

## Fashioning Cleveland's Union-Made Clothing "In Union There Is Strength"



The Carlin House 3233 Euclid Avenue  
Headquarters for the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union  
(ILGWU) 1951  
Cleveland Public Library/Photograph Collection



Hillman, Sidney Memorial Building (Amalgamated Clothing Workers)  
(Norma Herr Center) 2227 Payne Avenue Built in 1949  
Cleveland Historical.org

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a good percentage of the clothes that Americans wore were produced in Cleveland. At one time, one in seven Clevelanders worked in the garment industry, employing thousands of seamstresses and pressers. The garment industry was second to New York in size and the source of much of America's ready-to-wear clothing.

Cleveland was the fifth largest center of garment manufacturing in the country, after New York, Chicago, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Eight thousand people were employed in garment shops, double what it had been in 1900, outpacing increases across the country and the population of the city

Richman Brothers was once the largest retail manufacturer in the world in its imposing building complex on E. 55<sup>th</sup> Street. At one time, Joseph & Feiss was one of the largest of its kind in the United States, focused on producing men's and boys' clothing under the label "Clothcraft Clothes." And there were hundreds of other businesses -- almost all family run and almost entirely Jewish.

With the exception of Richman Brothers and Joseph & Feiss, most of the garment businesses were small and not as well known. Cleveland's garment manufacturers had more diverse owners and employers. The vast majority of garment employers in Cleveland were Jewish immigrants from Germany and Eastern Europe.

Less publicized compared to the New York sweatshops, Cleveland's businesses had better labor relations and had stopped using the sweatshop model by the 20th century.



Joseph & Feiss Co. 1942  
Cleveland Public Library/Photograph Collection

Although working conditions were somewhat better in Cleveland than in New York, Cleveland garment workers generally received low wages and worked long hours with few, if any, benefits. Like garment workers elsewhere, they sought to improve their wages and working conditions by organizing. In 1900 a number of small craft and trade unions joined together in New York City to form the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).

Two major American clothing workers' unions -- the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) -- defended the standards of living and the job security of their members through the use of the union label and the promotion of the fashion industry in collaboration with prominent American designers. Sewn into every union-made garment, the label signaled to consumers that the goods they were buying were produced by American workers who enjoyed "fair labor standards and the American way of life."

### Union Label Marketing – A Logo and An Iconic Jingle



Richman Brothers Factory (Undated)

[The Kheel Center ILGWU](#) Cleveland Public Library/Photograph  
Cornell University ILR School  
Collection

After the establishment of the Union Label Department in 1958, the ILGWU launched the first garment industry-wide label. The union sponsored many well-publicized launch events, during which the wives of several government officials, including Eleanor Roosevelt, sewed the label into garments made in unionized shops.

In 1959, the ILGWU national union label campaign was still appealing to traditional visions of American domesticity. When advertising executive Paula Green re-imagined the "Look for the

union label” campaign 16 years later, she—and the union—embraced the new language of feminism and women’s liberation, giving women workers the opportunity to speak for themselves about the importance of union wages in sustaining their families.

### **Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union**

**Labor leader Beryl Peppercorn** (1892-1969) and Frank Rosenblum co-founded the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) in 1914. Peppercorn, the son of a Jewish tailor from Austria whose family immigrated to Cleveland around 1900, emerged as the head of the local union. He was not only manager of the Cleveland Joint Board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America from 1922 to 1958. He was also instrumental in forming the first CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) unions in Cleveland during the 1930s and in fighting Communist domination of these unions during the early 1940s.

Under his guidance, the ACWA began organizing the **JOSEPH & FEISS CO.** in 1924, and ten years later the company recognized the ACWA after 1,600 of its workers went on strike. By 1935, the ACWA had negotiated contracts at most of the men's clothing stores in Cleveland, making it one of the largest labor unions in the area. Not only was the ACWA able to negotiate substantial improvements in wages and working conditions, but it also pioneered in the area of fringe benefits. During its organizing activities, the ACWA developed a close relationship with the manufacturers and they eventually became one of its strongest supporters. Peppercorn also instrumental in co-founding the Cleveland Industrial Union Council, the local affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during the 1930s, and in fighting Communist domination of the unions during the 1940s. Another prominent name associated with the Amalgamated union was **Sidney Hillman**, founder and president, of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (a predecessor union of Workers United, SEIU). He is remembered as one of the greatest labor leaders in U.S. history. His tireless efforts to bring dignity and respect to working people left a lasting legacy for the American public.



### **Local Industry-wide History**

A 1919 "general," or industry-wide, strike resulted in a 44-hour work week, increased wages, and union security in many of the Cleveland shops, and a seven-week strike in 1921 against the Douglas Tailoring Co., which had shops in Akron and Canton as well as Cleveland, resulted in the union's greatest organizing victory during its early years here.

