DRAFT OF HISTORY OF HOSIERY WORKERS UNION IS INTERESTINGLY WRITTEN, COVERING A QUARTER OF A CENTURY

(Taken in Part from Fortune Magazine)

(Continued from Last Week)

The story of a hard-boiled union which does its own wage-cutting, which has entered into an offensive and defensive alliance with its manufacturers, and which is the white hope of stabilization in a chaotic industry.

Up to 1925, the American Federation of Full Fashioned Hosiery Workers (hereinafter known as "The Union") was just another labor union. which is to say that it was a composite picture of the economic hopes, fears, and desires of several thousand human beings. These men and women lived for the most part in Philadelphia. They lived there because their existence was bound up in the great hosiery mills which centered there. Most of them had another common characteristic: they wore glasses. For the making of full-fashioned hosiery is a job in which the years of high production are limited by eye-strain. Most of the union's members were men; skilled knitters, many of them sons of Nottinghamshire knitters. They spent the major part of their existences watching the intricate play of their machines, adjusting incredibly tiny loops of silk on incredibly close-set rows of needles. The women members of the union, less numerous then than now (when they outnumber the men over two to one) worked at less highly paid jobs. They were toppers, loopers, seamers, boarders, menders, pairers, stampers, boxers—a great army of auxiliary workers.

All these men and women had come together in the Union for one great purpose; to keep their wages at as high levels as possible. For this, they had gone through costly strikes, as in the big Philadelphia 1921 strike, which cost over $150,000; for this they had lived for months on strike pay of $16 a week for married men and $8 for the unmarried; for this, many of them ran a daily risk of being fired by non-union employers; for this, they had stood long watches on picket duty. Just as in any other rather small, fairly prosperous industry, the fight had been a hard one.

In 1899 the Philadelphia leggers earned $16 to $18 for a 60-hour week, footers $20 and $22. They struck for more money in 1899, were defeated and were so disgusted with the defeat that nothing more was heard of a labor movement in the industry for ten years. But in 1909, 40 or 50 knitters formed their own local union of the United Textile Workers—Local 706. The first several presidents held office without leaving jobs at the mill. Then in 1911, Big Frank McKosky, left his knitting machine to devote his suave persuasiveness to the duties of a business agent on full time. In 1925 Big Frank had long returned from leadership to chiropractice and had been succeeded by a keen, conciliatory little man named Gustave Geiges, who was like the elder Reckefeller, a Baptist, no Socialist. The little band of forty had become 4,000 men and 8,000 women. And it was apaprently entering the promised land of high wages. For in 1925 one of the great post war booms suddenly roared up like a rocket into the industrial heavens.

In 1919, some 6,300,000 dozen pairs of full-fashioned silk stockings were produced; in 1925 this figure was 12,300,000 and by 1929 it had reached 26,900,000 dozen—i. e., 322,800,000 pairs of full-fashioned silk stockings or eight pairs per annum for each and every United States female above ten years of age. This whole boom, which determined the fortunes of thousands of workers, was based on the distinction between seamless thinly cotton) and full fashioned mainly silk) hosiery. Now seamless stockings are knitted as tubes of about the same diameter throughout. They are pressed into the appearance of being shaped to the leg—a delusion. Full fashioned stockings, on the contrary, are knitted flat with the edges curved by dropping stitches, so that when the two edges are sewed together at the seam the stocking really does follow the desired contour. Seamless tockings are much cheaper to make, but they do not fit the ankle if they fit the calf, and vice-versa. There was a time when only a very wealthy or a very wicked woman indulged in full-fashioned hosiery, and when seamless stockings (generally of cotton, were good enough for the poor but honest working girl. After the war came the flapper, and the contour of the feminine leg emerged into the open. About 1925, the American woman of every size, shape, age and condition hitched her skirt up several notches and—"silk stockings made short skirts wearable." The full-fashioned boom began tentatively in 1919, sprang into full flower in 1925, and has lasted ever since. It has outlasted the Flapper; it has even outlasted the short skirt. It has proved to be as permanent a rise in the American standard of living as the post-war automobile boom. In 1919, some 60 per cent of total women's hosiery consumed was seamless as against only 20 per cent full-fashioned. Today the proportions are almost reversed, with seamless stabilized at one-quarter of total production.

When production of full-fashioned hosiery was shooting up at a dizzy rate, anyone could make money in the industry, so far had demand outstripped supply. There are tales of knitters who scraped together their savings, got liberal bank loans, and set up as manufacturers with more or less success. And there are tales of the chambers of commerce in such Pennsylvania towns as Stroudsburg, Montgomery, Pottstown, or Lebanon offering to build a mill free of charge for a budding full-fashioned manufacturer. New Hosiery Mills sprang up in the South and out in the middle West. This ferment of activity bred two insistent demands; for machines and for knitters to work them. So frenzied was the demand for machines that Reading Textile Machine Works, then as now, the only sizable United States maker of full-fashioned machines, had to allot its production as far as two years ahead. The full-fashioned machine is not only about twelve times as expensive as the seamless ($8,000 as against $600), but it is also much more complex so that skilled knitters are required to work it whereas unskilled girls operate seamless machines. With knitters in demand everywhere, wages soared up to fabulous heights, until knitters were getting $75 and more a week, and were the highest paid skilled labor in the country. There were many cases of knitters making $5,000 and over a year. But the manufacturers apparently cared little what wages they paid (non-union shops were often as well paid as union shops), providing they got production. This they got in bigger and bigger chunks. but never quite enough to satisfy them. In the last year of the boom (1929) the industry's productive capacity actually increased 25 per cent. Which as we shall see, was 25 per cent too much.

Meanwhile, what of the Union? Its rank and file, the thousands of knitters and toppers and loopers who worked night and day in the humming mills of Philadelphia and other hosiery centers, were uncritically enthusiastic about the high wages they were receiving. And there was no doubt that so far as increasing numbers were concerned, the Union was flourishing like a green bay tree. (Of the 30,000 members of the entire United Textile Workers in 1929, some 15,000 belonged to the Union we are considering. But the boom was not an unmixed blessing to the Union. While the Union treasury was getting comfortably full and the Union was gaining members, it was losing ground proportionately in the industry. For as new mills opened up, they showed a natural tendency to pick out non-union localities. And some Union mils, anxious to get production without interruption of labor troubles, moved away into non-union territory. became, in the contemptuous slang of the Union, a "runaway mill." Thus it came about that during the boom the unionized proportion of the industry dropped from over 75 per cent to under 60 per cent.

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(Continued next week)