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Bread and Roses

The 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike



A Speak Out Now pamphlet

The 1912 Bread and Roses Strike, Lawrence Massachusetts

In 1912, in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, 25,000 workers went on strike. The people of Lawrence came from 51 different countries. More than four fifths of them were born in countries other than the U.S., or were the children of immigrants. They spoke a dozen different languages, held different beliefs, came from different cultures, and had different traditions. But they were drawn together in a struggle against the big textile mill owners of Lawrence who made millions of dollars off of their work. The leaders of the strike were the women workers of Lawrence who shouldered the double burden of working in the mills and caring for their families. Their struggle came to be known as the “Bread and Roses” strike, named after a song that became associated with the strike, sung from the perspective of a woman worker. The song, just like the strikers in 1912, calls for bread and roses. (The words to the song are at the end of this article.) The Lawrence workers wanted higher wages and better working and living conditions, but they also wanted access to education, culture and free time to enjoy nature.



Lawrence textile mill

The Whole World in One City

Lawrence, Massachusetts at that time was a town of just seven square miles, located along the banks of the Merrimack River. In 1912, its population was 86,000 people. The town was divided into neighborhoods where different immigrant communities lived. The main industry in Lawrence was cloth production or “textiles”. The town was built around the big mills in the 1840s, and the wealthy mill owners ran the town like they were medieval lords. The population was purposefully recruited to live in Lawrence from many different countries because the bosses thought that a workforce that couldn't speak the same language wouldn't be able to organize together. People came from many countries in Europe including Russia, Portugal, Armenia, Poland, Lithuania and Italy. A large group of Syrian immigrants also lived in Lawrence and worked in the mills. There was also a small number of African-Americans who took up residence in Lawrence. Walking the streets was like traveling the world. One could hear Polish and Russian spoken one second, Italian and Portuguese the



Mill workers

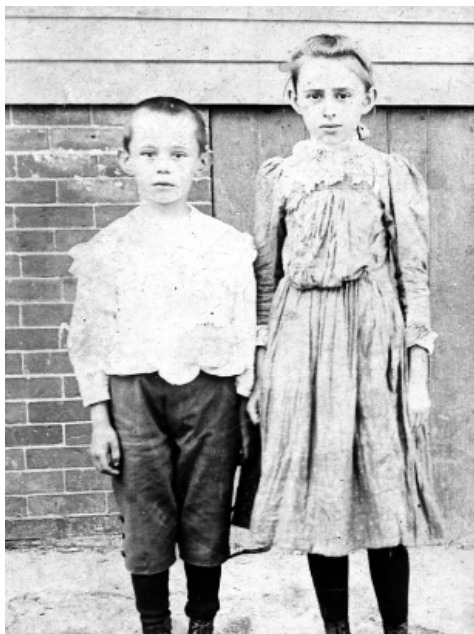
next, and then walk around the corner and hear a conversation in Arabic or Syriac.

The Workers Suffered from Miserable Living and Working Conditions

Conditions in the mills were beyond miserable. Mill workers worked for 60 hours or more per week. Child labor was a common practice, with children as young as five doing small jobs to keep the machines running or gathering and sorting cloth. No family could afford to live without sending the children to earn money, and children worked full-time without any education.

Many workers were regularly killed on the job, their bodies torn apart by dangerous machines. Those who learned to survive the millwork often died a slow death, from breathing dust and cloth fibers that destroyed the workers' lungs. The life expectancy of a mill worker

was around 32 years, 20 years less than the average life expectancy in the U.S. at the time. There were no pensions, life insurance, or disability benefits. Workers were thrown away just like old and broken machinery or textile scraps when they were no longer able to work. Workers' living quarters, owned and rented to them by the company, were no less miserable. They lived in overcrowded apartments. Oftentimes, families would share a bed, trading places during different shifts.



