

Lawrence Strike of 1912, Document-based Analysis

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.

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.

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 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. 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.

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 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 threw the children into waiting patrol wagons like so much rubbish.

The militia has used all kinds of methods to defeat the strikers. They have bayoneted a young boy. 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.

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.

Excerpts from "Proclamation of the Striking Textile Workers of Lawrence," 1912

1. List the grievances of the textile workers.
2. According to the Committee, why was it necessary to band together to form a union?
3. Where in this proclamation did workers use language drawn from the Declaration of Independence?
4. Why might the workers have used the language of the Declaration of Independence?

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Excerpt from Walter M. Pratt, "The Lawrence Revolution," *New England Magazine*, March 1912

A large majority of these strikers were Italians, Poles, Greeks, Syrians or other untutored people. These poor people did not understand the economic situation; they did not even understand English and were an easy prey to the agitation. About this time Joseph J. Ettor appeared upon the scene. Ettor is only twenty-six years of age but has been a leader in frightful outbreaks in Brooklyn and Patterson and prominent in the bloody riots of Schoenville, Pa. He is a man of unlimited physical vitality and wonderful capacity for leadership and a pronounced Socialist. In a few days he had become the idol of the workers of all the races, who believed every word of his incendiary speeches. He even fooled the general public and until he advocated the use of violence, which resulted in bloodshed he had the majority of the people with him. His misstatements were so cleverly made that at first they were believed. And it was generally taken for granted that the mill operatives were a much trodden, badly treated and under paid lot of people. This is not a fact. Instead of receiving five dollars a week as has been stated, the average wage, not including the higher officials, is between nine and ten dollars and it is largely a man's own fault if he receives only the average wage. Any intelligent person may become a skilled weaver and receive twenty to twenty-five dollars. The conditions under which the operators work are pleasant and everything possible is done to protect their health and bodies. Most of the mills are new and of modern construction and no expense has been spared to make the ventilation, light and sanitary condition the best. Some of the mills have escalators to the top floor and restaurants where an ample dinner may be purchased for ten cents, while most of the mills have shower baths. The American Woollen Company has built some two hundred houses, each seven rooms and bath which rent for eighteen dollars per month. The un-Americanized foreign element, however, are not educated up to things of this kind and if their pay was many times what it is they unquestionably would prefer to live as they do. Half a dozen families in one small tenement, eight or ten in a room wallowed in dirt.

Walter Merriam Pratt was a First Lieutenant of the Eighth Regiment and Battalion Adjutant on Colonel Sweetser's staff. He went to Lawrence the day the trouble broke out and remained on duty for twenty-six days.

1. According to Pratt, what was the role of the IWW and the Socialists in the strike?
2. How did Pratt evaluate the textile workers' reasons for striking?
3. How did Pratt view immigrants?

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1. Why might the striking workers have used the United States flag as a symbol during their strike?
2. What perspective might the militia have had of the strikers?

Excerpts from Textile Workers' Strike Committee, "Shall Wool and Cotton Kings Rule the Nation?" 1912

Revolting against a long train of appalling wrongs, 25,000 textile workers are on strike in Lawrence, Mass. Men and women, children even, are rebelling against a system of industrial slavery unequalled in its horrors in any part of the world.

The inhuman treatment and oppressive toil brought American, English, Irish, German, French, Polish, Belgian, Bohemian, Lithuanian, Jewish, Spanish, Portuguese, Syrian, Abyssinian, and Turkish workers together into one big army of toilers, who have joined hands and hearts for a fight against a brutal system of exploitation introduced in all the mills of Lawrence, a system which the manufacturers of cotton and woolen textiles thought of introducing in the mills everywhere.

The outcries of protests by the aroused toilers everywhere tell us that the whole working class is feeling the insults that the oppressors added to the long train of injury and abuse. The workers everywhere know that we are fighting, struggling, so that hundreds of thousands of others, yes, millions, may share in the benefits of this fierce revolt.

It is your duty to help. Our duty will be done; a duty we owe to ourselves and to the working class of the whole country.

Strike Committee
Joseph Bedard, Secretary

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1. What differences among the workers did the strike leaders have to overcome to organize the protest?
2. On what common ground did these workers unite?

Excerpts from Letter from William M. Wood to the Strike Committee, 19 January 1912

AMERICAN WOOLEN CO.
Lawrence, Mass., January 19, 1912

To our employees:

Last Friday many of you left our mills and have since remained away. Your . . . leaving the mills without notice and without any attempt at a conference is unfortunate all around. Both the company and employees are bound to lose a good deal of money as a result, which neither of us can afford.

I want every man and woman working for the American Woolen Co. to get the best wages that the company can afford. You work best for the interests of the company when you are contented, but you must realize that I must also care reasonably for the stockholders' interests and see that the business is properly managed. You know we have very sharp competition, and if we do not do our work economically our competitors will drive us out.

The last two years have been very discouraging years for us and for all manufacturers in our line. The present year being a presidential year is also bad for business. You realize, too, that the hours of labor are shorter here than in other States.

I have consulted long and anxiously with the directors and those associated with me in the management. Reluctantly and regretfully we have come to the conclusion that it is impossible, with a proper regard for the interests of the company, to grant at this time any increase in wages. Trade conditions do not justify an increase.

