



# Rhode Island History

Volume 46, Number 1

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## In This Issue

Working Lives: An Oral History  
of Rhode Island Labor

*Part One*



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Volume 46, Number 1

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## Contents

### Working Lives: An Oral History of Rhode Island Labor

#### *Part One*

#### *Acknowledgments*

2

#### Introduction

3

PAUL M. BUHLE

#### Time Long Passed, 1890–1928

11

#### Depression Rhode Island, 1929–1940

27

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Finally, the oral histories included here honor most of all those interviewees who have passed away: Luigi Nardella, pioneering labor activist and forgotten anti-Fascist crusader; Tom Longo, social director of the Mateotti Club in its late days, also actor, cook, and personality extraordinaire; and Chris Daniels, the ironic motorman. Perhaps we should repeat the labor eulogy delivered to a fallen comrade in Olneyville, center of Rhode Island textiles and unionism a century ago, which began with the phrase, "Whereas it having pleased the great Director of the Universe to call a higher Association of our beloved . . ." In any case *our* late comrades, like the others mentioned and unmentioned here, will not be forgotten by Rhode Islanders who cherish liberty and justice.

# Working Lives: An Oral History of Rhode Island Labor

## Part One

### Introduction

Paul M. Buhle

One story out of many. The Boston correspondent of a New York Yiddish newspaper travels to Providence in 1934 to cover the "general strike" of textile workers. Arrested, he is brought together with local communists for a police lineup and they are all given slouch hats to wear for an official photograph. The next day the press carries the picture on page one with the caption, "New York Hoodlums Arrested in Strike." Many more important things happen at the time. Save in the memories of a handful of people (and in a Yiddish memoir published forty years later) the incident is forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

Considered from different angles, the story is both painfully funny and more revealing than at first glance. When Governor Theodore Francis Green met the tumultuous strike and accompanying violence with state troopers and national guardsmen, he also proclaimed the imminence of

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Paul Buhle, a Rhode Islander since 1974, has lectured and interviewed throughout the state on labor history and work life. Director of the Oral History of the American Left at Tamiment Library, New York University, he has edited or written a dozen books including, with Alan Dawley, *Working for Democracy: American Workers from the Revolution to the Present* (University of Illinois) and *Labor's Joke Book* (WD Press). He is also a scholar of Liberation Theology, and of H. P. Lovecraft.

1. S. D. Levin, *Kapitlakh fun Mayn Lebn* (New York, 1971), 210-16.

An examination of Rhode Island daily newspapers failed to locate the slouch-hat photograph, although a picture of nearly a dozen Communists "captured" in their Westminister Street office appeared on 14 Sept. in the *Journal*. Most likely, the memory of journalist Levine has inscribed one more myth of 1934 upon all the others.

a "Communist Uprising" in the state. Communists were accused of such acts as inciting hoodlums to riot and plotting to sabotage the Blackstone Valley's water system. At that moment, there were perhaps all of forty Rhode Island Communists, mostly small businesspeople entirely outside the scope of the strike. By the political and industrial standards of the day—the Depression era when prominent American intellectuals and rising labor leaders turned to the Left—this was a very modest threat indeed. Green, like the police and the press, was dealing in symbols more than substance.

From another view, that of the predominantly Yankee millowning families, Green and the police force committed the unforgivable crime of permitting the organization of unions. The absolute rights of private property had been unquestionably infringed. Traditional power structures over employment, banks, newspapers, and polite society all remained intact, but the elite's control of social and political life slipped a notch downward. To them, the appearance of a very modest industrial democracy signified the onslaught of socialism if not communism.

In that light, the governor's careful juggling act, like the makeover of Communists into gangsters, might be seen as the type of ethnic-political maneuver typical of how social problems are handled in Rhode Island. The "Communist Menace," apart from the violence it did to the facts, provided a convenient handle for mythmaking. It was, one might say, a myth almost everyone could share.

The myth disguised a fundamental, if considerably less dramatic, truth about the bitter contest between equally church-going, moralistic (in

their own particular ways) owners, supervisors, and millhands. Nothing short of textile operatives' uprising amid the Depression and the New Deal could have introduced the new order—Rooseveltian Revolution with a Rhode Island twist. The Irish and to a lesser degree the French Canadians, Italians, Poles, even Cape Verdeans came into a share of power long monopolized by a single group. Urban predominance would at last exert its proportional weight: "Swamp Yankees" could no longer maintain Republican strength through a geographical hammerlock upon the legislature; Pawtucket, Woonsocket, and the ethnic neighborhoods across the state would be heard. Their representatives entered the halls of influence with a different but no less sincere version of "Americanism" and even anticommunism, rooted in visions of New Deal pluralism and Catholic church social teachings.

This was a historical turning point in Rhode Island, its most important between the height of textile influence in the 1880s (equally of labor's challenge, the Knights of Labor) and the post-industrial age of the present. The hapless reporter had stumbled upon a shift of interlocking traditions—ethnic, class, political, and cultural—long in the making. No wonder he still puzzled at it decades later.

The history of working people in Rhode Island has not, of course, been made up entirely or even mostly of such dramatic moments. Their history is not identical to the history of the labor movement; the history of the labor movement is not the same as that of unions which now exist and retain a significant membership or influence. Supervisory personnel, clerks in small shops, the paperboy, the vast majority of clerical workers, and indeed a majority of wage-earners have been outside unions. Union members themselves have always faced important issues in politics, culture, work- and home-life that an economic organization does not address.

That said, probably every worker in a state as compact and labor-conscious as Rhode Island has felt the influence of labor's traditions—if not in his or her own life, then in the lives of family and friends. Those traditions are engraved, so to speak, on every former milltown, Westerly to

# LABORERS!

**VOTE FOR COL. WILLIAM SPRAGUE,  
OR BE DISCHARGED.**

## **I, Charles Parker, on oath depose**

and say, That I have been in the employ of A. & W. Sprague, since July last, as Wood Repairer, at Baltic Mills, in Connecticut; that several weeks since, I gave the above Firm notice that I should leave. At the expiration of that notice, I was hired over at an advance on my former wages, and had worked seven days, up to this morning, April 3d, 1860, when I went to Henry Potter, the Superintendent of Baltic Mills, to get permission to go to Rhode Island. He asked me if I was going to vote against William Sprague. I told him I should; I should have to, if I voted my principles. He said if I was going to vote against him I might take my tools. I replied, very well. He said he would have no such work.

**CHARLES PARKER.**

Subscribed and sworn to, before me, at Providence, on this, 3d day of April, 1860.

**WM. H. GREENE, Justice of the Peace.**

*Early labor broadside proclaims the consequence workers faced in opposing the interests of millowners. Courtesy of the Scott Molloy Collection.*

Woonsocket and Warren to Scituate, on every older neighborhood of less-than-genteel origins, on every state institution, every school, and on every physical surrounding of a Rhode Islander's life from nursery to rest home.

This issue and the one to follow are extensions of the Rhode Island Labor History Project, itself the result of collective efforts dating back more than a decade. From the mid-1970s, a small band of labor historians began holding public forums and taping interviews with surviving labor activists. In part, the purpose could be described as preservation: the memories of pre-1920 and pre-1930 Rhode Island were then fast slipping away. From the beginning we also sought to revive a public dialogue on labor's role in democracy—especially Rhode Island democracy. The official Labor History Project, an oral history col-

lection launched in 1985 and housed at the Rhode Island Historical Society, allowed the editor of this volume (and Director of the Labor History Project) to consolidate existing interviews from a number of sources and to create a formidable new body of information.

As set forth in the *Guide to the Collection*, both participants and interview methods for that project were chosen with criteria taken from other oral history programs and specially adapted to the parameters of Rhode Island life. Previous interviews related to Rhode Island labor had been based on diverse interviewers' selective interests ranging from elderly radicals to clerical workers. The newer interviews reached out to the eldest participants in labor activities, to particular ethnic groups involved with labor, to transitional figures in the shift of workforce and unionization, to religious-leaning labor personalities, and to best-known labor and business leaders. We sought to probe the lives of the interviewees and to place their activities in the context of wide social changes in Rhode Island.

We believe that the current work presents a part of the truth too little acknowledged, a slice of Rhode Island history as lived and understood by ordinary (and some extraordinary) people. No effort of this length can hope to be comprehensive. But we have offered an insight—or perhaps better, a metaphor—about the inner processes of historical development in and around the community of labor, over the course of several generations.

No one, scholar or layman, is likely to take the experience of America's smallest state as definitive labor history for the nation. Still, our story offers provocative suggestions for the reinterpretation of labor's fate. The centrality of labor as a social and political force in community life of the 1880s to the 1950s has been acknowledged too rarely; the interrelated elements of that life, such as religion, ethnicity, and family patterns have not often been explored in relation to labor. Such special factors as radicalism or its opposite, conservative Catholicism, have generally been viewed through an ideological lens rather than as strategies and loyalties woven into daily patterns of community experiences. We have, we believe,

thrown on these subjects new light afforded by the deeply immigrant, blue-collar character of the state.


The following selections were chosen to construct a narrative from the multitude of stories discovered in living memory. As in other oral history investigations, the story itself has been the key, even more than the teller of the tale. We have sought to balance the description of Rhode Island labor's major events or generational experiences with some sense of the subtler continuities in home- and work-life. When possible, the syntax of the original recording has been exactly preserved. Ellipsis points appear where words or sentences within an excerpt have been omitted. The order of discussion has been altered when necessary and, in a few cases, whole narrative sections (marked \* \* \*) eradicated for the sake of the story and for its role in the larger project. Readers are referred to the original transcripts or to the Rhode Island Labor History Project recordings for more complete versions.

The great problem of *Working Lives* has been to cover its broad subject with the resources and limited space available. We have not touched working lives much outside Greater Providence from the Blackstone Valley in the north to the Pawtuxet Valley in the south. We have also, for lack of space and from the difficulty of conducting related interviews, passed over important racial and ethnic groups, small and large. We anticipate at least another ten years of further work in which these omissions among others can be rectified. We welcome public participation in the continuing effort.

### **Prelude: Rhode Island Labor Origins**

How did Rhode Island become the quintessential New Deal state, a largely blue-collar society with intense feelings of class and ethnicity? This is not the place for a narrative history. Still, an overview will prove helpful to introduce our subject.

Every historical account of Rhode Island business in the industrial age begins with Slater Mill and every historical account of labor with the famed women's strike of 1824. Both center upon



W.L. DOUGLAS  
\$3.00  
SHOE  
SILK STITCHED  
GLOVE KID  
BEST TANNERY CALF  
BOTTOM SEWED  
CELEBRATED  
K. of L.  
UNION - MADE  
W. L. Douglas  
\$2 BOYS' SHOE.  
Every Pair Warranted.  
HARRIS,  
87 North Main Street,  
SOLE AGENTS.

*Advertisements in The People (1886) found the union label to be an important selling point. Courtesy of the Scott Molloy Collection.*

Pawtucket, for good reason. Rhode Island's role as a key American manufactory dates to the new nation's struggle in the 1790s for true economic independence from Europe. Here, inevitably, the rise of industrialism very soon ran up against contrary tendencies just as essential to defining the new society. Proud Yankee farmers disdained the millowners' claims to available water, legally enjoining or even dynamiting the dams that destroyed fishing and threatened crops. Impoverished millhands, just as proud of their republican heritage, resisted the lengthening of hours, the acceleration of pace, and the lowering of life's minimum standards. In the respectable churches and well-organized Sunday schools, clerical sup-

porters of the millowners taught the godliness of capital, while in the Free-Will Baptist church a lay preacher delivered the sermon, "Do not the rich men oppress you? Wo to ye rich men, weep and howl for the miseries that shall come upon you."<sup>2</sup>

The conflicting sides had been set for many decades, even as the scale of production expanded and the state's population burgeoned. In truth, laboring people won few battles. Prominent allies, educated artisans, and reform-minded women of the middle classes struggled unsuccessfully to obtain legislation against long hours of work. Thomas Dorr, who gained his most reliable support for his attempted suffrage reform from the Pawtucket and Blackstone Valley mill villages, was crushed militarily in the brief "Dorr War" of 1842. Yet the indiscipline, the roughness, and unruly merriment of Pawtucket in particular were noted frequently by uneasy observers. Graphically expressed in the grandeur of high society and the presumed degradation of low society, an enduring two-class order emerged. Neither class had sufficient experience with the other for very accurate perception.

