

The Trouble at Lawrence

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A few weeks ago a company of about forty children of the Lawrence strikers, bound for Philadelphia, were forcibly prevented from leaving Lawrence by the order of City Marshal John J. Sullivan. He was led to this act by the belief that some of these children were leaving town without the consent of their parents. Before this several groups of children, to the total of nearly three hundred, had been sent out of town to the strike sympathizers in various cities, and public opinion against the departure of the children had been aroused. As Congressman Ames said: "The people here feel that the sending away of these children has hurt the fair name of Lawrence, since it is a rich town and capable of caring for all its needy children without the help of outsiders."

The forcible detention of these children had an extraordinary response throughout the country. It was one of those things that cannot be done in America without stirring up public opinion from north to south and east to west. There had been earlier aggressive moves on the part of the authorities: Joseph J. Ettor, one of the first to take charge of the strike on behalf of the Industrial Workers of the World, and Arturo Giovannitti, his chief lieutenant, were arrested and committed to jail without bail, as accessories to the murder of a woman, shot by a deflected bullet during a clash between the strikers and the police. Both men were two miles away during the conflict. Their imprisonment caused comment in the press, as did other episodes of the strike — for instance, the railroading of twenty-three men to prison for one year each, during a single morning's police-court session, on the charge of inciting to riot; but in the minds of the country at large these things have been simply incidents. The abridgment of the right of people to move from one place to another freely was at once a matter of national importance. It had for its immediate sequel the sending of that touching little band of thirteen children of various nationalities to Washington to state their grievances and to testify as to what occurred at the railway station on that Saturday morning.

This was the culminating incident in a strike which has been an extraordinary one throughout, and which, throughout, has been diversified with incidents of an unusual kind.

It is an eloquent little commentary on the wage scale of Lawrence that the passing of the beneficent fifty-four-hour bill should have been the indirect cause of the strike. This bill limited the work of women and children in Massachusetts to that number of hours a week, and the mills of Lawrence could not run fifty-six hours for their men alone. Therefore they cut the hours to fifty-four, as the law demanded, and, at the same time, cut the pay by 3.57 per cent. It is also claimed that the mills speeded up the work. January 13th was the last pay-day before the strike, and a few days later the mills were no longer making cloth.

In the present-day labor situation, as every one knows, strikes are prearranged, and, on a certain given day, the people walk out; but the strike of the textile workers in Lawrence was the spontaneous expression of discontent of a people whose scant wages, averaging between \$5 and \$6 a week, were cut below the living point. They went out, over 25,000 of them, of all crafts, without organization and without strike funds. They had no leaders and they themselves were composed of all the peoples of the earth, and were of warring nations and warring creeds. In this extraordinary fashion did the strike begin.

At the time the mill-hands went out, the American Federation of Labor had a membership, according to John P. Golden, president of the Textile Union of New England, of approximately 250, and the Industrial Workers of the World a membership of about 280. The American Federation of Labor has not recognized the strike. Apparently this organization was annoyed that the strikers had not played according to the rules of Hoyle laid down by their organization. It was not their strike, neither was it the strike of the Industrial Workers of the World. The strike was merely the indignant expression of people who considered that their wages had been cut below the living point.

The I.W.W. took immediate steps to bring some order out of the chaos in which the workers were plunged.

William D. Haywood, Ettor, and Giovannitti began to organize all of the textile workers into one great industrial union. They enrolled the majority of the 25,000 strikers, men, women, and children, in the I.W.W. They formulated demands for a flat increase in wages of 15 per cent., a fifty-four-hour week, double time for overtime, the abolition of the premium, or speeding-up system, and no discrimination against those who were on strike. Arrayed against the strikers, along with the mill-owners, the militia, and the police, were the officials of the Textile Union of New England and the Central Labor Union of Lawrence. The American Federation of Labor at Washington was also hostile, seeing in the ideal of labor solidarity that was being preached at Lawrence an attack on craft unionism. But it was a message which appealed strongly to the diverse mass of men and women who made up the strikers, and it held them. After Ettor's arrest the task of welding the alien groups into one fell upon the shoulders of Haywood, and the release of Ettor and Giovannitti was added to the demands.

As a contrast to the action against Ettor it is interesting to cite this incident: John Ramay, a young Syrian of nineteen, went out on the morning of the 29th of January at six o'clock. He joined a crowd of strikers which the militia moved along. He was at the back of the crowd. At fifteen minutes past six he was brought into his mother's house with a bayonet wound in the back, and he died at seven that night. The name of the militiaman who killed Ramay is unknown, nor has any action been taken against him. He was not held for murder nor complicity of murder, as it was decided that he was within his rights.

Lawrence is in atmosphere a New England city. It has about 88,000 inhabitants, of which 60,000 are mill-workers and their families. Thirty thousand of these people work in the mills, and it is said that over thirty-three dialects are spoken in this New England town and that of full American stock there are not more than 8,000 while 45,000 alone are of English-speaking nations.

