

Bread and Roses Strike - Lawrence, Mass. - (1912)

The Lawrence Textile Strike was a public protest mainly of immigrant workers from several countries, including Austria, Belgium, Cuba, Canada, France, England, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Scotland, Spain, Syria, and Turkey. According to the 1910 census, 65% of mill workers (many of whom eventually struck) lived in the United States for less than 10 years; 47% for less than five years.

Prompted by a wage cut, the walkout spread quickly from mill to mill across the city. Strikers defied the assumptions of conservative trade unions within the American Federation of Labor that immigrant, largely female and ethnically diverse workers could not be organized.

The Lawrence strike is referred to as the “Bread and Roses” strike and “The Strike for Three Loaves.” The first known source to do so was a 1916 labor anthology, *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest* by Upton Sinclair. Prior to that, the slogan, used as the title of a 1911 poem by James Oppenheim, had been attributed to ‘Chicago Women Trade Unionists.’ It has also been attributed to socialist union organizer Rose Schneiderman.

James Oppenheim claimed his seeing women strikers in Lawrence carrying a banner proclaiming “We Want Bread and Roses Too” inspired the poem, “Bread and Roses.” The poem, however, was written and published in 1911 prior to the strike. Later the poem was set to music by Caroline Kohlsaas and then by Mimi Farina. The song and slogan are now important parts of the labor movement and women’s movement worldwide.

Bread and Roses Strike of 1912: Two Months in Lawrence, Massachusetts, that Changed Labor History

A new Massachusetts law reduced the maximum number of hours of work per week for women and children from 56 to 54, effective January 1, 1912. On January 11, workers discovered their employers had reduced their weekly pay to match the reduction in their hours. That difference in wages amounted to several loaves of bread a week.

Bruce Watson in *Bread and Roses* quotes a mill overseer who stated “the strike began like a spark of electricity.” Polish women weavers at Everett Cotton Mills realized that their employer had reduced their pay by 32¢ and stopped their looms and left the mill, shouting “short pay, short pay!” (Watson, *Bread and Roses*, p. 11). Workers from other mills joined the next day; within a week 25,000 workers were on strike.

Joseph Ettor of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had been organizing in Lawrence for some time before the strike. He and Arturo Giovannitti of the Italian Socialist Federation of the Socialist Party of America helped to form a strike committee made up of two representatives from each ethnic group in the mills, which took responsibility for all major decisions. The committee arranged for its strike meetings to be translated into 25 different languages.

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Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Scotland, Spain, Syria, and Turkey. According to the 1910 census, 65% of mill workers (many of whom eventually struck) lived in the United States for less than 10 years; 47% for less than five years.

Conditions were such that, just days before the strike commenced, on Saturday, January 6, a worker from the Wood Mill walked into a store on Essex Street and dropped dead. Was it stress, factory fatigue, tuberculosis? No one knew. Three days later a fourteen year-old boy had his leg crushed in an elevator at the Arlington Mill; he died the next day.

Here, an excerpt from “open letter” circulated by the strikers explains what they hoped to gain: " We hold that as useful members of society and as wealth producers we have the right to lead decent and honorable lives; that we ought to have homes and not shacks; that we ought to have clean food and not adulterated food at high prices; that we ought to have clothes suited to the weather and not shoddy garments.”

The *Lawrence Eagle Tribune* reported on a strike meeting held on January 11: “Voting unanimously to walk out if their pay for 54 hours is less than that received for 56 hours, several hundred Italians, Poles, and Lithuanians, who are employed in the local mills, met last evening at Ford’s Hall. A majority of those who attended the meeting will receive their pay today. A mass meeting will be held Saturday afternoon at two o’clock in the City Hall at which speakers in English, Italian, Polish, and French will be present.”

Strikers and community members responded to the strike in unprecedented and remarkable ways. On the morning of January 12, even before the strike had spread, the *Boston Morning Journal* on its front page warned readers that Lawrence “faces one of the biggest strikes in its history” (Erin Dubinski, *The Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912*, unpublished paper).

On January 13, Industrial Workers of the World organizer, Joseph Ettor, arrived in the city. He spoke to workers at City Hall: "If the workers of the world want to win, all they have to do is recognize their own solidarity. They have nothing to do but fold their arms and the world will stop. The workers are more powerful with their hands in their pockets than all the property of the capitalists. As long as workers keep their hands in their pockets the capitalists cannot put theirs there. With passive resistance, with the workers absolutely refusing to move they are more powerful than all the weapons and instruments that the other side has for protection and attack.”