I ask you to have confidence in this statement and to return to your work. As long as I have managed the affairs of this company it has never yet reduced your wages, but on the contrary, four times this company has increased your wages without your asking. I say further to you that when the conditions of our business are again such as warrant raising your wages, I shall again, without even a request, recommend such an advance as circumstances warrant.

Very sincerely,
William M. Wood, President

1. According to Wood (an owner of the textile factory), why should the workers return to work?
2. How persuasive were his arguments given the strikers' grievances?

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Mary Kenney O'Sullivan (January 8, 1864 - January 18, 1943)

Mary Kenney O'Sullivan—working-class and Irish-American—became a dressmaker and then worked in a printing and binding factory in Missouri. She later worked in several binderies in Chicago. O'Sullivan helped organize the Chicago Women's Bindery Workers' Union, finding support for the union at Hull House, one of the nation's first settlement houses established by middle- and upper-class women for immigrant women and their families.

In 1892 the American Federation of Labor (AFL) appointed O'Sullivan the first woman organizer. That year she joined Mary Kehew in forming the Union for Industrial Progress to help study factory working conditions. After O'Sullivan's 1894 marriage to the *Boston Globe* labor editor, she moved to Boston where she organized rubber makers, shoe workers, laundry workers and garment workers.

After her husband's death in 1902, and now left with three children, O'Sullivan continued working with the AF, while also staying connected to the settlement house movement.

In 1903 she and William Walling, another settlement house resident, organized the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a cross-class organization of women committed to organizing and educating wage-earning women.

From 1914-1934 O'Sullivan worked as a factory inspector for the Division of Industrial Safety in Massachusetts.

Mary K. O'Sullivan, "The Labor War at Lawrence," April 1912

"We were drowning men ready to grasp at a straw when the Industrial Workers of the World appeared to save us," said more than one striker in Lawrence.

Up to the present time, the Textile Workers of the American Federation of Labor have failed to organize the unskilled and underpaid workers. Blocked by the mill interests, they have been defeated in their larger efforts for the skilled workers, and they have neglected the interests of the unskilled.

In the past the foreigners have been the element through which strikes in the textile industry have been lost. This is the first time in the history of our labor struggles that the foreigners have stood to the man to better their conditions as underpaid workers. The Textile Workers had only one permanent organization at Lawrence at the beginning of the strike (the Mule Spinners Union), while the Industrial Workers of the World had not any direct organization within the industry. Many of the unskilled workers, however, had independent unions not affiliated with any national organization. John Golden, the official head of the Textile Workers of America, instead of remaining in Lawrence and fighting for the interests of the workers, went to Boston and was reported to have denounced the strike as being led by a band of revolutionists, thus leaving them to be organized by any persons who might choose to use or help them. This was the first time in the history of the American Federation movement that a leader failed the people in his industry.

Members of the Industrial Workers of the World sent for Joe Ettor and in four days he organized a fighting unit such as never existed in New England before. At the head of it was a strikers' committee representing eighteen nationalities and composed of fifty-six members, each with an alternate trained to act in case of the disablement of his principal. This committee was organized, not to represent the Industrial Workers of the World, but to win the strike.

Nothing was so conducive to organization by the Industrial Workers of the World as the methods used by the three branches of the American Federation of Labor. These were the Lawrence Central Labor Union, the Boston Women's Trade Union League, and the Textile Workers of America. Catholics, Jews, Protestants, and unbelievers -- men and women of many races and languages -- were working together as human beings with a common cause. The American Federation of Labor alone refused to cooperate.

1. According to O'Sullivan, how and why did the American Federation of Labor fail the striking workers?
2. According to O'Sullivan, how and why did the Industrial Workers of the World help the striking workers?

Flyer distributed in Lawrence, September 1912

STRIKE

Quash The Indictment Against Ettor & Giovannitti



The Spirit of Lincoln

Fellow Workers - Citizens - Comrades

Do not let the Capitalist Editors befog the present situation for you. In the present disclosures revealing the Dynamite Planting by the Contemtable WOOD and his Gang of Hirelings, do not forget the real motive of the PLANT. Capitalist Editors say it was to discredit the strikers- that was only part of it- the bigger motive was TO GET EXCUSE TO ARREST ETTOR AND GIOVANNITTI. The Dynamite Planter was sent to plant the dynamite in Ettor's headquarters- only his unfamiliarity with the building caused it to be left on the other side of the partition in the cobbler's shop.

This was a week before Ettor and Giovannitti were arrested for murder. When one PLANT failed- the dastardly crew put up another. They started the disturbances that led to the killing of Anna LaPizzo. The whole thing is now exposed.

Innocent men have spent 8 months in jail. Demand an IMMEDIATE special session of the court and the quashing of the indictment against Ettor and Giovannitti.

And furthermore demand of Governor Foss and your state government a thoro investigation of the conduct of Judge Mahoney, Judge Brown and Dist. Attorney Attwill who are accused of "white-washing" and shielding these criminals of wealth. Demand these things- and DEMAND THEM NOW.

If Ettor and Giovannitti are not released from jail by September 30, all the workers, whether organized or unorganized ARE URGED TO STRIKE until these innocent union men are released.

Ettor-Giovannitti Defence Committee,
Central Bldg. Lawrence, Mass.

1. How does the flyer use Lincoln's words to oppose the arrest of Ettor and Giovanitti?