

# Why Teach a 100-Year-Old Strike?

## The “Bread and Roses” Centenary

BY NORM DIAMOND

Today’s movement in support of the 99 percent is a reminder that throughout U.S. history, a major engine of change has been grass-roots organizing and solidarity. As an old Industrial Workers of the World song goes:\*

“An injury to one, we say’s an injury to all,  
United we’re unbeatable, divided, we must fall.”

Major history textbooks, however, downplay the role of ordinary people in shaping events—especially those who formed labor unions and used the strike to assert their rights. One of the most significant strikes in U.S. history occurred 100 years ago, in the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile mills, and yet it merits barely a mention in the most widely used U.S. history textbooks.

It was known as the “Bread and Roses” strike because underlying the demand for adequate wages (“bread”) was a demand for dignity on the job and in life more generally (“roses”).

Until this strike, the U.S. Congress was indifferent to working conditions. The Wool Trust was as powerful as the Oil Trust and the Steel Trust. William Madison Wood, chairman of the American Woolen Company, was mentioned in the same breath as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J. P. Morgan. With the largest and most modern textile mills in the world and more than 30,000 workers, Lawrence was the epicenter and symbol of the new industrialization.

It had been founded only six decades earlier, a planned city derived from a utopian vision. The mills themselves were to provide cultural opportunities and education, refining the young women and men

attracted from surrounding farmsteads and rural communities. Housing was to be airy and spacious, with grass yards and limits on the number of tenants, and wages were to be adequate for a healthy diet.

By 1912, the drive for profits had destroyed the vision. Workers lived in fetid, crowded tenements. Working nine- and ten-hour days, six days a week, their main meal was usually little more than bread and molasses. The drinking water inside the mills was foul; supervisors developed a lucrative sideline selling water that was actually potable. Life expectancy for mill workers was 22 years less than for non-mill worker residents of Lawrence.

“If the women of this country knew how the cloth was made in Lawrence and at what price of human life they would never buy another yard,” said Vida Dutton Scudder, a professor at Wellesley College who spoke at one of the strikers’ rallies.

The workforce was one that unions and bosses alike thought impossible to organize. Mostly unskilled, a majority of them women, kept apart by more than a dozen languages, mill workers were both vanguard and victims of the new U.S. industrialization. The textile industry was the first to use new sources of power to drive its machines. It led the way in subdividing jobs into limited, repetitive movements, making workers interchangeable and replaceable. Hundreds of thousands were enticed from poor areas of Europe by posters and postcards showing happy mill hands leaving work with smiles and sacks of gold. But once mill owners had a surplus of workers desperate for jobs, they drove down wages and sped up the work.

They also experimented with different techniques to divide workers. In some mills, they deliberately placed workers together who spoke different languages. In others,

they allocated work by ethnicity so that particular jobs were given only to Lithuanians, or to French Canadians, or to the Irish. Supervisors used ethnic and racial slurs and sexual harassment as intentional means of control.

When individual states attempted regulation, companies threatened to move. There was a race to the bottom (which is being repeated today on an international scale), with states competing to offer companies the best deal, the least oversight. Companies claimed they could not act to improve conditions on their own; doing so would put them at a competitive



**Above:** When conditions became especially difficult, with food and heating fuel scarce and attacks by hired thugs and the state militia increasing, strikers sent some children to families of supporters in New York and Boston.

disadvantage. The responsibility, their spokespeople said, was not theirs: it was that of the economic system that bound them together and produced all the marvels of modern life.

### The Strike Begins

On January 12, 1912, the owners of all the Lawrence companies suddenly cut workers’ pay, and this seemingly docile workforce walked out. With no preparation and little prior organization, 23,000 workers went on strike. They set up communal kitchens and

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\*“Dublin Dan” Liston, “The Portland Revolution.” See Joyce L. Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing, 1998), 34.

created a committee structure responsible to daily mass meetings that took place in each of the ethnic constituencies.

In the beginning, men led the strike committees as well as the picketing and demonstrations. As the strike wore on, some of those early leaders faltered while women's participation and confidence grew. Sometimes having to overcome resistance from their husbands and fathers, women joined strategy discussions, chaired committees, and took the lead in picketing.

