

## GENDER AND AMERICAN CULTURE

### *Coeditors*

Thadious M. Davis  
Mary Kelley

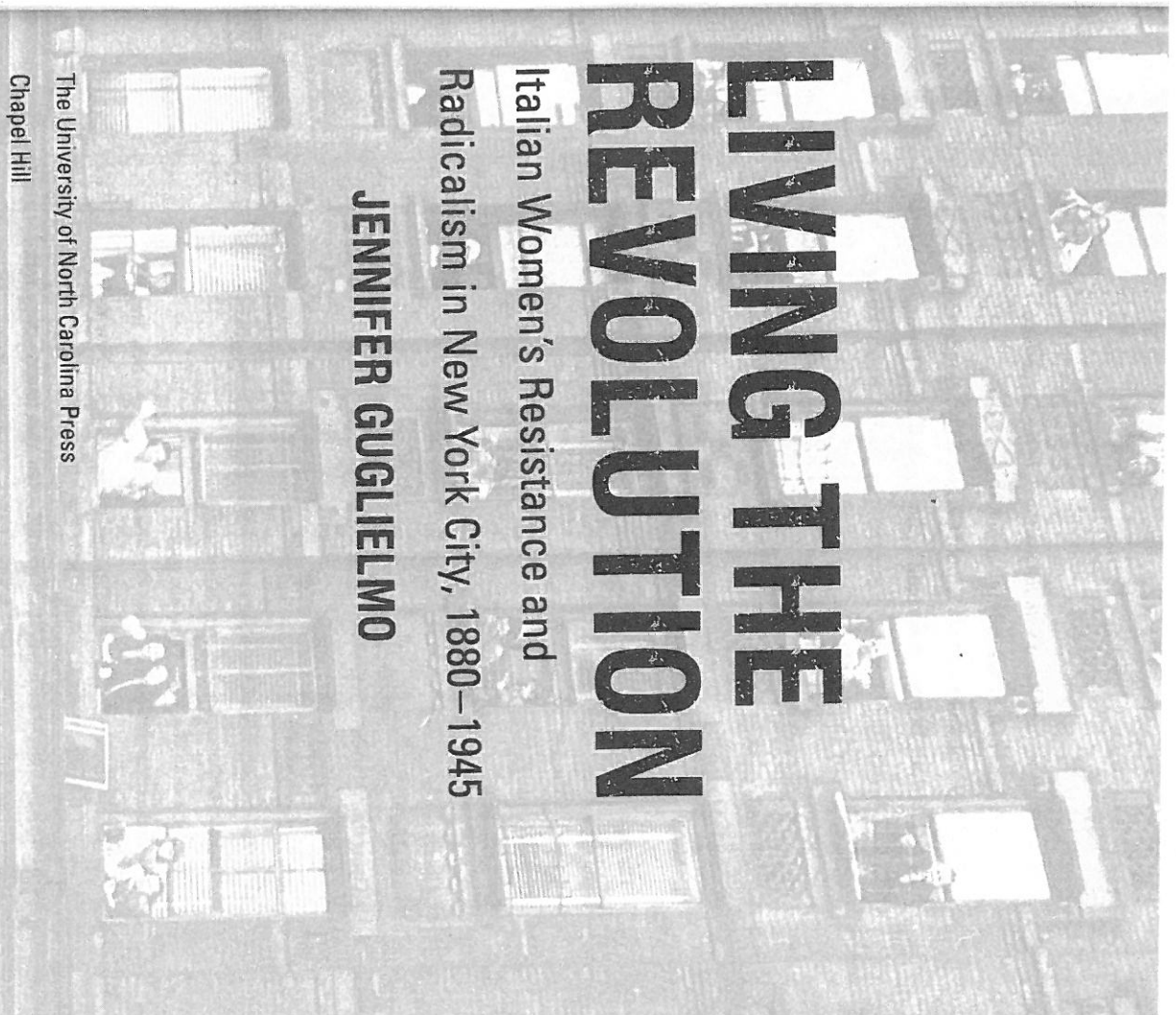
### *Editorial Advisory Board*

Nancy Cott	Linda K. Kerber
Jane Sherron De Hart	Annette Kolodny
John D'Emilio	Nell Irvin Painter
Farrah Griffin	Janice Radway
Amy Kaplan	Barbara Sicherman

### *Emerita Board Members*

Cathy N. Davidson  
Sara Evans  
Wendy Martin

A complete list of books published in Gender and  
American Culture is available at [www.uncpress.unc.edu](http://www.uncpress.unc.edu).



# LIVING THE REVOLUTION

Italian Women's Resistance and  
Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945

JENNIFER GUGLIELMO

The University of North Carolina Press  
Chapel Hill



## The 1909–1919 Strike Wave and the Birth of Industrial Unionism

On a cold winter evening in January 1913, more than four thousand Italian women garment workers gathered at Cooper Union in New York City with great anticipation. The meeting was the culmination of a mass organizing campaign in the waist and dress industry that had launched an impressive strike wave among garment workers in New York City and New Jersey. Unprecedented numbers of Italian women had joined the strike, alongside Russian, Lithuanian, Polish, German, Greek, Irish, Spanish, Hungarian, and other immigrant workers. By January, the strike had gathered considerable steam. More than 150,000 workers in four sectors of garment production had walked off their jobs, paralyzing the industry and forcing manufacturers into negotiation. Italian women had been pivotal to the success. In hundreds of shops spread across the city, they had organized picket lines, convinced others to walk off their jobs, and withstood arrest and beatings at the hands of employers and police. But on that January evening at Cooper Union, it appeared the union, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), had sacrificed their needs. Not only did the union sign an agreement with manufacturers without their approval, but the agreement did not even include most of the shops that employed Italian workers. With loud jeers and stomping feet, the Italian women present rejected the union leaders' instructions to return to work. Several rushed the stage, forcing speakers off the platform with cries of a frame up, and urged workers to abandon the ILGWU in favor of the more militant Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

This "storm of protest," as the *New York Times* termed it, spread to the streets. Several women smashed the windows of a nearby shirtwaist factory with rocks and others sat in the center of Third Avenue, bringing traffic in lower Manhattan to a halt. Dissent spread throughout Brooklyn and Harlem as more workers

learned of the settlement and gathered in the streets to defy the court injunction forbidding them to picket garment shops. The next day, in an icy snowstorm and subzero temperatures, twenty thousand workers, most of them Italian women, marched through the city's garment districts in opposition to the union, the state, and their employers. A week later, close to one thousand Italian immigrant women in twelve factories across New York City abandoned the ILGWU and declared a strike for better pay and shorter hours under the auspices of the IWW.<sup>1</sup>

As the second largest group of workers in the garment trades, Italian women's solidarity and militancy were crucial to the union's ability to orchestrate the 1913 uprising. Yet, at the height of the strike, it appeared that the ILGWU sold them out.<sup>2</sup> As workers in the most poorly paid and dangerous jobs in the city's dress and shirtwaist factories, they had the most to lose. Many were not covered by the settlement, and those who were faced a more deeply entrenched and institutionalized sex-based division of labor that continued to assign women to the lowest-paid jobs, and set their minimum wage lower than men who held the same jobs. The agreement had won some union recognition, but Italian women had not gained a voice in union affairs. Rather, it appeared as if the leaders of the ILGWU "preferred to deal with the employers rather than with their own members."

