



Many American Thread Co. workers were evicted from their homes after they joined the picket lines in 1925.

# LABOR STRIFE

In the midst of good times for many, a vicious strike divides a community

The "roaring" decade began in Willimantic with a number of Polish- and Russian-born American Thread workers being investigated by state authorities because of suspected links with socialist and communist organizations. This was the country's Red Scare. The infamous Palmer raids arrested more than 4,000 people, and more than 200 suspected socialists were deported to the Soviet Union. But life soon settled down in Willimantic, and a further period of prosperity followed, and a number of new immigrants arrived in town to work in the mills.

The Hartleys came from Lancashire, England, to work at American Thread. Fifteen-year-old Edith May Hartley recalled that the family arrived in New York Harbor on Labor Day, 1923. On arriving in Willimantic, the family moved into a company house at 75 Quercus Ave. When she was 16, Edith began work as a winder in American Thread's Mill No. 4, but soon afterwards, the company was hit by a destructive strike.

The wages of textile workers across America had increased during World War I, and continued to rise during the 1920s. In March 1925, the management at American Thread froze the wages of their employees. Mill by mill, ATCO's workers walked off the job. The company agent, English-born David Moxon, told the strikers they would lose their jobs if they did not return to work immediately.

But the workers' resolve was strong. Union organizers from the American Federation of Labor and Industrial Workers of the World arrived in town. Food kitchens were set up, and massive community support enabled the strike to continue. Local grocers and shops gave the strikers unlimited credit. This caused frustration at ATCO and the strikers were dismissed and evicted from their housing. The vast majority of the 2,700 workers left Willimantic and found work elsewhere, but many remained and organized a tent city next to the railroad tracks across from the area today occupied by the Windham Heights apartments.

The most contentious issue of the 1925 strike was ATCO's decision to bring in replacement workers, or scabs, to take the jobs of those who were on strike or had been fired. Each morning, the strikers marched around the city and congregated at the entrances of the plant, and shouted abuse as state troopers accompanied replacement workers into the ATCO plant. The majority of replacement workers were recruited from areas in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine and Rhode Island where the textile industries had closed.

New England's cotton mills began moving to the Southern states as early as the 1890s. Trade unions were banned in states like North Carolina where labor costs were lower, and newer, more efficient plants had been built. By the 1920s, many old textile

towns in New England were severely depressed and the unemployed workers in those places jumped at the chance to come to Willimantic to a full-time job.

Many of the replacement workers were French Canadian, and this caused a great deal of friction between the French Canadian strikers and the French Canadian replacements. There are still families in the town who will not speak to members of families who were perceived to have stolen jobs. Many French Canadian families had arrived in the town after the Civil War, and had long established roots here. Understandably, they were somewhat bitter. Valentine (Aubin) Allaire (1908-94) was born in Willimantic. Her Canadian-born parents had arrived from Lowell, Mass., in 1904. Valentine started work at American Thread in 1922 at age 14, and she experienced first hand the bitterness of the 1925 strike.

Her father was out on strike for six months. She recalled the policemen patrolling the streets with loaded guns. Valentine concluded that, "the 1925 strike ruined Willimantic. We lost all the good people who lived here." The strike lingered on for almost a year, but the company won and wages were frozen. Many people agree with Valentine that Willimantic was never the same after the 1925 strike. There were only a few years of prosperity left. In October 1929, the stock market crashed, and the decade of Depression came to northeastern Connecticut.