5 – The Strike for Bread and Loaves

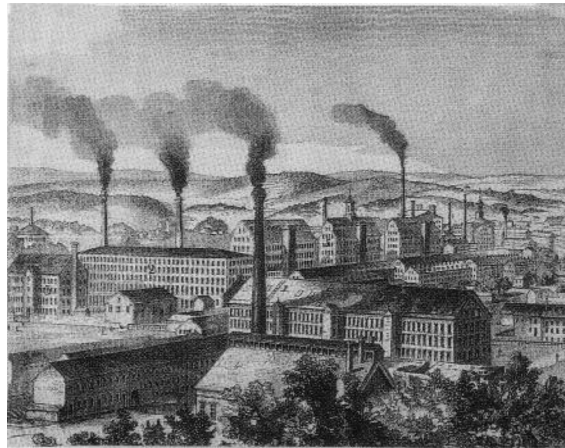
By Maria Fleming

1912: immigrant laborers join forces to demand fair wages in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

In the booming economy of the early 20th century, American industries needed cheap labor to keep factories humming and profits growing. They looked to newly arrived immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe as one source of this labor. Immigrants from Italy, Poland and other parts of Europe had left behind depressed conditions in the "old country." They said they came to America "for bread" - pane to the Italians, chleb *to the Poles.*

But life in the United States was full of its own hardships. Some factory owners exploited the newcomers, paying them the lowest wages for the hardest jobs. On a bitter cold day in 1912, immigrant laborers in New England's textile mills joined forces to demand fair pay for a day's work. They waged a two-month struggle for economic justice that drew the attention of the nation and became one of the most celebrated stories in labor history.

January 12, 1912, began like every other day for 14-year-old Carmella Teoli. The sleep-shattering screech of the factory whistle roused her from bed at dawn. The whistle regulated life in the textile city of Lawrence, Mass., telling laborers when to wake up, when to begin work and when to return home. Carmella dressed hurriedly and ate a meager breakfast of bread and molasses. When the whistle blew again, Carmella and her father shuffled to the hulking textile mills where they worked.



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Since the early 1800s, many textile cities had sprouted up in New England's green valleys. But Lawrence reigned as queen of the milltowns. Almost a dozen textile factories lined its riverbanks, with more than 40,000 people laboring
in the mills. Most of the workers, including Carmella Teoli and her father, were recent immigrants from Europe. Wood Mill, where Carmella worked, was the largest worsted wool mill in the world. More than a third of a mile long, with 30 acres of floor space, Wood Mill alone employed 10,000 workers.

Carmella had left school in the 6th grade, when she was 12, to work in the mills. Her family needed the $6.55 she could earn each week to help support Carmella and her four brothers

and sisters. Laws prohibited children younger than 14 from working in factories. But poor families and mill owners often found ways around these laws.

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The Teoli family had emigrated from Italy to America when Carmella was 3 years old. Italian immigrants were not the only ones who came to New England seeking jobs. Poles, Turks, Russians, Greeks, Syrians, Portuguese, Lithuanians and dozens of other nationalities flocked to Lawrence to work in the mills.

Immigrants like the Teolis were sometimes drawn to New England by advertisements placed by American mill owners in their native towns. One poster prominently displayed in an Italian village depicted a happy family, laden with bags of gold, marching into Lawrence's Wood Mill. "No one goes hungry in Lawrence. Here all can work, all can eat," the poster read.

The reality of life in Lawrence was a far cry from the pretty picture on the poster, however. The average 16 cents an hour that workers earned barely kept a family in bread, let alone gold. Meat, butter and milk were all luxuries. Workers couldn't afford the fine wool fabric they spent their days making; they dressed instead in thin, worn clothing.

Many of the immigrants lived crammed together in a slum called "the Plains." The mill operators owned many of the tenements the immigrants lived in and charged high rents. Some families took boarders in their already crowded apartments to help meet expenses. Usually, every room had at least one bed, including the kitchen.

Garbage-lined streets, rats and other unsanitary conditions in the Plains left its residents prone to diseases such as typhoid and cholera. "The mortality in the crowded tenement districts, especially in the summer ... reads like battle statistics," reported the *Lawrence Evening Tribune*.

Each morning, workers left the dismal tenements for the dismal mills. The cavernous factory rooms were alive with noise and motion - clicking spindles,; whirling bobbins, thundering looms - all turning cotton and wool into yarn and yarn into cloth. The steady roar of the machines was deafening.

Carmella Teoli worked as a doffer. Doffers scrambled over the huge machinery, replacing bobbins full of newly spun thread with empty ones. Many other children worked in the mills, too. Some worked as burlers, cutting knots out of cloth. Others were sweepers, clearing away lint and wool that covered the floor like drifts of snow.

