

Bread and Roses: Garment and Textile Worker Organizing, Then and Now



1912

*“Yes, it is bread we fight for —
but we fight for roses, too!”*

New England's Textile Mills

Working conditions were dismal in the U.S. textile industry in 1912. Workers toiled long hours for wages that made it nearly impossible to lift their families out of poverty. The work was dangerous and the average pay was a mere \$8.76 a week. Workers' weekly rent cost up to \$6.00 and living conditions were crowded and unhealthy. Half of the workers employed by the largest miller in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the American Woolen Company, were girls between the ages of 14 and 18.

Strike for Bread and Roses

In 1912, a new Massachusetts state law went into effect reducing the work week of women and children from 56 to 54 hours. On January 12, after the first paychecks of the year revealed a cut in pay — enough for several loaves of bread — thousands of workers shut down their looms and walked out of the mills. By the end of the week, more than 20,000 workers had joined the historic confrontation.

The Bread and Roses Strike of 1912, as it later became known, broke new ground in several ways. More than half of the workers in the textile mills were women and children, and women played a major role in the strike. Most of the workers were unskilled newcomers from southern and eastern Europe and the Middle East. The strikers built solidarity across ethnic lines and organized multilingual meetings. The union raised funds and organized relief committees, soup kitchens, and food distribution stations, while volunteer doctors provided medical care. Large groups went in and out of stores, not buying anything but effectively disrupting business. Huge marches were organized, with strikers singing songs, chanting, and carrying banners. Management and city officials responded to the strikers' growing solidarity with force. The state militia broke up actions and soldiers sprayed protesters with fire hoses.

The tactic of sending hundreds of children to live with supporters in other cities reduced maintenance costs of

the strikers and generated public sympathy and financial support. The exodus of the children was a public relations disaster for the Lawrence authorities, and they tried to prevent a group of children from leaving the city. On February 24, a group of defiant strikers accompanied their children to the railroad station. Police surrounded and brutally clubbed women and children alike, then threw them into patrol wagons. The press reported on the ugly scene, and people all around the country were outraged. A congressional investigation began.



By March, the hearings had caused so much negative publicity that the American Woolen Company decided to settle. On March 12, 1912, management agreed to the strikers' demands for a 15% pay raise, double pay for overtime, and no discrimination against workers for their strike activity. Other textile companies throughout New England, anxious to avoid a similar confrontation, followed suit.

The Bread and Roses Strike drew attention to the problems of child labor, workplace safety, and the unequal distribution of wealth and income. It was an important step in organized labor's long struggle to gain benefits that many of us take for granted today.

Sources:

<http://www.breadandrosescentennial.org>

<http://massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=16>

Bread and Roses

As we come marching, marching in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: "Bread and roses! Bread and roses!"
As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!
As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient cry for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for — but we fight for roses, too!
As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days.
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler — ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

—James Oppenheim, 1911

Sweatshops, Today's Apparel Industry Norm

While the production of textiles has become increasingly automated, the sewing of garments remains nearly as labor-intensive as one hundred years ago. Most of the production now takes place in countries all across the globe where labor costs are low and regulations weak. Today's working conditions in the global garment industry are eerily similar to the conditions of a century ago.

Today women comprise 70 to 90 percent of the labor force in the global garment industry. While increased access to employment has provided new opportunities for poor women, the jobs they occupy are unregulated and unstable. Sexual harassment in the workplace and workplace-related sexual violence is widespread. With minimum wages paid that typically are half to one third of the living wage, most garment workers can hardly provide for the daily bread for their families. Production quotas are high and hard to meet; workers who don't reach the target are often forced to do overtime without additional pay. When workers stand up for their rights and seek to organize to form a union, all too often they are fired. Today garment workers are still far from gaining the most basic dignity and respect.

Organizing for Change

Garment workers around the world are organizing in large numbers to demand higher wages and better, safer working conditions. Even though freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are part of the four core labor standards recognized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, these rights are frequently violated. Here are ten ways that companies and governments seek to stop workers from organizing:

1) Hiring paramilitary groups or colluding with local police or military forces to perform violent acts of intimidation against union leaders, activists and their families. These acts include assassinations, death threats, false arrests and physical and verbal harassment. According to the International Trade Union Confederation's Annual Survey, 90 unionists were killed worldwide in 2010.

2) Contracting workers out to temporary employment agencies, labor "cooperatives," or moving them to short-term contracts to disable them from joining unions and bargaining collectively.

3) Firing workers who are organizing or workers who are already union members. In countries where it is illegal to fire workers without "just cause," firings are often under the guise of "layoffs."

4) Blacklisting workers who were fired for organizing throughout a particular region or industry, sending an even stronger message that employers will not allow workers to form organizations of their choice.

5) Benefiting from Export Processing Zones (EPZs) which are often exempt from laws establishing freedom of association, the right to bargain collectively and other labor laws. It is almost always illegal to strike in EPZs, so when workers protest the conditions they can be arrested or subjected to violence.

6) Factory closings, reorganizations and relocations that are specifically designed to eliminate union presence or send a message that "unions force factories to close." The same facility often reopens with new non-union employees miles away.

7) Replacing independent unions with company-dominated unions or company-run committees comprised of workers chosen by management.

8) Interfering in the union registration or collective bargaining process and manipulating workers into revoking their union memberships. Interference in the union process often occurs at the government labor department level. It is also common for companies to refuse to bargain a contract with workers for years on end, even if their union is legally registered. This frustrates workers and weakens the union.

9) Exploiting migrants and children and recruiting them to replace union workers or serve as "strikebreakers." Migrants are sometimes legally barred from unionizing and employers often threaten to deport migrant workers who try to organize. Children are also illegally employed as another tactic to undermine adult union organizing efforts.

10) Criminalizing labor activists through defamation charges, false arrests, arrests of striking or protesting workers or illegal detentions.

Finding Solutions to Today's Sweatshops: what YOU can do

- Learn more and take action: laborrights.org
- Ask groups you're part of to buy union-made living-wage clothing: sweatfree.org/shopping
- Urge your city or state to stop buying public employee uniforms made in sweatshops: sweatfree.org, buysweatfree.org



A Network for Local Action Against Sweatshops
a campaign of International Labor Rights Forum 

