

## **The Lawrence Textile Strike, 1912**

(<http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/lawrstripoc.html> )

Also known as the "Bread and Roses strike", the Lawrence, Massachusetts textile workers strike of 1912 was one of the most dramatic labor struggles in American history. Led by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the strike was a public protest mainly of immigrant workers from several countries, including Belgium, Cuba, Canada, Austria, England, Germany, France, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Lithuania, Norway, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Scotland, Russia, Syria, Turkey, and Spain. On January 1, 1912, a new Massachusetts law was put into effect that reduced the maximum number of hours per week for women and children from 56 to 54. On January 11, workers discovered that their pay had also been cut to reflect the reduction in their hours. The wage difference amounted to several loaves of bread a week. Upon discovering this, Polish workers at Everett Cotton Mills stopped their looms and walked out. Within a week, 25,000 workers were on strike. The nature of the strike 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. In an amazing show of solidarity, working families developed multi-ethnic community support networks. The Franco-Belgian soup kitchen fed 23,000 workers and their dependents and families shared what coal they had to ward off the winter's cold. The city responded by appointing a company of local militia to patrol the streets, mill security turned fire hoses on the strikers and picketers, hundreds of people were arrested and several people were killed. On March 12, 1912, the American Woolen Company agreed to most of the worker's demands and the other manufacturers followed by the end of the month. 27,000 workers were affected with an immediate positive result, wages were increased from 5 to 25 percent, overtime pay was secured, and a modification of the "premium system" was also secured. The following document entitled "Proclamation of the Striking Textile Workers of Lawrence" draws largely from the Declaration of Independence to argue that worker's and labor ought not to be defined in the same ways that slaves and slave labor were.

### **"Proclamation of the Striking Textile Workers of Lawrence"**

We, the 20,000 textile workers of Lawrence, are out on strike for the right to live free from slavery and starvation; free from overwork and underpay; free from a state of affairs that had become so unbearable and beyond our control, that we were compelled to march out of the slave pens of Lawrence in united resistance against the wrongs and injustice of years and years of wage slavery.

In our fight we have suffered and borne patiently the abuse and calumnies of the mill owners, the city government, police, militia, State government, legislature, and the local police court judge. We feel that in justice to our fellow workers we should at this time make known the causes which compelled us to strike against the mill owners of Lawrence. 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. That to secure sufficient food, clothing and shelter in a society made up of a robber class on the one hand and a working class on the other hand, it is absolutely necessary for the toilers to band themselves together and form a union, organizing its powers in such form as to them seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that conditions long established should not be changed for light or transient causes, and accordingly all experience has shown that the workers are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves, by striking against the misery to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and ill treatment, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them to a state of beggary, it is their duty to resist such tactics and provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these textile workers, and such is now the necessity which compels them to fight the mill-owning class.

The history of the present mill owners is a history of repeated injuries, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these textile workers. To prove this let facts be submitted to all right-thinking men and women of the civilized world. These mill owners have refused to meet the committees of the strikers. They have refused to consider their demands in any way that is reasonable or just. They have, in the security of their sumptuous offices, behind stout mill gates and serried rows of bayonets and policemen's clubs, defied the State, city, and public. In fact, the city of Lawrence and the government of Massachusetts have become the creatures of the mill owners. They have declared that they will not treat with the strikers till they return to the slavery against which they are in rebellion. They have starved the workers and driven them to such an extent that their homes are homes no longer, inasmuch as the mothers and children are driven by the low wages to work side by side with the father in the factory for a wage that spells bare existence and untimely death. To prove this to the world the large death rate of children under one year of age in Lawrence proves that most of these children perish because they were starved before birth. And those who survive the starving process grow up the victims of malnutrition.

These mill owners not only have the corrupting force of dollars on their side, but the powers of the city and State government are being used by them to oppress and sweep aside all opposition on the part of those overworked and underpaid textile workers. The very courts, where justice is supposed to be impartial, are being used by the millionaire mill owners. And so serious has this become that the workers have lost all faith in the local presiding judge. Without any attempt at a trial, men have been fined or jailed from six months to a year on trumped-up charges, that would be a disgrace even in Russia. This judge is prejudiced and unfair in dealing with the strikers. He has placed all the strikers brought before him under excessive bail. He has dealt out lengthy sentences to the strikers as if they were hardened criminals, or old-time offenders. He has refused to release on bail two of the leaders of the strike, while he released a prisoner charged with conspiracy and planting dynamite, on a thousand dollars' bail. He sentenced, at one morning's session of court, 23 strikers to one year in jail on the fake charge of inciting to riot. This judge has declared he is opposed to the union that is conducting the strike.

The brutality of the police in dealing with the strikers has aroused them to a state of rebellious opposition to all such methods of maintaining order. The crimes of the police during this trouble are almost beyond human imagination. They have dragged young girls from their beds at midnight. They have clubbed the strikers at every opportunity. They have dragged little children from their mothers' arms and with their clubs they have struck women who are in a state of pregnancy. They have placed people under arrest for no reason whatsoever. They have prevented

mothers from sending their children out of the city and have laid hold of the children and the mothers violently and thr[own] the children into waiting patrol wagons like so much rubbish. They have caused the death of a striker by clubbing the strikers into a state of violence. They have arrested and clubbed young boys and placed under arrest innocent girls for no offense at all.

The militia has used all kinds of methods to defeat the strikers. They have bayoneted a young boy.<sup>2</sup> They have beaten up the strikers. They have been ordered to shoot to kill. They have murdered one young man, who died as a result of being bayoneted in the back. They have threatened one striker with death if he did not close the window of his home. They have threatened to stay in this city until the strike is over. They have bayoneted one citizen because he would not move along fast enough. And they have held up at the point of the bayonet hundreds of citizens and Civil War veterans.

The city government has denied the strikers the right to parade through the streets. They have abridged public assemblage by refusing the strikers the use of the city hall and public grounds for public meetings. They have turned the public buildings of the city into so many lodging houses for an army of hirelings and butchers. They have denied the strikers the right to use the Common for mass meetings, and they have ordered the police to take little children away from their parents, and they are responsible for all the violence and brutality on the part of the police.

The Massachusetts Legislature has refused to use any of the money of the State to help the strikers. They have voted \$150,000 to maintain an army of 1,500 militiamen to be ready to shoot down innocent men, women, and children who are out on strike for a living wage. They have refused to use the powers of the State for the workers. They have appointed investigation committees, who declare, after perceiving the signs of suffering on the part of the strikers on every side, that there is no trouble with these people.

All the nations of the world are represented in this fight of the workers for more bread. The flaxen-haired son of the North marches side by side with his dark-haired brother of the South. They have toiled together in the factory for one boss. And now they have joined together in a great cause, and they have cast aside all racial and religious prejudice for the common good, determined to win a victory over the greed of the corrupt, unfeeling mill owners, who have ruled these people so long with the whip of hunger and the lash of the unemployed.

Outlawed, with their children taken away from them, denied their rights before the law, surrounded by bayonets of the militia, and driven up and down the streets of the city by an overfed and arrogant body of police, these textile workers, sons and daughters of the working class, call upon the entire civilized world to witness what they have suffered at the hands of the hirelings of the mill-owning class. These men and women can not suffer much longer; they will be compelled to rise in armed revolt against their oppressors if the present state of affairs is allowed to continue in Lawrence