

The Lawrence Strike of 1912 and the IWW

by Philip C. Muth

At the beginning of this century, Lawrence, Massachusetts was the textile center of America with 12 mills employing more than 32,000 workers. The three largest mills were owned by the J. P. Morgan-controlled American Woolen Company, the largest textile corporation in the nation. <1> In 1905, this company netted profits of \$212,690,048, but less than 20 percent of this tremendous profit was used to pay the workers who toiled in the mills. <2>

The textile workers in Lawrence were, for the most part, newly-arrived immigrants from ethnically diverse backgrounds. More than 25 different nationalities were represented, speaking more than 20 languages. The largest group was Italian, but Poles, Germans, Lithuanians, Syrians and Scots also came to work in the mills. Many of these workers had been induced to travel to America by deceptive advertisements placed throughout Europe by the American Woolen Company. These placards showed happy textile workers clutching bags of gold and displaying large bank accounts while standing in front of stately homes. <3>

The reality of the situation was different. The textile workers in Lawrence worked and lived under deplorable conditions. The average wage was between \$6 and \$8 for a 56-hour work week. Entire families worked in the mills. Almost 45 percent of the workers were female and approximately 12 percent were children under the age of 18. <4> Most of the workers lived in filthy, overcrowded slums, where the infant mortality rate was one of the highest in the nation. Tuberculosis was rampant. <5> The mills were highly mechanized and industrial accidents were common. More than 33 percent of all mill workers died before they reached the age of 26. <6> The workers were treated as slaves. They had to pay for drinking water, they were docked an hour's pay for arriving minutes late (and would be fired if late three times), and the women were often forced to sleep with the foremen to keep their jobs. <7>

There was very little labor organization in the mills. Some of the skilled workers were in the American Federation of Labor's United Textile Workers, which had approximately 2,500 members in Lawrence. But the majority of workers were unskilled and foreign-speaking -- the types of worker the AFL deemed impossible to organize. The Industrial Workers of the World, often referred to as the Wobblies, were dedicated to the cause of organizing these immigrants. Local 20 of the IWW was established in Lawrence in 1906 and staged several strikes with moderate success. <8> But in 1911, Local 20 had only 300 members and lacked any real power. <9>

Organized labor had forced the Massachusetts legislature to pass a 54-hour work week law to go into effect January 1, 1912. Many workers were concerned whether a wage increase would be offered to offset the two-hour loss. The Italian branch of Local 20 voted to strike if no raise were given. <10>

The workers who received their pay packets the morning of January 12 discovered they had not been given a raise. They lost two hours of pay, amounting to 32 cents -- enough money to purchase ten loaves of bread. <11> For the long-suffering Italian workers at the Washington Mill, this was the last straw. They ran through the mill, turning off machines, slashing belts and cloth. Other workers were forced to leave their machines, sometimes at knife-point. All work at the Washington Mill stopped within a half-hour. <12>

The Italian strikers moved on to other mills. Machines were destroyed at the Wood Mill and the 5,000 workers joined the mob. <13> At the Ayer Mill, another 2,000 workers fell in with the unorganized strikers. By this time, the police had been called and the strikers were stopped at Duck Mill's gate. <14> The battle lines were being drawn. The state militia was called in, joining the police and firemen in turning hoses on the mob when it reached Pacific Mill. <15>

Meanwhile, the Italian branch of Local 20 decided at a mass meeting to send for Joseph J. "Smiling Joe" Ettor, an experienced IWW strike organizer. <16> Ettor arrived in Lawrence the following day, January 13, accompanied by Arturo Giovannitti of the Italian Socialist Federation. Ettor was faced with organizing a solid general strike committee which would establish and maintain order for 15,000 striking workers, while preventing further acts of worker violence which could jeopardize the strike.

