

# Some Aspects of the Situation in New Bedford

By ALBERT WEISBORD

**T**WENTY-SIX thousand textile workers of the cotton mills of New Bedford, Massachusetts, have been solidly on strike now for five weeks against a new wage cut of 10% that has been handed down by the mill owners of New England.

The significance of this strike cannot be overestimated by our Party. A brief analysis will make this clear.

In the first place we must understand that the textile industry is the largest primary industry in the U. S. embracing approximately 1,100,000 wage earners totalling about 13% of all the workers engaged in manufacturing enterprises. The organization of these textile workers is one of our greatest tasks.

Secondly, the basic section of the textile industry is the cotton section. Of the 1,100,000 textile workers, 445,000 or 40% of the total are cotton operatives. The organization and revolutionizing of these cotton workers must be the aim of all our strategy in the textile industry.

Yet these cotton workers are the most difficult to organize of all. First of all the cotton manufacturers are united in exceedingly powerful combines and having a long history in the U. S. know how to handle men and strikes effectively. Second, the cotton workers are scattered over a large territory ranging from New England to the South. Third, most of the cotton workers—243,000 of the 445,000—are in the South, and the South is especially difficult and dangerous to organize. Fourth, many of the cotton mills are in mill villages where the workers are provincial and where the terror and power of the mill owners are greatest. Fifth, the masses drawn into the cotton mills are of the most backward strata, made up in large part of those who hitherto have been untouched by the industrialization of America. (Agricultural workers, farmers, and Negroes of the South—French Canadians in the North, etc.). Sixth, the crisis in the textile industry has particularly affected the cotton section of the industry, severely dislocating the productive relations,

creating large unemployment and greatly lowering the resistance of the cotton workers. Seventh, to these special difficulties must be added the others, general to the textile industry as a whole, namely:

- (a.) The large number of immigrants of many races and tongues.
- (b.) The large number of women, youth and even children in the industry.
- (c.) The intense exploitation, creating extreme poverty and destitution, making the resisting powers of the workers very low indeed.
- (d.) The existence of company unions, welfare schemes, etc.
- (e.) The abandonment of the unskilled by the few skilled workers organized in small craft unions that fight each other.
- (f.) Smallness of left-wing forces in the textile industry.

When we understand these conditions, we can understand why in the great battles that took place in the recent past, the cotton workers, as a whole, were not in the forefront. In 1926 in Passaic, it was the woolen and worsted workers that led the way. In 1924 in Paterson, it was the silk workers. In 1922 it was mainly the woolen and worsted workers in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, similarly in 1919. Indeed we have to go back to 1912 before we see such large numbers of cotton workers acting in so concerted a manner in a struggle against the mill owners as they are now doing in New Bedford.

These considerations make us understand the basic meaning of the New Bedford strike. *This large New Bedford strike of 26,000 workers means the wage cutting campaign of the textile mill owners has now reached a point where the widest masses, even those most difficult to organize, are ready to rebel and is another indication of the increasing militancy of certain sections of the working class in America.*

To understand the significance of this strike we must understand the relationship of New Bedford, Mass., to its immediate environment. The textile industry is the greatest industry of New England, employing about 32% of the 1,100,000 workers in New England. Indeed, New England is the largest geographical division of the textile industry in America. 353,000 textile workers or 32% of the entire industry is to be found in New England. Of these 353,000 textile workers, the main body, 165,000 or 47% of the total are cotton workers making up 37% of the cotton industry. 106,000 or 30% of the total are woolen and worsted workers making up 64% of the woolen and worsted industry.

Thus to win New England means to win 32% of all textile workers, 37% of all the cotton workers, 64% of all the woolen

and worsted workers and to affect 32% of those employed in all the factories in New England.

The key State in New England is Massachusetts. 32% of all its factory workers are in the textile industry:

1. Massachusetts is the largest textile state in the U. S. and in New England (190,000 textile workers). 2. Massachusetts is the largest cotton manufacturing state in the United States and in New England (96,000 workers). 3. Massachusetts is the largest woolen and worsted manufacturing state in the U. S. and in New England (55,000 workers).

