Lawrence Strike, 1912

Massachusetts State Militia (National Guardsmen), armed with fixed bayonets, confront striking textile workers during the Lawrence Textile Strike.

Courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. Note: The Walter P. Reuther Library was founded with seed money from the United Automobile Workers and is the largest labor archive and one of the leading urban archives in the U.S.
Abstract: The 1912 Lawrence “Bread and Roses” textile strike was a signature moment in U.S. labor history that has captured public and scholarly attention for nearly a century. Taking place in the midst of the Progressive Era and the United States’ greatest period of industrialization, the event held many meanings to its diverse participants and to onlookers throughout the world. This historiographic essay explores the strike’s changing interpretations and legacies over the course of a century of debate, emphasizing how it lends itself to new methodologies of historical inquiry.

Mark W. Robbins is a labor historian at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Few events in American labor history have captured the attention of as wide a range of people, past and present, as the 1912 Lawrence “Bread and Roses” textile strike. At the height of the Progressive Era and in the midst of the United States’ greatest period of industrialization, thousands of impoverished Lawrence textile mill workers at the American Woolen Company (AWC) walked off their jobs when they discovered that their employer had reduced their wages. News of the work stoppage filled popular periodicals from Los Angeles to Italy. Laborers in Vermont, New York, and Poland cheered for the workers and offered their support. Many were
outraged when they read about the violence perpetrated by state militia and Lawrence police against employees, their wives and even their children. Yet others in the United States and elsewhere condemned the striking laborers, claiming that their radicalism threatened the fabric of free market capitalism.

Whether strikers or observers from afar, a variety of people felt connected to what scholars have called “the great textile strike,” a moment of “transnationalism of the Italian-American left,” and “a quintessentially American event.” 1 The strike held many meanings to its participants and onlookers. It comes as little surprise that in decades of historiography on the event, scholars have similarly put forth diverse interpretations of the strike and its legacy. Some scholars and public intellectuals have highlighted it as a moment in which workers proudly and successfully fought for both economic justice and respect. Others have criticized this argument as an agenda-driven attempt to impose present ideologies on the past, asserting that laborers fought for “bread,” but not “roses” or grander visions of the future. This article analyzes the changing interpretations of the strike through the lens of its historiography.

Over the last fifty years, the event has served as the primary subject matter and analytical launching point for scholars in a wide variety of fields, including immigration studies, labor, gender and popular history, biography, anthropology, and the history of memory. For nearly a century, the strike has offered participants, onlookers and generations both within and outside of the academic community a multi-dimensional moment of inspiration and inquiry. An event defined by its possibilities, the strike spoke to the hopes and dreams of a wide range of historical actors in 1912. In the years that followed, it has provided interpretive possibilities for scholars reiterating, recovering and reshaping its purposes and legacies.

THE STRIKE

Ironically, a small victory for Massachusetts laborers set the stage for the 1912 strike. It did not occur on a picket line outside a textile factory, but in the halls of the Massachusetts legislature. At the time, both middle class “progressive” reformers and labor unions questioned the excesses of rapid industrialization. Enormous factories operated by wealthy men drew individuals from the rural U.S. and southern and eastern Europe to the United States’ growing cities, where they lived in crowded housing in neighborhoods with inadequate social services or sanitation. A predominantly immigrant working class labored for long hours in unsafe conditions for low pay. In
response to these conditions, both reformers and organized labor sought new laws that they argued would help the working class.

In Massachusetts, reformers and the American Federation of Labor’s (AFL) state branch lobbied the legislature to shorten the maximum work week from 56 to 54 hours for women and children, who made up half of the American Woolen Company’s labor force.\(^2\) In spite of the AFL’s support for the law, which was set to take effect on January 1, 1912, many laborers worried that it would cut their total pay. While wages had remained the same after the last legislative mandate for a reduction in work hours in 1909, some employees asked AWC officials whether this time would be different. They received no clarification.\(^3\)

Wage earners at the AWC could ill-afford any reduction in pay, even if it meant two fewer hours of work. They lived in grinding poverty in a company town virtually controlled by AWC president William Wood. Wood owned the mills and some employee housing, and exercised a fair amount of influence over the local government and police. Rather than an exploiter of his workforce, however, Wood fashioned himself as the ultimate paternal figure. He claimed to care deeply about his employees, once referring to the American Woolen Company as “a great humane institution.”\(^4\) After all, as he
liked to remind, he had himself worked his way up from working-class roots to become one of the wealthiest men in the United States. Wood expected his laborers to work hard, express loyalty to the company and respond to his directives.

The portrait of a caring paternal figure, however, was at odds with his employees’ actual living and working conditions. The company’s tenements, much like those in many urban areas, were dark, dirty, crowded, and often unsanitary. In the mills, his employees labored in dark and noisy settings for wages that usually demanded that both parents and children work. Working-class families in Lawrence were often undernourished and exhausted. Making matters worse, their work pace had recently been increased. In spite of a $3,000,000 profit in 1911, Wood reasoned that he couldn’t afford to pay his laborers the same wages for two fewer hours of work per week. Although some union activists had predicted Wood’s response, others, who had supported the law, mistakenly expected that Massachusetts employers would raise hourly wages to offset the reduction in hours.

On January 11, 1912, a group of mostly Polish-American women weavers at the Everett Mill became outraged when their pay envelopes reflected the lower amount. Many walked off their jobs in disgust, and thousands of Lawrence wage earners followed their lead. The difference in pay amounted to thirty to fifty cents—or four loaves of bread—and few would dispute that this was a significant amount to workers who lived from paycheck to paycheck.

