

Work and Protest, 1920–1934 ^[1]

The 1920s Stretch-Out

Production in cotton mills soared during World War I to accommodate the demand for military supplies. At the end of the war, however, demand dropped precipitously ^[2]. The emergence of other textile centers throughout the world cut into Southern manufacturers' hold on international markets, and 1920s fashions that emphasized shorter skirts made of less material reduced sales even further. In response to these problems, owners tried to cut costs by reducing wages, running their mills around the clock, and making their employees work harder for their pay. Under such circumstances, labor unrest quickened.

In the 1920s, mill owners also tried to tighten expenses by eliminating wasted time and resources from mill operations. They added faster, more efficient equipment, which allowed them to fire some of their employees; they installed counting devices to keep track of employee production; and they adopted the techniques of scientific management made famous by Frederick W. Taylor. Manufacturers hired industrial efficiency consultants to find ways of getting more work from each employee. They also tied wages to rates of production that only the most skilled hands could match. Under this system, some employees could make a little extra, but most made less and worked harder to get it. Millhands running multiple, fast-moving machines found factory work increasingly strenuous ^[3]. They called these attempts at increased efficiency the "stretch out" and became frustrated at the difficulties they faced in meeting their quotas.

By 1929, workers' anger and dissatisfaction spilled into public unrest. "The issue in almost every case was rationalization and technological change. Faced with management attempts to turn back the clock on wartime wage gains and the breakdown of a tacit ^[4] social contract that permitted workers a measure of dignity and autonomy in the village and on the shop floor, a rising generation of southern millhands rediscovered and sharpened the weapons of collective resistance forged a decade before." (p. 212)

Strikes in 1929-1930

The wave of strikes began in Elizabethton, Tennessee on March 12, 1929. Millhands held out for three months, but ultimately came back to work after a settlement in which the company agreed not to discriminate against union workers, a promise that it did not keep. Before the Elizabethton strike ended, however, thousands of millhands had walked out of factories in Marion and Gastonia, North Carolina and in other textile communities across the Piedmont. In every case, the workers aimed their protests at what they called the "hard rules" of cotton mill labor. The odds, though, were stacked against the strikers. Manufacturers had warehouses full of goods and could simply wait for hunger and debt to force their employees back to work. The legal system also favored employers by allowing for the use of private police and the state tacit ^[4] militia to intimidate protesters. In Gastonia, Ella May Wiggins, the balladeer ^[5] and heroine of the local strike, was ambushed and murdered on her way to a union rally. The Gastonia protest collapsed in the aftermath of her death. There, as in other textile towns, the United Textile Workers union (UTW) was too weak to challenge the economic and political power of the cotton manufacturers and to organize the labor force.

The strikes of 1929 and 1930 were largely unsuccessful, but they were important to the future of textile unionism. "Creative tactics, indigenous ^[6] leaders, lessons in 'the power of group action' -- these were among the legacies of the 1920s. Even in Elizabethton, Gastonia, and Marion, where the strikes were checked at every turn, there were tangible benefits and seeds of resistance took hold. In Elizabethton, an autocratic ^[7] manager was recalled, wages went up, and hours went down. In Marion and Gastonia, the workweek was shortened, and conditions in the Marion mill village improved. For some individuals, the strikes brought a strengthened sense of self, a belief that they had made history and that later generations would benefit from what they had done." (p. 233)

When the stock market crashed in 1929, it brought a new wave of layoffs in the Southern textile industry, "further wage cuts, and efforts to recoup profits by 'stretch[ing] out the stretch-out.'" (p. 236) The stage was set for some of the most dramatic labor conflicts in all of American history.

The General Strike of 1934

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Industrial Recovery Act into law. Under the NIRA, a regulatory body known as the Cotton Textile Board was established to enforce a code of fair competition for the industry. The code's purpose was to limit destructive price competition among manufacturers, prevent the over-production of textile goods, and guarantee millhands a minimum wage. The Cotton Textile Board was controlled, however, by mill owners, and in practice, manufacturers often turned the code of fair competition to their own advantage. By "stretching out the stretch-out," they effectively turned the minimum wage into the maximum that most workers could earn and laid off thousands of additional hands.

The textile industry enjoyed a profitable year in 1933, but workers felt the squeeze of the renewed efforts to tighten

management control over the workday. Older millhands without pension plans were fired when they could not keep up with production, and the stretch-out hit spinners, most of them women and among the lowest paid workers in the industry, with particular force. Under such circumstances, workers found it increasingly difficult to feed their families and to maintain the dignity and autonomy that they had treasured and protected throughout their working lives.

After repeated refusals by the Cotton Textile Board to act on their complaints, millhands took matters into their own hands. "Beginning on July 14, 1934 in the northern Alabama community of Guntersville, wildcat strikes rolled across the state, pulling 20,000 workers out of the mills. Strikers demanded a twelve-dollar minimum wage for a thirty-hour week, abolition of the stretch-out, reinstatement of workers fired for union activity and union recognition." (pp. 328-329) When millhands in North Carolina threatened to do the same, the United Textile Workers union called a convention at which delegates presented resolutions calling for a general strike. By September 15, an estimated 400,000 textile workers had walked off their jobs, making the General Strike "the largest single labor conflict in American history." (p. 329)

Mill owners across the South responded to the strike by combining "armed self-defense with calls for military intervention." (p. 332) The governor of South Carolina mobilized the National Guard, as did the governors of North Carolina and Georgia. Manufacturers also tried to undercut millhands' unity by paying employees to cross the picket lines. At the national level, Franklin Roosevelt and his administration were slow to lend support to Southern workers. The President depended on the votes of conservative Southern Democrats in Congress to pass important New Deal legislation, and he could not afford to alienate them by confronting the textile manufacturers, many of whom were leaders of the Democratic party in the South.

Millhands and the United Textile Workers union were no match for those odds. After three weeks, workers began returning to the mills, forced to give up the strike by force and financial necessity. On September 22, the UTW called off the protest. Workers who had participated in the strike were often fired and evicted from mill villages after the General Strike ended. Many found themselves blacklisted and unable to find factory employment anywhere in the region.

"The General Strike, whatever else it may have been, was a moment in history that laid bare longings and antagonisms [8] ordinarily silenced, distorted, or repressed. Cotton mill people in the 1930s may not have subscribed to an abstract, universalistic notion of class solidarity. If nothing else, deep racial divisions militated against such perceptions. But mill folk did see themselves as a people apart, exploited by men with interests opposed to their own and denied opportunities for progress that had seemed within their grasp. Their militancy [9] sprang in part from a defense of traditional values and in part from a desire to exert control over their changing place in a new, more expansive world -- and it must be understood on its own terms and in its own historical moment." (p. 353)

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