And they sang, women and men alike. Songs became a common language, the means of uplifting their spirits and forging solidarity. For those who couldn't read, singing provided a political education, a way of learning about the world and putting their own struggles in a larger

context. Composer and singer Bernice Johnson Reagon called songs of the civil rights movement "the language that focused the energy of the people who filled the streets."<sup>†</sup> The same was true in Lawrence.

About 14,000 mill workers, half the workforce, held firm for nine and a half weeks. Despite repression, cold, and hunger, they won. They gained a raise in pay, with the largest increases for the lowest paid workers, as well as a higher rate for working overtime and a fairer system for calculating wages. After one last joyous march, on March 18 they went back to work.

They won because the mills couldn't function with so many workers showing no signs of coming back. They won because

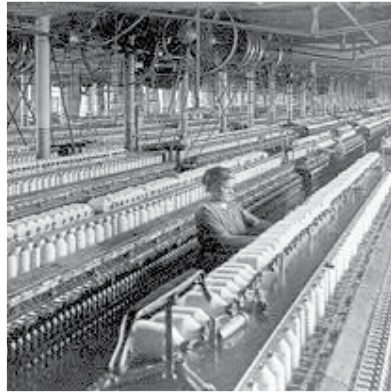
they forced congressional hearings and focused national outrage on living and working conditions and child labor. They won because wool industry profits were based on a tariff against foreign competitors, and mill owners feared that public outrage would prevent Congress from renewing the tariff. Most of all, they won because of their own solidarity.

## Lasting Lessons

Historic change is continuous but seldom smooth. More often, it happens the way tectonic plates grind together, lock under increasing tension into seeming stability, then spasm into a new configuration. It is in these times of spasm when people find

their old ways of understanding the world around them no longer making sense. These are the times when people reach for new ideas and new forms of social organization. These are the times we learn most about human aspiration and capability.

The Lawrence strike of 1912, the "singing strike," was an exceptional product



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**Left: A woman spins yarn in a Lawrence mill. Above: The state militia guards the approach to Lawrence's textile mills.**

of them had joined the chorus and personally participated.

For the workers, the strike was also about experiencing democracy in their own lives and awakening the nation's conscience to the exploitation of children and other vulnerable workers. It was about new and effective tactics: "We will win this strike by keeping our hands in our pockets," said one of their leaders, meaning that the strikers should ignore provocations and not respond to violence with violence. And it was about defending labor rights under attack. When a striker was killed—eyewitnesses said by a policeman—two of the strike leaders were charged as accomplices in her murder, even though the prosecution acknowledged they had been addressing a rally miles away at the time. According to the prosecutor, it was their militant pro-union speech that incited the crime. When a Lawrence jury found those leaders not guilty, all who value the First Amendment's provisions for free speech and freedom of assembly were the beneficiaries.

of one of those times. We should teach Lawrence because it opened possibilities that continue to resonate. Because it was important in building some of our freedoms that are now endangered. And because there are parallels and lessons for the challenges we face today.

There were dueling narratives during the strike, with some of the attacks on strikers framed in ways familiar to us a hundred years later. According to the Lawrence Citizens' Association, formed during the strike and composed of the local business and political elite, outside agitators were to blame for riling up the otherwise docile and responsible workforce. (Their actual words were "godless, unpatriotic outsiders.") Somewhat in contradiction with that characterization, they also faulted their own workers, calling them "illegal immigrants" who had come to this country just to ship their rich wages back to their families abroad.

For the workers, the story was different. It was about human solidarity across race, ethnicity, and gender. It was about community support and the possibility of new forms of workplace organizing. The industrial-type unions we have today, founded in the 1930s and '40s, grew directly out of the struggle in Lawrence. Not only did later union activists take inspiration from the "singing strike," some

We should teach Lawrence for its victorious solidarity and for its contributions to democracy. We should teach it because it is the gritty underpinning for topics that we do teach: populism, the Progressive Era, settlement houses, immigration, female suffrage, movements for public health and civil rights, and naturalism and realism in literature. Most of all, we should teach Lawrence because it was an exceptional historical event whose lessons still reverberate. In this time of renewed popular activism, we must revisit this country's rich history of social movements, labor struggle, and solidarity. □

<sup>†</sup>Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 261.