Accounts of the event vary, but a few features in particular garnered national attention. First, the strike highlighted a recurrent problem in American society. As a result of the uneven effects of rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large strikes had become all too common in the United States. Lawrence was a central example. The sheer number of employees who participated led the *New York Times* to proclaim, “Strike Riots Close Big Lawrence Mill … Eleven Thousand Made Idle,” with other publications printing similar headlines. Second, workers of different ethnicities, both within and outside of Lawrence, cooperated to a degree that was atypical in the early-twentieth-century labor movement. Third, the presence of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an organization that sought a United States governed by “one big union,” captivated the attention of many. Famed IWW activists Joseph Ettor, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Big” Bill Haywood, and poet Arturo Giovanitti, among others, participated in the Lawrence strike. Scores of Americans were genuinely alarmed by their presence in one of the most significant labor conflicts of the era.
In addition, the violence and drama that took place during the work stoppage made for powerful headlines in newspapers around the world. The American Woolen Company used security and police forces to battle violently with strikers. In perhaps the ordeal’s most famous moment, strikers borrowed a technique used in European labor disputes and sent the youth of Lawrence on a “children’s exodus.” As the families of laborers became increasingly strained by lack of income, sympathetic families in New York and Vermont offered to care for the children of striking parents. The workers’ need to move impoverished children out of town proved to be embarrassing to the AWC. Some children who had been part of the initial groups to leave even paraded down the streets of New York City holding pro-strike banners. When the next group of mothers and children arrived at the Lawrence train station...

**Left to right: Joseph Caruso, Joseph Ettor, and Arturo Giovannitti**

Notice that the three men are handcuffed to each other. This photo was taken while they were still in custody on the charges of murder and inciting a riot. Ettor’s characteristic grin can be found in almost every photo of him. Caruso was a very active, Italian-American striker. Ettor and Giovannitti were chief organizers for the I.W.W. and rushed to Lawrence at the onset of the strike. (Courtesy Bread and Roses Centennial Exhibit)
station on February 24, many of them were promptly beaten and taken into custody.

The children’s exodus, as much as any other event in the conflict, led the nation to question the effects of industrialization. The magnitude and publicity generated by the strike was so great that from March 2-7 of 1912 the U.S. Congress investigated its causes. The House Committee on Rules brought in participants to testify in front of not only congressmen but First Lady Helen Taft, who reportedly wept upon hearing about the conditions in which Lawrence children lived. Facing increasingly negative publicity, the American Woolen Company negotiated a settlement with the strikers. According to the settlement, employees would receive wage increases reported to be anywhere from 5 to 25 percent, depending on the job, and would be specially compensated for overtime work. In addition, a system of bonuses for fast work paces would restart every two weeks instead of four in order to minimize the impact of an unforeseen sickness or absence on take-home pay. Finally, there would be no retribution against those who had participated in the unrest. In response, the New Castle News declared “victory for strikers conceded” and the Daily Review of Decatur, IL reported on how the workers planned to “celebrate their victory.” Many other newspapers similarly called the settlement a triumph for the strikers.

The walkout had lasted nine weeks, ending March 12, but the battle continued, now in court. Italian-American IWW activists Joseph Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti remained in jail after being accused of serving as accomplices to the murder of striker Anna LoPizzo, who died on January 29 after being shot—quite possibly by police—during a heated confrontation. Joseph Caruso, another Italian-American, was also charged with conspiring to kill LoPizzo. Many unionists in the U.S. and around the world condemned the arrests and protested in the name of free speech, justice, and the right of labor to organize. Activists held rallies in countries from South Africa to Australia, and contributed $50,000 to a defense fund for the three men. Unlike many of their radical contemporaries in other trials of the period, Ettor and Giovannitti were acquitted by the end of the year.

The events of 1912 left a significant mark on Lawrence residents and U.S. society for many reasons. To its impoverished participants, a wage increase that amounted to four loaves of bread stood to have a significant impact on their economic survival and quality of life. For others, a victory against an employer who had refused to even meet with organized labor meant that they had seized a measure of control over their lives as workers. To the public, the strike increased popular knowledge of the effects of industrialization on the working class, and it also crystallized the radicalism and relevance of
the IWW in the popular imagination. Equally significant, over the course of the next century the historical memory of the strike would be used to represent ideas ranging from the dangers of radicalism to the importance of labor organization.

BUILDING THE STRIKE’S HISTORICAL MEANING

On the first anniversary of the strike, the Lawrence working-class community held a celebration of their victory. Joseph Ettor spoke to crowds, bands played, and employees and their families remembered a dramatic and important triumph. It seemed as if Lawrence was poised to embrace the memory of 1912 for years to come. Yet it would be decades before Lawrence citizens again commemorated the strikers’ sacrifices.

Demonstration at the Trial of IWW Leaders
Joseph Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti

Within a few years of 1912, many Lawrence residents appear to have distanced themselves from the memory of the strike. Indeed, the reasons for this formed the basis of a major debate among scholars during the 1980s and 1990s. Journalist Paul Cowan had begun the discussion in 1979 by suggesting that, given the anti-union beliefs of Lawrence employers and the legacy of violence from the ordeal, Lawrence residents were too intimidated to celebrate, let alone discuss their memories of it in the following decades.\textsuperscript{10} According to Cowan, the community literally and metaphorically forgot the events of 1912.

