

“We Want Bread and Roses”

Lawrence, Massachusetts was a factory town. It had the biggest clothing factories in the world. Factory *owners* hired *unskilled* workers from many countries in Europe to work there. Most of these workers were women. The factory owners got rich while their employees made almost no money and died.

The workers worked up to 60 hours a week, but only made about six dollars. Children 14 and younger worked in the factories. Eight to ten people lived in one small apartment. They were cold in the winter and hungry all year. Almost half of all children in Lawrence died before they were 6 years old. About 36% of workers got sick and died before they were 25.



In 1912, the state of Massachusetts said that employees could only work 54 hours a week – down from 56 hours. The factory owners made them work faster. On January 12th, a payday, some women workers saw that they got less money. They shouted, “Short pay! Short pay!” Thousands of workers went on strike that day. Soon, about 23,000 workers from more than 20 factories were on strike. Most of them were women, and almost all of them were immigrants. They *demand*ed a 15% *raise*, 54 hours of work a week and paid overtime. They had signs that said, “We want bread and roses.”

The workers didn't have a union. At that time, most unions were for skilled white men from the United States. The big unions didn't support the strike. They didn't believe unskilled workers, women and immigrants, could *succeed*. Most union leaders were friends with the bosses – not with unskilled workers.



One union helped the Lawrence strikers. It was the IWW. The IWW believed everyone should be in one big union. The IWW and many of the strikers believed that workers should own and run the factories. The mayor sent the police and military to stop the strikers. They arrested thirty-six and killed two more – a 34 year old woman and a 15 year old boy.

The strikers had a lot of problems. The police attacked them and put them in jail. They needed rent money, and their children needed food. New workers tried to take their jobs. What could they do?

Vocabulary

1. *owner* – noun – A person who owns something. “Someday, I want to be a homeowner.”
2. *unskilled* – adjective – No skills, not able to do something special for work. “Unskilled workers don't know how to use computers.”
3. *demand* – verb – When you say you have to have. “I demand respect from my boss.”
4. *raise* – verb – When you get more money at work. “We got a 4 percent raise this year.”
5. *succeed* – verb – Do a good job, get what you want. “I succeeded at getting a better job.”

Vocabulary

1. __ Unskilled	A. To say something that isn't true.
2. __ Owner	B. When you say you must have something.
3. __ Union	C. A person who owns something.
4. __ Demand	D. When workers stop work to get what they need
5. __ Raise	E. When many workers come together to get respect and better work
6. __ Succeed	F. Do a good job, get what you want.
7. __ Strike	G. A worker with no skills, nothing special they can do
	H. To get more money at work

Questions

1. Why did the factories hire more unskilled workers? Why women and immigrants?
2. Do you think only workers in Lawrence had these problems?
3. Does that happen in your country?
4. Why didn't the big unions like the strike? Why didn't they think the strikers could win?
5. Why do you think the workers asked for "Bread and Roses"?
6. Do you think the strikers won? Why?

Winning the Strike

The Lawrence Strike was the first strike in the US with women leaders. It was also the first strike with so many immigrants from so many different countries. Every strike meeting was translated into 25 different languages!

The factory owners hired new employees to take the strikers' jobs. The strikers needed to stop them, so they walked around the factories all day. This was called a picket line. The workers also stopped stores in Lawrence from selling clothing. Hundreds of strikers walked into clothing stores, so customers couldn't get inside.



The Army and the strikers in Lawrence

At first, the police believed that women were weak. One cold morning that January, the police *sprayed* water on some women strikers. Later, those women found a police officer alone on a bridge. They took his gun, took off all his clothes and almost dropped him into the river below the bridge. After that, the police didn't think women were weak. They said that one police officer can stop 10 men, but you need 10 police officers to stop one woman!



Children from Lawrence marching in New York City

Working people from around the country and the world helped the strikers. They gave strikers between \$2 and \$5 a week. Families in New York City offered to take in children during the strike. First, 119 children went to New York. About 5000 workers were there to meet them. A few weeks later, 92 more children arrived in New York. They marched through the city to teach people about the Lawrence Strike. After that, the politicians in Lawrence made it illegal for children to leave the city. When 150 more children tried to leave, the police hit the mothers and children and took them to jail.

This was too much. People all around the country learned about the strike. Americans learned that some workers had to clean the factories for free on Saturdays. They learned that workers had to pay money for drinking water. After two months, the companies agreed to all the workers' demands. They worked fewer hours, got raises and overtime. All the strikers were re-hired. Workers in other clothing factories outside of Lawrence got raises, too.

There were many unions in the US, but only the IWW helped the Lawrence strikers. After the strike, the owners wanted their workers to join weak unions. They were afraid of strong unions like the IWW. A year later, most of the workers had joined other unions. They lost their raises and had to work faster. But the Bread and Roses Strike showed that workers could win when they stayed together.

Vocabulary

spray – verb – To shoot water at something. “The firefighters sprayed water on the fire.”

Questions

1. Why do you think the police in Lawrence helped the factory bosses? Why didn't they help the strikers?



2. Why do you think workers in other cities got raises after the Lawrence strike?

3. When do skilled workers have power? When do unskilled workers, women and immigrants have power?

4. What was your favorite part of the Bread and Roses story?