

“HANDS”

by Leon Stein
Editor, *JUSTICE*, publication of
International Ladies' Garment
Workers Union

LABOR

While much is known about the songs and the history of the labor movement, surprisingly little is known about the traditions, the feelings, the sense of pride and craftsmanship of the union worker. It is in part to celebrate the union worker's considerable contribution to America's cultural and social fabric that member unions of AFL-CIO have been invited to take part in the Festival of American Folklife.

In the articles that follow, Leon Stein, editor of *JUSTICE*, a consistently excellent publication of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union and author of *The Triangle Fire* and other books, chronicles the importance of handcrafting in the Nation's fashion industry. Albert K. Herling, Public Relations Director of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers' Union and a participant in the 1971 Festival, speaks personally and intimately of the need for the continued involvement of union workers in the Festival. Kenneth S. Goldstein, Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and Chairman of the Graduate Folklore and Folklife Program at the University of Pennsylvania gently but pointedly chides his fellow scholars and the American people for overlooking the place of the union worker in American folk culture.

The Festival staff is pleased to present these three articles and to welcome the Lithographers and Photoengravers, the Carpenters and Joiners, the Molders and the Ladies' Garment Workers to the Mall.

Gerald L. Davis



For thousands of years workers were called "hands." Men were named for what they did with their hands. Masters addressed their serving men as baker or tailor, smith, fisher, or shoemaker. Only after those who worked with their hands began to gain political influence was "Mr." added. But even then, men of wealth continued to speak of the "hands" they hired, of how many "hands" they would need to run a farm or to lay a mile of railroad track or to dig a tunnel. There are hands that write, that mix, that mold, that shape, that grip, that tear, that build houses, that bake bread. Here



are the hands that make the nation's dresses. Hands . . .

The women's garment industry is a last major refuge of the handicraft worker. At no point can the work get away from the hands. Fabric itself has "life." At every stage, it must be controlled and directed. The sense of "feel," of control, is in the hands.

The techniques of mass production—possible with such standardized products as bricks or bread—are not characteristic of the women's garment industry. Except for the cutting of the fabric, each link in the chain of production involves the handling of no more



than two surfaces of fabric.

Only when all the layers have been spread, and the master patterns or the marker have topped off the pile, does the cutting begin. When only a small number of layers is to be cut, the hand-shears may be used. But when the thickness is more than hand-power can manage, the electrically powered cutting machine with vertical-reciprocal cutting blade or circular blade is used.

Beyond the cutting room, even this minimal mass production is absent. The machine operator, opening her bundle of cut parts for four or five garments, is her own engineer. She decides which parts to sew first—bodice or skirt, fronts or backs. But it is she who decides, putting a single cut piece of fabric upon a single cut piece

of fabric to join them under the foot of her sewing machine.

At the sewing machine, electric power supplements human muscles in driving the needle, whose ancestor was first shaped by Swiss lake dwellers or Eskimos. It is the same needle except that Elias Howe, more than a century ago, moved its eye from the base to the point. And it is a machine which, despite its electrical power and theoretical potential of superhuman stitching speed, still cannot run faster than the human agent who controls its stopping and starting.

But stitcher and machine still en-



"These are the hands that write, that mix, that mold, that shape, that grip, that tear, that build houses, that bake bread. Here are hands that make the nation's dresses." (Photographs courtesy of JUSTICE, a publication of the ILGWU)

gage in the dialogue of work—the machine impassively growling in the race with time, the operator still singing, cursing, cajoling, or, as repetitive work breeds mechanical familiarity, loosening attention and turning to talk with neighboring operators. In the distant days when the operator carried his machine on his shoulder in changing jobs, he called it in a variety of newcomer's languages his nemesis, his donkey—his Rosinante in the pursuit of hope in his new homeland.

Some sewing still defies the machine and must be done by hand finishers. All that is needed is a needle, a thimble, thread—and a skilled human worker, a combination unchanged for centuries.