As historian Bruce Watson notes in his comprehensive study *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream* (2006), in the decade following 1912, Lawrence residents also had to contend with the public’s growing intolerance of the IWW, an organization that had played a large role in the strike. Fear of the IWW had intensified to the point that police and government agents across the U.S. rounded up, jailed, and deported many IWW members for advocating supposedly unpatriotic ideologies. Failing to set up a permanent organization in Lawrence after the strike, the IWW also gave residents less reason to celebrate it. In any case, at least some in Lawrence did not want the city’s identity to be tied to such an unpopular organization. For example, one teacher thought that the radicalism and violence of 1912 had so damaged the city’s reputation that she instructed her students to say something good about Lawrence in letters to their pen pals across the country.\textsuperscript{11}

The few histories of the strike written by Lawrence groups, such as the Lawrence Citizen’s Association, frowned upon the event and argued that the IWW had taken advantage of the frustrated workers and temporarily led them astray. Representing the interests of employers, the Lawrence Citizen’s Association published *A Reign of Terror in an American City: Some of the Ways in Which Lawrence Was Held in Subjugation by a Gang of Out of Town Agitators* (1912). On the other hand, the fact that Lawrence workers engaged in a series of additional strikes throughout the next decade suggests that the 1912 events could not have entirely been a scar for the city in the minds of the local working-class community.\textsuperscript{12} These work stoppages also featured the presence of scabs, vigilante justice, and violence against labor leaders.

During the 1920s, northeastern mill owners increasingly moved factories to the South in order to avoid having to contend with the strong labor movement. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the largest of the Lawrence textile factories, including the Ayer, Monomac and Wood Mills, closed. The Pacific Mill, the last of the large mills, shut its doors in January of 1957.\textsuperscript{13} Lawrence’s population declined and the city’s unemployment rate in 1952
was the nation’s highest at 20.8 percent. Two years earlier, *Time* magazine reported that the city’s unemployment rate had reached nearly 40 percent during one week, forcing the mills to furlough workers in rotation to “ease its labor pains.” It is unclear how much or little this might have contributed to silencing Lawrence residents from discussing the legacies of 1912 and subsequent moments of labor unrest. In any case, scholars have suggested that much of the Lawrence community did not discuss the city’s radical past, and pro-employer versions of the strike continued to be the “official” story for nearly fifty years.

In 1963, Donald Cole published the first major work on the strike that avoided some, though not all, of the trappings of the pro-employer histories of the events of 1912. In *Immigrant City: Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1845-1921*, Cole encouraged scholars to interpret the strike within the context of immigrants’ goals. According to Cole, these immigrants came to Lawrence in different waves and expressed different aspirations over the course of each generation. Cole sought to debunk the idea that Lawrence was an “un-American” city, a notion stemming from the IWW leadership during the 1912 unrest. In Cole’s view, rather than seeking to overthrow capitalism and the U.S. system of government, immigrants in Lawrence mainly focused on achieving security. Generations of immigrants reached this goal through their family lives, jobs, clubs, “or simply being an American.” Most Lawrence immigrants, Cole asserts, did not embrace radicalism.

From a contemporary perspective, Cole’s analytical framework reflects the anti-radical sentiments of 1950s and early 1960s “consensus history.” Writing in the midst of the Cold War, many consensus historians centered their work on moments in which Americans either came together as one or expressed a feature of the national story that contrasted with the Eastern Bloc’s radicalism. Cole’s emphasis on immigration and assimilation over generations represents the latter. However, focusing on the themes of ethnicity and demography, Cole’s work in some ways was a forerunner to the “new social history,” a breakthrough in historiography emerging in the 1960s and 1970s that incorporated broader approaches and subject matter into historical analysis in order to tell a more diverse story of the past. Even though he dismisses the strike’s radical element, Cole does suggest that immigrant working-class history is important to United States history and is a worthy topic of examination. Ultimately, in spite of reflecting the assumptions of his generation of historians and the anti-IWW legacy of previous histories of the event, Cole sought to broaden Lawrence’s history.

In 1979, journalist Paul Cowan wrote an influential article in the *Village Voice* that sought to recover, reclaim, and celebrate the strike’s alleged lost
History for the Lawrence community. Cowan’s claims should perhaps be regarded with some skepticism, as neither Theresa Corcoran nor Lucille O’Connell, scholars whose articles were also published in 1979, discussed the existence of a “collective amnesia” within Lawrence regarding the events of 1912. Nevertheless, focusing on the Lawrence community, rather than historiography, Cowan was interested in residents’ knowledge of the event, how much they talked about it, and whether or not they celebrated it. Cowan came to this topic originally by pursuing a tangential one. He had first traveled to Lawrence to investigate why a blue collar community with residents who lived through 1912 would have supported the ultra-conservative presidential candidate George Wallace in the election of 1968. Cowan was surprised to find that few participants in the strike appeared to have openly conversed about it and that their descendents often knew little or nothing regarding the subject. He proclaimed, “Most participants were loathe to discuss the events. And the few who did refused to let me quote them by name.”

Cowan was most struck by the story of Josephine Palumbo Catalana, the daughter of former mill worker Camella Teoli. As a fourteen-year-old in 1912, Teoli had travelled to Washington D.C. to testify about the work stoppage and working conditions in Lawrence. She testified to having been scalped by a machine used for transforming cotton into thread. Teoli had remained in the hospital for many months, and had a permanent bald spot on her head because of the accident. Over the years, her daughter, Josephine Catalana, had often combed Teoli’s hair in order to disguise the spot, yet Catalana told Cowan that she knew nothing of her mother’s accident or her testimony before Congress. Based on interviews with an undisclosed number or range of Lawrence residents, Cowan concluded that this type of silence was all too frequent in the city.