Children of Lawrence



Women mill workers

Lawrence, Massachusetts was one of the United States' most desperate and impoverished places, and out of that poverty the mill owners squeezed millions of dollars in profits.

Shut Out by the Big Unions, Embraced by the Revolutionaries

Immigrant workers were usually ignored by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the main union federation. The AFL was founded by skilled workers and had a strategy of bargaining with the bosses based on their necessary skills. These unions relied on skilled workers who were mostly white American men from families who had immigrated generations before. The AFL fought against the inclusion of immigrants, women, African Americans, and children in union organizations. They believed that as long as skilled white male workers were organized, the union officials could sit down with the bosses and negotiate for a "fair day's work for a fair day's wage". Unions like the AFL wanted nothing to do with the workers in Lawrence who, in their view, were simply "the wrong kind of people".



The AFL wasn't the only organization in town. Revolutionary socialists and anarchists had founded a new union in 1905 along with more militant workers' unions from the less-privileged sections of the working class, such as the Western Federation of Miners. This new union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), was the opposite of the American Federation of Labor in every way. The IWW aimed to “organize the unorganized”. They organized migrant workers who rode the trains from the timber yards of the Northwest to the agricultural fields of California and New Mexico. They didn't deny women, Black people, immigrants, or anyone else, a place in the union. Leaders of the IWW included women like the organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, immigrants like Joe Hill, the writer of labor songs, and Black activists like Hubert Harrison, the working class intellectual from Harlem. The IWW didn't believe there was such a thing as a “fair wage” because every dollar the bosses kept was a dollar earned off of the labor of the workers. Instead the IWW sought to build “One Big Union” of all workers, to lead a revolution, create a socialist society,

and abolish the system of wage slavery entirely. While the AFL shut the door on the workers of Lawrence, the IWW welcomed them with open arms.

From a Spark to a Fire

The miserable conditions of workers in Lawrence led to an explosion on January 11th, 1912. A new law had been passed limiting the workweek to 54 hours. Rather than decrease their profits, the bosses hit fast-forward on the textile machines to make up for the lost time. Not only were the workers struggling to keep up with the killing pace, but when they lined up to receive their paychecks, they also discovered a nasty surprise: They were taking home less pay for producing the same amount of cloth.

The first workers who were brave enough to stand up were women at the Everett Cotton mill. A group of Polish women walked off the job and started to spread the word in Lawrence that they were on strike and disputing the pay cut. The spark lit by those women set Lawrence ablaze. Workers went from factory to factory calling on other workers to join them. It didn't matter what language people spoke, they all understood what was happening. By morning, half of the city's workers



went on strike and within a couple of days, workers had organized picket lines of 20,000 workers in front of the mills.

The General Staff of the Class Struggle

The workers dug in for a long and hard fight against bosses who had already demonstrated how little they cared about the workers' lives. The workers needed a strategy to defeat this powerful enemy. They turned to the IWW for advice. However, the handful of IWW organizers in Lawrence felt overwhelmed. They had been carefully building their links in the mills and working class communities. Out of 30,000 workers, only 300 were organized in the IWW union local. Now the strike had lifted the handful of IWW organizers to a position of leadership. Luckily they knew what to do. They called the IWW headquarters in New York for help.

The IWW was a union, but it was also a movement, a culture, and an organization of revolutionary activists. The IWW had its local activists spreading their perspective, and organizing workers in the day-to-day fights. But when a major strike like Lawrence broke out, then the IWW would call on its national organizers. The IWW had experienced revolutionary organizers who knew how to see the twists and turns of the bosses' strategy and how to guide the workers in figuring out how to fight back. They traveled the country from strike to strike organizing and reinforcing the workers when they went into action.