The waves of immigrants, drawn from the far corners of Europe by promise of industrial employment, deepened existing divisions while planting new ones among the poorest classes of workers. By the mid-1880s, foreign stock constituted well over 60 percent of the state's population, including some forty thousand Irish, twenty thousand British, and twenty thousand French Canadians actually born abroad. Rhode Island's 12 percent Catholic population, nearly double the national average, was easily the highest of any American state. It also claimed illiteracy rates among the highest outside the South. Into Pawtucket, Providence, Woonsocket, Manville, Quinneck, Artich, and all the other cities and towns immigrants flowed, launching new neighborhoods or overtaking older ones with new languages, new customs.

2. Ray Potter, *A Poor Man's Defense*. (Providence, 1823), 10. Quoted in Gary Kulik, "Pawtucket Village and the Strike of 1824: The Origins of Class Conflict in Rhode Island," *Radical History Review*, 17 (Spring 1978): 17.



Such communities of working people left too few of the usual records that historians use to understand private life. Their social betters wrote the diaries, published the poems, deposited or kept from harm the business and personal correspondence by which a generation might later be understood. We can nevertheless surmise, from interpretations of other such populations elsewhere in the United States, that such ordinary folk carried with them from England, Ireland, Quebec, or from the Yankee farming districts, their own most important resource—culture. Defined by anthropologists as an inherited and constantly expanding set of customs, values, public and private language, this “culture” allowed them to meet the formidable challenges they faced. They had to define for themselves a life whose general conditions were not of their own making. They sought to define for themselves a mixture of their communal traits and institutions—from cuisine and music to church and club—favorable to both retention of what they valued and openness to what benefits America might offer.<sup>3</sup>

The effect of their influence was felt first in the remarkable events of the middle 1880s. Practically overnight, an institution of working people arose to challenge every aspect of elite domination; it did so, not in the name of “communism” or even unionism as such, but rather in the name of an elementary dignity for all laboring classes, including small business people, and the fulfillment of American democratic promises.

Only a small portion of this vital story can be told here.<sup>4</sup> But it is worth noting how thoroughly the cultural and political situation of working people framed the hard-bitten conflict. From preceding strikes across the Blackstone Valley a decade earlier, the perception of management totali-

tarianism provoked a sense of popular outrage. (The mill superintendent, in the words of one embittered resident, was a “Policeman, Judge, Jury and Almost King” whose powers made the workingman hesitate to “blow his nose” without looking over his shoulder.) Naturally, wages higher than subsistence were desired, wage reductions below the level of minimum living standards resisted. But the recorded complaint that a Lonsdale or Ashton worker could not continue the British custom of singing at night for fear of eviction from company housing also carried weight.<sup>5</sup> Men and women had not left the old world in order to be reduced to servitude in the new.

During the early 1880s, reform legislation was introduced to limit the workday to ten hours and to provide special protection for child labor. Some dissident elites, including Yankee reformers and an occasional Republican newspaper editor hungry for circulation, backed the demands. The passage of such legislation (inadequately enforced and unrealized in practice until the 1890s) did not quell growing public agitation, but on the contrary roused sentiment for other kinds of reforms. American branches of the Irish Land League, a nationalist organization devoted to combating the evil of the English monopoly on Irish land ownership, sprang up not long after, typical of immigrants’ efforts to promote democracy in their homeland. On another track (but often inhabited by the same individuals), craft unions, mostly in the building trades, firmed up their early organizations sufficiently to institute a Rhode Island Central Labor Union in 1884.

The way had been prepared for the Knights of Labor, at the time rightly famous for a recent railroad strike in the southwest United States. It made a grand splash in Rhode Island, combining the skilled and unskilled, Irish and English, male and female laborers with every species of earnest reformer from teetotaler to suffragist to socialist. It was, one could say, a political and social organization in economic clothes.

3. The late Herbert Gutman, key spokesman of this Thompsonian history of working class life with an American twist, may be fairly described as an inspiration for this study as well; he served on the Advisory Board of the oral history project which made the current project possible. See his *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1976) for the best exposition of this viewpoint.

4. See Paul Buhle, “The Knights of Labor in Rhode Island,” *Radical History Review*, 17 (Spring 1978): 39–73.

5. “The Lonsdale Strike,” *The Sun* (Providence), 15 Jan. 1876, 1; “New York Herald Report,” *ibid.*, 19 Jan. 1876, 1.

The story of one such community, around the Wanskuck mill in North Providence, is exemplary. Known far and wide as a "particularly orderly, and law-abiding class of citizens," sober and thrifty, Wanskuck residents transformed a Young Men's Literary Association into a vital Knights of Labor branch which undertook to administer much of the production process from pace to work cooperation to inspection of the final product. Understandably, supervisors complained that they had lost authority. The number of Wanskuck Knights grew so great that no hall in the village was big enough for a meeting. This modest group of operatives, mostly women considered unskilled, had, in fact, begun to supersede existing institutions; they had moved to make the political claims of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights apply to the most important part of their lives. Even the predominantly Germanic socialists, with their own little hall in Wanskuck and their dedication to all things that Europeans viewed as radical, could hardly believe their eyes.<sup>6</sup>

Neither the Rhode Island Knights nor this form of industrial democracy practiced by it could survive the counterattack of newspaper hysteria and employers' combined resources. Within a year, Wanskuck had been returned to millowner prerogative. Something had changed, nonetheless. "One need not go to the state house," a reporter for labor reflected in 1886,

to perceive that labor breathes freer in Rhode Island than ever before. The time was, and not so long ago, when an artisan in the presence of his employer or overseer scarcely dared say that his soul was his own, or to speak above a whisper; but the Order of the Knights of Labor has changed all this. There is an atmosphere of independence on all sides. It is felt in the workshop, the mill, the cars, on the street; even the boys and girls show a spirit that they lacked before.<sup>7</sup>

6. See "State News: Wanskuck," in *The People* for the following dates: 5 Dec. 1885, 4; 13 Feb., 4; and 1 May 1886, 4; also "What the Knights are Doing in Wanskuck," in "Letters," 2 Jan. 1886, 4; and "The Struggle for Existence," 12 June 1886, 3.

7. "No Longer Afraid," *The People*, 20 March 1886, 2.

**UNEQUALLED !**  
**UNAPPROACHED !**  
 GRAND, COSTLY AND  
 SPECIAL VIEWS  
 ILLUSTRATING THE  
**LABOR**  
**Movement.**  
 "One half the world knows not how the other half lives," is a true saying, as will be emphatically realized by every one who passes over two hours viewing a continuous presentation of photographic scenes from among the homes of the workers and the drones. How plutocracy intends to remain in power will be strikingly illustrated.

**Benefit Rhode Island Central  
 Labor Union.**  
**Music Hall,**  
**Sunday Ev'g, Apr. 7.**

ADMISSION ONLY 25, 35 AND 500.

Tickets for sale at BILLINGS MUSIC STORE and by members of Committee and Labor Organizations.

*Newspaper advertisement from the Justice (1895) for an exhibit to benefit the Rhode Island Central Labor Union. Courtesy of the Scott Molloy Collection.*

The labor upsurge produced modest legislative change, as political agitation had encouraged working people to improve their conditions of work. The legislature, feeling the pressure of the Knights of Labor experience, voted in a universal manhood suffrage in 1888 (still limited by some property requirements but adequate to permit greater democratic participation). The Knights' visionaries had dreamed of a great surge forward in public life. Reality offered only compromises. The Democratic party made headway with a

mixture of patronage machine politics and representation of working people's needs. In towns like Pawtucket, they elected local officials sympathetic to labor. Across the state, they remained bottled up by the Republicans' ability to manipulate voting districts, liquor licenses, and the public credulity over the tariff.

Even these limited advances had their negative side. The distance between social classes remained almost beyond bridging. In some ways it grew. The severe recession that followed in the 1890s riddled virtually all that remained of labor's formal organization and drove thousands of working families to seek their livelihoods elsewhere. The "new immigrants," disproportionately Italian, but (among others) also Polish, Jewish, and Armenian, had less in common with the Irish and British than these earlier immigrants had had with their predecessors, the Yankees. Amid scarcity, the most limited prerogatives could be fiercely contested. Skilled, craft union jobs remained almost wholly in possession of English-language workers for a generation or more. So, to a great extent, did the Democratic party. So did the powers-that-be in the Roman Catholic church, Irishmen with no intention of yielding considerable institutional power to Poles or French Canadians. Industry had always known its variegated layers: more skilled and prosperous workers, the "aristocrats of labor"; and unskilled, poor, and poorest workers, the army of the frequently unemployed, worst paid, and worst treated. (Afro-Americans, relatively few in number, had never shared the advantages of other workers.) Now these layers of descending privilege acquired a deeper ethnic character and more complexity.

Another shadow lay across the industrial horizon as the twentieth century opened with a renewed prosperity. Yankee textiles, in particular cotton, had begun their historic drift downward. The South, with its proximity to cotton and its abysmal standards of working people's welfare, would one day play host to surviving firms whose fortunes had been made in Rhode Island. Production for war would twice lift Rhode Island textiles upward again, but the respite was temporary. New England's once-premier prestige

in manufacturing, finance, and intellectual energy inevitably declined. The rest of the North American continent had awakened.

Major changes in the conditions of working people, the emergence of twentieth-century American social life, frame the events that follow in our oral history text. The spread of public education, and mass media, from the newspaper to the moving picture to the radio, accelerated the process of universalization or homogenization. This process went far to evoke a new sense of specialness among American working people, a sense quite different from the older republican pride and glory in honest labor. Advertising promoted needs and desires that had been restricted to the elite. Leisure and celebrity, cultural values linked to the market (but also to deep-felt desires for individual self-expression) could be envisioned, if not necessarily experienced, by everyone with access to the media. Under this pressure, the sense of ethnic specialness began to give way.

The harsh conditions of working people (new immigrants, in particular) and the tenaciously undemocratic character of Rhode Island politics and economics at first disguised the changes. To take only one instance, regressive manufacturing techniques, piecework, and homework all found new life among these immigrants and especially among Italians, where families waged a collective battle for existence. Female labor, nearly twice the national average of 20 percent in manufactures, carried the stigma of low wages and poor conditions. Tragically, Italian, Polish, and Irish immigrant women had provided New England textiles their final reserve of virtually unpaid labor. Over half the Italian workers surveyed in 1915 made ten dollars per week or less, an increasingly killing wage with the rise of inflation from the onset of the European war in 1913.

Crusaders among working people set out to revive the dream of industrial and social democracy. James P. Reid, a dentist who as a boy had led a strike in Olneyville and by 1905 directed both the state's Socialist party and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), attained election to one term in the state legislature, from whence he was a tribune for working class justice. A now forgotten Italian-American intellectual, Luigi Nimini, pub-

lished a radical newspaper in his language from Federal Hill, and promoted industrial unionism. More moderate trade union leaders from textiles, machine tools, and other sectors set out plans for expanded unionism and political advances.

A strike wave led by the IWW, 1912-13, threw a scare into industrialists, civil authorities, and established craft unionists. None could assume any longer the passivity of the unskilled worker, most especially the Italian-American. Although the combined strength of employer, press, and police forces crushed the "Wobblies," wartime production and the tight labor market prompted collective struggle in most of the same industrial centers the IWW had seeded with its propaganda. Conditions improved considerably for the few years of American fighting. Italian-Americans attained, it is safe to say, a dignity and influence that had been unthinkable a few years earlier—and would be mostly lost in the postwar "rollback" of labor improvements, the so-called "American Plan" of lowered wages and intimidated employees. As before, vestiges of progress remained. A collective memory would not be eradicated even in the much-touted prosperity of the 1920s, with its illegal liquor and its Model-T Fords.<sup>8</sup>

On the eve of this issue's oral testimony, Rhode Island had changed greatly while maintaining nevertheless a quality that could be traced to the stable character of working people's lives. Rhode

Island's British-born working class, prominent at an earlier date, had faded almost from view. The industrial dominance of Rhode Island textiles, and of textiles in general within a diversifying national economy, could not be sustained. But in Pawtucket, Woonsocket, or many neighborhoods in Providence, the changes looked more like continuity. Working people tended somewhat more often to finish high school but only a few, among the exceptional upper layers, realistically aspired to college. A union job, in this world, was still a privilege. A job at the bottom of the heap, in the sweatshops or in the middle layer from machine-tool to secretarial work, was far more typical.

The consolations for such a life remained largely in the collectivity and warmth of the blue-collar ghetto. Without romanticizing even slightly, without hiding the products of poverty and frequent unemployment or barely tolerable employment, the broken homes, the alcoholism, the narrowed childhoods and adulthoods, we can look back to the powerful sense of connectedness. The middle class slowly rising out of these cultures still shared much, from cuisine to family relations, of its collective past. Relative to national stereotypes, life in Rhode Island continued to radiate low personal expectations for upward mobility. But on the other side of the coin, it had a specialness that only its citizens, above all working people, could fully understand.

