Bread and Roses: The 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike

By Joyce Kornbluh

“WE WANT BREAD AND ROSES TOO”
Giovannitti's speech, the first he had ever made publicly in English, moved even the reporters who were covering the trial. On November 26, 1912, the men were acquitted and released from jail.

Public opinion as expressed by the Eastern daily newspapers was practically unanimous in support of the acquittal of Ettor and Giovannitti. But the threat of anarchy and class war raised the fear that "a win in the Lawrence mills means a start that will only end with the downfall of the wage system." An editorial in the liberal Survey magazine questioned: "Are we to expect that instead of playing the game respectfully ... the labourers are to listen to subtle anarchistic philosophy which challenges the fundamental idea of law and order?"

Other publications around the country expressed alarm at the strange doctrines of "direct action," "syndicalism," "the general strike" – slogans of a new kind of revolution.

In the IWW local in Lawrence, membership swelled to 10,000 in the year following the strike but dropped to 400 by 1914 as the depression of the preceding year cut into employment in the textile industry. In addition, textile employers initiated an espionage system in the mills to counter any further radical influence. A 50 percent speedup of the textile machines after 1912 led to additional unemployment and offset the wage increase gained by the strike settlement.

But the immediate effect of the Lawrence strike was to hearten textile workers in other Eastern areas and to prepare for the next large strike drama in the silk mills of Paterson within the year. The strike also made a profound impression on the public and the rest of the labour movement by dramatizing the living and working conditions of unorganized, foreign-born workers in crowded industrial areas, and communicating the spirit of their rebellion.

Following the Salem trial, literary critic Kenneth McGowan wrote in Forum Magazine: Whatever its future, the I.W.W. has accomplished one tremendously big thing, a thing that sweeps away all twaddle over red flags and violence and sabotage, and that is the individual awakening of "illiterates" and "scum" to an original, personal conception of society and the realization of the dignity and rights of their part in it. They have learned more than class consciousness; they have learned consciousness of Self . . . .

This was a fitting interpretation of the spirit of the striking mill girls who carried picket signs which read:

WE WANT BREAD AND ROSES TOO.
Responding in a small way to public pressure over the working conditions of textile employees, the Massachusetts state legislature passed a law, effective January 1, 1912, which reduced the weekly hours from fifty-six to fifty-four for working women and children. Workers feared that this would mean a corresponding wage cut, and their suspicions were sharpened when the mill corporations speeded up the machines and posted notices that, following January 1, the fifty-four-hour work week would be maximum for both men and women operatives.

The I.W.W. had been organizing among the foreign born in Lawrence since 1907 and claimed over a thousand members, but it had only about 300 paid up members on its rolls. About 2500 English-speaking skilled workers were organized by craft into three local unions of the A.F.L.’s United Textile Workers, but only about 208 of these were in good standing in 1912. The small, English-speaking branch of the I.W.W. sent a letter to President Wood of the American Woollen Company asking how wages would be affected under the new law. There was no reply. Resentment grew as the textile workers realized that a reduction of two-hours pay from their marginal incomes would mean, as I.W.W. publicity pointed out, three loaves of bread less each week from their meagre diet.

Polish women weavers in the Everett Cotton Mills were the first to notice a shortage of thirty two cents in their pay envelopes on January 11. They stopped their looms and left the mill, shouting "short pay, short pay!" Other such outbursts took place throughout Lawrence. The next morning workers at the Washington and Wood mills joined the walkout. For the first time in the city’s history, the bells of the Lawrence city hall rang the general riot alarm.

That afternoon a mass meeting was held at the Franco-Belgian Hall, and a telegram was sent to Joseph Ettor, an I.W.W. Executive Board member, asking that he come from New York to assist the strike. Twenty-seven-year-old Ettor had visited Lawrence in the past to preach I.W.W. unionism. He was well known in the Italian community as a veteran I.W.W. organizer who had worked in the shipyards of San Francisco, travelled through West Coast mining and lumber camps, and led the foreign-born workers of the Pressed Steel Car Company in the 1909 McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, strike. Practical, pragmatic, and quick in decision-making Ettor could speak English, Italian, and Polish fluently and could understand Hungarian and Yiddish.

