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 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

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.

For details, photos, biographies, and more, see the Bread and Roses Centennial Exhibit at www.exhibit.breadandrosescentennial.org.

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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
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 discus-
sions, 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 move-
ment “the language that
focused the energy of the
people who filled the streets.”¹
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
got 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 competi-
tors, 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

¹Charles M. Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 261.

their old ways of under-
standing 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
of them who 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 police-
man—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.

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 nationalism and realism in
literature. Most of all, we should teach
Lawrence because it was an exceptional
historical event whose lessons still reverber-
ate. In this time of renewed popular
activism, we must revisit this country’s rich
history of social movements, labor struggle,
and solidarity.