The 1913 uprising encapsulates several compelling themes in the history of Italian immigrant women's activism in the United States. As with others in the clothing trades, they faced low wages, dangerous working conditions, and inhumane treatment. Yet, unlike the Jewish women who dominated the rank and file of the industry at the turn of the century, Italian women did not join the garment unions en masse until the Great Depression. While the press, union leaders, and some other workers considered hurling rocks through factory windows as riotous and as evidence of Italian immigrant women's inability to organize, this was a direct-action strategy firmly rooted in the struggles of their homelands. The American-born generation would eventually turn to reformist unions en masse, but the immigrant generation remained deeply skeptical of these organizations. Those who became active in the labor movement most often devoted themselves to transnational anarchist and revolutionary socialist circles and to the militant industrial union movement embodied by the IWW. And while Italian immigrant women were marginalized within most American labor organizations and often dismissed or derided because their actions confounded those around them, they were in fact creating a movement. They were drawing on communal protest traditions, and turning urban networks of mutual exchange into avenues of activism. As a result, in the decade from 1909 to 1919, they participated in some of the

largest labor strikes of this period and entered the industrial union movement in force, to create union cultures that were all their own.

### Beyond the 1909 Uprising of 20,000

Stories of Italian immigrant women's activism on the front lines of U.S. labor struggles were numerous in the Italian-language radical press during the early twentieth century. Often they highlighted women's audacity, courage, and inventiveness in confronting abusive and demeaning labor conditions. Such stories are largely absent from scholarship on garment workers' labor struggles in New York City in this period, however, which has for the most part portrayed Italian women as nonmilitants.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this history has almost exclusively focused on the first major garment strike, the 1909 "Uprising of 20,000" shirtwaist workers, which began in the city in July and quickly spread to Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

The details of this five-week strike have in fact become legendary. Young Clara Lemlich, a Jewish immigrant whose family had fled a pogrom in the Ukraine, led her mostly Jewish women co-workers with the rallying cry, "We are starving while we work; we might as well starve while we strike!" A self-proclaimed socialist and member of the union's executive board, Lemlich was a seasoned activist who had been beaten badly on the picket line at her shop. Defying the directives of male union leaders, she called for a general strike to the thunderous applause of the crowd. Jewish women workers also responded to the recalcitrance of the ILGWU's male leadership, by aligning with white Protestant middle-class progressives and feminist activists in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), who helped to organize the masses of women who showed up at union halls during the strike.<sup>5</sup>

The 1909 strike captured the imagination of a generation of women's historians for many reasons. It brought tens of thousands of working-class immigrant women into the union movement and strengthened the garment unions overall. It was also an inspiring example of working-class immigrant and middle-class native-born women aligning against men of all classes. Yet, much of this scholarship advanced the idea that Italian women in the garment trades were unorganized and unsympathetic to the union movement because they composed only 6 percent (approximately two thousand) of the strikers, while they were almost 34 percent of the shirtwaist industry labor force at the time. But those who drew such conclusions relied exclusively on English-language source material and uncritically accepted the opinions of many in organized labor. As a result, the reputation that Italian immigrant women were often submissive workers and scabs was passed down from one generation to the next.<sup>6</sup>



Italian and Jewish women at May Day parade in New York City, 1916, which drew more than 40,000 participants. At the time, close to 120,000 garment workers were on strike. The women hold a banner fashioned out of a nightgown with the word "purity" in Italian. Corbis, III34464.



The popular Italian-language daily newspapers in New York City, such as *Il Bollettino della Sera* and *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, covered the shirtwaist strike only briefly. But they gave considerable attention to another strike occurring that same month, just across the Hudson River in Hoboken, New Jersey. There, Italian women textile workers engaged in a month-long strike for livable wages, shorter work hours, and improved working conditions, and they did so alongside Italian men, and Armenian, Russian, German, Polish, and other immigrant women and men.<sup>7</sup> As a result of their success, the ILGWU and WTUV recruited Arturo Caroti, an IWW organizer of the strike, manager of a cooperative store owned by the Hoboken silk workers, and administrator for the Italian socialist newspaper *Il Proletario*, to organize Italian women garment workers in New York City.<sup>8</sup> But while Caroti gained public notoriety as the leader of the Hoboken strike, it was the *pinzettatrici* (pinchers) — Italian women in the worst-paid and most monotonous jobs as pieceworkers in the silk industry — who had formed the most militant core of strikers. Their successful efforts at forging cross-ethnic alliances with other textile and clothing workers under the IWW banner before and during the strike explains, in part, why immigrant workers in West New York, Hackensack, Passaic, Paterson, North Hudson, Jersey City, and New York City, walked off their jobs in solidarity with the Hoboken movement.<sup>9</sup>

Nor was this the first time Italian immigrant women launched a strike in the New York metro area. As soon as they arrived, they began protesting the conditions under which they labored. In early 1897, the Italian immigrant anarchist newspaper *La Questione Sociale* reported that several thousand Italian garment workers — women and men — had walked off their jobs in Brooklyn and Manhattan to protest their fifteen- to eighteen-hour workday and starvation wages. The women, the newspaper noted, were particularly enthusiastic in the movement. Later that year, several hundred Italian women and men joined together again in a strike against Paterson's silk mills. The same newspaper noted the "tight bonds of solidarity" that existed between the "workers of both sexes." Two years later, close to ninety Italian women workers in those same silk mills held a meeting on their own "to address the situation of over work and to discuss joining a labor union." When they showed up to work, however, the factory manager refused to let three of the most active women work. *La Questione Sociale* noted, "With the example of utmost solidarity, all of the other women workers walked off in a voluntary strike in support of their comrades, and demanded that they reinstate the three women and raise all of their pay by \$1.25 a week. . . . The strike continues."<sup>10</sup>

Such actions were regular occurrences, though the English-language press rarely reported on them. Indeed, Italian women working in the textile, garment, and cigar-making trades participated in many workplace actions across New

York City and northeastern New Jersey in the years before 1909. In 1903 hundreds struck in Paterson, Passaic Falls, and Astoria (Queens). In 1907, more than 250 Italian and Jewish garment workers (male and female) came together in Harlem to form a labor union. When the factory owner attempted to "inspire antagonism" by threatening to fire the Italian workers, the entire group, including large numbers of women, struck under the auspices of the IWW. Among the most important of their stated demands was that "bosses and foremen respect the women workers." That same year, Italians in West Hoboken issued a "boycott" of a certain silk mill, which refused to bargain with its employees. The strike committee included both women and men.<sup>11</sup> A year later, a group of mostly Italian male weavers at a Plainfield, New Jersey, silk mill sent a committee to the boss to demand higher wages, and Italian women workers at the same mill "applauded from the windows. All of them sympathetic to the strike."<sup>12</sup>

