

The New Bedford Textile Strike

By ALBERT WEISBORD

Secretary, National Textile Mill Committees

TWENTY-SIX thousand workers are on strike in New Bedford in one of the biggest textile strikes in years. And it is very significant that this strike is not a strike of knitgood workers or silk workers or even woolen and worsted workers, but is a strike affecting the very basic section of the textile industry, a section embracing as a whole 445,000 workers, namely the cotton section. This is the first time since 1912 that such large numbers of cotton workers have put up such a resistance. While the cotton section of the textile industry has been usually the first to see wage cuts meted out, the workers have usually suffered in silence. We should recall that in 1926 in Passaic it was the woolen and worsted workers that gave battle. In 1924 in Paterson it was the silk workers. In 1922 it was the woolen and worsted workers of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Similarly in 1919.

The backwardness of the cotton workers is not strange when we consider that differently from other textile workers, cotton workers are found scattered all over New England and the South. The fact that the workers are so scattered, the fact that the cotton textile manufacturers are in one of the most powerful combinations in the industry, the fact that the most backward strata of the masses have been drawn into the cotton mills in particular, all help explain why the cotton workers were not in the lead in resisting the textile manufacturers.

This large New Bedford strike of 26,000 workers therefore means the wage cutting campaign of the textile mill owners has now reached a point where



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Militant Leader of the Passaic strike; jail did not stop him. Now he is with the Textile Mill Committees leading the battle in New England.

the widest masses, even those most difficult to organize, are ready to rebel and is another indication of the increasing militancy of the working class.

In some respects New Bedford is a particularly good place for the workers to defend themselves. In the first place New Bedford with Fall River is the national center for fine cotton and cotton-silk mixed goods. The strike in New Bedford, therefore, grips the vitals of the fine cotton goods market in America. In the second place, New Bedford is near Fall River with 28,000 more cotton workers and in the heart of the main cotton region of New England embracing about 100,000

cotton workers. Should the strike spread to Fall River and to the cotton valleys of Rhode Island the greatest strike in the history of the textile industry in America will be in progress.

The strike in New Bedford began April 16th soon after a new wage cut of 10 per cent 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 \$18.35 as the average wage for the year 1925 of all the 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 has taken place lowering this average to about \$17.00 a week. With the wage cut announced this brought the level of wages desperately low. Many experienced men were working for \$16 a week, women



FRED BEAL

One of the two first organizers sent by the Textile Mill Committees to New Bedford. A splendid fighter for the workers, he incurs the wrath of reactionary union official and employers alike.

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 character of whose officials can well be judged by the fact that one of the leading officers of the union became head of the police force of Fall River. 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 organize into textile mill committees the large masses of workers left abandoned by the misleaders of the A. F. T. O. New demands were raised by the T. M. C. as follows:

Abolition of the 10% wage cut. 20% increase in wages. 40 hours, 5 day week. 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.

Our entrance 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 of no avail. The great mass of workers follow us. The mills are completely closed down by our mass picketing and this is now the fifth week of the strike.

Already the workers are beginning to feel the pinch of hunger. The Workers International Relief has now entered and is launching a big campaign to help the strikers. The A. F. T. O. does nothing to help those who were not in the union before the strike and have turned all other relief activities to a "citizens" committee that attacks the T. M. C. and is telling the workers to go back to work. The entire burden of relief therefore must fall on the T. M. C. and W. I. R. Funds must be forthcoming and quickly.

Send all money to Workers International Relief, 12 Rodney French Boulevard, New Bedford, Massachusetts, Room 4. This strike must not be lost for the lack of relief!

Let no one imagine that the textile magnates of New Bedford, with their tremendous power, and headed by that arch reactionary, Wm. M. Butler, chief advisor to Coolidge and leader of the Republican Party, are going to give in easily. On the contrary all signs point to a bitter struggle which up to date has only been in its preliminary phases.

The strike of the cotton workers of New Bedford is truly the fight of the 1,100,000 textile workers in the country. A militant fight will check the new offensive of the employers. A victory will be a tremendous achievement. To all militants and workers we say: **Full face to New Bedford—Full support to the Strikers!**

* NOTE.—It was erroneously stated in the article "New Bedford Stops A Wage Cut" in the May issue of Labor Unity, that Fred Beal was a reactionary and an associate of Batty. This mistake was due to confusing Beal's name, through similarity of sound with that of Binns, actually Batty's man. Fred Beal is a real rank and file leader, organizing the textile workers to win the strike, and has never been associated with the reactionary, Batty.—Editor