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Cry for “Bread & Roses” Still Resonates

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One hundred years ago this week, thousands of angry textile workers abandoned their looms and poured into the frigid streets of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Like Occupy Wall Street in our own gilded age, this unexpected grassroots protest cast a dramatic spotlight on the problem of social and economic inequality. In all of American labor history, there are few better examples of the synergy between radical activism and indigenous militancy.

The work stoppage now celebrated as the “Bread and Roses Strike” was triggered, ironically, by a Progressive-era reform that backfired. Well-meaning state legislators had just reduced the maximum allowable working hours for women and children from 56 to 54 hours per week. When this reduction went into effect, workers quickly discovered that their pay had been cut proportionately, and their jobs speeded up by the American Woolen Company and other firms.

The strike that started on January 12, 1912 created political tremors far beyond the Merrimack Valley. The shutdown of mills in Lawrence forced a national debate about factory conditions, child labor, the exploitation of immigrants, and the free exercise of First Amendment rights during labor disputes. The strikers’ appeals for solidarity and financial support also created a stark “Which Side Are You On?” moment for mainstream unions and middle-class reformers, both of whom were nervous about the role played by “outside agitators” in Lawrence.

An Immigrant Uprising

On one side of the class divide in Lawrence were rich, arrogant, and out-of-touch WASP manufacturers. Their “1%” sense of entitlement led them to spurn negotiations with “the offscourings of Southern Europe,” as New England Magazine disdainfully called the strikers. Instead, mill owners relied on rough policing by fifty state and local militia units (including a company composed of Harvard students who were offered course credit for their attempted strike breaking). Two workers were shot or bayonetted to death, while many others were clubbed and jailed. Three union organizers were falsely accused of conspiracy to murder and faced the electric chair before their post-strike acquittal.

Arrayed against American Woolen and its heavily armed defenders was a rainbow coalition of recently arrived immigrants—low-paid workers from 30 countries, who spoke 45 different languages. They were welded together into a militant, disciplined, and largely non-violent force, through their own efforts and the extraordinary organizing skills of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which began recruiting in Lawrence many months before the nine-week walkout.

Unlike, the elitist and conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL), the IWW championed the working poor, both native- and foreign-born. “There is no foreigner here except the capitalists,” thundered IWW leader “Big Bill” Haywood, in a speech to the Lawrence strikers. “Do not let them divide you by sex, color, creed or nationality.”

Many on the picket-lines in Lawrence were teen-agers or women. Their mistreatment at work, miserable living conditions, malnutrition, and other health problems soon became a national scandal. When a delegation of sixteen young strikers appeared before a House Committee hearing in Washington D.C, the wife of Republican President William Howard Taft was among those attending who were shocked by their account of factory life in Lawrence. These child laborers put a human face on the strikers’ now famous demand for “bread and roses.” They wanted more than just a living wage; they sought dignity, respect, and opportunities for personal fulfillment denied to those employed in the mills at age 14 or even younger.

IWW vs. AFL

Today, the “Bread and Roses Strike” is feted by all of organized labor. But, at the time, the work stoppage upstaged and embarrassed the American Federation of Labor, because Lawrence workers rallied under the banner of an organizational rival. IWW members fiercely criticized the AFL for keeping workers divided in different unions, based on occupation. Women, non-whites, and recent immigrants—particularly those deemed to be “un-skilled”—were largely excluded from the alliance of craft unions derided by the IWW as “the American Separation of Labor.” The AFL, in turn, dismissed the IWW’s quest for “One Big Union” and worker control of industry as a left-wing fantasy.

AFL President Samuel Gompers was particularly grumpy about the Lawrence strike. Like some of those skeptical of Occupy Wall Street last Fall, Gompers claimed the protest activity was just “a passing event”–the work of people more concerned with promoting a “class conscious industrial revolution” than advancing “the near future interests of the workers.” When the mill owners finally capitulated, however, strikers won most of their immediate demands—an outcome that vindicated their embrace of the IWW rather than the feeble AFL-affiliated United Textile Workers. The strike settlement, reached in March of 1912, provided wage increases, over-time pay, and amnesty for 20,000 strikers.

On the other hand, as many labor historians have noted, the IWW’s political influence in Lawrence proved to be short-lived. Industrial unionism didn’t gain a firmer footing in the Merrimack Valley until the 1930s and the great wave of Depression-inspired organizing by the Congress of Industrial Organizations. But even that later labor movement success was eroded over time by mill closings and the relocation of textile manufacturing from New England to the non-union south. The Merrimack Valley entered a period of steady decline.

Lawrence, Then and Now

In recent years, however, Lawrence’s long depressed neighbor to the west, the city of Lowell, has experienced an economic revival, due to public investment in higher education there, a convention center, and other facilities; it’s now widely hailed as a model of mill town re-invention and cultural diversity. Tourists flock to its museum of industrial history, run by the National Park Service.

Lawrence remains a city of the working poor, better known for its sub-standard housing, high unemployment, political corruption, and troublesome street crime. Ninety percent of its public school students are Hispanic and few speak English as a first language. Although not condemned to factory work at an early age, these children struggle to learn under tenement-like conditions. A recent report by the teachers’ union describes “crowded classrooms and physical infrastructure in distress: leaking roofs, poor air quality, persistent mold problems, crumbling walls and rodent infestation.” Demoralized teachers have been working without a new contract for two years; student performance is so dismal that a state take-over the school system has been actively considered.

When worker solidarity prevailed over corporate power in the icy streets of Lawrence a century ago, it made the promise of a better life real for many. The Bread and Roses strike became a consciousness-raising experience, not only for textile workers and their families, but the nation as a whole. Nevertheless, at centennial events in Lawrence over the next several months, (see http://breadandrosescentennial.org/), it will be hard not to notice that many immigrant workers there still lack “bread and roses”—in the form of living wage jobs, affordable housing, and better schools.

But that injustice will not be cured until U.S. workers and their allies, in Lawrence and elsewhere, find a way to make history again, not just celebrate it.

Lawrence, Mass.


http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L175xH272/earlylabor1-5ed38.jpg

Post-scriptum :

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