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# Lizzie Flynn to the rescue

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In April 1912, more than 1,000 of the American Thread Co.'s 2,500-member workforce in Willimantic went out on strike to protest the company's failure to implement an across-the-board 10 percent pay rise. These workers were unskilled Polish, Italian, French-Canadian and Syrian women.



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Consequently, ATCO's management, led by Eugene Boss, confidently predicted they would crush the protest because these women had no leadership and few could speak fluent English. However, the striking Willimantic women were well aware of a successful strike of women textile workers that had taken place three weeks earlier in Lawrence, Mass. Accordingly, they sent for that strike's union, the Industrial Workers of the World, and its main organizers, led by a fiery, 22-year-old orator named Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

Flynn was born in New Hampshire in 1890 and moved to New York with her family in 1900. Her parents were dedicated socialists and trained young Elizabeth in the philosophies and edicts of socialism. At age 16, she gave her first speech, a lecture at Harlem's Socialist Club titled "What Socialism Will Do for Women." As a result she was promptly expelled from high school.

In 1907, Flynn became a full-time organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World and over the next few years, she organized Pennsylvania garment workers, New Jersey silk weavers, New York City restaurant workers and Minnesota coal miners. This was capped off by her successes in the Bread and Roses strike in Lawrence.

A new Massachusetts state law had reduced the workweek from 56 to 54 hours but the Lawrence mill owners sped up the looms and cut the \$6 average weekly wage. This sparked a spontaneous strike that rippled through two dozen textile factories employing more than 23,000 people in Lawrence. Those affected were mainly immigrant women of many nationalities, who left the mills and poured into the streets.

Flynn entered this scene amidst intimidation and violence instigated by police and strikebreakers and helped to organize the strike. Flynn and the IWW organizers arranged soup kitchens and child nurseries and provided translators. The striking women carried a sign that said "We Want Bread and Roses Too!" On March 14, the strikers won a 25 percent raise for the lowest-paid workers and smaller increases for higher-paid workers, overtime and guarantees that there would not be discrimination against strikers. The Bread and Roses victory resulted in easily won wage increases in mill towns throughout New England, including Willimantic.

The striking Willimantic women arranged a mass meeting in the town hall on Sunday, April 29, 1912, and Flynn addressed them. She criticized John Golden, of the Textile Workers of America, who was attempting to organize only the mill's skilled mule spinners. She called for one big union and recounted the Bread and Roses strike. Flynn immediately saw that the strikers needed more Polish interpreters and she arranged for them to be recruited. She arranged for the strikers to parade down Main Street but urged them not to become involved in violence perpetrated by management.

The following day, ATCO bowed to the IWW's demands and implemented a 10 percent pay increase. Flynn held a mass rally and meeting in Willimantic on May 1. Those in attendance gave Flynn a standing ovation that lasted for seven minutes. She began by congratulating the Willimantic women workers for strike.

"On this beautiful May Day you operatives of the American Thread Company have much to be thankful for. You have won a

moral as well as a labor victory in your strike for better wages and conditions ... your victory must be backed up ... the French, Polish, Italian and Syrian-speaking people must hold separate meetings at least once a month," she said.

"This is the quickest settlement I ever heard of. The stockholders live in Boston, Chicago, New York and other places and had no other decision but grant the 10 percent raise asked. They did not care to stop the mills because of the fear of losing a big dividend ... the day will come when there will be an eight-hour working day and a \$3 daily wage for workers."

During this period, writer, Theodore Dreiser, described Flynn as "an East Side Joan of Arc." Flynn also was a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union and was passionately concerned with women's rights and supported birth control and women's suffrage. However, historians have generally overlooked this famous woman's visit to and actions in Willimantic.



Lizzie on the picket line.

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