

Pushing The Line

anon.

1976

NEW YORK—The 200 garment industry executives listened attentively as the seminar speaker, with evangelical fervor, told them how their industry can be brought “kicking and screaming into the 20th Century.”

The Saturday seminar for New York-area producers, at \$30 a head, was designed to show them how to use new assembly line techniques to cut costs. Workers assigned to a single task, such as sewing buttonholes, would work faster as the repetition increases their efficiency, the executives were told.

As the keynote speaker concluded, the congregated garment industry managers fervently applauded. In an industry threatened by antiquated production methods and increasing competition from imports, tidings of possible salvation are glad tidings indeed.

In this case, moreover, the bearer of the tidings was not the run-of-the-mill savior. He was Sol C. Chaikin, the 58-year-old president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, who four months earlier had bickered with some of the same executives across the bargaining table.

The union, representing workers who make women's clothing, is going all out to help save the threatened industry. As the seminar for executives indicates, the ILGWU is taking some unusual steps to try to turn things around at the 76-year-old union. Mr. Chaikin, who inherited the presidency from the ailing Louis Stulberg last year, acknowledges that the union faces an uphill battle to preserve even its present strength. The loss of tailors through retirement and death has intensified the search for assembly-line type methods that require few skills. The union's promotion of such advances, at the seminar last summer, for example, reflects its belief that much of the industry, especially in New York, can't survive the decade without major changes.

Drawing on expertise accumulated since the opening of the union's management-engineering department in 1941, ILGWU officials are trying to promote assembly line techniques not only to administer to an endangered industry, but also to help the garment workers, who are paid by the number of pieces they complete.

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