

The Realities of Life and Labor: The Lawrence Textile Strike

Essential questions: How did immigrant workers from different backgrounds connect in Lawrence, Massachusetts?

Homework/prior knowledge: Students should read chapter 21 in Joy Hakim’s *History of US* vol 8: *An Age of Extremes*, pp. 118 –123, an equivalent handout on the strike, or the Document A Introduction.

Vocabulary: Labor Union
Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.); Wobblies
Strike

Lessons:

Introductory Activity:

Read aloud the relevant passages from E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, chapter 16.

Pause to ask questions:

- What do you notice?
- What is going on?
- What pictures are forming in your mind?

If you feel like the class will not pay attention to you reading aloud, you may want to project the images found here: <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/unions/lawrence-strike/images/>.

After you have finished reading, discuss the scenario with the students.

Reviewing the homework:

- Who were the workers of Lawrence? Where were they from? How did they work?
- Why did the workers in Lawrence go on strike? What were their goals?
- What union helped them organize?
- What was the result of the strike?

Tell the students that during the next two class periods they will be learning a lot about the Lawrence textile strike.

Part 1: Who were the workers of Lawrence?

Documents:

- A. Introduction to the Lawrence Textile Workers Strike, 1912
- B. Paragraph excerpt from Strikers’ proclamation: “All the nations of the world are represented in this fight off the workers for bread.”
- C. “From the Battlefield,” *Il Proletario*, 22 March 1912, pp. 1-2.
- D. “Composition and Characteristics of the Population for Wards of Cities of 50,000 or More: Lawrence (Table)”

These are good documents to go through with the students because they are short and to the point. Show each document on a projector. Ask the students to do what historians do: they have a question or a series of questions, and they are looking at a primary source for the answer to that question.

Conclude by asking them how you would organize such a diverse group.

Closing questions:

How were the workers of Lawrence diverse?

What did they have in common?

Part 2: What did the strikers of Lawrence face in their fight for justice?

Documents: Photographs from the strike.

Examine the picture of the strikers vs. the bayonets. What is going on in the picture?

This is an excellent picture for a point-of-view writing exercise. Have the students write a story from within the scene from one of the participants' points of view. Have them share their story.

In your discussion, have the students share their literary interpretations of the picture.

Then move the discussion towards analysis:

- What advantage does the militia have? What advantage do the strikers have? Why are the strikers carrying American flags?
- Write the quotation from union organizer Joe Ettor on the board: "They cannot weave cloth with bayonets." What does he mean by that?

Independent work / document practice:

Analyze the other photographs and have the students write accounts from the participants' points of view.

Conclude by sharing your work in groups

Extend by creating a classroom exhibit of the Lawrence strike.

Put the students in groups. Have them revise their stories and mount them with the photograph on construction paper. Have the group write their own factual caption of the picture: essentially, who, what, where, when, why and how.

Part 3: What does the Lawrence strike say about labor conditions in America in 1912?

Document:

- E. To President William M. Wood From the Strike Committee and Arlington Mills, Lawrence, Mass. List Of Grievances.
- F. Camella Teoli Testifies about the 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike
- G. Photos of Lawrence Strike

Activity: Give the students roles to play to write about the strike:

- Striking worker
- Newspaper reporter
- Government inspector.
- Mill Owner

Have each student make a report about why the strike is happening. Have each student list three specific facts behind the worker's strike.

Use document analysis worksheets from the National Archives, These will help students organize their analysis of the documents and place them into historical context.

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/document.html>

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo.html>

Conclude by having the students share their reports. During the time of sharing, the rest of the class will play the part of government committee appointed to investigate conditions at the factories in Lawrence.

Extend by discussing child labor today. Ask the students to figure out where their clothing is made, and then take them to the website <http://www.nlcnet.org/>
For students in New York metropolitan area, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum <http://www.tenement.org/index.htm> has an exhibit on the garment industry which makes excellent connections between the Lower East Side at the turn of the century and the global sweatshops of today. Ask students what they think “we” can do to improve labor conditions in factories around the world.

Extensions from New York Times:

David Barboza, “In Chinese Factories, Lost Fingers and Low Pay,” *New York Times* January 5, 2008 available online at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/05/business/worldbusiness/05sweatshop.html>

Document A

Introduction to the Lawrence Textile Workers Strike, 1912

Lawrence, Massachusetts, the center of the textile industry in the United States, was home to the American Woolen Company's four giant mills. The textile industry employed nearly 60,000 of the town's approximately 85,000 residents, many of whom had recently immigrated from southern and eastern Europe. The Industrial Revolution had created a shift in the work force of textile mills from skilled to mostly unskilled labor. Skilled textile jobs in Lawrence went mostly to the native born or workers of English, German, and Irish descent, who were likely to be affiliated with the conservative **American Federation of Labor's** craft unions. These workers were being replaced by large numbers of unskilled, immigrant laborers from Italy, French-Canada, Portugal, and Poland, who earned wages of less than \$9 per week.

