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Bread And Roses: Mills, Migrants, And The Struggle For The American Dream



Synopsis

On January 12, 1912, an army of textile workers stormed out of the mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, commencing what has since become known as the "Bread and Roses" strike. Based on newspaper accounts, magazine reportage, and oral histories, Watson reconstructs a Dickensian drama involving thousands of parading strikers from fifty-one nations, unforgettable acts of cruelty, and even a protracted murder trial that tested the boundaries of free speech. A rousing look at a seminal and overlooked chapter of the past, *Bread and Roses* is indispensable reading.

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Customer Reviews

Well sourced, evenhanded and briskly paced, Watson's account of the dramatic textile mill strike in Lawrence, Mass., during the icy winter of 1912 presents a panoramic glimpse of a half-forgotten America, one in which violent agitation and swift repression were often the order of the day. The story of how a polyglot mass of immigrants hailing from Syria to Scotland cohered into a powerful bargaining force is riveting in itself, and Watson (*The Man Who Changed How Boys and Toys Were Made*) places that struggle within the larger currents of reform that were slowly reshaping America. The cast includes self-made mill owner William Wood, who simply couldn't understand how "his" workers could betray him; Joseph Ettor, the union organizer who slept in a different bed every night to avoid reprisals; fiery Big Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn of the IWW and muckracker Ida Tarbell. The bloody strike was repressed from public memory in the hyperpatriotic years of WWI, later idealized by the labor movement in ways that downplayed union violence. This book's subtitle,

and its contents, suggest that the "American Dream" enjoyed by the nation's middle class had to be taken by force by the working class and is by no means a permanent entitlement. (Aug.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

American labor history receives a stirring but studiously balanced narrative in Watson's recounting of the 1912 strike against the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts. What started as a spontaneous protest against a reduction in pay rapidly escalated into a battle between labor and capital. Coming a year after an infamous sweatshop fire in Manhattan (see David von Drehle's *Triangle*, 2003), the Lawrence strike drew press and congressional attention to the lot of the mill workers, whose low wages left them almost destitute. Watson, however, does not inveigh in simplistic fashion; rather, he explains Lawrence's mid-1800s industrial beginnings, its transformation by the immigrant influx in the two decades preceding the strike, and the economics of the industry. Also demurring from demonizing the mill owners (one was just as proletarian as any picketer), Watson wisely allows the strike's actors to orate, march, or stand trial through the ebb and flow of the strike. Effecting a realistic, street-level vision of the strike, Watson earns and deserves the attention of readers interested in labor and the Progressive Era. Gilbert Taylor Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Like other Bruce Watson's book I have read, this volume provides enormous insight into history. I have a strong attachment to the labor movement , so I was delighted with the scope of the information provided. The price paid for improvement of working conditions for mill workers was central. The book enhanced my understanding of the different labor leaders such as Haywood and Flynn as well as the IWW itself. The manipulation of manufacturers and politicians was examined. The superpatriotic response to the introduction of Marxist philosophy was a point which was very enlightening. The branding of labor opposition with an extreme and negative association was a sharp tool in the arsenal to those who opposed rights for the workers. Interesting parallels emerged with the present in terms of the use of the term "socialist" as an attack. The supporting bibliography and footnotes were extensive and thereby very helpful.

I grew up in Lawrence and had several members of my family work in the woolen mills....Although the strike was not talked about, I was very aware of how hard the work was and how much sacrifice

was made by each family. Sadly, the history of the strike was not taught in our classrooms - I strongly believe that it is as relevant today..... I urge everyone to read this book and to take it to your heart. Bruce Watson did an extraordinary job presenting this story. I always was and always will be proud to be a member of one of those hardworking immigrant families.....and continue to be proud to have been raised in Lawrence.