The main textile region in New England and in Massachusetts is the New Bedford region. In New Bedford are 28,000 cotton textile workers. Near New Bedford is the city of Fall River with 28,000 more cotton workers. Near New Bedford and Fall River are the valleys of Rhode Island with 30,000 more cotton workers. Thus in the immediate region of New Bedford can be found the bulk of the cotton workers of New England, or 100,000 cotton workers, not to speak of the many thousand other textile workers in the vicinity.

Not only is New Bedford the heart of the main cotton region of New England but it is (with Fall River) the national center for all fine cotton and cotton-silk mixed goods produced in this country. Close proximity to major markets, great capitalist rationalization and production of unique and finest cloths make the New Bedford Mills outstanding. The strike in New Bedford therefore already grips the vitals of the fine cotton goods market of the entire country and offers an excellent opportunity to throw the largest possible masses of textile workers against the bourgeoisie and to bring them closer to our Party.

## II

The strike in New Bedford began April 16th, soon after a new wage cut of 10% had been announced by the cotton mill operators in the whole region. This wage cut affected 100,000 in different localities and spared no one, skilled or unskilled. Wages in Massachusetts had been very low already, the census of manufacturers of 1925 giving about \$18.35 as the average wage for the year 1925 of all textile workers in Massachusetts. (Note this is the average wage of all the workers including the most skilled and even the foremen of the factories who may be engaged in manual labor.) Since 1925 a new wave of wage cuts had taken place lowering this average to about \$17.00 a week. With the new wage cut announced

this brought the level of wages desperately low. Many experienced men were working for \$16 a week, women for \$13 to \$14 a week, and young workers for \$8 to \$10 a week. To this must be added that the hours of labor were 48 to 60 a week and that within the last few years the exploitation of the workers had been greatly intensified.

In New Bedford many of the skilled workers were organized in a small independent union, the American Federation of Textile Operatives. The leaders of the A. F. T. O. were intimately connected with the mill owners' political machine. For 8 years Mr. Tansey, the President of the A. F. T. O. was the head of the police force in the city of Fall River. Mr. Binns, another official, became a Justice of the Peace in New Bedford. Always subservient to the mill owners, the officials of the union were persuaded by Mr. Butler to go to Washington and beg the U. S. Congress for a higher tariff so that Mr. Butler could make more profits on the ground that that would mean Mr. Butler could be good to his workers and pay them more wages. As for strikes, for sixteen years these officials had carried on successfully a policy of preventing strikes of the workers against the wage cuts and worsened conditions that had taken place since 1912.

When the new wage cuts took place in New Bedford, taking in as they did the skilled workers as well as the unskilled, the members of the A. F. T. O. demanded a strike vote. Under mass pressure the officials yielded, hoping to defeat the necessary 2/3 vote as had been done in Fall River by these same officials when the vote was counted there and found 11 votes "shy" of the necessary two-thirds.

However, this plan of the corrupt and reactionary officialdom of the A. F. T. O. failed, due to the fact that a *new factor* had now entered the situation. *This was the National Textile Mill Committees, the left wing section of the textile workers.* As soon as the situation became acute, Murdoch and Beal, two left wing textile workers were sent into the field to organize the 25,000 unorganized workers and to build up the left wing movement. At once a leaflet was issued calling on the unorganized workers to strike against wage cuts, to attend the meeting of the A. F. T. O. and compel a strike vote.

This leaflet had the desired result. By an overwhelming vote the proposition of the officials of the A. F. T. O., Batty and Binns and others, to put off the strike vote, was defeated and the strike declared in effect April 16th. Immediately the news spread like wild-fire and by Monday, April 16th, the strike was 100% complete

(with the exception of a small number of mills where wages had not been cut).

The Textile Mill Committees at once raised the demand that the A. F. T. O. form a united front of all the workers for the fight. This was rejected by Batty who denounced the Textile Mill Committees as a Communistic organization, splitting the workers and dangerous to both the mill owners and the A. F. T. O. The T. M. C. then called a large mass meeting of the unorganized workers and began to organize for the fight and into Textile Mill Committees the large mass of workers left abandoned by the misleaders of the A. F. T. O. New demands were raised by the T. M. C. as follows: 1. Abolition of the 10% wage cut. 2. 20% increase in wages 3. 40 hour, 5 day week. 3. Abolition of the speed-up system.

