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THE CHILDREN OF THE 1912 STRIKE

The fifty-six hour work week of women and children in the textile mills of Massachusetts was officially reduced to fifty-four hours on January 1, 1912. In the mills at Lawrence, wage rates were not adjusted, and workers' income was effectively reduced by two hours' pay per week. On January 11, after receiving their pay envelopes and verifying the rumored cut in their wages, weavers in the Everett mill walked away from their looms, thus beginning a strike which was to keep at least 23,000 of the city's 30,000 textile operatives out of work for two months while long overdue improvements in their working conditions were negotiated.

A Strike Committee was formed, with representatives from all major ethnic groups, and a member of the Executive Board of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was asked to preside over it. Strikers gathered to demonstrate their cause and to prevent other workers from entering the mills, and the regular police force was quickly augmented with special police and militia. Serious clashes between police and strikers in the early days of the strike created a tense and threatening atmosphere, which continued to pervade the city throughout the strike.

Appeals from religious and civic charitable organizations, as well as from the Strike Committee, began to bring in donations to feed and care for the families of unemployed workers. Soup kitchens and relief commissaries were opened in numerous locations. But those efforts were barely adequate; aid did not reach many. As the strike continued into February without a settlement in sight, a more radical plan for aiding the workers' families was formulated: their children would be sent to sympathetic workers in other cities, freeing the Lawrence workers to continue the strike without the fear of their children suffering in dangerous and uncertain circumstances.

'SEND THE CHILDREN,' IS WORKERS' SLOGAN IN LAWRENCE FIGHT

Empire City Makes Instant Response, Proclaiming
Solidarity of Workers of World Against
Bloodthirsty Mill Bosses.

PLEDGES POURING IN BY THE SCORE

Socialist Locals Everywhere Rally to Aid of Twenty
Thousand, Declaring Rod of Hunger Shall Not
Break Revolt of Starving Workers.

Send us your children! Is the cry that New York City must hear!

The New York Call (a Socialist daily newspaper) published an appeal for families in New York to take the Lawrence children, and within three days received some four hundred responses.

While committee workers in Lawrence took in applications for temporary homes, bought clothes, and had children examined by a physician, homes for the children were investigated by the Socialist Women's Committee in New York.

The New York Call, February 9, 1912

STRIKE AT LAWRENCE, MASS.

[Obverse side.]

IDENTIFICATION CARD.

Child's name, _____
Age, _____, Sex, _____
Father's name, _____
Mother's name (maiden), _____
Lawrence residence, _____
Parents' postal address, _____
Nationality, _____
Signatures: _____

SECRETARY LAWRENCE STRIKE COMMITTEE.

Men who will accompany the children to New York:

Remarks: _____

[Reverse side.]

Child's tutor, _____
Address, _____
Doctors in charge: _____
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Drug store where medicines can be obtained free of charge (address) _____
Signatures: _____

Secretary New York Committee for Lawrence Strikers.

Secretary Italian Medical Association.

Secretary Italian Pharmaceutical Association.

Medical calls.

Date	Remarks	Doctor's signature.
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from Mill Town

On February 10, the first group of 119 children boarded a train for New York. They were greeted by 5,000 people at Grand Central Station, then taken by elevated train to Labor Temple where another crowd awaited them. After a hot meal, their New York families took them home.

Throughout their stay in New York, the children were visited regularly by women on the IWW Strike Committee, who reported their condition to strike headquarters in Lawrence.



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Survey Magazine

[Acknowledgment of custody of child.]

NEW YORK COMMITTEE FOR THE STRIKERS OF LAWRENCE, MASS.,
New York, —, 1912.

No. —.
I, the undersigned, —, of —, have received from the New York committee in favor of strikers of Lawrence, Mass., the child, —, son, daughter of —. Said child was by me voluntarily requested to be taken and supported free of charge in my home, with all due care, during the time of the strike.

I bind myself to give back the above-named child at any time said committee should ask me to do so, with official letter, and to show the child whenever requested, to any person duly authorized by the committee; not to make the child work neither at home nor outside; and to notify the Italian Medical Association in case of the child's sickness.

In the presence of—

Secretary of Committee.



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from Mill Town

Reporting on the arrival and reception in New York of the first group, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn used the occasion to place the sending of the children within the framework of the IWW philosophy: "This taking of children is not solely through sympathy for the children. It means that the working class of America has at last realized that an injury to one workingman is an injury to all."

