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Wage cuts, new machinery mark turbulent era

Part three of three

In the 1960s, the American Thread Co. promotional material boasted that, apart from the bitter, yearlong strike of 1925, it had remained free from industrial action because the company always treated its Willimantic workers well. This piece of company propaganda ignored a great deal of local industrial strife, particularly that involving the Knights of Labor in the 1880s, World War I activity in 1912 and, in particular, a short but contentious strike in 1908.

ATCO instigated this dispute by introducing swathing wage cuts and by speeding up machinery.

More than 150 resilient "millgirls" and the United Textile Workers of America (UTWA) reacted against it.

In the summer of 1908, 150 women workers in ATCO's spool room walked off the job after management cut wages and sped up their machinery. When skilled male workers from the mill demonstrated support for the women strikers, ATCO's Willimantic chief, Eugene Boss, left to meet with company chiefs in New York City.

The local newspapers reporting the strike found information hard to come by because the women strikers refused to talk to them. The spoolers believed that the reporters had been spreading lies about their action and that the newspapermen were company stooges. However, when the strike was a week old, John Golden, the UTWA's president, held a press conference in the Ancient Order of Hibernians hall.



Tom
Beardsley

Golden stated that the women spoolers and the male dresser tenders had legally formed UTWA locals. Golden stressed to the reporters that the new union members in Willimantic were "a nice class of people" and had no "fire-eaters" in their ranks. In combating company propaganda, Golden described the strikers as "cool and conservative" and stressed that they had not intimidated those women who had returned to work. Moreover, the new spoolers' union had formed a committee to meet with Eugene Boss when he returned from New York City.

Observers of the strike noted that ATCO had not fired the striking mill women when the deadline had arrived, as threatened. Empowered by this, ATCO's dyers arranged a meeting with Golden to explore forming a dyers' local of the UTWA. They met with Golden in the evening and organized a third UTWA local in Willimantic, much to the chagrin of ATCO's management.

The following day, Golden told the press he expected the spoolers' local would meet with Boss that afternoon. Golden stressed the women spoolers had a strong case and that the pay cuts and speeding of machinery were unfair. However, Boss refused to meet with the striking spoolers so they decided to take their case to top management in New York. Golden agreed. The strikers had been patient, but waited for Boss' response for too long. Reporters looked forward to Golden's press conferences, because the striking women were seething over the negative tone and refused to talk to them. When Golden left Willimantic, the newspapermen approached ATCO for information. They discovered that Boss had returned to the city, but he refused to talk.

Frustrated at the lack of information, the *Chronicle* reprinted an article from the Springfield Republican newspaper, which noted that "millgirls" in ATCO's plant at Holyoke, Mass., had also walked off the job, because they could not make a living wage after cuts. On June 20, 1908, two weeks after the strike commenced, Golden announced the strike was over. ATCO had reviewed the wage cuts, and agreed upon a new pay schedule. The company assured the returning strikers they wouldn't be intimidated by the overseers and management in the Willimantic mills. This had been a moot point for the striking spoolers, who were aware of Boss' tactics.

Golden and Boss were tight-lipped about ATCO's stand down, but rumors abounded that Willimantic's leading businessmen had also appealed to the New York officials to avert a strike, suggesting that the city alderman would not increase the company's taxes if an agreement with the strikers could be reached. That workers had begun organizing union locals was unprecedented and a strike would affect businesses.

At the outset of the strike, Boss claimed that even the reduced wages were high for "girls." However, Willimantic's women had flexed their muscle and Boss never talked about the strikers' success again at least in public.

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