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8. See Paul Buhle, "Italian-American Radicals and the Labor Movement, 1903-1930," *Radical History Review*, 17 (Spring, 1978): 121-51.

## Long Time Passed, 1890–1928

The world of pre-1929 Rhode Island seems almost as distant as Roger Williams and the founding of the Slater Mill. Perhaps, however, we can still imagine the life of the mill village now vanished between highways and real estate developments. If so, we may bring to mind the quaint accents, the cricket fields or bocce courts, the proximity of woods and swimmable rivers to industry, and the simple expectation of a future flowing out of the present like a road leading into the far distance. We could also see, in our mind's eye, the panoply of Whitmanesque working-class: the craftsman with his tools, whistling merrily, proud and confident of his status—ship builder, wheelwright, machinist. We can see family and clan groups almost undiminished, loyalties supreme and apparently binding against the advance of individualism. For all its diversity and importance in the national economy, Providence would look to our eyes like a small town, and Warwick or Warren or even industrial Woonsocket mere villages. The countryside pressed in upon working people from all corners. The shoreline, except around Providence and Newport, remained untouched by today's standards. Rhode Island was still, physically, "an American Eden."

But this was no paradise for the great majority of its inhabitants. We must also imagine the deafening roar of the mills, the terribly long hours, pitifully low wages, and tyrannical work atmosphere. Widespread child labor had been reduced sharply by the 1890s, but home labor for entire families remained the rule in some districts. Extreme poverty, unrelieved by food stamps or welfare payments, haunted the lives of recent immigrants in particular. Working men and women struggled to save pennies against the

approach of old age and prayed they would not be dismissed at forty-five or fifty-five; no unemployment insurance, no Social Security awaited them. Only in recent decades had men gained the universal ballot, only in 1920 did women. No one doubted who ran the state and who would go on making the basic decisions regardless of elections.

In short, it was a world more ecologically beautiful, more collective, and considerably more difficult for Rhode Island working people. It was a place and time unique in the United States: the most Catholic and immigrant state in the country; the transition moment from the centrality of New England to its diminished importance in the national economy and politics; and close to the last moment when it would make itself widely known again, this time as the archetypal New Deal "labor" state, model of melting-pot democracy.

The scene is set and the characters enter. The first comes to us in 1892, a Blackstone Valley story that could have been told fifty or even (except for the pay scale) one hundred years earlier.

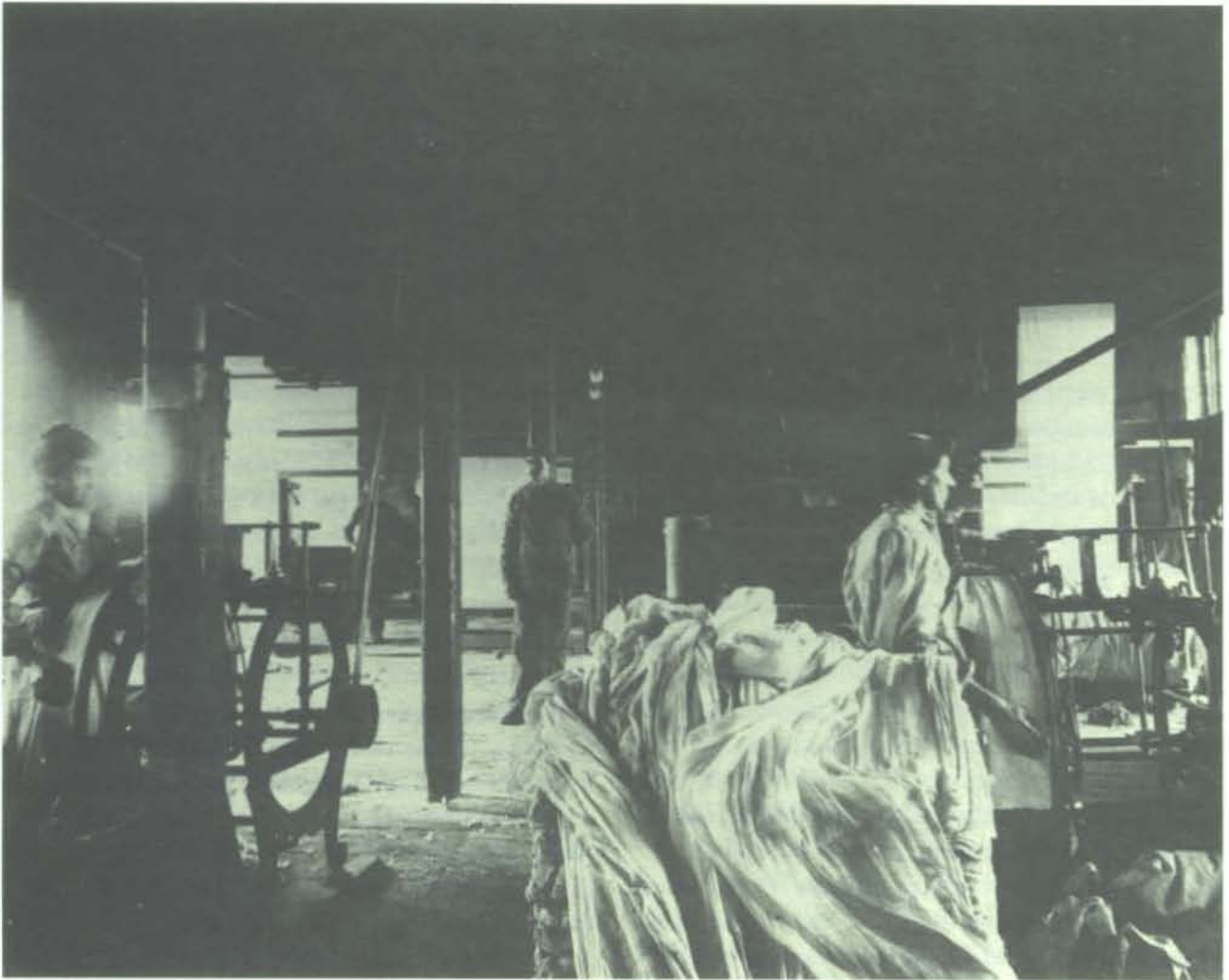
**Chris Daniels:** My two sisters worked in the factory, see.

*Where was that?*

In Ashton Mill, now the Glassworks. And the boss asked one of them if she had a brother, and she said, 'Yes.' 'How old is he?' She said, 'Nine years old.' He said, 'Bring him in Monday.' He didn't ask her if she wanted him to work, or did he want to work. In those days, you know, he just told her, 'Bring him in.' So she come home and

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*Chris Daniels died in 1978. He was interviewed in October 1976 by Scott Molloy.*



*This turn-of-the-century scene shows Apponaug Print Works Warwick, R.I. employees in the Grey Room where cloth was prepared for bleaching. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2192).*

said, 'You're going to work Monday.'

I worked there till [1901 when] I was about eighteen years old, just enough to get out.

*How much did they pay you, do you remember?*

Well, I got a dollar seventy-five for sixty-five hours.

*For sixty-five hours.*

Yeah. That was the beginning, and got kicked in the pants besides.

*What did you have to do?*

Sweep out pretty near all of them floors in that big mill. Sure.

*But you did that for eight or nine years?*

Not that alone. I did a number of things. After that you got to be a cleaner. I was a dauber.

I was a back boy. I was a spinner, and I was a twister tender. I helped set up machinery. But you couldn't get any higher than that. That was as high as you could get.

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*Chris Daniels set out on one of those fateful journeys known as the "longest trainride in the world," the short geographical distance from Ashton to Providence which symbolized the greater trip from the sleepy countryside to the modern, fast-paced hub of American civilization. After working in a "carriage trade" green-grocers at the foot of College Hill, he took one of the most important jobs in the city: the trolley-car driver who in an age before automobiles made human transportation, for both work and*

*leisure, possible. Already by 1901, a visit to the park and the shore had become part of the urban definition of the good life.*

**Chris Daniels:** Roger Williams Park and the shore resorts were big things then, so I broke in a Friday and Saturday with a man named John Hanley, a nice man. Sunday they put me on a Turks Head trip from [the] Turks Head [a building in downtown Providence] to Roger Williams Park with a little red dinky, seven, eight seats.

*After one day's training!*

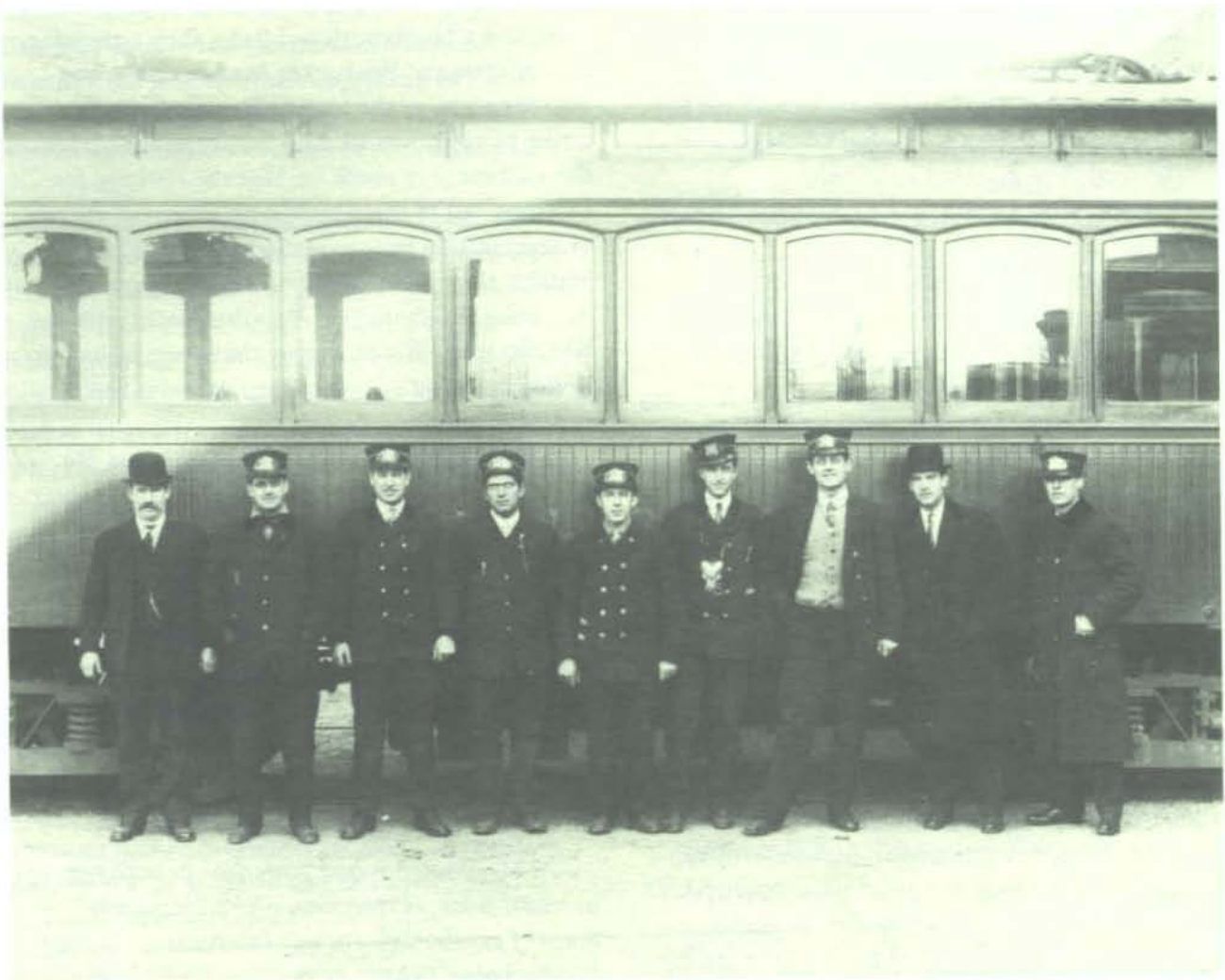
Yeah, a day and a half training. I didn't know a transfer from anything else. I lugged people all day long out to Roger Williams Park. Come noon-time I said, 'How's chances for dinner?' 'Keep

going.' So, all right. Kept going. Never turned the register back, y'know, I didn't have time. You'd get to Turks Head, and they'd flock on so fast they'd almost mob you.

