

Lawrence, 1912: The Singing Strike

BY *BILL BIGELOW AND NORMAN DIAMOND*

THIS ACTIVITY EMBODIES a couple of key insights of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*. One is that history is not inevitable. People’s choices matter. Through role play, students in this lesson explore some of the actual dilemmas faced by strikers in Lawrence, Mass., in 1912. Here, the teaching methodology is designed to match the history itself, as students portray Industrial Workers of the World organizers deciding how—and for what—to conduct a massive strike. The other is that social class matters. Too often, traditional textbooks and curricula neglect the way social class has shaped our country’s history and how people’s understanding of class has influenced their actions. Social class is at the heart of this lesson, as it is at the heart of so much of Howard Zinn’s work.

This activity—co-authored with Norm Diamond and included originally in the book *The Power in Our Hands: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States*—highlights how unions can have different goals and structures than the ones that predominate today. In “Lawrence, 1912,” students contrast the American Federation of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World. Students act as, and empathize with, union organizers. The role play illustrates, well, the power in our hands—one of the first major victories for U.S. labor, and an inspirational instance of worker solidarity. This lesson broadens students’ sense of what workers can and do fight for beyond wages and benefits.

Goals/Objectives:

- Students will become familiar with different understandings of the function and purpose of labor unions.
- Students will see relationships between these different conceptions of unions and the actual organizations that were built.
- Students will learn about some of the practicalities of labor organizing.
- Students will practice collective decision-making.

Materials Needed:

- Student Handout: “You Are in the IWW”
- Student Handout: “Lawrence, 1912—Part 1: The Strike Is On!”
- Student Handout: “Lawrence Problem-Solving #1: Getting Organized”
- Student Handout: “Lawrence, 1912—Part 2: Unity in Diversity” (student copies optional)
- Student Handout: “Lawrence Problem-Solving #2: Can We Win?”
- Student Handout: “Lawrence, 1912—Part 3: The Outcome”

Time Required:

The duration of the role play depends in large part on how long students take when they assume the role of IWW members and discuss issues confronted by striking workers in Lawrence. Several class periods are required for students to get the most out of the activity. And, as mentioned in the introduction to this guide, the pedagogy here reinforces the historical knowledge: students grasp how “people make history” as they discuss the difficult choices faced by the actual participants. It’s a history of living choices and not simply dead facts on a page.

Procedure:

Getting into Role

1. Distribute Student Handout “You Are in the IWW.” Explain to students that they will be involved in a role play in which each of them will portray a member of the Industrial Workers of the World—the IWW. Therefore, it will be important that they fully understand their roles. Tell students that you will put them in small groups so that they can help one another and you can better assist them with their work. Encourage students to complete the AFL/IWW comparisons in as much detail as possible. If students have not written interior monologues before, it would be helpful to review this part of the assignment.
2. Form the groups and ask students to read the role and work on the AFL/IWW comparisons. They should work individually on the interior monologues.
3. Ask for a few volunteers to read their interior monologues, either in their small groups or to the entire class.
4. Review with students the IWW role:
 - What big changes have occurred in the workplace?
 - How were tools owned before? How are they owned in the workplace now?
5. To clarify the reading up to this point, suggest that students imagine an industry producing a familiar product, such as shoes. Have them picture a number of shoe factories, set in different geographical locations. Ask how many owners there might have been in the 19th century. By 1912, if the number of factories stayed the same, would we expect more, fewer, or the same number of owners? If there had been a union in one of the factories at an earlier time, and the same union existed in 1912, how would the concentration of ownership have affected it? [It could be placed in competition with other workers in other factories of the same owner. Now if it went on strike, the company could shift production and obtain the same products or even increase production at its other factories.] Inside the factory, how have tools changed? Are there different kinds of workers? What would the IWW do about the changes in working conditions?
6. Remind students they are IWW members and interview them about their ideas. Play
 - What is a craft union?
 - What change has taken place in the ownership of industry?
 - How do all these changes affect the ability of unions to bargain for their members?
 - What kinds of workers does the AFL try to organize?
 - How does this compare to the IWW?
 - Remind them of Big Bill Haywood’s metaphor of the hand from the reading. What was the point of Haywood’s demonstration? How does the IWW try to bring the separate fingers into a fist? Is it simply that the IWW doesn’t divide people by craft, as the AFL does? How is the kind of education and involvement encouraged of IWW members important in uniting workers?
 - What do IWW members think the goal of a union should be? (What kind of society do you want to create?)
 - Why do you sing together?

this part with a contentious attitude, acting more as “devil’s advocate” than as neutral questioner. Pose these questions as challenges:

- Why do you think women can be organized?
- How can immigrant groups that don’t even speak the same language get together in a union?
- What makes you think that the whole society can be changed? What makes you believe that lowly, unskilled workers are in any position to change society?
- If you don’t recognize the right of owners to own, how could anything even be produced? Who would get everybody organized and working?
- If the AFL is so bad, why does it have so many more members around the country than the IWW?