Mill jobs required sharp eyes and quick fingers. If Carmella found a break in the thread, she had to fix it fast by tying the ends together. But workers had to be careful. Sometimes fingers got

caught in the machinery and snapped like the threads. Machines also mangled arms and legs - or worse.

One day, Carmella's long hair got tangled in some gears of a machine and a patch of her scalp was ripped from her head. Co workers wrapped the skin in newspaper and rushed Carmella to the hospital. After her wound healed, Carmella wore her hair in a bun to hide the 6-inch scar the accident had left.

Millwork was also known for its hidden dangers. The humid, lint-choked air wasn't safe to breathe. Many people contracted pneumonia, tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases. The death rate for millworkers was so high that a third of young millworkers never made it to their 25th birthday.For their efforts, the average laborers earned poverty wages - about $8.75 a week, barely enough to cover rent and food.

Perhaps the worst part of millwork was the grinding tedium - endless hours of the same dreary work, day after day. But for Carmella and other workers, this particular snowy Friday at the Wood Mill felt different. There was an undercurrent of tension and excitement in the air. People had heard rumors that owners were cutting wages, and, if they did, workers planned to protest.

A new law was at the root of the trouble. Beginning January 1, the state had ordered mill owners to reduce the work week from 56 to 54 hours. In the past, when hours had been cut, managers also slashed wages. They made up for lost time with "speed-ups" and "stretch-outs"; employees had to tend a larger number of machines operating at a faster rate, making the labor even more exhausting. So laborers simply ended up doing the same or more work for less money.

But today, January 12, was the first payday at Wood Mill since the law had gone into effect. The previous day, at the Everett Mill, a group of Polish women stormed off the job when they found a shortage in their pay envelopes. Now there were murmurings that if the other mills cut wages, too, there would be a mass strike in all the factories.

When the paymaster blew his whistle, Carmella and the other employees gathered anxiously around to collect their wages. They tore their envelopes open. Suddenly the mill erupted with shouts of "Short pay! Strike! All out!" Someone pulled a switch halting the bobbins in their spinning frames. Workers ran through the factory cutting belts on the machines, smashing gears and hurling bobbins and shuttles. Carmella Teoli joined the growing crowd of workers as they swarmed out of the mill, still shouting, "Strike! Short pay! Strike!"

The strike soon spread to the nearby Washington Mill, where Carmella's father worked. Soon, several thousand more laborers spilled onto the streets. Angry workers from the Washington and Wood mills then marched to the Ayer Mill where they broke through the gates and called on others to join the walkout. By noon on Friday, the strike swelled to 11,000 mill-workers.

The deduction from the workers' pay envelopes amounted to about 32 cents, roughly the cost of three loaves of bread. But for these immigrants eking out a living, it was a significant sum. What some workers came to call "the struggle for the three loaves" had begun.

That night, Angelo Rocco, a high school student and weaver for the American Woolen Company, sent a telegram to the New York headquarters of the Industrial Workers of the World,

a radical labor union. Rocco, an Italian immigrant, asked for the I.W.W.'s help in sustaining the strike till laborers' demands were met.

The I.W.W., known as the Wobblies, was a controversial group. Its mission was to unite working people everywhere in an effort to eliminate what its members called a system of "slave wages." They thought that the laborers who produced the world's goods should control the factories and reap the profits of industry.

While other unions such as the American Federation of Labor often discriminated against unskilled laborers from Asia and southeastern Europe, the Wobblies sought to bring together all workers. The Wobblies meant different things to different people: To some, they were a group of dangerous anarchists trying to wage a class war; to others, they were champions of justice and the one true friend of laborers.

Wobbly activist Joe Ettor, a fiery speaker who had organized strikes in shipyards, lumber mills and coal mines across the country, responded to the call for help. He arrived in Lawrence that weekend and immediately started organizing protesters.

Ettor knew that factory owners often used ethnic tensions to divide workers, paying some immigrant groups lower wages than others and threatening to replace workers of one nationality with workers of another. Mill executives hoped that creating such rivalries would prevent workers from forming unions.

To build unity among the 45 different ethnic groups the strikers represented, Ettor cautioned workers to "forget that you are Hebrews, forget that you are Poles, Germans, or Russians." Ettor formed a strike committee that included representatives from the different cultural groups. The committee presented its demands to the mill owners: a 15 percent increase in pay, overtime pay and a promise that no strikers would suffer penalties when they returned to work.

As some of the strikers engaged Wobbly support, city officials in Lawrence called for military backup. Hundreds of state police and militia, armed with bayonets, streamed into Lawrence to help control the crowds. News of the strike made front page headlines around the country as people waited to see what would happen in Lawrence.

Mill owners predicted that most of the belligerent workers would settle down and return to their factory posts after the weekend. But they were wrong. On Monday, January 15, in the midst of a snowstorm, 8,000 picketing strikers swirled around the Washington and Wood mills in an effort to prevent others from returning to work. Protesters were ruthless toward scabs, workers who refused to join the strike. They spat at the scabs, doused them with scalding water, dumped pails of garbage on them, tore off their coats, grabbed their lunch pails - anything to keep people from breaking the picket lines.