So all day I lugged them. And at night I asked, 'How's the chance for supper?' 'No supper. Keep going.' I said, 'Oh, boy.' I did that till—I got through around one in the morning. I was hungry and dirty. You know, the roads then wasn't paved. You were dusty as a—you looked like a coal miner! So that was my job. At night balancing the day card, you know, I had to separate all them trips. I guess I made about twenty trips or more. Well, I had a hell of a time. Anyhow, I got home about half past three in the morning.

That first day I worked from eight in the

*This photograph of trolley car drivers (circa 1910–15) includes interviewee Chris Daniels, second from the right. Courtesy of the Scott Molloy Collection.*



morning until twelve at night. Just kept working. Next morning I went to the barn and threw the badge on the desk. 'This is a hell of a job! Here's your badge,' I said. 'Work a man from eight to one in the morning, nothing to eat.' I was mad. And the boss said, 'Well now, don't get nervous,' he said. 'You're tired. You go home for two or three days and have a good rest, and,' he says 'when you come back I'll give you a nice easy run on Prairie Avenue,' he said, 'It will be nice.' So I went home, and it was a few days. I went back, anyhow. So he did. He put me on Prairie Avenue, Prairie Avenue and Ocean Street for a while. Then I said, 'I want to go back to my own barn.' So they sent me back to my own barn.

*How many hours did you work a week after that?*

Well, the regular work week was a seventy-seven-hour week. Seven days, no Sundays off. In the summer it was impossible to have a Sunday off or holiday, on account of the excursions. After a while I broke in on Rocky Point and Buttonwoods, you know. And [my family] wanted me to stand up for my sister's child, you know, on one Sunday, and they wouldn't let me off.

*They wouldn't let you off for your own sister's wedding?*

No, christening. No, they wouldn't let you off. I asked, 'Give me two hours, will you?' And you know, they never forgave me. If you work a full week you got fourteen dollars.

*Fourteen dollars for seventy-seven hours.*

You figure that up; fifty-two weeks and you got seven hundred, eight hundred dollars, that's all.

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*Now, look behind the curtain of social intercourse, behind the words of Constitution and the laws of regulation of commerce. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, you will find the real issues: industrialization, immigration, and the consequences the two bring. By 1865, most large American cities had a population majority of immigrants; industry had an overwhelming majority. Industrial development, far more than the political or spiritual freedom of America, encouraged immigration from hard-pressed districts of Europe. The strong backs, nimble fingers, and adaptive minds of*

*these people made the subsequent transformation of society possible. The Irish came first after the English, and kept arriving in numbers. They established the initial line of protest against the elite, and they set out the strategies of response.*

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**Al McAloon:** Our family has been here since, part of it since 1829, and the other part came here around 1852, '53; that is, my paternal grandfather Michael came here in the early '50s and lived until 1935. So I remember him very clearly. He was a vigorous, forceful man even in his 80s and early 90s, whose voice you could hear across the street if he wanted to make his point.

He gave a leadership in Irish-American affairs in Blackstone Valley for a good thirty-five or forty years. Because of his internal qualities or what you'd call innate leadership qualities. He was a big man, broad-shouldered.

He was a blacksmith and had a shop right near East Avenue and Pawtucket Avenue, and it was also the scene of the United Electric Railway strike in 1908, was it? And they took the part of the strikers very much, so that the strikers, for instance, out of this blacksmith shop, got plenty of ammunition from my grandfather, whose sympathies, though he owned his own property, and he owned the shop, his sympathies were with the laboring man because he saw the oppressor as the millowner. And of course the oppressor was the millowner.

[My grandfather] was always a Democrat. He made clear to all of us that he was a Democrat. He was active—I think, as far as we can determine, he was probably born around 1842 or '43, so that when he came to the United States and became old enough to become the blacksmith and own his own shop—and from that point on, I think you could say, he was active in Democratic circles. From what my father said, he was a natural, not only a natural leader, but a political

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*Al McAloon has had a lifetime of activism in social work, corrections, and professional areas of psychology. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 1 May 1985.*



leader, as I said earlier, getting out the vote, raising funds, the little that they had to raise. And more than that, giving a type of leadership in those days that was more suited to the street-corner and the knock on the door than the television. Plus the fact that I do know he went around and became known going around in what is called, if you recall the types of vehicles, wagons, an 'Old Democrat.' That was a two-seater with one horse. And a man named McAlevey from Pleasant View in Pawtucket and he became very friendly.<sup>1</sup> And they made it a point to go around the city in this Old Democrat wagon to make sure that you voted, you see. And they went from the tenement to the saloon to—since he was a small proprietor, he did try to reach some of the small proprietors, many of whom were beginning Irish proprietors. He was able to reach that. From what I gather, though, in discussing some of these latter years of my father's life, they always saw the Democratic party as a friend of the people, of the oppressed, of the poor, and which it was, y'know. So that it was almost antireligious to think of even voting for the Republicans.

The domestics were transmission belts. They transmitted what was being talked about in the living room or at the dinner. And they related back to the local political—in the neighborhoods, you see. And even those in those big houses, as they were called, didn't care or didn't realize what a transmission belt these maids were; so that [we were] kept abreast of GOP developments, which were taking place in Grace church or the Unitarian church, y'know, and being transmitted and transmuted up on Capitol Hill. So that it was a long time before the Irish here felt that Capitol Hill, the Capitol building, was theirs, because on the cornerstone of the Capitol building is the Masonic [i.e., anti-Catholic] insignia.

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*Other immigrants and in-migrants from rural America had been present all along, of course. But the rise of industry and commerce pin-*

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1. Patrick McAlevey, a Pawtucket "hostler" (a groom for horses at an inn or stable) and a perennial political figure.

*pointed their importance. Three testimonies of longshoremen tell a black and Portuguese story.*

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**Willis Jones:** Well you see, before. . . the waterfront when it was black, it was all black. My father and them, they were all black—there weren't any Portuguese—only one and that was Paul Mendos.

At the old Harbor junction, when they first started shoveling coal down there—that goes way back to 1918 and then afterwards—a lot of Portuguese people came in. And finally, it ended up being all Portuguese—all the colored were practically all gone but a few.

Blacks have been around Providence for a long time. Some of them came from the South to Rhode Island. My father was from North Carolina, but I'm a Rhode Islander—born and bred. I first lived on Clifford Street when I started working on the docks. Then after that, I got married and lived on the East Side. I lived around Howell Street in the Camp Street area.

The city was segregated to a certain extent then. Of course in this day and age things have changed from what they were, when I was a boy. When I was a boy, certain restaurants you couldn't go in them. They didn't want you in them. In fact, they wouldn't let you in them. When they couldn't keep you out, they just ignored you. Waitresses just walked by you and gave you time to walk out. You see, not all the prejudice was in the South. There was a lot of it right here!

**John "Toy" Fernandes:** I was born on Boa Vista Island on December 27, 1908 at home. I was an only child and we were very Catholic. My real name is John Rodrigues Evangelist Fernandes, but people called me Toy. I am seventy-five years old.

I came on a three mast schooner, although most Cape Verdeans used to come on two masted. They landed in New Bedford. A train ran

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*Willis Jones was interviewed by Sam Beck, 4 October 1983.*

*John "Toy" Fernandes was interviewed by Sam Beck, 4 October 1983.*



*A photograph of Portuguese dockworkers from an unknown publication was included in an unpublished manuscript "Immigrant City: A Pictorial and Textual Vignette of Providence & Its Environs, 1880-1928," compiled by John W. Browning and Chester A. Browning. The manuscript and photographs are now part of the RIHS Graphics Collection.*

from New Bedford to Providence. That's how I came to Providence—by train. The train stopped in East Providence, at the depot, and I guess from there we took a cab to Providence.

I came to live in Fox Point above the old Union Hall on South Main. But we moved to East Providence after a month where they bought a house. We lived on Hall Street, off of Waterman Avenue.

There weren't too many Cape Verdeans living there then. Mostly Italians.

My father worked on a whaleship. He could read and write, but my mother, she could only sign her name. He'd be away five to six months at a time before returning.

When the men were whaling, there wasn't a lot of dockwork in Providence. But when whaling stopped, then dockwork started. Almost all Cape Verdeans came into doing longshoreman work. They knew how to rig the ship. You had to know how to rig the ships—knowing the tonnage of the booms. Ships were carrying lumber from the west coast—mostly American ships. In those days booms were rigged for five tons; if there was more, you took your chances. Because at that time you didn't have safety—there was no safety check during the unloading process. Now with the union there is a safety man. In those days we had many casualties. You took your chances, then. There's been quite a change since the union. Quite a change!

My father became a longshoreman and then I became one in 1927. It was hard work. Cape Verdeans were hired. They were people who could be depended on. It was hard work. It was the only way we could survive. No one else wanted to do it—there was great discrimination at that time.

It was like Cape Verdeans passing on working as longshoremen from father to son. It was simple, when your son became of age, he became a longshoreman. Just like today, if a longshoreman is working and then retires, he passes his book to his son.

Ships come in with five hatches and each hatch has a gang. Fifteen men to a gang, depending on the cargo; more men are used with lumber cargo.

One Cape Verdean is a walking foreman—he is a leader—he picks these men. He has the capacity to control these men. He knows how to write and takes your name and turns it into the office for the payroll. The walking foreman is part of the company and gets higher pay on the ship.

**George Diaz:** We took ships from Norfolk, Vir-

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*George Diaz was interviewed by Sam Beck, 23 October 1983.*

ginia, freight from the South with machinery, box freight, wool, and steel. That was working coast-wise, every weekend three ships came out of Norfolk. A steady man would get fifty-five cents an hour; if you weren't part of the gang, you'd get a dime less, forty-five cents. At that time, for eight dollars a month you could get a mansion.

It was hard work! It was a son of a bitch! Walk and talk. Walk and talk. You worked twelve hours a day. Walking fifty miles a day. You had to pick up the lumber. It was all marked. With pig iron, you needed gloves—new gloves—every hour. At that time you could bring anyone in. All up and down the dock, it was all strictly black. The only other things you could do if you were a nigger was work in a hotel as a porter or go to the East Side to be a butler or chauffeur. It was hard work,

waiting for a boat, waiting, nothing, nothing. It was transit work. If you went to get a steady job, so you'd get thirty-six dollars a month. Then, there was no unemployment insurance! The boss was like Jesus Christ! You needed a hook and a good back! Guys would shine up their hooks with emery cloth to make it gleam. And then they'd put the hook on their shoulder when they were walking around.

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*The modern office meanwhile entered social and commercial life, bringing with it a greatly broadened category of working persons, the woman office worker—typist, filer, clerk, and all the other categories of clerical labor. Gertrude Motta graduated from a business school in Worcester and moved to Providence about 1910. She felt she had a special aptitude for "figuring" and*

*Office workers at the Royal Weaving Company, Pawtucket, ca. 1910–1918. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2198).*



The Dinner Hour, J. &amp; P. Coats Thread Mills, Central Falls, R. I.



A postcard (ca. 1910) showed workers at J. & P. Coats Thread Mills in Central Falls, R.I. leaving for the lunch hour. RIHS Graphics Collection.

*adapted quickly to new machines encountered at her jobs at Iron and Russell, a jewelry manufacturer, and later at Brown & Sharpe, a large machine tool manufacturer.*

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**Gertrude Motta:** I worked in Iron and Russell's—an emblem [manufacturer]. Then I had a little switchboard for the—just for the office. And also a comptometer, which I hadn't seen; they didn't teach it in the business college that I went to. So I just got used to it. I would have had to use it to do some of this work. So I—it evidently was—I was adapted to it, you know. I didn't have to be shown it. It didn't seem to be a puzzle to me. And I used it from then on.

And from there, Brown & Sharpe. And they

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*Gertrude Motta worked in Providence as an officer worker in the 1910s until a year after her marriage. She died on 10 May 1985, at the age of 95. She was interviewed by Gail Sansbury, 6 February 1983.*

were paying better. But you know, after you get there, you find out it wasn't salary. If you didn't work a day, you didn't get your pay. But I built up a lot of speed there [on the comptometer] because we had to. They would give—I was in the material distribution—and these stacks of inventories came in, and you'd have to get through with them in a day. So you—you build up speed on them.

So, I don't know that there was anything different about over there. It was a very, very large office. You must not talk to the girl next to you! But, of course, there's always a way. Sometimes I'd bring candy or something in. They put in the wastebasket, and the waste paper basket would go all around the room! Writing notes, too. I met some of my closest friends over there, that I'm still friendly with.

But it was a very, very large office. Each section had—well, supervisor, I suppose you'd call him. And he sat—we were three in a row—he sat in the middle of that first row. He faced this way,

though. We didn't face him; we faced away from him. Yes, so he was right there all the time. Stokes, his name was. Well, we had fifteen minutes out in the morning, fifteen minutes out in the afternoon. It was a little walk over to the ladies room. It was around the corridor. But we always took it. Maybe if we didn't have it—but if you had to go to the bathroom in between, you had to ask him. That was kind of embarrassing.