The IWW sent two young Italian organizers, Joe Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti, to Lawrence. Giovannitti and Ettor had traveled from one end of the U.S. to the other, organizing steel workers, lumberjacks, and workers in shoe-factories. These IWW organizers spoke to the workers of Lawrence in words unlike the words used by other union officials or politicians. They urged the workers to organize the strike themselves, and to form a strike committee chosen from among their own ranks. The IWW organizers didn't "take over" from the workers, but instead brought their knowledge and experience to help the workers achieve

the goals that the workers set for themselves. Moreover, the IWW organizers explained that the strike was part of a larger struggle of the working class to transform society. Not only did the workers deserve the bread they were fighting for, they should take control of the factories and all of the wealth they produce because it was all created from the workers' labor to begin with. The working class could create a new world where they would also have plenty of time to smell the flowers!



Mill workers confront state militia

The strike committee meetings were a miracle of organization. The committee was composed of 24 different workers from eleven different ethnic groups. Meetings were held in public and simultaneously translated into over a dozen languages. In the heat of the struggle, the divisions of language and culture melted away and workers stood together in solidarity as members of the same class against the mill owners.

The Singing Strike vs. The Bosses and their Government

The IWW-led strike committee organized effective pickets, which prevented replacement workers from scabbing on the strikers. Picket lines were set up blocking the gates of the mills and the roads leading in and out of town. In response, the Mayor of Lawrence called out the state militia. Some 250 armed troops arrived to put down the strike. The militias were sent out to guard the mills, freeing the city police to use their clubs, pistols, and fire hoses against the striking workers in the midst of the freezing winter weather.

In spite of the repression, the strikers held their ground and production in the mills was frozen like the ice on the Merrimack River. The striking workers also learned to sing songs in a dozen languages. One song they all knew, though the words were sung in many languages, was the “Internationale”, the anthem of the working class revolution written in tribute to the Paris Commune of 1871, when the workers of Paris had created the first workers power.

According to the reporter Mary Heaton Vorse: “The gray tired crowds ebbing and flowing perpetually into the mills had waked and opened their mouths to sing, the different nationalities all speaking one language when they sang together.”

Ettor and Giovannitti in Jail

The police and militia increased their violence against the strikers as the days passed. On January 29th, militia troops protecting a car full of scabs confronted a group of striking workers in the street. While the militia attacked from one end, police came from the other direction, trapping the workers in a bloody battle. During the chaos, a shot was fired and a woman striker, Annie LoPizzo was killed. The shooter was never identified, but many workers suspected the shooting was the responsibility of the militia and the police – aimed at intimidating the strikers with violence to drive them back to work.

The city officials took advantage of the death of LoPizzo to frame Ettor and Giovannitti. Regardless of the fact that they were blocks away from the shooting, Ettor and Giovannitti were accused of instigating a riot. Ettor and Giovannitti were revolutionaries. They advocated the right of the working class to defend itself. In the face of the overwhelming armed force of the police and militia, they insisted that the best weapon of the working class was the strike. As Ettor said in one of his speeches: "With passive resistance, with the workers absolutely refusing to move, laying absolutely silent, they are more powerful than all the weapons and instruments that the other side has for protection and attack."

Ettor and Giovannitti were innocent, but in the class struggle, the law is just one more weapon in the hands of the ruling class. Ettor and Giovannitti were thrown in prison where they would remain until after the end of the strike.



Joe Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti



NYC solidarity march

Big Bill Haywood and the Children of Lawrence

With Ettor and Giovannitti in jail, the IWW sent in its most prominent organizer, William “Big Bill” Haywood. Big Bill was an organizer of the Western Federation of Miners before the founding of the IWW. He was a westerner who had once been a gold miner and a cowboy. Haywood was a giant of the working class who had convened the first congress of the IWW in 1905 saying “This is the Continental Congress of the working class.”

Haywood was a tough revolutionary worker but he loved children more than anything. The children of Lawrence would gather around Haywood to hear stories of the West and his days of riding, gold prospecting, and mining. He told them stories of the future socialist society they would create where no child would work like they were forced to in Lawrence, or go to bed hungry and cold.