However, John Golden, President of the United Textile Workers of America, which previously had organized some of Lawrence's skilled workers into craft unions, denounced the action as a method to prevent an honorable settlement of the strike.

The police action of February 24 was the last violent act of the strike. On March 8 another forty children were sent to Philadelphia without interference, following a court ruling that strikers had the right to send their children away if the children were assured of care. Even as they were leaving, settlements with several mills were taking shape, and ten days later strikers voted to return to work in mills where settlements had been effected.

The terms of the settlement gave workers in Lawrence's mills wage increases from five per cent to twenty-five per cent, along with time and one quarter for overtime and a revised premium system based on two weeks' output and attendance. Mill owners further agreed not to discriminate against strikers, 17,000 of whom were still not working when the final vote was taken. Textile workers throughout New England ultimately benefited from the same improvements.

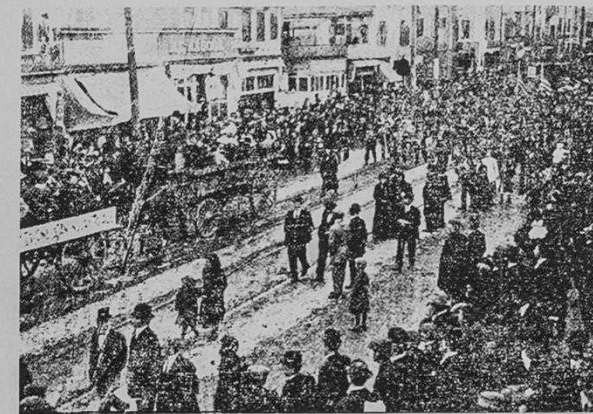
Lawrence made a holiday of the children's return. More than 15,000 jubilant mill operatives gathered for the mile long parade which marked the return of the children on Saturday, March 30. The bright eyed and well fed children, clutching bundles of new toys and clothing, were loaded into seven huge furniture vans at North Station and driven through the streets of Lawrence in a two hour celebration of their safe return and a victory won.



The Evening Tribune, April 1, 1912



The Evening Tribune, April 1, 1912



The Evening Tribune, April 1, 1912

The 1912 strike in Lawrence made working and living conditions of mill operatives a national concern, and a problem to be reckoned with in the city itself. The potential strength of an organized labor force, and the able leadership of the IWW, were illustrated at a time when socialism was seen by many Americans as a viable and attractive alternative to the corruptions of a capitalistic system.

It is difficult to assess what was accomplished by sending the children away from Lawrence, or whether the strike might have been unsuccessful if the plan had not been enacted. Seen in the context of that time and place, arranging for the care of the children by families in distant places was surely a tremendous organizational accomplishment, and a display of good will and compassion which would be difficult to duplicate today.

The fact that Lawrence's striking workers were willing to part with their children reflects not callousness, but a real desperation which no stated facts or figures can adequately convey. The plan had precedent among striking workers in Southern Europe. Children were also sent away during both World Wars from their homes in Europe and England, and more recently from war-torn Northern Ireland. The idea of sending one's children to an unknown place, to be cared for by strangers for an indefinite period of time, is unthinkable to us. Perhaps it was no less so to the people of Lawrence in 1912 until, confronted by life-threatening conditions, it became a realistic alternative.

On February 17, following the sending away of about 100 children to New York, Barre, Vermont, and other locations, Colonel E. LeRoy Sweetser, commanding officer of the militia in Lawrence, notified the Strike Committee that he would no longer permit the "wholesale shipping away of children" without the consent of parents.

When strikers undertook to send away another crowd of children on February 24, the police intervened and some thirty arrests resulted. The incident was widely reported as unnecessarily brutal, and the cartoon below, appearing nationally in many newspapers and magazines, captured the public outrage at the plight of the Lawrence strikers and their children.



LAW AND ORDER IN LAWRENCE

Hundreds of letters protesting the brutality were sent to Congressman Victor Berger, a Socialist Representative from Wisconsin, giving him the backing he needed to convince President Taft that the Lawrence situation should be investigated. An investigation of the condition of mill workers in Lawrence "as bearing upon the strike of the textile workers in that city" was begun by the Bureau of Labor. At the same time, the Rules Committee of the House of Representatives began hearing testimonies from a group of young mill workers brought from Lawrence, in an effort to resolve the legal issue of the rights of parents to send their children away, and to determine the relationship of the American Woolen Company to the strike.



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