These are just some of the many stories recounted by the Italian-language radical press. They challenge the conventional wisdom that Italian women did not join the 1909 shirtwaist workers' uprising because, unlike Jewish women, they were isolated from radical political and social movements, lacked a revolutionary tradition, or suffered from weak community networks and restrictive families.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Italian women did not join the 1909 strike en masse for several reasons. First, Italian workers were wary about the ILGWU, an affiliate of the conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL typically limited its membership to skilled white men and had not only excluded most Italian workers (as well as other semiskilled and unskilled laborers) but also lobbied to restrict their immigration. At the time, the IWW was garnering far more support from Italian workers and their mutual aid societies than the AFL was and actively working to recruit Italian immigrant women in both the textile and garment trades. This was in sharp contrast to the ILGWU, which did not make a significant effort to recruit Italian women before or during the 1909 strike. Rather, the strike was initiated and organized by Jewish workers in Local 25, a shirtwaist local of the ILGWU and United Hebrew Trades. The movement was immersed in Jewish working-class culture and meetings were conducted in Yiddish. Italian workers also tended to transfer "their antagonism for Jewish bosses to Jewish union organizers," and many resented Jewish workers for earning higher wages for the same jobs.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the ILGWU had only several hundred members at the time of the strike and thus had few resources to recruit Italians. Nor did the WTUV reach out to Italian immigrant workers. Within days of the 1909 uprising, the IWW, the Federazione Socialista Italiana (FSI), and the Socialist Party hastily sent out teams of organizers to mobilize Italian women garment workers because this work had not occurred. As a result, several thousand Italian women did walk off their



jobs in solidarity with Jewish women, but organizers noted that the vast majority were deeply skeptical of the strike because very little effort had been made to include them.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, most social reformers and labor organizers were unable to relate to Italian immigrant women workers. As with scholars of this history, they often compared Italians to Jews, to find Italians sorely lacking. When reformers observed relations on the shop floor, they noted, "Italian girls are seen as 'more tractable'" by their fellow workers, while Jewish women were "seen as 'agitators.'" Overall, Italians were "seen by other workers as undercutting wages" and to have "cheaped the whole trade." Moreover, they argued, "when an Italian girl exhibits an interest in her trade it is an interest in craftsmanship or in her own wages rather than in general trade conditions. The Jewish girl, on the contrary, has a sense of her social responsibility and often displays an eager zest for discussion of labor problems." Some expressed awareness that Italian workers' lack of interest might have stemmed from the fact the garment unions were fully immersed in the extensive network and culture of Jewish working-class mutual aid societies. But still they argued that "the Italian girl is more willing than the Jewish girl to accept conditions as she finds them."<sup>16</sup> Such ideas circulated freely between the shop floor, the union hall, and social reform circles and were often couched in the racial ideologies of the day. As a Jewish woman labor organizer told a social reformer of the Italian women workers in her midst, "If they were more civilized, they wouldn't take such low pay. But they go without hats and gloves and umbrellas."<sup>17</sup>

Few Italian women could afford these symbols of American middle-class civility and leisure. This woman's comment reveals, however, her awareness that a different set of priorities was operating for Italian immigrants. This generation of women was compelled to work for the most basic food, shelter, and clothing, and their wages rarely allowed for anything beyond. As historian Nancy Carnevale has written of the garment trades, "The unions saw in homeworkers—and home finishers, in particular—a threat to factory workers, who could not compete with the low wages home finishers accepted. Out of self-interest, they chose to oppose homework at every turn, rather than attempting the difficult task of organizing the overwhelmingly non-English-speaking Italian home finishers and other homeworkers in the garment industry."<sup>18</sup> As unions took up an antihomework agenda, they alienated Italian immigrant women workers, making it especially hard for them to join Jewish workers under the banner of the ILGWU. The leftist press did little to inform the public about these complexities, and the Italian *prominenti* did not help much either. As one noted northern Italian writer explained, "Those at the head of the movement for better conditions saw all their

efforts about to be nullified by this brown, ignorant, silent woman who would not listen, and when she did could not or would not understand."<sup>19</sup>

### Everyday Resistance on the Shop Floor

As in their homelands, Italian immigrant women's forms of protest and resistance were independent of formal organizations but embedded in their own neighborhood and kinship networks. Because most found jobs through family and friends and worked in factories located within or near their neighborhoods, the workplace was an important place where women built a sense of community. Women's conversations, songs, jokes, complaints, and shared dreams of a life without backbreaking work and never-ending struggle reinforced their sense of collective identity. Ginevra Spagnoletti's dress shop in the Bowery was "full of Italian women bending over their machines and peering at the needles," as the *El trains* roared by. But it was also a place where the women were always "singing and joking together to escape the monotony and beat back the gloom."<sup>20</sup> Even in shops where singing or talking was prohibited, it was common that "some girl, unable to endure the silence any longer, would begin humming a tune which would be taken up by others near her."<sup>21</sup> As with other workers, Italian women also colluded to steal time for themselves on the job by slowing down the pace of work and finding ways to talk about their families, neighborhoods, work conditions, and politics.<sup>22</sup> Ginevra Spagnoletti's son, Ralph Fasanella, worked as a steam iron operator, among other jobs, before becoming an artist. His painting *Dress Shop* (1970) depicted the factory in New York City where his mother worked as a buttonhole maker in the 1910s and 1920s. In the painting, he placed newspaper headlines on the walls of the factory to signify the women's worries, noting how the women "did not go through their days in a state of narcosis, but carried the news of the day with them, and worried about their families in the context of current affairs."<sup>23</sup>

Women's networks also facilitated dramatic episodes of resistance, and strikes often began when one woman was harassed or insulted and her co-workers walked off the job in protest. Familial experiences in the peasant and worker rebellions in southern Italy sometimes shaped and inspired their actions. Anna Valenti learned the power of collective action from her parents' stories of peasant uprisings in their *paese* at the turn of the century. As a teenager, she took action in her garment shop after listening to the women she worked alongside discuss their continual struggle to feed their families. "I was a fighter," she recalled of the day she shut off the power in her shop in the 1910s, and signaled workers to leave their machines and hold an outdoor meeting. When the owner came after her with an umbrella, demanding she leave, all the women operators walked out

with Anna.<sup>24</sup> Carrie Golzio recalled the Paterson ribbon mill where she worked as a child in the early twentieth century: the supervisors “were tough. But I was tough too. My father always said, ‘no matter where you work, don’t let them step on you.’ That was instilled in me when I was a kid and I always fought. . . . I used to fight like hell. . . . If there was a strike I was the first on the line.”<sup>25</sup> Angela and Maria Bambace were also politicized by women’s everyday struggles in the garment shops where they worked. There they met others committed to challenging the power of the bosses and became active in the radical milieu in East Harlem. When they became labor organizers themselves, they did so with their mother Giuseppina’s blessing. She even accompanied them on their union rounds with a rolling pin tucked under her arm, in case they encountered trouble.<sup>26</sup>

Stories of women’s everyday resistance on the job fill oral histories, but they are also visible in the radical press. On occasion, some English-language labor newspapers reported on these episodes to illustrate that, while Italian women might not be sympathetic to certain labor unions in the United States, they were adept at collective action and therefore capable of organization. In one story, an Italian labor organizer in the ILGWU told of several Italian women finishers who grew impatient with a demanding forelady after she continually screamed at them to



Women in garment shop, ca. 1900. International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union Archives, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University.



