

**THE LAWRENCE
STRIKE
OF 1912, PP. 1- 46**

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BY
JOHN BRUCE McPHERSON

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THE LAWRENCE STRIKE OF 1912.¹

DURING the early months of 1912 one of the fiercest, most dramatic, and most widely advertised industrial conflicts ever fought in New England was waged for nine weeks in Lawrence, the great center of the country's worsted industry. For the first time, leaders of the most recent propaganda amongst labor men — syndicalism or the industrial union — appeared in the extreme East, introducing methods both novel and spectacular, which constantly focused the attention of the laboring, as well as the political, class on the conflict and the combatants.

The mills involved in the strike, with the number of their employees when running at full capacity, were the Everett, with 2,500, the Atlantic, with 1,300, and the Pemberton and Lawrence Duck, each with 500 employees, which use cotton as their sole raw material. There were also the Washington, with 6,500, the Wood, with 5,200, the Ayer, with 2,000, and the Prospect, with 500 employees — controlled by the American Woolen Company; the Arlington, with 7,900, the Pacific, with 5,200, the Kunhardt, with 1,000, and the local plant of the United States Worsted Company, with 800 employees, whose chief raw material is wool.

RAPID INCREASE OF ILLITERATE IMMIGRANTS.

Prior to 1895 the population of Lawrence, originally almost exclusively native born or Irish, was largely increased by immigration from England, Germany, and French Canada. In 1905 the city contained 70,000 people, of whom 32,000 were foreign born. Five years later the population had been

¹ In the following pages I have attempted to tell in a truthful manner the story of the great labor outbreak which convulsed Lawrence last winter, attracted widespread attention, and provoked discussions in the halls of Congress. It has not been my aim to give an interpretation of this attempt on the part of the leaders to overthrow the present industrial organization, but simply to assemble and present the facts, many of which have not, up to this time (July), appeared in print. I may add that this article was prepared with no thought of having it appear in this Bulletin. —*J. B. McP.*

increased by more than fifteen thousand, the foreign born then numbering 41,000. The full significance of this increase of nine thousand in the foreign-born population is not disclosed by the figures themselves. It lies in the fact that the inpouring hosts no longer came from Teutonic stock in the countries of northern and western Europe, but chiefly from the countries of southeastern Europe and from Asia Minor. During the half decade the Italian population more than doubled. The increase of the Polanders showed even a larger percentage, while the Lithuanians more than trebled their number.

According to the census of 1910, the population of Lawrence was made up of 600 Armenians, 700 Portuguese, 1,200 French Belgians, 2,100 Poles, 2,300 Scotch, 2,500 Hebrews, 2,700 Syrians, 3,000 Lithuanians, 6,500 Germans, 8,000 Italians, 9,000 English, 12,000 French Canadians, 12,000 Americans, and 21,000 Irish, 86 per cent of the entire population being of foreign parentage.

This polyglot population increased too rapidly for the city properly to care for and assimilate it. Lawrence, to adopt the words Professor Ripley applied to the whole country, "has had to do not with the slow process of growth by deposit and accretion, but with violent and volcanic dislocation — a lava flow of population suddenly cast forth from Europe." Thousands of the newcomers — and the majority of them have been in the country less than three years — are either unmarried or have left their families in their old homes. Chiefly rural, they are illiterate folk, who have come with no purpose to settle in the country and become American citizens. On the contrary, they are a mobile, migratory crowd, with no permanent interest in any industry, or city, or in the country itself, their chief aim being to earn the largest amount under existing conditions, live upon the basis of minimum cheapness, and save the largest possible sum from their wages, with which to return to their native shores and establish themselves either in business or as land owners.

Unable to read or to speak the English language, these

people are nevertheless great consumers of European revolutionary literature. Unacquainted with our customs; possessing ideals and views of life radically different from ours; of a highly excitable temperament; natives of countries where no representative government exists, and where revolutionary intrigue is a daily occupation, they furnished a fine field for operations by a bold, able, and commanding set of revolutionary leaders. Given a cause and leadership, and there was sure to be an explosion of no mean dimension among these heterogeneous people.

THE OUTBREAK AND THE REASON GIVEN FOR IT.

Neither cause nor leader was wanting. The ostensible reason for the outbreak was the taking effect on January 1, 1912, of the law prohibiting the employment in factories of women and children — young persons under eighteen years — more than 54 hours a week, accompanied by a reduction of earnings corresponding to the reduced working time. This bill was passed by the General Court, and approved by the Governor May 27, 1911. Suspension of work on the part of the two classes named made it unprofitable to continue to move machinery on the 56-hour schedule in the departments where adult men predominated. The enactment of this law was urged by organized labor in the State, and was opposed by manufacturers as unwise further interference with the industries of the Commonwealth, because it would be an additional handicap from which competitors in other States permitting the operation of their factories from two to four hours longer per week were entirely free. When this bill was pending in the legislature, an argument used against its passage was that it would mean smaller earnings. The labor leaders, it is claimed, admitted that such would be the result, but as they believed that effect would only be temporary, they were willing to put up with it for the short time it was expected to last.¹

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¹ See Message of Governor Foss, January 25, 1912.

