Factory fire, 1911, unknown photographer.

On March 25th, 1911 a fire broke out in the Triangle Waist Factory, a typical sweatshop, located at 23-29 Washington Place in New York. Fire escapes were faulty and fire doors kept locked by the owners. The fire spread quickly and 146 mostly young immigrant women workers were killed. Over 100 years later garment workers still die in factory fires and collapsed buildings, and they continue to endure unsafe and life threatening working conditions. Demands for better working and living conditions from the turn of the 20th century are as relevant today as they were when the ILGWU was founded in 1900.

workplace safety and other protections for garment workers. Across the global North and South alike, today working conditions for garment workers are largely exploitative, precarious, low-waged, and often unsafe.

The images in the photo essay are arranged mainly in chronological order, in a visual narrative that depicts the ILGWU's earliest struggles and demands for basic rights from the turn of the 20th century to the second world war, to campaigns to strengthen and maintain union gains, to struggles against racial discrimination in the workplace and society at-large. Over time and reflecting the decline and later demise of American garment and textile manufacturing, the ILGWU battled to maintain existing contracts and agreements, and it urged consumers to buy union-made clothing produced in the USA as opposed to cheap imports, emphasizing the ways in which unions benefit workers and their families.

Ultimately, aggressive neoliberal trade policies, multinational dominance, an anti-union political climate hostile to organized labor have all combined to unravel the gains made by the ILGWU and other unions. By the mid-1990s, garment workers in the USA were struggling with many of the same working conditions as in 1900: isolation, piecework pay and low wages, dirty and unsafe working conditions, wage theft, a lack of overtime pay, no health benefits, the absence of union representation and collective bargaining rights, and a lack of enforcement of existing labor laws. As writer and union organizer Alan Howard observes, sweatshop conditions today remain more or less the same as they were 100 years ago.¹ The number of unionized workers in the USA has been declining steadily since 1983, spurred by a (mostly Republican-led) policy and legislative agenda that has substantially lowered labor standards, weakened unions, and eroded workplace protections for union and non-union workers alike. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of workers who belong to unions hit an all time low in 2016 — only 10.7 percent of the workforce was unionized, mostly in public sector unions, down from 20.1 percent in 1983.

Initiated in 2012, New Demands? is an ongoing series of art works and performances connecting the current crisis in timed labor to historical struggles for workers' rights, with a focus on the garment and textile industries. New Demands? calls attention to the dramatic erosion of organized labor and workers' rights. By mobilizing historical slogans and demands of the American labor movement and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union in particular, New Demands? laments the fact that so many basic demands for better living and working conditions from over 100 years ago remain relevant and necessary today. Through text-based installations, public performances and interventions, silk screen and digital prints, and neon works, these historical demands are reinserted back into public spaces, calling attention to late capitalism's assault on unions and workers' rights, and the devastating loss of jobs, wages, benefits, and collective organizing structures.

All images courtesy the
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NOTE

1 Howard, Alan. 2007.
"Labor, History, and
Sweatshops in the New
Global Economy," in
Livingstone, Joan and
Ploof, John (eds). The
Object of Labor: Art,
Cloth and Cultural
Production. Chicago:
School of the Art Institute
of Chicago Press and
Cambridge Mass and
London: MIT Press: 31-50.