According to Cowan, his Village Voice article on the silence of Lawrence, along with the exhibition in Lawrence of Ralph Fasanella’s paintings of the strike, helped to awaken the town to its history. In October of 1979, just six months after Cowan’s article was published, the Lawrence public library placed on display a series of Ralph Fasanella’s colorful, pro-strike paintings that celebrated the workers’ collective action. Fasanella portrayed both the event’s publicity and the level of repression Lawrence laborers were up against, and thousands of local school children were brought to the library to see the paintings. In this same timeframe, Cowan was a guest on a popular local radio program and began discussing the strike. Before long, callers filled up the lines with their own reminiscences. Shortly thereafter, the city held a public celebration of the events of 1912, which Cowan described in a follow-up article as “Bread and Roses Day, when the city celebrated
the labor and ethnic past that it had buried for more than 50 years." The celebration featured honored guests, the naming of a walkway after Camella Teoli, singing of the famous labor theme song “Solidarity Forever,” and the presence of reporters and journalists. Cowan reflected, “Ralph [Fasanella] and I often talked about how wonderful it would be if we could reacquaint the entire city with the history we had found so exhilarating.”

Rather than questioning Cowan’s findings, scholars were intrigued and expanded on his analysis of Lawrence’s supposed re-awakening. Cowan’s article seemed to fit firmly within the framework of the 1960s and 1970s “new social history,” which aimed to analyze the history of individuals, groups and subjects that had been denied a rightful place in history books. Captivated by Cowan’s article, Fasanella’s paintings, and the legacy of the Lawrence strike, a group of historians worked with members of the Lawrence community to offer a workshop on the city’s early twentieth century labor history held on October 11, 1980. Renowned labor historian Herbert Gutman argued that the story of Camella Teoli showed that anti-labor repression could occur not only at the work place or on the streets, but in the home and within the collective memory of laborers. Similarly, James Green reflected in a later article, “Cowan’s story dramatically underlined how official repression could create fear of historical memory.”

Uncritically accepting Cowan’s rendition of Teoli’s narrative, Gutman used it in his introduction to the 1980 edition of the book Working Lives to illustrate that both Teoli’s daughter and an Alabama union leader, who previously had been unaware of a history of inter-racial trade unionism in his home state, “had discovered a new past—a working-class past denied them by the ways in which mainstream American culture had come to celebrate ‘America’ by narrowly identifying it with achievement and assimilation.” To Gutman, Cowan, and others, Teoli’s daughter’s new awareness of her mother’s role in the events of 1912, as well as the 1980 Bread and Roses Day celebration, demonstrated how a community could proudly rediscover its history. Adding to the momentum of a city remembering a seemingly forgotten past, in 1980 Pilgrim Press published a lavishly illustrated pictorial history of the strike compiled by William Cahn titled Lawrence 1912: The Bread and Roses Strike. In the introduction, Cowan proclaimed, “Lawrence’s renewal of self-esteem [suggests] that in the 1980s, as in 1912, it may be possible for America to believe, once again, that economic justice is a goal that can be achieved.”

However, given that Cowan traced the beginning of the Lawrence community’s forgetting of its past to the 1910s, a period of major labor activism, there is reason to question his conclusion. Seven years following
the strike, AWC employees once again walked off their jobs for 107 days, eventually resulting in a 12.5 percent pay raise.\textsuperscript{24} Just one year later, after Wood began running its mills on short time, the Lawrence Central Council of the Amalgamated Textile Workers sent him a letter threatening that continuing to do so “will make it necessary for the workers to relieve you and your class of the control of industry.” It appears unlikely that such individuals would have been too intimidated to remember or speak of 1912.\textsuperscript{25}

In addition, if a number of residents did not talk about the strike, they might have chosen to do so for reasons other than intimidation. One potential explanation is that many violent incidents and hardships were also part of Lawrence’s past. As James Green recalls, a textile union business agent told participants in an October, 1980 workshop, “We’d like to forget about it, to be honest…How beautiful it is to sweetly forget the clubbing of 1912, the jailings of 1919, and the clubbing again of 1931.”\textsuperscript{26} Or, similar to what Jennifer Guglielmo has argued of the generation that followed early twentieth century radical Italian women in New York City, some American-born descendents of immigrant activists in Lawrence could perhaps have been eager to embrace access to American whiteness. This was an option that had been largely denied to their parents and might well have involved distancing themselves from the non-conformity of the previous generation.\textsuperscript{27}

During the 1990s, the intervention of historical anthropologists into the historiography and collective memory of the strike complicated the narrative of Lawrence’s “forgotten” past. David Cohen, the first to introduce an anthropological lens to scholarship on the topic, used Cowan’s story of Josephine Palumbo Catalana, the daughter of Camella Teoli, as a theoretical analogy for his larger work on the methods of historical anthropology. Titling his work \textit{The Combing of History} (1994), Cohen argued that the historical memory of the Lawrence strike, and particularly the narrative of Camella Teoli, represented the “continuous transformation of past as history into present experience.”\textsuperscript{28}

In his interpretation, the story of Teoli’s accident, the strike, and her testimony was told and retold silently each time Teoli had her daughter comb over her scar. Teoli had not forgotten the events—rather, the author suggests that “there was remembering in the ‘forgetting.’” She reproduced a memory of the ordeal and chose not to say anything each time her daughter combed her hair. The same reproduction of memory held true with the act of consciously remembering the labor unrest of 1912. When the city held commemorative activities, they actually produced a new layer of its history based on a selective understanding. As Cohen put it, “in approaching the ‘production of history’ one is also approaching ‘history as production.’” Thus,
in this interpretation, by both not talking about 1912 and later celebrating it, Lawrence residents neither forgot nor uncovered the “true meaning” of the past. Instead, they created new meanings that held a dynamic relationship to what had actually happened in 1912. By implication, one could suggest that the history of the strike belongs not just to the people who experienced it, but also to later generations of residents, activists, and scholars, each interpreting and understanding the strike according to their own perspectives and purposes.