Organizing for the Strike

1. Explain to students that as IWW members, they are going to be part of an important strike involving thousands of people. Their goal is both to build a strike that can win and to build a union in line with the IWW principles they’ve read about and discussed. Before talking about the specific strike, we need to discuss how to accomplish our larger, long-term goals: to build a union where all the members are leaders as well as organizers for social change.
2. Write on the board or overhead the following quote from Eugene V. Debs, a founder of the IWW:

Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. He has not come; he never will come. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds that there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves.

Read this aloud with the class. Ask them:

- What would people have to believe about themselves in order to accept that paragraph?
 - What attitudes would organizers need to develop and help others develop? (Some possible answers include: that we can act on our convictions; that we are able to join with others; that our actions together can make a difference.)
 - List student contributions on the board.
3. Distribute Student Handout “Lawrence, 1912—Part 1” and “Lawrence Problem-Solving #1”. Read the selections aloud in class. Ask them to jot down ideas for each of the questions in the problem solving.



Strikers’ children, Lawrence, Mass., 1912.

Brown Brothers, Sterling PA

The Strike Is On

1. Review with students:
 - Why did the strike occur? Besides the immediate events, the speed-up and pay cut, what about working and living conditions was important in the decision to strike?
 - What obstacles face IWW organizers attempting to build a unified strike? What divisions might exist within the workforce or community? What attitudes toward authority?
 - Why did the AFL act as it did?

2. Remind students that they are IWW members, planning and leading a complicated struggle. Once again, their goal is not simply to win the strike (although that's important), but to build a union along the principles of the IWW. The first problems they will face are included in "Lawrence Problem-Solving #1." Even before that, however, they'll have to decide on the process they'll use to discuss and solve the problems.
3. Seat students in a circle so that they can talk to one another more easily. Explain that because theirs is a democratic union and because they believe in equality, no one will be around to tell them what to do. In the IWW, not only would they not allow a single individual to make decisions for everyone else, but they would try to encourage the broadest possible participation. The strike will succeed only because they are able to make it succeed—together. Therefore, you (the teacher) will play no role in their discussions. Once their strike meeting begins, you will be just an observer. It will be up to the entire class to decide how to make decisions and what those decisions should be.
4. Once they understand that you won't assist with their deliberations, you may want to discuss with them some of the ways they can reach decisions. For example, they could select a chairperson who would then call on individuals to speak and propose when votes might be taken. Perhaps they will want to avoid leaders entirely—students might raise hands, with the last person to speak calling on the next speaker and so on. Or a rotating chairperson might be chosen—one chair per question, for example. The teacher's job is merely to help the students to make their own decisions. This is an essential part of the role play.
5. Tell students that the questions in the handout were genuine concerns in the actual strike. (It's not important that students arrive at the historically accurate answers—they'll be able to find those

answers in their homework reading. What is important is that they discuss the questions in terms of the IWW principles and goals.) Remind them to answer each of the questions as fully as possible. Tell them you will be available only if they have difficulty understanding any of the six questions.

6. Allow them to begin their meeting. Because students are not used to having to organize a discussion without the assistance of an authority figure, they may find it rough going at first. That's fine. Let them discover their own problems and solutions. Intervene only if you sense they are hopelessly frustrated, and then only to help them establish a clear decision-making process. As the meeting progresses, take notes on both their decision-making successes and failures and on the different ideas and arguments that students raise in answering the questions. I like to take verbatim notes on their deliberations and read portions of these back to students as a way to begin a following day of discussion.
7. At the conclusion of the strike meeting, ask students to write evaluations of their decisions and of the process that brought them to those decisions. Taking this break for reflection sometimes enables a class to discuss experiences a little more thoughtfully.

