

photo: Emmanuel Joseph



# LABOR ARCHIVES *and* RESEARCH CENTER

San Francisco State University

Newsletter No. 21 ~ 2008

## *In the Classroom*



Laney College Labor Studies comes to LARC

This has been a very busy semester for the Labor Archives - in April alone we had over 170 research visits! Much of this activity related to SFSU classes with course assignments that required students to do research at LARC. One

course focusing on the subject of class had each student write a paper on a local labor event, and another course on the history of Blacks in California brought students in to look at oral histories documenting African-American in San Francisco prior to World War II. For many of these students it was their first experience learning about labor.

Along with course assignments, LARC also provides instruction on primary research and an introduction to the rich resources held at the Archives to classes in a variety of disciplines. We work with educational institutions throughout the Bay Area, including Labor Studies programs at Laney College and the Community College of San Francisco.

## *LaborFest 2008*

Seventy years ago, in 1938, the Federal Theatre Project staged a pro-union play in Yiddish. Soon after it opened, David Pinski's "The Tailor Becomes a Storekeeper" was accused of subversion at a hearing of the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities in Washington, D.C. As part of LaborFest, SFSU Professor and theatre historian Joel Schechter will discuss Pinski's play and other progressive works staged under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Theatre Project between 1935 and 1939. The presentation will be held 7 p.m., Tuesday, **July 8th at the Labor Archives & Research Center, 480 Winston Drive, San Francisco.**



To find out more about LaborFest, visit their website [www.laborfest.net](http://www.laborfest.net).

## *Welcome*

We are pleased to welcome Benjamin (Ben) Blake as our new Reference Archivist. Ben has a MLIS degree in Archives and Records Management from the University of Pittsburgh, and an MA in History with a Concentration in American Labor History from Cleveland State University.

Ben's most recent position was as Archivist in the Pictorial Collections Department of Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, DE where he was responsible for research and reference services for photographic, audio and moving image materials in one of the nation's largest archives of American industry, technology and business. Prior to that, he was the Assistant Curator of Manuscripts at the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, OH, home to an extensive collection of regional labor union local records.

In addition to his professional work, Ben has written extensively on labor archives, including the article "The New Archives for American Labor: From Attic to Digital Shop Floor" in the spring/summer 2007 issue of *American Archivist*. He has also been an active member of various unions, including the American Federation of Teachers, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, United Steelworkers of America, and Glass Bottle Blowers Association.

## *Community Connections*

LARC helps to ensure that labor's history is celebrated by its own community. When the **Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW)** held its awards celebration this spring, the Archives displayed a travelling exhibit on *Working Women in the 1940s*. The exhibit was also shown at **Women Building California**, the statewide conference for women working in the building trades. Director Catherine Powell also made a presentation on San Francisco labor history and the important role of women in the union movement.



# ILGWU Leader Jennie Matyas (1895-1988)

by Doris Linder

Historian Doris Linder passed away in late April. Doris was a long-time supporter of the Labor Archives and did extensive research at LARC. In addition to her scholarship on the Sailors Union of the Pacific's Andrew Furuseth, Doris wrote about a number of strong women activists, including pioneer Swedish feminist and sex educator Elise Ottesen-Jensen (1886-1973). We pay tribute to her with an excerpt from her biography of Jennie Matyas, a leader in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union .

None of Jennie Matyas organizing achievements was more path-breaking than her performance during the thirteen-week strike (March-June 1938) of Chinese garment workers against the National Dollar Stores Company. From the very outset of her job as an organizer, she had faced the challenge of trying to unionize a largely female garment industry work force in Chinatown in which about 1,000 women were employed in non-union shops often under sweatshop conditions. Two years passed before she finally began to win ground late in 1937 among the over 100 employees of the Chinese-owned National Dollar Stores factory, the largest among the six Chinatown sewing factories.



Offended when their wealthy employer Joe Shoong sent out some of the work to contractors who did it more cheaply, a few employees approached Jennie. To encourage them, she met with them in their homes and in restaurants, accompanied by an interpreter who helped her communicate with the many who spoke no English. One of them, Sue Koh Lee, would

later say of Jennie that “Everyone trusted her within the group ... She’s not Chinese, but she’s a woman. She’s dedicated and she’s honest.” Jennie guided them in getting eighty workers to sign certification cards in favor of wanting a union shop. Rather than join Local 101, they formed the Chinese Ladies’ Garment Workers Union Local 341, chartered in November 1937.

Sam Kagel, representing the ILGWU, had little success in first attempts to negotiate with the Company, but Shoong eventually agreed that an election be held to prove that the workers wanted the ILGWU as their agent. In balloting (January 24, 1938) supervised by the regional NLRB office, the workers approved of the ILGWU as their agent, and the next day a closed shop agreement was reached with the Company. Two weeks later, however, National Dollar Company announced it had sold the company to Golden Gate Manufacturing, a move that the workers understood was a subterfuge to counter unionization. Renewed demands by the union and their rejection by National Dollar Stores and Golden Gate Manufacturing Company led Local 341 to call a strike February 26. Jennie led a strike action which included picketing of both the factory and National Dollar’s three retail stores in San Francisco.