Labor conditions in the mill were harsh. Half of the 40,000 workers in the American Woolen Company's four Lawrence mills were girls between the ages of 14 and 18. Workers paid high rents to live in small rooms in tenement houses; their pay provided a diet of bread, beans, and molasses. Factories were extremely hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Many workers died before the age of 40. The introduction of the two-loom system in the textile factories increased the pace of work and enabled the companies to reduce staff and impose pay cuts. Machinery that was already dangerous to operate became even more so given the increased speed of production. In an effort to **ameliorate** the lives of workers by reducing the number of hours exposed to such harsh working conditions, the Massachusetts state legislature approved legislation reducing the workweek from 56 to 54 hours beginning in 1912. A consequence of this "labor improvement" however was a reduction in wages by 22 cents per week, as the American Woolen Company refused to maintain the same pay for working two fewer hours per week. This pay cut cost workers the equivalent of three loaves of bread.

On January 12, 1912, Polish immigrant women closed their looms and took to the streets in protest against the pay cut. They were soon joined by men and women, both teens and adults, speaking more than a dozen languages. The AFL denounced the strike as revolutionary and **anarchistic** and its impact looked to be weak. However, the radical Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), whose aim was to unite all workers in one big union, sent in union organizer, Joseph Ettor, who helped provide food and clothing to strikers and their families. Large numbers of workers marched and carried banners declaring, "We want bread and roses too." They demanded respect as workers and a decent wage to feed their families. During a confrontation between strikers and the police and state militia, two protesters were killed. In response, children of striking workers were sent by train to other cities to be safely taken care of by families sympathetic to the strike. Public opinion toward the strike turned in favor of the workers when police attacked and arrested departing children and their mothers. Newspaper accounts of the attacks compelled President William Howard Taft to order a congressional investigation into industrial conditions in Lawrence and elsewhere in the country. In March, the American Woolen Company capitulated to the union's demands, granting a 15% pay raise, double pay for overtime, and amnesty for strikers. Soon afterward, other textile companies in Lawrence and New England complied with these terms.

Document B

Excerpt from "Proclamation of the Striking Textile Workers of Lawrence," Charles P. Neill, ed., *Report on the Strike of Textile Workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912*, 62nd Congress, 2nd Session, Senate Document 870 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912), pp. 503-04.

<http://www.alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/wasmrestricted/law/doc1.htm>

“All the nations of the world are represented in this fight of the workers for more bread. The flaxen-haired son of the North marches side by side with his dark-haired brother of the South. They have toiled together in the factory for one boss. And now they have joined together in a great cause, and they have cast aside all racial and religious prejudice for the common good, determined to win a victory over the greed of the corrupt, unfeeling mill owners, who have ruled these people so long with the whip of hunger and the lash of the unemployed.”

Document C: " From the Battlefield," // *Proletario* 22 March 1912, pp. 1-2. , (an Italian language Socialist newspaper)
<http://www.alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/wasmrestricted/law/doc27.htm>

Introduction

This article offers an account of the final settlement of the strike. The strikers were victorious; however, they had to accept a compromise with the owners. They did not receive their specific demands.

From The Battlefield: Lawrence

After nine weeks of continuous, aggressive man-to-man fighting, finally the battle has been won in a way quite satisfying to the strikers. The owners of the factories had to comprehend that fighting against the strikers, directed by the organizers of the I.W.W., was like colliding with a mountain of metal; they had to comprehend that their adversaries were [men] of many actions and few words and that therefore it was better to surrender.

They comforted themselves with the idea that they were dealing with a shapeless mass, ignorant, unaware of their very state; but they had to undeceive themselves when they saw the resolute attitude of the strikers who were ready for any sacrifice in order to obtain the laurels of victory. They [the owners] had sworn that they would never have anything to do with the powerful workers' organization, the Industrial Workers of the World; but after nine weeks of continuous fighting, they had to bow down before the I.W.W., because that is what the force of the strikers wanted. And so, this demonstrated that the people can do anything when they put their minds to it, and that against their firm, resolute will, laws, armed force, established powers and everything else that a government can arrange are powerless. . .

