

1912: The Lawrence textile strike



A short history of the strike of 20,000 textile workers, mostly women and girls who included native and immigrant workers, which won big concessions over wages, conditions and hours for the entire textile industry

At the turn of the 20th century, Lawrence, Massachusetts was one of the most important textile manufacturing towns in the United States. The mills in the area were principally under the ownership of the American Woollen Company, which employed about 40,000 people. The Company's consolidation of thirty-four factories across New England had a yearly output of about \$45,000,000. The dawn of the Industrial Revolution had allowed many employers to lay off skilled workers in favour of large numbers of unskilled, immigrant labourers who were working on average for less than \$9.00 for a full week's work. A large proportion of the work was done by women, and about half of the workers in the four mills in Lawrence owned by the American Woollen Company were girls aged between fourteen and eighteen.

The workers lived in small, cramped, and often dangerous tenement buildings and survived mostly on bread, beans, and molasses as their staple diet. 50% of the children brought up in these conditions did not survive to reach the age of six, while thirty-six out of every hundred men died before the age of twenty-five. As well as these inhumane conditions, workers had to contend with rent prices that were higher than rent prices in the rest of New England, and ranged from about \$1.00 to \$6.00 a week for the small apartments the workers lived in. 58% of these homes found it necessary to take in lodgers in order to be able to pay the rent.

The conditions in the mills became steadily worse before the strike began in January of 1912. With the introduction of a two-loom system, the pace of work became much faster for the workers, which in turn led to a series of layoffs and wage cuts for those that remained.

The skilled textile jobs in Lawrence were mostly held by 'native-born' workers of English, German and Irish descent, about 2,500 of whom, in theory, belonged to the United Textile Workers, a section of the conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL), although it is estimated only a couple of hundred of them were fully paid up by 1912. The unskilled workforce was made up mostly of Italian, French-Canadian, Portuguese, Slavic, Hungarian and Syrian immigrants who the [revolutionary syndicalist union the Industrial Workers of the World \(IWW\)](#) had been attempting to organise since 1907, they claimed over a thousand

members in the area, but as with the United Textile Workers, only about 300 were regularly paying dues by 1912.

Following a reduction of hours from fifty-six to fifty-four hours a week to comply with new state legislation, a letter was sent from the small English speaking IWW branch to President Wood of the American Woollen Company asking how the new law would affect wages. Wood did not reply. Anger with the company increased when workers realised that a reduction of two hours pay would mean (as the IWW publicly pointed out) three fewer loaves of bread a week to put on the table.

Polish women in the Everett cotton mills were the first to notice a shortage of thirty-two cents in their pay envelopes on January 11th, stopping their looms and leaving the mill shouting, "Short pay, short pay!" Similar events happened throughout Lawrence and the next morning workers from the Washington and Woods mills also walked out, within a week there were 20,000 workers on strike.

The IWW immediately took hold of the strike and after a mass meeting, a telegram was sent to the IWW in New York, requesting that Joseph Ettor (an Executive Board member well known for organising in Lawrence) be sent to Lawrence to lead the strike. He arrived quickly and set up a strike committee, two representatives from each ethnic group of strikers sat on the committee and took responsibility for most major decisions. The meetings of the committee were also translated into 25 different languages for the immigrant workers. The strike committee decided on a set of demands it was to make to the American Woollen Company; a 15% increase in wages, a return to the fifty hour work week, double time for overtime work and a stopping of discrimination for union activity.

In response to the circulation of strike leaflets, the Mayor ordered out the local Militia to patrol the streets, and the city's alarm bells rang for the first time. The strikers responded with mass picketing of the mills, and the women of the strike adopted the now famous slogan, "We want bread and roses too!" The sight of mass picketing (which had never been seen before in New England) prompted a vicious response from the authorities and strikers were attacked with water hoses from the rooftops of adjoining houses, the strikers responded by throwing chunks of ice. Thirty-six strikers were arrested and sentenced to one year each in prison.

A few days after the strike began, Arturo Giovannitti (another well known IWW organiser) arrived in Lawrence to organise strike relief. Relief committees, a network of soup kitchens and food distribution stations were set up to help the strikers, and families received between \$2-\$5 cash a week from a strike fund.

Lawrence was the first time large numbers of unskilled, immigrant workers had followed the leadership of the IWW John Golden, president of the United Textile Workers denounced the strike as 'revolutionary' and 'anarchistic' and unsuccessfully tried to take the leadership of the strike away from the IWW and into the hands of the AFL in order to break it up. Failing this, the AFL offered token words of support to the strikers.

