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Making the Amalgamated: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Baltimore Clothing Industry, 1899-1939 (Studies in Industry and Society)

Professor Jo Ann E. Argersinger

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"A volatile, competitive, and seasonal industry, the making of men's suits has long been characterized by manufacturers who search relentlessly for the cheapest labor pools. Sweatshop labor conditions have been a regular feature of the industry, provoking repeated and explosive investigations and constituting a target for social reform and a major source of union concern. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers from its inception in 1914 has sought to create a process of labor-management relations that emphasizes cooperation and negotiation" -- from the Introduction

Making the Amalgamated examines the policy and power relationships that developed on the shopfloor, in the union hall, on the picket line, and within the national organization of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW) in the period when this industry -- now largely departed from the United States -- teemed with activity. A progressive union imbued with socialist principles, the ACW practiced labor-management cooperation and attempted simultaneously to discipline union members and to bring clothing manufacturers to heel.

Jo Ann E. Argersinger examines both the interests that tended to unify workers and the forces that divided them. She studies the complex nature of union building itself, explores the seasonal cycles of the clothing industry as a whole, and places Baltimore and the ACW in national context, illustrating how local trends collided with national union politics. Argersinger draws from the strengths of the traditional approach to labor history. While offering a full account of institutional growth of the union movement, however, she also incorporates new insights, stressing labor's social context and the shifting influences of ethnicity, gender, and culture. Blending old and new perspectives, Making the Amalgamated calls for a more nuanced understanding of organized labor and business practices.

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