



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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U.S. textile workers strike against wage cuts, Passaic, NJ, 1926-1927

January 21,

1926

to: March 1,

1927

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Passaic, NJ

Location Description: Textile factories in and around Passaic, NJ

Goals:

"(1) abolition of the wage cut and a 10 percent increase in wages over the old scale;

(2) reimbursement of the money taken from the workers by the wage cuts since the time the cuts were imposed;

(3) time-and-a-half for overtime;

(4) a forty-four-hour week;

(5) decent sanitary working conditions;

(6) no discrimination against union members, and

(7) recognition of the union." - Philip Foner, historian

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 013. Deputations
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 051. Walk-outs
- 098. Quickie walkout (lightning strike)
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 016. Picketing

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- textile workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

United Front Committee (UFC); Albert Weisbord, head of the UFC; United Textile Workers; Mary Heaton Vorse

Partners:

The Trade Union Educational League

External allies:

Communist Party; American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU); Furriers' Union of New York; The Associated Societies and Churches of Passaic; American Fund for Public Service, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, acting representative; American Federation of Labor (AFL)

Involvement of social elites:

Robert Dunn, ACLU

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Communist Party
- The Trade Union Educational League (TUEL)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- ACLU
- AFL)
- Albert Weisbord (exit)
- American Fund for Public Service (exit)
- Communist Party (exit)
- Furriers' Union of New York
- TUEL (exit)
- The Associated Societies and Churches of Passaic
- United Front Committee (exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 67 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Botany Worsted Mills; Forstmann & Huffman Mills; Passaic Worsted and Spinning; Gero Mills; New Jersey Worsted and Spinning; Dundee Textile

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The strikers succeeded in obtaining written contracts or oral concessions from some of the targeted mills, however, soon after the end of the strike, the union, whose membership had swelled to 12,000 during the strike, lost widespread support. Mills violated the terms of the workers' contracts and conditions did not greatly improve.

A union presence among the 17,000 wool and silk factory workers in and around Passaic, NJ in late 1925 and early 1926 was almost nonexistent. The United Textile Workers (UTW), an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), had tried to organize the workers in the past but had had no success. The management of the mills used the fact that the workers were largely immigrants from many different countries to their advantage and suppressed union support.

Harsh working conditions and long hours were dominant at every textile factory in the area. Men earned between \$1,000 and \$1,200 a year, and women earned between \$800 and \$1,000. Fifty percent of the work force was women, many of whom worked night shifts, despite a 1924 New Jersey law which prohibited this. Following the example of textile mill owners in New England, all of the mills in and around Passaic, save Forstmann & Huffman, cut wages by 10 percent in October of 1925.

Albert Weisbord, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the City College of New York and Harvard Law School, who had been active in the International Workers of the World, and the Socialist and Communist parties, moved from New England to Passaic to organize the textile workers. He formed and chaired the Communist leaning United Front Committee (UFC) in Passaic, which was under the auspices of the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL).

The AFL-affiliated United Textile Workers had objected to the October 1925 wage cuts, but the union's weak status prevented it from doing anything about the cuts. Within two months of arriving in Passaic, Albert Weisbord's UFC had enrolled about a thousand workers and was prepared to unionize the region's textile workers at whatever price.

On January 21, 1926, the Botany Worsted Mills fired a worker for "agitating" on behalf of the United Front Committee. A committee of 3 elected representatives of the UFC met with the manager, Colonel F. H. Johnson, to protest the firing. Colonel Johnson told this small committee that any other workers known to be collaborating with the UFC would be similarly discharged.

On January 25, 1926, the UFC membership met and elected a committee of 45 to meet with Colonel Johnson again. Their demands, as presented by historian Philip Foner, were: "(1) abolition of the 10 percent wage cut; (2) time-and-a-half for overtime, and (3) no discrimination against union members." When Colonel Johnson fired all 45 committee members on the spot, they ran back into the mill and encouraged all workers to walk out.

