

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 4: "City of Immigrants"

"30,000 Waist Makers Declare Big Strike" Article Excerpt

This 1909 newspaper article describes a gathering of thousands of female shirtwaist makers. During the meeting, the workers made the decision to go on strike from their jobs to demand better working conditions. The article features quotations from strike supporters Samuel Gompers, the head of the American Federation of Labor union and Clara Lemlich, a young female worker.

Thirty thousand ladies waist makers, driven to desperation by the intolerable conditions prevailing in their trade, voted to go on a general strike last night at four enormous mass meetings which packed Cooper Union, Astoria Hall, Beethoven Hall, and Manhattan Lyceum.

The decision to strike was first reached at the Cooper Union meeting, which was addressed by Samuel Gompers, president of the A.F. of L (American Federation of Labor Union).

Gompers said: "I have never declared a strike in all my life. I have done my share to prevent strikes, but there comes a time when not to strike is but to rivet (fasten) the chains of slavery upon our wrists."

"This is the time and the opportunity, and I doubt if you let it pass whether it can be created again in five or ten years or a generation. I say, friends, do not enter too hastily but when you can't get the manufacturers to give you what you want, then strike. And when you strike, let the manufacturers know you are on strike!

"I ask you to stand together," said Gompers in conclusion, "to have faith in yourselves, to be true to your comrades. If you strike, be cool, calm, collected and determined. Let your watchword be: Union and progress, and until then no surrender!"

This was greeted with a storm of applause.

Clara Lemlich, who was badly beaten up by thugs during the strike in the shop of Louis Leiserson, interrupted Jacob Panken just as he started to speak, saying: "I wanted to say a few words." Cries came from all parts of the hall, "Get up on the platform!" Willing hands lifted the frail little girl with flashing black eyes to the stage, and she said simply: "I have listened to all the speakers. I would not have further patience for talk, as I am one of those who feels and suffers from the things pictured. I move that we go on a general strike!"

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As the tremulous voice of the girl died away, the audience rose en masse and cheered her to the echo. A grim sea of faces, with high purpose and resolve, they shouted and cheered the declaration of war for living conditions hoarsely

Source: "30,000 Waist Makers Declare Big Strike," *The Call*, November 23, 1909, in Leon Stein, ed., *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy* (New York: Quadrangle/New Times Book Company, 1977), 68-70