The A. F. T. O. making no efforts to picket the mills or to carry on any kind of a struggle, the field was left open for the T. M. C. Mass picketing was organized and all sections of the workers thrown into the fight. The militant tactics of the left wing leading the T. M. C. have now enabled us to take the lead in the fight and to win the support of the widest sections of the strikers. The best of the workers, those who had been good fighters in the old countries, those who had been active with the I. W. W. in 1912, and those who were the best of the old time anarchist elements have all rallied around the left wing in this struggle.

The entrance of the T. M. C. into the fight has taken the mill owners by surprise. The A. F. T. O. leadership is now quite discredited. In order to fight us better the A. F. T. O. leadership got the members of that organization to join the American Federation of Labor Union, the United Textile Workers, and daily carry on attacks, but to no avail. The left wing only further intrenched itself. On the relief field, the Workers International Relief had begun a drive to help the strikers. The A. F. T. O. officials had done nothing to help those who were not in their union before the strike and had turned over all other relief activities to a "citizens" committee that attacked the new union and told the workers to keep off the picket line. The entrance of the Workers International Relief served to check the strikebreaking activities of the A. F. T. O. leaders on this field also.

As soon as the ineffectiveness of Batty became generally known the capitalist newspapers began to welcome the entrance of the Socialist Party. The first thing the Socialist Party did was to rally round Batty and the contemptible officials of the A. F. T. O. to bolster them up and to hide their treachery. When the Socialist Party

sent in "Comrade" Manning of the Y. P. S. L. to help Batty he was given a very cordial reception. He was no outsider. He was no agitator, he was no dangerous red. He was taken into the bosom of the bosses at once and his articles played up in all the capitalist papers of the city.

"Comrade" Manning wrote an article for the capitalist papers. This strike, says Manning, is entirely different from Passaic where the Communists controlled.

"In other industrial disputes such as I observed in Passaic and elsewhere, red-hot coals of hate and passion filled the air; violence and bloodshed were on every hand. The police and the strikers regarded each other as mortal enemies, and conflicts were numerous. Here, I find the police, as well as the firemen, contributing to the strikers' fund. And the Chief of Police arms the strikers with his personal credential for collecting!"

Then listen to this: "Professional men, merchants and Labor seem to be united in resisting any attempt to lower the purchasing power of the workers. Behind them, and this is most remarkable, are the local papers whose editorial and news service have been decidedly fair to the strikers' cause."

And finally this: "My final thought is that it has been a joy to work here with the strikers; to observe the intelligent support of a good cause by the local press; to behold with amazement the police; to find the mayor working with the welfare department in its task of relieving distress to hundreds who have daily besieged it since the industrial cessation . . ."

What did Mr. Manning do by this article? His efforts were to prove: 1. The only union to support is Batty's union. 2. Hate and passion is very bad. It is in evidence only where Communists control as in Passaic. 3. The violence and bloodshed in Passaic was due to the Communists, for we see that where there are no Communists the police are very kind as in New Bedford. 4. It is not necessary that strikers and police should look on each other as mortal enemies. In fact they are great friends. The strikers should love the local police, for the police help strikers when in trouble. 5. The mayor (an arch-reactionary Republican, hand in glove with the mill owners) is a wonderful friend of the strikers, giving them credentials to help. 6. The poisonous reptile capitalist press of New Bedford is very fair to the strikers. 7. The business men, that is the Chamber of Commerce and others, are with the strikers one hundred percent. (This includes, of course, the Lions Club, the Rotary Club, the New Bedford Bar Association, the American Legion, and

all the other "tried and true" "friends of Labor.") To Mr. Manning none of these societies menaced the workers. Only the Communists must be fought.

Is it any wonder that the capitalist press printed this article prominently? Or that the papers warmly supported the Socialist Party?

The Socialist Party was welcomed as the organization that alone could have a chance of doing what the bosses and the Battys could not do, namely, destroy the Communists and left wingers, break up the new union of the hitherto unorganized workers, smash the picket line, and give a free hand for the police to club, jail, and terrorize the strikers after the destruction of their union.