It was very systematic. But, yet, you know, I liked it, I liked the girls.

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*Despite these changes, millwork remained the basic pattern of industrial life. The following speaker recalls the mill village as its quintessence.*

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**Margaret Jenckes:** My mother worked in Lonsdale Mills, at the Ann and Hope. She said she was back-tender, and got speeder-tending. I remember her saying that when she came to this country, right after [President] McKinley was assassinated [in 1901], they got three dollars a week. They worked from six in the morning until six at night. They went in the dark, in winter, and they came out in the dark. She got married in 1904, and didn't work for a while. When she got married, she went to live in the company houses. There was a local store where they

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*Margaret Jenckes, retired in Pawtucket after many years as a textile worker, is "doing well." She was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 1 September 1986.*

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*Footrace during the eighth annual outing for Sayles Finishing Plants employees to Crescent Park in East Providence, R.I., 18 July 1923. RIHS Collection (RHi S275 926).*



traded. And Lonsdale Company had a farm where they had cows; I remember they'd wake you up delivering the milk in the morning. When I was about ten or eleven I used to carry the dinner pails for my mother's cousins. That was nothing. Some of the kids used to carry four in each hand! And the thing that made me nervous, all these young people were running. You had to get up the stairs without knocking the pails over. They had tea or coffee in the bottom, and mashed potatoes, then sandwiches and dessert. So if you slopped it around too much, the tea would go into your potatoes. It scared me to death going up those stairs. . . . I started working at a mill when I was fourteen [in 1924].

I lived in the [Lonsdale] New Village until 1915. I can remember all the names of the people. It was mostly English and Irish, a few French families. There was a long brick block we lived in, that isn't there any more. We were all close. When they had a wake, people would loan each other things for the house. We used to laugh: every wake I went to in the Village, it was the same picture on the wall and the same table. They'd all rally together.

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*The immigration of Italians, Jews, Poles, Armenians, and others from eastern and southern Europe to Rhode Island, 1890–1915, dramatically changed the character of the workforce and the blue-collar neighborhoods. The First World War dramatized the influence of these new residents. Immigration slowed to a halt, production and profit levels rose sharply, and the labor market tightened. Strikes hit an all-time high in Rhode Island as elsewhere. Not many new unions were organized successfully among the mass of unskilled workers. But even in a nonunion environment, conditions improved and wages rose.*

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**Frank Sgambato:** You had the Centerdale Mill,

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*Frank Sgambato served as a member of the North Providence Town Council (1934–40) and state senate (1941–72). As a candidate for public office, he was never defeated. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 19 May 1984.*

you had the Allendale mill, you had the Georgiaville mill, all textile plants. . . . In those days that was the only industry that was more-or-less available.

We had all dirt roads at the time. Kids my age at the time at fifteen or sixteen [in 1916] were working at the mills. I believe I went to work when I got here. . . . I started to work in the Lymansville Mills, a mile and a half down here. No transportation in those days. You had streetcars. You walked to work at six in the morning, worked until six at night, an hour for lunch. We had sports in those days, too, little amateur teams. . . . Saturday was cleanup day. . . . [We made] \$4.54 a week.

. . . .

I worked in what they called the card-room. It wasn't a bad job, not too big a workload, but they paid you by the dollar. If you worked and you earned, say, \$4.54 or \$4.60, they wouldn't pay you the sixty cents until you earned the full dollar. . . . I remember, I told many people, they kept the difference [that week] even if you earned \$4.99. . . .

Before the late 1920s there was very little [labor] organizing. There were families in the mills, the fathers, mothers and children, but there was no movement.

You got some wage increases [during WWI]. . . . wages didn't move too fast, if you got a raise it was kindness on the part of the employer. . . . You would turn it over to the family, they would give you twenty-five cents or a dollar spending money at the end of the week. Of course, you could go to a movie for five or ten cents. . . .

People who had jobs in those days didn't have to worry about being laid off. There was plenty of work. There was no movement for increasing workloads, technological improvements in the machinery, and people seemed to be content way back in those days because they had a job.

I had an experience in Lymansville Mill. I had a particular job and I was fired on a Tuesday or Wednesday, and I moved to another mill, got a job on the following day. It was easy getting work in those days. They appreciated a good worker. . . . They would interview you more or less and say, Where did you work before? You would tell them.

LONG TIME PASSED

And what happened? I got fired. They would say, but what happened, what did you do that got you fired? You would give them a history of what happened, and they wouldn't hold it against you. If you didn't like that job, you'd leave it, and get a job in another factory in a day. . . . You would move from a card-room that took care of yarn

that was put into skeins and so forth, then you'd move from there, maybe go to another yarn mill where they had spinning frames, twisting frames. The women would run the frames and the boys would feed them with bobbins and so forth. . . . It wouldn't take you long to learn the job, become a doffer. . . . I worked in a [dyeing and] fin-

*This illustration from a Brown & Sharpe employee handbook c. 1940 was captioned "Neat Clothing and Good Housekeeping."*



ishing plant in Greenville, this was during World War I. . . .

You'd talk to your fellow workers once in a while and you'd say, 'Did you get hell from the boss today? What'd he give you hell for?' 'I wasn't pushing my work fast enough. . . . He gave me a call down that I'd have to move along.' So you'd have to think back, what did I do wrong? You'd move a little faster. . . . You have [some] workers that were favored, pets of the bosses, and if you were a little antagonistic, they knew your makeup. I was fortunate. I didn't get fired from many jobs. I left jobs to get to better jobs. I left Greenville finishing to go to the Esmond mills [a blanket mill]. Then I joined the Navy in 1919. When I got out of the Navy, I went back to Greenville, didn't like my job there, then went to Esmond.

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*After a brief recession, 1921-23, production rose again in woolen and worsted goods. Times were good for the American middle classes and better for fortunate working people than before the war.*

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**Frank Sgambato:** I had my problems with the bosses. Finally there was an opening for a hand-twister's job in the Esmond Mill. . . . The boss in the finishing room wouldn't transfer me to the weaving room. . . . I knew it was a skilled craft; the job was more or less noted to be an English job, they had very few mixed nationalities, and an Italo-American going into a twisting job was a little hard to accept. The boss in the weaving room was a Franco-American, French [and he said] forget it. . . . The superintendent was coming around and I was working in the finishing room one day—you didn't stop superintendents in those days, they were lords—and I stopped him and said I know there's an opening in the weave room and I'd like to get the opening. He said, they like you up here, just stay up here. My persistence got me the job. My girlfriend, who would later be my wife, was in the weave room. . . . It was a good job, it paid me at least ten dollars more than I was making. . . . twenty-four dollars a week. . . .

We got a few [wage] cuts [in the 'twenties]. The

Esmond Mill put a 10 percent cut into effect and there was a strike. . . . But there was no organizing. We just took it upon ourselves and struck. We were only out maybe a week, and finally they brought us back. . . .

Maybe a group of weavers in the weave room said, we can't take it, let's go out. . . . I went along with them, I was more or less a bit of an agitator. My father was a bit of an agitator himself. If he didn't like anything that was going on in politics he would say so. But he didn't express himself to the outside, he would tell us. And I was always aggressive, wanting something better, and never giving up, always wanted to maintain my earnings. But I worked for it. . . . I was so ambitious at the time as a twister that the weave room production was in the neighborhood of seventy percent and the supervisor came to me and said, how would you like to go on the incentive system. . . . you wouldn't earn less. There were only four weavers. . . . and one of them was a deaf and dumb guy. I explained things to him and said, how would you like to go on the incentive system. They didn't want it. . . . I sort of manipulated the things pretty well: we would do so many warps a day, then after a month, increase it. We finally got our pay up as high as the loom-fixers, and we raised the production in the weave room from seventy to ninety percent because there were not too many stoppages, warp-outs. . . . We used to work a lot of overtime, no time-and-a-half, and naturally you wanted to make more money. The ambition of anybody in those days was to make a good pay. . . . We raised our pay up to forty dollars a week. That was good money in those days.

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*The successful institutions, proud centers of advanced industry, never looked better.*

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**James Rigney:** At Brown & Sharpe—it was like a college they ran. And the kids came from all over

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*James H. Rigney is Director of Labor for the State of Rhode Island. He worked for Brown & Sharpe from 1937 until 1978, when he retired as vice president of industrial relations for the corporation nationwide. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 13 June 1985.*



the country. They were the top people in their business in the world. They were the world standard. That was a culmination of, in 1930, of then almost one hundred years of excellence in engineering skills.

We had all these uniforms, short sleeves and the blue jumpers and the blue overalls. And of course, they had a school, and they had the classrooms, etc. This became the standards for the federal apprenticeship standards.

The plant was then run, throughout the whole structure, with Nova Scotians. They'd come down and they would have—that was the previous bunch. And so they had the Anglo-Saxon, Scotch background, and if you were not of that stripe, you were not—you were suspect, okay?

The nostalgia was that it was a great institution that gave people a chance to develop. And they had a characteristic, those Nova Scotians—'cause they had come from small beginnings—to look for bright guys and give them a chance. They gave a lot of people a chance to take on responsibility. And they were at the top of the world, and it was a great institution, great institution.

You know, it's a funny thing, in those days, to make a distinction the shop foreman had to wear a pin-striped apron with a pin-striped jacket and a straw hat. That told you this was the boss. All other staff people had to wear grey alpaca coats. You had to buy them, and I think they cost about nine bucks or something, of course, a lot of money back then; but that made you look like management staff.

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*For cotton workers, facing a decline of the industry, things were not so good. Employers sought to make up for competition from the southern mills by reducing wage levels and increasing work hours back to a virtual industrial serfdom. From the Blackstone Valley to the Pawtuxet Valley, workers drew the line in 1922 when threatened with the fifty-five-hour work week and a 25 percent pay cut. The mill communities, with a minimum of leadership and outside assistance, created a vital counter-culture of services to strike-torn areas. In the end—after a six month struggle—the strikers*

*lost. But their effort presaged the milltown outbursts twelve years later, and set the pattern for the political victory of the New Deal democracy.*

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**Luigi Nardella:** Italians took the lead because they were in a majority in the mills. They suffered discrimination. People said 'Dago,' you might as well say 'Nigger.' When Italians first moved to Atwells Avenue they couldn't walk the streets. They'd get pelted with everything, eggs, tomatoes. They had to organize to defend themselves. In Natick the company wouldn't allow the Italians into the tenements on Main Street, even if the tenement was vacant and the Italians needed it. And Italians were fifty percent of the workers in the mill! The *Providence Tribune* had a reporter in the Pawtuxet Valley who said the first Pawtuxet soldier wounded in the war was an Italian, yet the Italians weren't allowed onto Main Street!

*Do you remember how the strike started?*

Yeah, my oldest brother, Guido, he started the strike. Guido pulled the handles on the looms in the Royal Mills, going from one section to the next shouting, 'Strike! Strike!' But I was the one who had to go out and bring in the support. When the strike started we didn't have any union organizers. But we had gotten the mills out, one after the other. We got together a group of girls and went from mill to mill, and that morning we got five mills out. We'd motion to the girls in the mills, 'Come out! Come out!' Then we'd go on to the next.

*You organized relief yourself, through the union?*

That's right. One time we had to get fifty cents per striker for benefits, and that money had to come out of the strike fund. We set up thirteen restaurants in the Pawtuxet Valley, three in Natick alone. My brother was the head of one; it fed the most people and was the least expensive. There'd be one hot meal, sandwiches and plenty of milk for the children. If they wanted a second

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*Luigi Nardella died in 1985 after a lifetime of labor activism. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 1 May 1978.*

glass, and they hadn't spilled, they could have a second. The doctors said that the children looked more healthy after the strike than before. We were proud of that. And we were giving relief to families who couldn't come to the restaurants. A woman who had just given birth, for instance, couldn't come to the restaurants. She had to have home relief. We gave the most needy families coal, we gave them wood, we gave them enough to get along.

*You and the other activists in Natick were known as the Iron Battalion, because of the way you shut down the mills and kept the strike going. Why were you called the Iron Battalion?*

I don't know how we got that name. I went to testify against an injunction, and they called me the head of the Iron Battalion. I told them that I didn't make up the name, the newspapers did to create an impression of conspiracy, to get a headline. But a group from Crompton, when they heard the name, they called themselves 'The Shock Troops.' It's true that we were determined. We had rock throwing, scabs pushed back, electric cars pulled off the tracks. The strikers wanted to stop automobiles from entering the factories. I told them, 'Don't do that. The best you can do is to get all the stones you can, put them along the sidewalk. Don't get in front of a car full of scabs. They'll run you down.' So kids, women, everyone threw stones. There were busted windshields. But these things happen in all strikes.

