

## **Textile workers win a hard-fought victory during hard times**

March 1879

It required many years of struggle, but the United States now officially recognizes March as Women's History Month. The commemoration was born out of a terrible workplace tragedy – a fire in a Manhattan skyscraper in 1911 which killed 146 garment workers, most of them women. Originally observed on March 8 each year and known as International Working Women's Day, the holiday eventually grew to become an entire month of observances. But while March contains the anniversary of some of the saddest moments in the history of women workers in the United States, the month also includes the anniversaries of some of the most hard-fought victories won by women workers. One such triumph occurred in March 1879 – in a very uphill battle.

For nine long months in 1878-79, some 550 workers, most of them women, waged a strike against a giant textile company in Paterson, New Jersey. Ultimately, they stopped the company from imposing its third wage cut in a year. Their success proved that a new era was beginning for labor after the Civil War.

The victory won by the workers of Paterson was especially important because it took place while the country was still immersed in the first economic depression after the Civil War, a crisis which had started five years before the strike began.

### **The Panic of 1873**

On September 18, 1873, the failure of a major banking house started a chain reaction, leading to the failure of many smaller banks. The entire credit structure of the nation collapsed. By the end of the year, 5,000 businesses had closed.

It was the worst depression in U.S history up to that point. It hit women workers especially hard.

For six long years, from 1873 until 1879, unemployment rose and wages fell. In the second half of 1874, one-quarter of the population of New York City was without work – a total of almost 94,000 people. By the end of the depression, wages had fallen back to the 1864 level. In 1883 – several years after recovery got under way – wages were lower than they had been in 1870.

The crisis brought ruin to many small businesses – and misery and death to working people. Meanwhile, Andrew Carnegie was capturing the steel market and John D. Rockefeller was eliminating his competitors in the oil industry.

All over the country, people were evicted from their homes. Many roamed the cities looking for food. During the first three months of 1874, some 90,000 workers, almost half of them women, had to sleep in police stations in New York. They were referred to as “revolvers” because they were restricted to one or two days a month in any one police station.

Just weeks after the crisis began, the New York Bulletin described the situation this way:

“Women are being discharged in bands of ten, twenty, fifty, and in too many cases, one hundred. What is worse, there is no immediate prospect of their obtaining work very soon. Those having comfortable

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homes are, unfortunately in the minority. There are too many to whom their daily pay is a matter of life and death, and to whom it may, in wretched extremity, make all the difference between lives of honor and shame. The office of the Workingwomen's Protective Union is painfully crowded with women seeking employment, and every day increases the list of applicants – yet every day some new avenue or source of employment is cut off. With no homes, no relatives to fall back upon, many girls and women know that it is only a question of a few days or hours when they will be turned out of their boarding or lodging houses – to a fate too painful to contemplate.”

### **The Crisis Devastates Paterson**

No city in the United States was hit harder than Paterson, New Jersey, and no part of Paterson's work force was affected more by the crisis than its women workers.

In 1846, Paterson had only 11,000 inhabitants. By 1870, its population had tripled – and it ranked as a major industrial city. Located 14 miles from New York City, Paterson was built on two major industries: iron and textiles. The iron factories hired only men. The textile mills relied mainly on women and on child labor.

By the early 1870s, Paterson was the country's foremost silk manufacturing center. It had separate jute, flax, and mosquito net mills which were each the largest of their kind in the nation. In the 1860s, silk and textile manufacturers and importers from New York and Boston had moved their mills to Paterson or had built new ones there. These “lords of the loom” introduced power machinery and other innovations and transformed the industry. In 1860, Paterson had four silk mills employing 590 workers. In 1876, eight silk ribbon and six broad silk factories gave work to 8,000 people, two-thirds of them women. At that time, one of every four silk workers was under 16 years of age.

During the 1870s, immigrants made up more than one-third of Paterson's residents. The work force in the textile mills included French and German skilled silk workers, and especially English skilled workers and a steadily increasing number of unskilled Irish laborers.

The first post-Civil War economic crisis stunned Paterson's once-booming economy. Gloom pervaded the city. The population of the city shrank by 10 percent between 1875 and 1878. In 1876, three years into the depression, a silk worker reported, “Paterson is in a deplorable condition.” A reporter for the New York Sun in September 1876 described Paterson as an industrial ghost town comparable to a Southern city after Lee's surrender.

The city's silk and textile workers were hit with repeated pay cuts between 1873 and 1877, cuts which reduced their wages from 10-30 percent. These cuts produced exceedingly hard times for almost 10,000 textile workers.

### **Unequal adversaries**

In the summer of 1877, the third wage cut in less than a year forced 550 unorganized workers, most of them women and children, to go on strike at the textile mills owned by two brothers, Robert and Henry Adams.

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R. & H. Adams and Company was a symbol of the rapid industrialization of Paterson. The firm had moved a small factory to Paterson from New York City in 1857. It was successful and the business added several large mills to the original plant. The company was the largest of its kind in the entire United States – and possibly in the world. It exported huge quantities of mosquito netting, especially to Africa and Asia.

The historian Herbert Gutman summed up the confrontation this way: “Two more unequal adversaries than the unorganized Adams strikers and their employer hardly could be found.” Gutman was right – yet the Adams strikers were ultimately victorious.

