

## More stuff you missed in history class: The Bread and Roses Strike of 1912, Part 3



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In early January 1912, nearly 30,000 immigrant textile workers were on strike in Lawrence, MA. What led to the strike, and the reaction of the public, can be found in my columns in the May and June issues of *The Postal Record*.

As the strike entered its fourth week, concerns about keeping their children warm and fed led the strikers to employ a relief tactic successfully used in Europe, where workers' children were sent away to live with friends and family in other areas, thereby lessening

the burden on their embattled parents. An exodus of children to sympathetic activists in New York and other cities began in mid-February. The children were met with open arms, and much publicity, in their temporary homes.

Concerned that strikers were gaining public support, Lawrence City Marshal John Sullivan outlawed removal of any more children, stating, "I will not hesitate to use all the force, power and authority I possess or may summon to my aid." Undeterred, the strike committee approved another exodus of children set for Feb. 24 to Philadelphia. As the mothers and their children attempted to leave, the police descended and began beating them with clubs. Those unable to escape were herded onto military convoy trucks and driven away. The women were jailed and the children sent to a home for neglected children. Frantic mothers and fathers stormed city hall only to be beaten back by police. Clashes occurred throughout the day with many more arrests. Eventually the children were returned to their parents, who sent them off to Philadelphia.

**The American public was outraged by the violence.** Labor activists and social reformers called upon Congress for an immediate investigation. Upon hearing of the incident, First Lady Nellie Taft took interest in the strikers' plight and attended the congressional hearings that began on March 2 to a packed audience. Many children testified. One of them, Camella Teoli, stated that in 1911, when she was 13 years old, a recruiter from the American Woolen Company persuaded her father to let her drop out of school and go to work in the mill. To circumvent child labor laws, the recruiter offered to forge a birth certificate for a bribe of \$4, showing that Camella was 14, old enough to work. Teoli had been working in the mills for about three weeks when her hair got caught in a machine used to twist cotton into thread, and part of her scalp was torn off. The injury was so severe she had to be hospitalized for seven months.

After the children's testimony, public tide turned in favor of the strikers for good. The mill owners were ready for a deal and agreed to most of the strikers' demands; a 15 percent wage hike, a bump in overtime compensation and a promise not to retaliate against strikers. On March 14, the nine-week strike ended as 15,000 workers gathered on Lawrence Common and ratified the agreement. Bill Haywood addressed them, saying, "You are the heart and soul of the working class. Single-handed you are helpless, but united you can win everything."

Though successful, the gains of the strike were short-lived. Within a few years, the wages were lowered under the guise of aiding the World War I effort. Many leaders of the IWW, including Bill Haywood, were rounded up and put in prison under the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918, which made illegal any statements deemed "disloyal."

Ettor and Giovannitti were found not guilty of conspiracy in the murder of Annie LoPizzo in November 1912 and released. Ettor and Flynn left the IWW in 1916. Elisabeth Flynn went on to become a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Giovannitti avoided volatile strikes and turned to poetry. His first book of poems, *Arrows in the Gale*, was published in 1914. In the introduction to the book, Helen Keller wrote: "Giovannitti is, like Shelley, a poet of revolt against the cruelty, the poverty, the ignorance which too many of us accept."

**Lawrence government and business officials, as well as** clergymen, tried to rewrite the history of the strike, which they saw as a stain on the city, by conducting a patriotic "God and Country" parade in October 1912. For decades to come, local memory of 1912 was dominated by the "God and Country" version of events: that outside agitators and godless "Communists" had duped the new immigrant millworkers, that the strike and participation in it were shameful, and that the patriotic citizens of Lawrence had saved the city via the "God and Country" parade. And so it was the "God and Country" parade, not the strike, which was commemorated through the decades following the strike and was even re-enacted at the 50th anniversary of the parade in 1962, while the strike itself remained a repressed memory, spoken of in hushed tones, if at all.

In the 1970s, this collective amnesia began to lift. Local historians took a fresh look at Lawrence and what resulted was a more accurate interpretation of the strike that celebrated the strikers' struggle and achievement. Today, the Bread and Roses Heritage Festival is a celebration of the ethnic diversity and labor history of Lawrence. This annual festival is celebrated on Labor Day to honor the most significant event in Lawrence history: the 1912 Bread and Roses Strike.



Above left: Children (including Camella Teoli, far l) testified before Congress about working conditions in Lawrence.

Above right: Bill Haywood addresses the strikers on March 14, 1912. Elisabeth Gurley Flynn stands to his right.

Left: Joseph Ettor (l) and Arturo Giovannitti sit handcuffed together during their trial.