Less than a week later, dynamite was found in several places around Lawrence, and the press was quick to lay blame to the strikers. However, a local undertaker was arrested and charged with planting the explosives in an attempt to discredit the workers. He was fined \$500 and released, President Wood of the American Woollen Company was implicated in the plot, but cleared by the court although he could not explain why he had made a recent large cash payment to the undertaker.

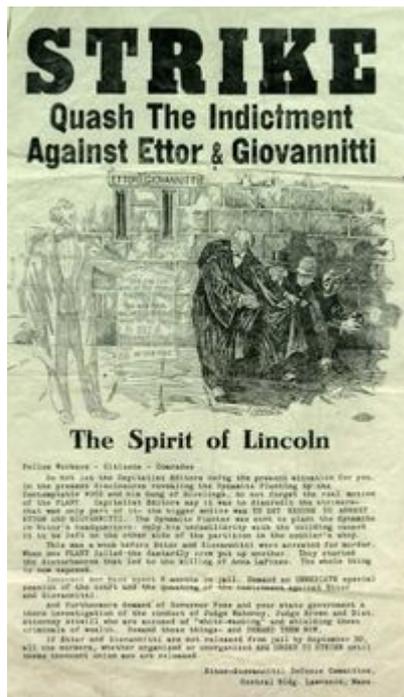


Contemporary cartoon from Industrial Worker depicting the bosses' brutality in Lawrence

On the evening of January 29th, a woman striker, Anna LoPizzo was killed by the police when they tried to break up a picket line, and, although three miles away at the time addressing a large rally of workers, Ettore and Giovannitti were arrested as 'accessories to murder'. They were refused bail and held for eight months without trial. The IWW responded by sending Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn to take over leadership of the strike, and later, Carlo Tresca, an Italian anarchist, who was met by 15,000 strikers at the train station and carried down Essex Street to Lawrence Common, where he addressed 25,000 workers, each nationality singing the 'Internationale' for him in their various tongues.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn organised for several hundred children from Lawrence to be temporarily fostered at supporters homes in New York for the duration of the strike, and on February 10th 120 children were met in New York by 5,000 members of the Italian Socialist Federation and the Socialist Party singing the 'Marseille' and the 'Internationale'. A few weeks later, ninety-two more children left for New York, and before going to their foster homes, were paraded with banners down Fifth Avenue. Troubled by the publicity this was creating for the strikers, the authorities in Lawrence ordered that no more children could leave for their temporary foster homes, and on February 24th when a group of 150 children were ready to leave for Philadelphia, fifty policemen and two militia companies surrounded the Lawrence railroad station. They took children away from their parents and threw 30 women and children into jail. The assault on the children and their mothers was all caught by the press, there to photograph the event. The matter ignited public outrage, to which Congress responded with investigative hearings into the matter, hearing many testimonies from the children of Lawrence.

On March 1st, the workers were offered a 5% pay rise, which they rejected. They then held out for another two weeks and the American Woollen Company conceded to all four of their original demands. Other textile companies soon followed, as well as other textile companies throughout New England who wanted to avoid a strike similar to Lawrence.



Poster calling for strike action in defence of Ettor and Giovannitti

However, Ettor and Giovannitti were still in prison after the strike had ended. The IWW had raised \$60,000 for their defence and had campaigned for their release, holding demonstrations and mass meetings throughout the country. In Boston, every member of the Ettor-Giovannitti Defence Committee was arrested, and 15,000 workers in Lawrence went on strike for a day on September 30th to demand Ettor and Giovannitti's release. Swedish and French workers proposed a boycott of all woollen goods from the United States and a refusal to load ships heading for the U.S. and Italian supporters rallied in front of the United States consulate in Rome.

The trial of Ettor and Giovannitti took place in Salem, Massachusetts at the end of September and lasted for two months during which workers would wait outside the courtroom and cheer the two men as they arrived and left each day. They were both acquitted on November 26th, 1912.

The strike and subsequent struggle for the release of Ettor and Giovannitti lasted nearly a year. However, within the next few years nearly all of the gains fought for by the workers and the IWW had been chiselled away by the mill companies and there were drops in pay and conditions, and the installation of labour spies to keep an eye on the workers, leading to the firing of many union activists. The workers had won a temporary victory in Lawrence, but eventually lost all that they had fought for due to the bullying and intimidation of the American Woollen Company of union members, and the coming economic decline in the US.

Sam Lowry

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