Within an hour, approximately 4,000 workers from the Botany Mill were on strike and had formed a picket line outside of the mill gates. By the end of the first week, workers at the Gera Mill, the New Jersey Spinning Company, the Passaic Worsted Spinning Mill, and the Garfield Worsted Mill had joined the strike. In all, after the first week, approximately 8,000 textile workers in the Passaic region were out on strike. The UFC composed a list of formal demands and presented them to the managements of all mills where workers had gone on strike. These demands, as presented by Foner, were: "(1) abolition of the

wage cut and a 10 percent increase in wages over the old scale; (2) reimbursement of the money taken from the workers by the wage cuts since the time the cuts were imposed; (3) time-and-a-half for overtime; (4) a forty-four-hour week; (5) decent sanitary working conditions; (6) no discrimination against union members, and (7) recognition of the union.”

Two weeks into the strike, most of the workers at the six mills that had cut wages were out on strike. UFC’s next targets were three mills owned by the Forstmann & Huffman Company, which employed another 4,000 workers in the area.

On February 9, 1926, a large number of picketing textile workers, their families and supporters attempted to cross a bridge from Passaic to Clifton to shut down the Clifton Forstmann & Huffman Mill. Police brutally attacked the picketers, forcing them to turn back. The mass of picketers returned the next day, and having expanded, was able to break through the police lines. UFC-affiliated workers at the Forstmann & Huffman Company shut the mill down, and on March 9, the United Piece Dye Works of Lodi closed due to lack of labor. Two months after the strike in Passaic had begun, fifteen thousand of the seventeen thousand textile workers in the region were out on strike.

The American Fund for Public Service’s Elizabeth Gurley Flynn hired Mary Heaton Vorse to be publicity director for the strikers. On February 25, Vorse published the first issue of the Textile Strike Bulletin, which served to raise the spirits of the strikers throughout the spring and summer. The Bulletin was written in plain English, easily read by newly arrived immigrants.

The strikers maintained daily picket lines at the targeted mills. Men, women, and children walked these lines. A strikers’ committee, with representatives from each mill, met at 9:00 AM each morning. Other mass meetings consisted of up to 10,000 workers. Communist party leaders from New York City, including Lena Cherneko and Jack Stachel, traveled to Passaic to assist with the organizing. Other support for the strike came from local storekeepers who extended credit to strikers. Some storekeepers made donations to the strike efforts. Landlords of strikers were lenient about collecting rent throughout the course of the strike. The strikers solicited financial support from across the nation by producing and distributing a seven-reel motion picture film about their strike, entitled *The Passaic Textile Strike*.

The Passaic City Council tried to outlaw picketing and public meetings when it invoked a Riot Act on February 25, 1926. On February 28, the strike headquarters announced that strikers would defy this ban. On March 1, a picket line of 2,000 strikers assembled in Passaic, and police stood by as the line progressed. The following day, however, police brutally attacked the equally large picket line, using clubs and tear gas bombs, and ordered the local fire department to spray the picketers with high pressure freezing cold water. The same thing occurred the following day with the police attacking not only the strikers and their families but media reporters as well. Two days later, the strikers came prepared with steel helmets. They marched joyfully past the onlooking police. Reporters covered the events from inside armored cars and from an airplane. Police attacked the picketers at different points during the strike and arrested strikers, who often served long jail time.

Children proved to be a valuable resource, gathering support and indirectly dissuading possible scab textile workers. On April 10, 5,000 school children marched through the streets of Passaic, raising support for the strike. Police brutally attacked this parade of children. The headline in *The New York Times* the following day read, “Passaic Police Rout Children’s Parade, 5,000 Youngsters Scatter in Disorder.”

Also in April 1926, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) intervened in Passaic to object to the enforcement of the Riot Act and martial law. After a series of arrests by city and county police, the ACLU sent national representatives to Passaic. After legal action, the organization won a restraining order barring the Bergen County sheriff from interfering with public mass meetings. Thus, the strikers were able to hold mass meetings in Garfield’s Belmont Park.

Delegates of 250 organizations representing 250,000 unionized workers gathered in Passaic on June 25, 1926. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (from the American Fund for Public Service) and Robert Dunn of the ACLU addressed the crowd.

On July 26, 1926, 350 members of the Furriers' Union of New York traveled by bus to Passaic to march in support of the textile strikers. The Passaic police chief, Richard L. Zober, objected to some signs that the furriers were carrying and ordered the police to attack them. Police charged and clubbed the demonstrators. They arrested six.