Every leftist political movement has its 'high holy days' of remembrance, or it should. The international labor movement has May Day and in the America labor movement today, Labor Day. There are, however, other days worthy of celebration by militants here in America (and internationally) like the anniversaries of Sacco and Vanzetti, the great general strikes of 1934 in Toledo, Minneapolis and San Francisco and the subject of this review the great 'Bread and Roses' strike in the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. That, until recently, this heroic (and victorious) strike was not remembered officially under any conditions by that very representative working class city and that it continues to remain shrouded in ignorance tells as much about contemporary American labor as any other indicator. That ignorance is something that Professor Bruce Watson has with this effort attempted to remedy. As an important work of labor history Watson has done more than a commendable job. Moreover, because he has done such a scholarly, well-written and easily readable work today's militants can draw many lessons from that seemingly long ago labor struggle. On completion of this book I was struck by the parallels between the conditions that fostered that 1912 strike, the social composition of that work force and the attitudes of those bosses and today's 'globalized' capitalist working conditions. The ethnic and racial groupings today that make up the core of the American working class, for example, are somewhat different from those that fought the 1912 where South and East Europeans predominated. However, the much overused sociological term 'melting pot' still applies to the extent that the working class is not heterogeneous in its racial and ethnic makeup, a factor that not only aids the breakdown of class unity but is, a more or less, conscious stratagem of the bosses to divide the working class at the base. Moreover, although we are not talking about fighting for nickel and dime raises like those asked for then today the wage system has created a wider gap between rich and poor that would not be unfamiliar to those strikers long ago. And certainly the bosses have not changed, although they are certainly slicker than in those days of William Woods and the other textile magnates. And they put their money where their mouths are, spending over a billion dollars a year to defeat unionization drives and strike action. One question, on which there is no comparison, or none worthy of mention, is the difference in labor leadership as the 1912 strike evolved and today's labor

leadership. This refers not only to the differences in political perspective of the Bill Haywood and Joseph Ettor-led Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and today's Democratic Party-embedded labor leadership which are striking enough but about the nature of society and politics.

Fundamentally the old preamble to the IWW constitution drawn up in 1905 is correct in its assertion that there are two distinct and different class interests in the world and at the end of the day they are irreconcilable. Today's labor leadership acts as if there wasn't a capitalist that it did not like. An interesting sidelight to the IWW-led 1912 struggle was the attempt by the conservative traditional craft unions associated with the AFOF L during the strike to break away from the bulk of the unskilled laborers who formed the core of the textile industry. That has happened in later struggles as well. One thing that was clear then and has been muddied by today's labor bureaucracy (with no little help from social democratic and other leftists) is the role of the state. If any mass struggle in the last one hundred years points out the capitalist class nature of the American state it is Lawrence. At every critical point from the first day of the strike and from the lowest level of government the police and military power of the state was used against the working class and in defense of the interests of the capitalist class. This is the class struggle in the raw, up close and personal, that usually only gets exposed in pre-revolutionary or revolutionary situations. If nothing else, whatever Professor Watson's personal political sympathies may be, he has performed a great service by placing the Lawrence strike in the context of the development of American capitalism, especially in its post-robber baron period; the development of the multi-ethnic working class; the role of the development of light industry and the Merrimack Valley in the development of American capitalism; the creation and furtherance of a radical response to the primitive capitalist production conditions; and, the role of the state in capitalist society. One may fault Professor Watson with a bit of a 'kitchen sink' approach to this work when he brings in every possible event and personality that can reasonably or logically be connected with the Lawrence strike in any way. Even Marxists recognize limits to the interrelatedness of events in any particular situation. However, that is a small price to pay for this important addition to labor history. Kudos.

Having grown up in Lawrence, I enjoyed reading this account of the strike and the bravery of the strikers. Mr. Watson does an admirable job in presenting the evidence and I highly recommend this book. However, I would like to caution reviewers such as J. Windsor of Seattle, WA who claim that the Lawrence strike occurred during 'free market' conditions. This is an erroneous statement; but the reviewer is not alone in thinking that the Robber Barron era was a period of free markets. U.S. style capitalism has little to do with free markets and everything with maintaining elite privilege. The

U.S. has had a regulated economy since at least Alexander Hamilton's time, who argued for a National Bank and a commitment to economic growth through protectionist tariffs, subsidies to industry, and other measures recommended in his Report on Manufactures to the U.S.

Congress. The so-called Robber Baron era was no different with capitalists receiving state interventions in various ways. The symbiosis between the state and capital can be illustrated by such pieces of federal legislation as the Copyright Act, the Indian Removal Act, the Pacific Railway Act, the McKinley tariff, and the Federal Reserve Act. The lesson is not more state regulations to help workers. Rather, it is to do away with the state since capitalism would not function without it and vice versa.

We should not forget the labor wars of the early 20th century and that people fought and died for the 8-hour day, a living wage, weekends, paid overtime and all the rest we who work in offices take for granted. Those things can easily be lost unless we remind ourselves of the people who stood up for them and for all of us who work for a living. Sitting at a computer is the new factory assembly line.

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