Under his aggressive leadership, a strike committee was immediately formed of two representatives from each of the nationalities represented among the mill workers. They were to meet each morning and take complete charge of the strike. The workers’ demands called for a 15 percent increase in wages on a fifty-four-hour work week, double time for overtime work, and no discrimination against any workers for their strike participation. In response to the circulation of strike leaflets throughout the town, Lawrence Mayor Scanlon ordered a company of local militia to spend the night at the armoury and patrol the streets around the mills.

Pitinan’s confession created a surge of sentiment in favour of the liberation of Ettor, Giovannitti, and Caruso. Publicity contrasted the case of the three men who had been detained for months in prison, with the case of Breen, the dynamite planter, who had been released without jail sentence on a $500 fine. Fifteen thousand Lawrence workers walked out again on September 30 for a twenty-four-hour demonstration strike. Textile workers in neighbouring cities threatened similar strikes in support of the I.W.W. leaders. Police, detectives, and the state militia were again called out. Mayor Scanlon started a "God and Country" campaign to drive the I.W.W. out of Lawrence. A parade was organized down the Lawrence main street under a banner which read:

"For God and Country! The stars and stripes forever! The red flag never!"

Lawrence citizens were encouraged by the town leaders to wear little American flags in their button holes as proof of their patriotic opposition to the I.W.W.

The trial of Ettor, Giovannitti, and Caruso began in Salem, Massachusetts, at the end of September; it lasted for two months. The defendants were kept in metal cages in the courtroom while the trial was in session. Crowds of workers waited each day outside the courthouse to cheer them as they entered and left the building. In Sweden and France workers proposed a boycott of American woollen goods along with a strike against all ships bound for American ports. Numerous telegrams were sent from Italy, where Giovannitti’s family lobbied actively in his behalf. Italian sympathizers demonstrated in front of the American consulate in Rome, and three Italian districts nominated Giovannitti for the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Delegations visited President Taft at his summer home in Beverly, Massachusetts, to plead for the prisoners' release.

The prosecution accused Ettor and Giovannitti of inciting the strikers to violence and murder, although witnesses proved that they were speaking to a meeting of workers several miles from the place where Anna LoPizzo was shot. Two hired detectives from a strike-breaking agency testified that Giovannitti had urged strikers to sleep in the daytime and "prowl around like wild beasts at night." But the detectives admitted that the speech to which they referred was in Italian and that they had no written notes of the meeting from which to quote. Witnesses testified that Joseph Caruso was home eating supper at the time the woman striker was killed. Caruso said that he was not an I.W.W. member and had never heard Ettor or Giovannitti speak before he was imprisoned. He also said he planned to become a Wobbly as soon as he was released from jail.

Before the end of the trial, Ettor and Giovannitti asked permission to make closing statements. Joe Ettor said in part:

"Does the District Attorney believe . . . that the gallows or guillotine ever settled an idea? If an idea can live, it lives because history adjudges it right. I ask only for justice. . . . The scaffold has never yet and never will destroy an idea or a movement. . . . An idea consisting of a social crime in one age becomes the very religion of humanity in the next.... Whatever my social views are, they are what they are. They cannot be tried in this courtroom."
In early March, the House Committee on Rules heard testimony from a group of Lawrence strikers including some teenagers under sixteen years of age. "As soon as I came home I had to go to sleep, I was so tired," the congressmen were told by a fifteen-year-old girl. The young workers testified that the textile companies held back a week of their wages, that they were often required to do unpaid clean-up work on Saturdays, and that in order to get decent drinking water in the mills some of them had to pay five or ten cents a week. So great was national indignation, the President's wife attended the hearings, and President Taft later ordered an investigation of industrial conditions throughout the nation.

Concerned over the public reaction to the hearings, and the possible threat to their own tariff protection, the American Woollen Company acceded to all the strikers' demands on March 12, 1912. By the end of March, the rest of the Lawrence textile companies fell in line. Wages were raised for textile workers throughout all of New England. And on March 30 the children who had been living in foster homes in New York City were brought home.

Meanwhile, in the Lawrence prison, Ettor and Giovannitti had turned their jail cells into studies. They read through the warden's library and then the books – Taine, Carlyle, Shelley, Byron, Kant – sent in by sympathizers. Ettor, interested in organization methods, requested Burke. Giovannitti had what he called his "afternoon matinees," reading an annotated edition of Shakespeare which had been sent to him by a Harvard student.

