

The Lawrence Textile Strike

In the early part of the 20th century, Lawrence, Massachusetts, was one of the most important textile towns in the United States. Its principal mills were those of the American Woolen Company whose yearly output was worth \$45,000,000. The woolen and cotton mills employed over 40,000 people. Many of these were foreign-born immigrants on low-wages.



Strikers in Lawrence, Massachusetts

It was estimated that about 50 per cent of Lawrence's textile workers were women and children aged under eighteen. A study by Dr. Elizabeth Shapleigh discovered that: "A considerable number of the boys and girls die within the first two or three years after beginning work. Thirty-six out of every 100 of all the men and women who work in the mill die before or by the time they are twenty-five years of age."

In January 1912 the America Woolen Company reduced the wages of its workers. This caused a walk-out and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), who had been busy recruiting workers into the union, took control of the dispute. The IWW formed a strike committee with two representatives from each of the nationalities in the industry. It was decided to demand a 15 per cent increase in wages, double-time for overtime work and a 55 hour week.

The mayor of Lawrence called in the local militia and attempts were made to stop the workers from picketing. Thirty-six of the workers were arrested and most of them sentenced to a year in prison.

Money was collected throughout America to help the strikers. One of the IWW's leading figures, Arturo Giovannitti, arrived in Lawrence to help organize relief. A network of soup kitchens and food distribution stations were set up and striking families received from \$2 to \$5 cash a week.

Bill Haywood, Carlo Tresca and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn of the Industrial Workers of the World now arrived in Lawrence and took over the running of the strike.

Dynamite was found in Lawrence and newspapers accused strikers of being responsible. However, John Breen, a local undertaker, was charged and arrested with planting the explosives in an attempt to discredit the IWW. It was later discovered that William Wood, the president of the American Woolen Company, had paid Breen \$500. Another man, Ernest Pitman, who claimed that he had been present in the company offices in Boston when the plan was developed, committed suicide before he could give evidence in court. Wood was unable to explain why he had given Breen the money but

charges against him were dropped.

The governor of Massachusetts ordered out the state militia and during one demonstration, a fifteen-year old boy was killed by a militiaman's bayonet. Soon afterwards a woman striker, Anna LoPizzo was shot dead. The union claimed that she had been killed by a police officer, but Joseph Caruso, a striker, was charged with her murder. Joseph Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti, who were three miles away speaking at a strike meeting, were arrested and charged as "accessories to the murder".

Faced with growing bad publicity, on 12th March, 1912, the American Woolen Company acceded to all the strikers' demands. By the end of the month, the rest of the other textile companies in Lawrence also agreed to pay the higher wages. However, Joseph Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti, remained in prison without trial. Protest meetings took place in cities throughout America and the case eventually took place in Salem, Massachusetts. On 26th November, 1912, both men were acquitted.