The children of Lawrence were suffering and the parents were losing their nerve as they watched their sons and daughters starve, freeze, and fall sick. The IWW militants had an idea. The revolutionaries called on their friends in New York, socialists who edited a nationally known socialist journal titled "The Call". Ads were posted calling on families all around the East Coast to take in the children while their parents fought the strike to the end. The Call was flooded with answers as hundreds of families, many of them with far greater levels of privilege and wealth than the workers of Lawrence, opened their doors to the children. In all, 700 children made the "Children's Exodus" to homes across the region. This strategy showed that solidarity and extended beyond the boundaries of Lawrence. It also focused national attention on the strike due to this act of kindness towards the children.

The Rebel Girl

Haywood brought another IWW organizer with him who played an important role in the strike. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was a twenty-one-year-old daughter of Irish immigrant workers who had dropped out of school in New York to become a full-time organizer for the IWW. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was an electrifying speaker who kept the strikers focused on their goal. The IWW songwriter Joe Hill later wrote a tribute to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn called *The Rebel Girl*, a song sung in IWW halls across the United States. According to the reporter Mary Heaton Vorse, when Elizabeth Gurley Flynn spoke "She stirred them, lifted them up in her appeal for solidarity. Then at the end of the meeting, they sang. It was as though a spurt of flame had gone through the audience."

Flynn was not only a skilled agitator. She organized and accompanied the children on their travels to their temporary homes. She also organized the children who remained in Lawrence to support their parents on strike against the school officials who tried to turn the

children against the strikers by teaching them that unions, socialism, and strikes were evil.

The Strike Ends Victoriously

The bosses of the Lawrence mills thought they could defeat the workers easily, but the workers had shown their unity and determination. The Children's Exodus had popularized the strike and the mill owners were exposed as the villains they were in the eyes of workers around the country. The bosses weren't just facing a strike. They were facing a strike backed up by the solidarity of tens of thousands of other American workers and the socialist movement. At the height of the strike, donations of one thousand dollars per day poured in to the strike committee's relief fund.

Finally, the bosses began to cave in. On March 5th they offered a five percent pay increase. While this covered the pay the workers had lost due to the pay cut before the strike, the workers of Lawrence felt their power and they were not going to accept so little in exchange for ending their strike. On March 12th, the bosses offered the strike committee an agreement – pay increases of five percent for the higher paid workers, and up to twenty percent for lower paid workers. But the agreement didn't just cover wage increases. The bosses offered time and a half for overtime work, no persecution of active strikers, and an end to the system of bonuses that encouraged speedup. It was a clear victory for the workers of Lawrence. Not only that, the Lawrence strike inspired other workers in the region's textile mills to organize and demand similar conditions. Fearing a wave of strikes like Lawrence, the mill owners accepted defeat and the conditions won by the Lawrence strikers spread throughout the region's textile industry.

In the final moments, at a mass meeting, Big Bill Haywood addressed the crowd: “You, the strikers of Lawrence have won the most signal victory of any body of organized working men in the world. You have won the strike for yourselves and by your strike you have won an

increase in wages for over 250,000 other textile workers in the vicinity, and that means in the aggregate millions of dollars a year... You are the heart and soul of the working class. Single-handed you are helpless but united you can win everything. You have won over the opposed power of the city, state, and national administrations, against the opposition of the combined forces of capitalism... You have won by your solidarity and brains and muscle, the first step in your progressive march to industrial freedom.”

Today, when we face the attacks of the wealthy and the government that serves them, it is important to remember the lessons of Lawrence in 1912 - immigrant workers and women workers can lead the fight, together with the whole working class, and overcome all the supposed obstacles and divisions which the ruling class uses to divide us. Just like the strikers of Lawrence in 1912, we need to take up that challenge because we still need bread, and roses too.



