

**THE DIARY OF A SHIRTWAIST
STRIKER: A STORY OF THE
SHIRTWAIST MAKERS' STRIKE
IN NEW YORK**

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Theresa Serber Malkiel

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The
Diary of a Striking Waist Maker

NOVEMBER 23, 1909.—Ha, ha, ha! that's a joke. By Jove, it is. I'm a striker. I wonder what Jim'll have to say to this?

I must say I really don't know why I became one—I went down just because everybody else in the workroom did. They did try to explain it all to us girls, but all I could make out from the woman's speech was when she raised her eyes to the ceiling and exclaimed, like they do on the stage: "Sisters, mine, we are all with you!"—the lot of good it'll do us.

Oh, pshaw, if one was to believe all they tell you down there! The idea of their telling us that us girls are nothin' but slaves. Perhaps they are, but not I. I'm a free-born American, I am.

Some of them speakers look too silly for anything, especially that one with the long bushy hair. An' the way he screamed at the top of his voice, one would think that the house is on fire. I wonder if it hurts him—this strike does?

I guess Jim wouldn't mind my being a striker if he knew what fun I'm getting out of it. But I know better, he's that strict about all such things. I can just hear him call me an anarchist. And yet, it's a good thing, this strike is; it makes you feel like a real grown-up person. But I wish I'd feel about it like them Jew girls do. Why, their eyes flash fire as soon as they commence to talk about the strike—and the lot of talk they can put up—at times they make a body feel like two cents.

I simply can't get over the way little Ray Goldovsky jumped on a chair and suddenly, without a minute's notice, stopped the electricity. I must say, it's nothing but her bravery that took us all. Why, we were simply stunned. And Mr. Hayman, too, was taken off his feet. Before you could say Jack Robinson we all rose, slipped on our duds and marched down the stairs, shouting, yelling and giggling about our walkout, as they called it.

From there we went down in a body to Clinton Hall, an' Lord! I never saw so many people at once in my life, as I did there this afternoon. Talk about pushing and shoving, I don't see how some of us weren't killed in that crowd. I think they're the funniest people out; I almost split my sides laughing at some

of them. And the way they were jabbering with each other, an' quarreling about that strike, you'd really think their whole life depended on it.

I ain't a bit sorry that I did go down. What do I lose by it? Mr. Hayman will be only too glad to take me back. Meanwhile I'm having stacks of fun. Ma don't know that I ain't working. What was the use of telling her? I suppose the whole thing will be over in a day or two, and what she don't know don't hurt her.

I hope it won't last long! Oh! well, I won't be in it if it does. It's all good and well as a novelty, but who cares to get excited over it and take it to heart, the way Sarah, for instance, does. No, thanks, none of that for mine.

I'm surprised that Mr. Hayman didn't show up this afternoon; they were all so sure that he'd settle within a few hours. I guess it has been the girls' own imagination. It makes me smile when I think of being labeled; but what was I to do? Everybody gave in their name, so I had to give mine and a dime with it. They warned me that I can't get my union book unless I pay in the rest, \$1.15 in all. As if a body cares for their old book. What in the world do I want with a union? My mother and grandmother have gone through life without belonging to one and I guess I, too, can get along without it.

The only thing that keeps me with them is that it may help those poor devils who have to work for three and four dollars a week. It's but very few of the girls that make such wages as I do. And I believe they must have a real hard time of it. They look it. It was enough to break one's heart to see some of them. Perhaps it will be over tomorrow.

NOVEMBER 24.—Well, well, I think this strike is a more serious business than I thought, otherwise the papers wouldn't make so much of it. Why, every one of them is full of the strike and strikers; we are made so much of. It really feels good to be somebody. It even gave me courage to tell ma that I, too, am a striker. Of course I had to give her a whopper—had to tell her that Mr. Hayman closed up shop when the girls went out. He's just the one to do it. He's sure to keep it up, if only for spite. I wonder why he hates the union so much?

It's strange, when you come to think of all the noise us girls have made for the last two days. Why, the Vanderbilts themselves ain't in it any more—the people are too busy with us.