Angela Bambace with her mother Giuseppina, ca. 1930. Bambace Papers, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

quicken their pace. When an older worker who “could not stand the nagging any longer” got the “courage to tell the forelady to ‘Shut Up,’” the forewoman, “with one hand, snatched the garments from her and with the other gave her a good strong push and told her to ‘Get out of the shop.’” In response, “every worker walked out of the shop in a body, in protest against the action of the forelady and in defense of the abused finisher.”<sup>27</sup> Italian-language labor newspapers regularly chronicled such stories to encourage oppositional activism. One such story is that of Rose Alagna, who wrote about the indignities that she and other women were forced to endure, in a shop on West 27th Street. She announced their plans to strike against the boss who demanded, among other things, that they stay late without compensation to gather stray pins on the floor.<sup>28</sup> Women also shared stories of resistance on the shop floor, around kitchen tables, and on tenement stoops, and such tales passed from one generation to the next. These daily, unorganized, seemingly spontaneous actions formed an important part of Italian immigrant women’s political culture, as they did for all workers.<sup>29</sup>

### Building the Industrial Union Movement

Italian immigrant women’s labor agitation increased dramatically after the founding of the ILWU in 1905.<sup>30</sup> As a “militant organization that made unskilled workers

the primary subjects of its revolutionary program," the IWW immediately appealed to Italian immigrants.<sup>31</sup> As one of the nation's largest pools of underemployed and exploited industrial workers, Italians were pivotal to the IWW's goal of creating a revolutionary alternative to the AFL. Founded by a variety of socialists, anarchists, and trade unionists, the "Wobblies" (the nickname for those active in the IWW) sought to organize workers who were excluded from the craft unions—women, migrant workers, people of color—into "One Big Union." Together they hoped to take over the means of production and distribution through workplace actions that would cripple capitalism and end the class system. Included in their founding statement was the line, "There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people, and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life." They argued that "by organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old." The IWW quickly became notorious for "its revolutionary tactics of direct action, its dynamic leaders, and its inspiring songs and graphics."<sup>32</sup>

The IWW also became known for its courageous and dramatic strikes. Between 1905 and 1914, as economic conditions worsened among America's working classes from a series of depressions, widespread unemployment, and declining wages, the IWW helped some of the most vulnerable workers—those in mining, textile production, lumbering, construction, agriculture, dock work, and marine transport—in a series of strikes that "shook the nation."<sup>33</sup> From the very beginning, Italian immigrants were a critical force within this movement. The anarchists in Paterson's silk mills were among the first to create a foreign-language local of the IWW, and they remained active during the critical period from 1905 to 1908 when the leadership of the IWW shifted from socialists to direct actionists.<sup>34</sup> In the years leading up to 1905, Italian silk workers in New Jersey had tried numerous times to organize a labor union, often employing strategies the IWW would later encourage and celebrate, such as parades, mass picketing, workplace sabotage, and threats against those workers who did not honor strikes. Indeed, the Italian anarchists were key activists in many workplace revolts, and both Paterson and West Hoboken became home to a strong, vocal IWW movement. The IWW "came the closest of any American leftist organization to paralleling the syndicalist movement in Italy," and was therefore the movement that Italian workers turned to en-masse once it was formed.<sup>35</sup> The IWW's direct-action philosophy and revolutionary socialist platform, in particular, made it appealing to those Italian immigrants who arrived fresh from the mass protests in Italy. But the IWW had broad appeal because it backed Italian immigrants' labor struggles, unlike any other organization in the period. Following the famous 1909 uprising of shirtwaist workers in New York City, for example, it was the IWW that

demanding that the ILGWU make all of its decisions in mass meetings rather than in committees where Italians were absent or underrepresented.<sup>36</sup>

For all of these reasons, some of the earliest IWW locals formed out of the anarchist circles described in the preceding chapter and many Italian immigrants active in the radical subculture became leaders in the major organizing drives among Italian shoemakers, hotel workers, barbers, piano makers, and textile, garment, construction, and dock workers throughout New York City and New Jersey.<sup>37</sup> Italian anarchists and socialists brought the IWW into their communities by inviting charismatic Wobblie speakers such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Big Bill Haywood, and Carlo Tresca to speak before large audiences. But it was during the 1909–13 strike wave that the IWW achieved its greatest notoriety, and it was largely thanks to Italian radicals that the "birth of unionism" occurred among Italian immigrant industrial workers. As Paul Buhle has observed, among "Italian clothing and garment workers of the 1910s, anarchist and syndicalist militants had an importance all out of proportion to their numbers. Without them, craft and industrial unionism might not have happened for another generation." While in Italy anarchist "insurrectionary strategies and egalitarian slogans disappeared into Communist political and ideological functions," in the United States they entered the industrial unions.<sup>38</sup> Italian immigrant women and their American-born daughters would play a crucial role in this movement.

### Creating a Radical Feminist Culture in the Industrial Unions

One can mark the beginning of the 1909–13 strike wave in Hoboken, or as many historians have done, with the famous uprising of twenty thousand shirtwaist workers. Italian women did not join their Jewish co-workers in large numbers that year, but they became visible and active participants in the "Great Revolt" of sixty thousand cloak makers one year later that helped to make the ILGWU the third largest member of the AFL. More than twenty-eight hundred Italian workers—many of them inspired by the gains made in the 1909 uprising—joined the ILGWU in the first three days of the 1910 strike.<sup>39</sup> Several men active in Italian socialist circles, such as Salvatore Ninio and Arturo Caroti, were central organizers in the strike. Less known is the role of women, like strikers Catherine Valenti, Anna Canno, and Sadie La Porta, who mobilized the unprecedented numbers of Italian women that began attending union meetings and joining picket lines, often with their children at their side. Their names suggest that they had either immigrated very young or were the daughters of immigrant women, but unfortunately they left few additional traces in the historical record. We do know, however, that within the next three weeks, an additional twenty thousand Italian



workers walked out on strike, including large numbers of women home-finishers who went on strike in solidarity with the mostly male cloak makers.<sup>40</sup>