The Strike Continues, Reflection

1. Tell students that it's time to find out how the strikers actually solved the problems with which the class has been dealing. Tell them to listen closely to compare the real decisions with the ones they reached.
2. Read aloud or distribute to students, "Lawrence, 1912—Part 2."
3. Compare their decisions in the first problem-solving session to what actually happened as described in the reading.
4. Discuss students' decision-making process. There will be opportunity for a fuller

discussion later in the lesson. At this point, simply raise:

- What was good about how the class conducted the discussion?
 - What difficulties did you have? Why?
 - How might the organizational meeting have gone better? Try to reach some decisions here because the class will soon be in the same group decision-making process.
5. (Optional) Encourage students to produce either a strike leaflet directed toward individuals still crossing picket lines, or an appeal for aid to workers in other cities. In each case, the leaflet or appeal should urge support for the strike and offer suggestions for how others could help. Encourage students to be both eloquent and artistic in their appeals. You might suggest that students complete their “leaflets” in the form of songs. One year a number of students wrote and performed songs based on contemporary melodies they were familiar with. While not strictly historically accurate, these efforts added drama and spirit to the lesson.
 6. Give students “Lawrence Problem-Solving #2.” For homework or in class before beginning discussion, ask students to jot down ideas for each question in preparation for the discussion.

The Strike Continues, Part 2

1. Reconvene the class as an IWW planning meeting, exactly as with the first decision-making session. This time, the task is to discuss specific challenges faced by the IWW during the strike, described in “Lawrence Problem-Solving #2.” Remind students of their dual goal: to win the strike and to build the union in line with IWW principles. Again, students address these questions without teacher direction. Clarify any misunderstandings of the questions on the problem-solving sheet and take notes on students’ discussion.

2. At the conclusion of the discussion, distribute “Lawrence, 1912—Part 3,” either as homework or to read aloud in class.

Concluding the Strike

1. Review the eight questions of “Lawrence Problem-Solving #2” one by one, asking students to compare their own decisions with what actually happened.
2. Tell the class that a year and a half after the strike, IWW membership in Lawrence plummeted from 14,000 to 700. Ask what might have caused the decline. Four factors are mentioned in the reading: decisions made by the IWW; government action; the effect produced by capitalist business cycles; and management strategy.
3. Ask whether the union could have acted differently to maintain its strength. (Rather than dispersing the most skilled organizers to other strikes or organizing drives, the union could have kept them in Lawrence, where they would be able to develop activities and services. The union might also have made efforts to organize all the mills in other locations owned by the same companies.)
4. Some other questions to raise about the strike:
 - Democracy is a key feature of what was called the Bread and Roses Strike. Are there groups that benefit from maintaining hierarchy and inequality? Who in Lawrence had a stake in inequality?
 - What are the various ways that these groups can oppose workers? (Some possible answers: layoffs, moving production to places where workers aren’t organized, police, passing laws, structuring the workplace to increase divisiveness.)
 - What might workers in Lawrence have learned about “winning” a strike? Can “winning” mean something more than successfully securing higher wages? What changes in their own abilities or attitudes did workers “win”?

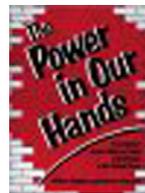


Strikers held back by soldiers, Lawrence, Mass., 1912.

- What experiences did people in Lawrence have during the strike that allowed them to make significant changes in their lives? in their attitudes toward themselves? in their abilities to think and act effectively with others?—Note: This question aims to explore the idea that people undergo important changes when they are involved in a struggle for something they believe in. More than this, the specific character of the strike in Lawrence enhanced people’s ability to change.
5. Discuss with students their decision-making process:
- Did your problem-solving improve from the first time to the second?
 - The IWW valued workers making decisions themselves, without bosses or union officials telling them what to do. Based on your experience together, do you see why the IWW would think this process so important?
 - As a class, what difficulties did you have in making decisions that a group of workers might also encounter?
 - What kind of decision-making skills are taught as part of your education? Are you encouraged to work and think together without an authority figure leading you?
- If not, why isn’t this skill taught more widely?
 - Would any social groups feel threatened if high schools graduated students who were comfortable making decisions collectively and who expected to continue to operate that way in their work lives? ■

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You Are in the IWW

THE YEAR IS 1912. New industries, based on new kinds of machinery, new ways of organizing work, and more use of unskilled and foreign-born workers, are flourishing. Most established labor unions (such as those in the American Federation of Labor, or AFL) have not tried to organize unskilled workers. But one has: the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW. You are a member of this union.