The Associated Societies and Churches of Passaic attempted to mediate a settlement between the employers and the strikers. Initially a neutral party, this organization of Russians, Poles, Slovaks, and Hungarians, eventually shifted to the side of the strikers, labeling the companies "Kaiser-like." This group organized a parade to raise support for the strikers and sent a delegation to Washington to ask for a federal investigation into police brutality. Other attempts to negotiate a settlement in the spring of 1926 were made by a citizen's committee, the Passaic Chamber of Commerce, and another committee organized by the ACLU.

John Davis, the U.S. Secretary of Labor, proposed in mid-March that the textile workers return to work and have their disputes settled in arbitration. The strikers rejected this offer.

On April 16, 1926, at the request of the Fortsmann & Huffman Company, a temporary injunction was imposed on the workers, forbidding them from picketing or consulting with other employees of the company. The strikers continued their protests and were not fazed by this injunction or the massive number of arrests that ensued.

Albert Wiesbord appealed for the support of the AFL Executive Committee on March 28, 1926. AFL president William Green quickly rejected Weisbord's appeal, making it clear that the AFL would only affiliate itself with the UTW. After much internal dialogue and discussion, the UFC and the TUEL decided that it would not be right to let the issue of communism get in the way of a settlement. The AFL was insisting that if that organization were to get involved in the campaign, Weisbord and other communist leadership would have to go.

In mid-August 1926, the change in leadership occurred. A new UTW Local 1603 was chartered and thereafter assumed control of the campaign. The AFL accepted the Local and therefore lent its support to the Passaic strikers. Thomas McMahon, UTW President and James Starr, UTW Vice-President, were now in charge of the strike.

Before the AFL takeover, the management of the mills said that they would only negotiate with the UTW and not with the communist run UFC. However, after the UFC was out of the picture, the management refused to negotiate with the conservative UTW.

By November, as the strike dragged on, the strikers' resources began to wear thin. Passaic landlords, who until then had been lenient regarding rent, began to evict strikers.

The strikers did not give up though, and a "Committee of Five" was formed to make another negotiation attempt. This Committee consisted of local residents and clergymen. On November 12, 1926, as a result of the Committee's efforts, the Passaic Worsted Company signed an agreement with the following terms, as presented by Foner: "(1) recognition of the union; (2) the right of the workers to bargain collectively; (3) no discrimination in rehiring; (4) arbitration of further disputes; (5) no outside help to be engaged until all the strikers were reemployed." The 10 percent wage reduction had been rescinded prior to this point, so it was not part of the November 12 agreement. The six hundred striking workers at the Worsted Mill met and voted to accept the terms of the agreement.

The Botany Mills settled with their workers on December 13, 1926. The Garfield Worsted Mill and the Dundee Textile Company then followed suit. Each agreement was modeled after the Worsted Company agreement, and each provided for the ten percent reduction to be eliminated.

Other mills refused to sign written contracts with their workers. After remaining on strike, workers at the Forstmann & Huffman Mills voted on February 14, 1927, to return to work. The only concession their company made was a promise to "endeavor to reemploy as many of our former workers as we possibly can, without discrimination." Two days later, workers at the Gera and New Jersey Worsted Mills voted to end their strike on the condition that they could join the AFL-affiliated UTW and would be reemployed without discrimination. The last strikers to return to work were workers at the United Piece Dye Works. These workers voted on March 1, 1927, to end their strike, without having won any concessions.

Following the strike, mill companies breached the terms of their agreements with the workers. It was common for a company to

fire workers and then rehire them at lower wages. The UTW did not have the necessary worker backing to object to these practices, nor did it mobilize its membership. Two years after the strike ended, the membership of the UTW had declined from 12,000 to less than 100. Soon thereafter, the union disappeared completely.

Research Notes

Influences:

Albert Weisbord brought with him to Passaic experiences from other labor strikes in new England as well as experiences from his involvement with the US Communist and Socialist Parties. (1)

Sources:

Philip S. Foner: History of the Labor Movement in the United States: Volume X: The T.U.E.L. - 1925 - 1929, International Publishers, New York, 1994, pages 143-163.

"The Passaic Textile Strike of 1926": <http://www.weisbord.org/Passaic.htm>

""The Prologue" from The Passaic Textile Strike : Albert Wagenknecht and others : Free Download & Streaming : Internet Archive": http://www.archive.org/details/passaic_textile_strike_1926

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Carl E. Sigmond, 29/08/2011

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