

April May 5, 2005

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The struggle continues

Part two of three

In the summer of 1908, 150 American Thread Co. "millgirls" in Willimantic shocked the city population and the multinational, British-owned company by walking out on strike. Despite receiving insults and threats from management and workers, the resilient women stood their ground.

ATCO had cut working hours from 60 to 50 and sped up the machinery. After three days of management untruths and intimidation, the strikers contacted a trade union, the United Textile Workers of America (UTWA), and decided to form a local, despite the fact that ATCO banned trade unions.

The striking women were mainly spoolers, who in fact agreed that a 7 1/2 percent pay cut was necessary because of the national recession in the cotton industry. However, as management had speeded up their machines, the women working on less productive grades of thread, such as shoe thread, suffered even further losses.

The strikers spokesman stressed that if ATCO spread the pay cut evenly across all grades of spoolers, and return the machinery to their former speeds, they would return to work.

In an attempt to split the work-

force, ATCO's manager Eugene Boss laid off workers claiming that the strikers had caused this event. This enraged many ATCO workers but many in the city had great sympathy for the striking women. The Ancient Order of Hibernians provided their hall free of charge for strike meetings and some of the city's well-heeled women provided the strikers with food and drink.

The strikers believed that strike reports in local newspapers had been critical of them, and instructed that no one should give any information to reporters representing the *Willimantic Chronicle*, the *Willimantic Journal*, the *Hartford Courant* and the *Hartford Times*. Accordingly, the press had to gain their information second and third hand.

Information filtered through to the reporters that the strikers had told the UTWA that their wages were rock bottom and that the 7 1/2 percent cut was the last straw. However, a small proportion of the striking women were reluctant to remain on strike, because they were self-supporting, and had no family to sustain them. However, the majority believed that joining the union would protect their interests in the long term. This news filtered back to Eugene Boss and he threatened to close down the entire Finishing Department



Tom Beardsley

on Monday, throwing 600 hands out of work. He then gave the strikers an ultimatum: return to work on Monday or face dismissal. This was Friday and a long weekend loomed ahead.

Despite the threats and ultimatums, the striking women received phone calls and letters from other women workers in spooling departments in mills across eastern Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Heartened by this, they held further meetings on Saturday afternoon to discuss the formation of a UTWA local.

Monday morning arrived and only two of the striking women returned to work in the spooling room. This greatly disappointed Eugene Boss, so he responded in a statement that after talking to the company's headquarters in New York City, he intended to fire the remaining 148 or so strikers and replace them with 30 hands who would be given work.

The strikers ignored the threat and later that morning met with John Golden, the UTWA's president, who had arrived in the city from Fall River, Mass. The newspaper reporters tried to enter Hibernian Hall to hear Golden talk, but they found that the strikers had bolted the hall's doors shut. However, the reporters heard that ATCO's dresser tenders, some of the company's most skilled and well-paid men were meeting with the TWU organizer.

The dresser tenders had indicated that they would refuse to handle any thread handled by replacement workers or non-union help. Frustrated by the lack of information emanating from the strikers' ranks, the reporters went over to the mills, but heard that when Boss became aware that Golden was in town and that the plant's skilled workers were planning to form a union local too, he immediately caught a train to New York to consult with ATCO's top management. The struggle continued.

Concluded next week