You feel strongly that the IWW is the only union with a future because it understands what's really going on in this country. As you see it, the other major labor federation, the AFL, is living in the past. It's from a time when most work was done by craftsmen owning their own tools—each trade was difficult and required lots of skill and time to learn. When there was conflict between skilled workers and owners, the craftsmen formed trade unions to protect themselves. These were unions based on a particular craft—shoemakers, carpenters, bricklayers, and the like.

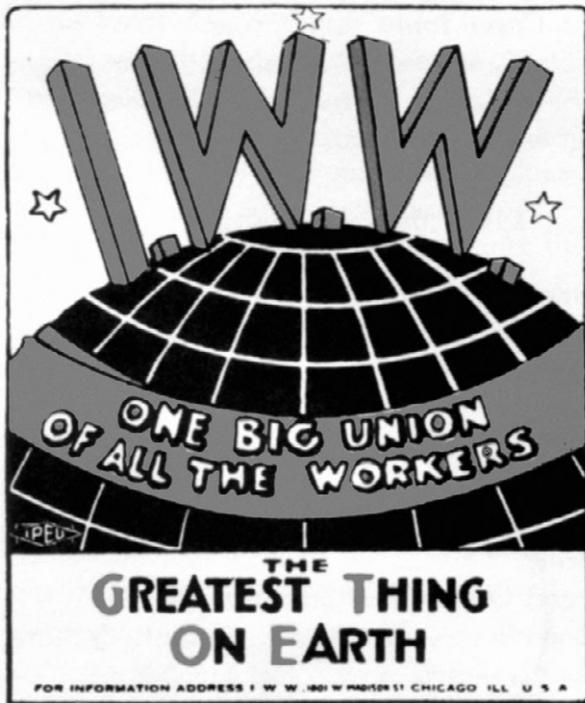
But times have changed. The hand tool has almost disappeared. Instead, there are huge factories with machines run by workers who don't own their own tools and have little control over how the work is performed. Ownership has also changed. Now, an individual factory may be only one of many controlled by the same owners. Yet the AFL craft unions continue as if nothing has changed—they still organize craft by craft. In your view, this divides workers and lets the owners play one craft or one factory against another. For instance, when workers in one factory go on strike, the owners simply increase production elsewhere.



The IWW, on the other hand, believes in the idea of One Big Union. And you think that the IWW is right: all workers—skilled and unskilled, native-born and foreign-born, men and women—should be in the same union. In your mind, it's time to stop this nonsense of organizing only skilled, American-born men. You like what Big Bill Haywood—one of the most famous IWW members—says: “The AFL organizes like this”—separating his fingers as far apart as they can go, and naming the separate crafts. “The IWW organizes like this”—making a tight fist and shaking it at the bosses.

There are other important differences between the IWW and the AFL craft unions. The AFL wants just a little bigger piece of the pie. Higher wages, shorter hours, improved conditions—that's all the AFL is after. You IWW members see these goals as short-sighted. For you, working people's problems will only begin to be solved when workers take over all the workplaces and run them together for the benefit of everyone—not just for the private profit of the owners. As long as owners run industry for themselves, there will be continual conflict between them and the workers. You believe that all wealth is produced by the workers, so all wealth should be controlled by the workers—what do owners produce?

Thus, the IWW's goal is not only for higher wages or shorter hours, but also to improve the whole society. Workplaces and all of society should be run by the people who produce, the people who do the work.



At first when you heard IWW members talking like this you thought it was a little silly. “They’re dreaming,” you said to yourself. “What do workers know about running anything?”

However, as you came to know the IWW people better, you saw they run their organization in a way that actually teaches people to be leaders and thinkers. The IWW halls have libraries. Workers hold classes to teach one another. They put on plays and sing together. Most importantly, the IWW also insists that all members participate in making decisions in the organization.

And the AFL seems to be afraid of strikes. The IWW isn’t. What better learning experience could there be than a confrontation between capitalists and workers? A strike allows the IWW to show workers that, “The capitalist class and the working class have nothing in common.” Strikes are an important chance for workers to learn that they can trust each other and make decisions together.

The IWW is more than an organization, it’s a social movement. One of the slogans of the IWW is, “We must form the structure of the new society in the shell of the old.”