In a special 1996 issue of *Radical History Review* dedicated to analyzing the historical memory of the strike, anthropologist Gerald Sider elaborated on Cohen’s insights, but pointedly portrayed the supposed rediscovery and retelling of the event as *constricting* its original purposes. Sider views the popular celebrations in Lawrence and the historiography of the strike as narrowing and counterproductive. He argues that Teoli’s “forgetting” of the events suggested less about actual reality and more about progressives’ and labor historians’ assumptions and agendas. In Sider’s view, the narrative that people in Lawrence “forgot” their history and, in turn, lost their class consciousness, allowed progressive intellectuals and labor historians to restore both their history and class consciousness. “With the intention of provocation,” Sider goes as far as proclaiming, “what more justification for the special role of progressive intellectuals, who help the natives discover their history and also, depending upon how ‘left’ the author, their future.” Sider also doubts the accuracy of both Teoli’s daughter’s lack of knowledge of the events of 1912 and the reasons why Teoli and others might have not shared their thoughts, experiences and memories of the strike. He argues that the circumstances surrounding the labor unrest might have been shameful and divisive to some participants.

The appropriateness of the slogan that strikers fought for “Bread and Roses too” has shaped much of the debate over the historical memory of the event, including Sider’s arguments. To strike for bread spoke to the desperate and dire circumstances of the typical American Woolen Company worker, who struggled to afford the basic necessities of life. To strike for roses suggested grander ambitions: that participants wanted to have more control at the workplace and be able to spend more time enjoying their lives. It also suggests that they hoped to be respected as human beings and workers.

However, by most accounts, the strike’s association with the slogan “For Bread and Roses Too” took place four years after the event, when a labor anthology attributed James Oppenheim’s poem “Bread and Roses” to the strike. There is little evidence to suggest that the strikers ever uttered the phrase, leading scholars like Sider to conclude that the meaning and purpose
of the work stoppage was more limited. Fittingly, Sider chose pointed phrasing on the opposite extreme in titling his article, “Cleansing History: Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Strike for Four Loaves of Bread and No Roses, and the Anthropology of Working-Class Consciousness.”

With this “cleansing of history,” Sider proclaims, historians and public intellectuals have painted an overly rosy picture of working-class consciousness. He suggested that the New Left and the new social history imposed radicalism and class-consciousness on historical actors. Historians and public intellectuals entering their careers during the 1960s and 1970s often reflected the political dispositions of the New Left and the new social history in their work. However, I would suggest that rather than imposing radical motivations, they largely told the story of labor radicalism precisely because it had been ignored and condemned for so many years. Although radicalism, or even workers’ desire for more respect, were not the only driving forces behind the strike, they were important components and are worthy of discussion.

Sider also accuses historians and public scholars of exaggerating the inter-ethnic cooperation that existed within the working class. Rather, he asserts, workers are usually divided along ethnic, religious and racial lines. While Sider correctly points out that the early-twentieth-century working class often expressed racial, ethnic, and religious divisions, he erroneously portrays the field of labor history as oblivious to this fact. Many labor historians have written about moments in which the labor movement suffered from these fragmentations, and Lawrence stands out as a relative exception. Certainly, ethnic divisions existed during the strike, despite participants having a common adversary, but as progressive activist Vida Scudder noted of the strike committee, “Men of different tongues and alien traditions were bound into one dogged unity … [and] vibrations of brotherhood ran through the great assembly.” Historians have not argued that this type of inter-ethnic solidarity was typical. Rather, the Lawrence strike is so interesting, in part, because it was comparatively different.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF LAWRENCE

Sider’s argument that historians and public intellectuals have stripped the original purposes of the strike from its participants fails to gasp the significance of the event’s dynamic and diverse meanings. Participants themselves often understood the strike in different ways. For some, it was literally a rebellion of the stomach, the need to buy four loaves of bread per week. For others, it was about not just economic need, but also about a vision
of a future in which employers gave workers more respect and allowed them to more thoroughly enjoy their lives. As one laborer proclaimed of the mill overseers, “They treat us like dumb cattle.” To many newspapers at the time, the strike reflected the growing problem of labor exploitation in the midst of rapid industrialization. Other newspapers, however, interpreted the conflict as an outgrowth of allegedly “un-American” radicalism. Workers in Italy viewed the event through the lens of trans-national Italian solidarity. Workers in Old Labor Hall in Barre, Vermont, who took in Lawrence children during

The “Committee of Ten” was a group of nine Lawrence textile workers and Joseph Ettor of the Industrial Workers of the World. It was charged with the responsibility of conducting negotiations with the textile corporations. With the arrest of Ettor on January 30, 1912, more responsibility fell on the remaining nine to maintain the momentum of the strike, solidarity of the strikers, and conduct negotiations with the corporations, most notably the American Woolen Company. (Courtesy: Bread and Roses Centennial Exhibit)
the children’s exodus, saw the strike as an opportunity to express working-
class solidarity.\textsuperscript{33} Just as participants and contemporaries often defined the
strike differently, suggesting the meaning or reality of it was not fixed even
then, historians, public intellectuals, politicians, and others have developed
similarly diverse interpretations for a variety of purposes. I would argue that
these efforts in the ongoing recovery, revision, and even creation of historical
memory have broadened the event’s meaning much more than they have
limited it.

