



A Thread In Time

Newsletter of the National Society of Descendants of
Textile Workers of America, Inc.

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President's Message

As I write my message, the horrific damage hurricane Harvey has wrecked on Houston and southeast Texas is on everyone's mind. It is hard to fathom 4 feet of rain in a couple of days. We have many members in the Houston Texas area, including some of our newer members. Our thoughts and prayers go out to them and I would urge our membership to contribute to our brothers and sisters in need. It looks like a long road to recovery.

The 2017 annual meeting of the National Society of the Descendants of Textile Workers of America, Inc. was held at 1:00 pm Sunday, March 19th at the Grill 37, 37 Putnam Street (Route 44) Pomfret, CT. All of the officers, and a few members were in attendance. Our membership is growing, with about a third of our members becoming life members. Insignia sales are brisk, supplying enough funds to maintain our scholarship fund. We have managed to keep our costs to a minimum and should be able to prevent any dues increases for a few years.

We have been printing a series on different mills in our newsletter, one of our members, Nancy Saunders of Gastonia, NC, suggested an article on the Loray Mill strike of 1929 which we printed in our last issue. We had such good feedback that in this issue we continue following the turmoil in the textile mills and how it came to a head in 1934 when the textile workers went on strike across the whole east coast.

Please contact me if you would like a mill in your area highlighted in one of our issues or if you have other aspects of the textile workers life you are interested in. It doesn't have to have much detail, the research into the article is the part I enjoy.

I would like to welcome our newest members from across the country. Please contact me if you have suggestions to improve our society. Also, if you have information to share on your ancestors, please submit it for inclusion on our website.

Best Regards, Bill Warner



Striking textile workers come up against state troopers in 1934. Public Domain, Libcom.net

New Members

We welcome our newest members to the society.

#70 - Susan Leining; Columbus, OH

#71 - Barbara E. Terrill; West End, NC

#72 - Judith Quinn; Rochester Hills, MI

#73 - Janisue Rigel; The Woodlands, TX

#74 - Sarah Schneider; Bursleson, TX

#75 - Luna Schneider; The Woodlands, TX

#76 - Davena Rigel-Liepman; The Woodlands, TX

#77 - Keven Botelho; Swansea, MA

TEXTILE WORKER'S STRIKE - 1934

The **textile workers' strike of 1934** was the largest strike in the labor history of the United States at the time, involving 400,000 textile workers from New England to the southern states lasting twenty-two days.

The textile industry, once concentrated in New England had started moving South in the 1880s. By 1933 Southern mills produced more than seventy percent of cotton and woolen textiles in more modern mills, drawing on the pool of dispossessed farmers and laborers willing to work for roughly forty percent less than their Northern counterparts.

Throughout the 1920s, however, the mills faced an intractable problem of overproduction, as the wartime boom for cotton goods ended, while foreign competition cut into their markets. Although manufacturers tried to reduce the oversupply by forming industry associations to regulate competition, their favored solution to the crisis was to squeeze more work out of their employees through what workers called the "stretch-out": speeding up production by increasing the number of looms assigned to each factory hand, limiting break times, paying workers by piece rates, and increasing the number of supervisors to keep workers from slowing down, talking or leaving work.

The stretch-out sparked hundreds of strikes throughout the Southeast: by one count, there were more than eighty strikes in South Carolina in 1929 alone. While most of them were short-lived, these strikes were almost all spontaneous walkouts, without any union – or other – leadership.

That year also saw the massive strikes that began in Gastonia, North Carolina, and Elizabethton, Tennessee, which were violently suppressed by local police and vigilantes. Here again, workers were often more militant than their trade union leadership: to take one striking example, the workers at the Loray Mill in Gastonia walked out under the leadership of the communist-led National Textile Workers Union.

In the meantime, the Great Depression made matters worse. The economic collapse drove a number of manufacturers into bankruptcy, while those employers who survived laid off workers and increased the amount and pace of work for their employees even further. Textile workers across the country engaged in hundreds of isolated strikes, even though there were thousands of unemployed workers desperate to take their places.

In 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt took office while the United States was in the midst of the worst economic crisis in its history. One of his first acts in office, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), guaranteed the rights of workers to form unions. The promise of the right to join a union had a big effect on textile workers: the United Textile Workers (UTW), which had no more than 15,000 members in February, 1933, grew to 250,000 members by June, 1934, of whom roughly half were cotton mill workers.

THE STRIKE BEGINS — The strike swept through Southern cotton mills, outpacing the union organizers and employing "flying squadrons" which traveled by truck and on foot from mill to mill, calling the workers out. In Gastonia, where authorities had violently suppressed a strike led by the National Textile Workers Union in 1929, an estimated 5,000 people marched in the September 3rd Labor Day parade. The next day union organizers estimated that 20,000 out of the 25,000 textile workers in the county were out on strike.