You in the IWW don’t believe in the idea of “follow the leader.” Your goal is for every union member to be a “leader.” ■

You Are in the IWW: Membership Questions

1. As an IWW member, what do you think are the most important differences between the IWW and the AFL? (List these on a separate sheet of paper.)
2. Write an “interior monologue” imagining some of the life experiences that led you to join the IWW. Where are you from? What is your work experience? What attracted you to the IWW? What worries do you have? What hopes do you have? Write this in the first person.

Lawrence, 1912—Part 1

The Strike Is On!

WORK CONDITIONS IN LAWRENCE, Massachusetts, were undergoing the same kinds of changes occurring in industries across the United States. In the 1880s, the mill owners brought in new machinery and lowered wages. They began to recruit immigrants from Europe. At first, they brought in just one nationality; then, to keep the workforce divided, another and another. To make the work seem attractive, they sent postcards to different parts of Europe that showed workers leaving the mills carrying bags of money on their way to the bank.

By 1912, there were dozens of different ethnic groups in Lawrence, speaking almost 30 different languages: Italian and Polish, Ukrainian and Yiddish, Portuguese and French. This Massachusetts city now produced more cloth than any other city in the country. And yet workers often couldn't afford to buy jackets. Malnutrition was common. Housing was crowded and lacked light and sanitation. Life expectancy of a Lawrence *worker* was 22 years less than that of a factory *owner*. Because of low wages, entire families had to work in the mills. Of the more than 30,000 workers, half were teenagers. In fact, one half of the children in Lawrence between 14 and 18 years old worked in the mills. A small percentage of the workers had better paid, skilled jobs. The AFL craft union had 208 members. It did not have a contract with the owners.

Not one mill owner lived in Lawrence. Profits were rising, and the pace of work was continually increasing. In 1905, the owners decided that each worker in the woolen mills would

operate two looms instead of one. In the cotton mills, every worker now tended twelve different machines at once.

Supervisors pressured women workers for dates and to provide sexual favors. They were abusive and disrespectful to foreign-born workers. Water in the mills was so contaminated by the heat and dust that it was undrinkable. Supervisors sold bottled water at a profit. The company paid part of workers' wages on what was called the "premium system." This meant that any worker who was sick for more than one day a month, or failed to produce the amount set by the supervisor (because his or her machine broke, for instance), lost the premium. Since skilled workers received their premium according to the production of the unskilled workers under them, they also pressured unskilled workers and played favorites.

The usual work week was 56 hours. Concerned about health conditions, the state legislature passed a law limiting work hours for children and women to 54 hours (six days a week, nine hours a day). Immediately, the owners saw a way to take advantage of this reform. They sped up the work yet again, so that the same amount of cloth was produced in 54 hours as had been produced in 56.

Now the question was: would the workers' pay be lowered? Since housing costs weren't going down, any pay cut would simply mean less to eat. On January 12, workers opened their pay envelopes to find ... a pay cut.

After a few stunned seconds, in desperation, someone yelled, "Strike!"



Winslow Homer sketched Lawrence, Mass. workers as they left the textile mills at the end of the day. This appeared in Harper's Weekly, July 25, 1868.

The strike spread quickly. Within days, more than 20,000 workers were picketing, often singing as they marched.

The national president of the AFL union came to Lawrence to try to discourage the strike. He was even more harsh than management in criticizing the strikers. His members—generally American-born skilled workers—crossed picket lines and continued to work. The union president's tactic was to show his loyalty to management in hopes

of being rewarded with union recognition. He offered mill owners a deal: sign a contract with his union and the AFL would continue to oppose the strike. Confident of victory, and opposing unions in any form, the owners refused.

After about three weeks, the strike was so effective that there remained little work for the skilled workers. Then they too joined the strike. Thousands of strikers became members of the Industrial Workers of the World—the IWW. ■

Lawrence Problem-Solving #1

Getting Organized

1. There are a number of different mills in Lawrence on strike. This involves over 30,000 workers. Many different ethnic groups are represented in Lawrence. Lots of different languages are spoken and there are a number of cultures in the city.

Question: How is the strike going to be “led”? Who will decide how to negotiate, what the demands of the strike should be, what tactics to use, whether to end the strike, etc.?

2. Many of the workers in Lawrence are illiterate. People speak a number of different languages. There are thousands of people involved in the strike, in more than one factory.

Question: Specifically, what kind of “organizational structure” should we use throughout the strike? (Some possibilities: large meetings involving all the strikers, elected representatives, rotating leadership, some other method.)

