NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# History repeats itself 100 years after textile mill strike

Mary Ann McGivern | Dec. 10, 2012 NCR Today

A hundred years ago, women in Lawrence, Mass., had shut down the textile plants, their leaders were sitting in jail, and their children had been sent to union supporters in New York City to keep them safe. All seemed lost.

The strike began in January. The state legislature had passed a law limiting women's and children's work hours to 54 per week, down from 56. The women generally worked in plants divided by ethnicity. The Polish women opened their pay envelopes, saw that their wages were cut by those hours lost, and walked out of the plant and on to other factories, shouting "Not enough pay" in Polish and calling for other women to join them.

The other women did join them, the textile mills closed, and police began cracking women's heads.

The strike was organized by the International Workers of the World, and it successfully resisted men's arguments that the women accept less pay and show some respect for ethnic divisions. The women held fast and in late December 1912, a jury acquitted their leaders.

The Lawrence textile mill strike is known as the strike that sang. "Bread and Roses" was written years later about the sign women carried: We Want Bread But We Want Roses Too. However, in the next five years, the women gradually lost everything they had gained and more. It would take the Depression for labor to rise again.

I think of those women now as laws repressing union organizing are on the upswing. I think of Wal-Mart, where the stores were built on tax increment financing -- taking away support for schools, police, fire departments -- while the workers, mostly women, don't earn enough to shop at Wal-Mart and, though they may make too much to be eligible for food stamps, are regulars at the food banks.

> "As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
> A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
> Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
> For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!"
> -- Words by James Oppenheim [1], music by Caroline Kohlsaat

**Source URL (retrieved on *09/03/2015 - 18:24*):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/history-repeats-itself-100-years-after-textile-mill-strike

**Links:**
[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Oppenheim