*Didn't the union try to influence the legislature by sending crowds up to the Capitol? Was it successful?*

Yes, to a certain extent. Because in 1924 we elected a Democratic governor. In 1932 we elected a whole Democratic ticket. In Natick, the lawyers who offered to help us were Democrats who wanted to take over the town. They did. The chairman of our strike [committee] became chief of police, a strike lawyer became town solicitor, his nephew became governor, and his cousin became sheriff of Providence County.

That was the beginning of Democratic party rule. Some Italians I knew very well turned away from the Republicans. They became state officials under the Democrats.

*Didn't the strike help to create a new political movement, at least for you and a few others?*

Yes. Somebody from the Young Workers' League came out to bring a check, and invited me to a meeting, and I went. Then I joined, and in a few years I was in the Risorgimento Club in Providence.<sup>2</sup> We were anti-Fascists. I spoke on street corners, [would] bring a stand, jump up, and talk to good crowds. And we led the support for Sacco and Vanzetti.

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*The execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti was one of the cruelest and most characteristic episodes in American social life of the 1920s. It has been described as a legally sanctioned version of a lynching, but it would be better explained, perhaps, as the revenge taken by a conservative elite for the labor turbulence of new immigrant communities. Little persuasive evidence was offered against the two defendants, accused of a robbery and murder in Braintree, Massachusetts. They were convicted for their ideas (they were both active anarchists) and for their race—Italian-Americans viewed, at the time, as somewhat less than "white."*

*The case shocked Rhode Island. Virtually every Italian-American organization ranging from fascist to communist swung into the support campaign for the victims on trial. Special trains ran to Boston from Providence for the last-minute demonstrations. And in the ethnic societies, a working class sentiment mixed desperation with self-pride. The Mateotti Club, named after an Italian senator murdered by Fascists, flourished in Cranston. From that center of free ideas, the nephew of the founder recalls, activity percolated outward.*

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2. The Risorgimento Club was an Italian-American, anti-fascist organization with a "united front" constituency of liberals, socialists, anarchists, communists, and independents. The club reached its peak influence in the 1920s, with speakers such as the famed Carlo Tresca (hero of the 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike and editor of the anarchist newspaper, *Il Martello*).

**Thomas Longo:** I think our mentor, at the time, as far back as I can remember, was Galleani, Luigi Galleani, right, from Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup> And he was the editor of *La Cronaca Sovversiva*. And I remember him several times when we had the club up on Spruce Street. And several times he came up there and he'd give speeches. He was a distinguished looking man, quiet-spoken.

I remember the part that the Church [played then]. The priest up at Saint Ann's there was telling the strikers at the Cranston Print Works that—or the wives, rather, because the men probably wouldn't go to church—'Tell your husbands to get back to work and feed their children,' that sort of thing, 'and forget about the strike.'

The thing that I remember about myself mostly was the fact that I was [an actor]—we used to have the Filodrammatico Spartico, and we used to give plays in New London, New Haven, Franklin, Mass., and some other towns in Massachusetts that I don't remember. And I was the child actor because at that time I was ten, eleven, twelve years old. No, wait a minute, in 1925 I was fourteen, but they billed me as eleven, anyway. And there was one play in particular that actually I was the victim besides being the hero of it. I'm the one that got killed in the machine in the shop and that sort of thing.

The plays were in Italian. And we used to raise a few bucks. Of course, you know, we'd make—two hundred dollars in those days was tremendous. To draw two hundred dollars, that meant at least four or five hundred people. Actually, I think it was thirty-five cents, fifty cents. That's the part that I enjoyed most because I was a bit of a ham, you know. But then, of course, I had to adopt their philosophy and all that, and I saw a few disturbances, you know, where they had to

*Thomas Longo died in 1985. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 22 May 1984.*

3. Luigi Galleani, foremost Italian-American anarchist intellectual, editor of *Cronaca Sovversiva* from Barre, Vermont and later Lynn, Massachusetts. Galleani bitterly opposed World War I, and for that reason several hundred of his followers were arrested, his newspaper was suppressed, and he himself was deported in 1919 by the U.S. government. He died in a fascist prison a decade later.

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*This broadside advertised a Spartacus Filodrammatico performance of a play devoted to the Sacco and Vanzetti case to be performed in Providence. Courtesy of the Scott Molloy Collection.*

call the police, you know, from Federal Hill. Somebody'd get on a soapbox, either my uncle or my father or somebody there would start talking about labor, and the police would come in with the horses, on horseback. And they had these horses trained so that they would never step on you, but they used to sidle, you know, and kind of knock you down.

*You must remember when just before the execution [of Sacco and Vanzetti] took place—the mass rallies in Providence and all the excitement.*

Do I ever! Yes. I remember the night of the execution. We were downtown. In the *Journal* building they had a telephone connection, and they gave sort of a blow-by-blow thing, you know, like Medeiros died first, then Sacco, and then Van-

zetti. And then in Federal Hill there was tears; they were running, flowing. That was a real travesty of justice. Obviously two innocent men like that.

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*Nor was this the only example of intolerance at hand during the 1920s. David Kolodoff remembers the understandable fears of immigrants then.*

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**David Kolodoff:** There was great fear of anti-Semitism. When I was just a kid, in 1924—I was eight then—I remember people talking about the Ku Klux Klan. I got so scared, I didn't leave the house. I didn't know what to do. I saw them actually burn a cross at the entrance of Roger Williams Park. The Edgewood-Pawtuxet Area was the center of their activities.

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*David Kolodoff, a retired liquor dealer, remains a social activist. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 7 May 1982.*

*In one more way it was the end of an era. Socialist Eugene Debs, the Martin Luther King, Jr., of his time, epitomized the striving of working people for justice and industrial democracy. Running for president in 1920 from a prison cell in which he had been confined for opposing the First World War, Debs attracted almost a million votes. At his death, in 1926, he was widely remembered as a martyr.*

**David Kolodoff:** I remember South Providence the day when Eugene Debs died. Everybody [on the street] was so sad. I was always on the streets, and since I was bilingual, I could listen to these people. I always loved elderly people. They said he was one of the greatest persons that ever lived, a great friend of humanity, he should have been in the White House instead of Hoover or Harding. He was then a hero among the Jewish people.

## Depression Rhode Island, 1929–1940

The 1929 stockmarket crash and the resulting industrial depression hit blue-collar Rhode Islanders hard. The great majority had no resources to fall back upon. Their faith in the system and confidence in business leaders sunk to an all-time low. No one knew what might fill the vacuum of leadership. Political reformers now made dramatic moves in an ethnic, working class direction.

**Al McAloon:** To the Irish, any sense of power didn't come until 1933. The revolution of 1933 and onward is very vivid in my mind, because I was out pushing doorbells in the 1930s. I was only, I think, fifteen, but they put me to work, you see. My father made sure that I got out and worked for a group of people who are out of office. And I can remember working in the program or the political campaign of 1930 for Harry Curvin.<sup>1</sup> Harry was the first one to break the mold, and that was two years ahead of the others.

One of the most forceful and remarkable [reformers] was the man who later became boss of the machine in Pawtucket, Thomas P. McCoy.<sup>2</sup> He was a streetcar conductor or driver. He was involved in that 1908 strike, vividly. He became—he was loquacious, a wisecracker, and

smart, very intelligent. He put himself through what they called in those days commercial high school, y'know. So that he could run a meeting well. He knew parliamentary law, and he had an empathy with the poor and the oppressed that was unique, so that he introduced many bills in the legislature, in, say, 1920 on, on what we would call today Social Security, Unemployment Compensation, support for childcare, Workman's Comp., as well as Unemployment. He introduced those bills year after year, and they were struck down by the forces of the *Providence Journal*.

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*Regardless of these shifts, the immediate problem raised by the Depression for most working people was simply survival. Hard times meant bleak expectations, as we hear from two women who entered long careers in clerical work, a man who became a radical organizer, and another who became a plant manager.*

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**Mary Wadbrook:** Unfortunately my father was not in the position to send us to college. None of us went to college, but we all finished high school and we all got good jobs and we more or less made ourselves what we are today, really. I had wanted to be a nurse, but my father was, as I said, really old-fashioned, and he didn't believe in women working nights and Sundays and holidays, so I went to work for the telephone company and I worked nights and Sundays and holidays. Even to this day, I wish I'd been a nurse.

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*Mary Wadbrook is now retired after more than thirty years as a telephone operator and office worker in a bank. She was interviewed by Pat Lawrence, 22 July 1981.*

1. Harry Curvin, State Representative from Pawtucket's Tenth District and Speaker of the House for more than twenty years, was the principal aide to Thomas P. McCoy in the new Democratic party state political machine.

2. Thomas P. McCoy was the most important of Irish-American reform politicians in Rhode Island of the 1920s–30s. With Robert E. Quinn and J. Howard McGrath, McCoy broadened the Democratic party appeal beyond the Irish constituency. He had been, in 1920, the first Democrat elected to the state legislature from Pawtucket, and in the legislature became known as a strong supporter of labor. Rising to state power with the Green administration, McCoy later became mayor of Pawtucket, remembered most for his close association with racetrack interests.

**Katherine Adams:** You had to make up your mind fairly early in those days because you had to get out and make a living, you had to make money. Money was in extremely short supply in the thirties. And so most people were very well aware that as soon as they possibly could they had to have some skill to make money. I was fortunate that I was able to finish high school but I knew that I would have liked to have been a nurse and then I thought I would like to be a school teacher. But I eventually settled down being a secretary and going into the office. I was fortunate in being able to go to business college after high school, which a lot of girls couldn't, and I was able to get a two-year course there before I went into the business world. But most of us had to make up our minds fairly early because there was not so much of educating after, the way it is

*Katherine Adams was interviewed by Cynthia Bartlett, 19 March 1983.*

today. You got your education and went to work and that was the end of it.

**Ray Bell:** My father was the type who voted for Alf Landon in 1936. He was the foreman at the New England Belt Company and he was also a teacher at the School of Design. He was fifteen years there and they gave him twenty-four hours notice. They couldn't afford to pay anybody then. It was run by . . . a very reckless crowd!

*You went to public school!*

Yes. Classical and Central. I tried to get a scholarship to Brown, but in 1933 you couldn't get them. Then I bummed around the country for a couple of years, freight cars and this and that. Then I started to learn a little bit, doing one thing and another.

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*Ray Bell is retired and lives in Pawtucket. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 1 August 1984.*

*Free distribution of fish to the unemployed in Providence. January 1932. Photograph courtesy of the Providence Journal Bulletin. (RHi X3 5692)*



**James Rigney:** I lived in what is now a pretty bad area. It was a tenement house area around the Mineral Spring Avenue and Lonsdale Avenue area, which is now heavily settled by immigrants again, Central Americans for one. But then it was a lot of English and Irish people in three-deck houses.

*And people worked in the factories in the neighborhood!*

Yeah, they worked in the textile mills, and my father scratched around and got jobs. Matter of fact, he finally got a job at Brown & Sharpe. But there were bad times in the Depression. Yeah. In that period my folks went—for some reason or other they were Episcopalians, but they weren't great churchgoers. But through my teenage contacts, I gravitated to the Woodlawn Baptist Church, which is right on the corner of Lonsdale Avenue and Weeden Street and is still there. And that was very nice. That was a great experience for me, 'cause I used to go to Sunday school and we were in plays and all that sort of stuff, y'know, the Fellowship. But during that bad period—and don't forget, in the Depression, and particularly the early thirties when I was in that Fellowship, I used to get food baskets from—because there were long periods of time with no work. And it was quite an event for me to get a big basket of food on a Sunday to take home. But that's what—of course, you've got to know that in those times there wasn't any welfare; there wasn't unemployment; there weren't any benefits whatsoever.