3. **Question: How should any meetings we hold be run? By whom?**

4. **Question: How can we make sure that we keep the strikers unified?**

5. With the thugs hired by management, the picket line can be dangerous and some people feel that it is no place for a woman. These workers point out that women are not even allowed to vote in national or local elections. Remember, the year is 1912.

Question: Should women be allowed to participate in the strike? If so, in what capacity?

6. There have been charges in the newspapers that some of the strikers are “illegal immigrants” who came to this country only in order to send money home.

Question: What should we do about these people?

Lawrence, 1912—Part 2

Unity in Diversity

AN OUTDOOR MEETING of thousands of strikers—men, women, and children—discussed and then agreed on the demands of the strike. People would not return to work until four conditions were met:

1. A wage increase
2. Extra pay for working overtime
3. An end to the premium system of payment and the pressures it brought
4. No penalties or discrimination against strikers

Each day, there were mass meetings organized according to nationality—Hungarians met with Hungarians, Italians with Italians, etc. These were the major decision-making meetings, chaired by people elected from the group. Here delegates reported to the strikers and received further directions from them.

A strike committee met every morning to coordinate activities. It consisted of elected delegates, four from each of 14 nationality groups, 56 in all, covering every workplace and every type of job. Delegates could be replaced at any time by the group that elected them. A second committee of 56 served as a back-up in case members of the strike committee were arrested. Delegates met outdoors so that their discussions could be heard and evaluated by everyone. In these gatherings the many strikers who attended could gain a renewed sense of their own numbers and strength.

On Saturdays and Sundays, huge meetings brought everyone together, tens of thousands of strikers and their families. At these and at the daily ethnic group meetings, there was entertainment, in addition to reports and discussions. People sang together, danced, and enjoyed performances by their neighbors.

These were meetings for all strikers, whether or not they were IWW members. In addition, the IWW called special meetings for women and children to encourage their participation and leadership. Organizers talked extensively with husbands to overcome their resistance to wives speaking in public or marching on the picket lines. In the difficult conditions of the strike, people discovered many new abilities: chairing meetings, speaking in public, organizing committees.

There were numerous efforts to divide the strikers. Newspapers and some religious leaders criticized husbands for permitting their wives and daughters to play an active role. Attempts were made to pit ethnic groups against each other. Some priests told Irish workers, for instance, that they were superior to the non-English-speaking nationalities. City officials charged that some workers were “illegal immigrants” and should be deported. These efforts took their toll. Some husbands kept their wives at home. Some nationalities participated more actively than did others. Overwhelmingly, however, the strikers remained firm, maintaining a belief that everyone had a right to work in decent conditions and to develop fully his or her capabilities. ■

Lawrence Problem-Solving #2

Can We Win?

1. Early in the strike, without meeting with any of the strikers, the employers agree to restore the 56-hour pay rate. If we don't go back to work, they may withdraw that decision.

Question: Shall we claim victory and go back to work? If not, what should we do?

2. The commanding officer of the militia who has been sent to Lawrence insists that different groups of strikers should meet separately with each employer. His hope is that agreements will be reached with some employers and that some strikers will return to work.

Question: How do we respond?

3. Our strike committee has just traveled to Boston to meet with the president of the largest group of mills. No agreement was reached. But now false reports are being circulated and newspapers are announcing that a settlement was reached and that the strike is over. Tomorrow is Monday. We know that employers are gearing up to reopen the mills. If people believe the rumors and return to work, the strike will be lost.

Question: What can we do?

4. There are still some people crossing the picket lines. Some of them are showing up at the relief committees while continuing to work.

Question: Should we feed them?

5. Violence has been increasing. Two people have been killed. A policeman shot a woman as she was picketing. A boy was bayoneted in the back while fleeing the militia. Our people are scared. Some want to end the violence by returning to work. Others are becoming restless and want to fight back with violence.

Question: What should we tell both groups?

6. Because of the violence, some of us fear for the safety of our children. Not only that, our resources here are limited and the children are hungrier than usual. Having members from so many different backgrounds means we can learn from each other's experiences and traditions. One group has said that during a bitter strike in their country, children are sometimes sent to the homes of workers in other cities. We have many supporters in New York City and elsewhere.

Question: Is this something we should do? If we send the children, is there some way they can win even greater support for our strike?

7. Martial law has been declared. All picketing is now against the law, as is any gathering of more than two people on the street.

Question: How can we respond? (Without picketing and meeting, our strike will die.)

