Bread and Roses one hundred years on

By Andy Piascik

(Incognizance of March as Women’s History Month, we are printing this article celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Bread and Roses strike.)

One hundred years ago this month, in the depths of a brutal New England winter, the great Bread and Roses Strike began in Lawrence, Mass. Accounts differ as to whether a woman striker actually held a sign that read “We Want Bread and We Want Roses.” But, or whether that’s a legend that has grown over time. No matter. It’s a wonderful phrase, as appropriate for the Lawrence strikers as for any group at any time. That, in addition to the necessities for survival, people should have “a sharing of life’s glories,” as James Oppenheim put it in his poem “Bread and Roses.”

Though 100 years have passed, the Bread and Roses strike resonates as one of the most important in the history of the United States. Like many labor conflicts of the time, the strike of Lawrence’s mill hands was marked by obscene disparities in wealth and power, open collusion between the state and business owners, large-scale violence against unarmed strikers, and the great ingenuity and solidarity on the part of workers. In important ways, though, the Bread and Roses strike was also unique. It was the first large-scale industrial strike, the overwhelming majority of the strikers were immigrants, and most were women and children. For all of those reasons and more, the strike and the phrase that has always been associated with it hold a special place in the glorious history of our country’s working people.

Perhaps the most important of the IWWM’s contributions was its emphasis on solidarity and its unshakable belief in the ability of the workers to do for themselves. Support from around the country proved invaluable, but it was the strikers who did the negotiating and made all the important decisions. Significantly, women were involved at every level and their leadership was absolutely crucial to victory.

It was women, for example, who moved to the front of many of the marches in an effort to curtail state violence against the strike (although the police and militias proved not at all shy about beating women and children as well). It was women who led the singing and spontaneous dancing that were hallmarks of the strike. And it was women who decided to send children out of town to supportive families (including to Bridgeport) so they would not realize they could refuse. For example, did you know that you do not normally have to accept being assigned more than three different courses concurrently? Were you aware that you may only hold a maximum of two online office hours in place of on-campus hours per week (4.4.2)? Have you heard that all-time counselors should have ten hours of professional development per week (4.8.3.2)?

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