Italian women's move from scabs to strikers in one year speaks less to their sudden politicization than of an important change in strategy that was taking form. First, Italian women were willing to join a strike orchestrated by the ILGWU because it was becoming increasingly impossible to organize separately from them. As historian Annelise Orleck has argued, the 1909 uprising produced mixed results, but it "breathed new life into a struggling immigrant labor movement and transformed the tiny ILGWU into a union of national significance."<sup>41</sup> In the next decade, the ILGWU would become more effective than the IWW in forcing garment employers to the bargaining table. As a result, the union began to attract Italian workers who hoped that building alliances with Jewish workers might bring access to higher wages, shorter hours, and safer working conditions. They also joined because the ILGWU began to actively recruit Italian workers.<sup>42</sup> They hired Arturo Caroti, hoping that his role in the Hoboken movement would enable him to mobilize Italian women workers in New York. His first step was to form a *circolo*, called the Italian Women's Mutual Benefit Society, open to "any girl of working age, and any female member of a workers' family." In addition to receiving "free medical care during illness," the women "were required to attend bi-monthly meetings held at two New York settlement houses."<sup>43</sup> Caroti's tactics also included buying off the strikebreakers and enlisting the support of fathers and husbands. But he failed to generate substantial union membership and returned to Italy in 1913. It was clear: neither the needs of the union nor the support of certain Italian male leaders were enough to coax Italian women into the ILGWU. Once the union trained Italian women to organize and granted them financial support and self-governing spaces crucial to developing the movement and building internal leadership, Italian women began to enter the union en masse.<sup>44</sup>

Such institutional support developed just as Italian immigration was peaking. Between 1900 and 1910, the numbers of Italians in the United States tripled. By the 1910s, "Italian associational networks had grown in leaps and bounds, and their presence within the American industrial apparatus had consolidated." In the next decade, Italians would play a central role in "one of the most sweeping organizational drives ever to take place in one single industrial sector"—the garment trades.<sup>45</sup> As the IWW and the ILGWU competed for Italian immigrant workers' allegiance, both became central to Italian American labor activism and radicalism. Many of the Italian men who rose to prominence in the radical subculture, such as Arturo Giovannitti and Antonio Crivello, would become officials in the ILGWU. But it was Italian women who at all times composed the

majority of workers in the garment industry, the majority of union members, and the most successful organizers.

After the 1910 strike, women formed the majority of the newly formed Organizational Committee of the Italian Branch of the ILGWU, which became the Italian Branch of Local 25 after the 1913 strike. As one male ILGWU official would note years later, "You needed women to approach the women."<sup>46</sup> From the outset, women such as Angela and Maria Bambace, Grace De Luise, Margaret Di Maggio, Millie Tarantino, Lucy Guida, Mary Sanfilippo, Clara Zara, Minnie Lero, Rose Grassa, Almerinda Castellucci, Rosalia Conforti, Mary Lamantia, Anna Cassio, Alma Varanelli, and countless others—many of whom were also active in anarchist or socialist circles in their neighborhoods—created the first organizing teams that brought thousands of Italian immigrant women into the union.<sup>47</sup> From isolated shops spread across the city, Italian women workers contacted the Italian Branch daily, reporting on their struggles, methods of resistance, and need for assistance. Organizers met with workers through community meetings and by finding work in garment shops that were nonunion. They listened to women's grievances, brought them into the union, and encouraged them to shape and direct the movement.

Women organizers faced almost constant harassment from police and employers, and many endured arrest and violent beatings. "There isn't a tougher job a woman can take than being an organizer," Angela Bambace would note. "This is a hard job." For much of her life, she spent every waking hour consumed by the movement. As a young woman she was often at the union hall late into the night after a full day of work as a seamstress in a shirtwaist shop. On her organizing rounds, she was regularly roughed up or thrown down stairs by employers, and on several occasions she was incarcerated, once for thirty days.<sup>48</sup> Most women active in the union during this period spoke of the picket line as if they were "in battle."<sup>49</sup> As historian Nan Enstad has documented, "Police violence, mass arrests, and harsh sentences were standard fare for workers who sought a political voice through strikes. Because the striking women were working class and mostly immigrants, police and thugs did not feel compelled to treat them with the deference due to white, middle-class women." She continues, "The women also faced tactics that capitalized on the historic association of unescorted women in public space with disorder, including sexual disorder."<sup>50</sup>

Margaret Di Maggio was beaten up and arrested several times while working to bring Italian women into the ILGWU in the 1910s. Described as both "crass and aggressive" and "talented" by others in the movement, she became well known for her courage as an organizer and power as an orator.<sup>51</sup> Grace De Luise was her organizing partner, and she recalled that "in those days, when we picketed, they

thought it was a horrible thing for young girls. They called us all sorts of terrible things and said that we were terrible people just because we were picketing to earn a better living." Organizing nonunion shops was particularly dangerous, De Luise recalled: "They would throw things at you, and you had to be ready to go running down the stairs." Once while on a picket line, a woman twice De Luise's size kicked her in the stomach in order to cross the picket line, sending De Luise to the hospital. Employers also hired enforcers from the mob to threaten and harass young women who picketed their shops, and many women recalled being thrown down stairs and hurled across rooms "like a football" by such men while on their organizing rounds. Such work also cost activists their lives. Willie Lurie, a close friend of De Luise and Di Maggio's, and fellow organizer, was shot dead by gangsters during a strike in the 1940s; and Giuseppa Maresca and Anna Lo Pizzo were two of the more publicized female strikers who were killed by police while walking picket lines in this period.<sup>52</sup>

Even in this climate, Italian women were able to generate support for the garment unions through a variety of strategies, including workplace committees, house visits, educational programs, community-wide publicity, cultural activities, demonstrations, strikes, picket lines, soup kitchens, and theater troupes, which often involved entire families.<sup>53</sup> The culture they sought to create is partly evident in the Italian-language weeklies that the ILGWU published during the 1910s to recruit and educate workers. As with some of the anarchist newspapers, these periodicals provided women with a space to articulate their own visions of industrial unionism. The audience of these newspapers was much broader, because it included the thousands of women union members who were regular subscribers by 1914.<sup>54</sup> But the union newspapers played an important role in bringing the radical subculture into many new homes. Some newspapers like *L'Operata* (The Woman Worker) were directed at an entirely female audience of Italian dressmakers, and while edited by Italian men, reprinted articles and poems by popular female authors from the anarchist and revolutionary socialist press. They also enlisted the more active and vocal female union members to write essays. In such writing, women worked to create a community of *lavoratrici coscienti* (conscious women workers), and they drew heavily upon the model offered by newspapers like *La Questione Sociale* and *L'Era Nuova* to do so. Other newspapers, like *Lotta di Classe* (Class Struggle) and *L'Era Nuova* to do so. Other Italian section of the Cloak and Skirt Makers' Union of the ILGWU in New York City—reserved a page for women's writing called *La Pagina della Donna*. Here various women active in the union shared stories from their experiences as organizers, and analyzed capitalism as well as patriarchal work and family relations. The paper also included the writing of well-known anarchists such as Leda Ra-

fanelli, Pietro Gori, and Luigi Galleani, and routinely announced the lectures, dances, picnics, and other events of the radical circles.<sup>55</sup>