Ettor established a general strike committee organized along ethnic divisions. Each of the 15 major language groups were allowed to elect four delegates to serve on the committee. Because of the possibility of arrest or illness, each delegate trained his own alternate. Trustworthy interpreters attempted to relieve the Babel-like communication problem. A committee was formed to raise funds, because the Wobblies did not maintain a "war chest" for strike activities. All of the decisions were decided democratically; the entire organization was an amazing achievement.

On January 14, the general strike was officially declared and the strike committee voted on its demands. Four were adopted:

1. A 15 percent wage increase and acceptance of the 54-hour week
2. An end to the premium and bonus system
3. Double pay for overtime
4. No retaliation against workers who struck <17>

These demands were modest and reasonable; there were "no demands for union recognition or a closed shop, nor any mention of revolution." <18> The Wobblies were feared and hated because of their revolutionary stance, but their position in Lawrence was more like the simple unionism" of Gompers than one of Marxist revolt.

New strike tactics were developed during the Lawrence strike, several of which became standard procedures in the future. Police and militia dispersed the first large picket lines in front of the mills. To combat this, Ettor and the committee devised the "moving picket line," which circled the entire mill district 24 hours a day. In order to avoid arrest, the

strikers were told to refrain from using violence against any scab. Rather, the committee dealt with scabs in a non-violent manner. Meetings were held to discover names and addresses of scabs. Groups would visit these homes late at night, singing to their inhabitants with loud voices. If this technique failed, letters were sent to the immigrant scab's home in Europe, adding familial shame to strikers' pressure tactics.

Thousands of workers marched down the streets singing "The Internationale" or "La Marsellaise" in frequently staged parades, which not only cemented unity among the strikers, but also demonstrated their united strength, convincing others to join the cause. <19> However, the parades were soon outlawed by the city and disrupted by the militia. The strike committee then devised parades in which large groups of 20 to 50 people linked arms and strode along the sidewalks brushing pedestrians aside. <20> As police moved to disband the parades, strikers entered stores to get off the sidewalk and disrupt business.

The patience of the Lawrence residents waned. The newspapers were filled with anti-worker propaganda charging strikers with outrageous crimes and violence -- false information that was usually supplied by mill owners. On January 20, caches of dynamite were found at several locations; Ettor and the strikers were blamed. Later it was discovered that the explosives had been planted by operatives of the American Woolen Company, under the direction of its president, William Wood. <21> John Barren, a local businessman, was convicted and fined \$500 for planting the dynamite. His accomplice later committed suicide and Wood was never prosecuted. <22>

However, after the botched TNT plan, the capitalist forces soon had another chance to remove Ettor. On January 29, three weeks into the strike of 25,000 workers, police and strikers clashed. Annie LoPezza, an immigrant worker, was shot to death by the police. Although no strikers had been armed, they were blamed for the death. Ettor and Giovannitti were charged as accomplices of Giuseppe Caruso, the worker accused of the murder. All three were arrested. The trumped-up charge was designed to break the will of the strikers. All three men were denied bail and remained in jail until their trials, almost a year later. <23>

The strikers now needed a new leader. The IWW sent "Big Bill" Haywood, a mythic figure in labor history, who was greeted by thousands of cheering workers at the train station. Haywood had his work cut out for him. He had to sustain the strikers' enthusiasm in the face of increasing opposition, and he needed to raise more money for the relief fund. Haywood accomplished these goals with an ingenious plan.

The Italians recommended sending the children of the strikers to other cities for care, an idea used in European strikes. Haywood seized upon the idea in order to remove the children from the violent atmosphere and harsh winter and to lessen the strain on relief programs. <24> Haywood was probably aware of the publicity and outpouring of sympathy such an action would elicit. <25> The removal of the children proved to be the turning point of the strike.

