



# Bread & Roses

NOT JUST SUBSISTENCE, BUT DIGNITY

The 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike set precedents for industry-wide action, inter-ethnic collaboration and women's leadership

By Gregory DL Morris

IN 1912, a state law in Massachusetts went into effect reducing the work week of women and children from 56 to 54 hours, according to the Bread & Roses Heritage Committee's (BRHC) brief history of the Lawrence Textile Strike. "But because so many women and children worked in the mills, men's hours were also reduced. When the first paychecks of the year revealed a cut in pay, thousands of workers, already barely surviving on an average

pay of \$8.76 a week, walked out of the mills" on January 11.

For nine weeks in a bitterly cold winter, more than 20,000 workers, mostly new immigrants, dared to challenge the mill owners and other city authorities, the BRHC wrote. "Thousands of picketers, many of them women, faced state militia armed with guns and clubs. But the strikers were generally peaceful. The three fatalities were strikers. A cache of dynamite, first attributed to the strikers, turned out to be planted by mill owners and their friends in a clumsy plot to discredit the strikers and their radical union, the Industrial Workers of the World," (IWW) often called the Wobblies.

Victory for the workers is widely seen today as a high-water mark for labor rights and working conditions across the industry

and the region. The New England textile industry began in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1823, which was founded as a company town with mills and boardinghouses for the workers, young women recruited from farms of the region. The work was difficult and the rules strict, but the women earned cash wages, education and a degree of independence impossible on the farm.

"Lowell's textile corporations paid higher wages than those in other textile cities, but work was arduous and conditions were frequently unhealthy," according to the Lowell National Historical Park, a well-preserved mill town not far from Lawrence. "Although the city's corporations threatened labor reformers with firing or blacklisting, many mill girls protested wage cuts and working conditions. Female workers struck twice in the 1830s. In the 1840s,

Cartoon published in *Collier's* on March 9, 1912. Original caption: On February 24 and 25, soldiers and policemen forcibly prevented parents from sending their children away from Lawrence to cities that offered food and shelter.



Militia confront strikers in Lawrence, MA, soon after the strike began in January. Note the flags held by the strikers, mostly men. Strike leaders emphasized the patriotism of the workers as a way of building cohesion among them, and also of emphasizing the strike was not the work of radicals.

female labor reformers banded together to promote the 10-hour day, in the face of strong corporate opposition. Few strikes succeeded, however, and Lowell's work force remained largely unorganized."

That all changed in 1912. In a tragic preamble, the horrific Triangle Shirtwaist Fire that killed 146 people in New York almost exactly a year earlier—March 25, 1911—drew national and international attention to the sweatshops where young women, some just girls, worked long hours in dismal conditions. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union had been formed in 1900 in the 'needle trades' making garments, but did not extend to the textile workers making fabric.

Hence the surprise at the cohesiveness of the Bread & Roses Strike. "Observers were impressed by the strikers' inter-ethnic cooperation, their soup kitchens, the important role of women and their reliance on song to bolster their spirits and express their beliefs," the BRHC wrote. Although a use of the phrase 'Bread and Roses' during the strike has never been documented, the words later became associated with it as symbolizing the workers' fight both for subsistence and for dignity.

The tide turned against the mill owners when police and militia, attempting to prevent strikers from sending their

children to the care of sympathetic families in other cities, caused a melee at the train station which received national and international condemnation.

"At a subsequent Congressional hearing," the BRHC wrote, "the testimony of Carmela Teoli, a young mill worker who had suffered a terrible injury to her scalp, shocked the nation. Soon the mills came to the bargaining table, and the strikers won most of their demands."

The BRHC stated that the strike "drew attention to the problems of child labor, workplace safety, and the unequal distribution of the profits of industry. It was an important step in organized labor's long struggle to gain benefits that many of us take for granted today. As the nation again faces an era of increasing inequalities of wealth, as well as a growing immigrant population, we can take inspiration from the workers of Lawrence."