8. A "Citizens Association" has been formed by local merchants and city officials against "outside agitators." "After all," they say, "our own good Lawrence folk wouldn't dream of striking." The mayor has launched a "God and Country" campaign. Businesses are flying American flags, citizens are being encouraged to wear patriotic lapel pins, all directed against the IWW. We too love the country, but we have a different vision of what it should become. We also now have 14,000 members in Lawrence.

Question: How can we respond?

Lawrence, 1912—Part 3

The Outcome

Pressures and Response

Not long after the strikers agreed on all four demands, the employers posted notices that they were restoring the former wages. For 54 hours' work (but 56 hours worth of production because of speedup), workers were to receive the same amount they had been paid for working 56 hours. If a significant number accepted this offer and returned to the mills, the strike would have been broken. Clearly the employers were trying to undermine worker solidarity.

Many workers must have been tempted. They were not used to challenging authority. Living conditions on strike were difficult. However, people remembered that living conditions had also been difficult when they were working. The strike meetings and activities were beginning to give them a sense of their own strength and hope for a better settlement. The strikers held firm.

There were other efforts to divide the strikers. Employers agreed to negotiate, but only on a company-by-company basis, not with the strike committee representing all the strikers. Recognizing that separate negotiations or even settlements would pull them apart, the strikers refused. An agency of the Massachusetts government intervened. The strike committee agreed to let the agency try to get the employers to sit down with the strikers and negotiate (that is, to *mediate*). However, the committee refused to let the agency decide the agenda or what the settlement would be (that is, to *arbitrate*).

The strikers fell into a trap. The president of the largest textile company agreed to meet in

Boston with strike committee representatives. The meeting took place over a weekend and did not lead to an agreement. As strike committee members returned to Lawrence on Sunday, they found that false rumors were being spread, along with newspaper stories, that a settlement had been reached. Supervisors were already gearing up the mills for the next day. The strike committee decided on a rally for early Monday morning. From the rally, thousands of strikers marched in a huge parade, stopping and alerting people who had believed the false reports.

Both employers and government continued pressure. Martial law was declared. Twenty-two companies of militia took over the town, including many Harvard boys carrying bayonets “up to teach those workers a lesson.” Any gathering of more than two people on the streets was banned, as was the stationing of pickets near the mills.

Strike Tactics

Their use of a parade led the workers on strike to other new tactics. Since the merchants couldn't survive if the order against gathering was enforced downtown, the strikers responded by going to the business district first. They formed large groups, posing as customers, milling in and out of stores but buying nothing. Other customers, of course, were reluctant to shop. The merchants quickly insisted that the authorities withdraw their order against gathering. Then the strikers formed an “endless chain of pickets,” 7,000 to 10,000 people, circling the entire industrial district. They maintained this constantly moving picket line for the remaining weeks of the strike.

Keeping up morale was the key to maintaining the strike, so providing for the needs of strikers and their families was an important task of the strikers' organizations. Publicity and finance committees got support from workers all across the country. Relief committees, organized by nationality, distributed food or money for food and fuel to more than 50,000 of the 86,000 people who lived in Lawrence. Some of the people still working tried to sneak in line and get assistance. They were always encouraged to stop crossing the picket lines, but were refused relief if they didn't join the strike. The AFL set up its own relief organization, providing aid only to people who agreed to end their strike.



Violence

With so many workers away from their jobs, the authorities continually claimed the strikers threatened violence. As workers left their looms the first day, the municipal government rang the city hall bells in a riot alarm. When workers first began picketing outside the mills, company supervisors on the rooftops sprayed them with icy water. When drenched and freezing workers retaliated by

throwing pieces of ice, the police moved in. Those strikers who were caught received ten-minute trials and sentences of a year in jail.

When they left their looms, some strikers had cut the belts that transmitted power. During the strike, when some workers continued to cross picket lines, the strikers tried persuasion, pressure, and even intimidation. Years of pent-up frustration could have led to disorganized fighting or further attacks on property. Instead, the strikers almost always honored the IWW call for discipline and peaceful protest.

There were many provocations. Police raids uncovered dynamite, and newspapers across the country blamed the strikers. Police used this episode as an excuse to close the industrial district to pickets and to harass workers in other ways. A trial showed that a small group of local merchants had planted the dynamite to discredit the strikers, then called the police. The conspiracy was planned in textile company offices.