As the months dragged on without a trial, the case of Giovannitti and Ettor became a cause celebre. "Open the jail gates or we will close the mill gates," threatened Haywood. Protest parades, demonstrations, and mass meetings in major cities throughout the country helped raise $60,000 needed for legal defence. In New York's Union Square, 25,000 persons gathered to hear Haywood appeal for funds, then march up Fifth avenue led by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. In Boston a great demonstration covered the Common. Massachusetts authorities indicted all the members of the Ettor-Giovannitti Defense Committee, then released them on bail.

Agitation mounted. A general strike was advocated by the IWW. In August, a new development in the dynamite plot made headlines. Ernest Pitman, a Lawrence contractor who had built the Wood mill of the American Woolen Company, confessed to a district attorney that the dynamite frame-up had been planned in the Boston offices of Lawrence textile corporations. Pitman committed suicide shortly after he was served papers ordering him to appear and testify before a grand jury. William Wood, who was implicated, was immediately exonerated in court.

Mass picketing and arrests started the first week of the strike. It was the first time there had ever been mass picketing in any New England town. When crowds of workers demonstrated in front of the Atlantic and Pacific mills, they were drenched by water from fire hoses on adjoining roofs. The strikers retaliated by throwing chunks of ice. Thirty-six were arrested and most of them sentenced to a year in prison. As the judge stated, "The Only way we can teach them is to deal out the severest sentences." The governor ordered out the state militia and state police. One officer remarked to a writer for Outlook Magazine: "Our company of militia went down to Lawrence during the first days of the strike. Most of them had to leave Harvard to do it; but they rather enjoyed going down there to have a fling at those people." Harry Emerson Fosdick quoted a Boston lawyer: "The strike should have been stopped in the first twenty-four hours. The militia should have been instructed to shoot. That is the way Napoleon did it."

A few days after the strike began, Arturo Giovannitti, an Italian poet and orator, came to Lawrence from New York City to take charge of strike relief. He came in the interest of Il Proletario, the newspaper which he edited for the Italian Socialist Federation. Relief committees, a network of soup kitchens, and food distribution stations were set up by each nationality group. The Franco-Belgian station alone took care of 1200 families weekly. Volunteer doctors gave medical care. Families received from $2.00 to $5.00 each week from the funds raised throughout the country in response to the strike committee's appeal. "The problem of relief was so efficiently handled," wrote labour historian Samuel Yellin, "that during the ten week strike there was no wavering in the strikers' ranks."

Lawrence was a new kind of strike, the first time such large numbers of unskilled, unorganized foreign-born workers had followed the radical leadership of the I.W.W. John Golden, president of the A.F.L. United Textile Workers denounced it as "revolutionary" and "anarchistic" and attempted unsuccessfully to wrest the leadership of the strike away from the I.W.W. A.F.L. President Samuel Gompers defined the strike as a "class conscious industrial revolution ... a passing event that is not intended to be an organization for the protection of the immediate rights or promotion of the near future interests of the workers." However, Gompers defended the lawful rights of the I.W.W. members to, "express themselves as their conscience dictates."

"It was the spirit of the workers that was dangerous," wrote labour reporter Mary Heaton Vorse. "They are always marching and singing. The tired, grey crowds ebbing and flowing perpetually into the mills had waked and opened their months to sing." And in the American Magazine, Ray Stannard Baker reported:

It is not short of amazing, the power of a great idea to weld men together . . . . There was in it a peculiar, intense, vital spirit, a religious spirit if you will, that I have never felt before in any strike. . . . At first everyone predicted that it would be impossible to hold these divergent people together, but aside from the skilled men, some of whom belonged to craft unions comparatively few went back to the mills. And as a whole, the strike was conducted with little violence.
Less than a week after the strike started, the police found dynamite in three different places in Lawrence: in a tenement house, in an empty lot, and in a shoemaker's shop next door to the print shop where Ettor received his mail. The press and the police were quick to assign guilt to the strikers. An editorial in the New York Times declared: "The strikers display a fiendish lack of humanity which ought to place them beyond the comfort of religion until they have repented." The I.W.W. claimed, however, that the Boston American, a Hearst paper, was off the press and on sale in Lawrence with the details of the dynamite discovery before the sticks of dynamite were actually found. Soon after, John Breen, a local undertaker and a member of the Lawrence school board, was arrested and charged with planting the explosives in a plot to discredit the workers. He was fined $500 and released on bail. President Wood of the American Woollen Company was implicated, but cleared by the court although he could not explain why he had recently made a cash payment to Breen.