These union newspapers reveal the importance of Italian women's radical political ideologies and practices, including feminism, to their emerging industrial union culture. Women authors conveyed the message that "the inferiority of women is not physiological or psychological, but social." They also advocated a "*femminismo*" (feminism) that was based on "the spirit of solidarity between women." This feminism, they asserted, was "not a movement against men, but one that is primarily interested in developing intelligence among women. . . . Feminism is the belief that the woman is exploited doubly, by capitalism and by her companion." Moreover, they contended, "In the labor movement women can find the opportunity to become a militant force for humanity with a clear vision of the world."<sup>57</sup> As in the anarchist newspapers, their feminism was transnational. Organizers continually publicized women's struggles in Italy and in factories across the United States, as evidence of their ability to fight oppression. Yet, unlike the anarchists, the union culture of the ILGWU drew upon Italian cultural codes of honor and respect, and an emergent Italian nationalism, to refute the reputation that plagued them: "You are not Italians," wrote Clara Zara, a labor organizer and factory operative, "you who trample on our revolutionary traditions; you are not Italians who dishonor and betray the holy and sublime cause of our work. . . . You have massacred our reputation, our dignity, our honor, [and created] the suspicion that Italian immigrant women workers have inherited."<sup>58</sup>

To dismantle this reputation, organizers sought to build a union movement in the garment trades that welcomed both immigrants and the American-born. In fact, union meetings, demonstrations, and picket lines were often multigenerational. Tina Gaeta learned labor activism from her immigrant mother: "My mother was always against homework and she encouraged my sister . . . to carry the picket sign when her shop went on strike." She "used to make me take hot coffee to [my sister] when she was picketing." On one occasion Tina joined the picket line as a child, "took the sign and put it on, and started walking with it so proudly." When her mother learned that she had participated, she "just smiled."<sup>59</sup> Francesca Crivello often brought her son Antonio to union meetings and picket lines. When he was a teenager, he organized an anarchist circle on the Lower East Side with other young immigrants from Italy and later became a union organizer in the ILGWU himself.<sup>60</sup> Genevieve Spagnoletti joined the union after she started reading the newspapers and pamphlets of an Italian anarchist group in her Greenwich Village neighborhood. Each evening after work, she read them aloud to her five children and encouraged political debate at the kitchen table.<sup>61</sup> Families thus remained a central site where Italian immigrant women developed



oppositional ideologies, and the union culture they created would be grounded in such relationships.

The Italian women who composed the first organizing teams for the ILGWU differed from their rank-and-file counterparts in one significant respect: most did not have children. Still, they worked in the same "women's jobs" as operatives, drapers, finishers, hemstitchers, and examiners. They became radicalized by the deteriorating labor conditions in the factories, exemplified most dramatically by the devastating fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory near Washington Square on 25 March 1911, which claimed the lives of 146 garment workers—the vast majority Italian and Jewish women and girls. The Triangle Fire was particularly devastating because it had been cited during the 1909 strike for hazardous working conditions. Moreover, the nightmare of dozens of workers—almost entirely young women in their teens and early twenties—jumping from the eighth and ninth floors of the factory and hitting the sidewalk with such force that they shattered the cement was horrific. Those who survived revealed that employers had locked the doors to keep workers from taking breaks and to prevent petty theft. They had disregarded rusty fire escapes and carelessly kept highly flammable oil close to bundles of fabric. Rage deepened. Many Italian immigrant women marked the fire as the critical moment when they committed themselves to the labor movement, believing that unionism was their most powerful recourse.<sup>62</sup>

In addition, the highly publicized and violent labor uprisings between 1910 and 1913, in Lawrence, Paterson, Chicago, Tampa, and other cities where Italian women were major components of the labor force, further politicized Italian immigrant women in New York City and New Jersey. These events also helped to unify Italian immigrant communities. Workers across regional and craft differences came together, and for the first time the mainstream Italian-language press, the *prominenti*, and local parish priests joined together in defense of labor.<sup>63</sup> In New York and New Jersey, Italian immigrant workers launched their own mass movement in 1913, in the hopes of building on the successful 1912 strike in Lawrence, to launch a series of general strikes that would change the face of the American labor movement.

### The Turning Point of 1913

With tens of thousands of Italian immigrant women joining in labor uprisings, 1913 unfolded as a year of dramatic activity. One mother of six children who joined the 1913 garment workers' strike in New York City spoke for many when she explained her rationale for joining the movement: "It's all for my child. I fight them again. I no care."<sup>64</sup> Stories of Italian women's militancy appeared in

leftist and mainstream newspapers daily because disturbances and confrontations became regular fare. In the first days of the strike, a group of several hundred Italian women stormed a large factory in lower Manhattan wielding umbrellas as weapons and lunging at police officers who tried to keep them from entering. Once inside the shop, "the women, fighting like furies, jabbed right and left with their umbrellas and in their excitement sometimes jabbed strikers."<sup>65</sup> Such demonstrations culminated in a meeting at Union Square on 14 January in which newspapers estimated that 100,000 attended. The *New York Call* reported, "There were Jews, Italians, Russians, Lithuanians, Poles, Germans, Americans, Spaniards, Hungarians, and others."<sup>66</sup> Four days later, however, Italian women would gather in Cooper Union to learn that the union had sacrificed their demands and settled without the women's approval.

In the following weeks, Italian women launched a movement of their own, confronting workers who crossed their picket lines. Angelina Bruno, Marguerite Cololito, and Rosie Cereida were just a few of the many young women arrested daily for disorderly conduct, when they tried to persuade other workers outside the factory to ignore the settlement and defy the union; their last names suggest they were not all Italian.<sup>67</sup> The union and manufacturers were forced to meet again, as a result of the unrest, to work out a new settlement. But the union also issued a statement expressing its disbelief that the women were acting on their own. Rather, they announced "that there was no real discontent among the workers, only a plot by the rival Industrial Workers of the World to destroy the union," and declared that the Italian women had been "easily pacified."<sup>68</sup> ILGWU officials focused their contempt on the IWW because many of the disgruntled workers turned to the revolutionary industrial union as they grew frustrated with the ILGWU's accommodationist strategy. What the ILGWU leaders failed to see was that Italian women were using a strategy of resistance that was proven in its effectiveness. As in their homelands, they deployed mass-based street demonstrations, civil disobedience, and the direct action of female mobs to assert their voices. The Italian-language press came to the defense of the strikers, and almost \$1 million in funds was raised by Italian mutual aid societies.<sup>69</sup>

This spirit of resistance spread across the city and into northeastern New Jersey. By February workers in Paterson were also inspired to launch what they hoped would be a duplication of the 1912 Lawrence strike. Immigrant textile workers, joined in solidarity across lines of ethnicity, led by a largely female rank and file, and supported by the IWW, hoped to force mill owners to meet their demands. Moreover, for the IWW the strike provided an opportunity to challenge the growing power of the AFL unions. From the beginning, Italian immigrant radical circles constituted the heart of the movement. They provided the meeting



halls, enlisted inspiring speakers to address the crowds of strikers, and formed a core group of organizers and picketers.<sup>70</sup> Paterson was particularly well suited for such a movement because the anarchist movement was strong and more than nine thousand of the city's residents were IWW members. As historian Steve Golin has noted, "In this fluid atmosphere, in which capitalism itself was open to question and revolution seemed a real possibility, the IWW thrived."<sup>71</sup> While the IWW was able to serve the workers of Paterson at this time, the strike was entirely immigrant directed—"the workers created their own unity."<sup>72</sup>