The victory of the Lawrence strikers also meant victory for an additional three hundred thousand workers of other localities. The owners of the factories have understood that other workers would have followed the example of those from Lawrence and therefore they tried to anticipate a very disastrous movement for them. . .

The strongest enemy, the American Woolen Company, held the last conference with the Strikers Committee on the ninth day of the month in the Boston State House. The company offered a wage increase ranging from a 5% increase for the higher wages up to 22% for the lower ones and a quarter [extra pay] for overtime.

The premium system was cut in half. Everyone has to be rehired without exception, without taking any account of their attitude during the strike. . .

"Composition and Characteristics of the Population for Wards of Cities of 50,000 or More: Lawrence (Table)," *Thirteenth Census of the United States taken in the Year 1910*, Federal Bureau of the Census, U.S. Decennial Census Publications: Vol. II, Population 1910 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913-1914), 893.

Introduction

This chart graphically shows the ethnic makeup of the city of Lawrence in 1910 and the residence patterns of different nationalities by wards. We see each group typically concentrated in a few ethnic enclaves across the city. Italians are concentrated in wards 1, 2, and 3; French Canadians in 4,5, and 6. Russians reside in large numbers in wards 3 and 4, Germans and Austrians in ward 1, and Turks in ward 3. Finally, native-born residents are found in greatest numbers in wards 5 and 6. This document is an excerpt from a larger chart that lists data for each major city in Massachusetts.

POPULATION—MASSACHUSETTS

TABLE V.—COMPOSITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POPULATION FOR
WARDS OF CITIES OF 50,000 OR MORE

LAWRENCE.

SUBJECT	THE CITY	WARD.					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
SEX, COLOR, AND NATIVITY							
Total population, 1910	85,892	14,186	13,571	14,236	13,581	16,180	14,138
Male	42,858	7,040	7,054	7,220	6,787	7,813	6,944
Female	43,034	7,146	6,517	7,016	6,794	8,367	7,194
Native white-Native parentage	11,699	1,693	1,814	1,212	1,483	2,505	2,992
Native white-Foreign or mixed parentage	32,553	4,991	4,576	5,129	5,160	6,545	6,152
Foreign-born white	41,319	7,475	7,168	7,858	6,864	6,983	4,971
Negro	265	21	6	27	51	145	15
Chinese	56	6	7	10	23	2	8

FOREIGN- BORN WHITE: <i>born in--</i>							
Austria	1,450	915	137	181	161	41	15
Belgium	314	55	80	29	4	138	8
Canada-French	7,698	99	112	715	2,351	3,240	1,181
Canada-Other	1,800	340	206	168	264	405	415
England	5,659	755	591	597	1,158	1,428	1,130
France	788	178	117	124	32	248	89
Germany	2,301	1,489	380	133	152	41	106
Greece	171	2	5	32	107	20	5
Ireland	5,943	859	1,007	1,433	889	548	1,207
Italy	6,693	1,721	3,341	1,374	75	26	156
Portugal	389	4	48	323	4	4	6
Russia	4,366	725	771	950	1,346	448	126
Scotland	1,336	188	138	122	164	322	402
Sweden	121	13	15	6	9	20	58
Turkey	2,077	85	183	1,645	108	34	22
Other foreign countries	213	47	37	25	40	20	44

Document E

To President William M. Wood
From the Strike Committee

LAWRENCE, MASS., January 22, 1912.

*Strike committee of the striking textile workers of the American Woolen
Co. to President William M. Wood:*

SIR: We, a committee of the strikers, take this means of answering a statement published in the papers of this city and elsewhere with your name attached. It is our intention to be as brief as possible in dealing with your open letter. . .

We are of the opinion that you have had ample time to consider the demands of the men, women, and children who have made the American Woolen Co. what it is to-day. In view of the fact that machinery has been improved and as a result the workers turn off more and more work, but they are not paid accordingly, even though the price of food, clothing, and shelter has in many cases increased 50 and even 100 per cent within the last few years. We, the committee, are willing to meet the officials of the company at any time and submit the grievances of the strikers. SO, if you believe in a square deal you will not refuse to meet with us but will come forward at once and try to bring the trouble to a final conclusion. . . .

We, the committee, would like to know if the militia, the special policemen, and the Pinkerton detectives, recently brought into this city, know anything about the textile industry except to bayonet and club honest workingmen into submission?

Your attention is called to the fact that all the mills of this city are more or less affected. So the committee desires the news to be spread broadcast that there is a general strike on in Lawrence against the slavery of the textile workers and a united opposition against the starvation wages of the past.