Sider’s article precipitated a number of critiques by historians, many
speaking to the positive aspects of the multifaceted interpretations of the
strike by participants, onlookers, and those writing its history. In “Bread and
Roses: A Response” published in the same issue of \textit{Radical History Review}, labor
historian Paul Buhle argues that even if Sider was possibly correct in pointing
out that the slogan “Bread and Roses” was never used during the strike, it
still represented the spirit of many participants’ ideology. Syndicalists, for
example, fought for the broader vision of a worker-controlled society. Buhle
also questions Sider’s portrayal of the working class as primarily pursuing
rebellions of the stomach, noting that many laborers have been intellectuals,
poets, artists, politicians and political philosophers.\textsuperscript{34}

David Montgomery makes similar observations in “Bread and Carnations
Maybe?” (1996), pointing out that many workers associated grander ideas and
philosophies with their labor activism in Lawrence. For example, the Young
People’s International League, which formed a few years later in Lawrence,
recited the slogan “Beauty through socialism.”\textsuperscript{35} According to Montgomery,
to dismiss the importance of the working class’s larger visions, culturally or
politically, is to “retreat” back to the days of the “old labor history,” during
which scholars studied only institutional economics, narrowly defined.\textsuperscript{36}

In “Comments on ‘Cleansing History’” (1996), Ardis Cameron asserts
that that even the “wrong” stories of Cowan and others have enabled diverse
groups—“workers of all sorts, including men, women, retired, unemployed,
immigrant or the grandchildren of immigrants”—to evaluate “their world
and [give] new meanings to it.”\textsuperscript{37} James Green had made a similar assertion
in his reflections on the 1987 Labor Day celebration in Lawrence. “For
Democratic politicians as well as union leaders,” Green asserted, “the myth
of the Lawrence strike, without some of its radical implications, served
an important need: the reconstruction of coalitions which could appeal
to largely disfranchised immigrant and minority groups.”\textsuperscript{38} Lastly, while
expressing misgivings about social historians’ reliance on personal stories as
“hermeneutic and literary devices,” Christine Stansell notes that the event
“was, arguably, the first major strike involving men as well as women to
attract sympathetic coverage from mass circulation publications.” It led, for better or for worse, to a “working relationship between the Wobblies and the New York [journalist] intellectuals.”

Taken together, Buhle, Montgomery, Cameron, and Stansell underscore how both historical actors and later generations have understood this famous moment in different and often empowering ways. Historical evidence and historiographic trends support this emphasis on its plural meanings.

The historiography of the strike has demonstrated and expanded on its multifaceted and dynamic interpretations. Over the last fifty years, scholars have incorporated the field’s newest methodologies and subject matter into their analyses. The strike’s “official” histories emphasized only benevolent mill operatives, destructive radical outsiders, and a passive rank and file, but beginning with the new social history emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, historians began to examine the event beyond the limited lens of only renowned actors. For the first time, historians took seriously the diverse aspirations of rank and file immigrant laborers, the culture of working-class neighborhoods, and the organizing efforts of women. In its history and historiography, the strike has been about bread, roses, and other possibilities.

Although they have largely not weighed in on the question of historical amnesia among Lawrence participants, historians of immigration have been among the most active in analyzing the wide-ranging significance of the strike. Expanding on Donald Cole’s 1963 foundational work, Immigrant City: Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1845-1921, which explored Lawrence immigrants’ search for economic security, more recent historians of immigration have both directly and indirectly explored the question of how much progress Lawrence immigrants actually achieved. These historians, however, have moved away from Cole’s preoccupation with demonstrating the “Americanness” of the city. Instead, they have emphasized the variety of circumstances immigrants faced, and their diverse motivations for joining the strike. In a 1979 article analyzing the congressional testimony of two Polish participants in the conflict, Lucille O’Connell documents not only the active role of Polish immigrants but also illuminates how even within Lawrence’s Polish-American community laborers expressed a variety of goals. Whereas one woman’s 1912 testimony indicated that she was generally “resigned to unfair mill conditions,” another wanted significant change. Josephine Liss, the latter woman, testified to abuses such as the presence of child labor in the Lawrence mills, having to pay for water on the job, the company holding back one week’s pay, and being falsely arrested for assaulting a soldier. Liss proclaimed, “It is funny that a person can not scratch his own head when he wants to.” To Liss, the strike was about more than four loaves of bread.
In recent years, scholars have made a case for the strike’s international importance to both the people of 1912 and to the historians of this generation. A number of articles have been written in foreign languages. These works have covered topics ranging from workers’ attempts to integrate recently arrived immigrants into their new surroundings to the relationship between the strike and socialism.42

Elucidating the strike’s transnational character in a 1997 article in the *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Michael Miller Topp argues that Italian immigrants in Lawrence held ongoing connections with their homeland that helped to shape their perceptions and actions. They moved “strategies, institutions, and ideologies between the United States and Italy.” 43 For example, Italian activists had used the children’s exodus strategy in Italy before Lawrence strikers attempted it. Stefano Luconi suggests in a recent article (2010) that some labor leaders who participated in the strike continued their activism in Italy after the inter-ethnic cooperation of 1912 faded. During their lives, they looked both within and outside of the United States for what they hoped to be signs of justice and a better future.44 The Lawrence strike is thus best understood not just as a Lawrence, Massachusetts, or even a United States event. Its significance in both the past and present has travelled across borders.