Regardless of its successes in the smaller shops, the union's welfare depended critically on its ability to organize the city's three largest garment manufacturers -- **Kaynee, Joseph and Feiss, and Richman Brothers**. Interestingly, all three were owned by Jewish entrepreneurs and developed national reputations for their progressive labor policies.

**Kaynee**, which employed around 700 workers at its main plant on Aetna Avenue in the Slavic Village neighborhood, produced mainly boys' clothing. The company was originally named the Kastriner and Eisenmann company but underwent a number of name changes before finally in 1914 settling on Kaynee, a phonetic spelling of the founders' Charles Eisenman's and Jacob Kastriner's surname initials. Kaynee's factory contained a day care center, recreation room, dance hall, and movie theater, as well as medical and dental clinics, and an outdoor playground.

**Bobbie Brooks, Inc.**, a leader in the production of women's apparel, was established by Maurice Saltzman and Max Reiter as Ritmore Sportswear, Inc. in a loft in the Bradley Bldg. on W. 6th St. in 1939. Beginning with a \$3,000 investment, they built the company into a multi-million dollar operation within the next 15 years. In 1953 Saltzman bought out Reiter's share in the company for \$1 million and the firm became Bobbie Brooks, Inc. With offices at 3830 Kelley Ave. and a plant at 2230 Superior Ave.,

**Joseph and Feiss Co.**, which employed some 2,000 workers at its West 53rd Street plant, combined scientific management and progressive welfare policies, resulting in well-lit and well-ventilated work spaces, work chairs and tables redesigned to maximize comfort and minimize injury, plus company-sponsored dances, choruses, athletic clubs, and more. Joseph and Feiss offered free medical care for workers, as well as the opportunity to take classes in English and other subjects. The company also operated a library where workers could go to borrow books or to have a quiet place to read. Additionally, the company introduced the five-day, forty-hour work week in 1917, before Henry Ford did so in Detroit.

**Richman Brothers**, operating out of a 65,000 sq. ft. factory on East 55th Street, offered its thousands of employees two weeks (later three) of paid annual leave, paid maternity leave, interest-free loans in times of need, and many other benefits.

The union had made concerted efforts to organize both Joseph and Feiss and Richman Brothers since 1926, but it was not until 1934

that they could claim success at Joseph and Feiss. The firing of a worker for union activity resulted in a walkout, picketing by as many as a thousand employees, and finally, after intervention by Hillman, a vote inside the factory on whether the workers preferred the Amalgamated or the pre-existing company union – a vote won overwhelmingly by the ACWA.

Later that year, the union called a strike at Kaynee, and after a two-month strike marred by violence and the company's temporary closing of the factory, the company agreed in January 1935 to a contract providing union recognition, wage increases, and other benefits.

Despite thirty years of trying, Richman Brothers was the one firm which the Amalgamated could never organize, Management of this firm had always tried to achieve a work environment suitable for its big "family" of employees, and toward the end of the union's efforts, in the early fifties, it complained that "the union plan has been one to crush our business."

Beryl Peppercorn reported to the 1950 convention that Richman Brothers remained unorganized, but he was hopeful the new union label program would lead to falling sales for the firm and an eventual union victory. The union also shifted its organizing efforts to the company's 64 retail outlets, which employed 800 workers, compared with 2,500 at the East 55th factory, and began picketing around half the stores in 1951.

With the defeat of the union efforts at Richman Brothers in the early fifties, the Amalgamated began a process of slow decline not long after the Sidney Hillman Building was opened. New plant technology, changing markets, and much cheaper labor, first in the American South and then overseas, sounded the death knell of the local industry.

In 1952 Aetna International bought a large share of Kaynee Co. stock and then sold it to Piedmont Shirt Co. of Greenville, S.C., which closed the Cleveland factory in 1958. In 1969, Richman Brothers merged with F.W. Woolworth, which liquidated the Cleveland firm and closed the massive factory in 1992. Finally, in 1995, Joseph and Feiss closed its doors after 150 years in Cleveland, and the main factory building was razed in 2003. The office building was spared and redeveloped in 2017 as Menlo Park Academy, a charter school.

As the industry declined locally, so did the union. It first merged with the Textile Workers Union in 1976 to form ACTWU, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, which then merged with the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union in 1995 to form UNITE, the United Needle Trades, Industrial, and Textile Employees, and then, in 2004 merged with the Hotel and Restaurant Employees (HERE) to form UNITE HERE. A dissident group broke from UNITE HERE in 2009 to form Workers United, a union which represented around 150 workers in Brooklyn, Ohio, producing expensive men's suits under the Hugo Boss label until that facility, too, was closed in 2019.

## **More on Cleveland's Clothing Manufacturing and Unions**

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