But who is Manning? Who had ever heard of him? The Socialist Party felt that it had not yet put its full force behind the strike,—to support Batty and the police. It decided therefore, to send in Norman Thomas to do the work. First Thomas sends in five dollars to the relief fund of Mr. Batty and the Citizen's Committee. This brings Thomas a front page article in the capitalist papers and his picture. Then it is announced that Thomas will speak for Batty at a mass meeting and that he sends \$500 from the Emergency Relief Committee of New York to the Citizens Committee to help them break the strike better. This brings warm approval. Then Mr. Thomas enters the field in person. Workmen's Circle, branch 723, "composed largely of small business men and storekeepers," as the local papers put it, gives Thomas a banquet. The capitalist papers fill the first page with Thomas, one paper putting five pictures of him on the front page at the same time. Everyone is urged to come out to hear him.

When Thomas came into the strike, the strike had been going on for about four weeks. Yet not a word had been said to the strikers about going on the picket line. Not a word was said as to the necessity of militant tactics during the struggle, or about the treachery of the A. F. T. O. leaders. On the contrary through all sorts of subtle means the strikers were given to understand that everybody was with them and they did not need to fight.

The entrance of Thomas was indeed a blow to the strikers. He gave standing and prestige to Batty and his crowd of strike

sellers. It was a declaration by the Socialist Party that the working class should support not the Textile Mill Committees that were actually doing the strike duties and organizing the unorganized but to support a gang of misleaders that had been exposed already a hundred times to the masses. The appearance of Thomas on the platform was the national signal for the Socialists all over the country to raise funds for the Citizens Committee and defeat any support of the Textile Mill Committees. And since the A. F. T. O. had by now joined the United Textile Workers of the American Federation of Labor, it meant that the Socialist Party had made a firm united front with the A. F. of L. bureaucracy against the left wing in the field carrying on the fight.

After Thomas came Paul Blanchard, textile "specialist" for the Socialist Party. In an article in the *New Leader*, Blanchard makes a plea for the workers to leave the Communists and join the "old veterans," leaders of the A. F. T. O. Blanchard acts as a special agent whose duty it is to expose the reds in the strike. He tells how the *Daily Worker* is distributed, how the Communists came into the field and created bitterness where none had been before, how the Communists attack the Citizens Relief Committee, and runs in a defense of Batty, Binns, and the rest.

In a special article for the *New Republic*, reprinted by all of the bosses' papers in New Bedford, Blanchard presses the attack. New Bedford is not Passaic he says. "In Passaic a radical minority, led by outsiders, created a mass movement which came close to being a mob movement." This is the way this yellow renegade characterizes the great Passaic strike of 1926.

Blanchard's main job was to boost the U. T. W. and the A. F. T. O. He writes: 1. "The Communists are splitters because they have come into the field. 2. They are attacking good leaders when they attack the officials of the A. F. T. O. and the A. F. of L. 3. The Communists have organized only a few Portuguese workers who are non-organizable anyway, not knowing the meaning of a union and never paying dues to Batty. 4. While the leaders of the A. F. of L. are tried and true, the Communists are reckless and useless. 5. And what with preachers, police, papers, and business men being with the A. F. T. O. it is necessary for the whole working class to rally round the A. F. T. O. leaders and defeat the Communists."

The Socialist Party has entered New Bedford. After Blanchard comes August Claessens, and Alfred Baker Lewis and an official resolution of the Massachusetts Socialist Party supporting Batty and fighting the real militants. These will do all they can to mask the



deadliest enemies of the workers and to crush the strike. But they will fail. So many workers have now joined the Textile Mill Committees that it has been reorganized into the New Bedford Textile Workers Union with thousands of members. This new union is in New Bedford to stay. Arrests have now taken place by the score by the "friendly," "smiling" police. "Sympathetic" judges have raised bail ten times above normal and handed out vicious sentences to crush the strike. Women are being manhandled in the streets. Detective agencies are rushing in men to frame up the leaders of the strike.

In spite of these things and the mask which the Socialist Party gives to these black deeds, the workers will win their strike. Throughout the country the new union, the New Bedford Textile Workers Union, will receive the support of all honest workers. And a left wing force will be created throughout the entire textile industry which will give the deathblow to the bosses and their Socialist hounds.