

June 8, 2006

Two-caste system of workers led to strike at Mills in April 1912

Part one of two

On Friday, April 26, 1912, 1,000 of the American Thread Co.'s 2,500 workers walked out of the plant protesting the company's failure to implement an across-the-board 10 percent pay rise. The increase was not uniform and individual pay raises ranged from only two percent to eight percent.

The company's lowest-paid workers suffered the most. These disgruntled workers were mainly women employed in Mills No. 2 and 4 and they immediately



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organized a mass meeting on the hill at the corner of Ives and Chapman streets. The strike ring-leaders made speeches in French and Polish and asked the workers to meet at the head of Railroad Street the following day to discuss tactics.

After the meeting the annoyed workers revealed the paucity of the pay increase to a *Chronicle* reporter. The highest paid of the employees received an 80-cent increase in pay, making their weekly wage \$10.80. The lowest paid included a 50-year-old, \$5-a-week bobbin distributor, whose pay went up by only 25 cents a week.

Most of the strikers worked 50 and 60 hours a week as carders, spinners, doffers and ring spoolers. The strike leaders claimed that the plant manager, Eugene Boss, had reneged on his word of an across-the-board 10 percent pay increase, because ATCO's unskilled workers had no union representation.

Moreover, they greatly disliked John Golden, the AFofL's Textile Workers Union leader, who represented ATCO's skilled workers because they thought he was in the company's pocket. The Willimantic strikers hoped that another union would be able to represent them more fairly than a union led by the untrustworthy Golden.

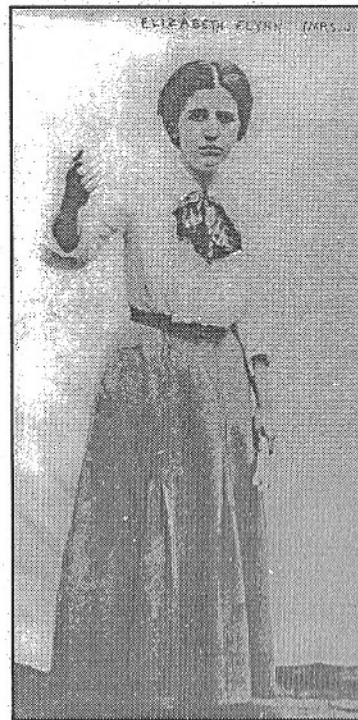
The following day, Saturday, April 27, the strikers met at the entrance to the footbridge and local organizers addressed them. They suggested that as Golden had refused to organize unskilled workers, they had asked the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to help them during the upcoming struggle with ATCO.

The IWW, or "Wobblies," had recently, and successfully, organized workers involved in a contentious strike at Lawrence, Mass. The Willimantic strike leaders announced that the IWW was sending organizers to the Thread City who could speak fluent Polish, Italian, Syrian and French-

Canadian, the languages of the vast majority of striking American Thread Co. employees.

One of the IWW organizers traveling to Willimantic was 22-year-old Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (1890-1964), a young woman who had built a reputation as a brilliant orator and organizer, particularly in the textile strike in Lawrence, which took place between January and March 1912.

The Lawrence strike was unique because it was the first led primarily by women and because it brought together people of 25 different nationalities to battle for better wages and working conditions. During the action, the women carried signs that said "We Want Bread and Roses Too!" and the Lawrence strike became known famously as the Bread and Roses Strike. Flynn was now bringing the Bread and Roses to Willimantic.



Union organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in 1917.

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