

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See also the Annals of the Fair, the Columbian, Queen Isabella, and Leo XIII.,

Annals from the Archives

Bread and Roses Strike, 1912

Textile workers on strike in Lawrence, January 1912

Image from digitalcommonwealth.org



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—As reported in last month's Annals from the Archives, Massachusetts has a long history with labor struggles. One of the most significant strikes in U.S. history began in Lawrence on January 12, 1912. At St. Mary's convent, the Annalist wrote that, "*January brought a great calamity to the people of Lawrence. The nine hour labor law went into effect here as elsewhere, and with it the consequent decrease in wages. In less than a week every mill in the city was closed, and thirty thousand men and women, mill operatives were on a strike. One cannot imagine the consternation in the city.*"

As a city planned originally for textile production, Lawrence became a mecca for immigrants hoping for a better life. But conditions in the mills and in the tenements built for the workers offered mostly disease and despair. According to the Lawrence Survey conducted in 1912, Lawrence had the 8th highest death rate in the country. The city with the highest mortality in the U.S.? That honor went to another mill city, Lowell, MA. More than a third of all mill employees in Lawrence died within 10 years after they began work there. The damp conditions, the lack of safety protocols for the machinery and the prevalence of disease—all contributed to the startling mortality rate. Half of all mill workers never reached the age of 25. In 1911, the year leading up to the strike, 50% of the deaths in the city were of children under the age of 6.

Workers in the Lawrence mills averaged \$8.28 for a full six days of work. Men earned 18 cents an hour, women 14 cents and children much less. Because they could pay the women and children less, the mills had more of them in their employ than men. On January 1, 1912, the Massachusetts State Legislature enacted a new law reducing women's and children's work week from 56 to 54 hours. When they received their pay on January 11, they discovered their wages had been reduced along with the hours. Women at the Everett Cotton Mills walked out first, crying "Short Pay! Short Pay!" Workers from other mills joined them and within a week more than 25,000 textile employees had gone on strike.

Approximately 65% of the textile workers were immigrants and the popular opinion in the area, as well as in the newspaper reports, focused on the "foreigners" as the source of unrest. The textile mill workers' objectives were simple ones, though. In the circular they wrote to present their demands they stated, "*We hold that as useful members of society and as wealth producers we have the right to lead decent and honorable lives; that we ought to have homes and not shacks; that we ought to have clean food and not adulterated food at high prices; that we ought to have clothes suited to the weather and not shoddy garments.*" While their complaints were just and their objectives reasonable, the city of Lawrence called in the Massachusetts Militia, as well as police from Lowell, Haverhill, Lynn, Newton, Wakefield, Stoneham, Charlestown, Waltham, and Boston. When the strikers, most of whom were women, refused to disperse, the militia turned fire hoses on them and arrested hundreds of men, women and children. There was little sympathy for the strikers anywhere in Lawrence. Among the most vocal critic of them was St. Mary's Church pastor, Fr. James T. O'Reilly.

The sisters at the St. Mary's convent accepted his view of the strikers as "socialists." The Annalist at St. Mary's wrote that, "*These foreigners became so violent, that the State Militia had to be called out. For about six weeks, the city was under martial law. We did not lose*



Alleyway in one of the tenements
Image from Digital Commonwealth



Fr. James T. O'Reilly

even a half day from school and Rev. Father O'Reilly, our Pastor, was not in the least intimidated. He had Mr. Goldstein come to Lawrence and give a lecture against "Socialism" in St. Mary's Hall and he invited all to be present." David Goldstein (1870-1958) was a Catholic convert and a prominent anti-Socialist speaker during those years. Fr. O'Reilly also spoke out against the strikers in his sermons, which were reprinted in the Lawrence Eagle, "It [the strike] is a war against lawfully constituted authority, against religion, against the home, against the people."

Though understanding for the strikers' demands ran short in Lawrence, members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) up and down the east coast offered their support by raising money to help the families of the textile workers on strike in the city. They also opened their homes to the children of those families. During the many weeks of protest, most of the children who did not work in the mills walked with their mothers and fathers during the parades and demonstrations. Because of that, the parents were worried their children might be harmed by the militia and police. And so began the Children's Exodus. Families from Vermont, Pennsylvania and New York opened their homes to the children of the men and women on strike.

In an attempt to undermine the protesters, police and the militia did their best to thwart them from sending their children away. On Feb. 24th, the police arrested mothers and children at the Lawrence train station who were trying to get their children onto the train. Because of the brutal means used during their arrest, one pregnant woman miscarried. Most of the children were sent to the City Farm for the poor, while the mothers, some with babies in their arms, were brought to the police court and accused of neglect. All refused to pay the fine and were jailed.

Headlines across the country protested the treatment of the women and children. The New York Times reported on those who had witnessed the women being clubbed by the police and children being torn from their mother's arms. When Helen Herron Taft, the president's wife, heard these stories from the strikers themselves, her outrage brought about an investigation into the handling of the strike by Congress. Some of the children from Lawrence testified to Congress about the conditions in the tenements and in the factories.

The strike finally ended on March 14th when the American Woolen Company agreed to meet all the workers' demands. Other mill owners soon followed suit. Wages were increased from 5% to 25% and overtime pay was guaranteed. As a result of the strike, other mills across New England began to raise their workers' pay as well, rather than face their employees' displeasure. Today, this worker strike, led mostly by women, is celebrated in Lawrence every Labor Day to remember one of the most important events in labor history.

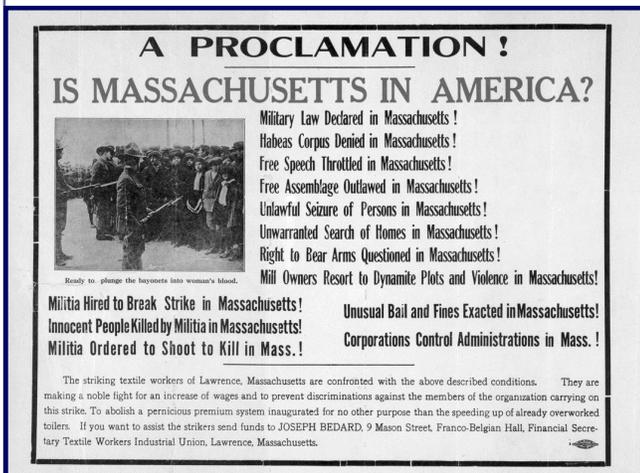


Image from the Digital Commonwealth

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