One of the largest demonstrations of the strike took place on January 29 when Ettor addressed a mass meeting on the Lawrence Common, urged the strikers to be peaceful and orderly, and led them on a march through the business district. At one of the mills, a company of militiamen refused to let them pass. Ettor averted a conflict by waving the paraders up a side street. They followed, and cheered him for his good sense.

That evening, independent of the earlier demonstration, Anna LoPizzo, a woman striker, was killed when police tried to break up a picket line. The strikers said she was shot by a Lawrence police officer. Nevertheless, Ettor and Giovannitti, who were three miles away talking to a meeting of German workers, were arrested as "accessories to the murder" and charged with inciting and provoking the violence. They were refused bail and imprisoned for eight months without trial. In April, Joseph Caruso, an Italian striker, was arrested and jailed in an attempt by Lawrence police to find the man who had fire the fatal shot.

Martial law was enforced following the arrest of the two I.W.W. strike leaders. City officials declared all public meetings illegal, and Lawrence authorities called out twenty-two more militia companies to patrol the streets. A militiaman's bayonet killed a fifteen-year old Syrian boy in another clash between strikers and police.

The arrest of Ettor and Giovannitti was aimed at disrupting the strike. However, the I.W.W. sent Bill Haywood to Lawrence, and with him came I.W.W. organizers William Trautmann, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and, later, Carlo Tresca, an Italian anarchist. More than 15,000 strikers met Haywood at the railroad station, and he addressed a group of 25,000 strikers. Group by group, they sang the "Internationale" for him in their various tongues. Looking down from the speaker's stand and seeing the young strikers in the crowd, Haywood roared in his foghorn voice: "Those kids should be in school instead of slaving in the mills."

Throughout the strike, Haywood urged strikers to maintain an attitude of passive resistance. But this took many forms. One innovation in strike technique was an endless chain picket line of thousands of strikers who marched through the mill districts wearing white armbands which read, "Don't be a scab." Large groups locked arms on the sidewalks and passed along the business streets. When this tactic was disrupted by the police, huge crowds of mill workers would move in and out of stores, not buying anything. As the acting head of the police later testified in Washington, "They had our shopkeepers in a state of terror; it was a question whether or not they would shut up their shops."

By far the most dramatic episode of the strike involved sending the strikers' children to sympathetic families in other cities, a measure of strike relief which had been used in Europe by French and Italian workers.

About 120 children left Lawrence on February 10 and were met at the station in New York City by 5000 members of the Italian Socialist Federation and the Socialist Party singing the "Internationale" and "The Marsaillaise." The youngsters were placed in homes which had been selected by a women's committee of New York sympathizers. Margaret Sanger, later famous for her work in birth control, was one of the nurses who accompanied the children on the train to New York City. She testified before a congressional committee in March: "Out of the 119 children, only four had underwear on ... their outerwear was almost in rags ... their coats were simply torn to shreds ... and it was the bitterest weather we have had this winter."

A few weeks later, ninety-two more children arrived in New York City and, before going to their temporary foster homes, paraded with banners down Fifth Avenue. Alarmed at the publicity this exodus was receiving, the Lawrence authorities ordered that no more children could leave the city. On February 24 when a group of 150 more children made ready to leave for Philadelphia, fifty policemen and two militia companies surrounded the Lawrence railroad station. They tore children away from their parents, threw women and children into a waiting patrol wagon, and detained thirty of them in jail. A member of the Philadelphia Women's Committee testified under oath:

When the time came to depart, the children, arranged in a long line, two by two in an orderly procession with the parents near at hand, were about to make their way to the train when the police . . . closed in on us with their clubs, beating right and left with no thought of the children who then were in desperate danger of being trampled to death. The mothers and the children were thus hurled in a mass and bodily dragged to a military truck and even then clubbed, irrespective of the cries of the panic-stricken mothers and children. We can scarcely find words with which to describe this display of brutality.

This clash between the children and the police was the turning point of the Lawrence strike. Protests from every part of the country reached Congress as newspaper and magazine articles focused national attention on the conflict. Congressman Victor Berger, a Socialist front Milwaukee, and Congressman William Wilson from Pennsylvania, who became the first secretary of labour, called for a congressional investigation of the Lawrence situation.