It's simply amazing what a difference one day may make. I think a complete change has come over me, and no wonder! It is enough to make any one mad the way they treat the girls, as if a body mustn't talk to anybody on the street. That's just why they've arrested Ray. It's ridiculous, their saying that she wanted to hit big Moe, as if that ruffian would be afraid of her. Poor kid, I'm real sorry for her, she has a hard lot with that

whole family upon her frail shoulders, an' I don't see how she can do it. Here am I that ain't got any board to pay, for ma don't need my money. Pa makes enough to keep the whole lot of us, so whatever I make is my own, but a body needs a whole lot these days and I don't get much left out of my wages.

That's just the reason why I went down, just for the fun of it, but it's getting quite serious. I've come to believe that this strike business is something like a catching sickness—measles or chicken-pox. Once you get it it sticks to you until it's all over.

And then again, one can't really help standing up for the girls. I went down to see Minnie; she's down in bed; some hoodlum hit her last night. God! how those people do live! I don't see how she can afford to stop for a single day.

Her brother Mack is out of work, her father never works, Minnie and her sister, Sarah, are out on strike. Talk about nerve, I really think them Jew girls have it all. I'd like a share of it myself, but somehow I ain't of the brave kind. Ray said she'd rather starve to death than be a scab and take some one else's bread out of their mouths. I'm sure I couldn't have that much courage, but I'd hate to go back on the girls.

One of these talking women was trying to tell us girls that we ought to be glad of the opportunity to be idle for awhile—it gives us a chance to see and learn things that we could have never known anything about. She may be right, after all; what I've learned in these last two days is enough to put me wise to many a wrong. Only a little while ago I would have laughed had somebody told me that I would take this strike in earnest, but this afternoon, listening to the stories of assault upon the girls, watching the poor, miserable creatures that don't earn enough to keep body and soul together, I believe I was as much excited as the rest of them.

The girls said that Hayman is just furious because he can't get any scabs, and he wanted to make us believe that he's got more hands willing to work than he had work for. I wonder who was the first to use the name scab? By Jove, it's the right one at that; nobody clean could be mean enough to step into somebody else's shoes.

That was a pretty smart woman who said that the trouble with us girls is our seeing life from it's funny side only. That we think it nothing but a place of entertainment and therefore try to dance through it. Then she added that it wasn't so—that life was a pretty serious proposition, and us girls should take our time to think more about it.

Honestly, there's nothing that will make you think so much as a strike does. I know it did me. I've been thinking and thinking till my head aches and when I think of meeting Jim my heart just goes way down to my boots, for I'm sure he'll say I've gone mad. And I like Jim better than I do anybody or anything in this world.

NOVEMBER 25.—Another day spent in that dingy, smelly hall and still no end. Mr. Hayman don't come around and I'm pretty sure he won't come, either. The crowds increase every hour. Just like the ocean tide, their number grew higher and yet they said down at the headquarters that forty-one bosses have settled already and seven thousand girls are back to work. But then there are still four times seven thousand out and if the bosses will be settling at the rate of seven thousand in three days it will take almost two weeks before this big strike is settled. I think it's terrible. Why, some of the girls can't wait a day!

They asked me to go picketing, but I refused, of course. The idea of walking around the street corner as if I was a watch dog! They ought to be glad that I come down to their meetings every day. That ain't so bad; why, I even had a dance there this afternoon. And why not? A body may as well enjoy life if there's a chance.

I was kind of upset by what the last speaker said to us. According to her notion the bosses consider us nothing but hands and don't care what happens to us. It was simply humiliating to listen to her string of words, but when I come to think of it she was right, after all. If I'm out of a job and pick up a newspaper to look for work I go for the page where it says "hands wanted." If I'm delayed and come too late the boss informs me that he has all the hands he needs. And that's exactly what the woman said. It isn't the mother's daughter, or brother's sister, or Miss So-and-So that the boss wants, but a good, swift pair of hands, and, if they're used up, he looks for others. We don't count at all.

But that's a measly shame; we ought to put a stop to it! They say that the union will. If it should be true I vouch to stick to it. But who can believe everything they say! Not I. I guess I'll have to listen more carefully to their talking and find out things for myself. Oh, Lord! I'm so tired, and yet I didn't do a stitch of work for the last three days. I guess it's the excitement. To be sure, I'm having plenty of it. Jim was up here a little while ago. It's just as I had expected; why, he is just wild at my having mixed myself up with the strike. He said that I'd better quit and I said I won't, and before long we were having a tongue lashing and came pretty near having a falling out. That never happened to us since we have been going together.