A woman picketer was shot and killed. In spite of many witnesses who identified a particular policeman as the killer, police arrested two IWW leaders, Arturo Giovannitti and Joseph Ettor, who had been speaking three miles away. That morning, streetcars were stopped and their windows smashed. Strikers identified thugs, hired by the mill owners, as responsible. Police repeatedly attacked picket lines, beating people so severely that pregnant women miscarried. A boy, fleeing the militia, was bayoneted in the back and died.

Because of difficult conditions, the violence, and the shortage of food and fuel, the strikers decided to accept another form of aid. As an expression of solidarity, workers in New York and Philadelphia invited young children of the strikers to come stay with them. The first trainloads of young people were welcomed warmly and also created favorable publicity for the strike. The next time parents took a group of children to the train station in Lawrence, police surrounded the station, then attacked, severely beating both children and parents. Police separated children and parents and took them to jail. The authorities began proceedings to permanently take the children from their parents.

Victory

Ultimately, the authorities' use of violence backfired, and the strikers' discipline prevailed. With families waiting in other cities to receive the children, the train station brutality became international news. A Socialist Party representative began Congressional hearings about the situation in Lawrence. The hearings focused not only on the immediate violence, but on the long-term violence of hunger, inadequate clothing and housing, early deaths, and the stunted lives of children.

By now the strike had gone on for more than two months. The companies kept the machinery running to make it sound as if work continued, although in fact they had not been able to produce any textiles. More than most industries, textile companies were vulnerable to public outrage and Congressional pressure. Their high profits were based in part on a tariff that kept out foreign textiles and gave the U.S. industry a near-monopoly. Now public anger at textile owners could lead Congress to end the tariff. Management decided to settle the strike. They asked the strike committee to begin serious negotiations and quickly agreed to all four of the strikers' demands.

A meeting of 15,000 strikers voted to accept the agreement. There would be wage increases, with the greatest increases going to the workers who had been most poorly paid. There would be extra pay for overtime work. No worker would be discriminated against for having been on strike. The premium system would be changed to reduce the pressure, with payment every two weeks instead of once a month.

Strikers returned to work; children came home to their families. The IWW, tiny before the strike, now had 14,000 members in Lawrence. And the struggle continued. The mayor began a "God and Country" campaign, using patriotism to claim the IWW was "un-American." IWW members threatened a boycott of "God and Country" merchants, and merchants ended their campaign. The two IWW leaders, Ettor and Giovannitti, remained in jail on trumped-up murder charges. The IWW declared a political strike in Lawrence. Thousands

of workers stayed away from work for a day to protest the continued jailing and to insist on a fair trial. Textile workers in other cities also threatened to strike if the two men were framed. The textile companies fired 1,500 workers for participating in the political strike. However, when the IWW threatened renewed strike action, owners backed down completely, rehiring every worker. A jury trial found the IWW leaders not guilty.

Postscript

The Lawrence strikers won a victory that most of the organized labor movement had thought impossible. They united women and men, mainly unskilled workers from dozens of nationality groups. They vastly increased their own self-confidence, skills, and knowledge, and built what seemed to be a powerful local union. Yet within the next few years, the union was again reduced to a small group and management succeeded in taking back some of the strikers' gains.

The reasons for this decline are complex. Some of the IWW's most skilled organizers left Lawrence after the strike, to spread the victory and try to build unions elsewhere. There was increased repression nationally against the IWW, with more trials, deportations, and even massacres of supporters. The more important cause, however, was probably the national economy and how management took advantage of that. In times of recession over the next few years, owners laid off workers who had been especially active in the union. They also lowered wages and sped up working conditions. Further, the companies expanded to locations where workers were not organized. Now they could outlast a strike in one location by increasing production in their mills elsewhere.

In the new large-scale industries, militant workers in just one location would have limited strength. Factory- and citywide organizing efforts were not enough; the next step would require workers to organize in whole industries. Until that happened, indeed long after, the "singing strike" continued to provide inspiration. ■

Questions

1. What are the important similarities between the answers you came up with in class and what the strikers actually decided in Lawrence? What are the important differences?
2. Why do you suppose the IWW lost so many members in Lawrence in the few years after the strike? Could they have done anything differently to preserve and strengthen their influence?
3. From your problem-solving in class, what have you learned about making decisions in groups? For example, why is it so difficult for people to make decisions together? Why don't school systems place a higher priority on teaching these skills? What are good methods of solving problems as a group?
4. What are some of the “lessons” for us today from the Lawrence strike?