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*Times were especially tough among workers competing for scarce jobs.*

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**Lawrence Spitz, Jr.:** If you wanted a job, you brought the foreman a bottle of whiskey or painted his kitchen on Sunday. Or, if you encountered a fair foreman, such as I did, he had a different method. On Monday morning, he would

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*Lawrence Spitz, Jr., retired in Sun City, Arizona, thought it "ludicrous" to summarize more than thirty years involvement with the Rhode Island labor movement in one or two sentences. He was interviewed by Gary Gerstle, 19 September 1979 and July 1981.*

stand on the loading dock and he would have a handful of spindles, the bobbins in which the yarn is wound, and they're hollow, made out of cardboard, hard cardboard. He needed ten people in his department, ten out of fifty or sixty spindles he had in his hand, a piece of paper in it with an X on it, tucked inside. He threw them up in the air, and then you scrambled on the street—on the sidewalk, in the gutter for these spindles. A young, strong, agile, wiry kid like myself would scoop up five or six. In the process, I had to knock a few of the old timers out of the way. But everybody was down on their knees scrambling for them. And that's how you got your job; if you found a spindle with an X on it you worked that week. This foreman felt that he was much fairer than the others because he didn't demand tribute. Of course, if you were a good-looking girl, it was an entirely different type of tribute that was demanded in those damn sweat shops. When I went to work in this mill, in Pawtucket, the foreman was a pretty decent guy and I had long talks—'don't mention union here, by God, you'll never get a job again. I won't say anything to the employers, but don't you mention unions. You're a nice, bright guy and you need the job,' and so on and so forth. Well, I needed the job, but I didn't need the job as badly as the guys who were married and had kids, and I had more of a sense of independence.

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*For many mill communities, the early 1930s marked the lull before the storm.* 🍀

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**Frank Sgambato:** Then the organizing started. It was right after the 10 percent cut. We wanted to get that cut back. In 1931 or 1932 there was a drive for organizing the Esmond Mill by the United Textile Workers. And I got interested, sort of active. I was always an agitator in the weave room, and people knew that. . . . The bosses wouldn't recognize you, only through force. So we started to organize the plants. . . . [They didn't fire me because] I was a good worker. In fact, they recognized and respected me at the time. . . . I was president of the first local. . . .

You used to collect dues, there was no check-off. That was the big thing. Twenty-four or

thirty-five cents per month, and finally it went up to a dollar. . . . It was tough, we used to collect in the middle [of the month]. They'd say, When are you going to get us a raise? They didn't want to pay anything till you got them a raise. . . .

[Management] recognized the leadership of the union. I was never threatened. In fact I was offered a boss job. I was aggressive and used to take up all the grievances. We had no shop stewards in those days. I used to run from one end to the other. My partner the twister tried to take on as much as he could while I was away on business. The managers kept saying, 'Why don't you get shop stewards?' I said, 'Where am I going to get them? Nobody wants to serve.' It took up a lot of time but we finally did. . . .

I attended the convention [of the UTW] when the strike vote was taken [in 1934]. . . . I was working in the Esmond Mill at the time, and we were the first mill that came out [on the General Strike]. Lymansville came after. Allendale was never organized. We had some mills in Olneyville partly organized. I pulled them out. I gave the company a day or so for shipment. . . . after that we're not going to produce. We had [roving pickets] at various plants, we'd sign them up, but we didn't have staff.

The biggest part of the mills came out, that we picketed. . . . But how long could you keep these people out? We had no [full-time] organizers. . . . We went back after three weeks. People kept saying, we lost the strike. We *didn't lose the strike!* We actually opened the door for all the industrial unions to move.

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*A few years or even a few months earlier, the system had seemed to operate with smooth paternalistic efficiency. Repeated wage cuts, "stretch-out" (intensification of work-pace), and management arrogance provoked a rage almost unthinkable in 1928—or 1940.*

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**Former Dyer, Glenlyon:** They'd go along, they'd keep a ledger on this family, how much money they make a week, they had their own farms, the company had their own farms, their own country store, coal. So if you made nine dollars by the time you got through you'd probably owe the company money.

**Former National Guardsman:** You must remember people from my generation, Sunday in the park, the band beating out 'The American Patrol.' You went to school Memorial Day, Veterans of the Civil War came and talked to you. The flag, the government, especially the federal government, this was, you'd die in the street, gladly. You believed all these things, these things without sin, the flag could have been lily white, no spots on it. And this is what you were taught.

*The sudden outbreak of violence touched off by the national textile strike of 1934 can be seen as the uprising anticipated by Rhode Islanders almost fifty years earlier—although the workers and managers had changed, the climate of industrial autocracy had remained largely the same. Now the chickens came home to roost. A striker at the Saylesville Bleachery, where crowds battled police and National Guardsmen, recalled, "Scared, any man who says he's not scared is a goddamned liar or he's crazy. But something makes you brave. I don't know what it is." Others, not participants but observers, recall the scenes of that day, 10 September 1934.*

**James Rigney:** As a matter of fact, as young fellows, all we could do was we'd walk around and buy a pint of ice cream for a dime, and that was great, and we'd walk and walk and walk. But we walked around there through that area with the National Guard there, and, of course, what was the National Guard trying to do? Protect the property. Property rights were the most important.

**Al McAloon:** The Metcalfs, the Chafees, the Pecks and Pelkeys, and a host of others not too well known were fatalistic that God had ordained them to lead and give them the fruits of the earth 'in great meed,' as the Bible says.<sup>3</sup> And if

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3. The Metcalfs, Chafees, Pecks, and Pelkeys were Republican leaders of political machines which delayed the Democratic, ethnic, blue-collar rise to political influence. Frederick S. Peck, "Boss" Brayton's successor to Republican Party leadership, was state commissioner of finance in the 1920s. The Peck Education Act of 1922, which forbade parochial teachers to instruct students in any non-English language, was widely considered a case of elite contempt for ethnic life. Only in later decades, with Zechariah Chafee's leadership of the *Providence Journal* and Sen. John H. Chafee's political career, did this tradition gain a more liberal conservationist edge.





*National Guardsmen erect barricades at Saylesville in 1934.*

you tried to take it away from them, they would call out the National Guard to put you down, which they did often. So that when I was a kid growing up, we referred to the National Guard as strikebreakers.

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*In Woonsocket, mobs struck out at the symbols of their oppression, the worst of the mills and the haughtiest of merchants. Two participants remember the night of violence from opposite sides.*

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**Robert Shapot:** I was stationed in the Cranston Street Armory. We left with four other men. I was told by my captain that we anticipated a little trouble in Woonsocket. . . . and that there was a company of men waiting for me at the Woon-

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*Robert Shapot's comments were contained in a public address delivered on 12 September 1984.*

socket Armory. The only problem was, I didn't know where Woonsocket was. The captain told me I'd meet him on the way, and I saw him three days later.

All we did that night was protect ourselves. When you've got [a crowd of] ten thousand against sixty men, what else can you do? They thought we had blanks in our guns, and we certainly didn't. The rest of the regiment arrived at two in the morning, and after that you had law and order.

**Gus Lavallee:** We're at Brouillard's Cafe when somebody comes in and said, the National Guard just arrived [and] you should see them! They are going to blast the hell out of [the] Social [district]. Now what do we do? Let's run down and see the action! I remember just like it was last night. . . .

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*Gus Lavallee's comments were contained in a public address delivered on 12 September 1984.*



Communist orator Anne Burlak speaks to a crowd of workers, circa 1931–32. Courtesy of the Scott Molloy Collection.

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*Contrary to the sensational journalism of the time, the violence could in no way be attributed to Communists. On the contrary, the handful of Communists had been working to create a public discussion of social issues, and to promote the formation of industrial unions.*

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**Anonymous:** The movement was so big that when we organized a meeting down [in what is now] Kennedy Center, and [when] a speaker got up on the City Hall steps, no trolley, nothing couldn't move, all the people were there. Time of the Depression, a lot of people had sympathy for the [Left] movement.

**Al Sisti:** During the 1930s, I remember Anne Burlak [a leading Communist labor agitator] speaking on Manton Avenue; people would go out for an hour at lunch and listen to her instead of going back to the job.<sup>4</sup> Cops from the patrol

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*Al Sisti, a retired steelworker, remains active in a variety of social movements. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle and Duane Clinker in February 1978.*

4. Anne Burlak, daughter of Ukrainian immigrants, early became active in radical trade unionism and Left politics. At seventeen, she was a delegate to the founding convention of the National Textile Workers Union, headed in Providence by former state Socialist party and IWW leader, James P. Reid. Through the mid-1930s, she was a frequent visitor to and sometime resident of Rhode Island, undoubtedly the most charismatic radical orator of labor causes and occasionally a candidate for public office.

wagons, 'Black Marias,' were handling her rough, practically dragging her away from the platform where she was talking. She wasn't shutting up for nobody, though. She inspired people in that mill, to a hell of a great extent.

I also remember the sitdown strikes, not in the Atlantic Mills but right down by the Woonasquatucket. Mostly women. I was really impressed by their militancy, and I have to think the inspiration went back to Burlak. It was unbelievable to see a woman say things like that, and whatever she was called, a Communist, it didn't mean much to us.

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*To the stunning series of events, and real public sympathy for radical militance if not radical philosophy, Governor Green devised his famous two-pronged solution. Arresting the Communists en masse, Green took a neutral position toward the strikers. He could not have done otherwise and consolidated the political power he had established for himself and the Democratic party. Green rightly counted on an underlying conservatism in the population itself to limit the challenges to his version of the system.*

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**Al McAloon:** So [Governor Green's] relationship to property took precedence and he called out the National Guard on his own, without any encouragement from those in the legislature. Now, we must remember, in '34 the Democrats had just entered the legislature in numbers; it was a new governor, it was a new legislature; and the people now were Italian, French, a few Polish people, and Irish, who were warned by their clerical betters not to become mixed up with socialists. To understand this fully, it's easy for us to look back fifty years and analyze it, but they were living it. And I remember. I can remember the events, 'cause I was at some of the events over on Central Avenue in Pawtucket. The parish became a teaching agent. It reflected a board of trustees, most of whom were either a banker, a successful businessman, and very seldom would the trustees be a workman. You were expected to contribute, and they did handsomely. It was the workman who built the schools and built the hospitals and built the churches and so forth. But

the workman was subservient, because he had no one to teach him not to be subservient. You were taught to be subservient. And the only reason that you were brought in to be a trustee was that you had made it. You had become part of the system, and you were respectable. So that was reflected in the sermons. I vividly remember some of the sermons where the younger priests were torn on how to interpret these goings on, but not the older men; they saw only the hand of a few local socialists in these struggles for justice. The younger clergy, who are now the old clergy, my age, didn't tackle the subject at all. . . . So that the average workers felt allegiance and loyalty to their beliefs, but began to have some doubts as to their clerical leaders. And that wasn't attacked for another ten years. So that was '34. It wasn't till about the '40s, '45, '46 that a whole new slew of better educated and feeling and compassionate young clergymen came on the scene to start the labor schools.

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*But this restraint did not eclipse labor activity. Far from it. Under the aegis of the New Deal, Rhode Island style, working people by the tens of thousands bestirred themselves. Often, it took a simple and familiar form of the craftsman struggling to maintain his position. Thus Edwin Brown, Jr., destined to become "Mr. Labor" in later years.*

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*What year was it you went to work?*

**Edwin Brown, Jr.:** Well, 1930, '28, '30, something like that. And when we organized, we had guys working in our tool room that would accept a toolmakers job for the thirteen that they would have got if they went on WPA.<sup>5</sup> And rather than go on WPA, they'd come to work in the shop for that same money. Because they wanted to keep their hands in, you know. And for thirteen bucks

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*Edwin Brown Jr. is the retired secretary treasurer of the Rhode Island AFL/CIO. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle. 3 March 1983.*

5. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was established by the Roosevelt administration to provide work for the unemployed in their own fields of endeavor. Under the WPA, some of the first investigations of historic Rhode Island working conditions were conducted.

a week, there's toolmakers, goddam good toolmakers—and, of course, when we went on strike, I was a lucky bastard; I happened to be getting seventy-five cents an hour in '35 when we went on strike, and I didn't get a raise from the strike. We were on strike for four weeks.

*How did you learn about unionism?*

It was just instinct, mostly. But Dave Clydesdale, who was the [machinists'] international union representative—we'd meet twice a month, every two weeks, and he would talk at that goddam union meeting; he was like the Samuel Gompers, y'know. He would talk, and that's when the National Labor Relations Board was coming along, and the Roosevelt administration, what the hell they were trying to do. And he was a Scotsman from down in Connecticut. And he'd come in and talk about it. And goddamnit, he talked in language that you could understand and realize what the hell he was doing. And he was good. We learned a lot from him. We learned a lot from him. It really started me reading, too. It really started me, you know, and I keep getting after my grandchildren today about reading, but you can't get people to read enough.