Massachusetts militiamen with bayonets surround a parade of strikers

Bread and Roses
by James Oppenheim (written in 1911)

As we come marching, marching in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: "Bread and roses! Bread and roses!"
As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!
As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient song of bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for — but we fight for roses, too!
As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days.
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler — ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!



Speak Out Now

Revolutionary Workers Group

Where We Stand

The world we live in today has enormous possibilities: the potential to open up the most challenging epoch of humanity's existence. We have the prospect of living in a conscious fashion, using all the advances of human knowledge and engaging the creative potential of each person on the planet. Instead we see the world moving in the opposite direction – increasingly ruled by prejudice and fear, a world of widespread violence and war, where exploitation and oppression are the rule, with the many dominated by the few.

The Force for Change Exists Today

Everywhere, working people's labor makes society run. The exploitation of labor is what generates profits, which are at the heart of capitalism. Working people have the power to bring this system to a halt and bring about the changes needed to transform our lives. Like slavery, feudalism and other systems that enriched the minority at the expense of the majority, capitalism's removal is long overdue. The time for socialism has come.

We Stand for Socialism

A world based on peaceful collaboration and international cooperation of working class people – not the exploiters who rule today.

- The common ownership and sharing of the world's resources and productive capacity under the democratic control of the world's peoples.

- An egalitarian and democratic government, organized and controlled from the bottom up, which facilitates people's active participation in making decisions about how society is run.
- Protection of the world's ecological systems, putting science to work to sustain life, not destroy it.
- A society where human relations are based on respect, equality and dignity of all peoples, not racism, sexism or homophobia.

Our Political Heritage

We base ourselves on the ideas and actions of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, on the model of the Russian Revolution of 1917 when the working class showed its capacity to take over and exert its power, and on the revolutionary ideas of the Fourth International in its struggles against Stalinism.

We Must Go Beyond Reforms

We support the struggles of those who are fighting against the oppression of capitalism, even if the goals of those struggles are not aimed at replacing the capitalist order. We support the right of people to determine how they will live and to throw off the forces of imperialism – be it the domination of the corporations, the World Bank, the IMF, military forces or other agents of imperialism. We support the fight against racial and sexual discrimination. We fight against attacks on the standard of living of working people — wage and benefit cuts, attacks on health care, education, housing and other basic rights.

Socialism cannot come through a modification of the existing system. It is not replacing corrupt politicians or union officials with those who are more honest or who are willing to see more of society's resources shared with the poor. It is not getting better contracts or laws. These systems based on privilege and exploitation must be removed and replaced by one that can guarantee the reorganization of society for the benefit of all.

What Is Needed to Bring This Change About?

It will take a massive social struggle, a revolution, by the majority, the workers and poor of the world, with the working class at its head, taking power in its name and reorganizing society.

It will take the construction of an international revolutionary leadership actively engaged in these struggles.

It will take the development of a party, based in the working class, in the U.S., the richest country of the world, as part of this international leadership. The fate of the world depends on building such an organization, though today it is represented only by individuals or small groups, scattered and marginalized, who share those goals.

The decisions made by a few individuals today, who are ready to start acting on these ideas and who are willing to collaborate with other groups who agree with this program and who are ready to work to implement it, could play a role in determining the future of the world.

Who We Are

Speak Out Now/Revolutionary Workers Group is a revolutionary group. We believe that a socialist world is possible and can be brought into being by the active struggles of the majority of the people of the world. We believe the international working class is the social force that can transform society and create a new world. But to do so, revolutionary organizations must be built in the working class. For this reason, our group aims its activity primarily at large workplaces. Our newsletters are distributed at several workplaces every two weeks.

We think it is important to both analyze the current world situation as well as to know and understand the history of past struggles. We have forums on current events and political topics and a yearly weekend called the Revolutionary University. We organize Marxist discussions and classes. We have pamphlets on past working class struggles, the revolutionary movements around the world and the current problems we face. We organize with others around many issues – racism, immigrant rights, climate change, police brutality, and more.

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