The idea of his saying that a strike is good enough for these East Side girls, but he can't see the sense of my going into it. As if I was something better, made of different clay, perhaps. No, the speaker justly said that it makes no difference to what nationality we girls belong, or of what religion we are, so long as we have to work one is as good as the other, for all have one and the same interest—to make life a bit easier.

I'm mighty glad I had the courage to tell Jim just what I thought of his words. I'm sure he'll mind his business after this and I'll try to mind my own. It's a bit too much, him acting as if he is my boss already. Not by a long shot! There's many a slip between the cup and the lip.

Of course, I felt miserable when he left. This quarrel went like a shot through me. Jim can't even guess how much I love him, for I won't show him that I take it so much to heart. What's the use, he'll only get stuck up; they all do.

I suppose he thought I was one of them fickle kind that change their mind like some people their gloves. Well, let him, it'll all come out in the wash.

I ain't the only one to make sacrifices. Look at Minnie; she was engaged to be married and left man and all to come over here to help out her family. To tell the truth, one can't help being less selfish when a body is all the time with those noble Jew girls. During the day I'm usually so busy thinking of the strike that I often forget about Jim, for he is, after all, only one and they're so many, these poor suffering creatures. They are surely tired of this constant insult and abuse.

Well, as long as there is life there's hope; we'll see what the morrow has in store for us.

NOVEMBER 26.—How some people do contradict themselves. Here's Mr. Hayman furious because the girls have made up their minds to form a union. And what does he do but go to work and organize one himself. Come to think of it, he had always been doing things that were tabooed to us girls.

It's strange, though; why should our bosses have to organize a union to fight us? Can't they do it single handed? They've lots of money, own the factories and machines. But no, they must needs come together in order to put up a fight against frail, poor, defenseless girls.

One of the speakers compared us the other day to a crowd of children out on the green playing a game of "London Bridge's Falling Down." The way she brought it out, it was self-understood that if us working girls will stand together and pull with all our might in the same direction we'll be sure to win. Our bosses will not be able to do anything against us then, not even if they all come together, for we will still have the numbers on our side. And I'm beginning to think that numbers count even more in real life than they do in games.

No doubt it will take some time before us girls can make them give in to us. The bosses have always been that proud—something better than us. And now we have cheek enough to stand up on our legs and demand that they come to the union to sign an agreement. Upon my word, we ought to be glad that we went out on strike—it teaches us self-respect.

If only the girls wouldn't be hounded so much. It's terrible the way they are treated, and what surprises me most is that they take it all. They seem to turn a deaf ear to everything. Their enthusiasm even grows with the hardships they're encountering. I think I'll try my hand at picketing tomorrow.

It ain't only our girls that are out doing that job, there is a lot of college women, members of the Woman's Trade Union League, who spend their days watching our factories. And a fine lot of women they are at that. I've come to know quite a number of them. What sets me a thinking is the fact that these women could go on living to their heart's content. They needn't come downtown among us if they don't want to, and why should they do it? It can't be for the sake of what's in it, for there ain't much fun in standing around the bleak, cold corners, being arrested by the cops and taken to the station house and police court.

I shouldn't wonder that their conscience pricks them a bit—they must be ashamed of being fortune children while so many of the girls have never known what a good day means. The rich women seem to be softer than the men; perhaps it's because they ain't making the money—they're only spending it. Or is it that women, as a rule, are better natured than their men folk? The saying has it that there is nothing so bad as a bad woman, nor anything better than a good one. I must admit the league women are the goodest of the good. And the Woman's Trade Union League in general is a mighty good thing for us girls.

Sarah was crying bitterly this afternoon, and I don't wonder. The idea of Mr. Hayman calling her a street woman! He surely knows better. Why, she has always been the quietest and most refined girl in the workroom. It's just because she's a foreigner. I'm sure he wouldn't dare say that to me. He knows that I wouldn't stand for it. I'd simply take the law into my own hands. And let him try to arrest me if he will.

It's really too bad that the strikers are mostly foreigners. Somehow everybody thinks that they can be handled in any which way and this is just the reason why the cops and the judges are so free in abusing and punishing them so much, when by rights they shouldn't be at all molested. The girls are attending to their own business, getting all the members they can to join the union. But the police ain't; they are sent to keep the peace and what do they do but start a row by using their big sticks on the girls' heads.

And our newspapers all seem to be tongue-tied! Not one of them dares to tell the truth of what is going on. And yet they ain't so dull. I suppose they wish to keep on the good side of our bosses.