

April 28, 2005

Battlelines are drawn over workers

Part one of two

In the face of a national downturn in trade during the spring of 1908, Willimantic's American Thread Co. plant reduced weekly working hours from 60 to 50 and then shortly afterwards announced a further wage cut. This enraged workers and on the morning of June 9, 50 dresser tenders left their machines in protest. These mostly skilled men operated machinery that prepared colored yarns for eventual weaving.

The dresser tenders reached a temporary agreement with management and returned to work after three hours. Nevertheless, they complained that a cut of 10 percent from their \$15 a week wage was too much and that management had ordered them to slow down the speed of their machines, which meant piecework rates would be much lower. Dissatisfaction with the wage cut and reduction of the working week from six to five days spread to the women workers in the Willimantic plant and more than 100 spoolers left their machines in the afternoon. Some of them stayed in the plant, but many of them went home. This action enraged ATCO's manager Eugene Stowell Boss and he threatened to transfer production to ATCO mills located in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and if necessary, close down the Willimantic mills. Those mills would be glad of the work, because the recession had hit harder in Massachusetts and Rhode Island where workers were on a three-day week.

ATCO claimed that under the new pay scale the workers in the spooling room at Willimantic would be able to earn between \$8 and \$10. This was a reduction of only 7 percent, which was fair because business across the coun-

try was poor. Moreover, claimed Boss, these rates were "good wages for girl help."

The spooling room girls did not agree and in total, 150 of them walked off the job. They had not protested too greatly when they had lost a day's work, but this 10 percent cut was too much. However, other workers in the mill believed that these women were too greedy. They explained that the female spoolers had speeded up their work once management had cut the working week by a day and extra piecework payments had replaced the payment lost by the one-day layoff. Moreover, these workers were afraid that a shortage of spooled cotton thread caused by the spoolers' strike would lead to their eventual suspension from work. In response, one of the women strikers claimed that management had been spreading lies about them to non-striking workers in the plant.

The "girls" became more determined to fight for their rights after attacks from management and because of the mistrust spread about them. Eugene Boss realized he had a fight on his hands and on June 10 he agreed to set up a committee of arbitration which would meet in the Board of Trade rooms in the Hayden Block.

ATCO had banned trade unions, so the women chose their own representatives on the committee of arbitration. Accordingly, it consisted of local businessmen, who

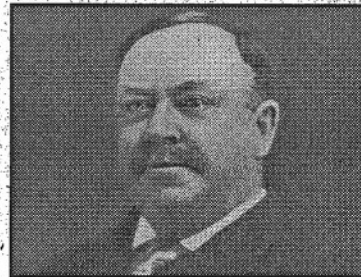


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would report to ATCO management, and four of the striking female workers.

After the meeting, the businessmen on the committee, Hugh Murray, Fred Jordan and Jeremiah O'Sullivan, went down to the mills and met with Boss. They reported the mill women's grievances, but Boss remained unmoved. He sent the businessmen back with the offer that the workers try out the new schedule and return to work immediately.

The women refused the offer and, in retaliation, Boss began laying other workers off, blaming the strikers for this. The striking "girls" knew that this was a ploy to make the strike unpopular and



Eugene Boss

in response, they contacted the Textile Workers of America Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor, and set up a meeting to form a local in Willimantic. The battle lines were drawn.

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