After doughnuts and coffee at ILGWU headquarters, the first shift was on the picket line by seven, and at the end of the day the strikers returned for meetings. Jennie was later to recall that “it was one of the most inspiring experiences I have ever had ... I was able to turn almost everything over to the Chinese members themselves. They arranged their picketing schedules .... all very democratically done ...” By mid-March Jennie was giving each striker \$5 a week from the International’s strike fund. She was also giving small sums to the seventy members of the Retail Department Store Employees Local 1100 who were showing support for the strike by refusing to cross picket lines around National Dollars’ retail stores and thereby causing them to close down. It was a demonstration of worker solidarity which impressed both Shoong and the strikers. Jennie’s efforts to gain the support of the Teamsters, among them a mid-March phone call to



President Dan Tobin when he was in town attending a Western states Teamsters convention, were not as successful.

Meanwhile on March 15 Shoong sued the ILGWU

(March 15) for \$500,000 in damages on grounds of an illegal strike and picketing, and a day later the union filed charges with the NLRB of unfair labor practices, arguing that the sale of the garment factory had been done in order to avoid collective bargaining. As the picketing around the factory continued, Jennie rallied the picketers and reached out to the community to cultivate support for their cause.

In late March Jennie had an evening meeting with a committee of the powerful Six Companies of Chinatown which lasted until three a.m. Proposals that the committee act as an intermediary regarding wages and National Dollar Stores' allocation of work to Golden Gate came to naught. The same week Jennie

presented the issues in the strike to an open meeting (March 28) sponsored by the Public Affairs and Industrial Committee of the YWCA. As a matter of course Jennie was reaching out for support from her own and other unions. In mid-March she sent letters to the AFL and CIO councils in the thirty-two Western cities in which National Dollar had retail stores asking them to encourage union members



to refrain from patronizing them and to spread information about the corporation's unfair labor practices. On the home scene she continued to speak at meetings of ILGWU locals and wrote in the pages of her Union Bulletin (May 1938) about the integrity and strong sense of responsibility of the Local 341 strikers. In that issue she included a message of appreciation from Local 341 to her and the ILGWU, printed

in Chinese characters together with an English translation.

On June 8, a settlement was finally reached in which the National Dollar Company withdrew its damage suit and the union its charges with NLRB. In contrast with the previous \$13.33 wage for a 48-hour week and under-reporting of workers' hours, wages were to be increased five percent and the work week was to be 40 hours with time-and-a-half for overtime. Health, fire, and sanitary regulations were to be enforced. Furthermore, the factory was to be a closed union shop, a shop steward was authorized to deal with grievances, and workers had the right to a hearing before an arbitration committee in unresolved disputes over contract terms or the questionable discharge of a worker. A price committee could intervene if piece rates did not yield the minimum wage for three-fourths of the workers. While not a complete victory for the workers, President Dubinsky deemed it a fair settlement. A dent had been made in organizing the San Francisco Chinatown garment industry.



Jennie participated in an intense debate in Local 341 over the contract terms and helped win a close vote of 31 to 27 in favor of acceptance. Many of the workers had wanted a more complete victory and left the union, their pride hurt. The contract was in effect only to the end of the year when the factory went out of business. Jennie now worked hard to find new jobs for the workers in white-operated shops, but race discrimination made this difficult.

AMCO Company, a firm with which she had amicable relations, hired the first, Edna Lee. A small union shop eventually employed staunch ILGWU member Sue Koh Lee as a machine operator, and when Koret Company took over this shop, she was promoted to a quality control position. In the post-World War II years, Lee, "my dear old friend" as mentor Jennie referred to her, went on to be elected secretary of both Local 101 and the Joint Board as well as become the first Chinese American business agent of a San Francisco ILGWU local. ~

***Labor and the Arts***

The Labor Archives provided research and images for two upcoming exhibitions that bring together art and labor history in a powerful way.

October 19th, with guided walking tours on July 26th and October 4th. For more information go to [www.ybca.org](http://www.ybca.org).

*Syndicate* is a gallery installation that will be part of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts world renowned exhibition *Bay Area Now 5*. *Syndicate* celebrates San Francisco union workers in performance and art spaces through time. Artist Jessica Tully will install sidewalk stencil images created from historic photographs at major theatre and art museums, creating a self-guided walking-tour with pod cast and audio components available from YBCA's website. Opening July 19th, the installation runs until



*Remembering the Struggle: A Community Retrospective of the Watsonville Strike (1985-1987)* will be held at the Pajaro Valley Arts Gallery in Watsonville from July 30th to September 21st. The "stubborn one thousand," as the Watsonville cannery strikers have sometimes been called, and their impact on the community will be remembered and honored through a unique art and historical exhibit. This show will not only display artwork and posters created at the time of the strike, but also contemporary works created by local artists inspired by the strike. Community events are being planned in conjunction with the exhibit, including a screening of Jon Silver's documentary, *Watsonville on Strike*. For more information visit the website [www.rememberingthestruggle.org](http://www.rememberingthestruggle.org).



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San Francisco, CA 94132**

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