

THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



Swimming against the tide; left: students in swimsuits picketing Gantner-Mattern, New York, June 1940; below: members of the union Local 191 protesting against Gantner-Mattern, San Francisco, June 1940. Some of the protestors are wearing handmade outfits created to look like Victorian swimsuits

THE SWIMSUIT STRIKE

In 1939, employees at a clothing factory in San Francisco began a strike that was soon copied across America. **Stefanie Halpern** reports on a fight that paved the way for improving workers' rights

“We'd rather give up swimming than wear a Gantner!” From 1939 to 1941, this chant could be heard on picket lines in front of the Gantner and Mattern clothing factory in San Francisco as workers protested about the company's unfair labour practices.

Gantner-Mattern was one of the most popular swimsuit brands of the time. It introduced the Floating Bra, which the company claimed raised “the bustline 1 to 2 inches higher,” as well as the Wikie, the first topless swimsuit for men. This caused quite a scandal, as it wasn't until the late 1930s that American states began to overturn the ban on men going shirtless in public.

In October 1939, Gantner-Mattern janitors went on strike after one janitor was fired. In solidarity, the company's knit workers refused to cross the picket line.

The knit workers were members of the Knitgoods Workers Union Local 191, which was part of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). The ILGWU had been formed in 1900 by delegates representing approximately 2,000 garment workers (mostly Eastern European Jewish immigrants) from local unions in cities including New York and Philadelphia.

In the UK, Jewish tailors had been prominent in fighting for workers' rights from 1889 in London's East End and 1892 in Manchester. By 1939, the ILGWU could boast a quarter of a million members across the United States and Canada, including Jewish, Italian, and Latino workers, three-quarters of whom were women.

When the janitors' strike ended, Gantner-Mattern refused to hire back some of the knit workers, and workers began a second strike in March 1940. Fellow knit workers, janitors, and college students across the United States picketed in solidarity with the Gantner-Mattern workers. With the introduction of men's swimming events in the 1896 Olympic



Games in Athens and the first women's events in the 1912 Summer Olympics in Stockholm, swimming had grown in popularity. Giving up this leisure-time sport, as many did to boycott Gantner-Mattern, was a serious affair. Some strikers walked the picket line in Victorian-era swimming costumes with signs that read, “We'd rather wear these than wear Gantner's!”

Eventually, John O. Gantner Sr, the president of the company, issued a statement to all its knit workers: “It is time for you as responsible employees to choose your path by getting in and working with, instead of against, the firm... If the Union chooses to call you out, or holds the matter up in the air, and you permit it to do so, we must consider it as a request from you to close our plant, and we are prepared to remain closed indefinitely.”

In January 1941, ILGWU Local 191 brought charges against the company to the National Labour Relations Board, but the Board dismissed the charges, and the company was not compelled to re-hire workers under a new contract.

Even after this defeat, the members of Local 191 refused to end the strike, and the ILGWU issued a nationwide boycott of Gantner-Mattern products. Other affiliated unions across the country joined in, issuing secondary boycotts and refusing to handle any goods produced by Gantner-Mattern or its affiliates. Students from a dozen states from New York to Arkansas to Wisconsin joined the picket line.

Though Gantner-Mattern refused to back down, the pickets and boycotts severely affected the company's sales and public standing, and served as a model for subsequent strikes in other sectors of industry, eventually leading to widespread changes in labour law. No one could deny that the size, power, and political clout of the ILGWU, a union of immigrants and women, exerted a great influence over business practices across the United States. ■

See: yivo.org. To learn more about YIVO's Jewish Labor Bund Archives, which holds the papers of the ILGWU as well as other labour organisations, see yivo.org/archives. **Stefanie Halpern** is the Acting Director of the YIVO Archives.