The strike began from below, from the most unskilled sectors of the city's textile trades. Southern Italian and Jewish dyers' helpers and broad silk weavers, many of whom were women, united out of a shared experience of oppression. Their sense of collective identity emerged not just from being confined to the worst-paid and most dangerous jobs but from all areas of life. One young Jewish woman from Poland "noticed—and never forgot—how her first-grade teacher, who was Irish, singled out the Jewish and Italian children, putting a plaster across their mouths when they made a noise."<sup>73</sup> In addition, throughout the strike, Paterson's predominantly Irish police force routinely referred to the strikers as the "Wops and Jews."<sup>74</sup> By the second week of the strike, twenty-four thousand workers had walked off their jobs. Sympathy strikes spread throughout New Jersey, to Summit, Hackensack, Carlstadt, Pompton Lakes, Lodi, Stirling, Phillipsburg, Hoboken, West New York, Weehawken, Union Hill, and North Bergen, and beyond, across Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan. The strike spread even further away, to Norwalk and New London, Connecticut; Buffalo, New York; and Pennsylvania. Paterson's mill owners moved production to the eastern part of Pennsylvania during the strike, where the IWW was not yet established, to reassert their power over workers. This tactic, in the end, would prove decisive in the strike. Unlike Lawrence, the Paterson movement was not able to completely halt production and force employers to meet their demands.<sup>75</sup> In addition, Paterson's manufacturers had two other things on their side: a repressive police force and hunger. During the first months of the strike, the police responded to the mass picket lines and meetings with extreme aggressiveness. They arrested speakers and pickets and attempted to discourage activism with violence. Ninfa Baronio was one of many arrested on the picket line. Her son recalled the mayhem that ensued: "Paolo Giabello was on the picket line and was ordered to move by the police. He didn't move fast enough and was clubbed to the ground. Mother had come to get me and saw Paolo fall. She got down to help and the police clubbed her too. They threw them in a police wagon pulled by a horse. I ran after it crying, 'Mama, Mama!' Paolo was bleeding all the way to the jail."<sup>76</sup> Mary Gasperano was not as well known in the community as Ninfa for her radical activities, but during the strike she and

many other women became local heroines. In one month she was arrested four times, for her speeches before the pickets, for biting the hand of a police sergeant during one arrest, and for slapping a woman strikebreaker across the face.<sup>77</sup>

Most employers, as well as outside observers, were unprepared for and surprised by women's militancy during the strike. While the strike included seasoned activists like Ninfa Baronio and other anarchists, it radicalized many young women. Teresa Cobiacci's experience was somewhat typical. She was only fifteen years old and working as a ribbon weaver in Paterson when the strike began. She was born in southern Italy but had come to Paterson with her parents when she was four years old. Although she returned to Italy with her mother who contracted tuberculosis and died soon after, she came back to Paterson at the age of twelve. Suffering from chronic stomach trouble and an injury she sustained when a fire hose came loose in the factory and struck her head, "she was badly underweight but 'with a face like a flower.'" Elizabeth Gurley Flynn recalled. Encouraged by Flynn, she delivered speeches at the largest meeting halls during strike meetings, to speak out about the terrible working conditions she endured. The experience changed her: "I want always to go back to Italy, but since the strike I am more happy here. We are all together. We stand solid. My father says there will always be bosses. I say 'Yes? Then we shall be the bosses.'"<sup>78</sup>

Carrie Golzio also began speaking publicly during the strike, often with her four-year-old sister by her side. As with many other young women, she attended the daily mass meetings that took place first thing in the morning and the shop meetings in the afternoon. While her husband protested, she justified her actions: "I can't stay home, I got to go out and fight." For many, the strike suspended the prohibitions that normally governed female behavior. Years later, Golzio would recall, "Ah that was a strike. I had a lot of fun. I'd go around and laugh and carry on. They had meetings with singing and dancing. . . . It was exciting."<sup>79</sup>

As the strike wore on, the regular meetings helped workers to stay united, inspired, and focused. In May, Pietro and Maria Botto offered their home in nearby suburban Haledon as a center for meetings when workers were barred by local authorities from assembling in Paterson. Their home was situated on a hill overlooking a large lawn, and included a small porch on the second floor that served as a platform for speakers. For the first time, strikers could meet in one large gathering. On Sundays, thousands took trolleys from surrounding towns to gather on the front lawn for rallies that included music, speeches, and a picnic. Estimates of thirty thousand participants were made by a wide range of sources.<sup>80</sup> To Eva and Adele, the Botto's young daughters, the transformation of their home into an amphitheater was spectacular. It was also exhausting. The home served as a boarding home to many speakers, and the women all worked around the clock

to maintain the household. On Sundays, hundreds and sometimes thousands of strikers gathered to hear well-known Wobblay leaders such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Carlo Tresca, Antonio Guabello, and Hubert Harrison speak from the second-floor balcony after a hearty meal downstairs. Less known, however, is that, as the strike wore on, Maria Botto's health steadily declined and within two years of the strike she was dead. "I'm certain the work contributed to her death," her granddaughter would later lament.<sup>81</sup>

To those in attendance, however, such gatherings were exhilarating. "To speak at such meetings," Bill Haywood, a founder of the IWW and strike leader, would later recall, "is worth a lifetime of agitation."<sup>82</sup> The gatherings provided visible evidence of the power of workers' solidarity. The weekly women's meetings were also among the most popular. Six hundred women attended the first meeting held on 5 March, about a month into the strike, but three thousand showed up for the second meeting, held only five days later. Steve Golin writes, "Not only did these meetings build confidence in the women, they also broke down the resistance of male strikers to the equal participation in the strike. They allowed women to show how much they cared."<sup>83</sup> They also created the setting where women strikers could develop leadership skills and learn about political radicalism. Because women's activism had been so crucial to winning the Lawrence strike, IWW leaders encouraged women's activism in Paterson and beyond, and they trained them to become organizers and public speakers, to address the crowds alongside the more seasoned activists.

