

**START! A Play in Seven Scenes, 1927**  
**(excerpted and abridged)**

**By Beckie Friedman and Eva Shafran**

This is an abridged excerpt of the first two scenes of a play in which the garment worker Sonia asks for her union's support for a campaign to organize New Jersey garment workers. It was written and produced by two female members of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) in 1927.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS:**

**Sonia:** a young female organizer for the garment union in New York City

**Bill:** a male organizer, slightly older than Sonia, for the garment union in New York City

**Chairman of Joint Board:** head of union committee that negotiates labor contracts with management

**President:** president of the garment workers union

**First presser:** typically, a male worker who handled heavy irons; likely older than Sonia and Bill

**Second presser:** works alongside the first presser

**Payneck:** older immigrant factor worker who speaks with a heavy Eastern European accent, whose name is a play on "Pain-in-the-Neck"

**SCENE 1: "A GARMENT UNION'S NEW YORK OFFICE"**

(Union meeting to take place soon. Members [first presser, second presser, Sonia, Bill, Payneck, perhaps a few others] talk among themselves, crack jokes, laugh [chairman sits behind table].)

**First presser:** [Darn] it! When will they open the meeting? My wife is waiting for me back home. She'll think I worked overtime. She never knows I'm going to meetings.

**2<sup>ND</sup> presser:** [Heck]! I hope they open it. I want to go home for supper.

**Sonia:** We must see that the first point on the order of business shall be the out-of-town organizational work.

**2<sup>nd</sup> presser:** That's right!

**Chairman:** (raps gavel against table) Come on, gang!... Let's open the meeting! Pretty soon you'll holler "Chairman, chairman, let's adjourn! We hafta go home!"

(all take their seats near the table where the chairman sits. Quiet prevails.)

**Chairman:** The order of business for tonight is reading of minutes, communications, manager's report – have you anything to add?

**Payneck:** Bruder chairman, I move you to put on the order the out-of-town organizational work, you knuw.

**First presser:** Brother chairman, I'm making this as a motion –

**2<sup>nd</sup> presser:** I second the motion –

**Chairman:** You've all heard the motion. What's the pleasure of the meeting?

**All:** Question!

**Chairman:** All those in favor say "ay"!

**All:** (in a mighty voice) Ay!

**Chairman:** That settles it then.

**Payneck:** Bruder charman and members of the choint boards, you knuw – ve dunt do nodding for dis union. Ve kent face de members, ve chopsudize de bosses, datsall!  
(others laugh)

**First presser:** He means “subsidize” – the damn fool!

**Sonia:** (A Russian-Jewish girl. Plainly dressed, serious looking, factory girl.)  
Chairman and delegates – The problem before us should get serious consideration. It’s a question of life and death for our organization. Manufacturers are slipping out of our [union’s] control through their moving out of town. New Jersey and Connecticut are scab states against our organization.  
([Union] members...seem to understand that Sonia is telling them something that concerns them.... They say “she says something!”)

**Sonia:** Are we going to allow our union to lose membership – lose control over the industry – our members to suffer from slack time and wage reductions? We should [return to the days of] the sweat shop and consumption [tuberculosis] – or are we going to organize these out-of-town workers, and keep our organization and protect our own lives?...  
If you brothers choose to protect yourselves and the organization, it means to organize the out-of-town workers... and if a strike will happen out of this, we’ve got to put up with it, if that’s the only way we have to save our organization. The matter is in your hands, brothers.  
(Applause greets Sonia as she sits down at the end of her speech.)

**First presser:** Of course we want to organize them.

**2<sup>nd</sup> presser:** Organizing? Sure, organizing – that’s what we need.

**Voices:** That’s right! That’s right! We know all this stuff!  
(Chairman hammers table)

**Payneck:** Bruder chairman – I vant the floor –

**Chairman:** What do you want to tell us now, Payneck?

**Payneck:** A kvestchun! It’s important!...

**Chairman:** Listen, brother, you always [slow us down]! Can’t you shut up for a while and let us do some business? And...

**Payneck:** I just as smaht as you are! Chairman and delegates, you knuw! We must celebrate the foist of May! All de voikahs of de voild make dis day a nashnul holiday. Ve moost get ready... And let me eggsplain to you de princibles of de foist of May...  
(While Payneck bucks up to make a windy speech, delegates rise, get restless)

**Sonia:** (turns to Bill) Well, what can you do? He’s always like this. He kills every meeting for us.

**Bill:** But it’s impossible!

**Payneck** (continuing)...and let me tell you that...

**Bill:** (cutting through his talk) Chairman, take it to a vote.

**Chairman:** All those in favor of the motion say “Ay.”

**All:** Ay.

**Chairman:** Against None. The Ays have it and it is so ordered.

## SCENE II: THE FOLLOWING EVENING

(The president, Sonia, Bill, and Chairman sit near a table. They look as if the meeting would have been on for quite a while).

**President:** (pleasantly) You people have really touched the question at its very roots. The out-of-town problem becomes more and more acute, with every single day that passes by. But I think that you people took the question in too narrow a scope. You only think of New Jersey, and you forget about the South that is now being industrially developed....

**Sonia:** We did talk about things like this, but it would be very good to hear your version of the story.

**President:** Modern capitalism does not stay in one place. It tries to move, at least insofar as profits are concerned. Of course, in our case, it might be the immediate fear [of] the union, but the most important thing is the economic reason.

**Bill:** In what respect do you mean?

**President:** I mean that the South is a cotton growing center. In former years, the textiles from the cotton that grows there, were not manufactured in the South, but shipped to the north and abroad. At present, the textile manufacturers have built up the most up to date factories right there, where the cotton grows. So it does not cost anything for exportation to the manufacturing centers. Labor in the South is cheap and profits are therefore big.

**Bill:** What does this have to do with our organizational work in New Jersey?

**President:** It has very much to do with us. The cotton is right there in the South. Why ship it to the North and create all these unnecessary expenses? Why not manufacture shirts right there, and save all these expenses for the pocket of the manufacturers. Yes, yes, our manufacturers, just like Ford, will own and control the sources of raw material and produce right on the spot.

**Sonia:** Maybe they will also install the belt system, like in the Ford factories?

**Chairman:** I wonder whether the unions will realize this menace to their existence.

**Sonia:** (raises her hand). Chairman.

**Chairman:** Yes, Sonia.

**Sonia:** We are glad indeed that our president gave us such a vivid picture of the situation as is developing in our industrial life .... Still we must recognize that the immediate problem before our union at present is still New Jersey, not only as one center, but to get prepared for our bigger task, for this section is the most unorganized, and the biggest evil for our organization....

(Sonia sits down.)

**President:** ...I do think that Sonia was right in saying that our immediate task is to tackle New Jersey... The general board has already assigned a staff of organizers to that work. (turns to all of them) Do you wish to have in addition to this one of your own people?

**Bill:** Yes, I should think so, and I think Sonia is the proper person for the job.

**Chairman:** That's right, Sonia, you go.

(they all rise)

**President:** I'm glad of this decision.

**Bill:** Make a good job, Sonia.

**Sonia:** I surely will do my best. Good-bye.

(exit Sonia)

(The committee stares and smiles grimly at each other, while the curtain falls.)

Text excerpted by Leilah Danielson, Northern Arizona University. From: "Start! A Play in Seven Scenes" by Beckie Friedman and Eva Shafran, Brookwood Labor College, 1927-1928; Josephine Colby Papers; WAG 008; box 1; folder 29; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.