To all Workers of Lawrence, Mass (from the Committee of Ten):

... As long as the fight was confined to the mills of Lawrence and appeared not to extend any further we deemed it unnecessary to appeal to other classes of workers; but now that the combination of capitalists have shown the unity of all our adversaries, we call on you as brothers and sisters to join hands with us in this great movement. Our cause is just...

Workers quit your hammers, thrown down your files, let the dynamos stop, the power cease to turn the wheels and the looms, leave the machinery, bank the fires, tie up the plants, tie up the town. Great is the provocation, greater must be the answer of the workers to the employing

class... On to the general strike of all workers, of all professions, of women, men, and children. Tie up everything. On to action!

At the Washington Mill at 9:00 AM on Friday, January 12, the paymaster witnessed “a blur of arms and backs surging through the mill gates and into the courtyard. He immediately called the police. Nightstick in hand, the lone cop on the local beat arrived a few minutes later to find two thousand people swarming outside the mill (Watson, Bread and Roses, p. 11).

Working families developed multi-ethnic community support networks. The Franco-Belgian soup kitchen fed over 23,000 workers and their dependents, this from a population of 1,200 Franco-Belgians in the city at the time of the strike. The cooperative store that coordinated this effort was modeled after organizations that originated in Belgium. And, families shared what coal they had to ward off the winter’s chill in their roughly furnished tenement apartments.

The city responded to the strike by ringing the city’s alarm bell for the first time in its history. A company of the local militia patrolled the streets. The strikers engaged in mass picketing. Mill security turned fire hoses on the picketers gathered in front of the mills. During the strike there were hundreds of arrests and strikers Anna LoPizzo and John Ramey lost their lives.

A week after the strike began a local undertaker attempted to frame the strike leadership, planting dynamite in several locations in town. He was caught and fined \$500, but not before several strike leaders were hauled off to jail. William Wood – the owner of the American Woolen Company, who had made a large payment to the defendant under unexplained circumstances shortly before the dynamite was found – was not charged.

A call for troops was sent on January 15th by Mayor Michael Scanlon to Captain Louis Cox of Battery C of the Massachusetts State Militia (now the National Guard). Battery C was the first company to be called to Lawrence to help maintain order during the strike. Later, police and militia would come from Lowell, Haverhill, Lynn, Newton, Wakefield, Stoneham, Charlestown, Waltham, and Boston.

A troop of Boston Metropolitan Police, and a number of sharpshooters from the US Marine Corps was in the city as well. Even Harvard’s Cavalry Troop C arrived in the city in early February. A *New York Times* story noted, “A large number of students will escape the ordeal of a mid-year examination as a result. All will be passed.”

The language in the second line of Mayor Scanlon’s call for the militia — “a tumult is threatened”—provides a sense of how it must have felt to be a city official, only a few days into his post, during the strike. Scanlon's command encapsulates the fear and panic felt by Lawrence’s power brokers and political leaders at the onset of the strike.

On January 29, the militia cornered a large group of marchers at the corner of Union and Garden streets. After some pushing and shoving a shot rang out; Annie LoPizzo, a 34-year-old striker, lay dead in the street. Witnesses charged that the bullet was fired by police officer Oscar Benoit, but he and others insisted someone specifically targeting LoPizzo fired the shot from behind the police. Two important strike leaders—Arturo Giovannitti and Joseph Ettor—were arrested for

murder conspiracy in her death. Striker Joseph Caruso was arrested in April and charged with the murder. The three remained in jail without bail until the end of November 1912. When their trial began in September 1912 in Salem, MA, before Judge Joseph F. Quinn, the three defendants were kept in metal cages in the court room.

Big Bill Haywood threatened a general strike to demand their freedom, with the cry "Open the jail gates or we will close the mill gates." The IWW raised \$60,000 for their defense and held demonstrations and mass meetings throughout the country in their support. At one point Boston law enforcement arrested all of the members of the Ettor-Giovannitti Defense Committee.

Fifteen thousand Lawrence workers went on a one-day strike on September 30, 1912, to demand the accused men be released. Swedish and French workers proposed a boycott of woolen goods from the US; Italian supporters of Giovannitti rallied in front of the U.S. consulate in Rome.

All three defendants were acquitted on November 26, 1912.