On June 20, 1878, the Adams strikers sent out a notice appealing “to their fellow working men and women throughout the United States to aid them in their struggle against starvation and poverty.” The strikers won the support of Joseph P. McDonnell, a plain-spoken Irish socialist immigrant, who came to Paterson to encourage the strikers. McDonnell organized the strikers into the International Labor Union, an industrial union for unskilled factory workers led by socialist immigrants and native-born advocates of the eight-hour day. McDonnell remained in Paterson and, weeks after the strike began, launched a weekly newspaper, the Paterson Labor Standard.

The columns of the Labor Standard held nothing back. The paper called Robert Adams “Lucifer” and the mills where the strikers worked “penitentiaries.” The wages the Adams company offered were referred to as “hunger rates.”

McDonnell appealed to the labor movement to support the Paterson strike financially:

“Many of these strikers – the greater number perhaps—are brave, heroic women who will hold out till victory crowns their efforts, and who are determined to make organization their watch-word in the future. The heroism of these 550 is more sublime than that of the 300 who fought and died at Thermopylae. They stand in the pass fighting for the rights not of Paterson or of the weavers, but of the whole human family.

“To their rescue workingmen and women of America. Success for the Paterson operatives means less poverty and more organization and power for our class.”

### **Strikers Mobilize Support**

On July 20, 1878, the strikers organized a huge procession through Paterson. Two hours before the demonstration was to begin, the streets were already crowded with spectators. The strikers marched with a brass band and a fife and drum band. Among the banners was one proclaiming: “Join the International Labor Union, a union which organizes all without regard to sex, color, nationality or race.”

At least 8,000 workers marched in the demonstration, while a majority of the city seemed to line the sidewalks. The people watching the parade made their support clear by cheering and waving handkerchiefs. At least 10,000 people attended the rally at the end of the march (where Joseph P. McDonnell was the main speaker.) At the conclusion of the rally, the strikers sang their battle song, an anthem heard many times during the strike. Called “The March of the Toilers,” the song was sung to

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the tune of the militantly pro-Union Army Civil War song “Marching Through Georgia.” Everyone at the rally joined in the chorus:

“We’ll fight, we’ll fight, for justice and fair play,  
We’ll fight, we’ll fight, nor care what despots say,  
We’ll make the cruel Adams’ class stand back and clear the way.  
We’ll give them a taste of our Union.”

The July 20, 1878 parade was just one of several demonstrations held during the strike. The thousands who rallied on behalf of the 550 strikers that day were a vivid indication of the depth of the strike’s support. Local workers – and even some shopkeepers and merchants – contributed to the strike fund. Concerts and picnics kept the strikers’ morale high. At least one of every eight residents of Paterson signed a petition attacking the Adams company.

### **Company Tactics Fail**

The Adams’ brothers used their money to try to destroy the strikers’ resolve, but the tactic did not work. The company sent special agents to Fall River, Massachusetts and other New England towns to entice workers to come to Paterson to break the strike. The Adams company hired many new people but it could keep few of them on the payroll because the strikers refused to cede control of the streets. Striking workers and their sympathizers met the potential strikebreakers at the rail depot or in the streets, told them about the strike, urged them to quit the company, and even paid their way home. (One of these encounters involved 2,000 supporters of the strike.) The first time that workers from Fall River experienced this kind of welcome, 22 of the 25 left immediately.

Finally, in March 1879, the company had seen enough. It conceded defeat, rescinded the wage cut, and offered an increase in wages. Robert Adams sold his share of the Paterson mills to his brother Henry – and left town.

Today, the world is vastly different from what it was when the 550 workers of the Adams mills “turned out” and began their strike in the summer of 1878. The Adams strikers triumphed because of their utter fearlessness, but also because of the fact that, in 1878, the industrialist capitalists of the United States had not finished establishing an absolute chokehold over the political and economic life of this country. During the Paterson strike, it was still possible for small shopkeepers to quietly help strikers, and for a city government to avoid intervening directly on behalf of the owners of large factories. That leeway would soon vanish.

In the years that followed, Paterson would be the scene of other confrontations, clashes which would not end so well for the workers. There would be another great strike in the silk mills – the gigantic battle of 1913 which would end in defeat for the strikers. There would also be other economic crises after the lean years of 1873-79: the crisis of 1893; of 1907; of 1919; and the Great Depression which began in 1929, to name just a few. In the midst of the Great Depression would come the legalization of unions in the United States, and a social contract between part of labor and business. The years of relative peace would then be followed by massive plant closings, as globalization and electronics

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destroyed good-paying jobs. However, in March 1879, all that was far off in the future. In the spring of 1879, the 550 workers who brought a huge textile manufacturer to its knees could take great pride in their accomplishment.

We, too, should take pride in the victory they won 128 years ago this month. Successes like those achieved by the Paterson textile workers in 1879 paved the way for union jobs at relatively good wages for a section of workers in this country. During this Women's History Month 2007, we should honor the courage of the strikers at the Adams mills by carefully thinking out how we can win justice in a very different environment than the one they operated in. Today, permanent unemployment for millions has replaced the "boom and bust" cycle which led to the Panic of 1873. To meet the challenge of how to respond to our unique situation, we will need all the courage the Adams mills strikers displayed -- and considerable imagination as well. But if they could accomplish what history demanded of them -- against such great odds -- surely we can too.