The crowd surged to 15,000 women, men and children. Protesters marched to the Prospect Mill, then on to the Atlantic and the Pacific mills, with plans to storm the gates and shut the mills down. Police and militia turned them back with bayonets and fire hoses. Strikers threw stones, coal and chunks of ice at law enforcers and mill windows. The rioting continued throughout the week. "Real Labor War Now in Lawrence," The New York Times declared.

City leaders denounced this rebellion by "ignorant foreigners." In a meeting with one of the strike leaders, Lawrence Mayor Michael A. Scanlon fumed, "I want you to understand that a crowd of bandits is not going to run this city. I will keep order here if I have to call on the whole Federal Army, and believe me when I tell you that if today's riots are repeated tomorrow, there will be an awful slaughter."

But the city's efforts to thwart the protesters merely spurred them on. "They will need five million militiamen to keep track of our pickets," organizer Joe Ettor challenged. He accused officials of tricking people into returning to work by announcing that the strike had ended. Even if they succeeded in thinning strikers' ranks, Ettor said, the mill owners would still pay a price. "We will cripple their machinery," he threatened. "God pity their looms. God pity their cloth."

By the middle of January, 25,000 workers from 11 mills were on strike - more than half of them women and children. Strikers formed human chains around the mills. They organized huge parades. Marchers carried banners reading "We Strike for Justice." Immigrants dressed their children in red, white and blue and waved U.S. flags, along with the flags of their homelands, to link their struggle with the ideals of their adopted country. The protesters shouted, sang anthems, clanged tin pans, blared horns and rang cow bells as they wound their way through the streets, calling to bystanders to join them.

Police and militia held back the Lawrence strikers at gunpoint.

A Wobbly writer described the power of the demonstrations: "It is the first strike I ever saw which sang. They are always marching and singing. The tired, gray crowds ebbing and flowing perpetually into the mills had waked and opened their mouths to sing. I shall not soon forget the curious lift, the strange sudden fire of the mingled nationalities at the strike meetings when they broke into the universal language of song."

The strike dragged on through the winter. On February 10, a violent conflict erupted between authorities and some of the protesters. Police were accused of assaulting women and children. Newspaper accounts of the bloody encounter prompted a public outcry, and Congress called for an investigation.

Some of the millworkers - 16 children and a handful of adults - traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify before a legislative committee about the incident. "I saw policemen clubbing women on their hearts and breasts; women being in the family way were arrested and dragged and pushed into the patrol wagon," one strike organizer reported. "I saw them take little children and pick them up by the leg and throw them in the patrol wagon like they were rags."

Children described the terrible working conditions in the mill. They also testified about how they lost an hour's wages if they were five minutes late for work, how they paid 10 cents every two weeks for drinking water, and how they cleaned the factories on Saturday mornings without pay.

Fourteen-year-old Carmella Teoli delivered the most dramatic testimony of the proceedings. In stark words, she described to a stunned group of legislators and onlookers how the mill machinery had scalped her. She told of the seven months she spent in the hospital while her butchered head healed. She talked of the fluctuating wages her father brought home and of her family's dependence on her earnings. When asked why she had joined the strike in Lawrence, Carmella said simply, "Because I didn't get enough to eat at home."

The testimonies prompted President William Howard Taft to launch a national investigation into factory working conditions. Newspapers around the U.S. reported the children's testimony. A few days later, on March 12, the Lawrence mill owners - humiliated by the negative publicity and worn down by the financial strain of their factories' gutted workforce - gave in to the strikers' demands.

A victory parade through the streets of Lawrence marked the end of the laborers' nine-week struggle. The strikers' success rippled out to other communities as well, with factory owners throughout New England announcing pay raises for workers. Labor experts estimate that more than 250,000 workers benefited from the Lawrence protest.

Angelo Rocco, who played an active role in the 1912 strike, would later recall how he and other rebelling workers were described by newspaper reporters and city officials during the demonstrations. "[They] always called me un-American, an immigrant or an alien," Rocco said. "Of course, I felt myself to be much more American than they were. They thought it was American to believe in exploitation. I thought it was American to believe in the Constitution."

In the end, the workers who rose up to march and sing and struggle in the name of justice during the bitter winter of 1912 averaged less than a dollar increase in their weekly wages. But the battle of Lawrence was about human dignity and the value of work. The Lawrence millworkers were poor immigrants who, having clothed their adopted nation through endless hours of grueling labor, voiced their ardent wish to become part of the fabric of America. They sought for themselves and their families their rightful place at the table, as well as the right to put on that table pane - *chleb* - bread.

This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit
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