Investigators were hired to check out the prospective foster homes throughout New England, the children were given medical examinations, and identification /permission papers were signed by the parents. On February 10, the first hundred children were sent to Wobbly households and other sympathizers. <26> Public opinion was turning in favor of the strikers, and the mill owners decided to strike back. They convinced the marshal to forbid the removal of children from the city. <27>

On the morning of February 24, about two hundred children, cleared by doctors and accompanied by their mothers, arrived at the train station. In a vicious and brutal display of force, police and militia descended upon the women and children with clubs, throwing many individuals into military trucks. <28> After the bomb plants and the false arrests of the strike leaders, the Lawrence officials and mill owners had made a grave mistake. The media created a national furor over the needless brutality, popular opinion swung heavily in the strikers' favor and relief donations flooded in. By early March, the strikers were in a solid position with plenty of funds, strong resolve, and wide-spread support and sympathy. Victor Berger, a Socialist congressman from Wisconsin, "demanded a congressional investigation, which resulted in hearings in Washington at which the strikers obtained still wider publicity." <29>

The American Woolen Company was forced to give in, and offered a 5 percent pay increase effective March 4. <30> The AFL's United Textile Workers accepted the offer and returned to work. John Golden, president of the UTW, had been working with the mill owners and actively tried to break the general strike from the beginning. But the Wobblies refused to accept the offer, although they sent 10 delegates to negotiate with the employers. <31>

On March 12, a settlement was reached with the American Woolen Company which basically met all four of the strikers' original demands. Agreements were reached with the other companies and the strike was called off on March 24, 1912. The strike committee was dissolved and the militia moved out. After two months of struggle, the Great Lawrence Strike had ended.

Because of the victory at Lawrence, other New England mills raised their wages to avoid similar strikes or unionization. Ettor and Giovannitti were tried in September and acquitted on November 26. <32> The Wobblies organized and funded the defense. At the time of the trial, Local 20 claimed more than 15,000 members. <33>

Unfortunately, the gains made at Lawrence did not last for long. The IWW was discredited and attacked. By the summer of 1913, Local 20 had only 700 members. <34> The victory at Lawrence signaled the high-water mark of the Wobblies. Despite further minor successes, the Wobblies never again reached the peak they held at Lawrence. Because of their opposition to World War 1, the Wobblies were systematically destroyed by the federal government.

But the Lawrence strike was significant for a number of reasons. It proved the AFL wrong in believing unskilled, foreign-speaking workers incapable of organizing. The

strike created new strategies, such as the moving picket line. The spirit of the strike was also important. The Wobblies were largely responsible for the incredible degree of solidarity at Lawrence, especially considering the vast differences between the workers involved. It was also one of the first strikes which really touched people throughout America who, perhaps for the first time, had some understanding of the unskilled worker's hardships.

Notes

1 Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Volume IV* (New York: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1965), p. 307.

2 Foner, p. 309.

3 Foner, p. 308.

4 Foner, p. 309.

5 Joseph R. Conlin, *Big Bill Haywood and the Radical Union Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969), p. 133.

6 Stewart Bird, et. al., *Solidarity Forever* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1985), p. 56.

7 Foner, p. 311.

8 Fred Thompson and Patrick Murfin, *The IWW: Its First Seventy Years (1905-1975)* (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1976), p. 54.

9 Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All* (New York: The New York Time Book Co, 1969), p. 234.

10 Foner, p. 315.

11 Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1967), p. 135.

12 Foner, p. 316.

13 Foner, p. 316.

14 Foner, p. 316.

15 Dubofsky, p. 246.

16 Foner, p. 317.

17 Dubofsky, p. 242.

18 Dubofsky, p. 242.

19 Dubofsky, p. 242.

20 Foner, p. 322.

21 Dubofsky, p. 247.

22 Dubofsky, p. 247.

23 Conlin, p. 135.

24 Foner, p. 325.

25 Conlin, p. 136.

26 Conlin, p. 136.

27 Dubofsky, p. 252.

28 Dubofsky, p. 252.

29 Dubofsky, p. 252.

30 Foner, p. 339.

31 Dubofsky, p. 255.

32 Dubofsky, p. 253.

33 Dubofsky, p. 253.

34 Foner, p. 349.

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