

Labor History: The Bread and Roses Strike

By Ed Leavy

The Lawrence Mill Strike of 1912 is one of the most famous strikes in American history. It featured legendary union figures such as Big Bill Haywood and Smiling Joe Ettor, a sensational murder trial, the Wobblies, a mass children's exodus which ended when mothers and small children were imprisoned, and a memorable name for the strike. It also exposed wretched living conditions of the mill workers and opened up a battle between unions that had long-term implications on the labor movement.

Ironically, the strike began in response to a Massachusetts state law that shortened the work week from fifty-six to fifty-four hours. The mill used the law to justify a cut in wages, although their workers were already among the lowest in the city; mill workers earned between \$3 and \$6 a week, while the town garbage men earned \$12. The mill argued that the wage cuts were necessary to compete with mills from other states that did not face the new "shortened" week. The workers, mostly recent immigrants who were barely literate in English, seemed not to understand that their wages would be reduced until they received their checks with the new rate. Immediately, long-simmering anger erupted toward company owner Billy Wood, who lived in a huge mansion in a neighboring town and had imposed a series of strict rules to increase production, and the town leaders who bragged about their modern industrial city while allowing its working class to live in subhuman conditions. The tenements where the workers lived were unbearably crowded – some areas had 600 people living per acre – and the lack of sanitation led to diseases that made death among the children commonplace.

A wildcat strike began; workers refused to return to the mill and damaged company property. Billy Wood pouted, viewing the strike as a personal betrayal and refusing to discuss the workers' demands of a 15% pay increase and overtime pay. What the strike had in passion it lacked in organization, however, until Smiling Joe Ettor from the Industrial Workers of the World arrived. The IWW, better known as the Wobblies, was renowned for its political radicalism and its defense of the First Amendment as opposed to its discipline in labor action, but Ettor turned out to be perfect for Lawrence. Ettor convinced the workers to maintain a nonviolent approach; the militia had arrived to guard the mills, and many strikes during that time period were lost after violent outbreaks left workers killed or in jail. He also noted that the company had long benefited from the ethnic and language divisions among the workers, so he formed a council in which every group was represented to ensure the strikers and their families could eat.

Two events transformed the strike from a local event to national news. A skirmish between militiamen and workers led to two deaths, Eighteen-year-old John Rami was stabbed to death by one of the troop's bayonets; the marshal refused to arrest the killer because "you can't arrest a soldier for doing his job." The marshal had no such qualms about arresting Ettor for the murder of millworker Anna LoPizzo, who was shot to death during the battle. Although Ettor had not been in the area when the murder occurred and had consistently preached nonviolence, he was charged as an "accessory before the fact" because he had supposedly incited the demonstration.

With Ettor in jail, the most famous Wobbly, Big Bill Haywood, arrived. His presence drew even more attention to what was now being called the Bread and Roses strike ("Bread and Roses" is a poem by John Oppenheimer; how the poem got connected to the strike is not clear to me). He drew more attention to the strike by starting the "Children's Exodus." With food for strikers now in short supply, the Wobblies asked sympathizers throughout the Northeast to take in area children. The response was overwhelming, and on February 10th the press descended on Lawrence to photograph children being put on trains by their parents and sent to strangers

who could better provide for them. The Wobblies then asked for more volunteers to take in an additional 1000 “strike waifs.” This time, the town leaders decided they could afford no more bad press for their “model city.” Police prevented the children from boarding trains at gunpoint, and mothers and children were sent to jail. The motive was ostensibly to prevent the Wobblies from manipulating the parents into giving up their children, but the hypocrisy was palatable. There was no such concern for the children when they died from their deplorable living conditions or had to quit school to work in the mills.

Not surprisingly, pictures of jailed mothers and children did not help the press coverage for Billy Wood and the town leaders. The company agreed to negotiate, and the workers received paid overtime, increased wages between 5%-25%, and improved working conditions. Despite Woods’ original fears, rather than take advantage of the changes in Lawrence mills in other states quickly followed suit; they were afraid of similar actions among their workers. The aftermath of the strike was less successful for the labor movement. Ettor’s murder trial resulted in a not guilty verdict despite the fact that the prosecution demanded that during the trial Ettor and his codefendants be locked in a cage in the courtroom to prevent further trouble; the legal costs, however, seriously hurt the already cash-strapped Wobblies. Inter-union battles also prevented the victory in the strike from spurring further growth in the labor movement. The United Textile Workers, worried that the more-radical IWW might make further inroads among mill workers, began a campaign to discredit the Wobblies. A group of anarchists with ties to the Wobblies marched in a Labor Day parade under the banner “Arise, Slaves of the world:... No God, No Country...” Both employers and the UTW used the banner to discredit the IWW, and their retreat into irrelevance began. The workers in Lawrence had moved forward, but the rest of labor did not move with them.

Information for this article is taken primarily from There is Power in a Union by Philip Dray