As in the meeting at Cooper Union across the river in Manhattan that January, the women in the crowd at Paterson played an active role and voiced their opinions freely. Flynn reported on one women's meeting in Paterson, where she, Bill Haywood, and Carlo Tresca spoke at the invitation of the strikers: "Tresca made some remarks about shorter hours, people being less tired, more time to spend together and jokingly he said: 'More babies.' The women did not look amused. When Haywood interrupted and said: 'No Carlo, we believe in birth control—a few babies, well cared for!' they burst into laughter and applause."<sup>84</sup> Haywood seems to have considered women's role in the movement as more central than Tresca or many of the other male leaders of the Italian syndicalist movement. The women, he wrote in the strike's fifth month, "have been an enormous factor in the Paterson strike. Each meeting for them has been attended by bigger and bigger crowds." Speaking before a large audience of male strikers, he made sure to remind them of the significance of women to a successful strike: "One woman is worth three men—I never knew it to fail."<sup>85</sup>

In the end, the defeat of the 1913 Paterson strike forced the IWW to retreat from the East Coast. Without the funds to continue organizing, especially during the

1914–15 period of economic downturn and unemployment, the IWW turned its attention to organizing miners in the Midwest and to antiwar activism. Most of the women in Paterson who were active in the strike were blacklisted and unable to find work in the local silk mills. The six-month strike had, however, shown many what it was like to conceive of a world run by workers, and what it might mean to create such a society. The radical subculture had become a part of the daily lives of not just several thousand but hundreds of thousands. It would not be until the 1918–19 strike wave that workers would rise up again with similar devotion to each other. By then, they would find themselves the target of a federal campaign to eliminate all opposition to the status quo.

### The 1919 Strikes and the Birth of the Italian Locals

In reflecting on the early years of labor organizing in New York City's garment shops, Angela Bambace recalled working all night on strike activities after a full day of sewing in the factory and dealing with abusive employers who resorted to all kinds of tactics, including physical violence, to keep organizers out of the shops. But one thing especially stood out for her: "The women played a very big part in the union and saved a lot of lives because they got the employer and the employees to sit down and talk instead of a lot of commotion and fighting."<sup>86</sup> Angela and her sister Maria joined the IWW during the 1919 strikes, where they witnessed firsthand the effectiveness of women organizers.

During the 1919 strike wave, four million workers walked off their jobs in thousands of strikes nationwide. In Manhattan, Brooklyn, Passaic, Paterson, and other locations, Italian immigrant women led the effort to organize the textile and garment trades. As with other workers across the country, they momentarily found themselves in an unprecedented position of power because strikes could block war production and force employers to the bargaining table.<sup>87</sup> Massive wartime inflation and the rising cost of living amid low wages and deteriorating working conditions led workers to come together to demand change. The feeling that capitalism could be successfully challenged from the bottom up grew particularly strong in November 1917, when the Bolshevik Party staged a successful communist revolution in Russia. Yet workers not only drew inspiration from the possibilities offered by developments in Russia. They also insisted that the United States live up to its own promises of democracy, freedom, and justice.

While the 1918–19 strikes were largely unsuccessful in the garment and textile trades, they provided a stage for Italian immigrant women to publicly demonstrate their commitment to the U.S. labor movement. Tens of thousands joined the walk-out and several hundred endured arrest on picket lines. They were "exceedingly

energetic and bellicose, as the police rolls showed” and “distinguished themselves on picket lines, at strikers’ meetings, and on organizational committees.”<sup>88</sup>

What distinguished this from earlier strikes was that following the 1919 strike Italian women workers achieved their first significant institutional space within the American labor movement—the ILGWU granted Italian dressmakers their own “language local,” the Italian Dressmakers Local 89, with headquarters at 8 West 21st Street in Manhattan. At the head of the organization department was Margaret Di Maggio, with Grace De Luise, Maria Bambace, Laura Di Guglielmo, Anna Fama, Lina Manetta, Angelina Limanti, Maria Prestianni, Anna Squillante, and Millie Tirreno serving on the local’s first board.<sup>89</sup> Almost all had been active in the movement since 1913. Italians also established two other large locals in the aftermath of strikes—Local 63 of the ACWA and Local 48 of the ILGWU.<sup>90</sup> Each of these locals cemented the presence of Italians in U.S. labor politics, and with a combined membership of more than twenty thousand, they became a center of Italian American working-class political activity from the 1920s through the 1970s.

The Italian locals of the ACWA and the ILGWU included many anarcho-syndicalists and revolutionary socialists who responded to the devastation of the 1913 strikes by infusing these new labor organizations with the kind of ideology and strategy that had defined the prewar movement. But these radicals faced a reformist leadership, not a revolutionary one, which continually opted to institutionalize hierarchy to maintain their own autonomy and power in the union. Rather than build an international, multiethnic movement to dismantle capitalism, the leadership of these locals focused on including their members in the U.S. polity. As a result, they cultivated ethnic nationalism in their members, encouraging them to identify as both Italians and Americans. As we will see, such a strategy created a sense of community, but it also reinforced ethnic antagonism and segmentation within the union. In the 1930s, the Italian Dressmakers Local 89 would become the single largest union local in the nation and a powerful institution through which Italian American workers could assert identities and mobilize as whites. We cannot understand why and how this developed without first attending to the dramatic upheavals of the 1920s, however. The rise of coercive nationalism in the form of the Red Scare, 100 percent Americanism, the hugely popular Ku Klux Klan, immigration restriction, and fascism would forever change American politics. The Italian immigrant Left turned increasingly to the new unions to build a meaningful political culture that could survive the pervasive antiradicalism in the United States. Italian immigrant women’s powerful role in the 1909–19 strike wave would ensure their centrality in this emerging world and usher in a new era of struggle over the meanings of emancipation.

## Red Scare, the Lure of Fascism, and Diasporic Resistance

Valentine’s Day 1920 was a day few in Paterson, New Jersey, would ever forget. The events surrounding that day would reverberate for generations, transforming Italian immigrant political cultures across the New York metropolitan area and far beyond. In the middle of the night, “over one hundred federal agents, assisted by volunteers from the American Legion, descended on Paterson and raided the homes of more than thirty members of *Gruppo L’Era Nuova*,” the group formerly known as *Gruppo Diritto all’Esistenza* (The Right to an Existence Group). Those arrested also came from another anarchist group, the Galleani-inspired *Gli Insorti* (The Insurgents), and the Ferrer School, “an anarchist-inspired place for the children of workers to study, which was directed by the workers themselves.”<sup>91</sup> With warrants in hand and several large suitcases, the agents arrested whomever they could find, confiscated over a ton of documents, and brought the suspects to Ellis Island’s detention cells to await possible deportation.

Among those arrested were Firmino Gallo, Ludovico Caminita, Alberto and Paolo Guabello, Pietro Baldisserotto, Serafino Grandi, and Severo Espi—all active anarchists. Agents gathered all the printed material they could find, as well as several revolvers.<sup>92</sup> The next morning the *New York Times* announced: “Terrorists Caught in Paterson Raids.” In a rudimentary fashion, the reporter translated and published selections from various anarchist texts to illustrate that these men were “anarchists of the worst type, not philosophical anarchists,” who “seek their ends . . . through the use of bombs and other engines of destruction to create terror and fear.”<sup>93</sup> Police raids had occurred in the past, but 1919 and 1920 witnessed a massive wave of government repression. Fueled by a heightened fear of political dissent during World War I, the U.S. Department of Justice launched a nationwide operation to crush the labor movement and working-class radicalism in all forms. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer led the charge, and in January