The mill owners did not just give in, said Ardis Cameron, distinguished professor *emeritus* of the University of Southern Maine in Portland, and author of *Radicals of the Worst Sort: The Laboring Women of Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1888–1912* (University of Illinois Press, 1993). She plotted the lives of 2,000 of the strikers and interviewed some of the last living participants of the strike. "The strikers won because

there was tremendous outcry in Congress and from First Lady Helen Taft, the President's wife."

Cameron also sought to dispel other myths about the strike, such as the belief that the immigrant workers had displaced the local mill girls. "The immigrant workers did not replace the Yankee girls," said Cameron. "The Yankee girls left because of the working conditions, and the mill owners actively recruited workers in Italy, French Canada and other places. The investors in the mills did not care about the benevolent model [on which some of the first mills had been founded]. The era of the 'mill girls' was only about the first 10 or 12 years. And even then the turnover was high, with individual young women working an average of 2½ years in the mills."

Part of the reason that mill owners recruited from multiple regions of the world was to keep the workforce fragmented. "The immigrant workers were all segregated," said Cameron. In addition to their inherent differences in language, customs, lifestyles and religion, "their wages were different," she explained. "It was arranged to exacerbate the ethnic antagonisms."

The flaw in the plan, however, was that the female workers were accommodated in boarding houses. "While they



Boott Cotton Mills Museum, Lowell National Historical Park, Lowell, MA. This well-preserved mill complex is very similar to the mills in Lawrence and is now a mixed-use area with residential, office and commercial space, as well as an excellent museum (see page 21). Note the canal in front: all the mills were driven by water power.

were all segregated at the mills,” Cameron explained, “off the shop floor they all lived together. They were also able to move around the town during the strike. While shopping and other duties they were also meeting and talking. The women were able to coordinate the strike while male strikers were being kept off the streets.”

Cameron also stressed that the IWW leaders and organizers were willing to listen to the female strikers. “It was the women who understood the consumer economics of the town, the importance of issues such as hunger and child care,” she said. “They were the ones who knew that the 32 cents a week that their pay had been reduced was enough to buy three loaves of bread. The men had no idea. It was a robust time for the women’s movement, including suffrage.”

There had been previous reduction in hours, said Bruce Watson, author of *Bread & Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream* (Penguin Books, 2005), and writer of the online history magazine *The Attic*. “In those instances, the workers’ total pay stayed the same. But 1911 had been a rough year, and in 1912 the mill owners did not feel able to hold the total the same again.”

In a small irony, the ethnic loyalties on which mill owners relied to keep workers played a large role in the cohesiveness of the Bread & Roses Strike from the very start. On the first day of the walkout, a local IWW representative, who was Italian, contacted the national union. Joseph Ettor, a member of the union’s general executive board and also Italian, arrived in Lawrence the next day, January 12.

“From the start Ettor spoke to and about the strikers as one cohesive group,” said Watson. “He spoke five languages and so was able to engage many of the strikers on a personal level. He selected 14 representatives from the various groups for the strike committee. Ettor also engaged the entire IWW in raising strike funds and generating publicity.”

Despite the radical elements in the IWW, or perhaps because of it, Ettor was careful to emphasize patriotism. “Within a week there was a parade in Lawrence with a big American flag. By the end it had 20,000 people as a solid, united group.”

Frightened, the mill owners over reacted. “If the strikers could have chosen their enemies, they could scarcely have done better than the mill owners,” Watson noted dryly. “There was a plot to frame the strikers by

planting dynamite, which was a common radical tactic of the time. But the dynamite was wrapped in a magazine on which was the name of the man who planted it.”

By the middle of February, the strikers were weakening and the mills were able to resume some production using replacement workers. Ettor was in jail on contrived charges, but William “Big Bill” Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, leaders of the IWW, had come to town.

“Haywood had the striking women go into shops with their hands in their empty pockets, then walk out again, showing local businesses that the loss of wages was a loss of economy to the whole town,” Watson said. “The mill owners lost the support of the merchants.”

The climax of the strike was the Children’s Exodus. Striking families faced hunger, so the IWW arranged for children to be sent in groups over several weeks to stay with sympathetic families in several cities. The first two were mostly unmarred, but earned national notoriety for the mill owners. Again, they and municipal authorities over reacted.