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*Had the labor movement been limited to such craftsmen's actions, no great change might have been recorded in social life or politics. But the tide swept over the unskilled, the young and others.*

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We worked fairly steady during the Depression. I could look out the window and see somebody selling apples at the corner of Manton Avenue and Delaine Street, and there were some days when there was nobody out on the street, he was standing there freezing and I said to myself, this shouldn't be. I developed a hell of a lot of my feelings about government, about people, from that. **Rose Bell:** I used to carry all of the cards in my apron pocket. I wore a dress with two big pockets. The people who would get pushed around, they would say to me that they wished

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*Rose Bell is retired and lives in Pawtucket. She was interviewed by Paul Buhle 1 August 1984.*

to hell that their boss would drop dead. I would tell them not to say that, that I had something in my pocket that would fix him. They would ask me what? I would say a union card, but you have to keep your mouth shut until I get a majority and get the thing going. So some of them would put them in their pockets and go into the ladies' room and sign themselves up. When I would get enough of them to call a meeting, I brought them down to the main [union] office to the organizer and we would meet. The boss would come up to me the next day and told me that he knew that I had something going on around there, but he couldn't figure it out. He said that he had been watching me for a very long time. He said that he wanted to fire me. I told him that he was sure out of luck now, bud. We have a majority! You are going to listen to us for a change.

I was a leader in my own department. There was always a stoppage if things weren't going right. We never went out on strike. I would just motion to them from the middle of the floor and they could see me. Then the boss would come running down and ask what the hell this here was all about. I told him this was brought up with him at three o'clock yesterday about our working hours. We didn't string it out I says. We give you three days. He said that he would see about it tomorrow. I said that he wouldn't see about it tomorrow, but he would see about it today. He came over and started talking nice and started to say that I was a good spinner and all that. I said that I ought to be because I had been there over ten years which is longer than you have.

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*In the end, by 1940, sections of labor had reorganized the fabric of the social life around them. Woonsocket stood in the lead, in many ways. Its textile workers had been as deprived and degraded as any in the state, more so in a sense because European management treated operatives as mere serfs commanded to doff their hats as they entered management's door. The response—the formation of a powerful and wide-ranging Independent [later, Industrial] Trades Union—had been in proportion to the sense of disenfranchisement. The ITU very nearly constituted a state within a state, a so-*

ciety within a society. It organized, it educated, and it raised up its membership. Despite strenuous efforts by conservative clergy to discredit its leadership, principally the Providence-born Lawrence Spitz Jr., the union gained the extreme loyalty of its members and the respect of forward-looking employers. It preached solidarity, constructive activity, pride in labor and labor's participation in society.

**George Butsika:** You have to remember [that in Woonsocket workers' homes] there were no radios. There were no telephones. There were no automobiles, you know. Families didn't have two, three automobiles as today. Phones came in

*George Butsika, a graduate of Brown University, served on the executive council of the Independent Trade Union. He was also staff representative and, later, education director for the steelworkers' union. He was interviewed by Paul Buhle, 3 March 1984.*

probably during the war or right after the war really. The social life took place at the union hall. And our union hall, we used to have, during the winter months, a forum every Wednesday evening. And we would pack three, four hundred people in that hall. And we'd have debates. And I can remember the debate on during the Civil War in Spain: Should we lift the embargo? And debate on it, you know, rank-and-filers. We'd have three, four hundred people to listen to us and then question and have good, prominent speakers come in.

We had a drama group, you know, during the WPA—the way they had the white-collar WPA—we had a drama group, and we were putting on the play "Waiting for Lefty." In English. And it went all over. In fact, we had the distinction of being barred in Pawtucket by the American Legion. We had a choral group. And it was because of the union that all of these things came in. And then we'd have classes, you know, history, on economics, almost anything that—dance groups. If

*Rubberworkers hold up cards urging their fellow workers to support the union in a late 1930s organizing drive. Photograph courtesy of the Scott Molloy Collection.*



we found somebody in the WPA was a dance instructor, okay! My job was to get a dozen people, you know; they're going to take dancing. So the union hall was—always some activity going on. I think I knew practically everybody in the city as a result of the union, because we were always there, the various locals. Each month we'd have a council meeting where the policy was laid down, and each local would have five delegates as a—minimum, I think, was five and probably six or seven if they were real large locals. So, you know, you'd meet a couple or three hundred people every month and talking about your various problems in the various plants and some of the things that are going on. And so socially I think it was because of the union; you broadened out, you know; you heard other people talking.

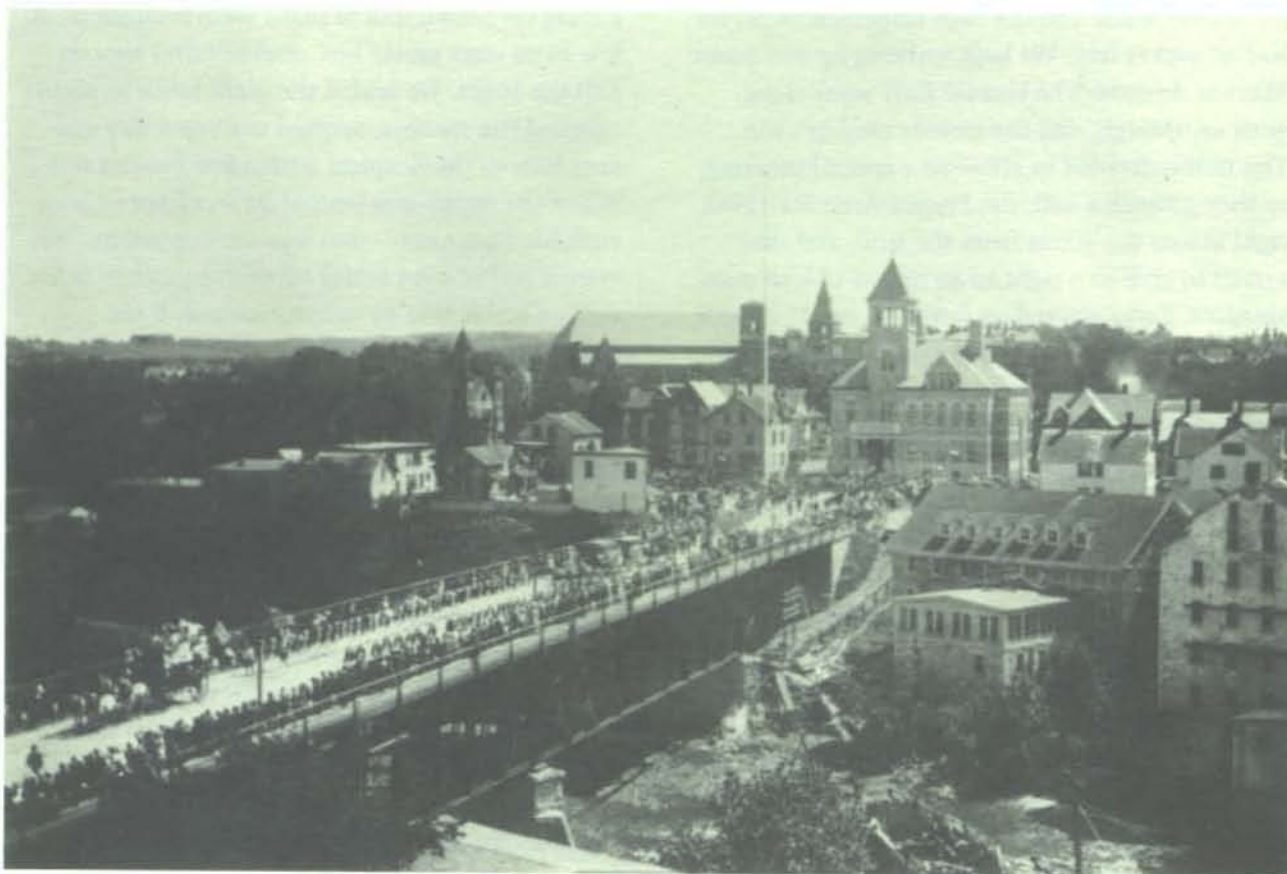
**Al Sisti:** I started to work at Atlantic Mills when I was thirteen. I knew nothing about a union at that age. You don't go through personnel, you don't sign anything, you just hang your coat on a nail and go to work. This was a mule-spinning department. I joined the union because my uncle told me to join the union. He was a spinner there, I became a back boy. He said to me, you join a union. I paid a quarter a month. At that age, I could think of all kinds of things I could do with that quarter—nobody told me what a union was, what it did. As I went along, I didn't like what was happening to me. I was very curious as a kid. I found out they had union meetings, and I could go to the meeting, but I was a twenty-five cents member with no voice. How did you become a fifty cents member? You became a piecer or spinner.

But things were happening to us. I felt it was wrong that I didn't have a say. I started to speak at a union meeting in the woolsorters' hall, and they told the sergeant-at-arms, throw him out. I can still see that sergeant-at-arms today—a big, rugged guy with a broken nose. He started towards me. I wasn't even seventeen then, but I backed up and picked up a chair, when they said, let him talk, we don't have to listen.

I can remember the union trying to collect dues, workers didn't have the money. But we knew what we were up against. Then the mills had huge motors that ran these machines, and

when a belt broke, a rivet went flying through the air. They made you fix that belt, one guy would hold it, the other would climb a ladder, pull the bolt until it flipped onto the pulley. One guy where I worked got flipped around and killed. They wouldn't stop the motors, that's why it happened. Sometimes people would get caught between them. We had union meetings down at Olneyville. Next to the hall was the barroom. The bar was open a couple of hours before the meeting Sunday morning, and somebody really heated up would go in and have a few drinks beforehand. The police were called sometimes, because the meetings were really hot. What I remember clearly was oldtimers speaking, with an English accent or Irish brogue; what impressed me was their leadership qualities, their ability to speak on the subjects they knew affected the working man. We used to listen and be inspired by them. We were in an independent union, the International Mulespinners of America. Woolsorters were an independent union, but they were the highest paid, strongest group in the mill, because they were so necessary, and because you could only learn the job from oldtimers. Those jobs were really sewed up mostly by English people who came over from the other side. The machinists came in with their own union. The CIO was organizing the weavers. And I was saying to myself, why don't we all join the same union? When the CIO really came in, everybody was ready for it, except the guys with their hands on the treasury of the independent union. They used to fight like hell.

It was so bad in the factory that they once mixed rabbit hair with wool, the rabbit hair would spin off and get into your eyes, your nose, everywhere, and got all over the machinery, so you had to clean the machines off several times a day instead of once. We started to bitch, but the union wouldn't listen to us, we were twenty-five-cents-a-month members. So we talked among ourselves and decided to strike. I led a wildcat strike. I was going to go up to the big boss, see if he would give us more money, and if he turned us down, I would head straight for my jacket and so would the others. I didn't know if anyone would follow. But it worked to this extent. Everybody got out



*In 1899, Woonsocket hosted America's first Labor Day parade. Courtesy of the Lawton Collection, Woonsocket High School.*



*A float from the 1941 International Textile Union Labor Day Parade in Woonsocket. Courtesy Woonsocket High School Social Studies Department, Woonsocket Collection.*

on the sidewalk, and the cops dispersed us, so we had no picket line. We kept walking up and down Manton Avenue. The second shift went along with us, though, and the factory couldn't run. The union decided to allow us a special meeting, so they gave us a hall, the Franco-American Hall, right across the street from the mill, and they agreed to give us a right to go in and talk to management. I was elected spokesman, and I can still remember the big, fat guy behind the desk—he looked like a caricature of a capitalist. He stopped me halfway through my speech, and said, would you start again? I guess it was a technique of his. I started again, almost word for word, and when I got halfway through this time, he said, don't worry about it, you're going to get your raise. And I guess we got a three dollar raise, second and first shift, and from there on in the twenty-five cents rules went out the window. Everyone got the same voice.

After that we didn't want another strike of our own—we wanted a strike of all of us against the big boss. Finally we did go out on strike, and it was bitter, it crippled the company, much of the spinning had to be brought from outside, and

during the strike lots of scabs were brought in. A few of us were pretty hot, couldn't find how to nail the scabs. We scaled the plant fence at night, climbed fire escapes, spotted one main guy and sent him to the hospital with a few broken ribs. When the strike was settled he was kept as boss with his horns cut—that was a compromise. We were a hell of a lot better off than people in other mills, I knew that by talking around. If we wanted to resist something, we could do it: If we decided a machine needed three men instead of two, by God those machines didn't run. No newspaper ever got ahold of these stories, nobody ever heard them but they happened.

**Lawrence Spitz, Jr.:** The Labor Day parades, the outings to Rocky Point—the buses used to stretch the whole length of the street. Oh, they had as many as fifty or sixty buses. We had a Labor Day affair in Cass Park [that] was a huge parade—they had at least forty floats, local after local, and had the Cass Park proceedings. When the speaking event took place, when the speaking program started, there must have been at least ten thousand.



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