In the midst of the broadening of the historiography of immigrant and ethnic groups, Ardis Cameron introduced the category of gender to academic analysis of the strike. Cameron’s work arrived after years of scholarly and popular neglect of the importance of women and gender to Lawrence labor activism. One notable exception was Theresa Corcoran’s 1979 article, which explored the connection between socialist progressive Vida Scudder and the strike. However, most works prior to Cameron’s *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912* (1995) virtually ignored the crucial participation and leadership of women, instead emphasizing male and IWW leadership with the occasional mention of radical IWW activist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.45 Previous scholarship had failed to use gender as an analytical category like class, as Joan Scott suggested in her foundational 1986 article, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” Even by the 1980s—more than a decade after the onset of second wave feminism—scholars had not adequately incorporated women’s and gender history into their analysis of important historical events like the Lawrence strike.46

As Cameron demonstrates, the coordination between women of different ethnicities in a “female space” was one major reason that a large amount of inter-ethnic solidarity was possible. In this “space,” both figurative and
literal, women, as both producers at the workplace and primary consumers for the household, interacted with shopkeepers and women of other ethnicities in their neighborhoods, sharing recipes and childcare, along with strike plans. Female strikers were thus able to utilize “the interconnectedness of individual lives in ways unavailable to unions or political parties.” They not only shaped their communities and affected the outcome of the work stoppage, but they also “disrupted established meanings and gave motive force to alternative visions of gender”; this is what caused them to be branded “radicals of the ‘worst sort.’”47 Cameron’s argument for the existence of a

“A considerable number of the boys and girls die within the first two or three years after beginning work,” wrote Lawrence physician Dr. Elizabeth Shapleigh. “Thirty of every 100 of all men and women who work in the mills die before or by the time they are 25 years of age.” Many of the workers in the woolen mills of Lawrence and in the textile industry elsewhere were young girls. Young women were recruited for employment by mill owners, many of whom believed that girls and women would provide a malleable workforce and were naturally disposed to textile work. (Courtesy: Bread and Roses Centennial Exhibit)
“female space” underscores a historical reality—present even in 1912—that women’s networks played a large role in the strike in ways that not even all strike participants would have fully understood. Examining this “female space” generations after 1912 also creates new meanings of the past and helps scholars broaden their understandings of history beyond discussion of traditional actors and spaces of protest. Cameron’s analysis of the importance of gender in shaping the event demonstrates how the strike had, and continues to have, dynamic multifaceted meanings.

Even as historians have adopted new methods of inquiry, the classic genre of historical biography has also served as an important medium through which to tell the story of the strike. Theresa Corcoran’s mini-biography of Vida Scudder emphasizes both the importance of women’s activism and the strike’s wide-ranging appeal. Likewise, through a narrative of the life of Carlo Tresca, “the last leader of the American anarchists,” Francis Russell familiarizes readers with the magnitude of employer and state repression of labor activism in Lawrence and how the event brought crucial publicity to the IWW.48 Perhaps most significant, in Mills, Mansions, and Mergers: The Life of William M. Wood (1982), Edward Roddy chronicles the life of William Wood, the fascinating president of the American Woolen Company, who was perceived as both a villain and a benevolent self-made man.49

Roddy’s work reflects the challenges of treating with sensitivity a man responsible for mistreating scores of Lawrence workers. While Roddy eloquently describes how Wood rose from a child of poor Portuguese immigrants to become one of the wealthiest men in the United States, his analysis is at times “apologetic.”50 For example, Roddy asserts that during the 1912 strike, Wood knew little of his employees’ difficult living conditions, and that his vision of having managers and workers not just working together, but also living together, represented his generosity rather than his desire for control. Such an analysis is not in keeping with the psychology of a man who later forced laborers to hold parades for him after he was indicted for profiteering.51 In any case, Roddy’s work is one of many that suggest that the drama of the strike and the complex characteristics of its historical actors continue to make it an attractive topic for biographers.

Three decades after Paul Cowan’s analysis of Lawrence’s supposed awakening to the strike’s history, its reach continues to extend beyond the walls of academia. In 2006, Penguin Press released Bruce Watson’s Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream, a comprehensive popular history. Watson synthesizes many of the aforementioned works in an engaging writing style intended to reach a popular audience. Similar to Donald Cole, Watson focuses on working-class
immigrants’ desire to achieve a better life, arguing that they were in pursuit of the American Dream. He interweaves the strike’s specific narrative with larger themes in labor history. He tells the story of how rapid industrialization, corporatization, and immigration affected laborers in the United States and how employers developed strategies to stifle unionization. Watson excels at the use of historical biography in his vignettes of William Wood and IWW leader Big Bill Haywood. Bridging academic and popular history, Watson’s narrative makes for an exciting entry point for non-academic readers into some of the most important themes of modern U.S. history. In many ways, his detailed work underscores the many interpretations of 1912, revealing how the historical meaning of the strike has changed over time. And while the slogan “Bread and Roses” appears in his book’s title, Watson stops short of suggesting that it speaks to the priorities of many of the strikers, since he agrees that the slogan originated four years later. Just as the phrase “American Dream” may or may not have been used by Lawrence strikers in 1912, I would argue that it and “Bread and Roses” both represent the spirit of what at least some participants fought for.