SHORTER HOURS AND THEIR EFFECT UPON WAGES.

For a number of years Massachusetts had been leading the campaign for shorter hours for women and children. As early as 1892 hours were reduced from 60 to 58. In 1909, when an effort was made to clip off at one time four hours of the week's working time, a compromise bill was passed which fixed the number at 56, but two years later the goal set in the previous attempt was reached, six hours having been cut off in less than twenty years. When the hours were reduced from 60 to 58, and from 58 to 56, no corresponding loss of earnings was experienced, and presumably no such result was really expected in January.

The question of what effect this law would have upon wages was not passed by without discussion by some of the operatives. At least one organized body was keenly alive to the situation. At their convention held in Boston in May, 1911, the loom fixers passed a resolution notifying the employers that if the 54-hour bill became a law, they would demand the same pay for 54 as for 56 hours' work. In pursuance of that action, a committee representing that organization held a conference on this very subject in December with the agent of at least one of the largest mills, and in this same mill the operatives were told orally about the change and what its results would be. The English Branch of the Industrial Workers of the World appointed a committee on January 2 to interview the mill officials and ask what effect the change of hours would have upon earnings. As a rule, however, its full effect was not posted clearly on the bulletin boards. The mill managers generally complied literally with the law, which requires the posting of the hours of labor in manufacturing establishments, taking it for granted, as has been said by one employer, that employees "paid by the hour must have known what would be the result, and those paid by the piece or the yard could see it also; or, as expressed by another, "the people could not expect to take home 56-hour wages for 54 hours of work."

BEGINNING OF THE STRIKE.

Contrary to the general belief, the first cessation of work did not occur in the Washington Mill of the American Woolen Company, but in the Lawrence Duck Mill, where a strike began on the first of January, the day on which the new 54-hour law took effect. On the preceding Friday a committee representing the employees held a conference with the treasurer about the effect the new law would have upon their hours and wages. They were told that inasmuch as all the weavers were men, the company was willing to run the mills 56 hours per week, so that there should be no change either in the working hours or the earnings, but that if the time was reduced to 54 hours, the pay for the two hours' reduction would be lost. In other words, the company was not willing to pay 56 hours' wages for 54 hours' work. This was not satisfactory to the committee and a strike was called.

On January 9 a meeting of the employees of the Duck Mill was addressed by Joseph Bedard, afterwards secretary of the Strike Committee, and sixty-eight persons filed applications for membership in the Industrial Workers of the World. The following night a mass meeting of almost all the Italian workers of the city was held to discuss the new law and to hear reports of committees which had been appointed to interview their respective mill agents. At this meeting, the chairman of which was Angeline Rocco, the 27-year old high school student and secretary of the Italian branch of the Industrial Workers of the World, it was decided that all Italians of all the mills should strike Friday evening. They declared that wages received owing to the 54-hour law were insufficient to live on, and they "wanted" pay kept at the amount which they received under the old law. This attitude indicating the temper of the operatives was emphasized by the action, on Thursday afternoon, January 11, of the Polish weavers (chiefly women) in the Everett Mill. When their wages were paid they protested against the smaller amount received, quit their looms, and

after a demonstration to influence other employees they retired from the mill, which was shut down on Saturday and remained closed until the strike was declared off.

To take any action, the result of which would be to lessen the earnings of the unskilled workers at a time when the cost of the necessaries of life was abnormally high, without discussing the question with the wage-earners, was impolitic and cost the companies dear.

DEPRESSION IN THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY.

It is true that the whole textile industry had just experienced several very unprofitable years. As the president of the National Association of Cotton Manufacturers said in his address at the April, 1912, meeting: "Few mills earned dividends; most mills which paid dividends took them from surplus accumulations of other years, and many were compelled to pass dividends entirely." A prominent cotton manufacturer of Rhode Island is on record as saying: "The year 1911 was one of almost unparalleled depression in the cotton industry in this country. Widespread curtailment and abnormally low selling prices were made to keep as much machinery as possible going. It is said that in one large center in Massachusetts the cotton manufacturing operations resulted in a loss exceeding two million dollars."

The depression under which the industries staggered was likewise hard on the employees, not because the rate of wages had been reduced but because extensive curtailment had been the rule, and this lack of employment caused the wages earned in normal years greatly to shrink during 1911. The lack of business, which was so damaging to mills and workers, has been attributed by at least one prominent treasurer to tariff agitation, to the fluctuating cost of raw materials, and to the popularity of narrow skirts, which lessened by half the cloth required for women's dresses and greatly diminished the requirements of the trade.

Notwithstanding a number of lean years in the last decade great expansion of mills occurred in Lawrence. Many thou-