

## More stuff you missed in history class: The Bread and Roses Strike of 1912, Part 2



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In early January 1912, nearly 30,000 textile workers in Lawrence, MA, walked off their jobs when their weekly pay was cut 32 cents. To workers who earned only about \$7 for a 54-hour week, this reduction, the cost of four loaves of bread, was unacceptable. The workers also wanted more than just being able to feed their families; they wanted a piece of the American Dream. Thus it came to be known as the Bread and Roses Strike.

This was a new kind of strike. This was the first time such large numbers of unskilled and unorganized foreign-born workers had successfully come together to obtain their demands. Moreover, a majority of the strikers were young women, and this was the first major labor protest where female workers provided significant leadership. Women led daily picket lines and effectively used their community-based networks to build support for the work stoppage. They helped form a central strike committee comprising 24 different ethnic groups that spoke 22 different languages. They set up soup kitchens and food stores for striking families building networks to help the various ethnic groups work through their differences and maintain solidarity.

**Mill owners wrongly predicted a quick end to the strike.** They assumed that the language and ethnic divisions among the workers would keep them from unifying into a single, collective group. They were shocked when they learned that enraged women who had happened upon a lone police officer on an icy bridge stripped him of his gun, club and badge, sliced his suspenders, took off his pants and dangled the officer over the freezing river. “One policeman can handle ten men,” Lawrence’s district attorney lamented, “while it takes ten policemen to handle one woman.” A horrified boss describing the female activists said, “They are radicals of the worst sort, full of cunning and also lots of bad temper. They’re everywhere and it’s getting worse all the time.” Such acts put an end to any hope that the young female strikers would quickly scurry back to work.

The workers also sought outside help from William Ettor, a 26-year-old IWW organizer who, along with Arturo Giovannitti, arrived in Lawrence within the first few days of the strike. Ettor instantly called on his ability to speak five languages to rally the strikers. On his first afternoon in Lawrence, he addressed thousands of strikers, fostering solidarity and discouraging violence. “All the blood that is spilled in a strike is your blood,” he told strikers. Denouncing the mill owners and sympathizing with the toil of textile workers, Ettor told them: “Do not let them divide you by sex, color, creed or nationality, for as you stand today, you are invincible.”

The city’s mayor wasted little time to call out the militia. Blocked by the soldiers from standing in front of the mills and canal bridges, the Lawrence women came up with the loud moving picket line. Upward of 5,000 singing, chanting

strikers, with arms linked together to prevent arrest, regularly marched through the city’s commercial district, challenging the police and militia to stop them.

**Tensions were high. To discredit the strikers, William Wood,** the powerful head of the American Woolen Company, hired a local undertaker and school board member to plant dynamite in several known locations where strike leaders met. The move backfired when it was determined that undertaker John Breen planted dynamite around the city at the behest of Wood.

On Jan. 29, the militia cornered a large group of marchers at the corner of Union and Garden Streets. After some pushing and shoving, a shot rang out and striker Annie LoPizzo lay dead in the street. Despite the fact that they were not even in Lawrence that day, Ettor and Giovannitti were arrested for murder conspiracy in her death and were placed in jail without bail. Though the arrests were made to try to break the strike, it didn’t happen. The week following the arrests witnessed the largest turnout during the whole strike. With Ettor locked up, effective leadership of the strike fell into the hands of IWW leader Bill Haywood, with Elisabeth Gurley Flynn, a 21-year-old IWW activist as his chief advisor.

Gurley Flynn was a constant presence in Lawrence, enormously popular among the workers. Recognizing the constraints faced by female strikers, she began holding women-only meetings, explaining, “The women wanted to picket. They were strikers as well as wives and were valiant fighters.” Such meetings contributed to the women’s empowerment.

**As February began, keeping the strikers fed and warm had become a serious problem.** The strikers employed a relief tactic successfully used in Europe where strikers’ children were sent away to live with friends and family, thereby lessening the burden on the embattled workers.

On Feb. 10, the first group of 119 children left the city for New York City with a handful of chaperones. More than 1,000 spectators were at Grand Central Station waiting to catch a glimpse of the children, with some hoping to perhaps take home any little ones who might have remained unclaimed.

A second children’s exodus took place on Feb. 17. A small group of 35 was sent to the mountains of Barre, VT, where they were met by three brass bands and a large crowd. Elisabeth Flynn accompanied another group to New York, where a parade was held with hundreds of people walking hand-in-hand with the children, holding banners and signs such as, “THEY Asked for Bread—THEY Received Bayonets.”

**See my column next month for the conclusion.**



**Top: Women strikers were described as “radicals of the worst sort.”**

**Above: The parade of strikers’ children in New York City.**