These are the demands of the strikers:

1. Fifteen per cent increase in wages.
2. The abolition of all bonus or premium systems.
3. Double pay for all overtime work.
4. No discrimination against the strikers for activity during the strike.

STRIKE COMMITTEE.

Source: <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/unions/lawrence-strike/strike-committee.htm>

Camella Teoli Testifies about the 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike

When 30,000 largely immigrant workers walked out of the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile mills in January 1912, they launched one of the epic confrontations between capital and labor. The strike began in part because of unsafe working conditions in the mills, which were described in graphic detail in the testimony that fourteen-year-old millworker Camella Teoli delivered before a U.S. Congressional hearing in March 1912. Her testimony (a portion of which was included here) about losing her hair when it got caught in a textile machine she was operating gained national headlines in 1912—in part because Helen Herron Taft, the wife of the president, was in the audience when Teoli testified. The resulting publicity helped secure a strike victory.

CHAIRMAN. Camella, how old are you?

Miss TEOLI. Fourteen years and eight months. . .

CHAIRMAN. Where do you work?

Miss TEOLI. In the woolen mill.

CHAIRMAN. For the American Woolen Co.?

Miss TEOLI. Yes.

CHAIRMAN. What sort of work do you do?

Miss TEOLI. Twisting.

CHAIRMAN. You do twisting?

Miss TEOLI. Yes.

CHAIRMAN. How much do you get a week?

Miss TEOLI. \$6.55.

CHAIRMAN. What is the smallest pay?

Miss TEOLI. \$2.64.

CHAIRMAN. Do you have to pay anything for water?

Miss TEOLI. Yes.

CHAIRMAN. How much?

Miss TEOLI. 10 cents every two weeks.

CHAIRMAN. Do they hold back any of your pay?

Miss TEOLI. No.

CHAIRMAN. Have they ever held back any?

Miss TEOLI. One week's pay.

CHAIRMAN. They have held back one week's pay?

Miss TEOLI. Yes.

CHAIRMAN. Does your father work, and where?

Miss TEOLI. My father works in the Washington.

CHAIRMAN. The Washington Woolen Mill?

Miss TEOLI. Yes, sir.

CHAIRMAN. How much pay does he get for a week's work?

Miss TEOLI. \$7.70

CHAIRMAN. Does he always work a full week?

Miss TEOLI. No.

CHAIRMAN. Well, how often does it happen that he does not work a full week?

Miss TEOLI. He works in the winter a full week, and usually he don't in the summer.

CHAIRMAN. In the winter he works a full week, and in the summer how much?

Miss TEOLI. Two or three days a week.

CHAIRMAN. What sort of work does he do?

Miss TEOLI. He is a comber.

CHAIRMAN. Now, did you ever get hurt in the mill?

Miss TEOLI. Yes.

CHAIRMAN. Can you tell the committee about that — how it happened and what it was?

Miss TEOLI. Yes.

CHAIRMAN. Tell us about it now, in your own way.

Miss TEOLI. Well, I used to go to school, and then a man came up to my house and asked my father why I didn't go to work, so my father says I don't know whether she is

13 or 14 years old. So, the man say you give me \$4 and I will make the papers come from the old country saying you are 14. So, my father gave him the \$4, and in one month came the papers that I was 14. I went to work, and about two weeks got hurt in my head. . .

CHAIRMAN. Well, how were you hurt?

Miss TEOLI. The machine pulled the scalp off.

CHAIRMAN. The machine pulled your scalp off?

Miss TEOLI. Yes, sir.

CHAIRMAN. How long ago was that?

Miss TEOLI. A year ago, or about a year ago.

CHAIRMAN. Were you in the hospital after that?

Miss TEOLI. I was in the hospital seven months. . .

Source: Hearings on the Strike at Lawrence, Massachusetts, House Document No. 671, 62nd Cong., 2nd sess. Reprinted in Joyce L. Kornbluh, ed. *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 181–184.
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/61/>

Document H: Photos of Lawrence Strike



Women strikers marching in support of the strike

Courtesy of George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, #1422



Massachusetts militiamen with fixed bayonets surround a parade of peaceful strikers

Courtesy of George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, #1425



**Some of over 100 children of Lawrence strikers preparing to travel
to New York City to find temporary homes**
Courtesy of George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, #1421



At a demonstration on behalf of Ettore and Giovannitti, women strikers circulate copies of the newspapers of the Federazione Socialista Italiana, Industrial Workers of the World, and Socialist Party.
Courtesy of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University