It is not clear whether the UTW expected to have this much success so easily and so quickly in the South; it had only shallow roots and few regular organizers in that region. But Southern textile workers had a good deal of experience in confronting management, both by impromptu strikes and other means, and a deep well of bitterness against their employers.

Textile workers in the North went out on strike in great numbers as well, although they were spread more evenly across different industries and had more diverse grievances than the Southern cotton mill workers. Within a week, almost 400,000 textile workers nationwide had left their jobs and the textile industry was shut down.

THE AUTHORITIES RESPOND — The mill owners were initially taken by surprise by the scope of the strike. They immediately took the position that these flying squadrons were, in fact, coercing their employees to go out on strike.

In many states, the Governors called out the National Guard to maintain order. Over the next couple of weeks, there were at least 16 deaths, dozens of shootings, and hundreds of arrests. The show of force effectively ended picketing throughout most of the country.

The strike was, in fact, already falling apart, particularly in the South, where local government refused to provide any relief assistance to strikers and there were few sympathetic churches or unions to provide support. Although the union had pledged before the walkout began to feed strikers, it was wholly unable to fulfill this promise. While roughly half of the textile workers in North and South Carolina and roughly three fourths in Georgia were on strike at this point,

with similar figures in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, workers had started to drift back to work and struck plants were reopening, if with only skeleton crews.

At that point, the mediation board that President Roosevelt had appointed in the first week of the strike issued its report. As was typical of federal commissions, the board urged further studies of the economic plight of the employers and the effects of the stretch-out on their employees. It urged the President to create a new Textile Labor

Relations Board to hear workers' complaints and urged employers not to discriminate against strikers.

President Roosevelt announced his support for the report, then urged employees to return to work and the manufacturers to accept the commission's recommendations. The UTW took the opportunity to declare victory and held a number of parades to celebrate the end of the strike.

In fact, the strike was a total defeat for the union, particularly in the South. The union had not forced the mill owners to recognize it or obtained any of its economic demands. The employers refused, moreover, to reinstate strikers throughout the South, while the Cotton Textile National Industrial Relations Board never ceded any authority to any other board. Thousands of strikers never returned to work in the mills.

THE AFTERMATH — The strike represented the high point for union hopes of organizing textile workers in the South for the next several decades. When the Congress of Industrial Organizations (**CIO**) formed the Textile Workers Organizing Committee three years later, the TWOC focused on northern manufacturers outside the cotton industry. TWOC's successor, the Textile Workers Union of America, faced similar problems organizing in the South; the CIO's postwar organizing drive in the South fell apart chiefly because of its inability to organize textile workers there.

The union might have escaped this disaster if it had characterized the strike as a first step, rather than attempting to pass it off as a victory. That, however, would have required that the union also devote the resources necessary to follow up with renewed, systematic organizing efforts in the immediate aftermath of the strike, instead of concerning itself with the futile effort to win reinstatement for discharged strikers through the Textile Labor Board. The memory of blacklisting and defeat soured many Southern textile workers on unions for decades.

The 1934 defeat was less cataclysmic in the North, in that the strike was in fact, a number of separate events, commencing at different times in separate industries and in furtherance of local goals. Northern employers were not as ruthless in blacklisting workers and the TWOC made some headway in organizing these plants in the years that followed. Those victories were impermanent, however, as much of northern industry either went South or went bankrupt in the years that followed.

Anti-union sentiment in the South kept wages low for decades, but also acted as a catalyst for development later when industries moved there from the North and Midwest because of lower costs.

The text for this article is taken from [Wikipedia.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1934_Textile_Industry_Strike).

Website

Once again, I invite you to visit our outstanding website at www.textileworker.com. Our newsletters are available on the website in full color. You will also notice that some of the honor roll members have special attachments with anecdotes about their life. You are welcome to submit material about your ancestor. Please contact Bill Warner at wwarner13@gmail.com or Mary Brown at mbrown06239@gmail.com for submission of this material.

Scholarship

A goal of our Society is to provide scholarships to Vocational School students. The scholarship does not have to be used for college. It can be for licensing fees, tools, etc. The student must meet the following criteria:

1. Exemplary work ethic
2. Respect for self, family, peers, and authority
3. Strong background and interest in American History
4. Good academic performance
5. Attendance record indicates no suspensions or unexcused absences

This past June, the scholarship was awarded to **Bailey Voorvaart** of Windham Technical High School, Willimantic, CT. Congratulations Bailey, we wish you the best.

Officers

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Insignia

You may order our insignia pin for \$40, our mini insignia for \$30, our charm for \$30 or the life membership pin for \$10 (available to Life Members only). Send a check, including \$5 for shipping and handling, made out to NSDTWA to Ms. Nancy Merwin, 284 Chesterfield Road, Oakdale, CT 06370. Insignia is always available at the annual meeting. All proceeds from the sale of insignia are placed in the scholarship fund.