



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Bread and Roses

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Good morning. This is a family story from my father and a history book by Bruce Watson. These events inspired me, my family, and our values. It goes like this:

Lawrence, Massachusetts, was built to be a Utopia of parks, shops, schools, libraries, and row houses, all dwarfed by the world's biggest factories – the Textile Mills on the Merrimack River. The city needed workers. Mill owners sent recruitment posters worldwide. One poster showed a family of ten, the father holding bags of gold, entering a modern mill. It read: "Here all can work, all can eat."

The richness of humanity came. People from 51 nations lived together in seven square miles. Lawrence was nicknamed the City of Immigrants, and it had a cosmopolitan air rarely found outside of Manhattan, from Italian bakeries to German newspapers. Besides gold, immigrants were seeking a new life and new hope. My father's family escaped the devastating aftermath of the 1908 Messina earthquake in Northeastern Sicily. The 7.1 magnitude earthquake flattened entire towns and killed nearly 200,000 people. Tens of thousands of residents were forced to emigrate.

In Lawrence, these people found jobs and hardship. A doctor's life expectancy was 65 years. Mill owners lived to 58. Mill workers died at 39.

Families lived packed like sardines as tight as 600 people in a single acre. This "utopia" had one of the nation's highest infant mortality rates.

The workers knew whom to blame: Textile tycoon William Madison Wood, the second highest paid executive in the United States. Billy Wood didn't share his millions, like Carnegie or Rockefeller. His gift was efficiency. Using bonuses and strict sick leave policies, Billy Wood sped up the looms from 90 picks per minute in 1890 to 140 in 1912; Lawrence's mills became the most productive in the country. But speed came with costs: illness, accidents and exhaustion.

Lawrence was a powder keg of 86,000 people. Then the spark was lit: In January 1912, the state cut the work week by two hours, to 54 hours. The mill owners responded by cutting pay by two hours a week — about 32 cents. On a Friday afternoon, when workers got their depleted paychecks, thousands walked out. Baton-swinging police and ice-throwing protestors faced off. The city was on the edge of chaos.

During a Sunday speech to the protestors, Industrial Workers of the World organizer Joseph Ettor — known as Smiling Joe — set the tone of passive resistance. He said, "You cannot win by fighting with your fists against men armed, or the militia, but you have a weapon they have not got. You have the weapon of labor, and with that you can beat them down if you stick together!" Encouraged, roughly 20,000 workers went on strike.

Smiling Joe formed a committee of 56 representing 14 nationalities to organize finance, publicity, investigation, and relief efforts. With translators, the committee operated like a United Nations — a herculean feat considering a quarter of the city's immigrants didn't read. Eating together in soup kitchens and marching together in peaceful parades broke down barriers. The next month, protestors formed the first marching

picket lines, a new tactic in America. Some churches, not all, aligned themselves with labor. The Unitarian minister raised strike funds in the collection plate.

Make no mistake, the strike was dangerous. An Italian woman was shot. A Syrian boy was stabbed and bled to death. A dynamite plot was thwarted. Dozens were beaten. Hundreds were arrested, including Smiling Joe. (Although he would be freed months later.) About 15 hundred soldiers, rifles ready, guarded the mills. One misstep would have caused a bloodbath. Weeks passed, and national journalists tried to understand how the strike could continue in the worst winter since the 1888 blizzard. They found a united people — singing. One seasoned reporter wrote: “I shall not soon forget the curious lift, the strange sudden fire of the mingled nationalities at the strike meetings when they broke into the universal language of song.”

The strike held. Women were the backbone, protesting loudly in the streets. Following the arrest of Smiling Joe, the nation’s most famous labor leader, William “Big Bill” Haywood of the Industrial Workers of the World, took charge.

On March 14, 1912, an agreement was reached. The workers would get pay increases, time-and-a-quarter for overtime, and a promise of no discrimination against strikers. “Big Bill” told them, “You have won the strike for yourselves, and by your strike you have won an increase in wages for over 250,000 other textile workers in the vicinity, and that means in the aggregate millions of dollars a year. ... You are the heart and soul of the working class. Single-handed you are helpless, but united you can win everything.”

The strike was over, but the battle wasn’t. The city fathers suppressed the story for decades, but eventually, the truth came out. The strike of 1912 was christened the Bread and Roses strike. Bread and Roses stood for labor’s struggle for decent wages and an eight hour day. The Bread and Roses strike has been immortalized in a poem, many articles, Labor Day festival, a book, and a song, including versions by John Denver and Judy Collins. The struggle lives on.

These events inspired my family’s values: cooperation, faith, hard work, hope, loyalty, and solidarity. My family still goes to political meetings, rallies and protests, and fights for what is right. My father goes because he has to “be with my people.” My mother comes from a union family too. But that’s another story for another time. That’s why my family is my treasure.

Those promised bags of gold? We’ve got them right here in our hearts.