The strike also maintains a significant place in the realm of public history. Writers and artists have penned poems and written songs celebrating the resolve and ambitions of its participants. Whether based on historical fact, myth, or some combination thereof, the city of Lawrence has held a number of commemorative activities, ranging from yearly Bread and Roses festivals to the naming of a walkway as “Camella Teoli Way.” The winner of the 2000 National History Day Labor Award, a prize given to the best presentation by a school student on the topic of labor at the National History Day competition, explored the Lawrence strike’s multifaceted importance. In addition to this recognition, Lisa Litterio’s presentation was published in the March 2001 issue of *Labor’s Heritage.* In 2007, Morgan Reynolds Publishing released a book written by Julie Baker for young readers on the event. As the Lawrence population shifted toward a Hispanic majority in recent years, people engaging with its public history continued to evaluate the meaning of the strike within the context of the changing times. From 1970 to 2000, Lawrence transitioned from being 3.3 to 60 percent Latino. Aiming to bridge Lawrence’s past and present diversity, recent Bread and Roses Festivals have featured Latino performers and those from a number of other immigrant groups. Festival organizer Jim Beauchesne noted, “We’ve had a lot of local acts, including ones from our Latino community,” in addition to a variety of performers from outside of the city. On the eve of the 2011 Bread and Roses Festival, the strike once again served as a launching
point for discussing what it means to be American. This time the discussion took place not just though books, articles, speeches, on the radio, or even though music or art, but also on an internet message board. Commenting on an article in the Lawrence *Eagle-Tribune*, which announced Frank Palumbo Jr.’s upcoming book on the life of Camella Teoli (his grandmother), message board users discussed her legacy, the current state of Lawrence, and illegal immigration. Some users distanced the city’s current ethnic majority from the 1912 strikers’ supposedly more legitimate grievances by lamenting the city’s current “crime wave” or making statements such as, “The people of 1912 had no welfare, and yet only fought for decent wages. What’s today’s excuse?” Others on the message board used the memory of the strike as an opportunity to call attention to modern-day injustices against Mexican immigrants. As one user proclaimed, “[injustice] is still happening to some illegals from south of the border...when will some responsible person speak up for them?” Whether advocating a greater commitment to protecting immigrant rights or condemning their alleged negative behavior, people continue to use the strike as a flexible moment to discuss the meaning of immigration to the local and national communities.57

The expanding analysis of the strike by academics, but also its place in public commemorations, popular histories, and children’s books, underscores the great importance it continues to hold for diverse audiences. During the strike, a wide range of historical actors battled over its meaning. The collective memory of the event over the course of the last half century has been little different. Rather than stifling its “original meaning,” these ongoing interpretations and reinterpretations have captured its diversity, expanded upon it, and applied the events of 1912 to the lives of people across many generations. The strike’s place in historical memory has largely been about possibilities: inspiration for the labor movement, pride for many residents of Lawrence, and a moment from which scholars, including but not limited
to progressive historians, anthropologists, and feminists, have offered new methods for analyzing the past.

Notes


3 While the American Woolen Company provided no clarification, newspapers and textile trade journals suggested that the company had no choice but to reduce wages. Watson, 12-13.


7 Karen Lane, “Old Labor Hall, Barre, Vermont,” *Labor’s Heritage* 10:3 (March 1999), 54.


9 Watson, 220-221.
11 Watson, 242-243, 251-252. Watson also notes that during the 1920s William Wood’s company began to offer workers benefits, including accident insurance, maternity benefits, sick leave and a program to assist in employee home ownership, which arguably gave his workers less to protest.
13 Bruce Watson notes that the Pacific Mill closed in 1957. However, Gerald Sider suggests that the “last textile mill closed and moved south” in 1954. Watson, 253; Gerald Sider, “Cleansing History: Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Strike for Four Loaves of Bread and No Roses, and the Anthropology of Working-Class Consciousness,” Radical History Review 65 (Spring 1996), 69.
15 Cole, 172.
16 Cowan, “Whose America Is This?”, 1, 11-17; Cowan, “A City Comes Alive,” 22.
18 Ibid., 20.
19 Cowan, “Whose America Is This?”, 1, 11-17; Cowan, “A City Comes Alive,” 22.
Cohen, 22.
Sider, 49.
Watson, 256.
Corcoran, 188. A number of historians have discussed inter-ethnic cooperation during the Lawrence strike. See, for example, Sefano Luconi, “Crossing Borders on the Picket Line: Italian-American Workers and the 1912 Strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts,” *Italian Americana* 28:2 (Summer 2010), 149-161.
Watson, 28.
Lane, 48-61.
Ibid., 99.
Ardis Cameron, “Comments on ‘Cleansing History,’” *Radical History Review* 65 (Spring 1996), 92.
Christine Stansell, “Response to ‘Cleansing History,’” *Radical History Review* 65 (Spring 1996), 103-104.
Ibid., 59.
Francis Russell, for example, proclaimed that “twenty-three thousand struck in aimless anger,” and that IWW leaders “gave the strike direction.” Francis Russell, “The Last of the Anarchists,” *Modern Age* 8:1 (Fall 1963), 65.
Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912*, 13, 126.
Russell, 61-76.


Ibid., 255-257.


This identification card would have been fixed to the lapel of children leaving Lawrence during the strike. To highlight the oppressive conditions in Lawrence and to attract public attention to their cause, many striking families sent their children to sympathetic families in other cities. Public officials required that the children have the proper signed permission from their guardians. The strike committee created these identification cards. (Courtesy: Bread and Roses Centennial Exhibit)