“A new police chief was appointed to crack down on the strikers, and he sent officers to the train station to prevent the third Children’s Exodus,” said Watson. “Women and children were dragged kicking and screaming off the train and back into the station.”

That caused a national outcry and Congressional hearings. “The IWW gathered the most articulate and sympathetic strikers to testify,” Watson said. “They made the issue not just the strike but working conditions. Soon after the hearings other mills around New England offered their workers 5-7% raises and improved working conditions. They did not want anything to do with what was happening in Lawrence. That benefited 125,000 workers, eventually spreading to 300,000.”

On March 12, the first Lawrence mill agreed to most of the strikers’ demands. By the end of the month all the mills had done likewise. All but a handful of the workers returned to the looms, and the children who had been sent away returned home.

Watson noted that “Big Bill was quoted saying, ‘the women won the strike.’”

Christopher Klein, author and historian, contrasted the tenor of the Bread & Roses Strike, as well as the national mood, with more violent labor actions before and



Belt-driven loom (left) and loom floor (right) at the Boott Mill Museum in Lowell. Docents in period dress keep the looms operating, powerfully demonstrating how loud, fast, complex and hazardous the mill work could be.

after. “These were women, some young women, and children. These were not burly men, or anarchists. The basic issue was one of fairness. They were not striking for a pay raise, they were striking to prevent a pay cut, so they could feed their families. The public opinion had a huge effect on the outcome.”

It is also immensely important that the IWW understood the power of public opinion. “They organized the Children’s Exodus,” said Klein. “The IWW brought its network to bear. They had members all over who were willing to take in the children.”

That said, the strikers had to hold together long enough for that public opinion to take effect. “It is a testament to the workers that so many ethnicities could find ways to collaborate,” said Klein. “By 1912 there were 51 different ethnicities living and working within seven square miles in Lawrence. It was a real American tapestry—not a melting pot. And the strike committee recognized that. It had representatives from each of the major groups.”

Professor Ileen DeVault, of the Labor Relations, Law, and History Department in the College of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, noted that the Bread & Roses Strike might not be as widely known as the Homestead or Pullman strikes, or the infamous Ludlow Massacre, “but it does have a huge place in labor history. It was the first successful

attempt to organize all the workers on an industrial scale, not just the skilled crafts, but everyone across an industry.”

DeVault explained that at the time, the mainstream national umbrella organization was the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which focused primarily on skilled, male, native-born workers. Both the AFL and the IWW had representatives in Lawrence and other mill towns, “but the AFL was not interested in running a strike that included unskilled workers, or a bunch of immigrants,” said DeVault. “The AFL was anti-immigrant, and especially the ‘new’ immigrant from southern and eastern Europe who they considered unorganizable.”

“The Bread & Roses Strike proved that those workers could be organized,” DeVault continued, “across languages, cultures, and trades, skilled and unskilled. The AFL was blown away, and many of its members and leaders were concerned that the AFL would lose out if they did not follow the creativity of the IWW, especially the practical steps and the stability” that were so successful in Lawrence.

In the wake of the Bread & Roses Strike, however, the AFL did not make meaningful efforts to organize unskilled, immigrant or female workers, DeVault explained. “That ultimately happened in the ‘30s with the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations.”

But neither did the IWW ride its success. “The Bread & Roses Strike was the high point for the IWW, at least on the East Coast,” said DeVault. “They did go on to have some successes in the West after that.”

The legacy of the Bread & Roses Strike is mixed. “The progressive reforms were institutionalized, especially in the mill cities of the North” said Klein. “The issues of work weeks and pay were mostly settled. There were child-labor laws. However, the textile industry started to leave the region and shift to the South.”

There was resurgence in the mills when World War I increased demand for textiles, but the Depression hit the region particularly hard. There was another recovery during World War II, but by the 1950s most of the industry had left New England.

Labor more broadly struggled as well. The Red Scares of the late teens and early ‘20s hurt the more radical IWW, as did the rise of the CIO in the ‘30s. For the record, the IWW is still active, with 9,000 members across North America. The AFL-CIO has 12.5 million. 💰

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