The town sits in a basin surrounded by hills. Along one side of it runs the Merrimack River, wide and shining. If you approach Lawrence from South Lawrence, you must pass through acre after acre of mill buildings and mill yards until you reach the wide water-way whose sides are factory-bordered, whose surface mirrors the monotonous pale-red brick of factory wall and factory chimney.

If you walk down Essex Street, the principal business street, and glance to your right and then to your left, you will receive an impression of always seeing at the end of the street on the one hand a little church steeple spiring upward and on the other an imposing mill chimney. The ever-recurring little church steeples of Lawrence give one the impression of the children of a dying race; the big smoke-stacks are the young giants of a new, red-blooded generation.

From one end to the other of Lawrence run the mills, most of them situated on a piece of made land between the Merrimack and the canal. The mills *are* Lawrence; you cannot escape them; the smoke of them fills the sky. The great mills of Lawrence make the Lawrence sky-line, they dominate and dwarf the churches. From Union Street to Broadway along the canal the mills stretch, a solid wall of brick and wide-paned glass, imposing by their vastness and almost beautiful, as anything is that without pretense is adapted absolutely to its own end. The mills seem like some strange fortress of industry, connected as they are by a series of bridges and separated by a canal from the town.

In the Syrian quarter, beautiful, long-eyed Syrian women, their hair down their backs, sat Oriental fashion on meager cushions on the floor nursing pale babies in rooms where it was almost dark, although outside the day was bright and clear and snow sparkled on the ground. A typical family of this sort is that of a certain woman in an alley tenement off Oak Street. There were six in the family, which lived in three rooms. The halls were dirty and full of ashes and unremoved garbage. The family [was] supported by the work of children — a boy of sixteen and one-half years and a girl of seventeen, who earned between them \$12.50 a week. The rent was \$10 a month. It was this girl who cried, in the tone of one who would say — “Oh, that one would give me to drink of the water that flows!”: “Oh, that only we had never come away from Damascus!” And one had a picture of these people who were so beautiful to look on in their own home, the sun at least about them. As a Syrian said apropos of the killing of Ramay, when Haywood cautioned his compatriots to moderation and patience: “If we have not much law in our country, at least we have satisfaction!”

It is in homes like these that one would find the posters of the Wood mills, representing long lines of the mills on the one hand and a happy band of workers, with their full dinner-pails, proceeding to work on the

other. These posters and the representations of agents caused many workers to come to this country.

It is only by chance that I have mentioned the Syrians; their case is of course that of all the other workers.

The Jewish strike delegate, an impressive man with a worn face, said he had a wife and eight children who were all too young to work in the mills. When he was asked how much he averaged he replied, "I'm ashamed to tell you." They paid \$2.25 a week for their tenement, and when he was asked if he took lodgers he replied in a matter-of-fact tone, "Why, of course, how else could I live?" Five of his children were among those who were being taken care of in New York and other cities.

The different nationalities keep together and have their own meeting-places, from the substantial brick Turn Verein building of the Germans to the tiny Lithuanian church.

There are quarters of the town where you may not hear a word of English spoken. I have been in Italian towns where I have heard more American-English spoken on the streets by returned emigrants than I did in the narrow streets and alleys and Valley Street. The picture-show notices were in Italian; goats' cheese and salami hung up in the windows; women with shawls on their heads went in to buy meager stores of their day's marketing, and windows of the stores held colored posters which represented the glorious victories of the Italians over the Turks.

This is the town, so New England in setting and surroundings, so mixed in its nationalities — this town whose great mills are the latest expression of our tremendous industrial development — a development which has created a situation which no one as yet fully understands in all its complexity, with which our State government cannot cope, and which has caught in its tangled web the people who are the very creators of the situation itself.

The strike of Lawrence involves the questions of emigration and of the tariff, of the ability of a State with a fifty-four-hour law to compete with a State whose workers have two extra working hours; the effect on the country at large of a working community which habitually lives under conditions which do not make for healthy children.

Lawrence is a small town; there are 20,000 people there who, whatever else happens, can never again have the race hatreds and creed prejudices that they did before they had learned what working together may mean. They have learned, too, the value of organization and their one executive ability has been developed, for they have had to feed a great company of people and administer the use of the strike funds. Young girls have had executive positions. Men and women who have known nothing but work in the home and mill have developed a larger social consciousness. A strike like this makes people think. Almost every day for weeks people of every one of these nations have gone to their crowded meetings and listened to the speakers and have discussed these questions afterward, and in the morning the women have resumed their duty on the picket lines and the working together for what they believed was the common good.

Additional Information

Taken from [HathiTrust](#).

Also see "[Syndicalist Tendencies in the American Labor Movement](#)" by Max Baginski for additional contemporary commentary on the strike.