

More stuff you missed in history class: The Bread and Roses Strike of 1912, Part 1



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One of the more fascinating and significant events in American labor history is the 1912 textile workers strike, which came to be known as the “Bread and Roses Strike.” It began almost spontaneously and was led and sustained by recently immigrated young women. It was one of the largest strikes in American history and the most successful strike in the U.S. textile industry. It’s a great story that can’t be properly told in a thousand words or less, so here’s Part 1.

Lawrence, MA, was a planned industrial town located about 35 miles north of Boston. In 1848, a stone dam and a canal were built on the Merrimack River for the express purpose of providing waterpower for the textile mills being constructed along the river. Banks, merchants, peddlers, blacksmiths and machinists set up shop near the mills, and low-quality housing was built for workers, turning Lawrence into one gigantic workshop. Thousands of European immigrants came to Lawrence to work in the mills and by 1880, the population of Lawrence topped 39,000. The last decade of the 19th century saw a massive influx of Southern European and Middle Eastern immigrants and by 1910, the population of Lawrence had swelled to more than 85,000. Nearly half of the workforce had lived in the United States for less than five years.

From a business standpoint, Lawrence was a success. It led the world in the production of worsted wool cloth, producing nearly 25 percent of all woolen cloth made in the United States. However, work in a textile mill took place at a grueling pace, and the labor was repetitive and dangerous. The mechanization and de-skilling of labor in the textile industry enabled factory owners to eliminate skilled workers and employ large numbers of unskilled immigrant workers, the majority of whom were women.

Half of all workers were females between the ages of 14 and 18. The workers in Lawrence lived in crowded and dangerous tenements, often with many families sharing each apartment. Half of all children died by the age of 6; 36 out of every 100 millworkers died before they reached 25. The average life expectancy of a millworker was 39 years, compared to 64 years for the rest of the population. The average family in Lawrence earned less than \$7 for working a 56-hour week. The workers were further tormented by the knowledge that workers in nearby North Andover, described by *The New York Times* as “of a higher type, consisting for the most part of Scotch, Irish and English workers,” were paid twice as much as those in Lawrence.

The mills and the community were divided along ethnic lines: Most of the skilled jobs were held by U.S.-born workers of English, Irish and German descent, while Italian, Slavic, Hungarian, Portuguese and Syrian immigrants made up most of the unskilled workforce. Several thousand skilled workers belonged—in theory, at least—to the American Federation of Labor-affiliated United Textile Workers union, but only a few hundred paid dues. The In-

dustrial Workers of the World had also been organizing for five years among workers in Lawrence, and although it had less than a thousand dues-paying members, it had earned the trust and respect of most of the unskilled workers.

In addition to these labor groups, female networks in Lawrence’s ethnic neighborhoods added considerably to the workers’ solidarity and strength. While the men tended to socialize within their own ethnic groups, female workers, wives and mothers forged strong alliances with their neighbors, regardless of ethnic backgrounds. They shared food, child care, laundry and papers necessary for gaining their children employment.

It should be noted that in the early part of the 20th century, union membership and strike activity by women were not socially accepted among the larger American culture. Picketing and parading were completely at odds with Victorian notions of feminine propriety. Though many immigrant women had not been bound by such cultural constraints in their homelands, mainstream American reaction to women’s labor activism was one of disdain and horror. At the time, traditional craft-based labor unions also ignored women workers, dismissing them as not worthy of representation. Not so for the IWW, which encouraged women’s participation and activism from its founding.

On Jan. 1, 1912, a new labor law took effect in Massachusetts, reducing the 56-hour workweek to 54 hours for women and children. Workers welcomed the two-hour reduction, provided that it did not reduce their weekly take-home pay. Thursday, Jan. 11, was payday at the mammoth Everett Mill in Lawrence. Weary women stopped weaving long enough to open their pay envelopes and count their money. When they discovered that their employer had reduced by about 32 cents their total wages, in unison they shut down their looms and walked away, telling their bosses, “Not enough money.”

The next day, workers in the Washington Mill also found that their wages had been cut. Prepared for the event by weeks of discussion, they walked out, calling, “Short pay, all out!”

The news of the pay cut was calamitous to the workers who were falling behind as the cost of living was rising and the rents in their slum tenements were going up. Every penny counted, and now that the cut was in effect, they refused to tolerate it. Within a few days, nearly 30,000 workers were on strike. The great Lawrence strike had begun.

Teenage female immigrants, who did most of the demeaning work in the mills and who were scoffed at and called “oxen without horns,” guided and inspired 30,000 of their co-workers, men and women, in the biggest strike that had ever been staged in America.

See my column next month for Part 2.



Women working in Lawrence’s mills began the event that became known as the “Bread and Roses Strike.”