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ROSS, WILLIAM

William Ross, 91, organized local ILGWU unit

William Ross, 91, a labor organizer and founder of Local 178 of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in this city, died on Nov. 17 in Philadelphia. He was the husband of Rose (Travis) Ross, a Fall River native.

An ILGWU organizer, Ross was sent to Fall River in 1934 by ILGWU president David Dubitsky to recruit angry dressmakers who had walked off their jobs at Little Dorothy Dress factory on Hope Street. The Little Dorothy strike led to the birth of Local 178.

Ross remained in this city for 10 years, during which the ILGWU established a firm base here and the ILGWU Health Center was established. In 1937, he organized workers at D. Schneierson & Bros., and in 1941 the union won one of its most impressive victories when Local 178 signed up 2,000 workers at Har-Lee Manufacturing Co. here.

A garment worker by trade, Ross left his position as ILGWU district manager here to take a West Coast assignment. An ILGWU national vice president, he went to Philadelphia in the 1950s as manager and vice president of the union's Joint Board.

He retired from that position in 1977, after more than a half century in the labor movement.

Ross was appointed to the Philadelphia Board of Education in 1965. He served on the board until 1973, the last three years as president. He resigned from the Board of Education after being roundly criticized for his hard-ball approach to negotiations with the striking Philadelphia Federation of Teachers while serving as a vice president of the Philadelphia AFL-CIO Council.

He said he was resigning to eliminate the personal element in the strike, which he termed a defeat for the city's school children. Ross also served on the Police Advisory Board, Cardinal John Krol's committee on parochial education and the executive board of the United Fund and Allied Jewish Appeal in Philadelphia.

Born in Tarnopol in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, he came to the United States at age 14 and lived in New York City, where he worked in the garment district on the Lower East Side. He got involved in the labor movement in the 1920s as an organizer. He led a bitter strike in North Carolina in 1929 which saw seven picketers killed. For the next three decades, Ross was at the forefront of the fledgling labor movement. He joined the ILGWU in 1934 as an organizer in southern New England, and later worked as an organizer in Canada, New York and Southern California. In 1948, when he was trying to clean out an organized crime element in a section of the New York garment district, Ross was severely beaten by thugs who invaded the ILGWU's New York office.

Until the mid 1980s, Ross and his wife came to Fall River every year to visit her relatives.

Besides his wife, he is survived by three sons, Jeremy, Carl and Marc Ross; a daughter, Johanna Ross; seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

Private funeral services were held.